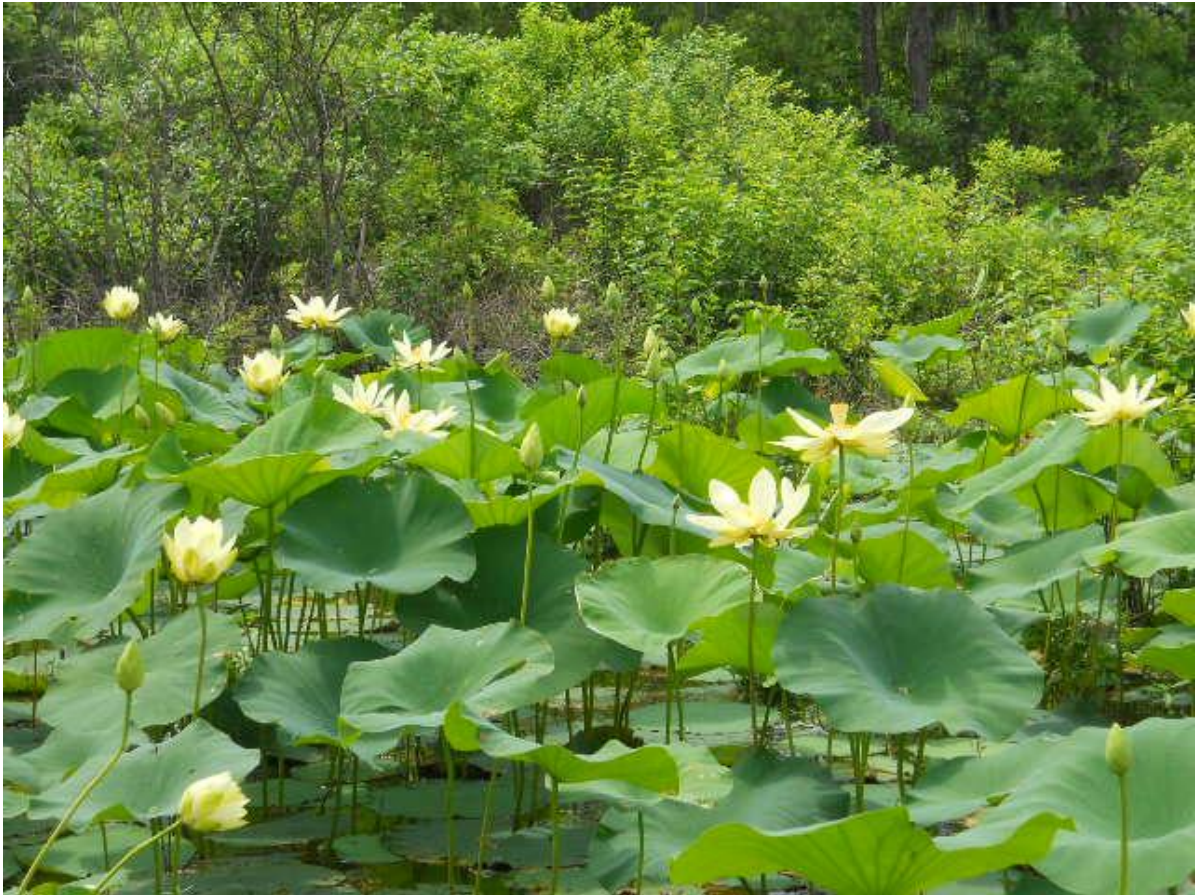


Speaking a Word for the Wetlands

There is No Lotus *in Spite of* the Swamp

John Clark

“The lotus plant ... takes root in the fetid but nutrient-rich mud of swamps so that its beautiful flower may rise above the murky water. The flower’s grace is inextricably connected to the noisome swamp, just as redemption exists in ruin, and creativity in destruction.” – “Artistic Director’s Statement” for *Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*.



American Lotuses in the Louisiana Swamp (louisianaswamptour.blogspot.com)

We are in the midst of an assault on the swamp. Though this assault has both material and ideological aspects, its most pernicious dimension is, of course, the ongoing physical destruction of swamps and other wetlands. Industrial capitalism, and, above all, the globally ecocidal oil industry, has been waging a war of annihilation against the swamp for most of the last century. In my own lifetime, we have seen the disappearance of almost two thousand square miles of coastal swamps, marshes and wetlands in Louisiana.

