



**Book Review:**

Rod Giblett.

**Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology**

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In recent years, studies on wetlands have flourished worldwide. From the Everglades to the Mekong Delta, wetland science is a new and vigorously evolving field in environmental and ecological sciences. Likewise, numerous treatises on wetland regulation from a sociopolitical perspective have also emerged. Surprisingly, however, even though wetlands have often been featured in several textual and cultural depictions in the West since the Anglo-Saxon period, there have been very few attempts in literary and cultural studies thus far that focus primarily on these unique and diverse landscapes. This monograph by Rod Giblett, Senior Lecturer in the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University in Australia is one of such early endeavors to use postmodern critical theory to scrutinize Western textual representations of wetlands. In so doing, the author who writes extensively on nature, especially wetlands, states that he aims to “deconstruct” and “decolonize” (156) the associations of wetlands with “death and disease, the monstrous and the melancholic, if not the downright mad,” which dominate the “patriarchal Western cultural tradition” (3).

Using an amalgamation of critical theories from Frederic Jameson to Deleuze and Guattari, Giblett argues that wetlands have constantly been poorly understood and underappreciated because they are “neither strictly land nor water” (3), but in fact they are wet *and* dry, solid *and* fluid, flowing

and stagnant. These latter qualities enable wetlands to be considered “an anomaly” (4) in Western classificatory orders established on the notion of well-defined dichotomies, such as land/water and masculine/feminine. This anxiety and uneasiness with the nature of wetlands has been materialized through the popular representations of wetlands in Western culture as horrific spaces infested with “malaria, miasma, and melancholia” (4). According to Giblett, these conditions are unwanted in the West because they are the direct opposite of core beliefs in patriarchy and modernism. It has thus become a civic duty for many Western states and societies since the late Middle Ages to drain, filled, and reclaim wetlands from the natural world by converting them into arable pastures and/or cities. Such practices of landscape transformation correspond closely with the emergence of discourse describing wetlands as the antithesis of patriarchy and modernism. Giblett analyzes and criticizes each aspect of this discourse in each chapter of his book. The first two chapters focus on the aesthetics of patriarchal culture and how wetlands are represented as dark and horrible instead of beautiful and alluring. These chapters connect well with Chapter 4 and 6 in which the author employs Freudian psychoanalysis to argue that wetlands are perceived as hideous and ghastly because they are as feminine as the womb itself. Furthermore, Giblett contends in the third chapter that Western patriarchy and modernism led to the burgeoning of capitalism, in which wetlands were regarded especially in the early modern period as unwanted properties and failing means of production. At that time, draining and converting wetlands into exploitable landscapes was necessary for the expanding cities and economies. Such endeavors, Giblett argues in accordance with Franz Fanon and Deleuze and Guattari, can be interpreted as acts of colonization, since colonization is “as much about the colonization of nature as it is about the colonization of ‘the natives’” (74).

The author argues further from Chapter 5 to 8 that what motivates the modernized West to transform wetlands is its obsession with health and hygiene. Wetlands have been associated with disease, mental illness, and death since the early medieval period (103). In order to improve both the physical and mental health of the population, it is crucial to drain and convert

wetlands. Otherwise, one might fall victim to melancholia and madness, as does Roderick Usher in Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (172).

The last two chapters of the monograph focus on politics and wetlands. Giblett in the end states that although wetlands have been considered undesirable and horrible in patriarchal Western culture, they are still seen as sites of refuge and resistance especially for the outsiders, the marginalized, and the fugitives. He explores textual representations from the Old English *Beowulf* to the slave narratives of the American South about the ways in which wetlands are regarded as havens for those considered marginal in the normative world. Then, in the last chapter, he concludes that with the rise of environmentalism and localism spearheaded by authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Seamus Heaney, wetlands are finally being appreciated as areas of vital, life-giving significance. Along with the rise of wetlands science, such positive representations have since encouraged new regulation focusing on conservation and restoration of wetlands together with their indigenous populations of “people, fauna and flora” as well as “the mystery and majesty of wet wilderness” (125).

Overall, this monograph is well researched and well written. The author has demonstrated throughout a thorough understanding of postmodern critical theory and a recognition of a way to turn theory into praxis. I appreciate his application of Freudian psychoanalysis to his rereading of texts such as *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Drowned World*. What I find quite disturbing in this theoretically astute book, however, is the use of theory itself. There are several instances in which Giblett’s use of critical theory seems quite unnecessary, superficial, and therefore superfluous. This is most evident in the second chapter, (in)aptly named “Philosophy in the Wetlands: The S(ub)lime and the Uncanny,” in which he attempts to cast Kant’s notion of the sublime into a dialogue with Sartre’s philosophical contemplation on the slimy. The dialogue seems forced and at times it reads as if the author is trying too hard to deconstruct the slimy (40-41). Furthermore, it seems to me that the author never provides a clarification of what he actually means when he refers to the “patriarchal Western cultural

tradition,” even though he uses this term on almost every page of the book. This weakness, however, is minor relative to the volume’s importance. This book is highly recommended for anyone who is interested in how wetlands, one of the most significant ecosystems on our earth, are texturally and culturally represented in the West.