

## NARRATIVES OF THE SELVES AND THE (IN)TANGIBILITY OF VIBRANT MATTER

**Teraya Paramehta**

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia

Email: [teraya@ui.ac.id](mailto:teraya@ui.ac.id)

### *Abstrak*

*Berfokus kepada cara narasi-diri mentransformasi narasi kebendaan, paper ini mengeksplorasi kategori ke(tidak)terabaan dalam materi vibran. Bagaimana dan dengan cara apa kualitas ke(tidak)terabaan suatu hal menjadi penting dalam persoalan material dan bagaimana ke(tidak)terabaan mentransformasi relasi material dalam narasi? Dengan melibatkan teori materialisme baru, seperti "daya benda" dan "agensi distributif" dari Jane Bennett, dan diskusi tentang animasi bahasa dari Mel Chen, paper ini juga berdialog dengan genealogi haptisitas afektif dan tradisi narasi-diri Barat. Menanggapi pertanyaan Jane Bennett mengenai manusia dan benda, paper ini mengusulkan bahwa ke(tidak)terabaan materi dapat memberikan cara menavigasi kesenjangan bahasa antara benda dan manusia. Paper ini berargumen bahwa memperhatikan momen proses ke(tidak)terabaan menunjukkan bahwa bahkan narasi memiliki narasinya sendiri, terlepas dari tendensi antroposentris kita dalam membaca narasi. Tanpa menempatkan subjektivitas manusia sebagai produsen tunggal narasi, paper ini mendemonstrasikan bahwa benda pun bernarasi—berdampingan dengan narasi Antroposen.*

**Kata kunci:** ke(tidak)terabaan, narasi, materialisme baru, materi vibran, daya benda.

### *Abstract*

Focusing specifically on how self-narratives transform narratives of other things, the paper focuses on the category of (in)tangibility in vibrant matter. How and in what ways does the (in)tangible quality of things matter in matters and how does it transform the material relationship of narratives? Engaging with theories of new materialism, such as Jane Bennett's "thing power" and "distributive

agency,” and Mel Chen’s discussion on animacy in language, the paper is also in conversation with the genealogy of affective hapticity and the Western tradition of self-narrative. Responding to Jane Bennett’s question on humans and things, the paper suggests that (in)tangibility of matter may offer us a way to better navigate the language gap between things and humans. The paper argues that pausing at moments of (in)tangible processes will make visible how narratives have their own narratives despite the seemingly anthropocentric nature of our reading of narratives. Placing human subjectivities not as the only producers of narratives, the paper demonstrates that things, too, share certain narratives that exist adjacent to the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** *(in)tangibility, narrative, new materialism, vibrant matter, thing power.*

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## INTRODUCTION

It began with an e-mail. Upon learning about my research interests on the transnationality of post-9/11 in New York and the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, the director of the Isana Dewata non-profit organization, whom I had not met before, wrote that she would give me two books that they had recently published. The books are anthologies of personal accounts by the Bali bombing survivors. Lina, the director, is a survivor of the bombings herself. Community initiated and independently published, the books contain a multitude of political forces as they archive the lives of the survivor community into written texts. Two months after we exchanged e-mail, I flew to Bali, met Lina, and the two books were in my hands. The books were fairly new; *Luka Bom Bali* was published in 2017 and *Janda-Janda Korban Terorisme di Bali* in 2016. But the personal narrative was based on what happened in 2002, when the bombs exploded and injured hundreds of people. Some had shared their personal narratives that are now printed on the

pagination of the books, bound as paperback copies; one of the copies reached my hands. The publication of the books is a materialization of personal narratives and how personal narratives become “community narratives” that respond to the post-9/11 geopolitical assemblages.<sup>1</sup>

At that very peculiar gift-giving moment, the books held a certain affective vibrancy to me. It was unexpected yet existed for a moment—like a very gentle flush. I wonder, though, was it the stories of these survivors induced by the gentle flush even before I read the books? Or, was it my subjective penchant for the tangibility of newly printed books? (I have always found the smell of bookstores very pleasant) Was it the whole assemblage of the very moment of gift-giving itself? I wonder where the affective vibrancy came from: the spatial and temporal aspects of the meeting (such as the place and time), the sociohistorical context (that I am meeting Lina for the first time because the bombing that happened in 2002 became my research topic 16 years later), the materiality of the books, including the narratives that is materialized in printed language, or the combination of all and/or some?

