

Book Review

Australian Wetland Cultures: Swamps and the Environmental Crisis. John Charles Ryan and Li Chen, eds. New York, London: Lexington Books, 2020.

Sandra Wooltorton¹, Len Collard²

As we write this review, we are sitting on the land of the Wadjuk Noongar leaders *kura, yeyi, boordawan*. We acknowledge their lives of caring-with place and culture in the southwest of Western Australia, with a depth of wisdom informed by millennia of creativity, philosophy and applied science. A window to wetlands wisdom is opened in this important book.

First used in academic contexts about 30 years ago³, *kura, yeyi, boordawan* represents a Noongar concept that means something like ‘the long now’, where past, present and future are still with us – and alive and powerful, today – the past through our places, archetypes and shadows, and the future in our hands through our actions. The ‘long now’ is one of this book’s unspoken background themes⁴.

This collection of chapters by established academics of the environmental humanities, is dedicated to Phil Jennings⁵, a seasoned environmental campaigner and educator who has made a substantial contribution to the campaign to preserve the health of wetlands on the Swan Coastal Plain. Skilfully edited by John Charles Ryan and Li Chen, the book is a love story about wetlands in recognition of their striving to survive with dignity in and beyond the Anthropocene.

In two parts, the book interweaves evocative wetlands poetry, with chapters using a variety of genres. Commentary on cultural-historic visual representations of swamps – from colonial perspectives to Aboriginal depictions showing uncanny, living black waters; a contemporary history of the wetlands preservation movement; an inspiring visual re-imaging project that re-foregrounds Noongar culture in the Perth of pre- and early-colonisation; and an essay on paludal heroes – are some of the book’s highlights. Writers are Nandi Chinna, John C. Ryan, Li Chen, Rod Giblett, John Kinsella, Danielle Brady, Christopher Kueh, Jeffrey Murray and Glen Phillips.

Each of the writers are already well published and their work well-known in the broad environmental humanities field, and particularly in wetlands studies. Rod Giblett has played a significant role over 25 or more years, in shaping the field of environmental humanities⁶. As well, John C. Ryan has played a substantial role in the same field particularly in relation to the lives and cultures of plants⁷. In its ample treatment of the arts for wetlands preservation, this book makes a valuable contribution to ecological philosophy, suggests tools for activists and offers inspiration for environmental educators.

The book depicts the concept of wetlands-cultures with clarity. Various chapter writers use the idea of nature-culture, which recognises that nature and culture are inseparable. Both the words – nature and culture – by themselves are non-sense in that there is no such notion as nature (or environment for that matter) that is separate from people or culture, and no such word as culture that is separate from nature or environment.

And wetlands culture is a nature-culture. The premise elaborated throughout *Australian Wetland Cultures* involves the re-envisioning of swamps as multispecies assemblages with endemic forms of agency and telos. Contrary to colonial reactions to swamps as dark places of miasma and disease to be infilled and quickly covered over, swamps have their own goals, intention and means for action. Ryan says⁸: “rather than denoting a wetland environment *cultured* by us, the idea of *wetland culture* refers to a confluence of beings – a ... locus of entangled things in which the wetlands actively *cultures* those humans and non-humans who interact with it.” This idea endows ‘nature’ with human cultural agency; a notion that is integral to a Noongar worldview⁹.

The book also comments on politicians, developers and their protégés; those whose decisions and actions wreak havoc on people and place. In effect, this powerful group set up the battle-lines that we as environmental activists are compelled to engage in, which Phil Jennings details with distinction in his chapter. We, as environmental activists, recognise the struggle as about life – of wetlands, social and ecological environments, the climate and the planet. The other side of this battle sees life as economic development comprising expansion for so-called progress. In chapter two, Giblett suggests these interests would take us all to hell in a handbasket via industrialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and more. Whilst our conflict metaphor oversimplifies the context, this book unravels some the complexity from many different viewpoints.

A poem by Nandi Chinna called *The Swamp* sets the tone for the book. Ryan and Chen then introduce wetlands as among the most fertile and biodiverse ecosystems on the planet, “comparable to rain forests and coral reefs”. They show that from Aboriginal perspectives, perennial wetlands are understood as places of nourishment for the spirit, body and community. Ryan and Chen refer to different cultural ways of viewing wetlands, such as the southern Chinese migrants who used traditional Chinese knowledge, cultural techniques and Taoist perceptions of wetland nature-cultures while vegetable gardening in wetlands. They suggest that thinking *about* wetlands also involves learning to *think-with* wetlands, allowing their inundated (and inundating) form of intelligence to pervade our knowledge systems, our ways of being and our bodily and meaning modes.

Ryan, Brady and Kueh describe a project that traced the walking trails of Fanny Balbuk, a Noongar woman of colonial times, entitled: *Where Fanny Balbuk Walked: Re-imagining Perth's Wetlands*. In an effort to save her *karla bidi*, her cultural trail, Balbuk took such actions as: walking through settlers' front doors and out the back doors if houses had been built over her trail, knocking down sections of fences where necessary to maintain the trail. She voiced her indignation over the “usurping of her beloved home ground”¹⁰. Balbuk's people were *of* the place, which they understood as ‘nourishing terrain’. Her people were vital ecological citizens of the place, whose attachment was – and still is – defined by cultural rules. Those Noongar home-places, stories, lives and wetlands were paved over with impunity. Although founded on now-banished wetlands, social memory maintains their images through these various projects.

