

## **THING-POWER: Toward an Ecological Materialism**

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*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<sup>1</sup>

*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<sup>2</sup>

### **Contending Materialities**

In the early nineties a Stanford 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 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 version come to stand in for "a materialist perspective" per se? Why is there not a livelier debate among contending theories of materiality? After all, historical materialism invokes only one kind of materiality, the economic kind. While that is potent stuff, there are other politically-relevant materialities and thus other "materialist perspectives."

In the last ten years or so there has been an explosion of political-theoretical work on the (human) body as a materiality, influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Judith

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, volume IV, edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Houghton Mifflin, 1949, p. 351.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (City Light Books, 1988) p. 81, as Spinoza, *Short Treatise II*, 16, 5.

Butler, and others. 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, disciplined, pacified, and excited. Body materialism, in other words, reveals how cultural practices shape what is experienced as natural or real.<sup>3</sup> Some of this genealogical work also insists upon the *material recalcitrance* of cultural products: though gender, sexuality, and race, for example, are congealed bodily effects of historical norms and practices, the fact that they are human artifacts does not mean that they will yield to human understanding or control. Everything is acculturated, but cultural forms are themselves material assemblages that *resist*.<sup>4</sup>

My essay takes off from that last insight: it features the recalcitrance or moment of vitality in

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<sup>3</sup>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 (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 materialisation in recent feminist thought, see Momin Rahman and Anne Witz, “What Really Matters? The elusive quality of the material in feminist thought,” paper presented to the Annual Congress of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, University of Toronto, May 28-31 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* (Routledge, 1993) and “Merely Cultural,” *New Left Review*, no. 227:33-44; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton, 1995); and Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question* (University of California, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>See, in particular, Moira Gatens’s Spinozist take on bodies in *Imaginary Bodies* (Routledge, 1996).

things. But unlike the general aim of the body materialists, I want to give voice to a *less specifically human* kind of materiality, to accent the force of what I call “thing-power.” I do so in order to explore the possibility that attentiveness to things and their powers can have a laudable effect on humans. (I am not utterly uninterested in humans.) Can, as Thoreau suggested, sensitivity to thing-power induce a stronger sense of ecological responsibility?

In developing the idea of thing-power, I hope 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 succeeds “reality” as the name for the stuff to which theory must be tied if it is to make a difference, if it is to matter. My Stanford 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 one 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 which could be re-shaped 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. The political potential of thing-power materialism resides primarily in its ability to induce a greater sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity. A significant shift here might mobilize the will to move economic, especially consumption, practices in a more ecologically sustainable direction.

The ecological 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 (be it a lake, a loon, or a person) that is distinguishable from the thing's imbrication with human subjectivity. It is due to this otherness or wildness, says Thoreau, that things have the power to disorient and re-arrange human thoughts and sensibilities. In the foreground is a Lucretian figuration of materiality as capable of free or aleatory movement, a Deleuzian understanding of nature as matter-flow, and a Spinozist notion of the conjunctive quality of bodies, that is, their propensity to form working groups. I draw examples from everyday life — from what Thomas Dumm calls “the ordinary,”<sup>5</sup> as well as from fiction, phenomenology, and natural science. Bruno Latour and Manuel De Landa's help me to think about the isomorphism between organic and inorganic materiality. I end by considering challenges posed to a thing-power materialism by Adorno's philosophy of “nonidentity.” For Adorno, the most one can say about a 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, can be nothing but a flight of fancy that fails to

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<sup>5</sup>See Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York University Press, 1999), for an elegant reckoning with the “obscure power of the ordinary.” (p. 7) 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.

respect the inherent obscurity of the thing. In response, I defend my “naive realism” for its more acute ability to bring thing-power to light.

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 familiar to see clearly. It seeks ways to acknowledge, even respect, the material dignity 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. The moral of this tale is that we are also nonhuman and things are also 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 things -- be they human or nonhuman, natural or artifactual -- and greater awareness of the dense web of their connections.

