Giblett, Rod. "Introduction: Looking Back, Looking Forward." *Cities and Wetlands: The Return of the Repressed in Nature and Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 3–14. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474269858.ch-001>>.

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Introduction: Looking Back, Looking Forward

I love wetlands and I live in a city; I love cities and I lived by a wetland for twenty-eight years, for the past five of which I was writing the bulk of this book. This wetland was on the outskirts of a city until the city swamped the surrounds of the wetland and I moved on to another city without many wetlands. I now live in an inner city and not by a wetland. Unlike many of the wetlands destroyed by cities, the wetland by which I lived has not been destroyed. The relationship between cities and wetlands is fraught and they are even inimical to each other: where the city is now, there the wetland was once; where the wetland is now on the outskirts of the city, the city, or its suburbs, soon will be; where the restored, rehabilitated, or artificial wetland is in the city, a wetland or wasteland once was.

Wetlands are vital for life on earth, including human and nonhuman life. The leading intergovernmental agency on wetlands states that

they are among the world's most productive environments; cradles of biological diversity that provide the water and productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival. Wetlands are indispensable for the countless benefits or "ecosystem services" that they provide humanity, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials, and biodiversity, to flood control, groundwater recharge, and climate change mitigation. Yet study after study demonstrates that wetland area[s] and [their] quality continue to decline in most regions of the world. As a result, the ecosystem services that wetlands provide to people are compromised. (Ramsar Convention Bureau, online)

Yet more than the mere providers of “ecosystem services,” wetlands are habitats for plants and animals, and homes for people. They are also principally under threat on the outskirts of cities where they are drained and filled to create sites for more homes for more people. The relationship between cities and wetlands is fraught, to say the least. *Cities and Wetlands* traces the relationship between cities and wetlands and calls for reconciliation between them so that they might coexist, if not live together bio- and psychosymbiotically (see Giblett, 2011).

To elaborate on the title of *Cities and Wetlands* and to locate it within its primary traditional disciplines, it is about cities and wetlands in history and literature. It builds on the previous work of others in these fields, such as Mumford’s classic *The City in History* and Lehan’s recent *The City in Literature*. *Cities and Wetlands* might have been entitled *Cities and Wetlands in History and Literature*, though this title would have situated the book in the past and in two disciplines alone, whereas it is also concerned with the present and the future, and with other disciplines, principally geography and environmental cultural studies.

To elaborate on its subtitle, *The Return of the Repressed in Nature and Culture*, *Cities and Wetlands* is also about the repression of wetlands by cities in the past and present, and about the return of repressed wetlands in culture and nature in the present and for the future. *Cities and Wetlands* both returns the repressed wetlands to present consciousness and is about the return of repressed past wetlands in the past and the present. It might have been subtitled *The Return of the Repressed in the Past, Present, and Future*. The book is in part about cities and wetlands in environmental cultural studies, geography, history and literature, the repression of wetlands by cities, and the return of repressed wetlands in culture and nature. To locate it within its transdisciplines and theoretical framework, *Cities and Wetlands* is an environmental cultural study conducted broadly within the transdisciplinary environmental humanities.

A book about cities and wetlands would have been a very short and slim one indeed if it had merely related the early history of various cities set in swamps or marshes and their later filling or draining, dredging or canalizing of those wetlands. The scope of *Cities and Wetlands* is much wider as it considers the return, both literally and metaphorically, in both nature and

culture, of the repressed wetlands on, or in, which the city was built. It might have been subtitled *The Return of the Repressed in People and Place*. This return occurs in fact when, for example, the leveed wetlands of New Orleans were broken in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and took the city back to its wetland beginnings, or when Venice has a high tide, or *acqua alta*, that brings up the waters below.

"Katrina" is a salutary instance of the need to think the cultural and natural together. In particular, it points to the need to think industrial capitalism and its technologies, weather, climate, cities, floods, rivers, and wetlands as intertwining and interrelated entities and agents. "Katrina" is a salutary instance of the cultural and natural operating together in and as "one single catastrophe" of history as viewed by the Angel of History, as Benjamin ([1940] 2003: 392) put it, looking back over the course of time. "Katrina" is also "one single catastrophe" of geography as viewed by the Angel of Geography looking over the expanse of space in the will to fill and the drive to drain or reclaim wetlands. Rather than a series of catastrophes proceeding one after the other through history, Benjamin's "Angel of History" sees one single catastrophe of history (392). This single catastrophe, however, occurs not only in time, in history, but also in space, in a place, in geography. As well as the "Angel of History," the "Angel of Geography" sees one single catastrophe of wetlands dredged, filled, and so "reclaimed," cities set in them and cities being reclaimed by them in storms and floods. In the case of "Katrina," the catastrophe of history and geography is tied up with the creation, destruction, and re-creation of New Orleans in its swampy location on the Mississippi delta.

