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Book Review



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Book Review: *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* by Rod Giblett



About the Author

Rod Giblett is the author of 30 books of fiction and faction ('non-fiction'), including recently a book of detective stories, *Swamp Deaths: Collected Cold Cases and Other Marshy Mysteries* (Europe Books, 2022). Forthcoming in 2023 is *Middlemarsh: The Hopkins River, Kindred Wetlands and Remarkable People in Western Victoria, Australia*. He is currently writing a book of novel polyphonic parafables entitled *Black Waters Live: Or, the Fertile Serpent*. He is the founder of wetland cultural studies, psychoanalytic ecology and conservation counter-theology. He is Honorary Associate Professor of Environmental Humanities in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Australia.

Book Review

Rod Giblett

Hubbell, J. Andrew, and John C. Ryan. 2022. *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*. London: Routledge.

Hubbell and Ryan are heroes, pioneers, and trailblazers for going boldly into the vast and varied field of the Environmental Humanities where no two authors have been brave enough to venture before them and to survey its prominent contours, map some of its borders, and botanize its growths. *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* is a great achievement and an exemplary transdisciplinary study. It is a vital and valuable introduction to the Environmental Humanities for teaching undergraduate students and for mapping the field for graduate students and teachers. It provides contemporary case studies with appropriate pictorial illustrations and accompanying learning tools, such as “waypoints” with definitions of key terms and “exercises” for further study and reflection.

The annotated bibliographies, links to online resources, and copious references for each chapter provide suggestions for further research and reading that give ample scope and plenty of opportunities for readers to continue exploring the vast area of the Environmental Humanities, to traverse many well-trod and not so well-trod avenues, and to discover many new delights. The book is what it says it is: an *introduction* to the Environmental Humanities. It is not the be all and end all, the final word, nor even *the* introduction to the Environmental Humanities, however. Both the *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*, and my review of it, also point towards the book’s absences, such as Ecocultural Studies, continuing the dialogue it generates. This review is an Ecocultural introduction to *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* for those who haven’t read it, or an Ecocultural conclusion for those who have.

Given the ambitious scope and vast range of what Hubbell and Ryan discuss and present in their book, an approach, aspect, feature, or figure in the Environmental Humanities was bound to have been overlooked, or not receive the consideration it deserves. Such is the case with Ecocultural Studies and the pioneering, transdisciplinary work of Raymond Williams, whom I have argued elsewhere is the founder of this field (Giblett 2012). Ecocultural Studies is not mentioned in the book, and Williams' work gets scant attention, despite its transdisciplinarity—a desideratum for Hubbell and Ryan. Transdisciplinarity in the Humanities is demonstrated by Williams's work on nature, culture, landscapes, livelihood, and resources for a journey of hope that cuts across the disciplines of Geography, History, Economics, Cultural Studies, and Literary Studies. Subsequent work in Ecocultural Studies following in Williams' footsteps—such as Alexander Wilson's classic *The Culture of Nature* (1992)—is not discussed either. Later work in Ecocultural Studies, following in both Wilson's and Williams' footsteps, such as that on landscapes, livelihood, and cultures of natures is also not discussed. Ecocultural Studies is an important way of knowing nature.

Psychoanalytic Ecology is another notable absence from *Introduction to Environmental Humanities*. Psychoanalytic Ecology diagnoses the symptoms of environmental illness in psycho-geopathology and prescribes the talking cure for them. It also promotes environmental health to prevent the manifestation of those symptoms in the first place by nurturing psycho-symbiosis (Giblett 1996; 2019). Similarly, the work of Walter Benjamin—the patron saint of cultural studies, as Rebecca Solnit calls him (2000)—is also absent from *Introduction to Environmental Humanities*. Benjamin is pertinent to the discussion of Environmental History, especially the history of cities and swamps briefly touched on by Hubbell and Ryan (2022, 265). The lost swamps on or in which many cities were founded are present “by virtue of [their] very oblivion” in Benjamin's terms (Benjamin 1968 [1934], 130). Benjamin has a foot in both the camps of Ecocultural Studies and Psychoanalytic Ecology. Yet, the Green Benjamin has not been taken up much in the Environmental Humanities with some exceptions (see Mules 2014). Of course, authors are always constrained by the word limits imposed by their publishers. Yet, in an introductory book such as *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*, one would expect that classic texts and pioneering writers would be given due attention, rather than concentrating exclusively on more recent developments and contemporary manifestation, as the classic texts and pioneering writers tend to get lost in the mists of time and in the obsession with the current and fashionable.