### **Thing-power I: Trash**

On 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 pods and seeds

one unsquished dead rat who looked asleep

one upturned 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 the one hand, stuff to ignore (notable only as a mark of humans: the litterer's incivility, the neighbor's failure to keep the storm drain clear, Sam's vermin-eradication efforts, the Department of Public Works' 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, problems, or projects. This latter, this thing-power, which commands attention and exudes a kind of dignity, is a function of the *materiality* of the glove, pod, rat, cap, stick.

I was fascinated by the sheer materiality of things, and by the energy possessed by entities alleged to be inert. Equally fascinating was the oscillation between thing and trash. Trash, it seems, is things dis-empowered, things that can no longer move or animate (us), and so are condemned to being buried alive in a landfill or cast adrift into the Chesapeake. Trash, garbage, litter, dirt, waste, bilge, debris, filth, refuse, detritus, rubbish, junk: things that no longer possess the power to move people (except perhaps in disgust) and so are thrown away, thrown on the ground. A "materialistic" way of life -- in so far 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.<sup>6</sup> It disables and obscures thing-power. After all, it is hard to discern, much less acknowledge, the material dignity of the thing

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<sup>6</sup>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* (Sage, 1996). I argue in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, 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.

when your nose is overwhelmed by the dozens of scents that “have collected into strata in the department store air”<sup>7</sup> or when your thoughts are scrambled by the light-years of shelving at a superstore. There is a way, then, in which American materialism is anti-materiality. Too much stuff in too quick succession = the fast ride from object to trash.

Trash, garbage, litter, dirt, waste, bilge, debris, filth, refuse, detritus, rubbish, junk. Compare the effect of that list to this one: shiny black glove, seed pod mat, serene rat, bright round cap, smooth wooden stick. What is it about the second, adjectival, list that allows thing-power to rise to the surface? Perhaps that it allows *objects* (a category meaningful only by way of its relation to human *subjects*) to appear more clearly as *things*, that is, as materialities somewhat aloof from human society, or never entirely reducible to the contexts in which we set them. The list addresses things (almost) as equals. Things show themselves to be not-wholly-incorporated into a human intention, use, or project - - to be out of line. The adjectival list, more like urban poetry than the thick description of anthropology, flashes a glimpse into a culture of things irreducible to a culture of objects. It better prepares us “to be surprised by what we see.”<sup>8</sup> The adjectival list clears a space, a perceptual space for us and an ontological space for it, for thing-power to flex its muscle.

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: Motility and Self-organization**

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<sup>7</sup>Steve Martin, *Shopgirl*, 40 Share Productions, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Dumm, p. 169.

Thing-power as a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans. The dead rat stopped me in my tracks, and so did the plastic cap and the wooden stick. Is this captivating power wholly a function of the subjective and inter-subjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my idea of these items? Was my momentary immobilization simply the sudden recollection of the web of cultural meanings associated with the images of rat, plastic, wood? Maybe. But maybe all that swarming activity inside my head is itself an asymmetrical echo or repetition-with-a-difference of a motility inherent to materiality per se. Manuel De Landa, for example, describes the power of 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.<sup>9</sup>

Kafka's short story "Cares of a Family Man" is a less scientific depiction of the power of things to move themselves. The protagonist, Odradek, is a spool of thread that can run and laugh. Odradek is, apparently, the result of the "spontaneous structural generation" (to use De Landa's phrase) of *animate wood*. Like the 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, ostensibly a human, 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, there 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.

Or is Odradek a living creature, a little person? But if so, his embodiment is unlike that of any other person we've known. 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":

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<sup>9</sup>Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Swerve Editions, 2000, p. 16.

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.

Like Kafka, the Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945) also refuses the sharp distinction between life and nonlife. Eschewing that dichotomy, he prefers 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 a 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.'"<sup>10</sup>

### **Thing-power III: Conjunctions**

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<sup>10</sup>Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?*, California, 1995, p. 50.