That simple moment when the books came to my hands immediately reminded me about Jane Bennett’s material vibrancy. Pursuing Deleuzian strands of materialism rather than Marxist, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) by Jane Bennett postulates a theory in which nonhuman matter plays a central role in the assemblages of agentic power. Attempting to answer the question of what political theory looks like if nonhuman forces are considered, using Bruno Latour’s term—as “actants”<sup>2</sup> rather than inert objects, Bennett argues that shifting the paradigm toward the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude for the excellent input and criticism provided by the editors of *Jurnal Filsafat* and two anonymous reviewers. Moreover, I am grateful to Dr. Natania Meeker and my fellow graduate students in the CSLC 502 “Introduction to Literary Theory” seminar during the fall 2018 at the University of Southern California, Dornsife. They reviewed a previous iteration of my ideas and provided valuable insights on the topic of new materialism, which was entirely new to me back then.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour (1996) defines “actant” as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others” (7)

vitality of things enables more politically sustainable and ethical ways to think about the ecological and other repercussions of human-nonhuman relations.

But, how about the books that were in my hands? They were obviously written by humans, so the nature of written narratives materialized in the books are anthropocentric. Nevertheless, sociohistorical and political contexts that were at play in the production of the books are not. The explosions of the bombs that debilitate the survivors themselves, despite being planned and executed by human beings, were actually an assemblage of nonhuman matter: fire, smoke, metal, chemical, toxic, and even cellular (one circulating information is that the bombs were ignited with a cell phone). This assemblage of human and nonhuman matter finds a way into the personal narratives materialized as written language in the anthology of memoirs about the Bali bombings. How does the dualism of human and non-human matters find a place in the production of memoirs? What is at play when human experiences translate non-human matter into stories of human experience? The urgency of decentering anthropocentrism has been central in new materialism thoughts, but how to represent the subjectivity and agency of non-human matters remains a question.

As I have these inquiries in mind, the relational affect of the books in my hands lingers. Would I feel the same way if the books were electronic copies that Lina could easily send by e-mail, which means that our meetings might not happen? There is something about the tangibility of the books that is central to all the questions I have about the vibrancy of written accounts of personal narratives. Juxtaposing Bennett's material vibrancy in conversation with Mel Chen's exploration of the linguistic turn and animatedness, as well as with Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* and Julietta Singh's discussion of the entanglement of narrative and matter, this paper aims to shift our attention to how narratives might have their own narratives, despite the seemingly anthropocentric nature of our reading of narratives. Situating human subjectivities not as the only

producers of narratives, the paper will demonstrate that things, too, share certain narratives that exist adjacent to the human.

### 1. On Material Vibrancy

Thinking of and through affect as “central to politics and ethics” (Bennett, 2010: xii), Bennett argues that material vibrancy encompasses “affect” that does not exclusively privilege human bodies. Rather, its power is impersonal; in Bennett’s words, “I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body” (Bennett, 2010: xiii). Bennett is interested in the political implication of “thing power”—embracing the powerful force of all matters. At its core of this thought-provoking notion are the philosophical lineage from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze, along with more recent contemporary philosophers whose thoughts advance materialism: such as Bruno Latour and Brian Massumi. Bennett begins with Deleuzian non-dualistic concept of “assemblage” to introduce what she calls “thing power”—the materialist sense of undoing dualistic thinking: human/nonhuman, subject/object, organic/inorganic, internal/external, and mind/body. At the vital core that “works both inside and outside of selves” (Bennett, 2010: 62), Bennett refutes the notion of machine-like “structure” that limits our understanding of how agency works beyond human matter: “Structures, surroundings, and contexts make a difference to outcomes, but they are not quite vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010: 29). In other words, Bennett’s new materialist thinking is not machinic nor predictable; instead, it is one that questions the tendency that flattens and totalizes myriad actants that shape an assemblage.

