More-than-green Ecologies

Christopher Schliephake

Lecturer, Universität Augsburg

christopher.schliephake@phil.uni-augsburg.de

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By now most of us will know that there are many shades of grey. It may come as a surprise that green is a color with many shades and guises as well. Situated between yellow and blue on the spectrum of visible light (in the subtractive color system, it is indeed created by a combination of the two), green has various cultural meanings often connected to youth, peasantry or commons, permission or monetary systems. Most importantly however, it is associated with nature and has also featured prominently in monotheistic religions as the color of Paradise. As such, it has been used by nongovernment organizations, political parties, and environmental activists in their protection of the non-human world and advocacy of environmental justice. The downside of this symbolic usage is twofold: on the one hand, subsuming different environmental initiatives under one label misses the heterogeneity, contradictions, and conflicts inherent in their respective programs. On the other, it can easily be appropriated by actors whose intentions may be diametrically opposed to these issues and whose actions are anything but sustainable – for instance, McDonald's changed, in a much-noticed advertisement campaign, its logo from red to green a few years ago. That the time may have come to re-think the primer upon which our environmental debates have been drawn and open the canvas up to the full color spectrum is one of the most important insights of the challenging, surprising, and insightful book *Prismatic Ecology. Ecotheory beyond Green*.

As its title indicates, *Prismatic Ecology* adjusts the focus of environmental philosophy, ecocriticism, and the new materialisms toward a more comprehensive take on colors and concerns, trading in an exclusive focus on "green" matters for a wider spectrum of hues and *environments*. As Jeffrey J. Cohen makes clear in his introduction to the volume, "a preponderance of green prevents the eye from noticing that the aerial is as much part of an

ecology as the arboreal (XIX). However, this does not entail leaving behind the theoretical insights and committed practice of "green criticism", but rather to look for new inter-relations between the experiencing I, the phenomena of the world, and the physical and material conditions that enable an exchange between the two. Cohen takes the example of a rainbow to illustrate how this optical phenomenon involves non-human matter, the individual perceiver and her position, combining them in "a sudden relation that changes the quality of light itself" (XXXVI). Paraphrasing the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, one could say that no human ever looks at the same rainbow twice. This insight does not deny that the human eye perceives the world in a certain (and individual) way, but rather reminds us that our surroundings are ever-changing, re-fracturing and re-assembling their material and optical fabrics. We look, but there is a world that looks back at us; we are co-perceivers.

In this context, "color is not some intangible quality that arrives belatedly to the composition but a material impress, an agency and partner, a thing made of other things through which worlds arrive" (XVI). The phenomenological and posthuman outlook of *Prismatic Ecology* is, against this background, to be thought of as a seeing instrument which helps us dissect the different natural, material, and sociocultural layers of our more-than-human worlds and explore how they interact to negotiate meaning. As Lawrence Buell's "Foreward" and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's "Onward", which frame the volume, make clear, this posthuman perspective also entails a new kind of ethics that does not abandon categories like human/non-human or culture/nature, but that re-aligns them on a horizontal axis where they share the same universe and where they constantly merge. Like this, the more-than-human world enters our interpretative and narrative horizons as an agent in its own right. This observation brings to mind a beautiful passage of Cormac McCarthy's otherwise harrowing landmark epic *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* in which the narrator describes a desolate prairie by pointing to "the optical democracy of such landscapes" where "all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinship" (McCarthy [1985] 2008, 247). Uncovering this kinship without neglecting the cultural mediation involved in the act of perceiving and interpreting it is one of the merits of *Prismatic Ecology*.

In sixteen essays, the authors look at a wide palette of colors that include primary (red, blue), design (chartreuse) and super-optical ones (ultraviolet). In accordance with the phenomenological and posthumanist tone set by the Introduction, the individual close readings of a respective color show that what we are faced with are not neatly distinct categories or

phenomena but rather interacting formations that are impure and ambiguous. Drawing on a different set of theoretical categories that emphasize co-habitation and entanglement (like Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality", Timothy Morthon's "mesh" or Bruno Latour's "network"), the essays point to the sets of ecological formations that make up our storied worlds. These range from Arctic (or Alaskan) adventures ("White", "Maroon") over the economics of the slaughterhouses and the high-tech menace of biotechnology ("Red", "Greener") to the liminal worlds of the undead or the deep sea ("Grey", "Violet-Black"). There is a lot to discover in *Prismatic Ecology* and although some essays have the tendency to lose sight of their initial topic, relegating environmental issues to the background in favor of other concerns ("Blue", "Pink"), or trade their color in for a noun associated with it ("Gold", "Orange"), we are still faced with a collection of essays that challenge common assumptions of what counts as environmental issues while also broadening the canon of our environmental texts (e.g. Jeffrey Cohen's own essay on the undead which complicates notions of life and death as well as the discussion of Ward Moore's neglected 1947 science fiction novel *Greener than You Think* or the works of Alaskan artist John Luther Adams).

A *Prismatic Ecology* as outlined in the volume has the benefit that it can take us to places and uncover parts of the world usually removed from sight or access. This is true for the deep-sea as well as the ultraviolet light spectrum or "X-Ray". In their respective essays, Stacy Alaimo and Timothy Morton take color as a signifier that can also tell us about things obscure or invisible to us, which gives them, in turn, room for problematizing an anthropocentric outlook on the world and for reflecting on the presence of non-human subjectivities or a thing world beyond our reach. There are also topics that remain outside of the scope of the volume, however: urban and postcolonial ecologies are subjects noticeably absent, although some of the colors would have invited an examination of these important fields of environmental debate. Yellow as a primary color would have deserved a chapter, as would have petrol. On the bright side, this means that there remains a lot of ground to cover and that our prismatic lenses are open to ever new colors in our examination of our more-than-green ecologies.

References

McCarthy, Cormac. (1985) 2008. *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage.