

David Borthwick  
University of Glasgow

Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster, eds., *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology and Place* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 438pp.

From the mid-1990s, first-wave Ecocriticism advocated lococentric perspectives. This has continued into the new millennium, where Heideggerian 'dwelling' remains a frequent critical reference, insisting on a need for the re-evaluation of relationships to the dirt and bones of the territory-at-hand. Yet relatively recently, second-wave Ecocriticism has provided a robust critique of this stance, most notably in Ursula Heise's important *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008). Subtitled "The Environmental Imagination of the Global," Heise called for a wider sense of vision, an "eco-cosmopolitanism" which is capable of allowing us to "envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (Heise, 61). Other critics, such as Timothy Morton, have encouraged us to "Think Big," eschewing local perspectives in order to confront the reality of global crisis (Morton, 20-59).

*The Bioregional Imagination*, then, may at first glance seem to fly in the face of more recent trends in Ecocriticism. What this valuable volume reveals, though, is that bioregional thinking and engagement continue to be of vital importance. Its authors do not shy away from the turn towards a more globalised thinking, however. Indeed, a very useful introduction deals with the relationship between the regional and the global head-on. One section is devoted to the discussion of "critiques of bioregionalism," and acknowledges objections made by Heise and others. The editors state: "we wholly concur that a localized sense of place is incomplete unless augmented by a sense of how that place is integrated into the wider biosphere and the global network of cultures and economies" (9). Yet the point is also made, and made well, that "the global is likewise incomplete without an awareness that the globe is an amalgamation of [...] connections among variously scaled and nested places."

The volume ranges widely, too, across global bioregions, from the USA to Australia, Italy to England to Africa, while Pavel Cenkl provides an excellent guide to "Reading Climate Change and Work in the Circumpolar North." A nice touch, each essay is accompanied by a map of the bioregion under discussion. This is extended to essays featuring fantasy or allegorical landscapes, from the Planet Arrakis of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (in Daniel Gustav Anderson's paper), to Hermann Moll's "Map of Houyhnhnms

Land” in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (featured in Anne Milne’s essay on “Thinking the Feral into Bioregionalism”).

This is a playful and restless volume, but the contributors’ engagements with bioregionalism are serious and committed attempts to redefine a critical landscape in which bioregionalism can be discussed in its manifold and diverse manifestations. Each of the four sections of the book is titled using the ‘Re-’ prefix, underlining the book’s stress upon reconsideration and redefinition of the terminology and practice surrounding bioregional thinking, and its critical application. The opening section, “Reinhabiting,” performs largely as a retrospective of the origins of the bioregional movement in the US, heavily influenced by Gary Snyder, as well as figures such as David Robertson and Robert L. Thayer Jr. In Cheryll Glotfelty’s interview with Robertson and Thayer, the men’s careers and invaluable contributions are recounted, with numerous snippets of experience and anecdote that resonate in the present, in particular the sense of bioregions as “nested,” as Thayer has it, and he invokes the mandala as a way of illustrating the relationship between “the specific and the universal” (43). In this section, too, we learn of the Chicago Wilderness movement in Rinda West’s essay documenting the challenges and responses as members of the urban coalition sought to engage and work with a wide variety of audiences. West quotes Michael Vincent McGinnis’ definition of a bioregion, something which he believes “represents the intersection of vernacular culture, place-based behaviour, and community” (59). Yet as West notes, bioregional thinking is about application, responsibility and action. She explains that the “mission” of the Chicago Wilderness project “has three parts: to study, restore, protect, and manage the natural ecosystems of the region; to contribute to the preservation of global biodiversity; and to involve local residents and improve the quality of their life” (62).