The city thus can, and sometimes does, revert to wetland in a return of the repressed wetland in a process of displacement and transformation, like its psychoanalytical counterpart. Water is not in the place it is supposed to be in the city, and the city is transformed back into the wet land it once was in what I call the return of the geographical and historical repressed wetland, of the spatial and temporal repressed, of the lost and forgotten wetland. Just as in psychoanalysis the repressed always returns, so too in city the repressed always returns as the repressed is never totally suppressed or destroyed. Active traces of the city repressed, as much as the psychological repressed, always remain to be reactivated and return naturally and culturally. The return of the repressed wetland also occurs figuratively, such as in the fascination with,

and horror of, the dark underside of the sewers and slums of the city figured in wetland tropes. *Cities and Wetlands* might have been subtitled *The Return of the Repressed in Fact and Figure*.

Tropes are the “dreams of speech,” as Nabokov (1971: 328) called them, and dreams are “the royal road to the unconscious,” as Freud ([1899] 1976: 769) defined them. Tropes are the royal road to the unconscious of speech, and writing; tropes for the dark and sewery underside of the city are the royal road to the wetland unconscious, and repressed, of the city. The repressed swampy or marshy beginnings and subsequent history of wetland cities, or aquaterrapolises, return in their speech and writing about it. The trope both represses that history and returns to it; the trope not only masters the absence of the lost wetland in common with all speech and writing, but also enacts the return of the repressed.

Cities and Wetlands undertakes an ecological psychoanalysis of the investments of desire and capital, yields of pleasure and profit, and relations of power and work in the history of the modern mercantilist and capitalist city with its industries and inhabitants in their relationships to its wetlands. As such, *Cities and Wetlands* is located within what I call a psychoanalytic ecology that not only reads the symptoms and engages in a talking cure of the psychogeopathology of the will to fill and the drive to drain wetlands inscribed on the surface of the body of the earth in the foundation and development of the city, but also nurtures gratitude for the generosity of the earth exemplified in wetlands and so tries to prevent the manifestation of those symptoms in the first place by developing ecomental health through bio- and psychosymbiotic lives and livelihoods with it and its wetlands. Psychoanalytic ecology promotes moving away from an emphasis on resource-exploitation, or greed and gluttony (oral sadism), to a relationship of generosity for gratitude, of respect for, reciprocity with, and restoration of the earth. *Cities and Wetlands* also rereads the use of the psychopathological vocabulary of melancholia, mourning, and the uncanny in relation to wetlands within the intertwined eco- and psychodynamics of aesthetic appreciation, bodily engagement, gender politics, sensory experience, and environmental conservation.

In this context, Henry David Thoreau’s concept/metaphor of “the quaking zone” is a useful way of thinking, living, and being the interrelationship between body, land, mind, and water. For him the quaking zone refers to both

a particular landform, such as a wetland as a place where the earth trembles, and a psycho-geo-somatic state, or affect, where mind, body, earth, and water meet and tremble in fear or flight, in horror or terror, in anticipation or fascination, in dread or hope, or a mixture of these terms. The quaking zone in general is a place and space of both fear and hope. Although Thoreau did not draw a distinction between native and feral quaking zones, he did compare and contrast the visceral and emotional qualities of being in a swamp and being in a city (as we will see in Chapter 10). Native quaking zones are more naturally places of hope than are feral quaking zones. They are also less plainly places of fear than are feral quaking zones. In addition, they are more markedly places of death and new life than are feral quaking zones.

Feral quaking zones are by no means hopeless and lifeless, but they are not as hopeful and full of life as native quaking zones. Feral quaking zones, like slums, would become more livable for their inhabitants if they became more like the fully functioning ecosystems of native quaking zones like swamps. Feral quaking zones are landscapes, such as cities, where the earth quakes and terror is experienced as a result of the inscription of modern industrial technology on the surfaces and depths (and sometimes heights) of the body, earth, and mind. The features of feral quaking zones and the quality of the human sensory experience of being them are quite different, though, from quaking zones not made by modern human hands, or native quaking zones, such as swamps which are home to the fearful and horrific alligator and crocodile, and to death, decomposition, and new life. Quaking zones are landscapes that are cultural or natural to greater or lesser degrees, or somewhere in between the two; they are in-between nature and culture, places of a culture of nature.

