

# Philosophy in the Wild: Listening to ‘Things’ in Baltimore

by Jane Bennett and Alexander Livingston

This summer we went for a walk around Baltimore to explore the city and catch a glimpse of the fugitive power of “things” at work. Baltimore, a.k.a. ‘Charm City,’ is located on the Amtrak line between New York City and Washington D.C., and yet it feels very off the grid. The deepest inland port on the U.S. east coast, Baltimore was once an industrial giant and an important transit hub for the rest of the continent by way of the Baltimore-Ohio railroad. With its population peaking at nearly a million residents in the 1950s, Baltimore has since grappled with the flight of population and capital that accompanied the implosion of the American industrial economy. Its population today is around 600,000.<sup>1</sup> What this means is that Baltimore is a city where a great deal of material things—homes, factories, storefronts, and highways—remain largely undisturbed by human agents. We had plans to conduct something like an interview about what it’s like living here. What happened, however, was that things kept interrupting our best attempts at narration. They insisted upon being part of the conversation.



**1** We took as our inspiration something that Thoreau once said about an encounter with “the Wild”: it is a tonic against conformity, a challenge to our default ways of seeing, feeling, judging. Thoreau found in Nature a source of “perpetual suggestions and provocations,” in contrast to “the trivialness of the street.”<sup>2</sup> Affirming the spirit if not the letter of Thoreau’s sojourns, we experienced a certain “wildness” in the lively (nonhuman) materials of the city: fire hydrants, piles of bricks, discarded furniture, weed trees, etc. The “street,” it turns out, is not at all so trivial. It is in this sense that we think of our walk as doing “philosophy in the wild.”

Henry David Thoreau proposed walking as a practice of opening oneself up to the “subtle magnetism in Nature.”<sup>3</sup> He found that his own daily walk produced a style of perception especially attuned to the specificity of things. This “technology of the self” was used to cultivate a sensibility that was awake to the world, to its claims and calls: “Morning is when I am awake and there is dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep...To be awake is to be alive.”<sup>4</sup> Thoreau chose beautiful nature as the partner for his sojourns. We chose Baltimore, and rather than plants, animals, or stars to catalogue, we are on the hunt for garbage. We start our walk in Hampden, a neighbourhood that once prided itself on producing North America’s finest “duck”: the heavy, woven cotton used for postal-delivery bags and the sails that brought ships in and out of Chesapeake Bay. We forgo the roads and move by alleyway in search of trash.

What’s the appeal of garbage? Garbage can tell us something about ourselves, about our consumption practices; it is the all-too-durable trace of human activity in the world. As we tramp through alleyways liberally scattered with diverse bits of refuse, we encounter bits of ourselves, evidence of our own trashy existence. Confronting the amazing volume of garbage that we continually produce makes us think of our own finitude: this junk will, quite literally, out-live us. And yet, trash can’t so easily be reduced to a marker of human agency. It also displays a certain independence as it blows down the street to collect in piles and lumps that become dense points of obstruction for sewage systems and colonies for bacteria, or giant continents of plastic in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Garbage has a life of its own we discover as we explore its habitat in the alleyways of Baltimore. It exceeds whatever use or meaning we assign to it.



**2** Hampden is a neighbourhood that has been defined by sudden waves of migration twice over. The first wave was formed by Appalachian workers who arrived in the mid 19th century to sell their labour in the mills. The second hit in the 1990s, when empty mill buildings became attractive studio spaces for artists. The two cultures of Hampden—inter-generational working-class families now marginalized in the neoliberal economy and a more mobile “creative class”—live side by side. New residents eat on the patio of an expensive Italian restaurant on Chestnut Avenue, while across the street people buy and sell crystal meth.

What did digging through and associating with the garbage of this neighbourhood do to us on our walk? How is it an occasion for an experience of materialist wonder akin to the sense of the wild Thoreau felt walking in the woods of Concord or atop Mt. Ktaadn in Maine?<sup>5</sup> This is a question of what powers (human and nonhuman) bodies have to affect one another and be affected by them in turn. Here we are invoking Spinoza’s definition of a “body” as that which is simultaneously a *source* of action and susceptible to being altered or “affected” by its encounters with others, and thus also a *recipient* of action. Wondering at trash has a levelling effect: we look at it as it looks back defiantly at us. “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.”<sup>6</sup> It can also enable a fleeting connection across divides of race and class. It is an affective-aesthetic exercise, but not an “aestheticism.” It requires only a willingness to expose oneself to the sensuous materiality of stuff.