This is but a recent battle in an age-old war against wetlands that in fact spans the entire history of Civilization. The project of annihilation of swamps began with the

destruction of the wetlands of the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia by the despotic ancient empires, and helped cause the first anthropogenic ecological and societal collapses in human history. This project has continued and has spanned the subsequent centuries. Indeed, it recently returned to where it began, with a literal vengeance, in Saddam Hussein's crusade to drain the Mesopotamian Marshes and eliminate those who took refuge there to resist his barbaric regime.

In the subjective realm, the obsessive fear and hatred of swamps and other wetlands has a long history that parallels civilization's material project of conquest of nature and its ruthless destruction of nature-affirming indigenous cultures. There is no English word that describes the primordial fear of swamps in particular, but we have the generic term "limnophobia" for the morbid loathing of the troubling "murky" waters of swamps, marshes and lakes.

This visceral, emotional repulsion by wetlands has been accompanied by an entire limnophobic imaginary and limnophobic ideology. In popular culture, ranging from traditional folk tales to recent B movies, swamps are fantasized as the site of the appearance of ghosts, goblins, monsters, zombies, and psychopaths. Moreover, even the flora and fauna of this ecosystem are depicted as menacing and homicidal.

There are exceptions. Indeed, the most notable swamp creature in the comics world, Swamp Thing, is portrayed as a defender of both nature and humanity. Yet, this has done little to transform swamps in the popular imagination. Recently, the popular TV series *Swamp People*, by identifying life in the swamps with the machismo and nature-battling involved in the trade of alligator-hunting, has reinforced the image of the swamp as a scene of struggle and conquest.

The imaginary assault on swamps has been accompanied an ideological one that has long been endemic to American society. In fact, it has been escalating recently. The most conspicuous evidence of this ideological intensification is, of course, Donald Trump's continued identification of everything that he finds evil and detestable in Washington as "the swamp," and his description the process of purging the country of all these evils and abuses as "draining the swamp."

One would hope that anyone using the theme of "Swamp" to conceptualize a major cultural event in a city whose identity is profoundly determined by swamps and other wetlands would reflect carefully on the nature of these ecosystems and strive to communicate that nature accurately. This is particularly important in the current climate of obscurantism and defiant rejection of clear scientific facts and crucial ecological realities. Unfortunately, the Artistic Director, despite his good intentions, seems only to compound the confusion, since he endows the conventional nonsense concerning swamps with a deceptive aura of sophisticated cultural theory.

It is worthwhile to look carefully at the specific words and images used in the "Statement," since they are a revealing example of how the limnophobic imaginary and ideology operate. The "Statement" calls Prospect.4 the fourth "iteration" of the event, adopting a fashionable technical term originating in mathematics and computer science. It claims that the event "finds inspiration in the lotus plant." The inspiration



The Phantom Stranger #14 (DC Comics, 8/1/71)

in question comes from the fact that the beautiful and spiritually evocative lotus flower grows in a swamp, which is fantasized according to the limnophobic imaginary as an environment that is, on the one hand, *filthy* and *repulsive*, and on the other, *hostile* and *threatening*.

Developing the theme of “filth,” the “Statement” describes the swamp as “fetid,” a term that is conventionally defined as “smelling extremely unpleasant,” and “noisome,” which is defined as “having an extremely offensive smell.” In addition, the swamp is, of course, characterized by the inevitable adjective “murky,” a term that means, specifically in relation to water, “dark and dirty,” but that also has connotations of “dark and gloomy.” To develop the second theme of “threat,” the “Statement” identifies the swamp with “ruin,” “destruction,” “arduous challenges,” and “difficulty and desolation.” Just as art triumphs over such evils in society, the lotus is depicted as triumphing over all of them as they are somehow embodied in the swamp.

