
Book Review

Karen Bray, Heather Eaton, and Whitney Bauman (eds.), *Earthly Things: Immanence, New Materialisms, and Planetary Thinking* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 352 pp, \$40 (pbk), ISBN: 9781-5315-0306-2.

This book is a timely collection of essays that brings together perspectives from religions and philosophies across the planet to understand how a framework of immanence could reshape contemporary ecological and planetary thought. The volume links the newer—though the editors specify ‘not better or worse’—mostly Western ideas of New Materialisms to older ‘again, not better or worse’ religious and philosophical traditions (p. 1). As an academic text, the volume offers critical insight and new perspectives in the ever-evolving eco-philosophies of our time. The editors cleverly frame the religious concept of immanence as a rich alternative formulation to think about materiality and embodiment in the climate crisis. The essays seek to move beyond ‘canonized thought’ in order to weave spirit and body ‘back together again after the Cartesian humpty dumpty fell off the wall’ (p. 5). In this anti-dualist mission, the collection enters an often-neglected dialogue between the broader field of environmental philosophy and the discipline of religion and ecology.

The volume comprises three intersecting thematic sections moving from ‘older’ understandings of immanence towards contemporary theories that reconceptualize similar themes. In the first section theme ‘Immanent Religiosities’, the various authors offer a comparative approach to immanence across world religions and ‘meaning-making practices’ (p. 3). With chapters covering a range of religious perspectives from Confucianism to Jainism, Hinduism to Judaism, and African Spiritualities to Christianity, this first section provides case studies of different beliefs and practices of Immanence. The second thematic section, ‘New Materialisms and Other Theories of Immanence’, offers critical reconsiderations of contemporary (Western) philosophies such as New Materialisms, Object-Oriented Ontology, affect theory, and critical romanticisms. These chapters challenge the separation of immanent thought and new materialisms while arguing that immersion into materiality is contingent upon some form of ‘unknowability’. The final conceptual grouping is titled ‘Planetary Thinking’. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (2003) theory of the planetary¹, this section engages

¹ Spivak first developed the idea of the planetary in contrast to the global in *Death of a Discipline* where she critiqued the traditional rules for the study of comparative literature.

embodied ground-up perspectives to ask what it means to live in a planet composed of multiple possible worlds.

The volume's focus on the religious sense of immanence allows for a reconsideration of an everyday sacred necessary to address the challenges of the climate crisis. Refreshingly, despite the clear investment in immanence, the volume does not make the mistake of rejecting all forms of transcendence. While the editors are careful to point out how theologies of transcendence are often used to justify and perpetuate systems of oppression such as patriarchy, colonialism, and the human/nature divide, the authors find ways of reuniting transcendence and immanence as relational rather than oppositional concepts. For example, Catherine Keller explores a form of Christian Panentheism in which transcendence is not a form of 'supersession' or 'metaphysical alterity'; but instead, a combination of transcendence and immanence in this tradition effects 'process of intertwined actualization' or 'novel becomings' of both creaturely and divine beings (p. 105). Elana Jefferson-Tatum similarly explains that while Africana cosmos-worlds typically 'embody...an immanent metaphysics' in which 'nature and cosmos are...understood as kin' the transcendent exists in relational contexts whereby gods are intentionally created by the humans whom they will come to possess (p. 68–69). In the god-making practices Jefferson-Tatum examines, creation is 'a testimony to the fundamental interdependence of the spiritual and material' (p. 67). Considering creative acts—including ritual, dance, and literature—as a meeting point of immanence and transcendence may offer fruitful ways of looking at literary and artistic expressions in the so-called Anthropocene.

Indeed, the text offers a number of insights that would be of interest to scholars across the various subfields of the environmental humanities. Unfortunately, however, the editors' dedication to 'a proliferation of meanings and interpretations' (p. 5) angled at being planetarily inclusive, does, at times, make the collection difficult to follow. Throughout the volume, authors introduce terminology such as 'process thought', 'emergence theory', 'OOO', and 'new-animisms' without explaining the historical and systematic differences between the theories. While this approach provides an interesting survey of various interrelated perspectives, without offering definitions of terms, the insights of individual essays may not be the most accessible to researchers not already well-versed in the connections between broader environmental thought and religious studies. Phillip Clayton picks up on this idea in his essay as he criticizes the proliferation of new 'isms' in environmental thought. Clayton argues that the 'ever more abstract distinctions' of various theories in the field not only divide researchers, but distance academia from activists and the very materiality of the climate crisis which it seeks to address (p. 292).

Earthly Things makes a valuable critique of New Materialisms by arguing that environmental thought needs to attend to the diverse traditions of immanence that have existed outside traditional Western academia. As Whitney A. Bauman puts it, 'these "new" ways of thinking' often lack intentional grounding in the ideas that precede them' (p. 274). However, the ideas of new materialisms are new only

for those who 'have been born into, and shaped by, Western, modern, and colonial ontologies' that separate humans from matter and matter from spirit (p. 6). *Earthly Things* urges academics to attend to wisdom and spiritual traditions that have long histories of immanence. In doing so, the volume engages in the invaluable work of undoing the myth of disenchantment. Creating the link between immanence and New Materialism, a connection that should be obvious, but has thus far not been prevalent in academic discourse, *Earthly Things* allows us new ways of remembering and recognizing the ongoing sacred presences and processes of this planet. It is an essential read for anyone in the environmental humanities who uses New Materialist ideas in imagining ways beyond the climate crisis.

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References

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