**3** On the other side of Hampden, past the highway, we find a small, seemingly forgotten neighbourhood of stone row houses between Woodberry and Television Hill. The neighbourhood strikes us as both beautiful and abrupt. It seems cut off from the rest of Charm City life. There’s an enormous concrete overpass which a planner decided to plunk down right in the middle of a once-quiet stone village. One ambitious native tree seems to have made peace with this concrete foreigner, as it snakes its way up out of its shadow into the light. We hope to find some exciting garbage underneath it, but it’s surprisingly tidy. (This reminds Jane of a sign that was common in the 1990s in windows on “The Avenue,” Hampden’s main shopping street: “Please keep Hampden Tidy.”) Perhaps the humans too have made their peace with it.



**4** It is not normal today to *think* of inanimate objects as possessing a capacity to do things to us and with us—even though it’s quite normal to *experience* them as such. Every day we encounter the power of possessions, tools, clutter, toys, commodities, keepsakes, trash. Why do we then overlook the creative contributions of nonhumans and underestimate their calls? One source of the tendency is a philosophical canon based on the presumption that man is the measure of all things; another is a default grammar that diligently assigns activity to subjects and passivity to objects; another is what Henri Bergson identified as the action-bias built right into human perception—sensory attention is continually directed pragmatically toward the potential *utility* of external bodies, rather than toward their non-instrumentalizable aspects or thing-powers.<sup>7</sup> We are all good moderns.<sup>8</sup> And yet, for the better part of human history the notion that there is vitality in things was widely affirmed. We think that even today there is an underground intuition, despite the great disenchanting power of modern rationality, that human and nonhuman bodies engage in some kind of communication. We know that we are all matter, all the way down: why then shouldn’t there be some resonance between the molecules of me and the molecules of stuff? There is a sense of this in Thoreau’s walks. Where archaic thought sought enchantment by humanizing plants, Thoreau and many “new materialists” like us want to “planticize” (mineralize?) humans. There is always some element of the non-human quality of the world at the core of whatever it is that we call human. We can think of what it means to humanize a stone, but let’s push that further and think about the stoniness in the human.



**5** Baltimore seems to be in a constant state of incomplete repair. You can’t really tell if businesses and construction projects are on their way in or out, up or down. But whereas urban repair in the U.S. and Canada often issues in dramatic real-estate speculation, Baltimore’s on-going rehab conforms more to a model of temporary *bricolage*. As Elizabeth Spelman writes in *Repair: The Impulse to Restore a Fragile World*, “Bricoleurs collect and make use of pieces of the past but do not try to return them to an earlier function.”<sup>9</sup> We head west to see the I-170, Baltimore’s famous “highway to nowhere”: an ambitious urban development project proposed by Robert Moses that would have stuck a four-lane highway right through west Baltimore in order to connect the city to the transcontinental I-70. Construction of the highway began in 1975, but the project, which cut through a vibrant African-American neighbourhood and displaced hundreds of vulnerable first-time homeowners, was thwarted by citizen opposition and lack of funds. What remained for a while was a sunken, two-mile stretch of highway dramatically terminating in a concrete wall. The highway is, one could say, the single biggest piece of garbage in the city. By the time we visited it, the city had begun tearing out the highway’s dead end in order to replace it with a park. We get no good photos. The park will change things a little, but it can’t erase the violence of this two-mile concrete scar.





**6** The materialist mood of our walk isn't anything fancy or dreamy—it's everyday, a conversation starter. It makes us think about the consequences of our consumption practices, but also about the effects initiated by the “products” themselves as they live on after we've abandoned them. Plastic bags are everywhere. Why are people so committed to using them? Despite multiple attempts by the city of Baltimore to pass a bylaw that charges money for them, the measure never passes. Avoiding plastic bags is one simple and effective way of reducing pollution in the bay, keeping litter off the streets, and encouraging people to think of goods as durable rather than disposable. But despite these sound reasons, citizens don't seem to feel it. Maybe these tactics need to be pluralized: they not only need to give good reasons, but also try to alter the senses to encourage citizens to be more awake to thing-powers. Perhaps “vital materialism” could help here.



**7** In a city like Baltimore it's hard to make connections with people across the stark lines of class and race. We go to Lexington Market and are struck by the experience of something like what Walt Whitman called democratic “comradeship”: it “is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship...that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof.”<sup>10</sup> Lexington Market is the oldest and most active of Baltimore's traditional seafood markets. Weaving our way through the crowd of human bodies shopping, chatting, waiting for the bus, selling drugs, and meeting with friends, we think about how the material constitution of the space enables the surprising encounters going on around us. We find a sopping wet thing under the table that we decide is gross. It looks like an eel, or a severed arm. We are told that it is some sort of sponge used to collect the runoff from the refrigerated cases of fish.