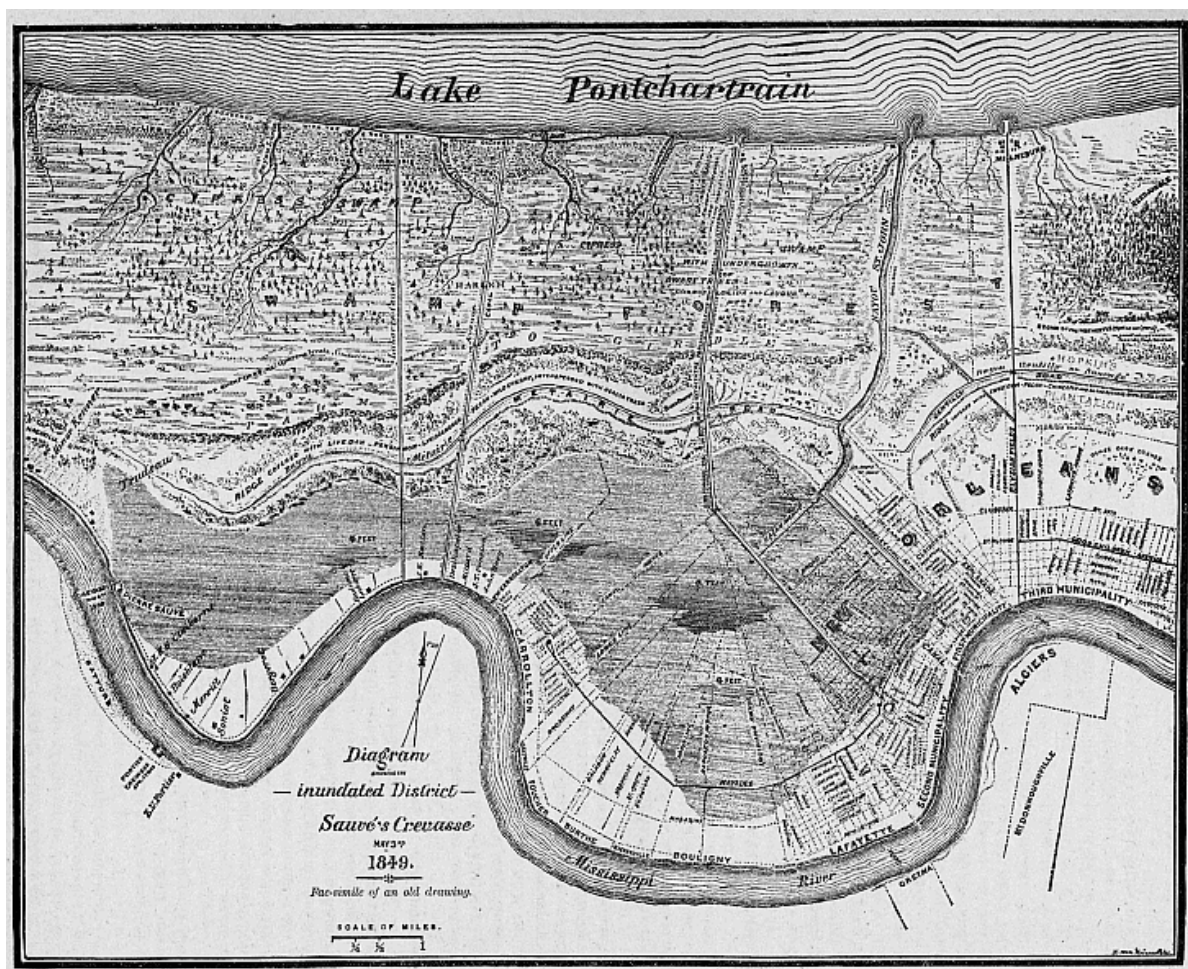
The latter part of this depiction may sound familiar, since it fits into a long and influential tradition in the social imaginary. The image of the swamp expressed in the “Statement” reflects the popular pseudo-Darwinian conception of nature. This conception is classically expressed through the image of the natural world as “the Jungle,” which is fantasized as the scene of a ruthless struggle for existence (the “Law of the Jungle”) in which higher, more refined, lotus-like things can only survive and flourish through a triumph over the brutal forces of nature.

In truth, the swamp is not really “the Jungle.” In fact, even the jungle isn’t really “the Jungle.”

