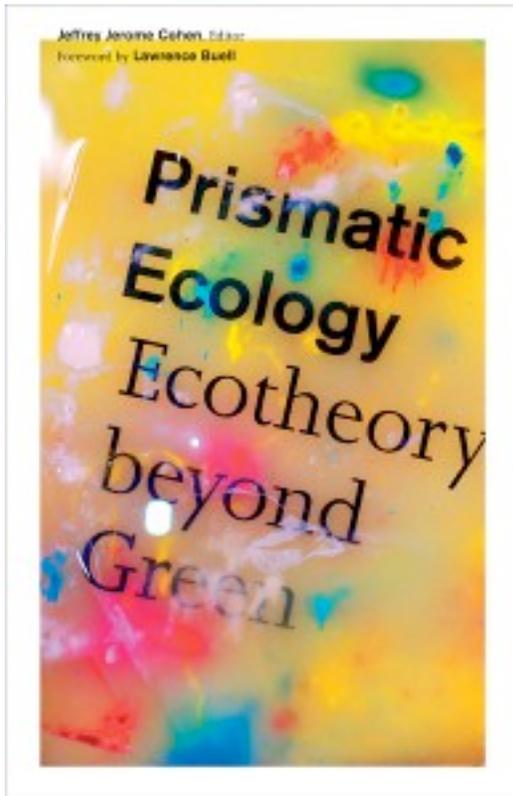


***Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013)**  
**Jeffery Jerome Cohen, ed. Minnesota: U of Minnesota P. 349 pp.**

ENLISTING the idea of the ‘prism’ in service of ecological thinking proves, as *Prismatic Ecology* demonstrates, an adept means of expressing, and assembling a phenomenological view of the other-than-human world. An optical prism is a transparent



(typically triangular) object used by physicists to study the properties of light and its interaction with matter. When a single band of light is passed through it, the beam is refracted and dispersed into a spectrum of colours (see the cover of Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*, below). Passing our vision of ‘nature’ through such a prism, it too fragments into a myriad of component aspects. Thus even though *Prismatic Ecology* consists of over a dozen separate essays written by different authors, it does not present itself as an edited collection that one might typically read selectively, according to author, theory, or subject. Whilst readers might be inclined to select an essay about their favourite colour, or even an ‘invisible’ colour (such as Ben Woodard’s ‘Ultra-Violet’ and Timothy Morton’s ‘X-ray’), or perhaps go with curiosity over what a particular colour ‘means’ ecologically

(i.e. Robert McRuer’s ‘Pink’), it seems that this book is better approached as a single work, a (by no-means complete) phenomenological survey of the world we live in through the spectral lens of the colours by which it is perceived. As each essay demonstrates, a particular colour encourages a specific set of ways of thinking about the world, or directs attention to a particular aspect of the world that is not disclosed by a ‘green’ mode of ecological thinking.



‘Green’, as we well know, has become an emblem for the conservation movement worldwide, and, more broadly, a symbol for anybody touting ‘earth-conscious’ credentials (including ecocriticism and ecophilosophy). Yet as editor Jeffery Jerome Cohen points out in his introduction, ‘green’ is a somewhat problematic frame for thinking about the other-than-human world and our relation to it. In the first place, adopting a single colour as representative for a world so dynamic and complex is rather reductive. Adopting *green*, more specifically, frames that world within the limited set of

meanings that colour connotes. ‘Green’, Cohen argues, supports a range of cultural associations that sustain and re-present ideas of the other-than-human world as ‘nature’: as an idealised other that stands juxtaposed against the ‘grey’ of an artificial urban world (xxii). Green ecology, adds Levi S. Bryant (author of ‘Black’), is a ‘mystified conception of nature that confuses its own normative preferences with the being of nature as such’ (291). Although the hierarchy between the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’ has been inverted, ‘green’ preserves the idea of nature as ‘a purified place to which one travels rather than dwells always within: separate from the human, empty, foundationally pure’ (Cohen, ‘Introduction’ xxi). In many respects, a *Prismatic Ecology* represents a symbolic deconstruction of the kind of ecological vision ‘green’ has come to imply; a reminder that the ‘nature’ represented by ‘green’ remains a cultural construct. A colour spectrum offers separate lenses through which to observe the way a range of entities (including, but not limited to, humans) interact in ways ‘beyond green’.

