

Michael Hirschbichler reads *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* edited by Mary Modeen and Iain Biggs (Routledge, 2020).

While reading Mary Modeen's and Iain Biggs' inspiring book *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place – Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies*, it occurred to me that the most appropriate way for me to review it would be to creatively engage with it. Following the spirit of the book I therefore tried to take the text as a place of engagement, a site of investigation and imagination, and to apply some of its key concepts upon the text itself. The book offers a broad spectrum of highly interesting and relevant concepts for engaging with places – with the environment around us and within us, of which each of us is an inseparable part. Texts as sites of reflection, of communication and interaction – as both narrative and material constructs – can definitely be understood as places in this sense that can be involved in the practices described by Mary and Iain.

These practices are grounded in an arts-led approach that adheres to what they call a 'disciplinary agnosticism.' They aim to transcend the boundaries of individual disciplines – and the notion of the self-sufficient, autonomous individual per se – and combine both arts and sciences, emotion and intellect. Mary and Iain advocate the arts as a mode of spatial enquiry and as 'primary texts for understanding the world.'¹ Practices of walking lead through landscapes, places (and texts?) and allow for a multifaceted 'lived experience' that becomes part of our 'body-memory.'² When engaging with places, Mary and Iain strive for a 'polyphonic approach' which appreciates and acknowledges difference: 'different perspectives, different languages, different experiences, and a respect for multiple, overlaid perceptions.'³ This encompasses arts-science as well as indigenous forms of knowledge enabling a quasi-animist understanding and an attunement to the spectral, the invisible and inaudible – to all that which has gone previously undetected, under the level of the recorded or noted.

Embedded in a wider understanding of the ecological urgency that we currently face, of the role of conceptions of the self (isolated and heroic or connected and open to collaboration), and of the modes of living, thinking, acting, researching, making art, and educating associated therewith, are three central concepts – which are also featured in the book's subtitle. Simply summarized these are:

1) 'Geopoetics,' as put forth by Mary and Iain, is 'a poetics of understanding' connected to 'the earth in its various forms.'⁴ This is a poetics of place composed of a bundle of spatial relations, a site-specific and situated form of narrating, writing, and rewriting that takes its own situatedness and its relation to the inhabitants of that site into consideration. Geopoetics is closely linked to *ecosophy* – 'the philosophy of sustainable and balanced ecosystems.'⁵

2) 'Deep mapping' – or narrative, fluid or slow mapping – can be summarily described as an open-ended creative process that extends over a longer period of time and aims to facilitate an intensive interaction between a place and individuals, and groups. By inventing appropriate processes in response to specific sites and striving for multiple perspectives, deep mapping enables us to dive deep into a place, to immerse in its complex reality and thereby gain an equally complex understanding. While Mary and Iain unfold the Euro-American history of the term in great detail, they intentionally resist a clear definition. Instead, they uphold deep mapping as a quintessentially open and barely definable process, as an ideal for an in-depth rational and imaginative, more-than-superficial and more-than-individualistic creative engagement with place.

3) 'Slow residency' – this third concept is closely linked to the longer temporal *durée* of deep mapping. This takes up the notion of the art residency and – acknowledging the length of time spent in a specific place that it usually implies – asks how much time an engagement with a place actually needs? With its focus on slowness the term also states that quickly passing by is not enough in most cases.

As an alternative to a conclusion, Mary and Iain formulate a different understanding of the practice of 'fieldwork.' Being out there in the field demands an intensive interaction – both cognitively and bodily – with an environment that is made up of the same atoms as our bodies. When they say 'we *are* the fieldwork,' Mary and Iain mean an interaction 'with our sister atoms, our sibling energies, our familial beings.'⁶ Besides all the methods and techniques that are employed, fieldwork is also always an intensive social experience that creates a *communitas* (in the sense of Victor Turner), ideally forming 'communities of transverse action' – a concept that transversally runs across the book on several levels.

Inspired by these thoughts – and keeping my task as a reviewer in mind – I decided to, first of all, slowly reside with Mary's and Iain's book, to keep it close to me while reading in it over the course of several months. I put it on my bedside book stack (the one mentioned in my biography as a

reader), took it with me on my travels and spread it out in the form of printed scans on my studio floor. The book travelled with me to the places of my teaching and research engagements – to Vienna, Delft, Lucerne, Mendrisio –, it was in my bag during artistic fieldwork, stayed with me in Munich over Christmas and sparked conversations and discussions with family, friends, colleagues, and students. Meanwhile it accumulated notes and traces of use. In my studio the annotated, scanned and printed pages lay scattered among the several works that I am currently working on – including a series of site-specific sculptural recordings of stone quarries and cement factories. Over time the pages were partly covered in cement dust, exposed to the fumes of crude oil paintings that rest in a shipping crate nearby, overlaid with other papers and sketches, and interspersed with coffee cups and dirty dishes. As it lay there amidst all these things, I enjoyed looking at the text as a landscape, infused with meaning, but also watched as materially it blended more and more with the activities of my everyday life. In this state, the text on deep mapping appeared to be a material map itself, demanding to be read on different days, under different weather conditions, in different moods, and at different scales. So I got up on a ladder and looked down upon the text-landscape, and used a microscope to dive deep into the text for a close-up reading.

While doing that it struck me that reviewing literally means re-viewing, viewing again and again, and on different levels. The snapshots attached are thus fragments of a re-view – a situated and open-ended process of multiple viewings. They can be understood as a material-narrative map of my slow residency with the book, a residual map (similar to the one described by Borges that is left to rot – on the studio floor?) of my time spent with Mary's and Iain's book. During this time some important insights from the book have resonated in me and might eventually become a part of my own creative ecology – linking me to the book's writers and its many other readers on whom it already has – and is yet to have – an impact. For that we may become, in this regard, a community of transverse readers, thinkers, writers, and creative actors.

¹ Iain Biggs and Mary Modeen, eds, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (London: Routledge, 2020), 67.

² Biggs and Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place*, 39.

³ Biggs and Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place*, 31.

⁴ Biggs and Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place*, 3.

⁵ Biggs and Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place*, 210.

⁶ Biggs and Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place*, 214.