THE FORCE OF THINGS
Steps toward an Ecology of Matter

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This essay seeks to give philosophical expression to the vitality, willfullness, and recalcitrance possessed by nonhuman entities and forces. It also considers the ethico-political import of an enhanced awareness of "thing-power." Drawing from Lucretius, Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, and others, it describes a materialism of lively matter, to be placed in conversation with the historical materialism of Marx and the body materialism of feminist and cultural studies. Thing-power materialism is a speculative onto-story, an admittedly presumptuous attempt to depict the nonhumanity that flows around and through humans. The essay concludes with a preliminary discussion of the ecological implications of thing-power.

Keywords: *materialism; materiality; ecology; Latour, Deleuze; Adorno; Spinoza; nonhuman; immanence*

> . . . the lovely puzzles, the enchanting beauty, and the excruciating complexity and intractability of actual organisms in real places.
>
> ——Stephen Jay Gould[1]

> I must let my senses wander as my thought, my eyes see without looking. . . . Go not to the object; let it come to you.
>
> ——Henry Thoreau[2]

> It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing; it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.
>
> ——Baruch Spinoza[3]

Seven-Up: You Like It. It likes you.[4]

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CONTENDING MATERIALITIES

In the early 1990s a literature professor I had just met asked me what I was working on, and I said I was writing a book on Henry Thoreau, whose interest in the Wild seemed to me to foreshadow Foucault's concern with otherness. My new friend replied that she didn't much care for Foucault, who "lacked a materialist perspective." At the time, I took this reply simply as her way of letting me know that she was committed to a Marx-inspired politics. But the comment stuck, and eventually provoked these thoughts: How did Marx's notion of materiality—as economic structures and exchanges—come to stand in for "a materialist perspective" per se? Why wasn't there a livelier debate among contending theories of materiality?

Since that time, there has been an explosion of political-theoretical work on the (human) body as a materiality, indebted to, among others, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler. One hallmark of this "body materialism" (as I will call it) is its insistence upon locating the body inside a culture or bio-culture. It has examined the micro- and macro-political forces through which the (human) body is, among other things, gendered, sexed, pacified, and excited. Body materialism, in other words, reveals how cultural practices shape what is experienced as natural or real.[5] Some of this genealogical work also insists upon the *material recalcitrance* of cultural products. Sexuality, for example, is shown to be a congealed bodily effect of historical norms and practices, but its status as a human artifact does *not* imply that it yields readily to human understanding or control. The point here is that cultural forms are themselves material assemblages that *resist*.[6]

My essay takes off from that last insight: it features the recalcitrance or moment of vitality in things. But unlike the general aim of the body materialists, I want to give voice to a *less specifically human* kind of materiality, to make manifest what I call "thing-power." I do so in order to explore the possibility that attentiveness to (nonhuman) things and their powers can have a laudable effect on humans. (I am not utterly uninterested in humans.) In particular, might, as Thoreau suggested, sensitivity to thing-power induce a stronger ecological sense?

The thing-power materialism I am trying to develop draws from various sources. In the background is, again, Thoreau's notion of the Wild, that is, his idea that there is an existence peculiar to a thing that is irreducible to the thing's imbrication with human subjectivity. It is due to this otherness or wildness, says Thoreau, that things have the power to addle and rearrange thoughts and perceptions. In the foreground is a Lucretian figuration of materiality as capable of free or aleatory movements; a non-Newtonian picture of

nature as matter-flow, especially as it is developed in the thought of Gilles Deleuze; and the Spinozist idea that bodies have a propensity to form collectivities. To illustrate the affinities between organic and inorganic matter, I cite examples from everyday life, or what Thomas Dumm calls "the ordinary,"[7] as well as from fiction, phenomenology, and natural science.

Thing-power materialism is a speculative onto-story, a rather presumptuous attempt to depict the nonhumanity that flows around but also through humans. Such a project violates Theodor Adorno's warning against the violent *hubris* of Western philosophy, which consistently fails to acknowledge the gap between concept and thing. For Adorno, the very most that can be said about the thing is that it refuses to be captured entirely by any concept, that there is always a "nonidentity" between the two. A materialism like mine, which fleshes out an ontological imaginary of things and their powers, is for him nothing but an arrogant failure to respect the inherent obscurity of the thing. In response, I argue that projecting a moment of "naive realism" into one's political theory may foster greater ethical appreciation of thing-power, an appreciation that I try, in a preliminary way, to tie to an ecological project of sustainability.

Thing-power materialism figures materiality as a protean flow of matter-energy and figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow. It hazards an account of materiality even though materiality is both too alien and too close for humans to see clearly. It seeks to promote acknowledgment, respect, and sometimes fear of the materiality of the thing and to articulate ways in which human being and thinghood overlap. It emphasizes those occasions in ordinary life when the us and the it slipslide into each other, for one moral of this materialist tale is that we are also nonhuman and that things too are vital players in the world. Like Thoreau, I hope to enhance my receptivity to thing-power by writing about it, by giving an account of the thingness of things that might enable me to feel it more intensely. I pursue this project in the hope of fostering greater recognition of the agential powers of natural and artifactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies, and, finally, a more cautious, intelligent approach to our interventions in that ecology.

THING-POWER I: TRASH

On a sunny Tuesday morning, June 4, 2002, in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane (which was being repaved), there was

one large men's black plastic work glove
a matted mass of tree pollen pods
one dead rat who looked asleep
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood

As I looked at these items, they shimmied back and forth between trash and thing—between, on one hand, stuff to ignore (notable only as a residue of human action and inaction: the litterer's incivility, the neighbor's failure to keep the storm drain clear, Sam's vermin-eradication efforts, the Department of Public Works' road maintenance schedule) and, on the other hand, stuff that commands attention as vital and alive in its own right, as an existant in excess of its reference to human flaws or projects. The second kind of stuff has thing-power: it commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry, or inspires fear.

I was struck by the singular materiality of the glove, the rat, the bottle cap—a singularity brought to light by the contingency of their co-presence, by the specific assemblage they formed.[8] For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic substantiality possessed by each of these things, things that I generally saw as inert. This opening was made possible by the fortuity of that particular configuration, but also, perhaps, by a certain anticipatory readiness—a perceptual style congenial to the possibility of thing-power. For I came upon the glove-pod-rat-cap-stick with Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to practice "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen,"[9] and also with Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had disclosed "an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends, . . . to the whole sensible world," and had shown me how "our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."[10]

I was struck as well by the way the glove, rat, cap oscillated: at one moment garbage, at the next stuff that made a claim on me. Is trash stuff whose power to move, speak, or make a difference has become dormant or dead? (As so it is buried in the landfill or cast adrift onto the Chesapeake?) Trash, garbage, litter, dirt, debris, filth, refuse, detritus, rubbish, junk: materialities without their thing-power. A "materialistic" way of life—insofar as it requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles—thus displays an *anti*-materiality bias. In other words, the sheer volume of products, and the necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, devalues the thing.[11] It disables and obscures thing-power. After all, it is hard to discern, much less acknowledge, the material dignity of

the thing when your nose is overwhelmed by the dozens of scents that "have collected into strata in the department store air"[12] or when your thoughts are scrambled by the miles of shelving at a superstore. There is a way, then, in which American materialism is antimateriality. Too much stuff in too quick succession equals the fast ride from object to trash.