Recent Ecocritical thought has called for a materialist turn, emphasising the need for scholars to find ways of having the Humanities engage with matters of responsibility and action, as opposed to the discursive, dialectic method that many of us call our home ground. In this volume, a wide variety of scholars demonstrate the value of bioregional thinking as a means of galvanising the individual into action. The final section of the book (“Renewal”) is a series of essays on bioregional pedagogy, which pulls no punches in asserting the need for scholarship to translate into committed action. Kathryn Miles and Mitchell Thomashow open their essay as follows: “We are compelled to educate a new generation of environmental leaders. This means we must understand what our students care about, their views and how they form them” (391). Indeed, Miles and Thomashow understand from their students how digital nativity influences and affects reactions to one’s local place. How does the world wide web influence connection to, or disconnection from, the links, interconnections and dependencies of a bioregion? The essays surrounding bioregional pedagogy largely rely on traditional phenomenological methods: immersion in territory, observation, and personal experience. Laurie Ricou’s class undertake “habitat studies,” with students each dedicating a semester to a particular species in the vicinity of the university campus, researching its habitat, behaviours and, coming back to literary study, its appearance and associations in

literature. Laird Christensen documents a distance-taught class, in which students negotiate the particulars of local habitat where they are, discussing them with each other using the internet: “my primary goal is to help students perceive the places they live in ecological rather than political terms,” Christensen explains. This is a sentiment that finds an echo in Daniel Gustav Anderson’s advocacy of what he refers to as “critical bioregionalism,” which assumes that “diverse bioregions are *functionally homogenous*. In other words, claims about the cultural life of bioregion X must be significant and meaningful to those in bioregion Y” (226). Bioregional distinctiveness is privileged across the collection as a way of culturally and critically engaging with ethical responsibility to the environment, but all of the contributors are clear-eyed about the need for bioregional thinking to transcend merely local concerns, and to contribute to, to enhance, a much wider global series of conversations and actions. That so many of the essays assembled here are based on real-world examples and case studies is testament to this impulse.

Many of the contributions in the volume problematize established notions of bioregionalism and bioregional identity. In her essay on the Po river valley in Italy, Serenella Iovino asks how a “dying region” can be reinhabited and depicted. The Po valley is a victim of industry and urban sprawl; it is, Iovino says, “a *necroregion*” (102). The essay explores the process of “narrative reinhabitation” in the work of two Po river poets, Gianni Celati and Ermanno Rea. In her important essay on Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Erin James cites Mitchell Thomashow’s concept of “Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism,” which insists on responses to phenomena such as environmental refugeeism, and the need to account for engagement with postcolonial landscapes and territories. When some place-based studies can seem to privilege authenticity or indigeneity, how do those who are recent arrivals in a bioregion respond to it, and what ownership can they lay claim to? James points out that bioregionalism and postcolonialism share an interest in “critiques of dominant power, be it power that stems from the nation, from imperialism, or from globalization” (263). A settled bioregional identity may itself be deemed open to question by those who are unable to conform to, or invest in, a dominant local narrative of inhabitation. Jill Gatlin’s essay on Lorna Dee Cervantes’ poem “Freeway 280” makes the point that the bioregional corpus must include urban and minority literatures as a condition of any grassroots movement truly enacting environmental justice. In short, a bioregional narrative must be inclusive, and this means acknowledging (in Gatlin’s words) “social inequalities that shape people’s relationships with their surroundings” (247).

In *The Bioregional Imagination*, the editors have been careful to commission essays which provide a comprehensive survey of the emergence of bioregionalism and its contemporary use. They have also permitted their contributors to engage critically with its central tenets, and to explore the meaning of bioregionalism from a wide variety of territories, perspectives and literary traditions. In addition, the section on bioregional pedagogy permits reflection and inspiration for readers and teachers. While the words of those who helped to define bioregionalism—Gary Snyder, Kirkpatrick Sale, Doug

Aberley, as well as Thayer and Robertson—are cited in almost every chapter, the book takes for granted that the moment is right to acknowledge, but also to depart from, these defining figures, redefining bioregionalism in a way that responds to our contemporary plight. This is an important book which recognises the efficacy of place-based thinking in the context of the global, and offers its audience a new starting point for active and responsible engagement with their own literary traditions and bioregional territories.

### **Works Cited**

Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination and the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2010. Print.