In *People and Places of Nature and Culture* (Giblett, 2011), I distinguish between the first nature of indigenous cultures and the second nature of “agri-urban” cultures. This second culture of nature gave rise to the third culture and nature of modernity, and of mercantile, and later industrial, capitalism. This third culture of nature then produced the fourth culture of nature of hypermodernity and modern communication technologies. Recently the fifth culture of nature of postmodernity and sacrality harks back to the first nature of culture.

In *People and Places of Nature and Culture* (Giblett, 2011), I also characterize these five cultures of nature in terms of human work (bodily and

mental): the first culture of nature works (with) nature (defined as land, air, water, and living beings); the second culture of nature works over nature in herding, tilling, mining, forging, and building; the third culture of nature overworks nature in modern mercantile, and later industrial, capitalism, and; the fourth culture of nature hyperworks nature in communication technologies (see Giblett, 2008b).

In *Landscapes of Culture and Nature* (Giblett, 2009), I traced, and compared and contrasted, the quaking zone of the first culture of nature of pre-modern indigenous societies and the second culture of nature of agri-urban societies with that of the third culture of nature in modernity, principally in modern cities and industrial warfare, and with the fourth culture of nature of hypermodernity, principally in landscape, wilderness, and wasteland photography, in hypermodern cities, and in national disasters. I concluded by considering the postmodern fifth culture of nature in terms of embodied being in the world and living mutually and sustainably with the earth.

In *Cities and Wetlands* I consider the history of the city in relation to wetlands as natural context and constraint in the intertwined natural and cultural histories and ecologies of the city and the wetland. Rather than the natural and the cultural being seen as entangled (as construed by some in the environmental humanities), this book and my previous work in the field regard them as both intertwined and needing to be teased apart in order that the relationship between the natural and the cultural is clearly articulated and not confused, so that the natural is not pressed into service of the cultural as legitimating trope, nor as a mere source of metaphor. This is particularly the case when the dark underside of city in its slums, or the feral quaking zone, is figured as the nether world of swamps, or the native quaking zone.

The polluting and filling of the urban wetland marks a shift in terms of a postmodern, political ecology and the cultures of natures from the modern culture of nature to the hypermodern culture of nature and the discourses of natures of aesthetics, industrialization, and conservation (see Giblett, 2011: chapter 1). Modern cities founded in wetlands flounder in hypermodern wastelands of their own making, and so either drain or fill them in response, and founder in their messy history of culture and nature intertwined. Postmodern ecology critiques this history, commemorates the life of the dead wetland, and celebrates the living earth more generally. It also tries to prevent

the repetition of the mistakes of the past by acknowledging and respecting the ecological role wetlands and other lands play in the present and into the future vital for life on earth.

Psychoanalytic and postmodern ecology address the personal, political, corporeal, cultural, and historical dimensions—the psychodynamics, politics, economics, semiotics, and symbiotics—of our relationship with the living earth at the local, regional, and global levels and at the micro- and macro-scales. All cities are situated in and are dependent on catchments and bioregions, the unique flows of water, the rock and soils on which they are built, the plants and animals that live or lived there, all of which turn the place into more than a background and setting for human action, but into a dynamic context and vital habitat for nonhuman and human beings and actors in living processes.

Although the chapters in *Cities and Wetlands* are presented in roughly chronological order, the historical geography developed in it adopts and adapts a genealogical approach in which, following Michel Foucault (1979: 31), I am interested in what he called “the history of the present,” rather than the history of the past. *Cities and Wetlands* is not a history of cities and wetlands as they were in the past. It tries to think history and geography together in the intertwining of time, space, and place in what I call “temporal geography.” It is a history of cities and wetlands in the present (even though the wetlands may now be absent). As a genealogist I ask: what were the driving forces, including the social, cultural, economic, and political factors, that led in the past to the founding of some cities in or by wetlands and to the absencing of wetlands from these cities in the present? As a wetland conservationist and ecoculturalist, I also ask: what are the driving forces, including the social, cultural, economic, and political factors, that might lead to the conservation of remaining wetlands in cities or their rehabilitation where possible and to a rapprochement between cities and wetlands more generally?

History is located in spaces and places; history always occurs in a place and space. Geography is set in time (past, present, and future); geography always takes place in time. Temporal geography is concerned with the geography of time, with the past, the present, and the future; the cycle of the seasons; life and death, the flows of energy and matter, the life, death, and possible rebirth of wetlands, and places hope in the future for wetlands. Hope in the future

entails a spatially emplaced and embodied history and a temporal geography of the past and present with a future that acknowledges the wetlands of cities in the past and in the present for the future. Temporal geography begins and ends in the language of time. Understanding the meanings, metaphors, landscapes, and gender politics of wetlands is part of a better understanding of one's place on earth and one's point in time suspended in the present between a past one cannot return to and a future one cannot know but can imagine and hope for.

