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**Life/Force: Novelty and New Materialism in Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter***

**Abstract**

New Materialism and Speculative Realism have obtained their avant-garde status by creating a simple division between their work and a past they characterize as constructivism or correlationism. While this satisfies libidinal and market forces that demand novelty, it depends on a chain of dogmatic reversals that remain deconstructible. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* operates according to such a set of reversals, opposing itself to the (old) representation of matter as inert and passive by describing matter as free, living, and creative. However, because these affirmations occur as reversals, without a phenomenology or deconstruction of the underlying concepts, a suppression of matter identical to that from the tradition remains in her work. Her dogmatic predications are necessary to uphold the claim of a simple break with the past, but this repression of undecidability renders untenable both matter’s novelty and the novelty of any progressivist historical schema, such as that of the “New” Materialism.

Among those speaking in the name of materialism, whether speculative, dialectical, or “new,” it is commonplace to dismiss with a single gesture a vast field of theoretical and philosophical endeavor, indicated as the last 50 or 250 years of theory and philosophy. Self-styled “speculative” writers who would surpass all philosophy since Kant and various New Materialists who sequester decades of thought under the heading of “constructivism” manufacture the avant-garde status of their own work by claiming to delineate a simple break with the past. We would be at a loss, and perhaps at risk of missing the point, if we sought to uncover the common essence underlying this “new” work, either by looking for an agreement about exactly which authors belong in the hastily sketched corral and on what grounds, or a philosophical accord about the putative outside being sought. Because there is always difference within a text, no work will ever fit comfortably on either side of these divisions; for this reason, rather than seeing this gesture as the diagnosis of a correlation (in the other), I find it more apt to read it as the imposition of a corral, a *corralation*.[[1]](#endnote-2) In work that purports to challenge the autonomy of the conscious human subject, to find our agency constantly shot through with the agency of matter, the most traditional notions of history as linear progress and autonomous decision reassert themselves in the form of this corralation. The very concept of novelty at work in the formation of this field or intellectual movement fundamentally compromises its anti-humanist project.

The commonalities that can be identified among these disparate studies often reside in their unstated presuppositions. The more we would like to celebrate matter and submit ourselves to its power, the more we must, in an ironic and auto-immune fashion, exaggerate our own knowledge of it. We cannot claim to attribute agency and freedom to matter, or even to know what counts as a material thing, unless we have imagined that the science, language, tradition, history, discourse, thought, etc. by which we know and describe matter is an absolute knowledge or transparent revelation of its being. If we place in question our own authority, and acknowledge the possibility that what we call “matter” and what we know of it is not necessarily or necessarily not matter “itself,” then we have complicated the possibility of granting it agency over ourselves. Which is not to claim that thinking, discourse, or even science comes first, but rather that there is a non-masterable differance at the origin, that no matter where we look we will find something divided in itself (as matter-thought, and as so many other differences besides). We have no name for the other matter that would subvert our categories and subject us to its unanticipatability, and we take the greatest risk when we allow the discourse of science to occupy its place. If we imagine that science gives us things as they are in themselves, immediately, we deprive ourselves of any reason or responsibility for questioning the constructions of science—though we ought to know that they often reinscribe the prejudices and violence of our culture within themselves, and call for vigilant contestations.

This refusal to acknowledge matter as differance, which often takes the form of immediate sense certainty or an unquestioned privilege of science, taking what it says of matter to be matter itself, could be exhibited in the work of any number of speculative realist or new materialist writers, even in discourses that at other points acknowledge science’s limits. A comprehensive reading along these lines of Meillassoux, Grosz, Malabou, Barad, and others will have to be undertaken elsewhere.[[2]](#endnote-3) When placing in question this absolutization of science, one should not ignore the external necessity that is often invoked to justify these discourses and their urgency. A climate catastrophe is imminent, and those who abnegate responsibility for protecting our planet and the life it harbors often challenge the authority of science. Our response should never be to pretend that science is absolute (which science? On what grounds?), as if one ever did so without first making a decision as to what would count as science. Such a pretense will always risk justifying the unjustifiable—the name of science and its apparatus for validation will always be a double-edged sword, invoked in defense of the best and the worst. Our ethical responsibility in this and every moment is more complicated than simply picking a side for or against “science” or “matter.”

It would not be possible to interrogate all of New Materialism at once, because precisely what is needed is not one-sided position taking but a course of reading that discovers difference in the same. My subject here will be Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, because itoffers a symptomatic example of how the corralationist effort to advance beyond past work produces skewed readings of that past and of the scientific or natural phenomena supposed to escape it. She justifies her own work by corralling the “social constructivists:”

What is at stake for political and ethical life (in North America?) in the fight against systems—or process—theories, especially since all the parties share a critique of linguistic and social constructivism? Since, that is, all parties see the nonhuman turn as a response to an overconfidence about human power that was embedded in the postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s?[[3]](#endnote-4) (Bennett, “Ontology” 227)

This corralationism dictates the fundamental gesture of her work, the reversal of the classical binaries that defined inorganic matter to grant it predicates traditionally reserved for organic matter or the human being, for example, freedom, agency, creativity, and life. Granting matter life, freedom, and invention is inconsequential so long as we have not asked what life, freedom, or invention are, not to mention matter. If an entire monograph, or an entire field, reshuffles these terms endlessly without ever placing their essence in question, it can only reinforce received, traditional definitions of the concepts it assumes. The effort made here to challenge this inheritance will begin to resemble phenomenology, *Destruktion*, or deconstruction. If the work of essential intuition discovers that life, freedom, and invention cannot appear as such, that they are phenomena of the non-phenomenal, and if we find no foundation in the textual history that might ground their concepts, we may glimpse, once we have exhausted essence and existence, the other matter or matter of the other which renders Bennett’s reversal just as untenable as any traditional dogmatism she hoped to upset.

