

## Book Review

*Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time.* TOM LYNCH, SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER, DRUCILLA WALL, and ALAN O. WELTZIEN, eds. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. xxvi+346, photographs, notes. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-8032-9958-0.

Reviewed by James E. Baker, Department of Geography, University of Nebraska Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, 68588. james.eugene.baker@huskers.unl.edu.

“Every place,” concludes the introduction of *Thinking Continental*, “however nondescript and seemingly secluded and provincial, is marked with the traces of the entire planet’s becoming.” The ambition of this volume – assembled by established professors of English literature and practitioners of environmental writing – is to “write the endangered worlds” of the Anthropocene, inscribing a sense of *place* within a sense of *planet* (Lynch et al. 2017, xiv). This clarion call comes at a time of freighted global discourse over “planetarian interests” which bioregionalist Peter Berg argues are no less critical than the “ongoing mutual inhabitation of this planet” (Lynch et al. 2017, xiv). Fraught, urgent, yet empathetic and imaginative, *Thinking Continental* is a book which provokes reflection on (re)inhabiting the intimate bonding of time and place – of what Susan Naramore Maher calls *residency* and *dwelling* on this restless planet.

*Thinking Continental* presents fifteen essays and thirty-nine poems challenging the false dichotomies which, like Homer’s Scylla and Charybdis, churn between the natural and cultural, and the sciences and the humanities. “Thinking continental”, as an epistemology and methodology, requires re-imagining the spaces and materials in-between which encompass the planetary and human embodied experience. It proposes the *continent* as grounding for what Tim Ingold calls a meshwork, an interwoven tangle of trails which draw people, places, lives, deaths, and materialities inward, where they sustain a resonance between sound, rhythm, form, and void – a progression of ideas which structures the narrative and lyrical accounts which unfold within this volume (Ingold 2015). As a “mediating nexus” harboring “the capacity to think between scales, to connect the local with the planetary,” (Lynch et al. 2017, xv) thinking continental affords the authors in this collection a framework a voice for engaging in “the many-layered sense of place” (Lynch et al. 2017, xxiii) speaking across planetary currents, over skerry, estuary, prairie, and alp.

This voice, typically in first-person narrative form, resounds through several essays within the volume. Geologist Harmon Maher likens the tectonic “mantling” (Lynch et al. 2017, 34) of the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard from “scattered exotic pieces,

some of which lack solid continental credentials” (Lynch et al. 2017, 35) to his own attachment to place through repeated field study. For Maher, thinking continentally is learned through an obsessive search for novelty at “the edge of understanding” (Lynch et al. 2017, 39). Maher’s photographs of research sites in the Arctic and South Dakota offer fleeting visual entrées into the grandeur of the landscapes at the heart of *Thinking Continental*. In greyscale, these photographs serve as small acts of noticing and ways of capturing the luminous beauty of vast landscapes in a manner Maher contends is “more primal than words” (Lynch et al. 2017, 39). Weaving together tensions which join at the zeugma of science and the sacred, Maher locates a cultural geography of *layering*: between gravity, time, and mantled over personal history in a search to find meaning and beauty in his “special bit of the earth” (Lynch et al. 2017, 33). The power of *Thinking Continental* is in the spaces between layers of this tapestry.

O. Alan Weltzien’s contribution operates by a similar visual metaphor to Harmon Maher’s geologic layering. In his essay, “Three Stations along the Ring of Fire,” Weltzien speaks to the “visual unity of the Pacific Ocean girded by volcanoes” (Lynch et al. 2017, 17), a unity masked by spatial and temporal divisions (such as the International Date Line). With cinematic sensibility, Weltzien thinks continental, reimagining the Pacific Ring of Fire from space:

“a microregion [that] defies our everyday imagination, despite the infrequent but disastrous felt experience, and extraordinary physics, of swift sound waves, tsunamis – one of the signal heartbeats of this giant horseshoe... Earth’s largest ‘place’” (Lynch et al. 2017, 17)

