



VIBRANCY OF THE MATERIAL WORLD IN PAOLO BACIGALUPI'S *SHIP BREAKER*

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Abstract

This research paper examines Paolo Bacigalupi's Ship Breaker (2010) using Jane Bennett's new materialist framework, especially her ideas of "thing-power", "assemblage", and "distributive agency". The novel's dystopian setting of the drowned Gulf Coast, filled with industrial wreckage, is not a mere passive backdrop but a vibrating field of material agencies. Using Bennett's lens, the paper illuminates how things like the "City Killer" storms, the chemical punch of "crystal slide", and the rusting power of the "Rust Saint" all possess thing-power that shapes who lives, who dies, and how people organise themselves. The paper also explores the posthuman disintegration of the anthropocentric subject illustrated through the hybrid existence of Tool, the bioengineered "half-man", or Richard Lopez, whose identity is affected by the agency of the drugs. Both show how slippery the idea of a stable human self really is. In the end, Ship Breaker doesn't just give us a dire, ecologically collapsed world; it maps out the messy politics of the Anthropocene, where agency is not solely located within humans alone. Instead, it's spread across a tangled web of people and things, all buzzing with energy, sometimes working together. The novel pushes us to drop the idea of human control and learn to survive by teaming up with the wild, unpredictable stuff that surrounds us.

Keywords

Thing-Power, Anthropocene, Assemblage, Distributive Agency, etc.

Full Article

"Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other"
(Bennett, 31)

Anthropogenic climate change has violently disrupted our perception of a passive, inert and instrumental world, a mere resource for human exploitation. One of the ways that climate change is addressed is through its dystopian settings, and Paolo Bacigalupi has become an influential voice within the newly spawned genre of climate fiction, whose dystopian fiction shows the darker future ruled by techno-capitalism and its resultant posthuman condition and ecological problems. The novel, *Ship Breaker* (2010) is a seminal work of young adult fiction that unfolds in the future coastal America destroyed by the melting of glaciers and rising sea, which has drowned the earlier world and led to the new capitalist mode of production and survival. It won the prestigious 'Locus Award' for 2011 and was also listed as first among the Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults for the same year. The narrative opens in a post-climate change world where the ecological collapse has drastically altered both Earth's surface and the societal structure. Polar ice



caps have melted, coastal cities are underwater, and hurricanes capable of destroying the cities are frequent. The setting of the shipbreaking yard is a physical and metaphorical graveyard pondering humanity's discarded remnants. The landscape is a testament to the aftermath of the violent rule of the Anthropos and the capital. The wreckage of oil tankers—the remnants of a drowned civilization—dominates the horizon and dictates the lives of the people who scramble over their carcasses for survival. The vibrancy of the material world – the ruined ships, the toxins that secrete from them, the scavenged metal, the ‘city killer’ storms – actively influences the narrative and the characters of the novel. Here the boundaries between the human subject and the material object are breached, which reveals an eco-centric world where “things” possess vitality.

Therefore, a new materialist reading of the novel challenges anthropocentricity by foregrounding the agency of the material world. In her seminal work, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett challenged the traditional western philosophical tradition that considers matter as “passive stuff, brute, or inert” (Preface, VII) and argues that all matter possesses an ability to act, influence, and participate in assemblages that goes beyond human control. Her concept of “vital materialism” and “thing-power” explains matter’s ability to influence and produce effects. She extends the agency, which, historically, has been attributed to the humans, to all matter, including food, metal, storms, and electric grids. In the ruined landscape of Bright Sands Beach, the decaying ships, the toxins in the air, the genetically modified “half-men”, and the city killer storms all become actants that interact and shape the identities of both human and non-human characters. The material world exerts itself and constructs the identities of the characters. The story of a teenage boy, Nailer, who works in the “light crew” of a shipbreaking yard, is deeply entangled with the lively agencies of the nonhuman environment. The human subject is no longer situated at the pinnacle of the earth but is a precarious part of an assemblage made of human and non-human components.

The new materialist turn within posthumanism has significantly challenged the dichotomies of human/non-human, mind/matter, and nature/culture. It refutes the Enlightenment’s ideas, which accord primacy to the rational mind over matter. According to the new materialists like Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby and others, post-structuralism has turned the matter into a matter of language. It tries to theorise the condition of matter as an exercise in language. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the primacy of matter, as matter and meaning are entangled. Matter is alive and agentic; it has both physical and symbolic materiality. Bennett’s work is a response to the ecological crisis of our times, as it aims to acknowledge the vitality of nonhuman forces and challenge the instrumentalist view rooted in anthropocentrism. Bennett defines vitality as “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” (Preface, VIII). Agency is not solely located within humans; rather, it is distributed more “horizontally” among both the human and the non-human actors. The concept of “thing-power” forms the core of Bennett’s framework, which she defines as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 6). They possess a “material recalcitrance” (Bennett, 3) and a capacity to alter the course of events. In *Ship Breaker*, the decaying ships are more than just dead matter waiting to be mined; they are a force that resists dismantling. It groans, shifts, collapses, and dictates the lives of the scavengers. Nailer hunts for copper wires which seems to slip away from him—tucked behind steel walls, always just out of reach. That wire shapes who is paid and who goes hungry. Bennett tells us to pay attention to the “out-side” of things, the part that does not dissolve into human meaning and utility. In the shipbreaking yards, the ships more than the piles of metal; they’re mysterious mazes. The scavengers can never fully grasp them. The ships keep their secrets and, in a way, resist being chastened.



The novel's dramatic opening puts the eponymous character Nailer, a teenage boy in an ecologically collapsed and drowned world, working in the shipbreaking yard as a member of the "light crew," composed of similarly aged poor children, to gather useful copper wires and pieces of metal like nickel and aluminium from obsolete, abandoned, and outmoded ships. Such ships are now unable to function because of the extinction of fossil fuels. The environment that Nailer inhabits has a significant impact on the human characters, as he nearly died while escaping from the trapped ship that was submerged in an oil pocket. Smeared with the phosphorous LED paint that glows in the dark, Nailer's occupation forces him to readily engage with the agentic metal capable of drowning and piercing his flesh. Shipbreakers literally have to consume the ship bodies by scavenging them in order to survive. Their bodies are marked by ship toxicity in the form of scars and the toxic chemicals that release from it. The abandoned ships, their hulls, and the toxic environment possess a form of thing-power. To present a "more horizontal relationship with things than vertical hierarchy of beings" (Bacigalupi, 6), Bennett extends her notion of vitality to the non-human world, which possesses it in different degrees rather than a complete absence of it. The vitality of the objects needs to be acknowledged, which the anthropocentric and consumeristic biases hide.

The piece of rusty metal that pierced Nailer violently asserts the impact of material decay on the human body. The oil reserves found in the dead ships are worth more than human life, as evident by the incident when Sloth, Nailer's crew member, left him to drown in it. The novelist states, "Just a little oil has done so much for Lucky Strike, and Nailer found himself up to his neck in the damn stuff" (Bacigalupi, 26). The oil in that ship's pockets has breached Nailer's body and mixed with the ocean water, thereby exerting its own agency. The rusty, decayed ships secreted toxic chemicals and oils into the water. Their presence signifies the agency that the non-human material world possesses. Even when fossil fuels and oil are exhausted, these old ships are polluting the world. Further, the frequent violent storms and the rising sea have reframed the geography of the land. "He'd heard that sometimes a surge could move the coastline inland as much as a mile, turning beaches and trees into a murky swamp sea, the new ragged tide line of rising sea levels" (Bacigalupi, 63-4). The storm that hit the scavenge-gathering community of Nailer wiped everything out. "Not a sign of human habitation.... The soot was gone, the oil in the waters, and everything shone brightly under the blaze of morning tropic sun" (Bacigalupi, 68-9). The water has already submerged the previous "accelerated age" (Bacigalupi, 80), revealing its buildings in the crystal-clear waters.

Bennett, though aware of its limitation and human-centredness, advocates anthropomorphising the non-human world as a way to access the thing-power of the objects. Attributing human traits to the non-human is a strategic move. She argues that "we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (Preface, XVI). The use of anthropomorphising in the novel for the Scavenge God, or Rust Saint, shows the characters' belief in the agency of the non-human world. Scavenge community pray and give offerings to Scavenge God, Rust Saint and Fates. The environment has become so uncongenial and unpredictable that they have deified the material world that governs their lives. The characters frequently refer to the "Rust Saint", a deity who personifies the process of oxidation. Sloth considers betraying Nailer "if Fates and the Rust Saint worked in her favour" (Bacigalupi, 28). The process of slow decaying is an active force with its own will. Scavengers show respect for rust, since it decides whether their world holds together or comes crashing down. If the Rust Saint gets angry, a bulkhead gives way, and someone ends up crushed beneath the wreckage. Also, there is the Scavenge God—a symbol of chaos when it comes to finding resources inside the ships. The workers can't see through steel. They have no clue where copper or oil hides, so they chalk up any lucky find to the Scavenge



