

Acting in the face of strangers: A response to Jane Bennett's political ecology*

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Since I first came into contact with the work of Jane Bennett, I have never looked at my food in the exact same way.

From the moment I read *Vibrant Matter* life, became more animated, alluring and strange, both underneath and out beyond the skin that used to signal the frontier of my body and the perimeter of my own selfhood.¹ After Bennett, my days emerged as unending negotiations amongst the parts of my body that perform to keep me from disintegrating, and between this confederated body of mine and all other bodies that it encounters on its way between sleeps.

At times, it can all get pretty exhausting.

Notwithstanding the battleground that has become my dinner plate, what strikes me about Bennett's work in the context of the broader materialist and realist philosophical projects that have emerged in the past decade, is the way in which her work manages to achieve a successful compromise between the dynamics of 'life' and ontogenesis, that have been associated with the work of Gilles Deleuze, and a more recent reinvestment in 'things,' 'objects,' 'units,' or 'bodies' as I prefer to call them - that is, systems of parts that come together and survive as a unit by keeping internal levels of entropy below those of their environment.² In short, and in my view, one of the most important contributions Bennett has made to the philosophical and political debates of the ecological age is just this reconciliation of matter and force - of 'thing' and agency - that turned *Vibrant Matter* into a landmark of recent ecopolitical thought.

There is, however, a crucial part of Bennett's argument that I struggle to come to terms with. This is the idea that differences amongst bodies can somehow be reconciled through the recognition of the

* This paper was originally published in *A Feeling for Things: Conversations on and Around the Work of Jane Bennett*, ed. Lisa Baraitser. Brooklyn: punctum books, 2017.

¹ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

² For Deleuze's work on ontogenesis and 'life,' see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For the recent reinvestment in "things" or "objects" see Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2011); or Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

one substance - 'matter-energy' - that, in Bennett's argument, is common to them all.³ I struggle with the idea that the singularity of the body that addresses you now, the singularity of the body of this sheet of paper, of this text, of this language, of these ideas, can somehow fade away, and the ways in which you engage with this speaking body, this sheet of paper, text, language, or ideas, should instead be determined by nothing other than a recognition and acceptance on your part of a kind of Deleuzian plane of immanence from where we have all come and to where we will all return - ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

My discomfort with this aspect of Bennett's political ecology has to do with, first, my belief that, once bodies emerge - and they *do* emerge - as operationally closed units from a confederation of parts, they immediately resist being reduced to any kind of primordial substance that might have pre-existed them at some point in their ontogenetic history; and, second, I have a resistance to perpetuating a view of politics that is dependent on the recognition of something that is purportedly common to all. I would, therefore, like to use this article to expand on those two points.

On this body of mine, and why it can't be yours

Responding to Adorno's thesis that only a foregrounding of the nonidentity of objects and concepts can open the door to ethics, Bennett claims, in *Vibrant Matter*, that

For the vital materialist, however, the starting point of ethics is less the acceptance of the impossibility of "reconciliation" and more the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality.⁴

Such a vital materiality, or 'matter-energy' as Bennett also calls it, is put forward as first substance, as an ontological field of material forces and flows that lacks primordial divisions until it 'congeals into bodies, bodies that seek to persevere or prolong their run.'⁵ According to this argument, heir to a Spinozist lineage of thought, the ethical moment can only emerge once difference is subsumed by a certain *je ne sais quoi* that is retroactively recognised as having preceded all individuation. As Spinoza explains in a letter to the German theologian and first secretary of the Royal Society, Henry Oldenburg:

³ See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

[...] by Substance I understand what is conceived through itself and in itself, i.e., that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing; but by modification, *or* Accident, what is in another and is conceived through what it is in. From this it is clear that:

[A1] Substance is by nature prior to its Accidents, for without it, they can neither be nor be conceived.

