



*The Vital Lives
of Rocks*

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During the summer of 1989 my parents got divorced. My mother, an adventurer at heart, packed our taupe-colored 1985 Honda Civic hatchback with what belongings would fit and took my sister and I on a road trip to Alaska. For the first month and a half we had no tent, but managed just fine. We stayed on BLM lands in the clear-cut areas of Montana, house sat in Sedona, AZ, and slept on the side of the road on the Alaska-Canada Highway. We eventually got a tent just before rainy season in Fairbanks, AK and by the end of summer an apartment. That summer I learned: how to shoot a .22 rifle, how to start a fire, how to piss anywhere, how to navigate with a map, and how to pitch a tent.

As we travelled I became actively interested in rocks. I pocketed them whenever possible, spending hours with my sister squatting in the dirt and looking for interesting specimens. I started to amass a collection of rocks, many softball sized and larger. Two pieces stick out, one piece was red sandstone from the Sedona area shaped like a large jelly bean. The other piece was given to me in Cody, WY. The people who gave it to me said it was petrified wood, but the

wood was not agatized, it looks like white rock with grain—I always thought it was fake. The two rocks were the gems of my collection. When my mom made me get rid of my rocks because there was no room in the car, I kept hold of my two prizes by hiding the rocks in my pillow until she forgot about them.

While my story takes place over the course of one summer, the theory of the Big Bang places the age of the Universe at approximately 13.8 billion years old. The Earth is thought to be roughly 4.5 billion years old, a young planet when compared to the Universe. Our solar system is on the outer edge of the Milky Way, which is a barred spiral galaxy. And from Earth's position it is possible to see more than 100 billion galaxies. The oldest rock on earth is a zircon that is estimated to be 4.3 billion years old. To think about rocks is to think in deep time or time that is well beyond the scale of a human life. Human experience on Earth is just a blink of an eye when compared to the history of the Earth. *Deep time* is an invitation to think in time scales that are beyond our comprehension.

The Earth is carefully cradled in a crust of very old rock formations. Once the rocks make it to the surface of the earth, they erode, making sand and ever smaller rocks which settle back into bodies of water, creating sediment; then with pressure and heat, new rocks are formed. Some rocks come from inside the Earth, places in the mantle where there has been a melt. Sometimes the magma makes it to the surface and sometimes it shows up later. Rocks are made of minerals, which are crystalline solids. Mineral extraction is big business, playing an important role in many industries: construction, pharmaceuticals, dietary supplements, glass making, salt, to name a few. Rocks are pulverized, minerals are extracted, industrial processes completed,

products consumed, and wastes left. These processes can take anywhere from 2.4 billion years to a couple of days, depending on whether they are natural or human.

This project is inspired by an ongoing suspicion about the word *nature*. When I was an undergrad art history student I took a class on Modern Art History. The course was taught by Dr. Sue Taylor, a fastidious and strict teacher that introduced me to feminist and psycho-analytic perspectives. She was the first person in my life to point out that if something was described as “natural” or as “human nature” then one should be suspect of the intentions of the speaker. Nature was a way for the patriarchy to rationalize the subjugation of women. Women were part of nature, fecund and ready to reproduce, to be taken and controlled. Because that’s what humans do, control the *natural* world. Of course in this type of rhetoric, human is usually a stand in for white male, preferably with money. This was also a time in my life when I was also contemplating the term *misandrist*.

Ever since that class with Dr. Taylor, I have continued to be suspicious of the term nature. Luckily there are a lot of people who are invested in re-thinking the relationships between the human and nonhuman world. My favorite authors are those that situate the human within the natural world, as another object in the world, rather than the master of the world. There are two books that came to mind when I was thinking about the vital lives of rocks, *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett and *The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton. These two authors are part of a loose group of academics that are writing about environmental concerns, science, philosophy, and interdisciplinary practices.¹ They are both heavily influenced by Bruno Latour, whose interdisciplinary studies in science and philosophy have encouraged recent thinkers to make space for objects.

Jane Bennett's main focus in *Vibrant Matter* is to get the reader to identify with and acknowledge that the nonhuman world has potential for agency. Her text is part of a growing body of work that seeks to de-center humans from conversations about ecology and environmental concerns. Bennett builds on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the *assemblage*, calling an assemblage "an ad hoc grouping of diverse elements."² As an example, she considers the rolling black-outs that hit the East Coast of the US in 2003 as an assemblage. The assemblage of the black-out acknowledges that the electrons in the power currents have a certain type of agency that behaved in an unpredictable manner. Bennett asks the reader to consider the agency of non-human materials alongside human-influences. The assemblage bears a resemblance to Timothy Morton's idea of the *mesh*.

The idea of the *mesh* found in Morton's *The Ecological Thought*,³ asks humans to reconsider their place within the world and to stop separating humans from nature. The mesh builds upon rhizomatic thinking, asking the reader to place all objects in non-hierarchical relationship. My computer, the cat, coffee, apartment building, me, etc. are all equal yet distinct parts of the same mesh network. This mesh is the interconnectedness of all, but also includes the gaps and absences. It is an ecological entanglement that goes beyond the limited idea of nature as separate from other objects. The mesh involves all objects equally.

Both authors have coined ways to handle complex situations with all actants involved, not just humans. Whether it is the mesh or an assemblage, the environment around me is a series of complex relationships between materials. To think about the Earth as a system, requires the reader to go beyond the nation state, to question the role of capitalism, and power of the state. And if anything this epoch of

human intervention, or the Anthropocene, will bring these questions to the forefront. So while I know a rock cannot talk anymore than a tree or my glass of water, it's interesting to try to understand rocks as parts in an assemblage or within the ecological mesh. And then in turn to think about humans being one little part of a much larger system. The forms of rocks surround me, make up the ground below me and form the shape of the home that houses me. I am interested in rocks and minerals as materials, as part of the Earth Cycle, and a material that covers the Earth. But let's also be clear about the fact that I am not attempting to talk for rocks, with rocks, or to rocks. And in the mean time, the rocks will wait and watch, as they have done for billions of years.

NOTES

¹ Bennett is more associated with New Materialism and Morton with Object Oriented Ontology, but there are several other names they get grouped under. There is an interesting, albeit dense article about this, in the Summer 2016 *October*.

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p 23.

³ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, pp 28-29.