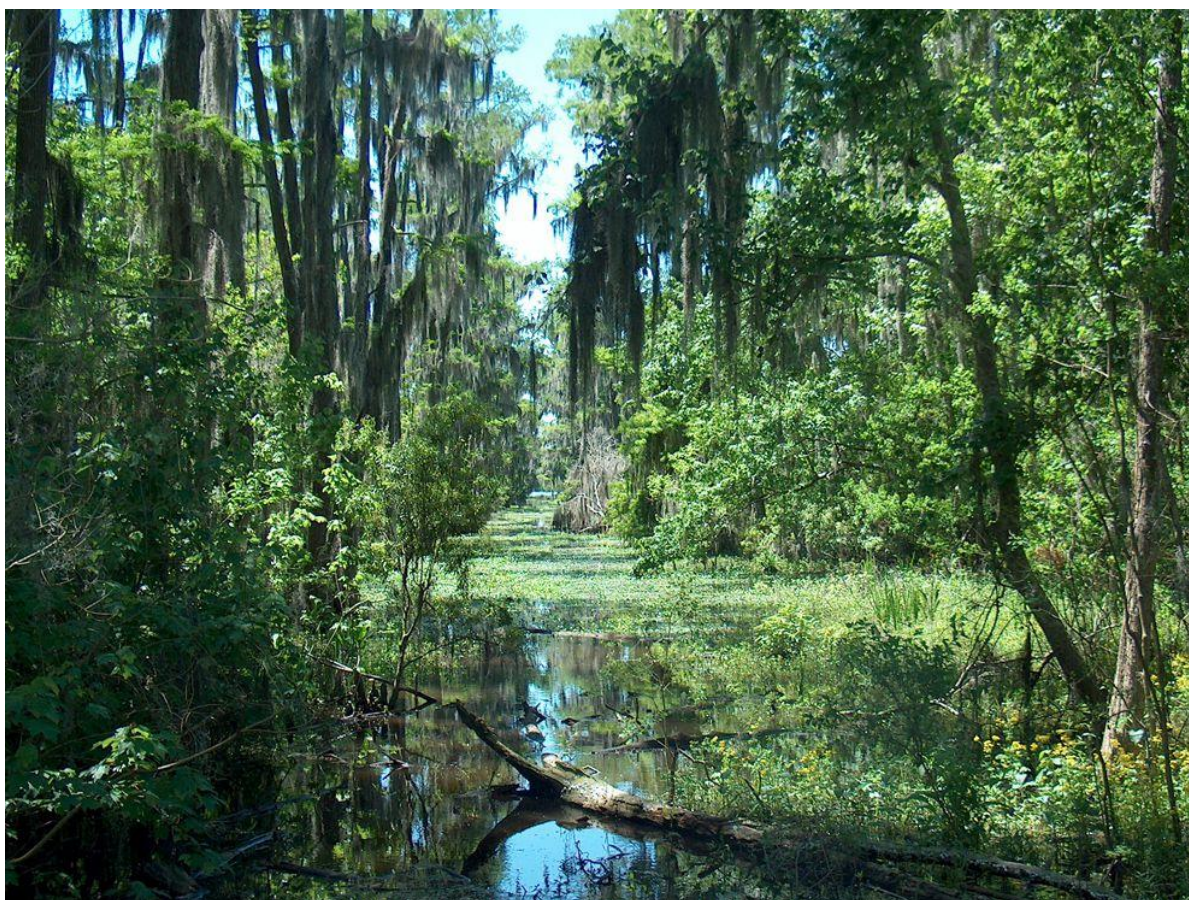
The graphic that accompanies the “Statement” is a well-known image dated May 3, 1849. It shows the severe flooding of the city in that year. This event was historic in that it was the last time the city was inundated by a break in the Mississippi River levees. It was one of the long series of traumas that our city has endured. On June 17 of that year, my great-great-great grandfather Paul Lobit wrote his brother Emile in France of the many disasters (“beaucoup de catastrophes”) that had beset the city at that moment: a cholera epidemic, the widespread flooding, the destitution of individuals, the ruin of businesses. It was a significant historical moment for New Orleans.

However, the image depicting the flood seems to have been selected randomly with no knowledge of the history of the city and the surrounding wetlands. The salient element of the map is the large area flooded by the breach of the natural levee at Sauvé’s Crevasse, upriver from New Orleans. The inundated area included both large expanses of backswamp and a significant part of the city itself. It certainly doesn’t depict anything about a “lotus in spite of the swamp.” It shows that flooding takes place in low-lying areas, which in this case included those in which the swamp had been cleared for the city to expand. There is no doubt that the extensive areas of remaining swampland reduced the degree to which the city itself was flooded and thus mitigated the disaster.