[A2] Except for Substances and Accidents, nothing exists in reality, *or* outside the intellect [...].⁶

For Bennett, all things are manifestations of ‘matter-energy’, very much like, in Spinoza, all bodies are modes of the divine Substance. As Spinoza states:

*God is a being of whom all attributes are predicated; whence it clearly follows that all other things can by no means be, or be understood, apart from or outside him.*⁷

Like Spinoza, the ethics in *Vibrant Matter* also privileges a common origin of all things over any eventual divergences in the particular ontogenetic paths from which their present differences might have resulted.

One of the difficulties with Bennett’s attempt to establish, or at least hint at the existence of a primordial and, most crucially, *identifiable* ‘something’ that unites all bodies beyond their differences, is that materialist positions of such kind have yet to define convincingly what exactly that primordial something is, and where it can be found. Interestingly, similar endeavours to locate and identify the original building blocks of matter have also proved rather difficult in scientific enquiry, with the seemingly unending discovery of whole ‘universes’ within what was previously thought to be the ground zero of the physical world - from atoms to protons and from there to quarks and, more recently, strings.⁸ Some physicists now even argue for the impossibility of

⁶ Baruch Spinoza, “Letter 4: B.D.S. To the Most Noble and Learned Henry Oldenburg,” in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 171.

⁷ Baruch Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 50.

⁸ Put simply, String Theory, first proposed in the early 1970s, aimed to reconcile and unify the two major physical theories developed in the 20th century: general relativity and quantum mechanics. The former is central to our understanding of the laws governing large-scale physical bodies, whilst the latter is used to understand subatomic physics. The crucial point here, however, is that the two appeared irreconcilable with one another for each dependent on very different concepts, observables and types of calculation, with few physicists being versed in both. In order to overcome this division and unify the two theories, String Theory postulates the existence of fundamental objects which, rather than being point-like elementary particles (like quarks, electrons or bosons), are instead one-dimensional strings with different oscillation modes to which the different particles correspond. One of the most important features of String Theory is that it requires gravity at both macroscopic and microscopic levels, thus being the first theory that was able to reconcile general relativity with quantum mechanics. See Katrin Becker, Melanie Becker, and John Schwarz, *String Theory and M-Theory: A Modern Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–16; also Richard Dawid, *String Theory and the Scientific Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9–38.

unifying the real in an ultimate theory of everything.⁹ To make such investment in knowable unifying structures even harder, be they a finite number of mathematical principles or the ultimate building blocks of matter, research has recently been carried out that goes as far as calling into question the consensus built around the existence of a T=0 instant for the whole universe, thus pushing back indefinitely the time singularity known as ‘Big Bang’ and predicting an ‘everlasting universe’ with no originary moment.¹⁰

In such a context, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain an ethical project that is solely dependent on the retroactive identification and naming of a single common origin, achieved either through the compulsive breaking down of the real into ever-smaller component parts or the mathematical rewinding of ontogenetic histories back to a singular moment precedent to all individuation. Furthermore, if Spinozist ethics itself can be seen, at least since Deleuze, as being primarily concerned with what a body can do, what it can perform, rather than what caused it to be, then, as Ian Buchanan writes, ‘it looks forwards and not backwards; [...] it looks outwards and not inwards.’¹¹

Aware of some of the problems associated with reducing the many to the one, in *Vibrant Matter* Bennett does indeed try to negotiate her interest in Spinoza’s ‘Substance’ and in the vitalism of Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson, with the materialism of a Deleuzian political thought that is sensitive to processes of differentiation. The way she does so is by presenting a monism she qualifies as ‘strange:’

[Lucretius’] same-stuff claim, this insinuation that deep down everything is connected and irreducible to a simple substrate, resonates with an *ecological sensibility*, and that too is important to me. But in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, my monism posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit. The formula here, writes Deleuze, is “ontologically one, formally diverse.” This is, as Michel Serres says in *The Birth of Physics*, a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate. Though I find Epicureanism to be too simple in its imagery of individual atoms falling and swerving in the void, I share

⁹ By ‘real’ I understand any body, human or nonhuman, independently of all its relations. See, for instance Guido Küng, “The intentional and the real object.” *Dialectica* 38, no. 2/3 (1984): 143–156; Barry Stroud, *The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21–44; or Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse* II (2007): 187–221. For more on the impossibility of unifying the real in a single theory, see, for instance, Stephen Hawking, “Godel and the End of the Universe.” Available at: <http://www.hawking.org.uk/godel-and-the-end-of-physics.html>.