Bennett is clear that she does not attempt to flatten human/nonhuman actants, nor does she overlook human agency entirely. What she aims to do is to stimulate a language in which the active vitality of nonhuman subjects is more recognized, even within human bodily subjects or when the human is internal to matter. Such a goal may be deemed impossible, as she mentions in

her lecture on September 27, 2011, for our sense of things is defined both conceptually and symbolically through a human-centric “language”. Bennett discusses this significant challenge in her discussion of vibrant materiality, or its early conceptual nucleus, in her engagement with Spinoza, Deleuze, Kant, Driesch, Bergson and many more throughout her book.

The “vibrancy” of matter means that all matters, whether biological or nonbiological, are living matters. What Bennett means by “life” is not merely as organic part of a larger structure or organism but rather as having the power to create political effects beyond its ontological realms as subjects, objects, or beyond (in fact, Bennett rejects this dualism, and only embrace it strategically as “distributive agency”). Hoarders’ possessive relationship with the rubbish they collected, the Pacific garbage patch phenomenon, and the failure of the grid system in New York that causes unpredictable massive power outage are some of the examples that Bennett draws to engender her argument. These “matter” vibrates political affects that create and transform political ecologies in which human is no longer hold agentic supremacy. One cannot isolate one (or several) source of political actants—we (human and non-human, biological and non-biological) are all affectively connected as living political beings that shape each other. In her words: “any action is always a trans-action, and any act is really but an initiative that gives birth to a cascade of legitimate and bastard progeny” (Bennett, 2010: 101).

Bennett seeks plausible alternatives for the human experience of things by extracting “thing power” itself despite the failure of anthropocentric “language” to do so. To do this, Bennett leans toward a Spinozian sensibility defined in *natura naturans*, “the uncaused causality ceaselessly generates new forms,” in opposition to *natura naturata*, “the passive order” of nature (Bennett, 2010: 117). Such sensibility might be enabled by “anthromorphization”; Bennett admits that the human-centric logic of “anthropomorphization” of matter will not result in complete translation of human and non-human languages, but it will further “chasten [my] fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common

materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (Bennett, 2010: 122). In other words, we can benefit from strategic anthromorphization. She introduces “distributive agency,” which complicates the causative effects of subject relations. Arguing that “there are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play,” the urgency of understanding agency is actually “to identify the contours of the swarm, and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits,” which produces an incomprehensible result of agentic relations (Bennett, 2010: 32). Bennett meticulously attends to “things” that are mundane and beneath what is comprehensible to neo-capitalist logic, such as debris on the street, plastic trash in the ocean, and the vitality of electric grids, including the lives beyond human perception. Such details are helpful in understanding how “thing power” works — identifying inanimate objects that are alive beyond (or beneath) what humans understand, and how their existence (or its nonexistence) affects our human-centric perception more than humans could imagine, as exemplified in her discussion of the power outage. The ontological turn Bennett offers, then, may ignite forces in which nonhuman matter and assemblages create ecologies. However, the core challenge that Bennett attempts to overcome in *Vibrant Matter* remains open: What would a language of “things” look and sound like? The language barrier between things and humans remains untranslated. If things have power that humans can never understand, how does distributive agency work if the very core of understanding in human perception is limited? How can humans perceive, or be more aware of, “thing” language? Should we even call it language at all?

I shift my attention to the (in)tangibility of matter that may offer a way to better navigate the language gap between things and humans. My turn to intagibility and tangibility as inseparable moments, which I call (in)tangibility, may allow a kind of mediation for narratives as matter to emerge in a less visible and palpable form. How and in what ways does the (in)tangible quality of things matter in matter? Moreover, how and in what ways does a certain

intangible “thing,” which does not occupy space but can be experienced in time, become an “actant”? How can examining the (in)tangibility of matter further complicate or clarify Bennett’s “distributive agency”? Bennett’s discussion of vibrant matter includes a variety of tangible and intangible matter, from random debris to electricity to micro-bacteria. Despite the heterogeneity of matter, I am more curious about the transitional quality—the process in which matter takes shape and meaning—in the (in)tangibility of matter, as I suspect more can be postulated about the assemblage of “distributive agency” if we pause and rethink our relationship with moments when matter changes; thus, the political ecology of things should give more attention to the flow and material quality of (in)tangibility. This is why I explore narratives—the practices (and aesthetics) of telling stories. I argue that self-narratives, despite seemingly anthropocentric, enable narratives of their own that in themselves possess material vibrancy; focusing and developing (in)tangibility as a category to think about material vibrancy will also show that the (in)tangibility of matter is always an ongoing process of creating, shaping and transforming its political ecology.