Trash, garbage, litter, dirt, debris, filth, refuse, detritus, rubbish, junk. Compare the effect of that list to this mise-en-scéne: on an asphalt platform, a shiny black glove rests on a pollen mat, a prone rat in the foreground, bright plastic cap and smooth wooden stick to the left. Here each thing is individuated, but also located within an assemblage—each is shown to be in a relationship with the others, and also with the sunlight and the street, and not simply with me, my vision, or my cultural frame. Here thing-power rises to the surface. In this assemblage, *objects* appear more vividly as *things*, that is, as entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. To encounter the gutter on Cold Spring Lane as a mise-en-scéne rather than as trash is to glimpse a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects. It is to become better able "to be surprised by what we see."[13]

Flower Power, Black Power, Girl Power. *Thing Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.

THING-POWER II: CREATIVE SELF-ORGANIZATION

Thing-power is a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans. The dead rat stopped me in my tracks, as did the plastic cap and the wooden stick. But the suspicion remains: was this captivating power ultimately a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my idea of these items? Was my immobilization simply the result of my sudden recollection of the web of cultural meanings associated with the images "rat," "plastic," "wood"? It could be. But what if all the swarming activity *inside* my head was itself an expression of a motility inherent to materiality per se? In support of the latter view, Manuel De Landa describes the power of nonhuman materiality to "self-organize":

> inorganic matter-energy has a wider range of alternatives for the generation of structure than just simple phase transitions. . . . In other words, even the humblest forms of matter and energy have the potential for *self-organization* beyond the relatively simple type involved in the creation of crystals. There are, for instance, those coherent waves called solitons which form in many different types of materials, ranging from ocean waters (where they are called tsunamis) to lasers. Then there are . . . stable states (or attractors),

> which can sustain coherent cyclic activity. . . . Finally, and unlike the previous examples of nonlinear self-organization where true innovation cannot occur, there [are] . . . the different combinations into which entities derived from the previous processes (crystals, coherent pulses, cyclic patterns) may enter. When put together, these forms of spontaneous structural generation suggest that inorganic matter is much more variable and creative than we ever imagined. And this insight into matter's inherent creativity needs to be fully incorporated into our new materialist philosophies.[14]

Kafka's "Cares of a Family Man" is a less scientific depiction of the power of things to mobilize and re-form. The protagonist, Odradek, is a spool of thread who/that can run and laugh. As *animate wood*, Odradek is the result of a "spontaneous structural generation" (to use De Landa's phrase). Like a soliton, this particular mode of matter-energy resides in a world where the line between inert matter and vital energy, between animate and inanimate, is permeable—and where all things, to some degree or other, live on both sides.

The narrator of Kafka's story has trouble assigning an ontological category to Odradek. Is Odradek an artifact? But if so, its purpose is obscure:

> it looks like a flat star-shaped spool of thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, these are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. . . . One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; . . . nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind: the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished.[15]

Or is Odradek a living creature, a little person? But if so, his embodiment is unlike that of any other person we've encountered. From the center of Odradek's star there protrudes a small wooden crossbar, and "by means of this latter rod . . . and one of the points of the star . . . , the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs." And Odradek not only stands, he is "extraordinarily nimble":

> He lurks by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies, the entrance hall. Often for months on end he is not to be seen; then he has presumably moved into other houses; but he always comes faithfully back to our house again. Many a time when you go out of the door and he happens just to be leaning directly beneath you against the banisters you feel inclined to speak to him. Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. "Well, what's your name?" you ask him. "Odradek," he says. "And where do you live?" "No fixed abode," he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance.[16]

Like De Landa and Kafka, the Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-45) also refused any sharp distinction between life and matter. Eschewing that dichotomy, he preferred to speak of "living matter." Vernadsky "made every attempt to consider life part of other physical processes and consistently used the gerund 'living' to stress that life was less a thing and more a happening, a process. Organisms for Vernadsky are special, distributed forms of the common mineral, water. . . . Emphasizing the continuity of watery life and rocks, such as that evident in coal or fossil limestone reefs, Vernadsky noted how these apparently inert strata are 'traces of bygone biospheres.'"[17] Deleuze, invoking Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, agrees: just as there is "a halo of instinct in intelligence, a nebula of intelligence in instinct," there is "a hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals."[18]

Hylozoism: a doctrine held, especially by early Greek philosophers, but also by the Jains of India, that all matter has life.

THING-POWER III: CONJUNCTIONS

De Landa's soliton, Kafka's Odradek, and Vernadsky's living matter upset conventional distinctions between matter and life, inorganic and organic, passive object and active subject. These examples dramatize the ability of materiality to move across those lines, varying the speed or level of activity as it migrates from resting to mobile and back. Or, as a Spinozist might put the point, to adjust its relations of movement and rest in relation to other bodies. For Spinoza, this capacity is bound up with the fact that every entity is a "mode" of one ontological substance (call it either God or Nature, he said). Each human, as one mode, is always in the process of entering into a set of relationships with other modes. Because this set itself changes over time (bodies move about, propelled by internal and external forces), to be a mode is, in turn, to mode-ify and be modified. Nature according to Spinoza is a place wherein bodies strive to enhance their power of activity by forging alliances with other bodies in their vicinity (and, in a parallel way, wherein ideas strive to enhance their power of activity by joining up with other ideas). This process of mode-ifying is never under the full control of any one body, for it is always subject to the contingency of aleatory encounters with other modes. Though one goal of Spinozist ethics is to exercise a greater degree of self-direction regarding one's encounters, humans are never *outside* of a set of relations with other modes: we may learn to alter the quality of our encounters but not our encountering nature.[19] The relevant point for thinking about thing-power is this: a material body always resides within some assemblage

or other, and its thing-power *is a function of that grouping*. A thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction* with other things.

Spinoza helps the thing-materialist to rearticulate what is more often conceived as the subject-object relationship: the particular matter-energy formation that is a human is always engaged in a working relationship with other formations, some human and some not. Deleuze and Guattari, in a similar vein, locate humanity within a single cosmic flow of "matter-movement." This autopoetic flow is capable of an astonishingly wide variety of mobile configurations: it is "matter in variation that enter assemblages and leaves them."[20] This is not a world, in the first instance, of subjects and objects, but of various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations. It is a world populated less by individuals than by groupings or compositions that shift over time. For example, the current alliance Jane-keyboard-birdsong (from the yard outside) will become another ensemble of flesh, plastic, and sound when, later in the day, I drive in my car to the dentist. And once there, in the dentist chair, the operative animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster—and its degrees and types of power—will again change.

What Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari here suggest to me is that thing-power, as a kind of agency, *is the property of an assemblage*. Thing-power materialism is a (necessarily speculative) onto-theory that presumes that matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with varying degrees of stability. Here, then, is an affinity between thing-power materialism and ecological thinking: both advocate the cultivation of an enhanced sense of the extent to which all things are spun together in a dense web, and both warn of the self-destructive character of human actions that are reckless with regard to the other nodes of the web.

THING-POWER IV: ACTANCY

Thing-power entails the ability to shift or vibrate between different states of being, to go from trash/inanimate/resting to treasure/animate/alert. Thing-power is also a relational effect, a function of several things operating at the same time or in conjunction with one another. I experienced a bit of this thing-power recently while serving on a jury. There I encountered the Gun Powder Residue Sampler. A small glass vial topped with an adhesive-covered metal disk, the Sampler was dabbed on the suspect's hand and then proferred microscopic evidence that the hand had fired a gun or been within three feet of a gun firing. The Sampler was shown to the jury twice by expert witnesses and mentioned many times during the course of the trial, each time

gaining power. This small, at first apparently inert, arrangement of glass, metal, and glue began to present itself as what Bruno Latour calls an "actant."

Unlike the term "actor," an actant can be either human or nonhuman: it is that which *does* something, has sufficient coherence to perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations. Sometimes, says Latour, as in laboratory experiments, a proto-actant emerges that does not yet have a stabilized identity and is thus describable only as a list of effects or performances. Here the term "name of action" is more appropriate than actant, for "only later does one deduce from these performances a competence," that is, an entity congealed enough to make a difference in the situation.[21] Latour strives to develop a vocabulary to better capture the multiple modalities and degrees of agency. Agency appears to him as a continuum, as a power differentially expressed by *all* material bodies.

The idea of agency as a continuum seems also to be present in the notion of "deodand," a figure of English law from about 1200 until its abolishment in 1846. In cases of accidental death or serious injury to a human, the evil thing involved—the knife that pierced the flesh or the carriage that trampled the leg—became deodand or "that which must be given to God." Deodand, "suspended between human and thing,"[22] designated the instrument of death or destruction. In what can be seen as recognition of its peculiar kind of culpability, the deodand had to be surrendered to the Crown in order to be used (or sold) to compensate for the harm done by its movement or presence. According to William Pietz, "any culture must establish some procedure of compensation, expiation, or punishment to settle the debt created by unintended human deaths whose direct cause is not a morally accountable person, but a nonhuman material object. This was the issue thematized in public discourse by . . . the law of deodand."[23]

There is of course a difference between the knife that impaled a man and the man impaled, and between the technician who dabs the Sampler and the Sampler. But the thing-power materialist agrees with John Frow that this difference "needs to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being. It's a feature of our world that we can and do distinguish . . . things from persons. But the sort of world we live in makes it constantly possible for these two sets of kinds to exchange properties."[24]

The rat body, the bottle cap, Odradek, soliton, deodand. Or the self-levitating plates and napkins of Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*: there was a "white tablecloth, like a covering of snow newly fallen, from which rose symmetrically the plates and napkins crowned with light-coloured rolls."[25] Or the human body and its "motor intentionality," a kind of directionality inside the motion of an arm or hand that is not reducible, says Merleau-Ponty, to any

subjective or self-conscious decision. For him, the body possesses the very quality, that is, intentionality, for which the category of mind was invented.[26] Or the thing-power of Nike shoes: they can produce narapathy in the bodies of factory workers as well aesthetic pleasure in the viewers of its 2002 "Move" television commercial, which is filmed so as to reveal uncanny similarities between bodies in motion, be they basketballs and gymnasts or a group of cyclists and a flock of birds.[27]

Today the tendency is to refer all expressions of thing-power back to a *human* operation conceived as its ultimate source—to, for example, the cultural meanings invested in a rat, the no-return/no-deposit policy governing the bottle cap, or the corporate greed oozing from the Nikes. But what if we slowed this crossing from thing to human culture in order to reach a more complex understanding of their relationship? To help us, we might paradoxically recall a more naive orientation to the thing. I turn briefly to the ancient materialism of Lucretius.

A NAIVE MOMENT

In his *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius, Roman devotee of Epicurus, asserts that every real and potential thing is material. There is no supernatural arena, no immortal soul. Though we sometimes *experience* things as if they were "of" the spirit, this is only because we are embodied in such a way as to be unable to sense some kinds and collections of matter. For Lucretian materialism, there are bodies and void (the space in which they move), and that's it. As we shall see, the matter imagined in this materialism is not the lifeless stuff of mechanistic theories of nature, but more like the vital force of Spinoza's *natura naturans*, a materiality that is always in the process of reinventing itself, which William Connolly has described as "a world of diverse energies and strange vitalities that whirls around and through [us]."[28] I will return to this lively materiality later; I'd like to focus now on Lucretius's willingness to hazard an account of matter at all, on his bold attempt to describe a something that subsists below anything specifically human (even as that matter also constitutes human bodies and ideas). *De Rerum Natura* depicts a world that preexists our arrival, constitutes our present, and would endure our departure. It claims to reveal the blueprint of being: here are the smallest constituent parts of being (material atoms or "primordia"), and here are the principles of association governing them. It rejects religion and disempowers the gods, presents death as a reconfiguration of primordia made necessary by the essential motility of matter, and offers advice on how to live well while existing in one's current material form. *De Rerum Natura* is at once a book of

physics, ontology, and ethics. I admire Lucretius's audacity: he claims to describe the world as it is with or without us, for the most part ignoring the mediating role and idiosyncratic status of his perceptions, his Latin, his "paganism."

It's hard to get away with that today. Contemporary materialists must contend with a well-established critique of the "naive realist" claim to get underneath, behind, or in front of the mediating screens of subjectivity, cultural formations, and perceptual biases. The realist quests for the thing itself, say the critics, but there is no there there—or, at least, no way for us to grasp it or know it. Adorno, for example, applies the criticism to Heidegger:

> Realism seeks to breach the walls which thought has built around itself, to pierce the interjected layer of subjective positions that have become a second nature. . . . Heidegger's realism turns a somersault: his aim is to philosophize formlessly, so to speak, purely on the ground of things, with the result that things evaporate for him. Weary of the subjective jail of cognition, he becomes convinced that what is transcendent to subjectivity is immediate for subjectivity, without being conceptually stained by subjectivity.[29]

Adorno insists, as do the "body materialists" cited at the start of this essay, that *things* are always already humanized *objects*. This object status arises the very instant something comes into our awareness or under our gaze. For Marx, too, naive realism was the philosophy to overcome. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the "metaphysical materialism" of the Epicureans, and it was partly against its naivete and abstraction that he would eventually define his own new "historical materialism." Historical materialism would not be a phantasmatic ontological tale but a real social theory; it would focus not on matter per se but on concrete, social materialities. Marx and Adorno themselves eschew any (explicit) ontology, they refuse to detach materiality from humanity, and they seek to discredit as "naive" materialisms that do otherwise.