¹⁰ Ahmed Farag Ali and Saurya Das, “Cosmology from quantum potential.” *Physics Letters B* 741 (2015), 278.

¹¹ Ian Buchanan, “The Problem of the Body in Deleuze and Guattari, Or, What Can a Body Do?” *Body & Society* 3, no. 3 (1997): 80.

its conviction that there remains a natural *tendency* to the way things are - and that human decency and a decent politics are fostered if we tune in to the strange logic of turbulence.¹²

This decision, to ground an ethical project in the assumption of a common ‘matter-energy,’ however ‘turbulent,’ remains problematic on various levels. Firstly there are dangers associated with the assumption of ‘natural’ tendencies, if for no other reason than the ways in which ‘natural’ often comes to stand for something with an unquestionable positive value. Although I am certainly not claiming that to be Bennett’s intention in the passage above, such nostalgic insistence on the necessity of reconnecting with the forgotten ‘natural tendency’ of things, however ‘strange’ in its logics, detracts from the much-needed eco-political project *Vibrant Matter* itself wants to pursue, one which involves doing away with categories of ‘nature’ altogether. Second, if one is to rethink ecology and community differently, and in such a way that the ethical duty of consideration no longer requires membership of a particular genus of being - white or non-white, male or female, human or nonhuman, ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’, for instance – it would seem important to avoid reproducing the same kinds of logics that allowed for ecocide in the first place, logics such as those that, in positing forgotten common origins, allow for the simultaneous protection *and* exploitation of such a Garden of Eden through its objectification as something that, in being elsewhere, is always-already out of now.¹³ A true democracy of all things cannot ignore individual paths of differentiation by projecting and favouring a pre-existing sameness in which to ground the democratic ecological politics of the present.

Rather than departing from a position of recognition of the one in the Other, political ecology could, instead, be attentive to the failed identity that, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have highlighted, will always constitute one’s relationship with both oneself and the Other, and is thus both condition of possibility for a pluralist democracy and sign of the impossibility of its full realisation.¹⁴ Instead of allowing political tension to be released through resolving conflict with identity and recognition, it is the antagonism between self and Other that allows for a democratic polity to emerge as permanent negotiation. In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, ‘the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity.’¹⁵

¹² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xi.

¹³ For more on the ecological dangers of a nostalgia for an ‘elsewhere,’ see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–12.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 122–27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

Finally, as Bennett recognises, the vital principle she argues is shared by all things and from which a new polity should emerge is ‘too close and too fugitive, [...] as much wind as thing, impetus as entity.’¹⁶ If that is the case, if such a ‘matter-energy’ is so hard to pin down, then we could trace a series of problems that arise: Why, for instance, ought one insist on building an ethics and a politics grounded in such elusive foundations? How strong a ground can it be? Is Bennett insisting on it just for the sake of clinging to the idea that a polity can only emerge through the recognition of something that is common to all its members? Is it necessary to stick to a narrative that, despite all our differences, there must be something we all share, even if that something is a certain *je ne sais quoi* we might never be able to locate with certainty? Would it not be more productive, especially at a time of such pressing ecological urgencies, to depart from a position of actual conflict and misidentification rather than from the retroactive projection of a shared something that is so fugitive and hard to discern that it might not be able to sustain a strong and lasting ethico-political project? Why privilege the material energy that allowed this body to emerge from a confederation of parts that affect and are affected by one another, to the detriment of everything else about this body that cannot be reduced to the performance of its constituent parts? Is there not a difference between the cookie and the sum of its crumbs? Why should that fleeting matter-energy that brought the parts of my body together be favoured over my body understood as a unit whose behaviour cannot be exhausted by the behaviours of its parts?