*Prismatic Ecology* does not however reach for an atomised picture of ecology. The essays found within it generally test or engage with variations on the theme of a human/nonhuman ‘intertwining’ or ‘entanglement’, that has recently emerged in response to the trenchant dualisms that have continued to define much ecological thinking (represented by Graham Harman’s ‘object-oriented ontology’, Timothy Morton’s ‘mesh’, and Stacy Alaimo’s ‘transcorporeality’). In place of neatly distinct entities interacting with each other in observable and predictable ways, many of the featured colours in *Prismatic Ecology* identify ‘a restless expanse of multihued contaminations, impurities, hybridity, monstrosity, contagion, interruption, hesitation, enmeshment, refraction, unexpected relations, and wonder. A swirl of colours, a torrent, a muddy river’ (Cohen, Introduction xxiv).

The ambiguities many colours suggest become, in a number of essays, a means of articulating the ‘muddiness’ of human/nonhuman cohabitation. For Jeffery Jerome Cohen, a ‘grey’ ecology engages the liminality that colour suggests as a way of thinking ‘the in-between and the uncertain’ (271); and acts as a symbol for permeation of ‘living’ matter by ‘dead’ matter, and vice versa, complicating the separate identities of each—‘Grey is the human in the microbe and the stone as well as the virus and the rock in the human’ (272). ‘Brown’ is another representative of the transcorporeal porousness of bodies and environments. A ‘brown ecology’, argues Steve Mentz, discloses the waste and pollution that remains an ineradicable feature of our contemporary world, which a ‘green’ vision does not, *prima facie*, admit. Yet inasmuch as we would do well to acknowledge the existence of our refuse, we can no longer expect to be its masters or possessors: ‘[w]e cannot own the brown stuff even though it is ours and so remains’ (206).

One of the consequences of an ‘enmeshed’ view of human/nonhuman ecologies, and the loss of the objectivity it entails, is the necessity of acknowledging how the other-than-human continues to exist beyond the ‘green’ frame of our ecological understanding. Attentiveness to worlds invisible or obscure to us is a feature of many of the essays in this book. Colours become a means of directing our attention towards such dimensions, and (re)thinking the emptiness that was presumed to lie therein. For Stacy Alaimo and Timothy Morton, colour can signify (Derridean-inspired) invisible ecologies. Alaimo’s

subject is the ‘abyssal ecology’ of the deepest oceans. Its ‘violet-black’ hue leads her to ‘a spectrum of colours extending across the range of what is humanly visible and beyond’ (245), and to the vertiginous depth of subjectivities from whom these colours emanate (246, 247). Different colours become signifiers for the presence of autonomous nonhuman subjectivities in the midst of (humanly) constructed space. Timothy Morton uses the visibility implied by ‘X-ray’ as a metaphor for thinking about things outside or beneath the bindings of metaphysical ‘presence’. Colour, he argues, is a signal for ‘things-in-themselves’; a ‘radiating shadow’ of things that cannot be spoken of or known directly (312). Morton’s ‘X-ray’ represents something of a response to Levi S. Bryant’s (‘Black’) Nietzschean ‘transvaluation’ of the ‘green’ ecological construct. Upon ascribing things as (objectively) unknowable, colour, for Morton, becomes a signal for things outside of our grasp, an assurance of their existence.

As a collective, the essays in *Prismatic Ecology* mark an inspiring new direction in ecophilosophical and ecocritical thinking. With caution towards viewing ecology (solely) in terms of ‘green’, *Prismatic Ecology* is a timely encouragement to think carefully about the symbols we use to represent the world, whilst finding within the colour spectrum a range of motifs to express and drive different ways of thinking about human and other-than-human interaction.

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