Temporal geography works not only generally within environmental cultural studies or ecocultural studies, but also specifically within postmodern and psychoanalytic ecology that reads critically the symptoms of land pathology of the will to fill and the drive to drain wetlands inscribed on the surface of the earth in the modern city. *Cities and Wetlands* considers the intertwined natural and cultural histories and ecologies of the city by retelling the history of the founding of a number of cities in, on, or by wetlands, and their dredging, draining, canalizing, pollution, and destruction of their wetlands. It also does so by retracing critically the history of the urban wetland in the stories told about it and in some cases the maps drawn of the city.

Each chapter of *Cities and Wetlands* is devoted to an individual city and begins with an historical account of the beginnings of the city under discussion built on or by a marsh or swamp. Each chapter then goes on to consider the return of the repressed both literally and metaphorically. In some cases they also go on to make an excursion into related topics that they often have in common with other cities. Various chapters make these excursions with a range of writers for companions, often including Walter Benjamin: Paris, into its sewers and the dialectical image; Venice, into mourning and melancholy; St. Petersburg, into modernity and phantasmagoria; London, into its slums and Crystal Palace; Hamburg, into the fire-bombing of this and other cities during World War II; Boston, into cities and swamps; and New York, into its sewers, alligators, and the uncanny. All these excursions are linked back to the main themes and concerns of the fraught relationship between cities and wetlands, and enact in some way a return of the repressed wetland.

All histories to date of these and other former wetland cities note their swampy beginnings, but do not compare them or make the connection with

other former wetland cities, nor do general books about the cities note their common wetland beginnings and regard this feature as typical of many cities, and so worthy of note and comment. *Cities and Wetlands* makes the comparisons, presents the general history, and shows the commonalities, but also discusses how each city refracted these commonalities in slightly different ways. Cities founded in or by wetlands were developed in and out of the conjunction of ancient and modern imperialism (both endo- and exo-imperialism) and of mercantile and modern industrial capitalism: Roman imperialism founded London and Paris; Russian imperialism founded St. Petersburg; Dutch imperialism founded New York and British and American imperialism followed; French imperialism founded New Orleans and American imperialism followed; British imperialism founded Toronto and Canadian imperialism followed; and American imperialism founded Washington and Chicago. All these cities are imperialist and capitalist swamp cities.

Many former wetland cities, such as London, Hamburg, New Orleans, New York, Toronto, and Venice, were also, and still are, port cities, maritime metropolises, and trading hubs located in riverine deltas or at the “mouth” of a river where land and ocean or sea meet at the point of interchange between interior and exterior, the hinterland and the overseas commercial empire. They are also maritime marsh metropolises. Many former wetland cities were, and in some cases still are, national capital cities: London, Paris, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Washington, and Toronto (as the original capital of “Upper Canada”). They are also national capital swamp cities.

Some former wetland cities, such as Paris, Chicago, and Berlin, were also, and still are, central commercial nodes located in the middle of national territories and at the center of railway and road networks. They are also swamp city central. All the iconic cities of modernity were set in wetlands: Paris, Berlin, New York, Petersburg, Chicago, and London. They represent the triumph of the modern city over premodern wetlands. All these commonalities and differences between former wetland cities demonstrate the importance of considering cities and wetlands in any critical discussion, especially to an environmental history, of either, and to the economic and political critique of the development and power of imperialism, capitalism, and modernity. All these commonalities and differences demonstrate that the European city and the city of its settler diasporas are inimical to the wetland.

The structure of the book is organized both geographically and historically with the book divided into two main parts: the first major part deals with European cities and the second major part with North American cities. Within each part, the order of discussion is roughly chronological proceeding from the oldest city, founded the earliest, to the youngest city, founded most recently. Each chapter is also arranged in rough chronological order beginning with the discussion of an early phase when the city under consideration was a city of wetlands, only to be followed by a phase when the city dredged, drained, filled, or canalized and so became largely wetlandless, and then by a phase when the lost wetlands returned in writing about the city, concluding finally with a call to a rapprochement between the city and wetland, and more generally for city and country dwellers to live bio- and psychosymbiotic livelihoods in bioregional home-habitats of the living earth that include wetlands. Such a call is made in the context of imagining, hoping for, and promoting a transition from the anthropocene to the symbiocene¹ as the geological and human period that might come after and that should replace the anthropocene. The symbiocene is the hoped for coming geological age in which humans live bio- and psychosymbiotic livelihoods in bioregional home-habitats of the living earth.