My view is that while humans do indeed encounter things only in a mediated way, there nonetheless remains something to be said for the naivete of naive realism. A moment of naivete is, I think, indispensable for any discernment of thing-power, if there is to be any chance of acknowledging the force of matter. A naive realism (which, in my case functions as an onto-story rather than an apodictic account) allows nonhumanity to appear on the ethical radar screen. Yes, there is a sense in which any thing-power discerned is an effect of culture, and this insight is a valuable counter to moralistic appeals to "nature." But concentration on this insight alone also diminishes any potential we might possess to render more *manifest* the world of nonhuman vitality.

To "render manifest" is both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received. What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them: we bring something from ourselves to the experience, and so it is not pure or unmediated. But a receptive mood with a moment of naivete is a useful counter to the tendency (prevalent in sociological and anthropological studies of material culture) to conclude the biography of an object by showing how it, like everything, is socially constituted. To pursue an ecology of things is sometimes to resist that punch line, to elide its truth, for it inclines thinking and perception too much toward the primacy of humans and "the subject." Lucretius's poem, in contrast, gives center stage to the power of the specifically *nonhuman* dimension of humans and other things; it gives greater latitude to the capacity of things to move, threaten, inspire, and animate the more obviously animated things called humans. There is an advantage, then, to this naive realism: it "disavows . . . the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality as such. It does so, however, in the name of *avowing* the force of questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word."[30]

Such a naive realism takes human fascination with objects as a clue to the secret life of nonhumans. It seeks the holy grail of the materiality of the rat body, the bottle cap, the wooden stick. It pursues the "actancy" of materiality. The primordia of Lucretius, for example, possess an amplitude of agency, a lively power to enter into new combinations, to make a difference and make things happen. These matter-bits are said to fall endlessly through a void, though every now and then, without warning and at no regular interval, they swerve from their downward path, bump into others, and thus form the assemblages that constitute the things around and in us:

> *at times quite undetermined and at undetermined spots they push a little from their path*: yet only just so much as you could call a change of trend. [For if they did not] . . . swerve, all things would fall downwards through the deep void like drops of rain, nor could collision come to be, nor a blow brought to pass for the primordia: so nature would never have brought anything into existence.[31]

Lucretius's assertion of a primordial swerve in matter says that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides in the nature of things. It also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other things. A kind of thing-power.

Deleuze and Guattari allude to the swerve when they say that that which has a body by that very token has a spiritedness (an *esprit de corps*), and even a kind of thrust or directionality (a *nomos*).[32] There is also an interesting relationship to be explored between the swerve and Henri Bergson's *elan vital*.[33] Finally, a group of neo-Marxists calling themselves "aleatory materialists" endorse a modified version of hylozoism. They argue that because classical Marxism's image of the structure of capitalism is more rigid and impervious than many contemporary forms of power seem to be, materialism today must rework the view of nature and history inherited from Marx by acknowledging something like a surprising swerve in matter.[34] According to Antonio Negri, for example, "aleatory materialism is a 'completely naked' materialism," one no longer conceived as the economic base of a social structure but rather as a shimmering and inherently unpredictable "horizon of presence."[35]

The materialisms of Lucretius, Deleuze, and Negri are impertinent: they dare to speak of things as if from the perspective of the (cheeky) entities themselves. They reserve a place in theory for the aleatory and in so doing display a kind of respect for the cunning thing-power of things. And they do so in part through a willingness to indulge in a moment of naivete.[36]

WALKING, TALKING MINERALS

Thing-power materialism offers a contestable but, I think, auspicious account of how it is that things have the power to move humans, the beings who—in accounts that emphasize Augustinian free will or Kantian autonomy or Hegelian self-consciousness—are figured as *self*-movers. It emphasizes the shared material basis, the kinship, of all things, regardless of their status as human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. It does not deny that there are differences between human and nonhuman, though it strives to describe them without succumbing to the temptation to place humans at the ontological center. One way to do so is to distinguish humans as things composed of a *particularly rich and complex* collection of materiality.[37] In Jean-Francois Lyotard's "Postmodern Fable," for example, "humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language for a highly complex material system"; Richard Rorty also suggests that human beings are more complex animals, rather than animals "with an extra added ingredient called 'intellect' or 'the rational soul.'"[38] Vernadsky sees humans as a particularly potent mix of minerals, as Lynn Margulis's summary shows:

> What struck [Vernadsky] most was that the material of Earth's crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate oxygen . . . and other elements of Earth's crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth's surface. *We are walking, talking minerals*.[39]

Thing materialism emphasizes the kinship between people and things. So far, the case for that kinship has proceeded primarily by presenting *nonhumanity* as an active actant. But to make the case for kinship, must it not also be shown how humanity participates in thinghood? De Landa cites bone as an example of our interior inorganicism; bone reveals one way in which we are not only animal and vegetable, but also mineral:

> . . . soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden *mineralization*, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerge: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself.[40]

The emergence of bone "made new forms of movement control possible among animals, freeing them from many constraints and literally setting them into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land."[41] Here bone is a mover and shaker, mineralization an agent. There is a sense in which we are *its* object, and improved in our own agency as a result. Or perhaps it is most accurate to say that agency is a property less of individual entities than of assemblages of humans and nonhumans.

The view that there is a thing-ness to humans, that the human contains no distinct substance, but shares the *elan vital* of less complexly or differently organized things, risks being used as a justification for the instrumental use of persons, for their objectification or commodification. Of course, what is immoral here is the goal of domination, not the act of recognizing the presence of the nonhuman within the human. But the danger of a harmful or cruel instrumentalism is real. It might, however, be mitigated when the blurring of the human/nonhuman distinction is combined with the attempt to enhance the ethical standing *of things*. The danger of reducing subjects to "mere objects" is most acute, I think, in a materialism in which things are always already on their way to becoming trash (where materiality is conceived as the dead other to life). Thing-power materialism, in contrast, figures things as being more than mere objects, emphasizing their powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will; these are powers that, in a tightly knit world, we ignore at our own peril. The perspective I am pursuing does not reject self-

interest as one motivation for ethical behavior, nor does it think it possible to eliminate completely the conceptual "enframing" that Heidegger criticizes. Rather, it seeks to cultivate a more enlightened self-interest, one cognizant of our embeddedness in a natural-cultural-technological assemblage. Even such an enlightened understanding of interest is not always sufficient to provoke ethical behavior toward other bodies. Ethical motivation needs also to draw upon co-feeling or sympathy with suffering, and also upon a certain love of the world, or enchantment with it. This last source is best inspired, I think, by an onto-tale that enhances one's awareness of the vitality of the world with which one is enmeshed. Again, it must be said that the relation between an ontology and an ethic is always loose, though the relation is rendered less indeterminate when the temper in which the ontology is lived is considered.