As Weltzien argues, the explanatory calques – the myths, visceral lore, disinterested science alike – we borrow to assemble common values and a sense of meaning on the fault lines of “Earth’s largest ‘place’” provide a bridge between local, regional, and planetary identity. Weltzien’s preferred metaphor, elaborated through the “three pauses” (Lynch et al. 2017, 18) in the unity of the Ring of Fire (Mts. Rainier, Fujiyama, and

Chimborazo) is the triptych, which he claims “suggests the right spiritual relation...as an altar to a microregion exceedingly difficult to grasp” (Lynch et al. 2017, 19). The triptych frames the diverse meanings he assigns to his personal relationship to Pacific volcanoes: philosophy, asceticism, and citizenship. Freeing the triptych metaphor from Western aesthetics and metaphysics, a crisper understanding could be *Ma*, the Japanese concept for the space in-between, the gap which has substance, or the pause between movements. Contemporary geographers may find that this notion of space and spacing echoes the kinetic relationalities and “scrumpled geographies” in Marcus Doel’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari (1996).

Weltzien’s idea of citizenship –imagined honestly by the author “as a kinship as a middle-aged white American” (Lynch et al. 2017, 18) – is perhaps the widest (and most distorted) lens through which to ‘think continental.’ Nessa Cronin’s use of the clever term “epistemic peg” to define the heuristics and systems we “employ consciously and unconsciously every day that influence the way we position ourselves within our communities and in the world” (Lynch et al. 2017, 49) speaks to a ‘ground truthing’ of Weltzien’s notion of citizenship, and the transnational research of many of the writers and subjects within the volume. Whether it is possible or advisable to seek a citizen or universal subject in the *planetarian* idea espoused by Peter Berg, it runs counter to the ethos of *Thinking Continental*. Tom Lynch’s exploration of Loren Eiseley’s ‘watershed consciousness’ affords a denser, richer trope of “familial braiding” and relationality in place, as the watershed is “the first and last nation whose boundaries, though subtly shifting, are unarguable” (Lynch et al. 2017, 138). Citizenship as a (b)ordered ontology cuts through the ‘familial braiding’ of the umbilical cord as it binds people to place: *jus solis, jus sanguinis*. Like the seasonal fog of Duluth, Minnesota pithily described by Susan Naramore Maher in her John McPhee-esque contribution, “Superior,” in regimes of citizenship, “the perceived world shrinks” (Lynch et al. 2017, 169).

Movement and itinerancy shape the transnational, border hopping research of each author in *Thinking Continental*. Mary Swander’s essay “What You Take from the Sea” exemplifies this theme, transplanting the poet laureate of Iowa to her mother’s home in Connemara, Ireland, where she writes caught betwixt the “pull of diaspora with the push of late middle age” (Lynch et al. 2017, 209). Swander’s essay is a compelling elegy to two Claddaghduff fishermen drowned in a traditional Irish currach off the shore of Omev Island. Observing the grief of a community dependent on the sea – unbordered save for the traces and tidemarks of place, ocean, time, and accident – Swander’s prose captures the everyday rhythms of life and death entangled with the “shadowy undertow” of Claddaghduff (Lynch et al. 2017, 217). As Swander’s elegy concludes, Ingold’s meshwork presences subtly in the cultural practice of burying fishermen lost to sea: “bouquets of flowers were laid on top of the sod, then a fishing net was cast over the whole burial site, holding down the flowers and sod from the fierce

