

facts, concepts, questions, and interviews, critically analyzed and drawn into a provocative overarching framework. Demonstrating the value of an informative and entertaining narrative, the author cleverly weaves humor throughout the text captions and descriptions, rendering explanations memorable. Takach also includes interviews with notable historical figures: an Albertosaurus with T-Rex baggage and the spirited Alberta from whom the province received its name. Smartly blending details on nature, politics, and culture with interview responses from politicians, artists, tourists, and athletes, Takach moves beyond listing and analysis to synthesis as a whole narrative. Cultural geographers may find value in *Will the Real Alberta Please Stand Up?* as a text in applied research methods, as essential reading for studies in Canada, and as an example of high-caliber research.

Sarah Wandersee

San Diego State University

E-mail: wanderse@rohan.sdsu.edu

© 2012, Sarah Wandersee

The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape, by Harm de Blij, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xiv + 280 pp. US\$16.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-19-975432-8

Place has immense importance to the success or failure of all populations and societies. Over the past decade considerable attention has been given to the notion that worldwide progress is leading to global “flattening”. Flattening suggests that as technology improves, governments and corporations are more readily able to exchange goods and services on a global scale and thus places lose their distinctiveness. This book serves as rejoinder; a reminder that individual location remains important. It argues that “the confines of place continue to impose severe limits on human thought and action, engendering [inherent] inequalities” (p. 4). In other words, place still matters.

Drawing upon countless personal and professional examples, Harm de Blij describes, explains, and gives the significance of ten intellectual exercises ranging in scale from local to global to reinforce the importance of place. His initial chapter examines the world's total population where a lucky few will assume a global perspective, whereas the majority will continue to think and act locally. The second, third, and fourth chapters treat language, religion, and human health as indicators of habitat occupancy, cultural adaptation, and ability to survive as organized units of people. Jeopardy is explored in Chapter Five through analyses of risk. Here, environmental challenges including volcanoes, tsunamis, and flood plains are coupled with human responses to illustrate how power of place can dramatically influence settlement patterns.

Mythogeography: A Guide to Walking Sideways, by Phil Smith, Devon, UK: Triarchy Press, 2010. 256 pp., £28 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-9562631-3-1

Since the mid-20th century, the subject of cities and city life has drawn the attention of a broad range of academic disciplines including cultural geography. In post-war Europe, new perspectives on the city emerged. From the Lettrist artists of the 1940s and 50s, and later the Situationist movement, came psychogeography. This joining of psychoanalysis and urbanism was promoted with concepts such as *derive* (an unplanned journey wherein the traveler is subconsciously directed by architecture). Psychogeography, along with related theories—unitary urbanism (from the Lettrists), flaneurism (chance wandering, with its origins in Baudelaire), and urban archeology (the investigation of the city as a kind of

palimpsest)—informed the development of urban exploration. Urban exploration might be described as an extreme sport, akin to spelunking, with ‘urban explorers’ venturing into abandoned factories, warehouses, and homes, documenting them through photography, often with an emphasis on decay. Such approaches to understanding the city (some conceived by artists and philosophers, others contrived by academics) have inspired a small but growing body of non-academic writings, such as Iain Sinclair’s *London Orbital*, Jeff Chapman’s *Access All Areas*, and Will Self’s *Psychogeography*, to name but a few. Such work has a strong bent toward cartography and geographic interests, for much of it contemplates alternative methods of, and meanings to, mapping.

Mythogeography: A Guide to Walking Sideways is representative of such an approach. Its eponymous concept draws from urban exploration and psychogeography, but it is presented as oppositional, emphasizing mythology. It is a mix of fiction, folklore, and presumably factual documentation. It is at once a handbook, a manifesto, and a parody of handbooks and manifestos, a formal subversion in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan’s collaborations with Harley Parker, with their resistance of cover-to-cover trajectory. I characterize *Mythogeography* as non-academic because it contributes to the formally subversive tradition of artist’s books; despite its ‘handbook’ guise, *Mythogeography* offers neither practical application nor theoretical rubric. For example, the book begins with a map legend. Rather than wed hieroglyphic stamps to functional signifiers, they indicate ‘pylons’, ‘tripods’, ‘benchmarks’, ‘wormholes’, ‘footnotes within footnotes’, et cetera. These symbols continue through the manuscript, along the outer margins of the page, but they defy consonance with the text. This lends the book a complexity that parodies and rejects navigation, adding a layer of abstruse anti-meaning to the project.

He is not identified on the book, but the author is English dramatist and academic Phil Smith. The work is credited instead, on its inner cover, to the 18th century Comte de Saint Germain and the fictional A.J. Salmon, Crab Man, and Wigan P.A. One of the reasons for Smith’s relative anonymity is this claim of multiple authors, apparent in the text as multiple voices deliver anecdotes and historical narrative. Smith claims that for every fictitious invention within the book, there is a real equivalent. The puckish nature of *Mythogeography*, alternating its informal punk aesthetic with postmodern academic patois, demands that we suspend our disbelief and embrace its stream of consciousness. With its manifold purposes, as travel guide, fiction, memoir, and encyclopedia, Smith’s writing gives this impression of medleyed voices. This, too, may be one of Smith’s conceits: he fashions an illusion of collectivity that allows his mischievous project its indexical structure.

The author’s dedication to his thematically complex and inaccessible structure is impressive. His subject lends itself to improvised form, and the book, in its codified, non-linear construction, is distinguished from other

works on related subjects. Smith's chosen terminology does not sufficiently distinguish his work from psychogeography, nor does the book succeed in inventing the titular cultural practice. However, the form is so aggressively geared to an aesthetic of aimless wandering that it effectively echoes related urban research practices. The book invites comparison to Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* (a circumnavigation of London's M25 highway on foot) although *Mythogeography* does not have Sinclair's site-specific concentration. It also seems a close relative of the artist Patrick Keiller's series of films about England's changing landscape (*London, Robinson in Space, Robinson in Ruins*), which similarly meld fiction and fact. That these works are all a product of European, specifically British, psychogeography is not coincidental. There is a distinction to be made between European psychogeography and its stateside equivalents, and that distinction is primarily in the relationship between the researcher and the historical city. Medieval and ancient qualities of Europe influence such works of urban research, especially in the added context of mythology. *Mythogeography*, with its self-referential and folkloric sensibilities, also owes a debt to McLuhan and Jorge Luis Borges, for whom the architecture of the book was a primary theme. Philosophies of space and mapping are not alien to the history and theory of the book, and Smith demonstrates a unique understanding of this relationship between subject and form.

To weigh the success and failure of Smith's book in the context of other writings on space and the city is an irrelevant undertaking, for like McLuhan's work, it takes on the modernist impulse to perform its sources. As a work of postmodern critical thinking, it mocks and subverts traditional expectations of the book, specifically the academic book, with its argument and citation structure. It does not wholly succeed in this gesture, but in a field where silly concepts are written of with gaunt severity, *Mythogeography* might be singled out for its fierce dedication to chaos. In resisting the traditional mapping of a book, it becomes a maze.

Stephen Broomer
 Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada
 E-mail: sbroomer@ryerson.ca
 © 2012, Stephen Broomer