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Review of Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time

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Review of *Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017)

Edited by Tom Lynch, Susan Naramore Maher, Drucilla Wall and O.

Alan Weltzien

John Charles Ryan (University of New England)

Through the interplay of the creative and the critical—in which both modes of ecological writing exist side by side, in exchange with one another—*Thinking Continental* presents a timely and distinct contribution to the blossoming of the environmental humanities. The volume consists of three parts, Ground Truths, Watershed Ways and Planetary Currents, each of which ends with a lyrical coda of poems from leading writers on environment, ecology, place, region and the nonhuman. Cross-disciplinary and, moreover, cross-genre, *Thinking Continental* enlarges the spectrum of recent theoretical work in the environmental humanities, notably Robert Emmett and David Nye's *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* and Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann's *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, both works published in 2017.

This dynamic volume hinges on the contrapuntal movement between the more academic-in-voice and research-intensive chapters; reflective, personal, experientially-based essays; and, of course, poetry encompassing a far-reaching range of themes and styles. The collection's polyvocality coalesces around the possibility of *thinking continental*. In their Introduction, Lynch, Maher, Wall and Weltzien define this organising concept as “the capacity to think between scales, to connect the local with the planetary” (xv), signifying “the chronic interpenetration of the planetary with the local” (xxi). As the editors contend, *thinking continental* represents a riposte to the misleading yet entrenched dichotomies of “local-global, cosmopolitan-provincial, place-planet” (xiii) inherent to many theorisations of topographical situatedness and de-situatedness—place coupling and

decoupling—including, for instance, Heise’s *eco-cosmopolitanism* and Mitch Thomashow’s *cosmopolitan bioregionalism*.

When I first read the title, I linked the volume to Aldo Leopold’s phrase “thinking like a mountain” (129–33). In *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949), Leopold asserts that “every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call” of the mountain (129). In this brief section of the book, Leopold proposed a kind of Heideggerian listening to the world as a medium for *thinking-with* and *thinking-into* in contrast to a thinking *about* or thinking *of* that would promulgate a split between perceiving subject (the human) and perceived object (the other-than-human). The Leopoldian premise of *thinking like a mountain* centres on the possibility of thought becoming thought when the object of thought becomes a thinking subject. In this manner, *Thinking Continental* challenges the rift, within contemporary environmental scholarship, between the “staying put ethos” and more “global, cosmopolitan, or planetary perspectives” (xi). Rather than shying away from an ever more globalized planet, the practice of *thinking continental* draws attention to—and engages with—the multiple scales of affect and effect between all beings existing in a place.

In its reference to the scales, contexts and manifestations of place in non-binary terms, *thinking continental* aligns with John Kinsella’s recent call for “polysituatedness,” but without rejecting seminal thought in place-thinking, particularly bioregionalism (Berg). As I interpret the premise, *thinking continental* involves the projection of oneself—an expression of profound identification—into the polyscalar textures of the other-than-human domain. At the same time, the term implies a sentient, cognizant, cogitating world or, put differently, the thinking that is performed by “the continental,” irrespective of our thinking *about* it. It is the expression of a radical form of empathy—neither restricted to the local, nor rendered abstract by the global—that is central to this volume and particularised in each of the essays and poems.

Drucilla Wall’s chapter, “Life on the Western Edge of It All: Conceptions of Place in Tess Gallagher’s Lough Arrow Poems,” is exemplary of a reflective scholarly approach to *thinking continental* (274–88). Wall begins by narrating her initial encounter with

American poet Tess Gallagher's poetry through a locus she shared with the poet: Lough Arrow, County Sligo, Ireland. Wall summons the concept of "multiple Wests" (277) in elaborating the "larger system of discourse, beyond the national imaginary, pointing in many directions at once" (278) out of which Gallagher's writing emerges. Wall's nuanced exploration reinforces how a critical-creative nexus within the environmental humanities makes it possible for signifiers from non-Anglophonic languages and traditions to enter English discourse in order to communicate facets of ecological being-in-the-world that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to articulate. This is evident in her invocation of the Irish language term *dinnseanchas* to denote "the lore of place [embracing] a totality of topography, history, geology, animal life, nonhuman spirit beings, and human impact on a place" (278).

Similarly, in his chapter "Pathways of the Yellowstone," Bernard Quetchenbach borrows the term *Zugunruhe* from German biologists for "the characteristic urge that spurs migration" (180) in, for instance, lark buntings, longspurs, phalaropes and other avian peripatetics. For Quetchenbach, birds *think continental* through their advanced sensitivities to magnetic impulses and celestial patterns. At the conclusion of the chapter, the "irresistible impulse to move on" (180) provokes a crucial question: "Why wouldn't those titanic creative forces that shape the planet sometimes put bird or bear in motion? Or erupt into a people's story of itself, taking shape as a mythic purpose or triggering a poet's imagination" (191). Understanding Yellowstone through the prism of *Zugunruhe*, thus, offers a basis for conceptualising the immense forces of the continental as inhering within the nuances of the local. Also with a view towards semiotic expansiveness, Andrea Benassi, in "Imagining the Memory of the Earth: Geo-Site and the Aesthetic of the Anthropocene," invokes *réseau* networks of "human and nonhuman actors" (76).