Vernadsky's watery life, De Landa's soliton, and Kafka's Odradek are neither quite inorganic nor quite organic. They reside ontologically in neither the realm of the inert object nor that of the active subject. These examples dramatize the ability of materiality to vary its speed or level of activity, to move from inert to animate 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 thing is a "mode" of one Substance (which, he says, can be called either God or Nature). To be a "mode" means to be always in the process of entering into a set of relationships with other modes. Because this set necessarily changes over time (bodies move about, propelled by internal and external forces), to be a mode is to mode-ify and be modified in turn. Spinoza's world is a cosmos 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 a Spinozist ethics is to exercise a greater degree of self-direction regarding our encounters, humans are never *outside* of a set of relations with other modes: we can alter the quality of our encounters but not our encountering nature.<sup>11</sup> The relevant point for thinking about thing-power is this: a material body always

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<sup>11</sup>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 operated in perfect tandem though also perfectly uncontaminated by each other. Spinoza's parallelism disqualifies 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 ... [ones] own nature considered only in itself" rather than "by things external." (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Samuel

resides within some assemblage or other, and its thing-power *is a function of that grouping*. A thing, in so far as it has power, operates *in conjunction* with other things.

The thing-materialist can thus re-articulate 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, for example, locate humanity within a single cosmic flow of “matter-movement.” This autopoietic flow is capable of an astonishingly wide variety of mobile configurations: it is “matter in variation that enter assemblages and leaves them.”<sup>12</sup> 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 the 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, the operative animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster -- and its degrees and types of power -- will again change. Again, the point is that thing-power is the effect of an *assemblage*.

### **Thing-power IV: Actants**

Thing-power entails the ability to shift or vibrate between different states of being, to go from

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Shirley, Hackett, 1992, p. 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.” (174). Though Spinoza does say that all bodies are animate in the sense of possessing a *conatus* or vitalistic drive to persevere.

<sup>12</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minnesota, 1987), p. 407.

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 thing Gun Powder Residue (GPR) Sampler: it looked like a small glass vial with a circular metal disk as its lid. The lid was covered with an adhesive which, when the thing was dabbed on the suspect's hand, provided microscopic evidence that the hand had fired a gun or been within three feet of a gun firing. GPR Sampler was shown to the jury twice by expert witnesses and mentioned many times during the course of the trial, each time gaining more importance. 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 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, a substance that explains why the actant behaves as it does.<sup>13</sup> Latour strives to develop a vocabulary to better capture the multiple modalities and degrees of agency. Agency now appears as a continuum, as a power differentially expressed by *all* material bodies. The crime lab Technicians who testified at the trial presented GPR Sampler as a stable and reliable tool -- but wasn't

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<sup>13</sup>I take these terms from Bruno Latour, who develops them in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Harvard, 1999). See especially pages 303 and 308 for his Glossary definitions.

it also more than that? Wasn't it an actant? Didn't it straddle the line between active subject and passive object? Sometimes it lay mute on the witness stand and sometimes it seemed to laugh an Odradekan laugh at the jury's inability to understand the secrets it knew.

Daniel Tiffany's "thing theory" identifies such uncanniness as one of the essential attributes of materiality. He draws an analogy between the shifty vitality of material things and the enigmatic and lively nature of a riddle, in particular the riddles that appear in 7<sup>th</sup> century secular English poetry. For example: "Cross is my name. Once, trembling and drenched with blood, I bore the mighty king." Like this particular cross, the thing too moves between states: sometimes (talking) human, sometimes inert wooden stick, sometimes culpable deodand. A deodand is a word in English Law used to designate the instrument, whether it be an animal or an inanimate thing, which has caused the death of a man. The deodand was "suspended between human and thing."<sup>14</sup>

There is of course a difference between the technician who dabs GPR Sampler and GPR Sampler, and between the cross used to impale a human and the human who held the cross that impaled. But the thing 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

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<sup>14</sup>Daniel Tiffany, "Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity," *Critical Inquiry* 28, Autumn 2001, p. 74. Riddles, like material substance, are suspended between subject and object, and engage in "transubstantiation[s] from metal to human flesh to divine matter." (77) In offering a theory of things based on the analogy to the language of riddles, Tiffany rejects the long-standing norm that regards science as "the sole arbiter in the determination of matter. The result is that the authority and explanatory power of literary or cultural theory in relation to material culture is limited by its dependence on science not only to furnish a plausible account of material substance but to determine, in a fundamental sense, what sets materials things apart from ideas or events." Tiffany want to pick "the lock that currently bars the literary critic from addressing the problem of material substance." (pp. 75, 77)

