Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 518 pp.

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Veer Ecology is the third volume in a loosely connected series from the University of Minnesota Press. The previous volumes are *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (2014) edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (2015), edited by Cohen and Lowell Duckert. In each volume, certain terms become the impetus for extended essays. In *Prismatic Ecology* these are various colors, as the volume aims to overcome the overdependence of ecological thought on only one color out of a whole planetary palette: green. *Elemental Ecocriticism* works to revive the classical notion of the four elements with a new materialist inflection.

Veer Ecology swerves from the relatively straightforward approach of these previous collections, introducing a generative unpredictability and serendipity. Here Cohen and Duckert asked 30 environmental humanities scholars from various fields to write about one "vital term to think with for ecological and environmental theory" (vii). And, they stipulated, this term had to be a verb, had to represent a way of moving not just being, had to be at risk of spiraling off into novel ways of thinking. Some of the chosen terms seem fairly obvious for an ecocritical project: *vegetate*, *compost*, *environ*. Others, however, are unexpected, like *decorate*, *shade*, *wait*, *whirl*. In her introduction, Cheryll Glotfelty suggests that perhaps "we need a new set of verbs that will help us think—and perhaps act—outside the box" (vii). This is a compelling proposition, and the collection certainly provides a new set of verbs for ecological thinking that sometimes stray outside the box in productive and entertaining ways.

When I first encountered *Veer Ecology*, I assumed it was another offering in the tradition of numerous keyword projects, particularly since the editors specifically cite Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and Joni Adamson and William A. Gleason's more recent *Keywords for Environmental Studies* as exemplars of important keyword volumes. They also note that Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*, though not a keywords project per se, is also organized around key terms. The editors, however, propose—I think correctly—that they have veered rather widely from such a tradition. They suggest that such keyword-based projects, whatever their other virtues, are flawed in that they demand "a foundational principle of order" (5). Such an effort to bring order to ecocriticism, they propose, "risks obscuring [the field's] turbulence, a multivectored proliferativeness made clear by its burgeoning number of readers, handbooks, and research guides" (5). Fair enough. The explication of keywords does tend to fix meaning, which, though possessing pedagogical value, might prove a bit stifling to adventurous

theorists. It might almost make sense to think of this collection as an antikeyword project, suggesting that, when properly explicated, any term can be a keyword, any word can unlock a door into a new way of thinking about the environment.

Having edited several collections myself, and having found it a challenge to organize the compiled essays into a coherent system, I looked at first through the table of contents for a pattern: alphabetical, geographical, chronological, thematic. But I could find none. As I began reading, I realized that this lack of structure was intentional. Rather than attempt to impose order on that which is innately and happily disordered, the editors posit, "[T]his collection follows a rather different path, accompanying some ecologically rich verbs, companioning their trajectories, seeing where they lead as they perturb disciplines, boundaries, domains" (5). For the most part the sequence of essays does seem random. Occasionally, there are streams that flow from one to another. Whether such groupings are intentional, however, seems uncertain. Four chapters in a row—Jesse Oak Taylor's "Globalize," Tobias Menely's "Commodify," Joseph Campana's "Power Down," and Margaret Ronda's "Obsolesce"—all cite Karl Marx and draw at least minimally upon Marxist theory. Similarly, Steve Mentz's "Seep" and the subsequent chapter, Laura Ogden's "Saturate," clearly share a watery theme. On the other hand, Catriona Sandilands's "Vegetate," a plant studies endeavor, is the first essay in the collection, whereas Lara Farina's chapter "Curl," also a plant studies effort, is in the next-to-last position. Were the essays grouped thematically I would expect these two to be adjacent.

Many of the essays draw heavily on philosophy (some of the authors are indeed philosophers). I imagine that, because of the focus on words, the volume sometimes felt like a reassertion of the sort of abstract, linguistically oriented, philosophy-driven critical theory that ecocriticism had originally spurned in favor of more materialist approaches. Again, because of the focus on words, there is plenty of playful, witty wordplay. This is entertaining, but beware: your tolerance for puns may well be strained. I noticed, too, that essays often delved into the roots of their terms. A common gesture is to discuss the origins of the word under consideration and then to trace its evolving etymology and related terms. As fascinating as I find such discussions, I was reminded how frequently various nature writers have sought out word origins as well. Henry Thoreau, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry come immediately to mind. There seems to be a sense in such efforts that if we can trace language back to its origins, we can have a more authentic, less specious and devious vocabulary. This seems a rather undertheorized, if common, and, I admit, appealing, notion.

As the editors encourage, many of the essays do tend to veer, moving more by a process of association than by the linear argumentation for a thesis. This veering structure meant that it wasn't always clear what an essay added up to, what was at stake and why.

Nevertheless, it was a pleasure to see a new chapter's title word, try to anticipate what the essay would be about, and find myself usually wrong and for the most part pleasantly surprised. I did not anticipate, for example, that Laura Ogden's "Saturate" would take me to Tierra del Fuego and discuss the havoc caused by the introduction of North American beavers into that region's ecosystem.

In spite of these delights, I must admit to reading with a pestering disquiet. First, I should say, I began the book while spending time in southern Colorado, when a massive fire soon erupted near the small town where I was staying. Many people in outlying communities fled their homes, and we were put on pre-evacuation status. The sky filled with massive pillars of smoke. One night the power went out and the only lights visible were the flames on the not-so-distant horizon. I was reading the book with bags packed and periodically checking my Facebook feed for an evacuation order, or going to the window to watch the progress of the flames and make sure they hadn't come too close. While fires are natural and normal features of forest ecology, all evidence suggests that this and similar recent fires are more frequent and more intense due to global warming and other anthropogenic changes. In this case, a century of fire suppression combined with a mountain pine beetle outbreak that left millions of trees dead, plus a record-setting drought and heat wave all combined to create one of the worst fires in Colorado history. Such events tend to alter perspectives, and I couldn't help relating the fire to the "environmental thinking" of the text. Few things bring to uncanny consciousness the reality of the Anthropocene more than flames flickering across the midnight horizon. It's a veritable index of the advancing Anthropocene, and much of the book felt discordant in such a context.

Of course, we now live in a world quite different from the one in which *Veer Ecology* was conceived and written. The book was published in January 2017, the same month Donald Trump was sworn in as president. For many, that event ushered in a new sense of urgency, a new desire for activism. The source of my dispersed unease was crystalized in Stacy Alaimo's essay "Unmoor," when she said: "we may want to hold on to a certain skepticism regarding . . . modes of philosophical critique that leave political activism without an edge, without leverage, without something to propel change. Floating too freely may be counterproductive" (416). For the most part, I concede that I did not find here the leverage for political activism. There were, for example, no activist verbs, no "resist," "rage," "occupy," "blockade," etc. I had to wonder to what extent the book was "floating too freely" to be productive. Frankly, I'm not sure. I mean that sincerely. But I think these days that's a question worth asking of this and every book.

It's not fair to expect *Veer Ecology* to reflect this newfound panic. It arrives as a visitor from an earlier, more hopeful and, I guess, unbeknownst to itself, rather naive era,

seemingly decades ago though only a year-and-a-half as I write this. At the same time, we can't *not* read the book in this new era. We are now immersed in it. Things have indeed veered, in dismal and frightening ways. What will we need to do for our criticism to respond to that veering?