God's whim. When Nailer yanks staples from the wall, the text lingers on the sound: "The staples pinged about the cramped metal passage like coins offered to the Scavenge God..." (Bacigalupi, 1) This anthropomorphising turns a mere labour activity into a religious ritual. Instead of just tossing scrap, Nailer's making an offering—dropping coins at the feet of a material deity. Nailer doesn't believe he's the only one shaping his fate. He's working with the ship itself. The Scavenge God is another name for probability. By turning probability into a god, the workers try to bargain with it. It's an attempt to negotiate with the stubbornness of the material world—to make chance feel like something that can be reasoned with, or maybe even won over. Therefore, by deifying the material forces, the characters acknowledge their entanglement with their environment and the role that such material force plays in their lives.

The value of a scavenger's life is also politically and economically entangled with the non-human world of metal, toxins, and the sea. On Bright Sands Beach, only brute enforcement of power operates. The scavenging children have disposable lives, which has turned them into scavengers too. Nailer's constant fear of not making quotas, of injury, and of his abusive father demonstrates a life stripped of dignity and security, reduced to the bare, animalistic functions of survival. Human bodies can also be scavenged for their organs, which can be sold to Harvesters and LifeCults. "No one would even blink if she went under the knives of the Harvesters. Blue Eyes would hand her over to her cult, and no one would think twice about protecting her" (Bacigalupi, 163). They don't see the human body as something sacred or whole. To them, it's just a collection of usable parts, waiting to be picked apart. Richard Lopez doesn't see Nita as a person at all. For him, she's just spare parts. The hunger for organs among the wealthy drags violence out of men like Lopez. He's just the instrument, the means by which the global economy rips out whatever biological matter it wants.

Furthermore, the idea of assemblage, which counters the centrality of the humans, aligns with the critical posthumanist thought. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett defines an assemblage as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (Bennett, 23). It's a temporary, messy grouping of human and nonhuman forces that come together in the moment. Agency here doesn't reside within a single person. Instead, it's spread out across the whole assemblage. For instance, the act of scavenging by Nailer is a result of a whole network coming together. Nailer's small stature allows him to squeeze into tight ducts, and the tools he uses, including his filter mask, flashlight, and cutter, along with the ship's layout, the swirling toxic dust, and the heat—all of these elements work together, not just him acting alone. The assemblage does the work. But if the flashlight battery dies, the whole system falls apart, and Nailer's stuck.

According to Pramod Nayar, critical posthumanism has called for the "radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (Nayar, Chapter, 1). The self-imposed boundaries between human, animal and machine have been breached by evolutionary biotechnology, consciousness studies, animal studies and others. The human subject, far from being a subject, is an aggregation, co-evolving with other life forms and enmeshed with the environment. It removes him from his position as a dominant species, and the agency is "horizontally distributed across species, networks, and computational processes" (Ferrando, 51). The genetically engineered halfmen embody material agency, as they are made of the DNA of animals, including dogs, tigers, hyenas, and humans. Their identity blurs the boundaries of the species, technology and nature as they inhabit all the materiality of all three. Each half-man is created to protect, serve and die for their human masters. The unpredictable and violent nature of these creatures is repetitively mentioned. When Nailer and his crewmate, Pima, found three dead half-men and a girl, Nita Patel, on a wrecked high-tech Clipper ship, they were



reluctant to approach them. The hybrid creatures are “too creepy...to consider getting close to them” (Bacigalupi, 88).