Focusing on the (in)tangibility of things may help us understand the conceptual language barrier that keeps us, humans, from fully exploring the realm of nonhuman agency, even though it means we are also shifting our attention to phenomenology. To illustrate, it seems more likely or more natural that human perception makes sense of tangible items, plastic trash for instance, but is more oblivious to the intangible toxic ethanol the waste produces. But then again, such attention might rely too much upon human perception, which circles back to the problem Bennett addresses in her book. Yet, this is a risk I am willing to take.

## 2. (in)Tangibility of Things

I suggest that tangibility as a category to navigate material vibrancy is inseparable from “haptics”. This is to say that the



problems of (in)tangibility will always rely on touch. The conceptual nucleus of (in)tangibility stems from a Derridean reading of touching and affective rendition of “haptic,” which I will elaborate in this section, before moving on to the ways in which Mel Chen’s concept of “animacy” helps us understand (in)tangibility in narrative.

Analyzing Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Corpus*, which reflects the ontological and phenomenological relationships between body and soul as multitude of finite coexistences, Jacques Derrida’s (2005) deconstruction of touch shows that “*différance* of tact” is located in between touching the intangible or the untouchable:

What one does not touch is that which one touches, and it is *part* of what is called touch: what parts touching and divides it makes it be a *part* greater than the whole that it designates, and so forth. A part of oneself.

Undecidable play of the metonymy. To touch, to touch him/it, is possible only by not touching. Experience of the impossible. One thus touches either upon the *intangible* or on the *untouchable*, depending on whether one accentuates the *cannot-touch* or the *must-not-touch*. Between the intangible and the untouchable, the *différance* of tact. (Derrida, 2005: 298)

In Derrida’s tribute to Nancy’s reflection on the body, he emphasizes that touching is not merely the physical act of one touching another object, yet it includes an affective experience indescribable in the tangible/intangible or touchable/untouchable split. Moreover, Miller’s (2009; 159) reading of Derrida’s *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* suggests that “[t]ouch is always mediated, distanced, divided, parted, translated, transplanted, translated, prosthetic, like Nancy’s transplanted heart, a constant theme or figure, theme/figure, in *Le toucher*”. In other words, deconstructing the notion of touch from Aristotle, to Husserl, and to

Nancy himself, Derrida sees no fixity of 'the' touch. Reading this strand of thought along with the affective turn, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) in her seminal work *Touching Feeling*, also seeks nuances in non-binary relations. Her position on words and things is especially useful in thinking about the (in)tangibility of narratives:

I assume that the line between words and things or between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena is endlessly changing, permeable, and entirely unsusceptible to any definitive articulation ... Many kinds of objects and events *mean*, in many heterogeneous ways and contexts, and I see some value in not reifying or mystifying the linguistic kinds of meaning unnecessarily. (Sedgwick, 2003: 6)

In addition to the relationality of linguistic and nonlinguistic categories of matter, Sedgwick's responded to Renu Bora's essay on texture suggests that the haptic, which is closely tied to the category of (in)tangibility, is a reciprocal affect that enables a nuanced human perception (Sedgwick, 2003: 13). Furthermore, for Sedgwick, "the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity" (Sedgwick, 2003: 14) because "tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word 'touching'; equally it's internal to the word 'feeling'" (Sedgwick, 2003: 17). Breaking from dualistic thinking, along with the presumed hierarchy, this paper is built upon Sedgwick's argument that binary thinking is insufficient to interpret the link between affect and tactile and untouchable matter. Like Bennet's departure from binary logic, Sedgwick suggests, "Attending to psychology and materiality at the level of affect and texture is also to enter a conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or means versus ends." (Sedgwick, 2003: 21) Thus, touching itself is an affective intimacy that should not be read within binary logic; I locate the notion of (in)tangibility in the context of

Sedgwick's "touching feelings" that influenced my reading of Mel Chen's "animacy".