wind” (Lynch et al. 2017, 218). A thing is what it does, and Swander’s illustration of the fishing net provides the meshwork which draws communities – living and deceased – into *place* and *planet* at St. Brendan’s Cemetery on Omev Island, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Movement and itinerancy, while contingent and surprising, are lines and traces which are, as cultural anthropologist Sarah Green puts it, “power-inflected” and open to “constant redefinition” (Green 2018, 80). Finding a professional and private ‘home’ in this world is an act of privilege as much as it may be an act of personal return, a characteristic of kinetic transnational, trans-border elites. Not unlike the North American ranchers in Nancy Cook’s essay “The Lariat and the GPS” who “may be daunted by exchanging their idea of rootedness in place for a globally engaged sense of identity, such a shift is necessary for their survival” (Lynch et al. 2017, 257), the poets and academics who comprise *Thinking Continental* exist in a world of islands increasingly connected, increasingly (b) ordered. Put bluntly, they may not have much choice in the matter. Such an island may be unmistakably insular, resembling the microscale biota of Elizabeth Dodd’s Maud Island, equipped with time-consuming biosecurity thorough enough to remove seeds from the honeycombed soles of sneakers to protect the last living individual kakapo on Maud Island and other “painfully rare birds” and “shiveringly rare frogs” (Lynch et al. 2017, 11) of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Islands existing behind *cordons sanitaire* are by definition isolated by oceans. They can be contiguous and imagined nation-state communities – landlocked even, like contemporary Hungary – reacting to the “glocal’ perspective” (xv) which widens and constricts with news cycles, fueling concerned scientists and ethnonationalist types alike, in which “extreme weather ‘events’” (Lynch et al. 2017, xv) and patterns of human migration remap old borders and repackage authoritarian tendencies. Political geography can reimagine continental heartlands as islands; human and ecological catastrophes have a tendency to remind people of the irreplaceable value of John Donne’s “clod washed away by the sea.” As a remedy, maritime sociologist Emilio Cocco prescribes “recontinentalizing Europe” as a way for macroscale communities such as nation-states and supranational organizations (like the European Union) to overcome the island impulse wherein “single national imaginaries and cultural heritages...reduce ‘diversities’ to ‘minorities’” (Lynch et al. 2017, 225).

If *Thinking Continental* or ‘thinking continental’ embodies a wicked problem, it’s how to get from *here* to *there*; abating existential threats to recover knowledges of *(re)inhabiting* the planet. The environmental costs of mobility are non-zero: repeated travel to and from distant research destinations leaves ‘thinking continental’ with a fuel economy below that of a Lincoln Continental. Thinking locally, how can watershed consciousness effect environmental justice, connecting place with the planetary in a Great Plains where colonization and ecological imperialism have dispossessed indigenous cultural

landscapes with a conflictual commons and human-nature relationship? How can life-giving flows exist *in place* with petrosheds and extractive liquidities harnessed through braided networks of transnational pipelines? For its scale-shifting force and empathy, *Thinking Continental* merits dialogue with the intersectionalities of black and feminist geography demonstrated in Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). How can those who cannot *move*, and those who could not *stay* 'think continental'?

Moving from the marginal *here* to the continental *there* is daunting, and we may not have much choice, grinding forward with what critical race scholar Paul Gilroy calls the "triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals" (Lynch et al. 2017, xiv). Commoning demands equal parts care and resistance, and the time for action is shiveringly short. Rebuilding through *solastalgia* — distress caused by environmental loss — through "telling, bonding, and understanding" (Lynch et al. 2017, xiv) will form new worlds of meanings around attachments to and detachments from *place* and *planet*. This will require more than 'writing the planet' place by place, and it must start with the 'ground truths' of continents within, in the process *re-placing* what was thought to be lost.

## REFERENCES

- Doel, M. A. 1996. A Hundred Thousand Lines of Flight: A Machinic Introduction to the Nomad Thought and Scrumpled Geography of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Environment and planning D: Society and Space*, 14(4): 421-439.
- Green, S. 2018. Lines, traces, and tidemarks: Further reflections on forms of border. In *The Political Materialities of Borders*, O. Demetriou and R. Dimova (eds) Manchester University Press.
- Ingold, T. 2015. *The Life of Lines*. Routledge.
- Lynch, T., Naramore Maher, S., Wall, D., and Weltzien, A.O. (eds.) 2017. *Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Yusoff, K. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University of Minnesota Press.

**James E. Baker** is a second-year doctoral student in the Department of Geography at University of Nebraska Lincoln interested in studying how spatial regimes of affective nationalism persist in autocratic states and "frustrated democracies" and across the Former Soviet Union.