One of the key debates in the environmental humanities is the extent to which a rapprochement between the arts, humanities and sciences is possible, given their markedly divergent epistemologies, methodologies, languages and traditions. After all, as the editors explain, current ecological challenges require "the keen insights not only of scientists but of poets, humanists and social scientists as well" (xv). As illustrations of productive

convergence between disciplines, two chapters stand out. The first, O. Alan Weltzien's "Three Stations Along the Ring of Fire," is written by a poet and humanist, whereas the second, Harmon Maher's "The Deepest Layer," comes from the geological tradition. Weltzien furnishes an engrossing account of the Ring of Fire, Ring of Subduction Zones or Circum-Pacific Belt, a 40,000-kilometre zone of the Pacific Ocean characterised by frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The author formulates a narrative approach to the macroregion, "Earth's largest place" (17), vis-à-vis three sites—Mount Rainier, Mount Fuji and Chimborazo—and concludes that the "primal unity" of the Gondwanan continent is also a unity of consciousness, cognition and corpus (28). For Weltzien, to be sure, "this macroregion returns us to our own region, above all our own body" (28).

Companionably, Maher posits "layered thinking" as "fundamental to the earth, part of its essential fabric" and comprising the sedimentary and metamorphic, the "concordant and discordant, tilted and overturned" (33). Through layered thinking, it is possible to render deep time accessible to perception and consciousness. In making a case for the significance of layering, Maher's chapter incorporates striking panoramic images of layered geological formations. To be certain, the geological, geographical and cartographical emphasis of many chapters in the book appears prominently in Nessa Cronin's "Deep Mapping Communities in the West of Ireland." Cronin understands community mapping as "an act of expressing and making tangible that which is tacit and often remains intangible, inaudible, and invisible to people 'outside' of the immediate community or local" (47). In her view, deep mapping facilitates ground truthing as the scientific verification of data sets (48, 53). Cronin's analysis of the X-PO Mapping Group, dedicated to the "tracing, naming and mapping of every house and ruin in the parish of Kilnaboy" (50) in County Clare, Ireland, exemplifies the heterogeneous texts, artefacts and objects of study made available through an environmental humanities framework, while intersecting with recent developments in the digital environmental humanities (see, for example, Travis and von Lünen) and geocriticism (Tally and Battista).

In addition to its creative-critical trajectory, *Thinking Continental* includes a collection of thirty-nine poems, each of which contributes lyrically to the theoretical focus

of the volume through elegiac and celebratory modes of address. Twyla Hansen's "Communion," for instance, contributes a sense of the natural world as sacred—though tinged with loss and mourning—to the formulation of *thinking continental*:

Could any place be more sacred?
Once-treeless plain where the first
people sipped from that cool spring
down in the field, where the graves
of Native children dotted those hills. (116, lines 16–20)

[...]

Those fields now a factory of corn
and soybean, no trace of livestock
or silo... (117, lines 26–28)

In narrativising the effects of industrial agriculture, Hansen's poem can be regarded as an antipastoral work. Yet, other poems construe the natural world as an assemblage of thinking subjects. Kimberly Blaeser's "Sutra, in UMBER" relates that "Each burr, each blade of copper grass / remembers. And soon every black bark knot becomes eyes" (120, lines 24–25). From my perspective, one of the potentialities of poetry—as distinct from other genres and forms of art—is its capacity to mediate *thinking-with* grass, trees and other nonhuman Others.

The poetry contained in the volume crystallises the various dimensions of *thinking continental*. In Alice Azure's "Portage" (254), the ultimate inclination of the mind, imagination and spirit, is to return to ancestral places, whereas Linda Hogan reminds us that "When the body wishes to speak, she will / reach into the night" (320, lines 1–2). Still, another highpoint of the volume's poetry is Walter Bargen's "Ornithological Perspectives,"

reinforcing the figure of the avian as an embodiment of thinking, being *and* doing continental (313–14).

Despite its many praiseworthy strengths, one of the limitations of the volume is its overarching focus on European (Italian, Irish) and North American (Canadian, US-American) landscapes and writers. What might it mean to extend *thinking continental* to African, Asian, South American and other global contexts? Notwithstanding these continental absences, international scholars in the environmental humanities, ecocriticism and place-based creative studies will find the volume of relevance to their own environments, ecologies, places, regions and nonhumans. As the diverse contributions make clear, “the chronic interpenetration of the planetary with the local” (xxi) can be illuminated through a parallel “chronic interpenetration” of the creative and the critical.

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