Mel Chen introduces "animacy" as a specific formulation of affective and material qualities of human and nonhuman, alive and dead things, that are racialized and sexualized, allowing some of us to navigate the myriad "biopolitical realizations of animacy" (Chen, 2012: 5). On the hierarchy of animacy in language, Chen argues:

The degree of anthropocentricity most certainly varies, is arguably more cultural than universal, and helps us to see how certain animate hierarchies or animate variants become privileged in one group or another. If animacy not only works in different ways for different cultures but indicates different hierarchizations of matter, then it is critical to distinguish between relatively dominant formulations of animacy hierarchies and relatively subordinated ones, a project that seems all too vital for studies that reify the place in 'nature' of non-Western or subordinated cosmologies. (Chen, 2012: 29)

Chen reminds us that anthropocentricity is cultural bound, which means that understanding anthropocentricity requires an understanding of the systemic hierarchization of cultures—including being sensitive to the Western bias that subordinates non-Western cosmologies. I suspect that animacy of matter can help us think about narrative (in)tangibility and material vibrancy. Written form of language—materializing human-made sounds into structures of symbols—marks historical milestones of civilization. The period before a civilization invents its written language is called "prehistory", as if history only exists after written language is discovered. It is hard to ignore how celebrated the invention of written language is as a cultural milestone, and that civilization and cultural intelligence are signified by the written, making oral culture seem subordinate (to be clear, it is not). Language (including speech), too, is matter with vibrancy. Bennett does not specifically

focus on language as a vibrant matter, but thinking about language alongside vibrant matter is productive. Again, I return to Mel Chen, who greatly informs my thinking about language and vibrant matter:

I refute the recent moves to evacuate substance from language, for instance, the notion that language is simply dematerialized; one of the outcomes of this belief, it seems to me, is that language discussions seem to disappear in the theorizing of new materialisms. The concern about language's absent materiality has in part to do with what are, in my view, misconceptions regarding the role of thought and mentality in general, which language is understood primarily to register. (Chen, 2012: 51)

Later, Chen continues:

Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material. For humans and others, spoken and signed speech can involve the tongue, vocal tract, breath, lips, hands, eyes, and shoulders. It is a corporeal, sensual, embodied act. It is, by definition, animated. But in spite of, or because of, the so-called linguistic turn (which occurred outside of the social-science discipline of linguistics, largely in the humanities) and the influence of poststructuralist thought, language in theory has in many ways steadily become bleached of its quality to be anything but referential, or structural, or performative. Some attempts at theorizing language have been labeled shallow "linguisticisms" that fail to recognize, or include, the vast materialities that set up the conditions under which language might even begin to be spoken. (Chen, 2012: 53)

Supporting Chen's argument that language, too, is material, I intend to expand the animacy and vibrancy of language—first, to include narratives, and then to include its tangible form, such as

prints and books. Therefore, I propose a more productive lens through which one can trace vibrancy in language, as well as narratives, which is the turn to a specific moment in the interaction of the tangible and intangible in the transition and the interaction of both, the space and moment in between, where distributive agency is at work. As I return to the experience I describe in the beginning of the paper, the seemingly intangible self-narratives transform into tangible matter, in the form of the books, but in the exchange the books 'speak' to me as I have them in my hands, even before I open the covers to read the symbolic structures on the pages. Several processes of animacies are at play here, including those that are coming from my perception and subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

To juxtapose the paused moment with the question, how can material vibrancy engage politically, I will strategically shift to the problem of anthropocentrism: what kind of stories, and narratives enable such affective movement to our anthropocentric self? According to Chen:

I read this hierarchy, treated by linguists as an avowedly conceptual organization of worldly and abstract things with grammatical consequence, as naturally also an ontology of affect: for animacy hierarchies are precisely about which things can or cannot affect—or be affected by—which other things within a specific scheme of possible action. (Chen, 2012: 30)

Which books—which narratives affect us? Would I feel the same should the books I receive have no political implications, no specific context that can affectively touch me? The very moment the books were in my hand, they became animated, at least to me. They are more than just abstract symbols set into Indonesian language,

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<sup>3</sup> Pausing at this moment, we can investigate how it can subject to racialization and/or sexualization, which could be an interesting conversation for another time.

printed with ink on papers that are stacked and bound into a paperback copy. They have a human quality that is not merely given (by me? by Lina?) but simply brought into being through the temporality of the context that I have experienced. Chen aptly describes my personal experience, “Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response” (Chen, 2012: 54). I would add here that it was not just the words or language, it was its tangibility; the fact that I can hold, touch, feel, smell the books, amplifies the affect in its very ephemeral temporality.

