



Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

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Stone maps the force, vivacity, and stories within our most mundane matter, stone. For too long stone has served as an unexamined metaphor for the “really real”: blunt factuality, nature’s curt rebuke. Yet, medieval writers knew that stones drop with fire from the sky, emerge through the subterranean lovemaking of the elements, tumble along riverbeds from Eden, partner with the masons who build worlds with them. Such motion suggests an ecological enmeshment and an almost creaturely mineral life.

Although geological time can leave us reeling, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that stone’s endurance is also an invitation to apprehend the world in other than human terms. Never truly inert, stone poses a profound challenge to modernity’s disenchantments. Its agency undermines the human desire to be separate from the environment, a bifurcation that renders nature “out there,” a mere resource for recreation, consumption, and exploitation.

Written with great verve and elegance, this pioneering work is notable not only for interweaving the medieval and the modern but also as a major contribution to ecotheory. Comprising chapters organized by concept —“Geophilia,” “Time,” “Force,” and “Soul”—Cohen seamlessly brings together a wide range of topics including stone’s potential to transport humans into nonanthropocentric scales of place and time, the “petrification” of certain cultures, the messages fossils bear, the architecture of Bordeaux and Montparnasse, Yucca Mountain and nuclear waste disposal, the ability of stone to communicate across millennia in structures like Stonehenge, and debates over whether stones reproduce and have souls.

Showing that what is often assumed to be the most lifeless of substances is, in its own time, restless and forever in motion, *Stone* fittingly concludes by taking us to Iceland—a land that, writes the author, “reminds us that stone like water is alive, that stone like water is transient.”

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