NEGATIVITY AND THINGS

Because the human too is a materiality, it possesses a thing-power of its own. This thing-power sometimes makes itself known as an uneasy feeling of internal resistance, as an alien presence that is uncannily familiar. Perhaps this is what Socrates referred to as his *daemon* or nay-saying gadfly.[42] Recent work in cultural theory has highlighted this force that is experienced as in but not quite of oneself. This indeterminate and never fully determinable dimension of things has been called *differance* (Jacques Derrida), *the virtual* (Gilles Deleuze), *the invisible* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), *the semiotic* (Julia Kristeva), and *nonidentity* (Theodor Adorno). Jean-Francois Lyotard describes this obstinate remainder, which hovers between the ontological and the epistemological registers, as "that which exceeds every putting into form or object without being anywhere else but within them."[43] These various terms of art mark the fact that thing-power often first reveals itself as a negativity, a confounding or fouling up of an intention, desire, schema, or concept. But, as many of the thinkers named above have noted, such negativity is also the same stuff out of which positive things emerge. It is a negativity that is profoundly productive: the materiality that resists us is also the protean source of being, the essentially vague matrix of things.[44]

In the work of Derrida, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, and Adorno, we find accounts of materiality pitched at the same level as that offered by *De Rerum Natura*. These more recent onto-tales differ from Lucretius's, however, in their greater focus on the difficulty, even impossibility, of *comprehending* materiality. Adorno has perhaps gone furthest here: he speaks of the resistance as "nonidentity," or the persistent lack of fit between concept and

thing. Nonidentity is what is "heterogeneous" to all concepts, and it presents itself as a painful and nagging sense that something's being forgotten or left out—despite the vigilance of one's attentiveness to the thing or the degree of one's conceptual refinement. Adorno devises a "negative dialectics" as a way of honing in on this nonidentity, which, he insists, can *never* be grasped fully or reconciled with us. I examine negative dialectics in what follows because it offers an alternative way of conceiving the nonhuman (not as thing-power but as nonidentity), and because it offers a contending model of what motivates ethical action (not fascination with a vital material world but the painful experience of an absent absolute).

Adorno attempts to deploy the negativity of nonidentity—its discomfiting static buzz—to chasten the human urge to master the world. Negative dialectics is a style of thinking, a pedagogy really, designed to remind us that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder"[45] but, more importantly, to teach us how to stop raging against that nonidentity, against, that is, a world that refuses to offer the "reconcilement"—between concept and thing, self and other, nature and culture—that we (are said to) desire. (For the thing-power materialist, the desire for "reconcilement" may be less pronounced, given that everything is thought already to participate in a common materiality.[46])

Just as the thing-power materialist practices certain techniques of the self in order to cultivate perceptual openness to nonhuman forms of vitality and agency, Adorno recommends practical exercises for training oneself to honor nonidentity. One such technique is making the process of conceptualization itself an object of reflection. Concepts always fail to coincide with things and conceptualization always works to obscure this fact, but critical reflection can expose the inadequacy of concepts and thus open a tiny window onto the nonidentity dispersed around them.[47] A second technique is to admit the "playful element" into one's thinking. The negative dialectician "knows how far he remains from the object of this thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him."[48] Adorno suggests, finally, that the negative dialectician should engage in utopian thinking: she imagines emergent possibilities and does not restrict herself to the examination of existing objects.[49] Nonidentity consists in those denied possibilities, in the invisible field that surrounds and infuses the world of objects.

The self-criticism of conceptualization, the art of clowning, and the exercise of an unrealistic imagination: such practices can lessen the "rage" against nonidentity, which for Adorno is the driving force behind interhuman

acts of cruelty and violence. Going even further, he suggests that negative dialectics can transmute the anguish of nonidentity into a will to political action: the object thwarts our desire for conceptual and practical mastery and the sting of this refusal contains a moral message *which the practice of negative dialectics can decode*. The message is "that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. 'Woe speaks: "Go."' Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice."[50]

Adorno does not elaborate how or why the pain of conceptual failure provokes a desire to redress the socially induced pain of others. But even if one grants that the pangs of nonidentity can engender the adage that "things should be different," such an awakening of moral judgment often does not issue in "social change in practice." In other words, there seems to be a second gap, alongside that between concept and thing, that needs to be addressed: the gap between recognizing the suffering of others and engaging in ameliorative action. To the thing-power materialist, one powerful source of the energy required to jump the gap is joy—joy as one expression of the thing-power of the human body, joy as a animating energy generated in part by affection for a material world experienced as vital and alive.[51] The practice of negative dialectics does not court the joyful affects, but is designed to enhance feelings of guilt, suffering, and a haunting sense of loss.[52]

Adorno founds his ethics upon attentiveness to nonidentity, an elusive force that is discernible, in a dark way, in "the object's qualitative moments."[53] Qualitative singularities can never be fully grasped, of course, and the best one can do is to "grope" toward "the preponderance of the object."[54] Adorno's invocation of the object is not a claim about a thing-power distinguishable (even in principle) from human subjectivity. It is *not* the purpose of negative dialectics, he writes, "to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol."[55] Adorno insists that the object is accessible only "as it entwines with subjectivity"[56] and speaks of the object's "preponderance" merely as a counter to the dominant philosophical presumption in favor of an absolute, transcendental subject.[57] But he retains the vocabulary of "subject" and "object" as a bulwark against the naive realism of a third term, like "thing," which is supposed to be reducible to neither.[58] Instead of the spectacle of swerving primordia, Adorno offers the mysterious recalcitrance of nonidentity.[59] He is extremely cautious about saying anything substantial about this force; to say too much, to narrativize, would be an act of hubris. Nonidentity is dark and brooding—it makes itself known, to the extent that it does, through its mute resistance or infliction of pain.