*Freedom*

The foundational claim of a “vital materialism” must be the assertion that all matter is living.[[4]](#endnote-5) In Bennett’s words, “In this onto-tale, everything is, in a sense, alive” (117).[[5]](#endnote-6) The reservation expressed here (“in a sense”) is due to her questioning of the vitalist traditions that animated matter by positing a para-material force (such as the soul). Because of her apprehension that attributing life to matter will only reproduce this immaterial privilege, she primarily grants it life-effects, including self-organization, activity, force, energy, and agency. She rejects mechanism, the model of inert or passive matter, preferring to emphasize its indeterminateness, chanciness, and contingency. She identifies this suspension of necessity with freedom:

There is, of course, a rich tradition of another materialism, one in which atoms swerve, bodies are driven by conatus, and “unformed elements and materials dance.” From the perspective of this tradition, mechanical materialism underestimates the complex, emergent causality of materiality […]. Yet the popular image of materialism as mechanistic endures, perhaps because the scientific community tends to emphasize how human ingenuity can result in greater control over nature more than the element of freedom in matter. (Bennett 91)

The predications and equivalences assumed here are not interrogated in Bennett’s work. Is contingency a sure sign of freedom? And how does one observe or verify contingency at the level of empirical investigation or scientific proof? The elision of these questions, which ought to be foundational for a “vital materialism” equating vitality with indeterminacy and freedom, marks the absence of and the need for an investigation into these concepts that would bring her project into a dialogue with the “constructivist” tradition New Materialism began by rejecting.

At the very least, one would hope to find an acknowledgment that a significant segment of the history of reflection on freedom actually ties its concept to necessity. Even if Bennett invoked this tradition only to reject it or offer counterarguments, the exercise of tarrying with the history of thought could refine our understanding of the concept. One index of the elision of this history: Spinoza’s conatus appears in the passage just cited, alongside the atomist clinamen, as an example of anti-determinism. Spinoza rather placed all of nature, including the human order, under the bonds of necessity, *which he considered to be the positive ground of freedom*. Far from an isolated whim, this bond of freedom and necessity proved decisive for German Idealism, and its traces can be unearthed in every discussion of the nature of freedom.[[6]](#endnote-7)

Freedom is always in a double bind between necessity and contingency. For this reason, the metaphysical tradition has passed through every permutation not only of where to locate contingency and necessity among the components of free action, but also of which combination would or would not signify freedom. The necessity of matter is a positive ground of the possibility of freedom for a will that must be able to predict its effects on its body and external bodies in order to receive a basic awareness of its own agency. Of course, matter must also be contingent to the extent that it can accept the irruption of a somehow external spiritual force or enable the decision-making of a consciousness understood monistically. This impetus or force, if it is aware only of its own contingency or whim, may be obeying the law (the necessity) of the other, unawares. It may even grant itself and identify itself with a law of action (such as a categorical imperative) to foreclose any thoughts of this heteronomy. At the other extreme, the necessity of matter or human will may be the result of the contingency of its beginning or beginninglessness, as certain atomist traditions imagined, or a result of an overarching, providential foresight that illumines necessity with a Godly freedom. These terms allow for an endless specular play. I will propose that what is ultimately untenable is the idea of a freedom of sovereign decision, a freedom that would be one’s own and would return to the same, whether we imagine it as the freedom of matter or life, human or nonhuman—but we are not there yet.

Every discussion of freedom reveals this double bind between necessity and contingency, and Bennett’s is no exception. “Matter,” as the metaphysical tradition defines it, is not a group of objects (or processes, or flows) but the role passivity and inertia play in a structural relationship with other concepts (activity, force, and so on). For this reason, our thinking of matter has not changed in the least if certain objects (electricity, metals, foods) have been granted agency, without questioning the relationship of this term, and of the structure of identity in general, to the law-governed form of necessity. When Bennett would like to provide an example of “nonhuman agency at work,” she resorts to a positivistic scientific study dependent on the most traditional definition of matter:

Several recent studies suggest that fat […] can make prisoners less prone to violent acts, inattentive schoolchildren better able to focus, and bipolar persons less depressed. A widely cited 2002 “double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial of nutritional supplements on 231 young adult prisoners […]” shows a 35 percent reduction of offences among British prisoners given omega-3 fatty acids. (41)

Bennett would like to place in question the independence of human thought from its interplay with matter, but she can do so here only by binding matter and mind to a probabilistic law. If “matter” were free to do as it pleased, (which it may well be—the physical, chemical, and biological laws that posit it as a substrate of necessity and predictability may well be distortions), we would be no more certain of our own agency then we would be of the agency of matter.[[7]](#endnote-8) Again, so it may be—I would suggest revising Bennett’s position not in the direction of a restoration of human exceptionalism, but rather toward a recognition of the undecidability of the agency or activity of all matter, organic and inorganic, human and non-human. Because Bennett has only reversed the concepts in play, without deconstructing them, matter remains in her work under the yoke of the law, the essence of its traditional definition.