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...”<sup>15</sup>

The rat body, the bottle cap, Odradek, soliton, GPR Sampler, 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.”<sup>16</sup> Or the human body and its “motor intentionality,” a kind of directionality inside the motion of an arm or hand which is not reducible, says Merleau-Ponty, to any subjective or self-conscious decision. The body possesses the very quality --intentionality -- for which the category mind was invented.<sup>17</sup> Or the thing-power of *Nike* shoes: they can produce narapathy in the bodies of factory workers in Indonesia as well aesthetic pleasure in the viewers of its 2002 “Move” television commercial, which is filmed so as to reveal the uncanny similarities between bodies in motion, be they basketballs and tumblers or a group of cyclists and a flock of birds.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>John Frow, “A Pebble, A Camera, A Man” in *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2001: 270-285, p. 283.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. Merleau-Ponty also speaks of scissors and pieces of leather that “offer themselves to the subject as poles of action.” (106)

<sup>17</sup>*The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup>“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.’” See Peter Hitchcock, *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and Spirit of Millennial Materialism* (Minnesota, 1999), p. 129. 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* (Vintage, 2000).

The tendency today is to refer such 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 continue to do so, we might recall an earlier, “pagan” orientation to the thing. I turn briefly to the ancient materialism of Lucretius.

### **In Defense of Naive Realism**

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: but only sensuous matter exists even if not all bodies are adequate to the perception of all other bodies. There is nothing but immanence, nothing transcendent to matter or other to it. To paraphrase Lucretius, you got your bodies and you got your void (the space in which they move), and that’s it.

What particularly interests me in my pursuit of a thing-power materialism is Lucretius’s willingness to describe matter itself, to give an account of the stuff that subsists below anything specifically human (even as that matter also constitutes human bodies and ideas). *De Rerum Natura* confidently depicts a world that pre-exists our arrival, constitutes our present, and would endure our wholesale departure. It claims to reveal the very blueprint of being: the nature of material atoms or “primordia,” those smallest constituent parts of reality, and 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, and his humanity.

It's hard to get away with that today. Contemporary materialists must contend with a well-established critique of "naive realism." The naivete of naive realism consists in its claim to get underneath, behind or in front of the mediating screens of subjectivity, cultural formations, and human-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.<sup>19</sup>

Adorno, like the body materialist, insists that things are always already humanized *objects*.

This object status arises the very instant something comes into our awareness or under our gaze. For

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<sup>19</sup>Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, Continuum, 1973, p. 78. I leave open the question of whether or not Adorno's understanding of Heidegger is defensible. See Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton Jr and Vera Deutsch (Gateway, 1967).

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 it is true that humans can encounter things only second-hand (that is, there is no unmediated knowledge of things), there nonetheless remains something to be said for naive realism, at least as a conscious (and thus not *utterly* naive) strategy of presentation. Naive realism, when understood as an ontological imaginary rather than an apodictic account of the nature of things, puts things on the ethical radar screen. In giving the thing an explicit part in the drama of life, in making it a vivid character, naive realism helps us to better attend to its (less theatrical) manifestations in everyday life. Yes, there is a sense in which thing-power is always a “materiality-effect” (of culture), and this insight is a valuable counter to moralistic appeals to “nature.” But concentration on this insight alone tends to diminish our capacity to discern whatever manifestation of nonhuman vitality there is to be had. For example, in much of the anthropological and sociological literature on “material culture,” the biography of an object is concluded once it is shown 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 biases thinking and sensibility too much toward the primacy of humans and “the subject.” Lucretius’s naive onto-tale instead gives center stage to the agency and vitality of the specifically nonhuman dimension of humans and other things. It gives latitude to the power of things to move, threaten, inspire, and animate

the more obviously animated things called humans. There is an advantage, then, to this 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.”<sup>20</sup>

This kind of naive realism takes fascination with objects as a clue about the secret nonhuman nature of things. 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 make a difference, to enter into new combinations, to make things happen. They 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.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>This is Bill Brown’s account of Arjun Appadurai’s project in *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986). See Brown’s “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, vol 1:1-22, Autumn 2002, for a useful survey of different approaches to the thing.

