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Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time by Tom Lynch, Susan Naramore Maher, Drucilla Wall, and O. Alan Weltzien

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A Nexus Between the Local and the Planetary

Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time edited by TOM LYNCH, SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER, DRUCILLA WALL, and O. ALAN WELTZIEN
University of Nebraska Press, 2017
\$29.95 USD

Reviewed by CORY WILLARD

In this diverse and varied anthology, editors Thomas Lynch, Susan Naramore Maher, Drucilla Wall, and O. Alan Weltzien bring together different perspectives, bridging the gap between the local and planetary scales most commonly seen in environmental writing.

In their introduction, the editors suggest that there is a common critical move to “simplify and establish easy dichotomies,” to “exaggerate differences and ignore complexity” (xii). Rallying against such simplicity, however, the editors make the argument “that such dichotomies—local-global, cosmopolitan-provincial, place-planet—are misleading” (xiii). To break down such binaries, the editors focus on Mitch Thomashow’s “cosmopolitan bioregionalism” and Ursula K. Heise’s “eco-cosmopolitanism.” While there are differences between the two, the editors suggest there is more similarity than difference, and it is at these junctures of commonality that “thinking continental” might take place. Thus, they propose,

‘thinking continental’ could be construed to mean the capacity to think between scales, to connect the local with the planetary. (xv)

This concept of the “continental” is predicated on the idea of the “continent as the mediating nexus between one’s local bioregion and the planet’s biosphere” (xv). While many environmental writers focus locally, or more recently at the planetary scale, this anthology argues that a middle ground is necessary to navigate the environmental issues we face which are both planetary in scale and locally embedded.

While the anthology is not specifically focused on climate change or the Anthropocene, it is understandable given current environmental discourse that many of the authors touch on components of each. To foreground a comparison, in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015), Timothy Clark writes that “no-one has access to the world as a planet,” and that

many of the intellectual challenges and dangers of overload that accompany the thought of the Anthropocene are already and at once embedded in the perplexing multiple conceptions of the ‘Anthropocene’ itself. (5)

Thinking in kind, the editors of *Thinking Continental* summon Wendell Berry, who argues that “not only is it not desirable to think globally but it is not even possible” (xiii). The issue, as with so many other ecological concerns, is that we encounter a problem of scale. On one hand, the local ignores the reality of planetary environmental systems. On the other hand, the planetary is a scale that we do not have access to cognitively or in a real, felt sense. What “thinking continental” aims to do, then, is bridge such a gap so that we may have meaningful and constructive discourse

about environmental processes and the challenges we face.

The essays in *Thinking Continental* are split into three categories. The first section contains essays that are involved most closely with landscapes, the second contains essays preoccupied with water, and the third section includes essays that are concerned with planetary or intercontinental issues and forces. After each section of essays there is a collection of related poetry. The collection of poetry, more than just fluff or an afterthought, is drawn from an impressive list of contributors, including five U.S. state poets laureate, Indigenous poets, and other Irish and American poets. The inclusion of poetry in a book like this continues the overarching metaphor of the anthology as a bridge or nexus, for links are made not only between the local and planetary, but between the arts and sciences, and between North America and Europe.

In “The Proximity of Far Away: Climate Change Comes to the Alligator,” Rick Van Noy suggests that

[t]he climate crisis is global, but the effects are felt most intensely as place based and local. [...] Noticing [...] small changes requires knowing a place deeply, the kind of local knowledge that is passed down over time. Surely the ability to recognize patterns is also evolved into us. (195)

Referencing *The Immense Journey*, Tom Lynch similarly links the problem of observation and perception to evolution. In “Braided Channels of Watershed Consciousness: Loren Eiseley’s ‘The Flow of the River’ and the Platte Basin Timelapse Project,” Lynch writes that

life seems to have originated in the warm seas of an early Earth, and much of the process of evolution has involved figuring out how life can move into increasingly drier regions and still maintain the original water bath that is its origin [...] The main evolutionary problem, in a way, is how to extend the reach of the watershed. (142)

And, indeed, in a time of planetary environmental crises we need to evolve ways of writing about and conceptualizing environmental issues and representations that extend our watersheds and our deeply held, felt experiences of places into larger scales. Focusing on what Gary Snyder has termed a “watershed consciousness,” Lynch traces the similarities between Eiseley’s experience of the Platte River and the Platte Basin Timelapse Project—a digital deep map of the interrelated meanings of the Platte River watershed co-founded by Nebraskan photographers Mike Forsberg and Michael Farrell. The conclusion Lynch comes to, as do others in the anthology, is that

[o]ne of the major tasks for environmental writers and artists is to find ways to evoke and personalize the long spans of time and the long reaches of space that [...] are necessary both to comprehend watersheds in their full richness and complex dimensions and to motivate us to proper ethical action for their protection and enhancement. (143)

Whether landscape, watershed, or planetary process, again, it is that bridging,

or “thinking continental,” that might come into play.

One would be remiss to discuss *Thinking Continental* without addressing perhaps its most distinctive aspect — the poetry. As with the essays, the included poems assemble a range of voices operating at different scales. Brendan Galvin’s “Links,” for instance, charts the complex associations between micro-organisms, zooplankton, human observation, economy, and the threat of extinction. Linda Hogan’s “When the Body” at once links the land, Native American displacement, and cultural genocide to the interconnected cosmic scale that ultimately constructs the human body:

the body so finely a miracle of its own, created of the elements of anything that has lived on earth where everything that was still is. (37-39)

In doing so, Hogan creates a parallel between ongoing creation still impacted by cultural trauma and the ongoing creation of matter through the exchange of atoms.

Ultimately, *Thinking Continental* is a welcome and interesting addition to the fields of ecocriticism and environmental studies. While many anthologies focus almost exclusively on American or European criticism, something Canadians have tried to remedy with *Greening the Maple:*

Canadian Ecocriticism in Context (2013), *Thinking Continental* includes an array of both European and North American scholarship. It would be intriguing to see this idea of scale applied to continents beyond North America and Europe; however, in our present moment, when environmental writers are trying to find effective (and affective) ways to engage both the local and the planetary reality we live in, the discussions begun by *Thinking Continental* are a worthwhile place to start.

WORKS CITED

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

CORY WILLARD is a PhD student in Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he studies ecocriticism and North American nature writing. His most recent publication is the essay “Glaciers, Embodiment, and the Sublime: An Ecocritical Approach to Thomas Wharton’s *Icefields*” in *Writing the Body in Motion: A Critical Anthology on Canadian Sport Literature* from Athabasca University Press.