Such gestures are common among New Materialists. For example, Coole and Frost cite similar studies in their “Introducing the New Materialisms” (18). Bennett takes a precaution the others forego, however, in recognition of the paradoxical nature of her argument:

This effectivity ought not to be imagined as a mechanical causality […]. It is more likely that an emergent causality is at work here: particular fats, acting in different ways in different bodies […] may produce patterns of effects, though not in ways that are fully predictable […]. The assemblage in which persons and fats are participants is perhaps better figured as a nonlinear system… (41-2)

Is this invocation of chaos and complexity (“nonlinear system,” “emergent causality”) enough to absolve Bennett of any complicity with mechanism? The assertion being made, here and elsewhere in her work, is that these fields can offer scientific proof of the contingency governing chaotic and complex systems. She credits “systems theory, complexity theory, chaos theory, fluid dynamics,” and “biophilosophies of flow” as forming a scientific consensus on “the freedom of matter” (Bennett 91). Even the most rudimentary knowledge of chaos theory belies this conclusion. It is certainly the case that the study of chaos undermines our faith in the fundamental predictability of physics, understood in the most classical sense as natural change. Chaos serves as a reminder that the mechanistic model was just that—a model, an idealization of the forces contributing to movement. But we enter the realm of mystagoguery if we think that the representations of chaos theory are anything but models themselves, still separated from the “matter” they describe by a necessary spacing.[[8]](#endnote-9) Even if we accept the premise that randomness is equivalent to freedom, we can never know if our stochastic modeling touches the essence of the system we describe or not. The possibility that unknown or even unknowable variables exist beyond our model governing what seems stochastic will always remain. Similarly, the mathematics of chaos theory has shown that many systems traditionally modelled as deterministic can also be approximated, that is, modelled, by stochastic formulae. The study of chaos does not reveal the absolute status of freedom or contingency, but rather the undecidability of the determinism or indeterminism of nature. Far from proving the contingency of matter, the most basic chaotic model, the Lorenz attractor, demonstrates that completely unpredictable behavior could emerge *from purely deterministic interactions*.[[9]](#endnote-10) We should not make the mistake of thinking that what is unpredictable for us is proven thereby to be random or free in itself—this conclusion can only be drawn if we forget the limits of our own knowledge and accept the absolute status of scientific modelling.[[10]](#endnote-11) To avoid this pitfall, one would have to further develop the precaution Bennett takes when she describes the behavior of worms as “free, or at least unpredictable” (96).

It is because of the dogmatism with which Bennett attributes predicates such as freedom to vital matter that she does not enter into these necessary problematics. Consider the passage quoted above, where she claimed that, “the scientific community tends to emphasize how human ingenuity can result in greater control over nature more than the element of freedom in matter” (Bennett 91). How could science emphasize the freedom of matter and remain science? Science can only offer legislative descriptions of its observations, because that is what constitutes a scientific explanation. That it must place the particular under a universal is its Platonico-Artistotelian legacy, from which it could not escape without ceasing to be recognizable as science. A science of freedom is oxymoronic, because an event that could be derived from a principle is to that very extent unfree. A science that emphasized the freedom in matter could say nothing at each moment besides: here is the free, the spontaneous, the unprecedented, the inexplicable. It would give up the pursuit of knowledge or explanation to revel in an anti-empiricism indistinguishable from spiritualism. To claim that nomothetic, empirical science has its roots in the scientific community’s emphasis on “how human ingenuity can result in greater control over nature” is to mistake effect for cause.

One finds two conflicting impetuses in Bennett’s work: respect for a certain mystery of matter, the “inscrutability” of its causality,[[11]](#endnote-12) alongside the assertion that our scientific representation of matter is an absolute truth. If we can understand this as a necessary tension, we are beginning to see deconstruction at work in her text. Without something unknown, matter is too much like a mechanism, a machine, the clockwork necessity she hopes to exclude. Nonetheless, if we acknowledge that freedom is something in principle unknowable, then we are in ignorance as to whether or not we observe it, whether in ourselves or in the other, for example the other matter. To avoid this conclusion, Bennett posits our absolute, scientific knowledge of matter’s freedom, a contradiction on which her project depends. Ultimately, this absolutism requires treating our ignorance as absolute knowledge, which is perhaps the common ground of anti-correlational and anti-constructivist discourses, and a sort of last refuge for speculative thought. One finds science treated as absolute knowledge in work otherwise as heterogeneous as Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* and Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* though a full demonstration of this will have to be pursued elsewhere.

*Life*

Bennett cites several “critical vitalist” thinkers as stepping stones toward her vital materialism. Though Kant, Driesch, and Bergson still separate the vital force from matter, they nonetheless refuse to posit it in a spirit independent of matter. They attempt in this way to navigate the concept of life, whose traditional positions are all aporetic: 1) vitalism, which posits life in an immaterial force (soul, spirit, mind, etc.), leaves unanswered how this immateriality interfaces with matter to produce its effects, 2) hylozoism, which posits the life force immediately in matter, only defers the question of how this self-relation is possible, and 3) mechanism, which accounts for the phenomena of life through physico-chemical causality, less explains than explains away life. Bennett claims to find both ontological and ethical reasons to support the critical gesture that brings life closer to matter; however, she attempts to identify vitality and materiality without considering these aporias, effacing something fundamental about the concepts in play.