**8** Ideas, like things, are dangerous because their effectivity is indeterminate—you know they're going to produce effects, but you don't know what effects. If “vital materialism” can have some positive eco-political potential, it has to counter the idea of vitality that is also at work in the neoliberal, capitalist practice of endless economic “growth.” We've organized our entire society around a vitalistic understanding of political economy, with disastrous consequences: perpetual growth, unending streams of consumer “goods,” over-stimulated desiring selves, mountains of poisonous garbage. As Deleuze and Guattari have said, “Capitalism is at the crossroads of all kinds of formations—it is neocapitalism by nature.”<sup>11</sup> This materialism is ultimately unsustainable and self-defeating, as it undermines the activity of repair and the restorative capacity of the ecological systems that sustain it. Why do we keep on this way? Is it the thrill of endless immortality? But this is just one vision of vitality, and not the most desirable one. Renaissance humanists also thought about the vitality at work in history, but theirs was an organic vitalism that stressed the interdependence of growth and decline. Vital materialists also think that the world engages in real creativity, but its processes of growth and decay don't have to be channelled in a single capitalist direction. Instead they affirm the plurality of vital systems and their diverse forms of interdependence. The market is not a privileged site of vitality, and the vitality on display is actually plural—in distinction to the false choices posed by free market evangelists and their oligarchical backers.

**9** Being a materialist means being open to surprises. We walk north from the market, past an abandoned restaurant on Eutaw that was the site of one of the city's most important civil rights sit-ins, and arrive at Seton Hill, a neighbourhood of renovated row-houses, public housing, and warehouses of unidentified purpose, surrounding an English garden park. We find a church we like on Orchard Street and decide to go in. On a plaque in the entrance we learn that we are in the oldest standing structure built by African-Americans in Baltimore. While Maryland didn't secede during the Civil War, it was the northern-most southern state and an active hub in the North American slave trade. The port of Baltimore was home to five slave pens near the inner harbour where human beings were bought and sold. In his speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass mentions the terrible sound of “the piteous cries of the chained gangs that passed our door,” as slaves were brought from the pens past his house on Pratt St. on the way to the harbour.<sup>12</sup> As we are leaving the woman in the Baltimore Urban League office (in the same building) suggests we check out the basement, telling us that there's a tunnel that was part of the Underground Railroad, the network fugitive slaves used to escape from the south to New York or Boston. We are both drawn to touch the bricks of the tunnel wall, where the material overcomes the semi-otic: the slave was HERE, his or her hands left their mark on these bricks that we now touch. There is no plaque to celebrate the tunnel; only the baked clay stands witness.



**10** Edified by our contact with these bricks, we are set to open ourselves up to what's next. We find some grass strewn with litter that reminds us of mushrooms we found earlier in the day in Druid Park. We were so very pleased, enchanted really, with the line of fungus we found in the park. But we don't care much for the line of trash in this park. Why? No materiality is ever really available to us as something utterly divorced from its cultural effects. But still, we value the useful fiction of the thing-in-itself, which still sometimes affords us a tiny glimpse of a material agency, which is indeed at work around and within us.



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Thinkers like Graham Harman have recently been trying to articulate an “object-oriented ontology.” This is a valuable project, but not the same as the one going on in our rubbish walk. Our aim has as much to do with politics (polemics) as metaphysics. Of course, “nature” lends itself to a variety of metaphysical accounts. Like Deleuze and Dewey, vital materialists are also pragmatists. For us today, living in the wealthy and profoundly unequal democracies of North America, vital materialism is a strategy for sensing the visceral dimensions of our destructive political culture and discovering alternatives to it. It is a way of opening ourselves to things so our minds and bodies can be changed by them, as well as a theory of agentic material assemblages. We lose sight of what a philosophy is good for when we lose sight of the very real problems that provoke it.

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- Notes**
1. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore)
  2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Walden, Maine Woods, and Cape Cod, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 403.
  3. Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” in *Collected Essays and Poems* (Library of America, 2001), 233.
  4. Thoreau, *Walden*, 394.
  5. See Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*.
  6. Benedictus de Spinoza, “Short Treatise” in *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 82.
  7. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 28-29.
  8. See Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1952).
  9. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (Boston: Beacon 2003), 5.
  10. Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” in *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1005.
  11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1987), 20.
  12. Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” in *The American Intellectual Tradition* vol. 1, eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 453.