Adorno's epistemological task, then, is to better attend to that which is essentially unknowable. This epistemological task dovetails with an ethical one: to honor nonidentity as perhaps one would honor an unknowable god, holy but profoundly mysterious. In the most significant departure from the thing-power materialism I have been developing, Adorno refuses to confine nonidentity to an immanent, material world. It is true that nonidentity manifests itself through the experience of bodily pain, but Adorno does not rule out divinity as a power behind or within this force. Of course, he rejects any *naive* picture of transcendence, like that of a loving God who designed the world. Who can believe this after Auschwitz? he asks. "Metaphysics cannot rise again," but the desire for transcendence endures because "nothing could be experienced as truly alive if something that transcends life were not promised also. . . . The transcendent is, and it is not."[60]

Adorno seems, then, to maintain the possibility of transcendence by honoring nonidentity as an *absent* absolute, as a messianic promise.[61] A thing-power materialist might respond by invoking the wondrous energy of actants as itself sufficient to warrant an honorable relation to things, or to justify the wisdom of proceeding cautiously in our engagements with the world. To us, resistances and swerves are less gestures of transcendence than manifestations of the vitality of immanent forces that flow through us as well as course over and under us. These forces are not *fully* knowable or predictable, but their aleatory dimension is not figured as transcendent. Thing-power materialism, as an adventurous ontological imaginary, offers a picture of matter as so active, intricate, and awesome, that it's no disgrace to be made up wholly of the stuff oneself. In this onto-tale, humans and their thoughts, like other things, are part of a mobile set of material assemblages, and no term like "soul" or "spirit" is needed to express the (sometimes noble, sometimes destructive, sometimes ineffable) complexity of human acts or desires.

Adorno struggles to describe a force that is *material* in its resistance to human concepts but *spiritual* insofar as it is a dark or vague promise of an absolute-to-come. The thing-power materialist struggles to describe forces that, though never fully transparent to us, offer no such promise. Its hope is placed, rather, in the prospect of becoming *more awake* to the vitality of matter. There is no definitive way to choose between these two ontological imaginaries, and that is why some find Adorno's approach, which explicitly leaves *open* the possibility of a divine power of transcendence, preferable to a materialism that seems to close the question.[62] Nevertheless, despite the theological difference between a philosophy of nonidentity and a thing-power materialism, both can be seen as sharing an ethical urge to tread more lightly upon the earth.

TOWARD AN ECOLOGY OF MATTER

> The force of the ordinary . . . can be obscured, reduced, or eliminated . . . by a lack of appreciation of the richness of its connections to the larger world it composes.
>
> ——Thomas Dumm[63]

Ecology can be defined as the study or story (*logos*) of the place where we live (*oikos*), or better, the place that we live. For a thing-power materialist, that place is a dynamic flow of matter-energy that tends to settle into various bodies, bodies that often join forces, make connections, form alliances. The Earth, then, is *natura naturans*, a swarm of productive activity, or, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, "an immense Abstract Machine" whose "pieces are the various assemblages and individuals, each of which groups together an infinity of particles entering into an infinity of more or less interconnected relations." In this ecological tale, "a fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible."[64] For a thing-power materialist, humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections or an *ecology.*

Thing-power is the lively energy and/or resistant pressure that issues from one material assemblage and is received by others. Thing-power, in other words, is immanent in collectives that include humans, the beings best able to recount the experience of the force of things. Thing-power materialism emphasizes the closeness, the intimacy, of humans and nonhumans.[65] And it is here, in a heightened sense of that mutual implication, that thing-power materialism can contribute to an ecological ethos. To call something ecological is to draw attention to its necessary implication in a network of relations, to mark its persistent tendency to enter into a working system.[66] That system, however, can be more or less mobile, more or less transient, more or less conflictual: thing-power materialism does not endorse the view, absorbed from the nineteenth-century roots of the science of ecology by deep ecologists, that "ecological" means "harmonious" or tending toward equilibrium. To be ecological is to participate in a collectivity, but not all collectives operate as *organic* wholes.

I am not sure just how an increase in recognition of the force of things would play out in terms of consumption practices. My hope is that it would increase the deliberateness or intentionality involved—less thoughtless waste, and so perhaps less waste overall. I do think that a renewed emphasis on our entanglement with things, an entanglement that renders us susceptible to an array of dangers and diseases as well as joys and inspirations, is compatible with a "wise use" orientation to consumption. Tread lightly upon the

earth, both because things are alive and have value as such *and* because we should be cautious around things that have the power to do us harm.[67]

Thing-power materialism is also compatible with what James Nash described as the ecological virtue of frugality. Distinguishable from austerity, frugality is a disciplined form of consumption, an "earth-affirming norm," a

> 'sparing' in production and consumption—literally sparing of the resources necessary for human communities and sparing of the other species that are both values in themselves and instrumental values for human needs. Frugality minimizes harm to humans and other lifeforms, enabling thereby a greater thriving of all life. At its best, therefore, frugality can be described paradoxically as hedonistic self-denial, since it is a sensuous concern, or, as Alan Durning notes, 'a true materialism that does not just care *about* thing, but cares *for* them.'[68]

My primary goal has been to give expression to thing-power. This is not the same as questing for the thing-in-itself. I don't seek the thing as it stands alone, but rather the not-fully-humanized dimension of a thing as it manifests itself amidst other entities and forces. My contention is that this peculiar dimension persists even inside the ubiquitous framing of human thought and perception. I have also suggested that a playful, naive stance toward nonhuman things is a way for us to render more manifest a fugitive dimension of experience. In the moment of naivete, it becomes possible to discern a resemblance between one's interior thinghood (e.g., bones) and the object-entities exterior to one's body. In the sympathetic link so formed, which also constitutes a line of flight from the anthropocentrism of everyday experience, thing-power comes to presence.

In developing the idea of thing-power, my aim was to enliven the debate over materiality—what it is and does. It is important that "materiality" be a contested term in political theory, especially as it replaces "reality" as the name for the stuff to which theory must be tied if it is to make a difference. My friend's assumption—that there is really only one way to theorize the relevance of materiality to politics—relegates other materialisms to the apolitical ether of idealism or aestheticism. But thing materialism is, I think, a viable competitor alongside the historical materialism of Marx and the body materialism of cultural studies. I present it as a contestable figuration of materiality among others, each of which emphasizes a different set of powers and does different political work. Historical materialism has tended to emphasize the *structured* quality of materiality—its ability to congeal into economic classes, stratified patterns of work, and dominant practices of exchange. Its political strength lies in its ability to expose hidden injuries of class, global economic inequities, and other unjust effects of capital flows

and sedimentations. Body materialism has tended to focus on the *human* body and its collective practices (or arts of the self). It highlights the susceptibility of nature and biology to culture, and it exposes the extent to which cultural notions and ideals are themselves embodied entities and thus materialities that could be reshaped through politics. Thing-power materialism, for its part, focuses on *energetic forces* that course through humans and cultures without being exhausted by them. It pursues the quixotic task of a materialism that is not also an anthropology. Its political potential resides in its ability to induce a greater sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity. A significant shift here might mobilize the will to move consumption practices in a more ecologically sustainable direction.

NOTES

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1338.

2. Henry Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, Vol. 4, edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 351.

3. Cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Light, 1988), 81, from Spinoza's *Short Treatise II*, 16, 5.

4. Slogan from the days of glass-bottle soda. Thanks to Steven De Caroli for this reference.

5. There is too much good work here in feminist theory, queer studies, and cultural studies to cite. The three volumes of *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, edited by Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989) offer one map of the terrain. The first volume explores "the human body's relationship to the divine, to the bestial and to the machines that imitate or simulate it"; the second takes a "'psychosomatic' approach, studying the manifestation—or production—of the soul and the expression of the emotions through the body's attitudes"; and the third shows "how a certain organ or bodily substance can be used to justify or challenge the way human society functions and, reciprocally, how a certain political or social function tends to make the body of the person filling [it] . . . the organ of . . . the social body." For a good summary of the role of the concepts of the material, materiality, and materialization in recent feminist thought, see Momin Rahman and Anne Witz, "What Really Matters? The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought" (paper presented at the Annual Congress of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, University of Toronto, May 2002). Rahman and Witz argue that "the feminist desire to engage 'at the level of material life' . . . was intimately linked to a desire to re-locate questions of sexuality and gender within the sphere of the social and thus political" (p. 9). Good examples of such work include Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993); "Merely Cultural," *New Left Review* 227:33-44; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

6. See, in particular, Moira Gatens's Spinozist take on bodies in *Imaginary Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

7. See Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 7, for a subtle reckoning with the "obscure power of the ordinary." My attempt to speak on

behalf of "things" is a companion project to Dumm's attempt to mine the ordinary as a potential site of resistance to conventional and normalizing practices.

8. My thanks to Bonnie Honig for helping me to focus on this point.

9. Henry Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Walden*, edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 111. Thoreau trained his gaze upon things with faith that "the perception of surfaces will always have the effect of miracle to a sane sense." Thoreau, *Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, 313.

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 197.

11. For a good analysis of the implications of the trash-and-waste culture for democracy, see John Buell and Tom DeLuca, *Sustainable Democracy: Individuality and the Politics of the Environment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996). I argue in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) that commodity culture is not wholly reducible to this environmentally destructive dimension, for it also includes an aesthetic, even artistic, dimension whose moral standing is more ambiguous.

12. Steve Martin, *Shopgirl* (New York: 40 Share Productions, 2000), 3.

13. Dumm, *Politics of the Ordinary*, 169.

14. Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), 16.

15. Franz Kafka, "Cares of a Family Man," in *Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1983), 428.

16. Ibid., 428.

17. Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 50.

18. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone, 1991), 95.

19. Spinoza imagines the world as an infinite substance with many, many modes, each of which can be thought of, interchangeably, as a body-in-space or as an idea. Bodies and ideas operate in perfect tandem though also perfectly uncontaminated by each other. Spinoza's parallelism may disqualify him from being classified as a materialist, though bodies and their encounters do occupy a crucial place in his ontological imaginary. Moreover, Spinoza tends to emphasize the special status of human bodies/ideas. *Human* relations of movement and rest have the unique potential to organize themselves "under the guidance of reason" and be "determined . . . to act in a way required by . . . [one's] own nature considered only in itself" rather than "by things external." Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley. (New York: Hackett, 1992), 174. This is why Spinoza says that humans are right to make use of animals as we please and deal with them as best suits us, "seeing that they do not agree with us in nature" (p. 174). (Though Spinoza does say that all bodies are animate in the sense of possessing a *conatus* or vitalistic drive to persevere.)

20. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 407.

21. I take these terms from Bruno Latour, who develops them in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See especially pages 303 and 308 for his glossary definitions.

22. Daniel Tiffany, "Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 74. Tiffany draws an analogy between riddles and materiality per se: both are suspended between subject and object and engage in "transubstantiations" from the organic to the inorganic and the earthly and the divine. In developing his materialism from out of an analysis of literary forms, Tiffany challenges the long-standing norm that regards science as "the sole

arbiter in the determination of matter" (p. 75). He wants to pick "the lock that currently bars the literary critic from addressing the problem of material substance" (p. 77).

23. William Pietz, "Death of the Deodand: Accursed Objects and the Money Value of Human Life," *Res* 31 (1997): 97-108.

24. John Frow, "A Pebble, A Camera, A Man," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 270-85, 283.

25. Quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty also speaks of scissors and pieces of leather that "offer themselves to the subject as poles of action" (p. 106).

26. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 110.

27. I am grateful to Matthew Scherer for drawing my attention to this ad. For an account of the dangerous power of Nike shoe production, see Peter Hitchcock, *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and Spirit of Millennial Materialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 129: "Nike moved to Indonesia from the middle of the 1980s. . . . The solvents used to glue the soles of these shoes are highly toxic, and even when the extractor fans are working well the women constantly breathe fumes. Interestingly, the co-founder of Nike, Bill Bowerman, often made shoe prototypes using similar glue solvents and was eventually crippled by them. He developed narapathy, a degenerative condition often experienced by shoe and hat makers that gives us the popular phrase 'mad as a hatter.'" For an excellent account of the genesis and politics of the Free Trade Zone factories where most U.S. corporations now have their manufacturing done, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

28. William E. Connolly, "Voices from the Whirlwind," in *In the Nature of Things*, edited by Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 205. As for Spinoza, *Natura naturans*, nature as the very activity or process of producing, making, creating, is the first of two aspects of God-or-Nature in his ontology. The second is *natura naturata*, or nature as a system of already produced (or spatialized) things. See Spinoza's *Ethics*, book I, prop 29; see also Seymour Feldman, "Introduction," in Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (New York: Hackett, 1992), 11.

29. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 78. I leave open the question of whether Adorno's understanding of Heidegger is defensible. See Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton Jr. and Vera Deutsch (New York: Gateway, 1967).

30. This is Bill Brown's account of Arjun Appadurai's project in *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See Brown's "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002): 1-22, for a useful survey of different approaches to the thing.

31. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, (II, 216), in John Gaskin, ed., *The Epicurean Philosophers* (New York: Everyman, 1995).

32. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 407-8.

33. My thanks to Bill Connolly for introducing me to Bergson, whom I had not read when I first composed this essay. Since then, Bergson has alerted me to the limitations of an ontological imaginary presented primarily in terms of bodies-in-space. He argues that there is something about the very imaginary of bodies-in-space that obscures becoming, that conceals from view the active and continual morphing in which we are only participants along with other things. For Bergson, it is not simply that a thing is always changing its physical and cultural locations. Rather, each "thing," as a slice of duration, is itself engaged in an internal process of deformation. *Internal* differentiation as the way of the world. See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone, 1991) and *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover, 1998).

34. The phrase "aleatory materialism" is taken from Althusser and the project is also inspired by postmodernist critiques of essentialism and teleology. See Antonio Callari and David Ruccio, *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univer-

sity Press, 1996); J. K. Gibson-Graham, "An Ethics of the Local," *Rethinking Marxism* 15, no. 1 (2003).

35. Antonio Negri, "Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Athusser" in Callari and Ruccio, *Postmodern Materialism*, 62.