Life cannot be identified with a substance, but requires the difference of form for its appearance. If there were not an order governed by repetition (that of classical mechanics), or one that trended toward indifference (thermodynamics) or decay (death), life would have no background on which to appear as the realm of self-organization. In other words, life never appears as such. We must represent some substrate as constrained in itself, in order to present ourselves with the phenomenon of its diverted course. Life is the external agency posited behind this phenomenon as the force bending matter to its will. When we look for life, nonetheless, we find only the law-governed motions of matter, for this is the essence of scientific explanation. The more we can explain life in terms of physico-chemical laws, the further we are from understanding that life whose principle is self-organization, *if there is any*. When Bennett proposes to attribute life, freedom, spontaneity, and invention to all matter, she proposes the disappearance of all life, and all science. I agree with her gesture to this extent, that the assertion of matter’s determinism (as it appears in Kant, Bergson, Driesch, and an entire tradition) is metaphysical. However, we should not rush toward an equally dogmatic reversal that imagines an empirico-positivistic or scientific status for vital matter.[[12]](#endnote-13)

There are necessary reasons why life stands in an awkward relationship with scientific inquiry. Science can discover only mechanical causality, the causality of a part toward another part, and of an other toward its other. The concept of life is inimical to this investigation, because it is the concept of a whole that determines its parts, and which institutes the wholeness of that whole, the self, by being its own cause and effect. As a result, a scientific investigation that would like to uncover a vitalist agency at work cannot do so by finding a cause but only by claiming that no cause can be found. Vitalism is not based on a positive scientific knowledge, but is attributed only where science has not yet explained it away. Driesch’s “empirical” investigations, and the conclusions Bennett bases on them, are examples of this aporia of science and life.

In part because of life’s resistance to empirical observation, its position oscillates in Bennett’s discourse. On the one hand, she describes all matter as “lively” (xvii, *passim*), “alive” (117), and of course vital. While these attributions seem to suggest that life is present in all matter, there are other formulations that suggest life itself must be kept at a distance in order to allow the vitality of matter to appear, “picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral […] its differentiations are too protean and diverse to coincide exclusively with the philosophical categories of life, matter, mental, environmental” (Bennett 116-7). It would be easy enough to account for this oscillating role of the term “life” if it were simply a matter of saying that Bennett wants to wed life to matter itself, and takes precautions lest the vitalist implication of an extra-material force or even a personal soul were to intrude. But the trouble returns if we recognize that the properties of this vitality without life, (agency, activity, freedom, creativity, self-organization, etc.) are impossible without the sort of difference that separated the vitalist spirit from matter. No activity without passivity, no creativity without the object formed by the agent, even or especially when that object is the self itself, which thus must contain the other or the non-vital, the fatal, as a moment within itself. It must be *life death*. These differences return to haunt every New Materialist discourse that would like to universalize vitality, a gesture that can be found, for example, in the work of Karen Barad and Catherine Malabou.[[13]](#endnote-14) Bennett acknowledges this difference without acknowledging it when she divides the figure of nature into a “brute matter” and a “generativity,” into “*natura naturata*” and “*natura naturans*” (117). She would like to keep only the active half of these divisions, but each is impossible without its counterpart. The implication, of course, is that life (or vitality, or any of its predicates) is not *immediately* matter, but emerges from differences of matter, in which certain matter comes to make itself more vital by its difference from or suppression of some “brute” matter. At times, Bennett’s discourse acknowledges this more than she might like, “All forces and flows (materialities) are *or can become* lively, affective, and signaling” (117, my emphasis).

The violence implied in this becoming-alive, which is the very violence of the metaphysical concepts Bennett uses to define life (activity vs. the passive, etc.), has dangerous repercussions for the ethical impetus of her discourse. She claims that vital materialism can level the hierarchy among beings implied by vitalism, “Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota” (Bennett 112). So, she stages a debate between Hans Driesch, a critical vitalist (proto-vital-materialist) and the spiritualism of the culture of life, which opposes stem cell research and abortion while sanctioning warfare. The culture of life leads to such (un)ethical conclusions because, according to Bennett, it transfers hierarchies between the human and other forms of life to hierarchies among different groups of humans. The other danger of the culture of life is its faith-based premises, Bennett suggests, which render this violent hierarchy incontestable. She argues that Driesch offers an empirical, falsifiable method for studying life, and one which undermines any hierarchy among the living.

But is Driesch’s vitalism truly empirical? Bennett makes the claim: “Driesch’s greater identification with and immersion in the techniques of experimental science may offer the advantage of better protection against the temptation in vitalism to spiritualize the vital agent” (81). In fact, Driesch has not fully resisted this “temptation” to spiritualize—he posits a supersensible force, then looks at organic matter and claims to see his force at work there. His research is as “empirical” as a scientific investigation would be if it claimed to find God in nature (or, for example, if it claimed evidence of intelligent design). He begins the section of *The History and Theory of Vitalism* entitled “The Empirical Proofs of Vitalism” by claiming that the revelation of “non-mechanical causality” at work in nature is a “purely empirical problem” (Driesch 207). He assumes the principle that a whole extended in space must have a non-spatial cause of unity, in order for any or all of its parts to be able to form or reform the whole. His empirical research involves, therefore, spatial division, either to show that individual cells of a sea-urchin embryo can still grow into a whole if artificially isolated, or that other organisms can be cut into pieces that then begin to function as individuals. His conclusion depends on the assumption that mechanical causality could not produce such results: “how could a machine *be divided innumerable times and yet remain what it was?*” (Driesch 211-2). Therefore, an extra-spatial force he calls *entelechy* must exist as unifying cause. The “critical” aspect of this vitalism comes from the dependence of this force on the matter it guides: its abilities are limited to “*suspending possible change* and *relaxing suspension*” (Driesch 203).

