

Karen Bray, Heather Eaton, and Whitney Bauman, eds. (2023). *Earthly Things: Immanence, New Materialisms, and Planetary Thinking*. Fordham University Press. ISBN: 9781531503062.

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Containing an Introduction and twenty-two stand-alone chapters, *Earthly Things* is the culmination of five-years of the editors and contributors meeting face-to-face at annual American Academy of Religions gatherings, which were structured around the goal of providing “a new turn to ontology” (1). This turn centers upon “how our ideas materialize in the world and how our entanglement with other bodies in an evolving planetary community shape our ideas [and] have great potential for rethinking human-technology-animal-Earth relationships” (1). The editors explain that during this gestation period they discussed the themes of *Earthly Things* and workshopped ideas and drafts that eventually became the respective contributions from those involved (three editors, nineteen other contributors). Overall, the book is structured around three “main, intersecting themes: Immanent Religiosities, New Materialisms and other theories of Immanence, and Planetary Thinking” (2-3).

Given the professional locations of the varied and accomplished authors, these themes and goals are systematically addressed by chapters that center the phenomenon of religion. Some chapters address “thinking ethically, aesthetically, and politically with the planetary imaginary” (7) by exploring such themes from the perspective of a religious tradition (Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism and Jainism, Buddhism, Indigenous religions, animisms/new animisms, Christianity, Africana religions). Other chapters address these themes directly from varied theoretical perspectives, shaped by religious studies theorizing and also the theories of new materialisms; others do so from the perspective of bodies, human and non-human both, recognizing that “not all agency is of the same type” (218). Overall, all authors committed to situating their chapters in “transdisciplinary conversation” (7) with one another, often referencing other chapters in the volume, but also the thought of new materialist thinkers in varied academic domains.

The comprehensive volume succeeds in its flow of chapters, with the expansive bibliography generated by the contributors being of great assistance to anyone looking to sift through the key literature on new materialisms to-date. It also succeeds in inviting scholars, especially of religious studies, to take new materialism seriously in its theorizing (see also LeVasseur; Mickey; and Keller and Rubenstein). Some chapters also helpfully point towards important pathways forward in undertaking ethnography (for example, Sarah Pike’s chapter on Rewilding Religion). Meanwhile, many help situate debates and varied positions germane to the differing branches of new materialist thinking and theorizing, bringing these to life for those in the environmental humanities, broadly,

* This article was published through an open-access model that charged no article processing fees.

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and signposting their relevance to religious studies, specifically. As such, the book offers a formative starting point for scholars not familiar with new materialist, immanent, and planetary modes of thinking and theorizing. However, it also provides enough nuance and analytical depth to be challenging for those readers who may already be more familiar with such theories. Overall, its focus on what I term “logics of relationality” covers topics of agency, justice, norms, harms, ethics, temporalities, concepts of self/human/culture/cosmos/creation, art, and the plural worlds these elements combine towards.

The richness of the book’s contributions is captured by Kimerer LaMothe, who in their chapter explains that, “Those of us contributing to this volume hold out hope that worldviews, featuring some kind of divine *immanence*, may impel strategic interventions in the global rush to ecological destruction by countering the notions of divine *transcendence* that can and have been used to justify unfettered use of the natural world” (186). And even here, Catherine Keller in their chapter asks a pertinent and haunting question, given such destruction: “do we abandon what cannot be healed?” (107) even as we strive for “survival” (John Grim, 90)? These and many other urgent, ontologically important, and theoretically rich reflections and questions are posed throughout the volume, suggesting a rich level of dialogue that must have occurred amongst the cohort over their five years of meeting.

Yet, Heather Eaton offers an honest assessment that contains a note of caution: “What new materialisms and planetary thinking are attempting is to open academic flood gates, and enlarge frameworks, methods, and modes of analyses...[however], academics are routinely trained to deconstruct, expose fault lines, take a stance...and remain in the realm of critique. To construct and/or propose viable alternatives; or invent, imagine, or create fresh and vibrant options, are far more difficult” (224). She continues, explaining how “the norm in academia is to try to evade overt political stances, ethical certainties, and ideological commitments. Planetary thinking is, overall, about scientific, ethical, and political projects. The desire ethos is to propose novel planetary thinking and visions, without losing perspicacity. Planetary thinking includes social, political, and ecological transformations” (224). But what if such systems are unable to be transformed? What if most scholars will not entertain new materialist thinking, or are flat-out unable to understand it? To what extent can theory actually lead the hoped-for transformation/s that motivate the entire project? These questions signal the limitations of the volume, and similar theoretical work of new materialisms: this is a discourse seemingly limited to intellectual elites.

Moreso, there is no evidence cited anywhere in the otherwise probing, articulate, and beautifully written chapters that thinking differently, let alone immanently and/or planetarily, leads to any type of behavioral shifts in regard to the planetary. This is a huge gap of the book, and that the book either ignored it—or all the authors failed to address it—is problematic, including for the movement of new materialisms broadly. In many ways, then, the audience remains the same for this type of theorizing: liberal (politically, ethically, ecologically) scholars and theologians, who all have been clamoring for a better world for decades now, with scant evidence to offer that world is possible, let alone desired by the average non-academic. This is even hinted at by Christopher Ives in their chapter on Buddhism, where they point out that despite the theoretical work in their chapter, the “importance of this for environmental ethics should not, however, be overstated” (49). The chapter that best tries to bridge this gap is LaMothe’s, which attempts to bring new materialist insights into bodies, directly, via dance and “kinetic creativity” (187), pointing out that “divine immanence is never merely an idea” (193).



Precisely how the robust, technical, and challenging theories of planetary new materialisms can be made alive, experienced, and embodied (especially for non-academics), in ways that lead to measurable shifts in human behaviors away from planetary destruction and dualisms and towards planetary regeneration and immanence, is still an open question. It is one not addressed, or at least, not addressed adequately, in this volume. To say that this needed to be, or should have been, addressed, however, is not a form of finger pointing or a means of suggesting that the book is not worth reading. To the contrary, *Earthy Things* is indeed worth reading, especially for those in religious studies, theology, and the environmental humanities, broadly. I have already cited it in other work and will continue to do so. Rather, my criticism is a statement in alignment with the editors themselves, who point out that the entirety of new materialisms is and requires transdisciplinarity. The volume thus offers a helpful foundation for those who want to enter such transdisciplinary theorizing and mix this with research into actual, applied praxis and behavioral studies of sustainability (Taylor, et al.), to see if thinking immanently can indeed lead to new modes of being; and if so, how, and in what ways.

References

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