36. Paul Patton pointed out to me that Deleuze described his own work as "naive": "[Foucault] may perhaps have meant that I was the most naive philosopher of our generation. In all of us you find themes like multiplicity, difference, repetition. But I put forward almost raw concepts of these, while others work with more mediations. I've never worried about going beyond metaphysics . . . I've never renounced a kind of empiricism. . . . Maybe that's what Foucault meant: I wasn't better than the others, but more naive, producing a kind of *art brut*, so to speak, not the most profound but the most innocent." Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 88-89.

37. Lucretius, for example, says that "it is right to have this truth . . . surely sealed and to keep it stored in your remembering mind, that there is not one of all the things, whose nature is seen before our face, which is built of one kind of primordia, nor anything which is not created of well-mingled seed. And whatever possesses within it more forces and powers, it thus shows that there are in it most kinds of primordia and diverse shapes" (II, 581).

38. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 98; Richard Rorty, *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to his Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 199.

39. Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Life?* 49, emphasis added.

40. De Landa, *Thousand Years*, 26.

41. Ibid., 26-27.

42. Lucretius describes it thus: "although external force propels many along and often obliges them to . . . be driven headlong, nevertheless there is something in our chest capable of fighting and resisting. . . . [T]hat the mind should not itself possess an internal necessity in all its behaviour, . . . that is brought about by a tiny swerve of atoms." *De Rerum Natura*, trans. Long and Sedley, II, 277-93.

43. Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 29.

44. I take this list of negativity terms and the notion of a productive resistance from Diana Coole's *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

45. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5. Romand Coles offers a developed interpretation of Adorno as an ethical theorist: he presents negative dialectics as a "morality of thinking" or a "mode of conduct" that fosters generosity toward others and toward the nonidentical in oneself. According to Coles, Adorno's morality of thinking acknowledges (and thereby begins to mitigate) the violence done by conceptualization and the suffering imposed by the quest to know and control all things. See Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), chap. 2.

46. I treat idealism as a historically established position against which thing-power materialism is defined even while I resist the image of matter bequeathed to us by idealism.

47. All concepts "refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 12. Because nonidentity simply does not avail itself to any *immediate* relationship, all access to it, however obscure, must be via the mediation of concepts. But it is possible, says Adorno, to become a "discriminating man" who "in the matter and its concept can distinguish even the infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 45.

48. Ibid., 14.

49. "The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52. Diana Coole elaborates this point: "In aiming for the impossible, [negative dialectics] . . . practices negativity and dwells irredeemably in the realms of the is-not, yet it thereby practices the very non-identity thinking that exemplifies the only practicable subject-object reconciliation." Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 184-85.

50. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202-3. Adorno also describes this pain as the "guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life" (p. 364). Coles calls it the "ongoing discomfort that solicits our critical efforts." Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 89.

51. I make the case for the ethical role of the positive affects in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, especially in chapters 1 and 7.

52. Adorno himself discerns no such ethical potential in moments of joy or in the attachment to life that they can induce. For him, the feeling of "the fullness of life" can only be an illusion in a world whose essential characteristic is the gap of nonidentity and, ultimately, death. Adorno identifies with Kant, who "disdained the passage to affirmation," and rejects those who offer "positivities" for this world, for "no reforms . . . [can ever suffice] . . . to do justice to the dead, . . . none of them [touch] . . . upon the wrong of death." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 385. What is more, the joyful passions are all bound up with the desire for domination, the very thing that negative dialectics seeks to combat: the idea of fullness of life "is inseparable from . . . a desire in which violence and subjugation are inherent. . . . There is no fullness without biceps-flexing." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 378. From the perspective of the thing-power materialist, Adorno teeters on the edge of what Dumm describes as "the overwhelming sense of loss that could swamp us when we approach [the thing's] *unknowable vastness*." Dumm, *Politics of the Ordinary*, 169, emphasis added.

53. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 43.

54. Ibid., 183. It is, moreover, only "by passing to the object's preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic" (p. 192).

55. Ibid., 181.

56. Ibid., 186.

57. "Preponderance of the object is a thought of which any pretentious philosophy will be suspicious. . . . [Such] protestations . . . seek to drown out the festering suspicion that heteronomy might be mightier than the autonomy of which Kant . . . taught. . . . Such philosophical subjectivism is the ideological accompaniment of the . . . bourgeois I." Ibid., 189.

58. Ibid., 174-75.

59. "What we may call the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less. . . . It is nonidentity through identity." Ibid., 189.

60. Ibid., 404, 375. The gap between concept and thing can never be closed, and withstanding this unconcilement is possible for Adorno, according to Albrecht Wellmer, only "in the *name* of an absolute, which, although it is veiled in black, is not nothing. Between the being and the non-being of the absolute there remains an infinitely narrow crack through which a glimmer of light falls upon the world, the light of an absolute which is yet to come into being." Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 171, emphasis added.

61. Thanks to Lars Tonder for alerting me to the messianic dimension of Adorno's thinking. It is also relevant to note Adorno's admiration for Kant, who is said to have found a way to assign transcendence an important role while making it inaccessible in principle: "What finite beings say about transcendence is the semblance of transcendence; but as Kant well knew, it is a necessary semblance. Hence the incomparable metaphysical relevance of the rescue of semblance, the object of esthetics." *Negative Dialectics*, 393. For Adorno, "the idea of truth is supreme among

the metaphysical ideas, and this is why . . . one who believes in God cannot believe in God, why the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe." *Negative Dialectics*, 401-2. According to Coles, it does not matter to Adorno whether the transcendent realm actually exists, what matters is the "demand . . . placed on thought" by its promise. Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 114.

62. My thanks to Morton Schoolman for this point. Schoolman develops this reading of Adorno, and links Adorno's thought to the project of democratic individuality, in *Reason and Horror* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

63. Dumm, *Politics of the Ordinary*, 7.

64. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 254-56, 250.

65. I've tried to avoid conceiving of that relationship in terms of "subjects" and "objects," though I have come to see that such a formulation is not entirely dispensable.

66. The modern use of the term "ecology" "came from Darwin through Ernst Haeckel, who . . . spoke of 'nature's Economy' (1866) with reference to interrelationships and interactions among competing organisms in a community." Joseph M. Petulla, *American Environmentalism* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 31-32. Arnold Berleant argues that in recent years the scope of the ecological has enlarged: "The notion of an ecosystem has expanded the organism-environment interaction to encompass an entire community of bacteria, plants, and animals, joined with the physical, chemical, and geographical conditions under which they live. . . . We are slowly beginning to realize that no domain of our planet can any longer be regarded as an independent and sovereign realm. Indeed, the concept of environment as outside, external to the human organism, is a comforting notion now utterly discarded both by ecological studies and post-Cartesian philosophy." Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 4-5.

67. I am grateful to Stephen White and John O'Dougherty for helping me to think about the implications of thing-power for an environmental ethics.

68. James A. Nash, "On the Subversive Virtue: Frugality," in *Ethics of Consumption*, edited by David A. Cricker and Toby Linden (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 427.

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