<sup>21</sup>Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, (II, 216), in John Gaskin, ed., *The Epicurean Philosophers* (Everyman, 1995).

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*").<sup>22</sup> There is a group of neo-Marxists calling themselves "aleatory materialists" who also tell an onto-tale of lively matter. They argue that because classical Marxism's notion of capitalist structure is more rigid and hierarchical than many contemporary forms of power seem to be, materialism today must rework the view of nature and history inherited from Marx with explicit acknowledgment of something like a swerve in materiality.<sup>23</sup> 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 unpredictable "horizon of presence."<sup>24</sup>

The materialisms of Lucretius, Deleuze, and Negri are impertinent: they dare to speak of, even depict, 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.

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<sup>22</sup>*A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 407-08.

<sup>23</sup>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* (Wesleyan, 1996) and J.K. Gibson-Graham, "An Ethics of the Local," *Rethinking Marxism* (forthcoming, 2003).

<sup>24</sup>Antonio Negri, "Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser" in Callari and Ruccio, p. 62.

And they do so in part because of their naive realism.

### **The Human Thing**

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 secondary 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.'"<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky agrees that humans differ from other materialities in degree but not in kind. Lynn Margulis summarizes Vernadsky's view of humans as a particularly potent

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<sup>25</sup>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)

<sup>26</sup>See Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele, Minnesota, 1997, p. 98) and Rorty, *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to his Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., Vanderbilt University Press, 1995, p 199.

mix of minerals:

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.<sup>27</sup>

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. Spinoza, Kafka, Lucretius and Vernadsky help us to envision how what has been called *human* agency might not be not utterly alien to other arrangements of materiality. But to make the case for kinship, must it not also be shown how humanity participates in thinghood? This idea, that the human contains no *special* substance, but is, rather, made of the same material as that which constitutes less complexly organized things, does carry moral dangers. These have been well-documented, and rightly condemned, as the "objectification" or "instrumentalization" of persons. To draw parallels between the human and the nonhuman is a project tinged with the violence of the reduction of subjects to mere objects. This is especially true within a materialism in which things are always already on their way to becoming trash (where materiality is conceived as the dead other to life).

But perhaps what is immoral here is the goal of domination, more than the recognition of the presence of the nonhuman within the human. De Landa offers an account of the participation of the

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<sup>27</sup>Margulis and Sagan, p. 49.

nonhuman in humanity that does not reduce to objectification. He 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:

In the organic world,... 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...<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of the thing bone in turn created new emergences, thus displaying the thing-power to make things happen. Things as movers and shakers: “Primitive bone, a stiff, calcified central rod that would later become the vertebral column, 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.”<sup>29</sup> Here mineralization is the agent. We are its object, and improved in our own agency as a result.

### **Thing-power and Nonidentity**

Because the human too is a materiality, it possesses its own thing-power. We are aware of this as an uneasy feeling of resistance *internal* to one’s body, as that “alien” presence with which we are

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<sup>28</sup>De Landa, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup>De Landa, pp. 26-27.

all-too-familiar. Perhaps it is what Socrates referred to as his *daemon* or nay-saying gadfly.<sup>30</sup> Recent work in cultural theory has also focused on this ontological resistance encountered by humans as both an interior and exterior force. The persistent presence of that which resists theoretical or objective capture, the 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 reminder as “that which exceeds every putting into form or object without being anywhere else but within them.”<sup>31</sup> Such terms mark the fact that thing-power often first brings itself to human attention as a negativity or confounding, a fouling up of an intention, desire, schema, or concept. But, as many of the thinkers named above have also noted, such negativity is the same stuff out of which positive things emerge. This negativity is productive: the materiality that resists us is also the protean source of being, the essentially vague matrix of things.<sup>32</sup>

In the work of Derrida, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, and Adorno we find accounts of materiality pitched at the same -- ontological -- level as that offered by *De Rerum Natura*. These recent onto-tales differ from Lucretius’s, however, in their greater focus on the difficulty, even

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<sup>30</sup>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, 277-293.)

