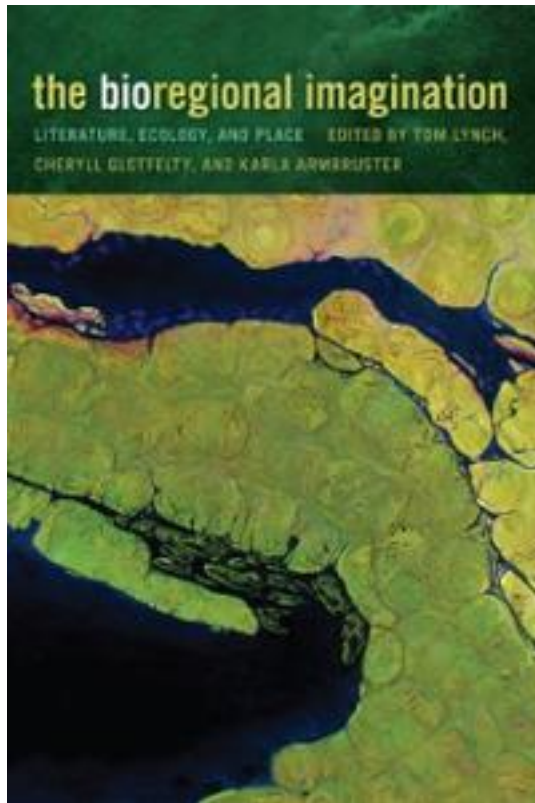


The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, Place.

Edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster.

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The central illustration in Ebenezer Howard's innovative urban design plan, 'Garden City', possesses the elegant symmetries of a mandala – a concentric pattern in which circling spheres of human communities are arranged evenly along radial lines as if in harmonised planetary orbit. Created in 1902 as a solution to the congestion and environmental ill-effects of industrialised London, Howard's elegantly abstract diagram also pictures an innovative ideology: the 'Garden City', in both name and image, proposes a futuristic model of urban collectivism based on implicitly natural ('garden') principles, what we might call a mode of yeoman communalism designed to replace, or perhaps more correctly, emplace the offensive congeries (in Howard's view) of inner city London.

The program notes to the current exhibition in which Howard's urban design work features (alongside the visions of Corbusier and others) remind us that the designer's vision would not translate neatly and practically to living urban reality.¹ Indeed, the 'alternative way of life' (as the promotional commentary puts it) envisioned by Howard in the form of abstract illustrations is itself illustrative of the effacement of the particularity of place through the impositional projection of human design in space – an early 20th century version of what Kate Rigby calls the 'supremacy of Cartesian-Newtonian space' over the immersive and shaping practices of 'place making' that began to occur in the seventeenth century (*Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* 2004: 61). Yet, in reviewing a collection of essays on the subject of bioregionalism, it is worth noting that, through a kind of transformative displacement, Howard's urban design ideas survive as aesthetic images: they now occupy a different culture space—that of the museum—and so carry a different kind of cultural value as artifacts. Howard's idealist conceptions, then, might not qualify as bioregionalist 'mappings' initiating the process of *reinhabitation* of a given place—a defining idea in bioregional practice—but they do demonstrate an important point: any reading of the human interaction with actual and particular place is richer for acknowledging the subtle interpretative dynamics occurring between idea and action, imaginative vision and living engagement.

It is precisely the role of the imagination, as an agent of political and cultural change and as expressed in (primarily) literary form, that concerns the editors of *The*

Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place, Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. And well it might, for while the place of place, as it were, in contemporary analyses of geopolitical issues and concerns has become central, it is no less contestatory for that, particularly when the vexed political question of *rights* to place inevitably enter the frame of debate. While the notion of ‘living-in-place’ points to fresh imaginative possibilities of ‘reterritorializing’ one’s life through re-connection with place—here the fundamental restorative imperative of bioregional practice comes into view: the practice of bioregionalism hinges on the *reclamation* of a sense of place—these same conceptual acts of ‘reinhabitation’ can be seen to elide or dilute pressing disputes over ownership and (dis)possession of land, and thus the continuing effects of colonisation, even as the wider effects of deterritorialisation through globalisation increasingly define contemporary experience for great numbers of human beings.

Put more pointedly, the indigenous person’s invocation of place-as-spiritual entity does not necessarily harmonise with non-indigenous poeticised evocations of place-as-dwelling. However, as the subtitle of this collection of essays *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* implies, it is the customary role of literature and art to explore, through dramatised narrative, poetic invocation, aesthetic experiment, and stylistic innovation, the modulations and manifold inflections of such elemental words as ‘place’ – a word that generates an array of powerful connotations such as ‘home’, ‘locality’, ‘ground’ and ‘belonging’ and attendantly powerful notions of identity (consider the evocative charge of the mundane phrase ‘my place’).