I would contend that the only thing that precedes this body of mine are other, smaller bodies that will stick together as long as my levels of internal entropy are lower than those of my environment. That is the only condition for the life, that is, the sustainability, of this body. Those parts also have parts of their own that, if performing in an equally sustainable way, guarantee the survival of those body-parts of mine, all the way down to the level of atoms, and from there to that of quarks, and from there to that of the strings that, for the time being, are the farthest we have managed to apprehend. Is it not that my own body is itself part of other higher-level bodies - social, ecological, cosmological - whose survival is dependent on the ways in which the bodies at my level of the real encounter and affect one another? If so, shouldn't we be privileging what we can do, what we can perform, how we can affect and be affected, rather than what, by virtue of its presence on the ontological periodic table, has caused us to be whatever we are?

¹⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 119.

An ethics beyond the common

Spinoza ascribes to bodies a peculiar vitality: “Each thing [*res*], as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its own being.” *Conatus* names an “active impulsion” or trending tendency to persist.¹⁷

In this passage, Bennett rightfully recognizes that, once bodies are formed, they immediately start striving to prolong their lives as coherent, that is, less entropic systems, in line with the impulse to persist that Spinoza identified in all things. It is on the basis of a similar ‘trending tendency to persist’ that the autonomy of bodies has also been postulated by second-order cyberneticians Paul Bourguine and Francisco Varela:

Autonomy in this context refers to [a living creature’s] basic and fundamental capacity to *be*, to assert their existence and to bring forth a world that is significant and pertinent without being pre-digested in advance. Thus the autonomy of the living is understood here *both* in regards to its actions and to the way it shapes a world into significance. This conceptual exploration goes hand in hand with the design and construction of autonomous agents and suggest an enormous range of applications at all scales, from cells to societies.¹⁸

If all bodies, despite being formed by a conglomerate of parts, *perform* to assert their autonomous existence as a differential from their environment, a question could be asked: Why insist that somehow such bodies, defined by their ability to sustain their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the world, should have their actions considered merely on the basis of the shared purpose of their acting to the detriment of the autonomy (that is, the difference) each of them strives to assert? Could the focus of such ethical attention not lead to more ecological losses than benefits? If, as Bennett claims, ethics ought to be grounded on the recognition of a shared vital materiality rather than, as in Laclau and Mouffe, on the acceptance that recognition is always a contingent and incomplete process, might that not lead to a situation in which bodies become redundant and interchangeable exactly because they start standing for nothing other than the matter-energy they all purportedly carry within them? This might allow for a strange form of fetishism whereby relations between discreet political actors are abstracted and replace an eco-logics of bodies and relations with an eco-nomics of ‘thing-power’. If, despite all our differences, we ought to approach one another simply on the grounds of

¹⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2.

¹⁸ Paul Bourguine and Francisco Varela, “Introduction: Towards a Practice of Autonomous Systems,” in *Toward a Practice of Autonomous Systems: Proceedings of the First European Conference on Artificial Life*, eds. Francisco Varela and Paul Bourguine (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1992), xi.

that which we might have in common, our differences could easily be reduced to exchange-value in an economy of 'matter-energy'. If that's the case, then there may be nothing stopping me from annihilating you if I can always encounter the same 'matter-energy' in other bodies that accumulate around me, including my own. In a purely economic cost-benefit logic, what do I lose by losing you, if what ultimately matters from this ethical position - the value of your existence - can always be retrieved elsewhere through a simple process of equivalence and conversion?

Furthermore, it appears to me that the theatrics of identity and recognition on which Bennett bases her ethical project, carries within it a particular concept of what an ecological community might entail, one that resonates with Victor Turner's definition of *communitas* as the feeling that emerges when individuals are able to elude the differences amongst them and, through that, develop comradeship and egalitarianism.¹⁹