Driesch sets a low bar for the machinist to clear, and Bakhtin in his 1926 article “Contemporary Vitalism” was already able to suggest a plausible model for explaining such behavior by means of organic chemicals.[[14]](#endnote-15) Is Driesch's conclusion truly empirical when he claims that anything we cannot explain or reproduce mechanically is a result of a supersensible force? Notice that this logic, treating our ignorance as a knowledge of the supersensible, mirrors the absolute nescience we identified in the previous section. Even if Driesch’s particular arguments were falsified, perhaps more logically than empirically, by Bakhtin, Bennett’s own appropriation of them shows the persistence of his way of thought. Despite Bakhtin’s admonitions, she continues to treat everything that remains unexplained or unpredictable in our science as evidence of a creativity and agency of matter. Her vital materialism is no more empirical than the spiritualism for which, “…no science could contravene the theological verities of ensoulment, human exceptionalism and the qualitative hierarchy of Creation” (Bennett 87). That is not to say that any scientific project can free itself of faith. Rather, the ubiquity of faith should suggest that its presence or absence is not a useful guide, in itself, to ethicality or its failure. While we should recognize that an empirical investigation of life is only possible if there are quantifiable differences of vitality (and thus that the opposition Bennett creates between empiricism and hierarchy is untenable), she even demonstrates the difficulty of taking the horizontality of vital matter on faith.

Bennett’s trouble drawing ethical conclusions from these premises is indicative of the violence that remains in her conceptual framework. While she claims that Driesch’s opposition to Nazi appropriation of his research demonstrates the anti-hierarchical nature of his critical vitalism, she nonetheless acknowledges that he posited a hierarchy among living beings, with humanity granted a “special intensity” of *entelechy* (Bennett73). And she avoids drawing any vital materialist conclusions regarding stem cell research or abortion policy, perhaps because it would be more difficult to make them align with liberal politics. Her declared ethical objection to the spiritualism of the culture of life ultimately appears as more of a defensive projection. Not only does vital materialism offer no critical resources against spiritualism, it shares in spiritualism’s essence.

A prime example of Bennett’s retention of the traditional subjugation of matter is her logocentric view of the machine. Bakhtin suggested, quite accurately, that a machine would be capable of all the things Driesch thought only an extra-spatial force could accomplish. Bakhtin thought this argument supported the mechanistic view of matter, and I agree with Bennett that his view unduly elevates our thinking by restraining its substrate. But to shift mechanism to the figure of the machine in order to liberate matter retains the logocentric violence implicit in this distinction:

…machines and energies are concepts that simply cannot stretch to include as much freedom and spontaneity (i.e., that “*indefiniteness* of correspondence between specific cause and specific effect”) as Driesch senses to be operative in the world. What ultimately distinguishes Bahktin from Driesch, then, is the question of whether or not natural creativity is even in principle calculable. Driesch says no, Bahktin seems to say yes. Here I side with Driesch.[[15]](#endnote-16) (Bennett76)

Out of what would this machine of lifeless repetition be made in a world of vital matter? Creativity is not calculable, but to deny it to machines is to found it on a sovereign self-possession that preserves the same violence formerly perpetrated against matter. Instead, one must view both life and machine as kinds of difference, never able to simply carry out a program or protocol because of the lack of self-identity of the very principle under which we might to try to gather their behavior. A thinking that respected this difference would respond to the challenge Derrida poses: “What it would be necessary to try to think, and this is extremely difficult, is the event *with* the machine” (49). To do so, one must forfeit any claim to knowledge or certainty about the phenomenal presence of creativity, of invention.

*Invention, Intention*

Vital materialism also hopes to bestow on matter the predicate of creativity, a capacity for novelty or invention: “The point is this: an active becoming, a *creative not-quite-human force capable of producing the new,* buzzes within the history of the term nature*.* This vital materiality congeals into bodies” (Bennett118). As we have found with every term definitive of vitality, creativity is dogmatically asserted without an investigation into the essence of the new. What is the new? Can it ever appear as such? An aporia haunts this concept and prevents any possibility of recognition, as the new, in order to appear, would have to conform to the concept of novelty and thus lack originality. That something in no way predictable or calculable comes into being can remain for us as an object of faith, but the dogmatic assertion of its scientific status (again, claimed as verified by an absolutization of the stochastic in chaos or complexity theory) confines it to an empirical order inimical to its realization. This monism or immanence of the new participates in the very logocentric humanism it hopes to undo.

How could science verify that the new has taken place? Our inability to foresee, predict, or calculate an event would only be sufficient proof if our knowledge was absolute. That calculable novelty requires absolute knowledge to surprise itself is one formulation of its paradoxical nature. A tradition attempted to reduce matter to mere repetition of the same in order to enable the sovereign act of the human being who, uniquely able to form an idea prior to realizing it, could influence and alter this necessity, could introduce the new. But this, in turn, could only represent true novelty if concepts could be created from nothing, if they were not pre-ordained by an iterability akin to that of Ramon Llull’s thinking machine.[[16]](#endnote-17) Without exhausting the possible permutations of this aporia, I will suggest that merely extending the sovereign capacity for novelty to matter displaces without undoing the violence inherent in this gesture, which still must exaggerate our knowledge and deny the undecidability of matter.

Perhaps the clearest sign of this preservation of old hierarchies[[17]](#endnote-18) in Bennett’s vital materialism is her description of her doctrine as an “anthropomorphism:”

Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman “environment.” Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency. (120)

What does Bennett mean by saying her attribution of life, and with it “creative agency,” to matter is an instance of anthropomorphism? There can only be sense in invoking this figure if vitality, and with it all the predicates we have examined, including freedom and creativity, belong already to the human being. This rhetorical transfer would even suggest that they are the proper possession of humanity and are extended to matter by analogy or fantasy. Indeed, though Bennett repeatedly denies that matter has intention, subject, soul, mind, purposiveness, or person, human intentionality is taken for granted throughout her work. This has ramifications for both the ontological and ethico-political aspects of her project.