As the names of the various cities mentioned here suggest and as the table of contents indicates, the scope of the book is confined, for reasons of time and space, to European and North American cities. I have written and published previously on a couple of Australian cities and their wetlands, such as Perth (Western Australia) (Giblett, 1996: chapter 3; Giblett and Webb, 1996: 127–146; Giblett, 2013: chapter 15) and Melbourne (Giblett, 2016, in press). Perth and Melbourne were both founded by British imperialism, are both state capitals, and were both located on marshy rivers and in close proximity to ports. Other wetland cities (or former wetland cities) elsewhere in the world, for instance, in Asia, such as Shanghai, Djakarta (Batavia), Bangkok (commonly called the “Venice of the East”), and Dhaka (commonly compared to the “Venice in the West”); and in Africa, such as Kampala and Lagos, are notable absences from *Cities and Wetlands*, yet could no doubt bear the same scrutiny as I give other cities and are certainly topics for future research by others. All of these cities and those discussed in *Cities and Wetlands* demonstrate that their relation to their wetlands is a defining and salient feature of the urban project.

All the cities discussed in *Cities and Wetlands* are former wetland cities as all their wetlands have been destroyed. Unlike these cities, Perth is unique in that it is still a wetland city. The wetlands of the central business district, the “entertainment precinct,” and the inner suburbs have been destroyed, but many wetlands remain in the outer metropolitan area of Perth, such as in Forrestdale where I lived for twenty-eight years. In fact, so extensive are (or were) these wetlands that a geomorphic mapping project was conducted in 1989–1990 under the auspices of the then Western Australian Water Authority with the title of “Perth: A City of Wetlands” in order to establish their extent and conservation values so as to conserve them (see Giblett, 1996: 66 and figure 3).

For wetland conservationists, the loss of the urban wetland in the past is an act of destruction to mourn as well as a motivation to prevent the repetition of wetland destruction in the future and for the conservation of wetlands and the rehabilitation of lost wetlands in the present and future. For cultural environmentalists or ecoculturalists, the loss of the wetland is a memory to retrieve and a story to retell about the fraught relationships between culture and nature, city and wetland, past and present, place and people in order to try to achieve a rapprochement between them now and into the future.

Wetlands are maternal as they give birth to new life and nourish it. They are environmental waters of nourishing milk, their living waters are the breast of the great mother, the earth, and they are the moist womb that gives birth to new life. Wetlands are also maternal as they are the tomb for decaying and dying matter that gives rebirth to new life. Wetlands as womb are the source of life and wetlands as living waters are the first source of nourishment, the first object of love and the first object to be lost in modernization, colonization, drainage, and “progress.” The living waters of wetlands thus enact, more so than others, a sense of the loss of the breast as a loved object. In environmental terms, the melancholic subject wants to incorporate the nourishing qualities of the living waters of the wetland breast into itself by devouring it through drainage or filling, and even by creating artificial ones. The object of investment was initially an object of love that was later lost. The loved object, which is lost for the melancholic, is the breast of the mother and the water that is specifically breast milk is the water of the wetland, the first water that nourished life (on earth), the breast of mother earth. In mourning the world

is experienced as loss whereas in melancholia the ego is experienced as lost. Instead of seeing the object (the breast, the wetland) as lost, the melancholic ego sees itself as lost in a massive act of narcissistic disavowal and egotism. As a result the ego desires itself.

Repression is to subjectivity as drainage is to wetlands; repression (and drainage) fixes the flows of embodied subjects (and wetlands). Repression is constitutive precisely of *melancholic* subjectivity; subjectivity is melancholic and mournful. The subject desires itself as a product of a melancholic loss of the loved object of the mother and great mother, the earth, of the mother's breasts and mother earth's breasts, the living waters of wetlands. Just as drainage was necessary for modernity, so is repression necessary for subjectivity.

As wetlands are increasingly lost from the earth and are lost as an object of love that nourishes life, both mourning and melancholia are experienced and exercised in relation to them. Humans should be in mourning for the loss of wetlands that gave us life and nourished us, but instead of being in mourning and regarding the earth as losing its wetlands and becoming empty of them, humans experience this loss as a melancholic loss of our own ego, our own selfhood, and our sense of identity. The earth is becoming empty of wetlands; the earth is losing its wetlands; the world of humans and the earth is losing its selfhood and identity.