

REVIEWS

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Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2015, 376 pages, paperback, ISBN 9780816692620, \$25.95.

Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman opens with the lamenting words of Job: 'My strength is not the strength of stones, nor is my flesh of brass' (Job 6:12; p. 1 of the book under review). These words articulate the endurance and inertness often associated with rock. Stone is used to build memorials and homes because of its ability to last. It is used as a metaphor to describe things unchanging, frozen and passive. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's new book overturns this understanding of rock as lifeless and still. The reader is taken on an exploration into stone's agency: from the geographic movements of mountains to the magical rocky realm of *Sir Orfeo* and Stonehenge's shifting symbolism. Cohen argues for the vivacity of the lithic and seeks to move beyond a dispassionate approach to matter.

Michael Cole recently stated in an essay entitled 'The Cult of Materials' that few topics 'have seen as much success in recent years as those relating to 'materials' and 'materiality'".¹ But unlike Joachim Strupp's and Fabio Barry's recent work on coloured marbles, or Suzanne Butters's research on porphyry, Cohen departs from previous studies in his concern for the raw substance

of stone.² It is a book that prompts readers to consider the meanings, histories and materiality of rocks before they were turned into sculptural and architectural works. In doing so, Cohen positions *Stone* as part of New Materialism, while turning primarily to Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and Graham Harman's Object Orientated Ontology to make his case.³

Like the rocks he writes about, Cohen's text is sedimentary, bringing together sources from past and present, and across geographical boundaries, into a multilayered depository. Contemporary theories such as posthumanism and ecotology, medieval manuscripts, philosophy and natural history jostle alongside each other. In the chapter 'Time', the reader is taken from the fourteenth-century travel narrative, *The Book of John Mandeville*, to the storage of radioactive material inside Nevada's Yucca Mountain. Such weaving between time and genres can be disorientating. There is no sense of linearity in this book; reading becomes an exercise in wandering. It is a method that reflects the medieval authors that are the book's foundation blocks. *Stone* is like a modern day medieval lapidary, in which science and myth intermingle, and the text jumps from the physical properties of rock to poetry.

In this way, form mimics content. Stone, Cohen argues, denies the temporal and spatial

segmentation of Historicism; it ‘does not offer easy or secure knowledge and exceeds any attempt to still it into familiarity. Rock marks the point at which understanding fails’ (pp. 31–32). This brittle loss of certainty is potentially productive for cultural historians, opening up a space for new forms of writing, in which ‘affective force’, ‘ethical generosity’, ‘enchantment’ and ‘time travel’ override strict chronological concerns (p. 9). Cohen positions stone as a way to undo institutional frameworks.

Following his own cue, Cohen intersperses critical analysis and history with self-proclaimed thought experiments, personal memories, photographs and pieces of psycho-geography. When Cohen writes of ‘the pines, craggy shores, gneiss and gray granite of New England’, the landscape of his childhood (p. 17), or of his desire to ‘feel the power of the stone’ at Barber Rock in Avebury (p. 75), he consciously follows stone’s propensity to tell stories, as well as the historic writers that haunt his book, such as Augustine of Hippo, whose *City of God* is peppered with personal accounts.

Cohen seems aware that these anecdotes may be seen to compromise the text’s academic authority. In his afterword he writes: ‘Too sentimental, I suppose, to write such things. Too personal’ (p. 257). But Cohen’s reflections openly announce the personal context from which everyone must invariably write, offering the reader intimacy and honesty, and a richer dialogue with the author. In this instance, any fear of scholarly looseness is immediately set aside by the sheer volume and density of Cohen’s informative footnotes.

In his book *Planet in a Pebble*, paleobiologist Jan Zalesiewicz traces Earth’s history from the big bang to the present

through a single stone found on a Welsh beach, presenting rock as a material that ‘contains time itself.’⁴ *Stone* also explores the huge geologic timeframe of the lithic, which makes human temporality insignificant and our attempts to be remembered through sculptures and monuments almost futile. At one point in the book Cohen even gives voice to rocky matter: ‘If stone could speak, what would it say about us? Stone would call you transient, sporadic. The mayflies analogy is apt’ (p. 30).