<sup>31</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minnesota, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>32</sup>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* (Routledge, 2000).



impossibility, of comprehending materiality. Adorno has perhaps gone furthest here. He speaks of ontological 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 vague, painful, and nagging sense that something’s being forgotten or left out -- regardless of 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 overcome. The goal, rather, is to persist in “groping” toward nonidentity in order to heighten one’s sensitivity to its discomfiting presence, and thus to intensify its effects.

The effect with which Adorno is most concerned is an ethical one. He suggests that the painful negativity of nonidentity -- its discomfiting static buzz -- might be able to chasten the human urge to dominate and master the world. Negative dialectics, which strives never to forget the fact that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder,”<sup>33</sup> is a style of thinking, a pedagogy really, designed to teach us to stop raging against nonidentity, against, that is, a world that refuses to offer the “reconciliation” -- between concept and thing, self and other, nature and culture -- that we (are said to) desire. (In the thing materialism I prefer, the desire for “reconciliation” is less pronounced, given that everything already participates in materiality.<sup>34</sup>)

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<sup>33</sup>Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Continuum, 1973), p. 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 Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, Cornell, 1997, chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup>The question will arise: how can you even speak of a thing materialism that bears no relation to idealism? Aren’t the two essentially inter-coded? Yes, but I treat idealism as a historically

Adorno recommends various practical techniques for training oneself to honor this obdurately mysterious nonidentity. The first is to make the process of conceptualization itself an object of reflection. Concepts always fail to coincide with their things and conceptualization always works to obscure this fact, but critical reflection upon the concept can expose the inadequacy of conceptualization and thus open a tiny window onto the nonidentity dispersed around it.<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> The negative dialectician should, third, engage in utopian thinking: she imagines possibilities and does not restrict herself to the examination of actualities. “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.”<sup>37</sup> Nonidentity consists in those denied possibilities, in the invisible, virtual field that surrounds and infuses the world of actualities. Nonidentity is “visible” then, only in a negative sense, as the haunting shadow

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established position against which thing materialism is defined even while it resists the inert materialism traditionally bequeathed to it by idealism.

<sup>35</sup>All concepts “refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation...” (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.” (45)

<sup>36</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 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.” (184-85)

thrown by any positivity, any actual “thing.”

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 inter-human acts of cruelty and violence. Going even further, Adorno links the practice of negative dialectics to an ethic of social justice in the tradition of Marx. He suggests that negative dialectics can transmute the “pain” 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*. What does the message say? The sting of thwarted desire tells us “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.”<sup>38</sup>

Adorno’s sketch of an ethical theory moves too quickly, I think, from the painful recognition of conceptual failure to the desire to engage in action to redress other painful situations that are, unlike the ontological condition of conceptual failure, political and thus alterable. But even if one grants that the pangs of nonidentity can engender the idea that “things should be different,” such an awakening of moral judgment does not necessarily translate into “social change in practice.” There is, in other words, a second gap, alongside that between concept and thing, which Adorno seems to ignore. And that is the gap between the recognition of the suffering of others and the actual practice of ameliorative ethical or political action. It seems to me that the latter requires a burst of material energy, a kind of thing-power

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<sup>38</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 202-03. Adorno also describes this pain as the “guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life.” (364) Coles calls it the “ongoing discomfort that solicits our critical efforts.” (89)

interior to the self. A great amount of affective energy is required to spur, propel, and fuel activity in the service of sufferers, and I wonder whether pain and suffering alone can do the job. The practice of negative dialectics is designed to enhance the feelings of guilt, suffering, and a haunting sense of loss, and while these are ethically relevant emotions, the joyful or positive affects also seem needed as sources of the bodily energy required to engage in the arduous work of social justice. 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup>

Eschewing the energy of an affirmative attachment to life, Adorno founds his ethics instead upon attentiveness to nonidentity and its “inaudible cries that things should be different.”<sup>41</sup> These “inaudible” cries are nevertheless discernible if one pays careful enough heed to “the object’s qualitative moments.”<sup>42</sup> The negative dialectician acknowledges that what is qualitatively singular about a thing can never really be heard or grasped: the best one can do is to “grope” toward “the preponderance of the

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<sup>39</sup>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.” (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 385.) What is more, the joyful passions are all bound up with the desire for domination, the very thing which 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.” (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 378.)

<sup>40</sup>Dumm, p. 169.