Because she would like to avoid the “old” vitalism, which separated life force from matter, Bennett emphasizes that vital matter is not an “intentional subject” (20), not an “active soul or mind” (10), but rather “impersonal” (59) and without purposiveness (69, 93).[[18]](#endnote-19) These are important steps toward the deconstruction of the metaphysical concept of life—suspending its ties to the intentional subject and broaching the thought of an unconscious life. However, one preserves the worst of metaphysics, and with it of anthropocentrism, if one preserves intentionality for the human alone, which is what Bennett means by referring to her “anthropomorphism.”[[19]](#endnote-20)

The human being is assumed to be a rational animal in Bennett’s study, and the only one. How, if these humans are composed of purposeless, intentionless, monistic vital matter, do they come to have intentions at all? Bennett makes several attempts to undo this exceptionalism by subjecting human intentions to a system, process, flow, or assemblage of material influences. She foregoes the many strategies others have attempted to make thinking part of a material plane of immanence, such as yoking it to neural, hormonal, or genetic matter or evolutionary or perceptual influences. Instead, she opts for anagraphy. Every system she would present as a vital materialist assemblage becomes a sort of list poem, from the Thing-Power introduced in *Vibrant Matter*’s opening pages (“Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” [Bennett 4]) to the list of lists she offers as summary and conclusion:

…insofar as anything “acts” at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage: for example, Hurricanes-FEMA-GlobalWarming; or StemCells-NIH-Souls; or Worms-Topsoil-Garbage; or Electricity-Deregulation-Fire-Greed; or E.Coli-Abattoirs-Agribusiness. (Bennett 120-1)

We might question how far toward the dissolution of subjectivity we have advanced by juxtaposing substantives. Is the *trait d’union* enough to awaken a thinking where identity is posterior to relationality? If the only aspect of these lists that makes them vital materialist is the inclusion of entities that traditionally would be placed on either side of the natural/cultural, material/ideal divide, the risk is run of reinforcing these binaries in their classical form.

In addition to these ontological quandaries, Bennett’s anthropomorphic humanism produces challenges for her ethico-political goals. Because matter remains, in her work, the thing stripped of all culture (its traditional, oppositional definition), the agency she grants it isolates it, rather than producing the relationality she celebrates. The claim that matter will affect us outside of our “cultural” view of it merely effaces the cultural differences that shape our experience of it. In this vein, Washick and Wingrove offer an insightful critique of Bennett’s reading of a GAP advertisement, which Bennett claimed would produce a “pagan sensibility” in viewers through the “infectious energy” and “vitality” of “*the khakis themselves*” (qtd. in Washick and Wingrove 70-71; Bennett’s emphasis). But such imagined access to matter and the thing itself is the stripping away of its cultural-economic predicates, an imaginary, originary wholeness that is only a modification of commodity fetishism. Her analysis obscures the exploitative capitalist dynamics of production and the inequalities of race and gender depicted in the advertisement. In fact, she seems to celebrate this aspect of her project, “Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power*” (6). Similarly, Abrahamsson et al. point out that Bennett’s celebration of Omega-3’s agency obscures the global system of exploitation that reduces fish to dietary supplements for European and North American markets while causing food shortages in the global south (12). The risk of Bennett’s claim that we know and experience the agency of matter itself is that our analysis must efface all of these ways in which matter remains relational to our activity and understanding.

Meanwhile, the ethical role remaining for we the humans is entirely on the side of our conscious, representationalist voluntarism.[[20]](#endnote-21) This logocentric humanism fundamentally undermines Bennett’s project. She frames her work, from its opening pages and throughout, as an appeal to this conscious subject, downplaying the truth-value of her own discourse to foreground its rhetorical force of persuasion, “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” (xvi). The anthropomorphism just mentioned is a component of this rhetoric. Though Bennett refers to her project also as a “positive ontology of vibrant matter” (x), “a (meta)physics of vibrant materiality” (94), and places significant emphasis on interrogating the history of philosophy, she halts this ostensible discourse on being intermittently to put forward an underlying method that elides precisely the ontological questions that occupy much of her work, “Postpone for a while the topics of subjectivity or the nature of human interiority, or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the animal, plant, and thing” (120). Such an *ethical attitude*, the understanding of ethical responsibility itself as an attitude adjustment, assumes precisely the separability of the human subject from material relationality that the ontological part of her project denounces.[[21]](#endnote-22) Our conscious intentionality exists apart from the world, and freely takes up an attitude toward it. The consideration of life in the previous section demonstrated how the ontological questions she dismisses to focus on ethics can presuppose and surreptitiously reinforce the ethical comportment she would like to discourage. No clean distinction can be made between the ontological and the ethical.

The political conclusion of *Vibrant Matter* remains mired in Bennett’s humanist logocentrism as well. Her vision of expanding the demos to include nonhumans is based on the model of representative democracy by which participation is allotted by means of the vote, the voice, “But surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs” (109). Matter cannot simply be added to this public as one more constituent but must fundamentally transform our notion of politics and the public if it is to be included, because it has been defined in advance as the outside of voice and consciousness. Ethical and political agency are clearly still being imagined as contemplative decisions made within the isolated consciousness of a thinking subject—Bennett has explicitly denied such a capacity to matter and does not address the question of how one could give nonhuman matter a participatory role in democracy.

To bring about such a politico-ontological revolution, one would have to pose the question: what does matter want? We should not be surprised to find this formulation echoing or parodying the Freudian question about female libido. Indeed, as early as Aristotle the matter/form distinction was explicitly mapped onto female and male sexuality (*Met.* I.6, 988a). No amount of investigation or analysis will uncover female desire if a phallogocentric conceptuality has marked out libido in advance as masculine. Similarly, the desire of matter will not communicate itself to us within the anthropocentric conceptuality that Bennett has not placed in question. This desire would neither be that of a living being nor that of a conscious subject, because it disrupts any guiding concept or form of self-organization, and endlessly produces its telos as a differential *restance.* Matter can only play its traditional causal role in Bennett’s thought, as a check or hindrance, because she has not deconstructed the passive repetition and sovereign innovation that both prevent the event of the desire *of* the other.