Ryan and Chen portray a love of life and love of swamps through the eyes of wetlands heroes such as David James, offering a powerful description of values,

commitment and deep passion in activism. As a final word, Giblett argues for the project of decolonisation to include the decolonisation of wetlands – without which decolonisation cannot take place.

Earlier in this review, we mentioned *kura*, *yeyi*, *burdawan* – where past, present and future are all here in the long now. Through this book, we see that the past is here in the present through ongoing colonisation, rich and resilient Noongar heritage and in the social memory of stolen wetlands. And the future for wetlands conservation is here in the present in our hands, through poetry, painting, science, digital visualisation and activism.

In Noongar language, *bilya* (beeliar) means river. *Beeliar* also means people of the river, according to Bates¹¹ who writes the word as *bilgur*. On his *boodja* place-names website, Collard¹² writes that Beeliar means “the run of water on a westerly direction by or through that place”. Alongside other research¹³, an understanding of Beeliar as the wetlands AND its people is implied: *Beeliar boodja moort*¹⁴, meaning social systems and ecological relationships. The point here is that Noongar language speakers identify as people of a place, which includes an intimate knowledge of that place.

With the Beeliar wetlands as another background theme, this book inspired us to reflect on the symbolism of the successful campaign to halt the proposed highway extension named Roe 8¹⁵. Along with the authors of the book, we ask how the people of the Swan coastal plain today – and Australians everywhere – might live a wetlands culture, and we believe seeing ourselves as people of wetlands *boodja* – is an important part of that.

Upfront Ryan and Chen ask the rhetorical questions: “just how do wetlands culture humanity?” and “What are the implications of swamping our thinking and learning to think-with wetlands?” The book answers these questions. Ryan writes that the challenge ahead for humankind in the Anthropocene is to learn to understand the natural world, including wet-landscapes, as inherently poetic – as intrinsically *poietic*. *Poietic* is a word that means having the capacity to make, to produce, or ‘bring into being’. For people interested in engaging more deeply with wetlands, this book will serve that purpose with distinction. In searching for something of the book to critique, the only point we find is that parts of it may be seen as dense by writers new to the field. We hope a part two of this book will follow.

Notes

1. Sandra Woollorton is Associate Professor, Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome. She has a background in education and cultural geography, and is interested in education for social change, ecological philosophy, sustainability transition cultures and place-based stories, particularly those relating to the nature of the relationship between people and place. Sandra has been learning Noongar language and culture (*katijiny bidi*) with Len Collard and others for many years.
2. Professor Len Collard is an Australian Research Council Chief Investigator with the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. He has a background in literature and communications and his research interests are in the area of Aboriginal Studies, including Nyungar interpretive histories and Nyungar theoretical and practical research models. Len is a Whadjuk Nyungar and is a Traditional Owner of the Perth Metropolitan area and surrounding lands, rivers, swamps, ocean and its cultures.
3. By academic Len Collard.
4. This concept is explained further in: Woollorton, S., Collard, L., & Horwitz, P. 2017, *The Land Still Speaks*. Ni, Katij! PAN: Philosophy, activism, nature(13), 2-15. Retrieved from: <http://panjournal.net/>.
5. Phil Jennings is also an Emeritus Professor of Physics: <http://profiles.murdoch.edu.au/myprofile/philip-jennings/>
6. See for instance, these three books (and many more):
Giblett, R.J. and Webb, H. 1996, *Western Australian Wetlands : The Kimberley and South-West*. Perth, Western Australia: Black Swan Press;
Giblett, R.J. 2004, *Living with the Earth : Mastery to Mutuality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom;

-
- Giblett, R.J. 2016, *Cities and Wetlands: The Return of the Repressed in Nature and Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
7. See for instance, these three books (and more):
Ryan, J. C. 2013, *Unbraided lines : essays in environmental thinking and writing*. Champaign, Illinois, USA: Common Ground;
Ryan, J. C. 2014, *Being with : essays in poetics, ecology, and the senses*. Champaign, Illinois, USA: Common Ground.
Ryan, J. C. 2015, *Posthuman plants : rethinking the vegetal through culture, art, and poetry*. Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground.
 8. Ryan, J.C. 2020, *Poet and Swamp: Wetlands in Australian Verse*, In Ryan, J.C & Chen, L. *Australian Wetland Cultures: Swamps and the Environmental Crisis*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, ch. 4; pp. 71-98; p. 74.
 9. See, for example: Wooltorton, S., Collard, L., & Horwitz, P. 2019, "Living Water: Groundwater and Wetlands in Gngangara, Noongar Boodjar," In PAN: Philosophy, activism, nature, no. 14, <http://panjournal.net/>.
 10. Ryan, J.C, Brady, D. & Kueh, C. 2020, "Where Fanny Balbuk Walked: Re-Imagining Perth's Wetlands", in Ryan, J.C & Chen, L. *Australian Wetland Cultures: Swamps and the Environmental Crisis*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books. Ch. 7; pp. 163-174. P. 163.
 11. Bates, D. 1985, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*. Canberra, Australia: National Library of Australia.
 12. Boodjar: Nyungar Placenames in the South-West of Western Australia, 2015, directed by Collard, L., Harben, S. & Rooney, A. <http://www.boodjar.sis.uwa.edu.au/index.htm>.
 13. And others, for instance: Wooltorton, S. Collard, L. & Horwitz, P. "Layers of Meanings in Our Landscapes: Hiding in Full View," in ed. Ellis, M., *Critical Global Semiotics: Understanding Sustainable Transformational Citizenship*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
 14. Often translated as river, Country, family, although the reality is more complex from Noongar perspectives.
 15. See chapter eight.