The swamp occupies an intriguingly complex place in the Southern and national imaginations. As the South comes to look more and more like the rest of America, colonized by the relentless progress of strip malls and suburban sprawl, Southern wooded wetlands have come to embody the last part of the South that will always be beyond cultural dominion, however illusory that understanding may be.

Traditionally, the term “swamp” has been used to define an area outside civilization whose geographic features—notably its treacherous mix of water and earth—render it resistant to colonization or agriculture. Swamps have represented a challenge to imposed order since well before the colonization of America. The swamps’ essential resistance to culturally viable classification was compounded by the nature of their earliest denizens. The presence of Native Americans in the swamps only underscored their wicked association for Europeans who viewed the Indian as the embodiment of savagery.

In the antebellum North, abolitionists applied disparaging images of swamps they often had never seen to describe the moral decadence of the entire South. Yet the qualities of alienation from societal order also held a profound appeal for American writers and thinkers outside the South, who elevated the swamps for the characteristics that led most people to shun them. Thoreau, for example, said that “[w]hen I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of nature.” Walt Whitman, too, extolled the charms of the Southern swamps before the Civil War in his poem “O Magnet South” (1860): “O the strange fascination of these half-known half-impassable / swamps, infested by reptiles, resounding with the bellow / of the alligator, the sad noise of the rattlesnake.”

While the swamp’s figurative significance came to define it for much of the nation, for the South its physical presence as obstacle to agriculture and shelter for the dispossessed keeps its significance grounded in tangible reality. The swamp carried both a promise of freedom for escaped slaves and a threat to social order for the plantation aristocracy.

Aside from the specter of the escaped slave, swamp dwellers of various kinds emerge repeatedly as ideological and practical threats. One of the most threatening aspects of the swamp, paradoxically, is its very bounty— the effortless “living off the land.” In his famous 1856 study, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, a collection of pieces written for the New York Daily Times between 1853 and 1854, Frederick Law Olmsted recounts a conversation with Mr. R., a South Louisiana plantation owner, about a nearby group of Acadians: “Mr. R. described them as lazy vagabonds, doing but little work, and spending much time in shooting, fishing, and play… Why did he so dislike to have these poor people living near him? Because, he said, they demoralized his negroes. The slaves seeing them living in apparent comfort, without much property and without steady labor, could not help thinking that it was not necessary for men to work so hard as they themselves were obliged to; that if they were free they would not need to work.”

The 1939 release of Gone with the Wind, perhaps the most influential representation of the American South in the 20th century, and its legion of less-noted precursors and ubiquitous imitators, largely redefined the nation’s concept of the antebellum South. Edward D.C. Campbell, in his 1981 study, The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth, explains that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, “plantation stories were good business, attracting Academy Awards and, most importantly, customers.” As they recreated the myths underpinning an idealized plantation South, studios also proved adept at reviving the image of the Southern swamp as breeding ground for natural and supernatural horrors.

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Even after the vogue for romanticized visions of the plantation South passed after World War II, the swamp retained its vilified status. Hollywood, particularly in B movies, perpetuated horrific versions of the Southern swamps. Hollywood bombarded the public with films about swamp monsters (Creature of the Swamp Creature is a typical example of the B-movie swamp craze, as is 1955’s Attack of the Giant Leeches), lurid depictions of criminals escaping into hellish swampy swamps (Swamp Women, a Roger Corman effort, stands out in this genre, as do better-regarded films such as I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang), and images of riverboat captains wrestling alligators in forbidding swamp landscapes (1956’s Swamp Fire, starring Johnny Weissmuller, best known for his portrayals of Tarzan, is a dubious but notable exception from a Chain Gang movement was acutely tied to the preservation of elements of Southern culture threatened by wetland development. Sportsmen, hunters and fishermen, often politically conservative in other respects, banded together to protect the land that enabled their activities. Even now the environmental movement in the South is made up of what might seem strange bedfellows: more traditional ecologists, academics and conservationists as well as throngs of hunters and fishermen—a group that has claimed the tongue-in-cheek designation “Bubba environmentalists.”

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