Cohen ultimately argues for a shift away from our dominant anthropocentrism to a stance where the non-human holds equal sway. As Jane Bennett writes, to turn to materiality can allow a horizontal relationship between ‘humans, biota and abiota’, in which the Great Chain of Being is viewed ‘sideways’.⁵ *Stone* is in many ways a natural progression for Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose texts have always explored things and themes at the limits, from monsters and giants to the body and cultural diversity. To read *Stone* — a rich addition to the ‘geologic turn’ in cultural studies — is to discover the complex history of humans and stone, in which the organic and inorganic become entwined.

- 1 Michael Cole, ‘The Cult of Materials’, in Sébastien Clerbois and Martina Droth (eds), *Revival and Invention: Sculpture Through its Material Histories*, Oxford and New York, 2010, pp. 1–15, p. 1.
- 2 Joachim Strupp, ‘The Colour of Money: Use, Cost, and Aesthetic Appreciation of Marble in Venice ca. 1500’, in *Venezia Cinquecento*, vol. 3, 1993, pp. 7–32; Fabio Barry, *Painting in Stone: The Symbolic Identity of Coloured Marbles from Antiquity until the Age of Enlightenment*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2006; Suzanne B. Butters, *The Triumph of the Vulcan: Sculptors’ Tools, Porphyry, and the Prince in Ducal Florence*, 2 vols., Florence, 1996.
- 3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford, 2005; Graham Harman, *Circus Philosophicus*, Ropley, 2010.
- 4 Jan Zalesiewicz, *Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth’s Deep History*, Oxford, 2010, p. 101.

5 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, N. C., 2010, p. 112.

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'Splendour and Misery. Pictures of Prostitution, 1850–1910', Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 22 September 2015 – 17 January 2016. Catalogue: Musée d'Orsay/Flammarion, Paris, 2015, 308 pages, hardback, ISBN 978-2-0831-7274-0, €45.00.

When the Musée d'Orsay advertises the 'first major show on the subject of prostitution', we are immediately wont to wonder why no such exhibition has been organized before. There is no dearth of art, material culture or archival documentation relating to the sex trade from 1850–1910, nor a want of art historical scholarship on the practice or its representation in that period. And so it seems appropriate to ask, reprising Linda Nochlin's foundational feminist inquiry as to 'why have there been no great women artists', whether the question of why there has been no major show of 'pictures of prostitution' might suggest a problem inherent in the concept of prostitution itself.¹ Like greatness – a constructed category obscuring underlying social and economic relations – prostitution is also a projection of fantasy that fascinates because it mystifies.

The prostitute in nineteenth-century France resisted definition. The term named a phantasmatic figuration of difference rather than an actual woman, as demonstrated by the fact that within the show it applies to women of radically disparate experiences,

from the wealthiest courtesans to the most desperate poor. Proliferating terms intended to distinguish between types of venal femininity attested to the difficulty of classifying women by a singular quality, their perceived sexuality. Henry de Hem's Second Empire lithograph (1869), illustrating 25 types of grisettes (working class women who took lovers but were unpaid for sex) and cocottes (referring either to flirtatious women understood to be of 'easy virtue' and not necessarily paid, or sometimes to successful courtesans) is a case in point. The first four rooms entitled 'Ambiguity' address this confusion concerning which women sold sex. Dim lights that force us to squint at the text mounted on maroon walls stage the problem of identification, especially in the third and notably darker room, titled 'L'heure du gaz', which dramatically simulates the trade's nocturnal nature with spotlights that illuminate paintings as street lamps would street walkers.

Thus we are initiated into a curatorial strategy casting us in the role of potential customer of sexualized female bodies; the only traces in the 17 rooms of male prostitution, not an insignificant corner of the market that generated its own anxiety about male–male sexual relations, are six small pornographic photographs of naked boys and a page from a police record of the so-called pederasts who purchased their services. Moving into the display of paintings of the opera, the carpet turns red as if to welcome us as *abonnés* to the spectacle of female flesh on the stage or waiting in the wings. Entering the next set of rooms on brothels, Courbet's *Mère Grégoire* (1855 and 1857–1859) faces us on a barrier that we move around. We are the unseen clients with whom this madam negotiates an admission fee to the interior space, as imagined