Such inflections can be lost to the initiate’s view on first encountering bioregional thought and practice, for the idea of place as expounded by many of the central proponents of bioregionalism, particularly in the early phases of the movement in North America, appears to promote the rural over the urban, the local in ostensible opposition to the global. Some might add that the politics of bioregionalism can come across as prescriptively environmentalist, and, by corollary, that for all the emphasis on learning to take one’s place *in place*, bioregionalism endorses a universalist set of ethical tenets. Yet, as the editors of *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* rightly observe, the ‘supposed opposition between city and country, local and global’ (10) is a false dichotomy; and, further to their aim of promoting the merits and attractions of bioregional practice, they both encourage the integration of allegedly opposing perspectives, and emphasise the ‘rich and multifaceted’ character of a ‘sociopolitical and cultural movement’ which, given its guiding principles of sustainability and interrelatedness—modes of living that inhere in the active attentiveness to the interrelational intricacies of living ecosystems—has genuinely come into its own in the 21st century. Indeed, in consonance with the still-emergent phenomenon of globalised interconnectedness, coupled with what increasingly reveals itself to be the all-encompassing nature of the environmental crisis, the editors’ insistence that bioregionalism inheres not in programmatic ideology but in ‘evolving dialogue’ and the continual testing of ideas and ideals among diverse participants attests the importance of this collection.

Lynch *et al* encapsulate the history and the defining contours of bioregionalism in their introduction to *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Yet the strength of this collection comes through the focus on the alliance of

‘bioregional literature (and by extension, art) and criticism’ in encouraging and creating enriching and beneficial experiences of place. For this reviewer, the democratic pairing of art and criticism marks an important step in scholarly terms. For, as they demonstrate confidently, literary and cultural criticism play an integral and equal part in the role of literature and art as modes of imaginative ‘re-encountering’ with place. Criticism, that is, collaborates directly in fostering deeper understandings and responsiveness to particularities of locality – a re-invigoration of ‘place conscious’ living and being. The essays comprising this are organised under four thematic sections: ‘Reinhabiting’; ‘Rereading’; ‘Reimagining’, and ‘Renewal’, a practical ‘placing’ of each section whereby interrelationship is emphasised. For the first time reader, such an arrangement works very well; the range of essays give a full-flavoured introduction to the many aspects of bioregionalism, from the more philosophically and theoretically inflected work in the first section to the crucial role of pedagogy in the last. In fact, the focus on role of teaching—the various aspects and implications of teaching and learning as practiced at the conjunction of local habitat studies and literary studies in particular—is a distinguishing feature of the book.

There is not sufficient room here to draw out the distinctive characteristics of each contribution, although all warrant and invite close and careful attention. Readers will inevitably find certain essays more compelling and illuminating than others, according to their interests. Suffice it to say that the level of scholarship and the sophistication of argument and exposition is of a recognisably high and consistent standard, and in this respect, the collection fulfills the editors’ ambitions – to generate debate and discussion about the undoubted significance of bioregionalism as transformative practice inhering in communality and cooperation, with the explicit aim of encouraging sustainability as both practical and philosophical engagement with natural ecosystems of place.

It is a mark of the success of *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* that readers are compelled to reappraise and rethink their relationship with place: to understand that to think and act bioregionally is to do much more than endorse stylised images of regional localities (the ‘heritage’ versions of local identity and place) and to subscribe obediently to ‘green’ values. Bioregionalism is a summons to immerse ourselves in the deep fields of local sites so as to reform our relationship with place, community and, ultimately, self. It is not to champion territorial exclusivity but rather to nurture a Blakeian understanding of the universal through the particular. Certainly, bioregionalism carries a political message expressed in the form of a moral imperative: to attend with all one’s senses – bodily, as it were – to the immediate complexities and intricacies of locality. ‘Dwelling’, ‘reinhabitation’, ‘living-in-place’, ‘mapping’: these central tenets point to a politics of re-engagement through renewed identification with place. In turn, this enacts an ethics of sustainability – the individual and collective commitment to harmonious interrelationship with the complex biological and natural dynamics of a given site. Whether pertaining to urban planning of forest dwelling, the challenge is at once imaginative and practical, personal and social; it is also a challenge that we need to meet.

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¹ The exhibition, entitled ‘Grand Reductions: 10 Diagrams that Changed City Planning’, opened at the SPUR Urban Centre Gallery (San Francisco) in November 2012.