For example, *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* devotes individual chapters to most of the disciplines of Geography, History, and Literary Studies that Williams

worked across, with the additions of Environmental Anthropology, Environmental Philosophy, Ecological Religious Studies, as well as Environmental Theater, Film, and Journalism. Emerging theoretical areas, such as Critical Animal and Plant Studies, Gender and Queer Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Energy Studies are also introduced. Re-emerging theoretical areas, such as class, critique of Political Economy and Socialist Ecology, are not introduced—all of which Williams contributed to. Ryan is eminently well-qualified to introduce Plant Studies as he is the author or editor of many books in this field (for Ryan as “the patron saint of plants” see Giblett 2021a).

Williams’ work on nature, culture, landscapes, livelihood, and resources for a journey of hope qualify him as “the patron saint of ecocultural studies” (Giblett 2020). He is arguably both *a* founder of Cultural Studies and the transdisciplinary Environmental Humanities, as well as *the* founder of Ecocriticism and Ecocultural Studies—though of course he did not use these terms, nor make these distinctions between them, but that is the point. Williams is exemplary in this respect; he just got on and did the eco and this is no more the case than in his development of the concept of livelihood—though this concept is included in a glossary of “Keywords in Space and Place Studies” in *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (Hubbell and Ryan 2022, 77). Livelihood deconstructs the culture/nature binary and decolonises the commodification and aestheticization of land as landscape (Williams 1985; 1989). It reinstates nature as ordinary, as the stuff of work and everyday life. Nature, like culture for Williams, is ordinary too. The integral role of nature to the development of Cultural Studies and the Environmental Humanities is particularly evident in Williams’ discussion of the politics and aesthetics of landscape, especially the commodification and aestheticization of land as landscape, in *The Country and the City* (1973). Though *The Country and the City* is mentioned briefly in *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*, strangely in the annotated bibliography to a chapter on “Environmental Anthropology” (2022, 86), it is not discussed elsewhere in the chapters on Environmental Art and Literary Studies.

Furthermore, by organizing the chapters of *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* according to the traditional disciplines—Anthropology, Philosophy, History, Literary Studies, etc.—Hubbell and Ryan run the danger of inadvertently reinforcing their hegemony, despite their admiration for transdisciplinarity. Overlooking or neglecting Ecocultural Studies, as well as giving the work of Williams scant attention and not foregrounding its transdisciplinarity, seem like a missed opportunity to strengthen the case for the transdisciplinary Environmental Humanities and advance its cause. By not doing so, however, they have given me the opportunity to do so, for which I am grateful. Certainly, gaining a solid grounding in the core disciplines is desirable as Hubbell and

Ryan (1) argue (and I certainly benefitted from studying English, History, and Philosophy as an undergraduate), but at some stage it's time to move on and work across the disciplines with environments and environmental issues that rarely stick within one discipline. Hubbell and Ryan devote the final page of *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* (265) to a brief discussion of what they call “the wetland humanities,” which has been transdisciplinary from the get-go twenty-five years ago (Giblett 1996) and still is (Giblett 2021b).

As the publisher's blurb for *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* says, “in an era of climate change, deforestation, melting ice caps, poisoned environments, and species loss, many people are turning to the power of the arts and humanities for sustainable solutions to global ecological problems. *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities* offers a practical and accessible guide to this dynamic and interdisciplinary field.” Indeed it does. Many readers would do well to follow it with the supplement of this review: for additional guidance and references that are suggestions for further reading in the rich and fertile field of the Environmental Humanities, a field that embraces Ecocultural Studies as a way of knowing nature and Psychoanalytic Ecology as the talking cure for environmental illness and health.

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