Drawing from his anthropological study of ritual processes, Turner used the term '*communitas*' to designate the feeling of belonging that individuals develop during the liminal stage of a ritual. If, following Arnold van Gennep, rituals possess three distinct phases - 'separation,' 'margin' or '*limen*,' and 'aggregation' - it is during the second of those stages that participants are able, after having separated themselves from the space-time of everyday life, to blur boundaries between self and other and emerge as an unstructured, undifferentiated, "community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders."²⁰ Whether anchored in the transcendent authority of ritual elders identified by Turner or in the immanent 'matter-energy' posited by Bennett, I would argue that both views of community depend on the existence of a realm outside of the ordinary everyday that is postulated as having the power to build communion through a blurring of difference. Thus, despite their ability to highlight the historicity and contingency of all identity formations at the level of the individual, as well as the degree of susceptibility to change and becoming of all individual and societal structures, ultimately both Bennett's and Turner's works ground community on an third, unifying term—an 'elsewhere' to the space-time of the everyday where actual ethical decisions take place, and to which they both ascribe the task of resolving political dissonance with the major chord of pre-individual identity. What separates Turner from Bennett, however, is that whilst the former was exclusively concerned with studying human ritual and social drama, the latter has extended that theatrical logic of recognition and identification beyond the realm of the human and its 'cultural' productions. The principle, however, remains the same: through recognizing that which is common, bodies are drawn closer

¹⁹ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick and London: AldineTransaction, 1995), 94–96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

together and that, in turn, can make them kinder to one another by pre-empting the possibility of some of us becoming mere resources for the consumption of others.

Although I cannot but share in Bennett's willingness to trouble the certainty of the divide between humans and nonhumans in the name of a more sustainable ecological politics, we differ on whether the way to do so must pass through the privileging of recognition, to the detriment of all the unreconcilable differences that are responsible for our bodies not melting into one another. Aiming for a community sustained by something that is purportedly shared by all is at odds, I would argue, with the meaning of community itself. As Roberto Esposito highlighted by referring to Quintilian's maxim *Quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium*, what we share with another ceases to be our own.²¹ In other words, rather than presupposing the existence of something that belongs to all, the common in *communitas* is something that, in being given away, is no longer ours and, therefore, cannot be shared. By going back to the etymological history of the term '*munus*' from which '*communitas*' is derived, Esposito claims that community is not about possessing something that the other also possesses and, therefore, forming some kind of bond around that shared possession, but it is, instead, always about owing something to the other, about an unconditional duty of giving. For Esposito, *communitas* 'does not, by any means, imply the stability of a possession and even less the acquisitive dynamic of something earned, but loss, subtraction, transfer. It is a 'pledge' or a 'tribute' that one pays in an obligatory form.'²² As a result,

[In *communitas*,] subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure within which they can establish transparent communication or even a content to be communicated. [...] Therefore the community cannot be thought of as a body, as a corporation [...] in which individuals are founded in a larger individual. Neither is community to be interpreted as a mutual, intersubjective "recognition" in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity.²³

In other words, a community that is worthy of its name has to be grounded in the loss rather than in the addition of what is 'proper'. If what is common is what ultimately keeps bodies apart from one another, community can perhaps be thought to come about through irreconcilable differences rather than through reassuring misrecognitions. Or, in a reworked Adornian fashion, it is only through the foregrounding of their strangeness to one another that bodies will be able to come together as strong

²¹ See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 1–7.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

and lasting communities grounded on a duty of consideration for that which will always remain other. In such a community, the impossibility of belonging is recognized through the unveiling of the absolute strangeness of all bodies, human and nonhuman, of their ultimate and non-negotiable difference from themselves and one another even at the moment of their being entangled. Such a *communitas* is, therefore, not a community of shared possessions. It is, instead, the dwelling-together of those who share nothing or that, in sharing something, will not be able to ever know exactly what it is they share. As Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such*—this is the lover’s particular fetishism. Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality or essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility.²⁴

Because all bodies are both singular and strange—irreducible as they are to either their individual properties or some primordial commonality—a democratic polity of things can only emerge out of the ethical call to consider all bodies in their irreplaceable and ultimately strange difference. If, as Thomas Birch has noted, ‘the institution of *any* practice or *any* criterion of moral considerability is an act of power,’ then an ecological polis must vehemently refuse to play the game of moral criteria, no matter how universal criteria such as possession of ‘thing-power’ might claim to be.²⁵