Bacigalupi uses Tool, a genetically engineered half-man, to challenge human boundaries. His very name brands him as an object, something designed and owned, nothing more than “meat” created for violence and loyalty. His creators hardwired obedience into his DNA and programmed him to serve. Yet, Tool refuses to be just a tool. Bennett’s idea that matter always escapes complete control comes to life here; there’s always some “out-side” that refuses to be managed. In Tool, that spark is his growing self-awareness. “I am not a dog,” he insists, rejecting the label forced on him. Nita considers him as a “useful creature like a dog, but not actually a person” (Bacigalupi, 210). Tool’s defiance of bounded slavery and overcoming his genetic boundaries puzzles her. He says to her, “I go where I please” (Bacigalupi, 212). It’s not just defiance; it’s a political statement. Tool claims personhood even though he’s manufactured. He’s a patchwork of species, a “swarm of vitalities” (Bacigalupi, 32) under one skin, echoing Bennett’s description of humans as walking microbiomes. His posthuman condition makes it impossible to ignore the fact that we’re all mixtures of genes, bacteria, and chemicals. There’s a constant pull in Tool between nature—his genetic programming—and nurture—his will and experience. His brain tries to keep him in line, rewarding obedience with chemical pleasure and punishing rebellion. It proves that engineered matter, no matter how tightly controlled, can push back. Tool’s violent and animalistic demeanour undergoes a significant change when he becomes willing to help Nailer save Nita. He accompanies Nailer and Nita to the drowned city of Orleans, where he can find a captain loyal to her father and expose Pyce’s illegal enterprise. When Tool recognises Nailer as not a master but as a companion, their bond shifts from ownership to kinship. They become co-conspirators in the web of vibrant matter. Forging of such bonds is mutually beneficial and transformative. When the captain loyal to Nita’s father enquires why he did not sacrifice himself for Nailer and Nita as he is programmed to do, he says, “I do not crave death on the seas” (Bacigalupi, 246). The manufactured monster turned out to be more rational and ethical than the humans who made him.

Furthermore, Nailer’s father, Richard Lopez, stands out as an example of what Jane Bennett calls “edible matter” which acts “as a powerful agent, as stuff that modifies the human matter with which it comes into contact” (Bacigalupi, 39). Bennett looks at how things like omega-3s or heavy metals can shift a person’s mood and cognitive abilities. Bennett argues that vitality runs through all matter, including the ingestible substances. When Richard is on drugs, he enters into an assemblage where the chemical agency takes charge, and his will gets pushed aside. He isn’t just a violent, abusive man. His rage is tangled up with his use of drugs and alcohol. The drugs not only muddle his mind, but also change his physiology. His eyes turn “red” and “feral”. He shakes, sweat gleams on his skin. They’re proof of some foreign substance taking control. Crystal slide floods him with energy, makes him “horribly fast” and a “perfect killer”—but it’s not his own strength. It’s borrowed, and there’s always a cost. As Sadna says, “Killing isn’t free... It’s always a trade.” The drugs give him power for a while, but they eat away at his soul, burning it down slowly, the same way rust eats away at the metal of a ship. The thing-power of the drugs twists a father into something predatory. The novelist describes him almost like the half-man. “The man was horribly fast. Amped on amphetamines, he was superhuman” (Bacigalupi, 305). Resultantly, Nailer has to kill his drug-induced father to save himself and Nita. He is trapped in the ship’s hydrofoils, but the drugs delayed his awareness of his situation.

Concludingly, Bacigalupi’s novel *Ship Breaker* presents a world where the material world itself challenges human exceptionalism. Humans become an actant in a wider web of materialities. Bennett’s theoretical lens shows us the story of Nailer cannot be separately told without his embeddedness in a terrifying material world. Things like storms, wires, and bodies shape politics and life just as much as people do. As Bennett has argued that humanity must “find a more



horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants” (Bennett, 98), the novel tries to bridge such dualist beliefs. Agency is never solitary but always distributed among a network of actants. The novel’s real ethical core comes out in how it draws a line between people who try to control everything around them and those who figure out how to work with the world as it is. Richard Lopez views everything, including his own son, as a resource to deplete. He gets overwhelmed by his addictions and the storm’s violence, both of which he never tries to understand or respect. Nailer, in contrast, succeeds because he understands the inherent power of the objects in his world. He doesn’t simply push his way through the ducts; instead, he observes their intricate twists. When the storm hits, he doesn’t try to beat it; he survives by accepting its agency. Even with Tool, he manages to see the person inside the half-man. The “strategic anthropomorphism” practised by the characters allows them to make sense of their reality. They know rust eats, storms kill, and luck has its liking. It’s not a mere superstition but a way to make sense of life in the Anthropocene. It is an admission that humans are not the central species but one vibrant material among many.

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