This other matter is neither an inert nor a spontaneous ground of material beings or our experience of them, because it is not a ground. No longer *materia prima*, it would subvert both the sense of priority, always having its basis in another contingent necessitation or necessary contingency, as well as the mathematical sense of the prime as the undivided (a-tom). That is, it would be different from itself, in the sense of always already spatialized life that differs without any decidability of agent or patient, substrate or superstructure. It would no more be the cosmos or divine as *zoon*,[[22]](#endnote-23)without the promise of organic unity or an intentionality that could return to itself as sovereign decision. This matter could be called free only to the extent that it belonged to a freedom that was not its own, that neither its predictable nor its unpredictable activities were any more nor less conative or innate. To recognize it as vital would be to acknowledge that it disappears from itself, that it participates in the life of the other who is not an empirically verifiable organic unity but an insurgent *arrivant*. The life our biology has hunted after for some time is no more empirical and no less differential than this life of matter, which finds itself not within the forms of familiar objects, the substantives still at home in Bennett’s anagraphy of actants, but rather only appears on the basis of their transgression. We will never exhaust the question of whose inventiveness or creativity satisfies itself through them, or through our asking. We can only say that this invention, if there is any, is an invention of the other.

If we have drawn into question the possibility of novelty, it is as much to render undecidable the dogmatic conclusions of Bennett’s empirical or pseudo-empirical investigation that would attribute it to matter, as to question the success of the work proclaiming a “new” materialism. We have repeatedly seen the most traditional concepts, those as old or in a certain sense older than history, reassert themselves in Bennett’s work, and we will find the same in any discourse founded on the corralation, a performative gesture of exclusion. No doctrine will ever be able, at the level of positivistic knowledge, to secure its own novelty, and so can only prop up this pretense with denegations of its inheritance. Only a discourse that respects the undecidability of these borders, their fragile, fractured, perhaps even their fractal structure, whose self-similar scaling guarantees we are never any closer to or further from transgressing them, only such a discourse may, unbeknownst to itself, become the body, organ, free act, or invention of another matter, whether in the sense of *Sache* or *Ding,* subject matter or subject-matter, always at the point where this difference too is undecidable.

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1. Many of my conclusions regarding New Materialism and its corralationist form will echo Sara Ahmed’s in “Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions.” She identifies in feminist New Materialist work the dismissal of past scholarship to prop up a new field and the absence of engagement with both the materialist philosophy supposedly championed and the feminist, “anti-biologist” scholarship supposedly critiqued. She also expresses skepticism about the value placed on novelty.