By departing from an awareness that bodies are always more than the sum of the workings of their parts and more than anything they might have in common, such a community of strangers turns the impossibility of finding a common ground into an opportunity for respecting the singularity of every single body, as one would respect one’s own in all its ungraspability. For, unlike what might happen in a community that is based on resonance or homosociality, in a community of strangers bodies will never be able to fully match one another, making it the only kind of community in which a loss is a loss is a loss that can never be recovered. As Alphonso Lingis notes, ‘One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one’s forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice.’²⁶ It is only through the recognition of the absolute strangeness of every single

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

²⁵ See Thomas Birch, “Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration,” *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 4 (1993), 317.

²⁶ Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 12.

body that a principle of ethical inviolability of the other can ever be guaranteed. As Lévinas wrote in relation to the singularity of the Other:

The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus [...]. The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity.²⁷

In our ecological present, a time when all bodies have been found to be dangerously entangled and simultaneously strangers to one another, ethics can only emerge as a leap of faith, as a gesture of respect for bodies in all their irreconcilable differences. By bringing forth a community of 'foreigners' predicated on the embracing of what Lingis sees as the other's condition of 'intruder,' a more ecological politics beyond the 'nature'/'culture' divide may be possible, one that overcomes the contingencies of recognition and the fragility of all relations of kinship, consonance and empathy.²⁸ When we stop asking whether or not a body is worth saving based on what it may or may not have in common with other bodies and our own - what attributes of that body might or might not overlap with ours - only then we will be able to inhabit a world in which ethical consideration is given *a priori* to all bodies, and where the entanglement of humans and nonhumans will no longer be overlooked but, rather, respected and approached with the caution and dedication that their ungraspable and yet always seductive strangeness requires from us. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in a way that, despite being focused on the human, could easily be pushed beyond the frontier of our skin:

[Climate] change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. We may provisionally call it, a "negative universal history."²⁹

²⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

²⁸ See Lingis: "The other comes as an intruder, and an authority, into the order of nature that my thought has represented in obedience to its own imperative; into the practicable field my thought has represented in a layout of means toward ends; and into the social field whose economic, political, and linguistic laws and codes of status and etiquette my thought has represented in obedience to its own imperative. He or she approaches as the surface of another imperative. His approach contests my environment, my practicable layout, and my social arena. Her approach commands an understanding that arises out of the sensitivity that is afflicted by her suffering." Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, 34.

²⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009), 222.

Thus, and in conclusion, whilst I claim an allegiance with Bennett in stressing the importance of trying to overcome human exceptionalism and thinking the reality of bodies without overlooking their power to affect and be affected, I am wary of the ways her vital materialism reproduces a view of community as a formation that privileges, and thus depends on, an identifiable something its members must share as the condition for their membership of the new ecological polis. I question the romantic nostalgia that subsumes the many into the one, even if that one is postulated as always-already multiple, as a virtual realm that unites a multiplicity of actual forms and thus predicts a coming together of humans and nonhumans as a polity through a recognition of their shared vital materiality. I do so because I fear monism risks making singular bodies redundant and, therefore, exchangeable in a grand economy of being, predicated on the abstraction of bodies into equivalences of ‘thing-power’ or ‘matter-energy.’ And even if we were to be protected from such abstraction and consequent equivalence and exchange by some regulatory body of ontological finance, ‘matter-energy’ seems to me too fleeting and slippery a thing to serve as the foundation for any kind of lasting polis, unless, that is, we learn how to build safely on sinking grounds.

Instead, I contend it is only through an embrace of the irreconcilable differences that make all bodies individual and irreplaceable, that a strong and truly lasting ethical community can become achievable, one in which all bodies are approached in the same considerate manner because to lose one of them is to lose something that will never be replaced. In short, whilst, Bennett finishes *Vibrant Matter* with a litany in which she states her belief in ‘one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen,’ I end here, by claiming my arguably paradoxical belief that only a radical privileging of, and care for, the irreconcilable difference of all bodies can open up the doors to a fairer, more considerate, and solidary ecological polis.³⁰

³⁰ For Bennett’s litany, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.