<sup>41</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 381.

<sup>42</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 43.

object.”<sup>43</sup> It is important not to mistake Adorno’s concern with the object for an interest in a thing-power independent of 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.”<sup>44</sup> Adorno insists that the object is accessible only “as it entwines with subjectivity”<sup>45</sup> and speaks of the object’s “preponderance” merely as a counter to the dominant philosophical presumption in favor of an absolute, transcendental subject.<sup>46</sup> Though Adorno acknowledges that “the subject is never quite the subject, and the object never quite the object,” he retains the duality of subject and object as a bulwark against the naive realism of a third term, like “thing” -- said to be reducible to neither.<sup>47</sup> Instead of the phenomenon of swerving primordia he offers to ecological materialism the mysterious recalcitrance of nonidentity.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the thing-power materialist, Adorno is extremely cautious about saying anything too substantial about thing-power: he prefers the bare minimalism or nominalism of nonidentity. To say much more, to narrativize it, would be an act of hubris. Nonidentity is dark and brooding -- it makes itself known not through speech or even sound but through a mute resistance or the infliction of pain.

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<sup>43</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 183. It is, moreover, only “by passing to the object’s preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic.” (192)

<sup>44</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 181.

<sup>45</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 186.

<sup>46</sup>“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.” (*Negative Dialectics*, p.189)

<sup>47</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, pp. 174-75.

<sup>48</sup>“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.” (189)

Adorno's epistemological task, then, is to walk a tightrope: he must find a way to better attend to that which is essentially unknowable. His epistemological task dovetails with an ethical one: to honor nonidentity as perhaps one would honor an unknowable god, or that which is sacred 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. Nonidentity does manifest itself in this world through the painful bodily experience of resistance, but Adorno does not rule out divinity as a power behind or within this recalcitrance. The gap between concept and thing can never be closed or reconciled, and the best we can do in its absence is to "withstand" the world. Albrecht Wellmer argues that for Adorno this withstanding

is only possible 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.<sup>49</sup>

Nonidentity has, then, the structure of a messianic promise: negative dialectics retains a place, however obscure, for transcendence. Of course, Adorno rejects any *naive* picture of transcendence, like that of a loving God who designed the world -- for who can believe this after Auschwitz? "Metaphysics cannot rise again," he writes, though we continue to long for transcendence because "nothing could be experienced as truly alive if something that transcends life were not promised also..."

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<sup>49</sup>Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley, MIT, 1998, p. 171.

The transcendent is, and it is not.”<sup>50</sup> Adorno maintains the possibility of transcendence by honoring nonidentity as the absent absolute.<sup>51</sup>

Adorno made no distinction between an ontology that claims to be grounded in truth and an onto-story whose status is self-consciously contestable, even utopian or playful in intent. If he did, perhaps he would have been less averse to an alternative onto-story which contests the trace of transcendence he discerns. (After all, adding playful and utopian elements to one’s thinking are two of the techniques of negative dialectics itself.) Even without this insight, Adorno’s work stands as a reminder of the need to continually counteract the dogmatism (what he calls “hypostatism”) lurking in all ontological projections.<sup>52</sup> And yet Adorno himself invokes an ontological imaginary: he figures immanence as the lifeless other to spirit (which is why nonidentity could not be confined to its colorless realm). How could nonidentity call for *respect* if it was (merely) a material recalcitrance? And why

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<sup>50</sup>*Negative Dialectics*, p. 404, p. 375.

<sup>51</sup>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*, p. 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*, pp. 401-02) 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. (See Coles, p. 114)

<sup>52</sup>Negative dialecticians “do not aim at another ontology, not even at one of being nonontological. If that were our purpose we would be merely positing another downright ‘first’ -- not absolute identity, this time, not the concept, not Being [in itself], but nonidentity, facticity, entity. We would be hypostatizing the concept of nonconceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning.” (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 136)

would nonidentity be felt as a *painful* resistance if there were no whisper of transcendence in it?