   Noela Davis, in her 2009 response to Ahmed, suggests that many New Materialist authors should be exempt from this critique, because they do not propose a corralation of the form ‘the past said culture whereas I say nature,’ but rather say that the past attempted to keep separate what should be represented as entangled: nature-culture. My hypothesis is that the very periodizing corralation these works use to separate themselves from the past dictates that the past work on the bad side and the scientific phenomena on the good side of the corralation will be misread in a one-sided fashion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. I have undertaken such a reading of Barad in “Other Matters: Karen Barad’s Two Materialisms and the Science of Undecidability,” forthcoming in *Angelaki*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. This statement is the most one-sided form of a gesture found in much of her writing. For example, “Part of this may be a pendulum swing in scholarship: a reaction to the good but overstated insights of social constructivist approaches” (Bennett, “Interview”98). This “good but overstated” is the most economical expression of the effort she makes always to have one leg in and one leg out of the field New Materialism tries to create by its performative act of exclusion. Another sign of this is her choice of the name Vital Materialism, which sets her work off from the “New,” but not from the “Materialism.” This could just as easily be read as a concession or as upping the ante of the progressivist gesture, seeking to profit from the field that has been carved out already, while nonetheless turning the same gesture against that field to declare her own uniqueness. Similar, more detailed forms of this corralation can be found in *Vibrant Matter* (1-2, 17). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. I do not know, in selecting the term vital materialism, if Bennett had in mind Diderot, whom Jean Wahl once described as a “*matérialiste vitaliste*” (Wahl 53). In either case, the connection is more than fortuitous; Diderot is one of several figures from the metaphysical tradition who could aptly be described as a hylozoist, one who posits all matter as living. Diderot is cited as an influence in *Vibrant Matter*, pp. xiii, 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. All references to Jane Bennett’s work are to *Vibrant Matter* unless otherwise noted. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. In the same letter Bennett cites, Spinoza writes, “So you see that I place freedom, not in free decision, but in free necessity” (Spinoza 909). This connection of freedom and necessity remained decisive at least from Kant, who understood our freedom as autonomy, our discovery in ourselves of the moral law, to Hegel, who wrote, “From this we can also gather how absurd it is to regard freedom and necessity as mutually exclusive. To be sure, necessity as such is not yet freedom; but freedom presupposes necessity and contains it sublated within itself” (Hegel 232). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. In “Living with Omega-3,”Abrahamsson et al. also identify the contradiction in Bennett’s use of this study, describing it as a tension between the agency or activity of matter and its causality (14). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, who are an important reference point for Bennett and a significant precursor of New Materialist studies in general, commit this same error. They recognize mechanistic descriptions of nature as a model while treating chaotic descriptions as absolute knowledge. For example, in *Order Out of Chaos*, they have the following to say about the “limit” reached by “classical science:” “One aspect of this transformation is the discovery of the limitations of classical concepts that imply that a knowledge of the world ‘as it is’ was possible […] As randomness, complexity, and irreversibility enter into physics as objects of positive knowledge, we are moving away from this rather naive assumption of a direct connection between our description of the world and the world itself” (Prigogine and Stengers 54-55). Nonetheless, they embrace this “direct connection” when describing chaos and complexity: “The artificial may be deterministic and reversible. The natural contains essential elements of randomness and irreversibility. This leads to a new view of matter in which matter is no longer the passive substance described in the mechanistic world view but is associated with spontaneous activity” (Prigogine and Stengers 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See Gleick, *Chaos* pp. 21-23. Tellingly, this subsection is titled “Order masquerading as randomness” (Gleick ix). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Nor should we think that whatever indeterminacy or undecidability exists belongs on the side of the subject (or language), whether as a corrigible or incorrigible shortcoming of our knowledge. What belongs to or comes from subject and object, being and thinking, is just as undecidable as the necessity or contingency on either side. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. “(My vital materialism posits the causality of both inorganic and organic matter to be, to some extent, inscrutable to us, and also that a mechanistic model is inadequate to both.)” (Bennett67). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Several critics of vital materialism have taken issue with its undifferentiated representation of life. Lemke suggests that Bennett effaces a relational view necessary to account for a “government of things’ (15), Braun and Whatmore call Bennett’s undifferentiated approach a “metaphysics” (xxix), and Bannon suggests that Bennett has mistaken affectivity for vitality (3). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Barad asserts the universality of “aliveness” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, pp. 177 and 234-5. For an understanding of this theme in the work of Catherine Malabou, I am indebted to Thomas Clement Mercier’s “Resisting the Present: Biopower in the Face of the Event (Some Notes on Monstrous Lives),” forthcoming in *CR: The New Centennial Review*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. For a survey of more contemporary research on Positional Information, see ch. 6 of Evelyn Fox Keller’s *Making Sense of Life*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. In “A Vitalist Stopover,” Bennett considers the same debate and reaches the opposite conclusion, “Bakhtin recommended that Driesch rethink what a ‘machine’ can be rather than reject physico-materialist explanation per se. I agree” (56). While she seems to take a more generous stance to the possibility of a creative machine in this passage, she misattributes this idea to Bakhtin. The latter maintained a rigorously mechanistic representation of both matter and the machine, and refuted Driesch on those grounds. Of course, because Driesch separates the vital force from matter, and Bakhtin represents matter as mechanistic, she disagrees with both of them. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. See Borges’ “Ramon Llull’s Thinking Machine.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. In “Logics of Generalization,” David Cunningham offers an insightful critique of the corralationist gesture that treats Derrida as a transcendental linguist akin to Benveniste. Cunningham’s conclusion, that self-styled speculative and materialist work ends up in a “return to a pre-critical idea of philosophy,” demonstrates the relationship of supposed novelty to conservatism that I am sketching out here. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. It is difficult to evaluate what Bennett means by this term (purposiveness). It occurs most frequently in connection with her discussion of Kant in chapter 5, though she seems to use the term in an almost opposite sense to Kant’s usage. It seems to be equivalent to “intentional” in her discourse, suggesting that she takes it to mean a consciously held and represented purpose. But Kant is explicit throughout the “Critique of Teleological Judgment” that purposiveness is simply the amenability organized beings and nature as a whole provide to our subjective effort to discover final causality, without offering any proof of the presence of underlying representational purposes in the object. One can think organization without purpose (though this would not form such a sharp distinction with what Bennett calls trajectory or drive), but it is unclear, if one eliminates *purposiveness*, on what grounds one identifies vitality at all. See *Critique of Judgment,* Intro. IV and §61. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Jacques Lezra is equally critical of this “anthropomorphisation” in his “Uncountable Matter.” On the stubborn persistence of teleology in biology and philosophy, and for an attempt to think it deconstructively in its relation to life, see Francesco Vitale’s “‘With or Without You…’” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Washick and Wingrove criticize the isolating subjectivity of the modified “Nicene Creed” that concludes *Vibrant Matter*, “I believe in one matter-energy […] I believe […] I believe” (Washick and Wingrove 76). This pledge of faith shows how little Bennett’s thought has challenged the ontotheological subject. It exists in isolation from the world, making a private, internal decision as to how matter should or should not be recognized. While Washick and Wingrove point out that Bennett has even singularized the Christian Creed’s first-person-plural, Bennett counters that “such litanies are performed aloud in groups” and thus that she was imagining an “action-in-concert” (“Ontology” 84-5). But even an intersubjective pledge of faith remains within the isolated, worldless thought of immaterial consciousness. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. The notion of sympathy that Bennett has developed in recent work is an attempt to respond to these lingering tensions from *Vibrant Matter* (“Material Sympathies,” “Whitman’s Sympathies”). How do we recognize the agency of matter without absolving ourselves of responsibility? Can we recognize our participation and influence in larger assemblages without reducing ourselves to an isolated subjectivity or invoking the too-cultural discourse of structures? Sympathy attempts to thread these needles by producing a hybrid sort of influence: matter or nature can have a pre-subjective influence on us, that ultimately results in our more sympathetic engagement with that nature. Apart from the many questions we could pose with respect to this form of influence (isn’t difference, dissimilarity, dissension also a fundamental force of nature?), I will note only that it maintains the separation of matter from a metaphysical, human subject, which is what provokes this search for a bridge between them. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Recall that Plato in the *Timaeus* invoked the vitality of the cosmos to suggest that it had no outside, that its only difference was internal and auto-affective, feeding only on the waste it produced (33c). On God as a living thing, see Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Book XII, 1072b. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)