To that end, what is (in)tangibility? And is it synonymous with (in)visibility? The “(in)” means the in-between-ness and the existence of both polars. It is meant to challenge our dualistic thinking bias and our tendency to seek closure or conclusion rather than open-ended possibilities. It is a meaning and process making without boundaries, including one that is bounded with time. Instead of limiting its definition with boundaries, I find it more productive to describe its characteristics. Tangibility, simply put, is related to human apprehension through the sensorium. Something that can be touched, felt, smelled, and sometimes seen. Nevertheless, visibility is not absolute. (In)tangibility is also a moment when tangibility is ineligible for the human sensorium—a moment when both our subjectivity fails to recognize its existence, a “not yet” tangible moment. The opposite is also relevant; a tangible moment may become intangible and unbounded by time. The sun, for instance, cannot be touched but its existence is real to our sensorium, both the existence and absence are felt and determined by how the living beings signify the (intangible) concept of time. The water cycle, without which many living beings cannot live, has so much to teach us here. Water will *evaporate* into intangible air. The *sublimation* process makes solids into air, and under certain circumstances the *deposition* (also known as *desublimation*) process makes air into solid. (In)tangibility manifests in these ephemeral moments: a specific transitional point when

water temperature is just beginning to increase and to evaporate but has not quite become air yet. After all, water contains oxygen, a vital element in both water and air, so when does the transition begin and end? Liquid, air, and solid are just one set of examples.

When we, mere human beings, look closer, pay a closer attention to moments of (in)tangibility, we may notice that our bodily perceptions rely so much upon but might have been too oblivious to the banal existence of (in)tangibility. This is one action that is worth trying. However, our anthropocentric bias may hinder (in)tangibility to become legible, but it is not impossible. Like many other new materialist thinkers, my point here is not to reject anthropocentrism entirely, but rather acknowledge and embrace the ways in which it limits our perceptions of the world. This way, we move toward understanding anthropocentrism as one actant in a political ecology, in Jane Bennett's sense. The very essence of chemical metamorphosis in nature might offer a different and fresh way of thinking about the (in)tangibility of narratives. My goal is to find moments of (in)tangible processes in the materiality of narrative. Do language and narratives *evaporate*, *sublimate*, and/or *desublimate*? A closer look at moments of (in)tangibility—which means pausing to reflect or contemplate of our material becomings—might not offer a complete picture, but this framework, I believe, allows a more complex affective appreciation of processes and in-between-ness in narratives and their myriad material forms, from the banal (such as a doodle or scribble on a piece of paper), the orally anthropocentric (gossip between friends), to the neoliberal (mass produced bestsellers that romanticize colonialism).

### 3. Narratives of Selves

In this section, I will show how turning to the genre of life writing may help us think about the (in)tangibility of vibrant materiality. Narratives, including ones that are anthropocentric, can have narratives of their own. There are dynamic (in)tangibility processes in language: experience, written and published, books,

audience, reading practices, and many more. Paying close attention to (in)tangibility as a category of transition in distributive agency highlights how vibrant matter works. In self-narrative, (in)tangibility works and reworks itself, from tangible to intangible and vice versa. Nevertheless, the moments of (in)tangibility are crucial to seeing the materialization of narrative as having its own narrative.

To do this, I return to Roland Barthes' exploration of reading and writing as a bliss-induced relationship. For Barthes, bliss and pleasure are different, yet it is in the "in-between" process of reading and understanding that a text that activates bliss, or *jouissance*—ecstasy-like intellectual and physical pleasure.

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes, 1998: 14)

Through Barthes' erotic metaphor of bliss, which reflects on the human relationship to language/text, Barthes shows that the text and the body are always bounded. Self-narrative is a specific yet apt literary form in which one may find, or feel, the (in)tangibility of material vibrancy. Arguably a written mode of human experience, the process of writing different genres of self-narration such as memoir, biography, or autofiction, suggests a flow of materialization; often a source of very productive debate, the relationship of the narrator, the author, and the protagonist is unique to the reader. For the limited scope of this paper, I will only focus on autofiction as a literary genre.