A thing-power materialist might answer by invoking the wondrous energy of actants as itself sufficient to warrant honor or justify ethical concern. To us, resistance and swerves are less signs of transcendence and more reminders of the vitality of immanence that flows through us as well as coursing over and under us. Thing-power materialism, when viewed as an adventurous ontological imaginary, offers a picture of matter as so active, intricate, and marvelous, that it's no disgrace to be made up of the stuff oneself. In this onto-tale, humans and their thoughts, like other things, are part of a mobile set of material assemblages. No third term like soul or spirit is needed to account for the (sometimes noble, sometimes destructive) complexity of human acts or desires. Adorno's less immanent figuration of materiality struggles to describe a force that is material in its *resistance* to human concepts but darkly allied to a spirituality or an absent absolute. His negative dialectics remains relevant to thing-power materialism in that he offers a way to include a role for transcendence within it. He also chastens the ecological materialist to remember that the path that leads toward greater respect for things may have to be indirect and wandering.

### **Ecological Materialism**

*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<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*, p. 7.



I have been trying to give expression to thing-power. I don't seek the thing in its autonomy (what could that possibly mean?), but instead the not-fully-humanized dimension of a thing, which persists even inside the ubiquitous frame of human thought and perception. That is why the title of the essay is not "The Thing Itself" but "Thing-*power*," which implies a relationship between the thing and the objects of its effects. Thing-power is the lively force and/or resistant pressure that issues from one material assemblage and is received by others. Thing-power, in other words, is a property of an collectivity that includes humans; it is an effect of those particular materiality-coalitions which include things arranged in such a way as to be able to write about or otherwise recount their experiences of thing-power. My claims about thing-power presuppose a series of close, even intimate, *relationships* between humans and nonhumans. I'm trying to avoid conceiving of that relationship in terms of "subjects" and "objects," though I have come to see that that formulation is never entirely dispensable.

How is thing-power materialism ecological?

By *ecological* I mean the quality of relatedness or the capacity to enter into assemblages. 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."<sup>54</sup> *Ecological*, then, as the opposite of *atomistic*: to take an ecological perspective is to take note of the sense in which a thing is not an isolate but a segment of an assemblage or working system.<sup>55</sup> That working system can be more or less mobile, more or less transient, more or less

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<sup>54</sup>Joseph M. Petulla, *American Environmentalism*, Texas A&M, 1980, pp. 31-32.

<sup>55</sup>My definition is consistent with Arnold Berleant's view that the scope of ecology is becoming larger: "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

conflictual: I do not share the view, absorbed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century roots of the science of ecology, that “ecological” necessarily implies harmonious or tending-toward-equilibrium. To be ecological is to participate in a collectivity, but only some collectivities operate as *organic* wholes.

The word ecology comes from the Greek *oikos* (house, home, residence or habitual locale) and *logos* (words, stories, logic, nature). If *logos* also suggests “the mysterious essence,”<sup>56</sup> then ecology can be defined as the study of the essence of the place where we live. For me, that place is Earth as an arrangement of matter-energy, and its essence is the tendency of matter-energy to form working systems or operative assemblages. (Things tend to join forces, make connections, form alliances, engroup themselves.) By *Earth* I mean what Spinoza called *natura naturans*, or nature insofar as it is a swarm of productive activity. Deleuze and Guattari describe it as

an immense Abstract Machine... its 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. There is therefore a unity to the plane of Nature, which applies equally to the inanimate and the animate, the artificial and the natural....<sup>57</sup>

The human is always in composition with the nonhuman, never outside of its web of connections -- its *ecology*. “A fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from

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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*, Temple, 1992, pp. 4-5)

<sup>56</sup>Thomas Moore, “Ecology: Sacred Homemaking” in *The Soul of Nature*, ed. Michael Tobias and Georgianne Cowan, 1996, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup>*A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 254-56.

molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible.”<sup>58</sup> To pay attention to thing-power, is to experience Earth as a motile, self-organizing, creative, and resisting *thing*.

By “*ecological materialism*,” then, I mean a (necessarily speculative) theory of materiality that begins with the presumption that matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with variable degrees of stability. Such an understanding of materiality induces a heightened sensitivity to the interdependencies linking humanity to nonhumanity, and perhaps a greater commitment to participate with care in the complex ecological assemblage that is Earth.

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<sup>58</sup>A *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 250.