The online National Geographic *Encyclopedic Entries* site, which is aimed at educating young people and others in basic knowledge of nature, would be a convenient



“Diagram SHOWING THE - inundated District - Sauvé's Crevasse May 3RD 1849”



Louisiana swamp from *National Geographic Encyclopedic Entries*

place for the Artistic Director or anyone to begin learning about true nature of swamps. The site's article on "Swamps" notes that these ecosystems are a particularly favorable milieu for the flourishing of life. It specifically mentions that the freshwater swamps between the Tigris and Euphrates gave the region in ancient times the name "Fertile Crescent," because of its life-giving fecundity.

The article also points out that coastal saltwater swamps are called "the nurseries of the ocean" because so much life in the sea is spawned and nurtured there. It explains that swamps are "among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth" for "moderating the effects of flooding" (such as the flooding depicted in the Artistic Director's image), "protecting coastal areas from storm surges," and "filtering wastes and purifying water." Finally, the article notes foolish popular prejudices concerning swamps in the past, when they "were looked upon as wastelands" and thought to be "sinister and forbidding."

One of things that immediately disturbed me about the "Statement" was its depiction of swamps as extremely foul-smelling. In a way, it seems more forgivable that one would absorb what the dominant ideology says about nature in general being a ruthless "struggle for survival," since this is at least based on a one-sided exaggeration of an aspect of biological reality. But it seems much less forgivable that one would distort something that is a matter of basic sensory perception. One must wonder if the Artistic Director has ever had the opportunity to spend time in swamps.

In my experience, I have never found swamps to be "fetid," "noisome," or foul-smelling. The presence of noxious odors seems to me to be the exception in swamps (as opposed, for example, to many industrialized areas). As I look back on all my time since childhood fishing and canoeing in and around marshes and swamps, I remember marshes to be sometimes, but not always, pervaded by the smell of biogas, but swamps to be almost always free of such odors.

On the other hand, I have found that there is nothing I can imagine that is more magnificent than sunrise and sunset over the swamp. For this reason, the most significant adjective that occurs to me when I think of swamps is not "fetid," "noisome," or "murky," but rather "sublime." They are rightly classed among nature's "Cathedrals of the Spirit."

It occurred to me, however, that it is possible that I have been a victim of "wishful perception," or perhaps more accurately, "wishful perceptual memory." Is it possible that because I am such a partisan of swamps that I notice noxious odors less when I am in such an ecosystem, and that I suppress memory of negative or unpleasant sensations when I recall my experience of such wondrous and inspiring places?

Consequently, I decided to question concerning their experience in this matter several of the people I know who have had the most extensive experience of swamps. All responded that during the long periods of time they have spent in swamps they have seldom if ever found them to be foul-smelling. One replied that in his experience they had *never* had this characteristic. He went so far as to say that to typify them this way was "ludicrous and insane," and expressed sadness that, despite the dedicated efforts



Sunset at Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge (<http://baconbaron.com/>)

of naturalists and other lovers of these ecosystems, such distorted stereotypes are still so widespread. Another noted that despite occasional releases of sulfide smell, “in my experience swamps in their undisturbed state have a deep, sensuous, organic smell.”

It seems unfortunate that the Artistic Director found a quote from a jazz musician who described jazz as “a lily that grows, in spite of the swamp,” and that he decided to take this depiction as his model in conceptualizing an important cultural event in our community. The quote is certainly appealing, and the point the musician makes about jazz is an excellent one. The history of that musical genre does indeed reflect the “triumph of the human spirit” in the face of social injustice and oppression. This is a deep and momentous truth that we should ponder and never forget. But the unquestionable validity of this truth does nothing to make the specific metaphor used to express this verity an appropriate one.

The process in which, as the Artistic Director puts it, New Orleans “gave birth to jazz ... under adverse circumstances” is not at all analogous to the manner in which swamps give birth to lilies or lotuses. A milieu that produces vast biodiversity is anything but “adverse” in relation to the flourishing of indigenous life forms. Louisiana swamps are famous for their beautiful lotuses, lilies, and irises – perhaps above all for the magnificent, indeed, seemingly miraculous expanses of blue irises. But these lotuses, lilies and irises do not grow and flourish *in spite of* the swamp. They do so precisely *because of* the swamp.



Blue irises in the Louisiana swamp (blog.albanywoodworks.com)

Biographical note: The author grew up in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans on *Arts* near *Marais*.

The Ted K Archive

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