The term autofiction was coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in his novel *Fils*. According to Hywel Dix (2018),



autofiction can be defined based on its style, sociological context, and history. Doubrovsky defines autofiction as ‘fiction of strictly real events’ at the back cover of *Fils* (in Dix 2); he then revised his definition in its sociological context--arguing that autofiction can be written by anyone, and is not written by an influential person like an autobiography. Finally, he expresses the historical significance of the genre, noting its twentieth and early twentieth-century rise to popularity:

It departs from the autobiographical pact by placing in question the assumption that a first-person autobiographical narrative uncomplicatedly refers to a stable, factual object. Autofiction raises the possibility of a non-referential, non-object-oriented form of autobiographical writing. As such it may be considered as autobiographical fiction written in the subjunctive mood. (Dix, 2018: 6)

Another important point worth noting from autofiction is that it is a project of the author’s “self-exploration and self-experimentation” partly because many works of autofiction are the result of an “aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience—real or imagined” (Dix, 2018: 4). How can a reader or an author find bliss in works of autofiction, then? And, where is the (in)tangibility?

Returning to my relationship with the anthology of books from the Bali Bombing survivors, which can be categorized as a form of autofiction or memoir, the tangibility of the books in my hand, and the sociohistorical context of these stories that were intangible in my perspective until I touched the material “things” shows that the text is not only bound to the author’s and reader’s bodies but to its physical form and its own narrative. Bliss, or *jouissance*, then happens in the (in)tangible moment, and partly it was a moment when the “thing,” in my subjective perspective, speaks vibrancy to me. Thus, it was more effortless, at least for me, to imagine the anthromorphization of these books.

Narratives of selves do not evaporate and become untouchable / intangible when they are not written; they are actually untouchable

/ intangible matter in the beginning and the process of writing is a desublimation into tangible matter. Yet, the same can also be said about the tangible “thing” at the very moment touching takes place: books, seemingly tangible, are maybe intangible up until they are actually in my hands. Touching becomes a vital process of perceiving (in)tangibility. Yet, through its tangibility, the intangibility of narrative also come to life. Taking this into account, the seemingly anthropocentric life-narratives rely heavily on the assemblage (in the Deleuzian sense) and the ecology (in Bennett’s term) of human and things.

### CONCLUSION: POLITICAL STAKES

This article echoes Julietta Singh’s (2018) argument in *Unthinking Mastery* that “narrative and materiality are entangled in ways that cannot possibly be reduced to a unidirectional causality” (Singh, 2018: 18). Agreeing with Bennett, Singh links Bennett’s “vibrancy” into the complex narrative of mastery: “Matter is not stable and cannot be mastered, despite the narrative fictions that enable us to imagine and engage it as such. It is not inert in time; it evolves, shifts, mutates, surprises” (Singh, 2018: 18).

Human perception might privilege tangible things over intangible things in its understanding of matter. Touching does amplify certain sensory experience, but as authors such as Sedgwick and Derrida have shown, touching is not limited only to its sensory experience. Instead, it is affectively multidimensional. What I am trying to highlight in this article, instead of solely the sense of touch, which focuses on the human, is the (in)tangibility of things--opening a way to think about the human perception of things and how it may translate the always ongoing, continuously and endlessly transforming material forms.

Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* asks us to reframe our political intervention in environmental projects. “Distributive agency” and “thing power” enable us to assess the state of human lives when nonhuman actants are not in the realm of how humans understand their place in the world. Although extremely important and

significant, thinking in terms of material vibrancy can still benefit seemingly anthropocentric narratives.

Through moments of (in)tangibility, such as when Lina gave me the books she had previously mentioned in our emails, the books as “things” ‘speak’ to me in ways unlike any reading experiences can describe. They ‘speak’ and ‘move’ even before I read the first sentence. They ‘speak’ and ‘move’ through touching, through (in)tangible processes during a simple exchange from things to a human. During this moment, the narratives are not just the autofiction stories written on the pages of the books, but the materialization of the books as matter and how they reach me. I would like to think that there is a political stake in pausing at such an (in)tangible moment, as Singh aptly articulates: “What is true of matter is true of those forms of matter called humans, who come to resist the narratives of mastery that shaped their subjectivities in surprising and excessive ways” (Singh, 2018: 18).

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