



# Performing the swamp, producing the wetland: Social spatialization in the Atchafalaya Basin

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## ABSTRACT

Critical geographers of nature have assessed commodification of wetland spaces from top-down political economic perspectives as well as from perspectives of local lived experience. This paper argues that to better understand and critique processes of wetland abstraction and commodification, we must acknowledge on-site, live production of wetlands. Using a performative approach allows for tourism and swamp tour guides to be understood as vital producers of wetland experiences and knowledge. To grasp how swamp tours can act to spatialize and commodify the swamp, I participated in a host of tours in Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin and collected numerous interviews with tour guides, tourists and locals during the summer of 2010. Cultural and eco-tourism have thrived here in the context of wetland environmental protection and Cajun cultural expression. On tours, guides spatialize the swamp in performances of its nature and culture by positioning themselves as expert insiders who know how the swamp should be developed. As a part of this process of production, exoticism and wildness are reiterated as essential tropes of the geographic imaginary of the Atchafalaya Basin. However, guides also have the ability to resist the exploitation of the swamp and its inhabitants by creatively rejecting any conceptions of the swamp that they see as inappropriate. By observing how wetlands are performed and valued from within the swamp we can further understand the unique local manifestations of swamp culture alongside the generalized abstractions of wetlands that is entailed by their production as commodities.

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## 1. Introduction

On two different swamp tours a few miles apart in Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin an alligator encounter looms on any horizon. On either one of the tours, tourists sit alert in anticipation of this event, ready to record it with phones, cameras or just in their memories. Both guides are seasoned swamp workers, both are Cajuns, and both can speak Cajun French. As the boats slide around a bend, the shape of an alligator peeks through the busy biota and the gator sees the tourists too. Depending on which tour they happen to have chosen today, the guide says one of the following:

*"Alligators will live to be 100 plus years of age and they are a cousin to the dinosaur. A lot of times those small gators won't survive because there are a lot of predators who will eat them and gators are cannibals, so they will eat their own"* (Interview A, 2010).

*"Come on now, here kitty kitty! Attention mais, allons manger! [Hey man, let's eat!] J'ai tout les tourists ici a la bateau! I told him I have a lot of tourists on the boat"* (Interview B, 2010).

The first guide gives an informative take on the gator, based on his knowledge of its ecology, threats and diet. The second guide presents himself jokingly as a nurturing friend to the gator, here to give him his morning meal. Though they share reference to the alligator's eating habits, they present a radically different notion of the "king of the swamp". Yet both encounters share the capacity to give a meaning to this space that surrounds the visitors.

With similar backgrounds and a similar task at hand (to translate the Atchafalaya swamp by describing its ecology, biota, and social spaces) guides play a pivotal role in creating imagined geographies of the swamp for thousands of people throughout the year. Though the swamp context could exude subjective meanings to each person – tourists could ignore the guide and let the landscape represent itself – to assume that a self-led experience is what motivates swamp tourism ignores the role guides play in producing a tour. The guides sell an hour or two of their local expertise (for about \$25) and this expert translation of the swamp adds value to the experience that could not be otherwise obtained. The 'text' of the guide's oration is, like any, filtered through dominant and personal ideologies, and seeks to fix the swamp as a space of ecology or resources or spiritual contact, but most importantly, to fix the swamp as a place-source of valuable experiences. Encountering the swamp as a lived space rather than simply a zone of science or 'natural resources' is a rare and novel product for

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those who are willing to pay for a tour. This paper treats these moments of live touristic experience as a vital spatialization and commodification of the swamp.

For two centuries, the Atchafalaya has been a source of all sorts of material commodities. I suggest that the continuation of this commodification of wetlands is produced through performances of tourism. Wetland experience commodities are produced with the same intent to sell as the extraction of material wetland resources, though the product of swamp tourism is an exoticized, picture-worthy moment rather than so many barrels of oil or board feet of lumber. This type of product shares similarities with wetland mitigation banking, which seeks to quantify and compare wetlands such that one can be destroyed as long as another is created or protected (treated in depth by Robertson (2000, 2004, 2006)). Both tourism and wetland mitigation banking represent the most recent techno-political form of wetland product, and both processes of commodification depend upon abstraction of the space. Rather than simplifying functions of the wetland to exchangeable numbers, paper forms and technical descriptions like wetland scientists or ecological economists may, tour guides produce value by spinning a personal cultural and ecological narrative about the swamp, a simplification and privatization nonetheless. Tours depend upon entertainment where unique characters make the experience memorable for an equally unique audience of tourists. Yet this practice also involves the constant reiteration of standardized narratives of appropriate and detrimental uses of the swamp. Using a performative approach to engage this sort of wetland production is appropriate since the guide is performing in the banal sense, but also because performance implies both a context dependent interplay with the live surroundings, and a reiterated and often scripted spatialization.

Informed by participant/observation and interview research with thirteen swamp tour operations in the Atchafalaya Basin, I argue that through tourism in 'the Basin' (as it is referred to locally) we are able to witness representation of the swamp, its multiple meanings and purposes through guides and tourists performances of spatialization. I suggest that using touristic moments of spatialization can supplement our understanding of how wetlands are conceptualized as commodities. In such moments, development for tourism is characterized by guides as environmental protection and not only an appropriate use of the swamp but *resistance* to swamp exploitation.

### 1.1. Touristic performance of social spatialization

Critical geographers and social theorists have shown that culturally specific ideologies are fixed to landscapes through the iteration of dominant representations which can be reified or rejected. Theorizations of the process of social spatialization have grown from the work of Henri Lefebvre (and have since been expanded upon directly and indirectly by Shields (1991) concerning the Canadian North, Sibley (1995) concerning natural spaces broadly, Steinberg (2001) concerning ocean spaces and Price (2004) regarding the US American Southwest, among others). The co-constitutive aspects of "the (social) production of (social) space" – spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation – might simply be understood as the behaviors, knowledge and creative capacities of people with reference to their surroundings (Lefebvre, 1991). As Lefebvre demonstrates, particular characteristics of any place are not simply ascribed onto its people and environments; rather, they are reproduced or resisted in context by people during conscious or unconscious moments of appropriation. Negotiating the interplay between social ordering, iterated practice and landscape concretization produces a rationalized (if only momentarily) notion of a place. Shields focuses on ways in which individuals reproduce, or singularly resist, place myths,

the "relatively robust set[s] of core concepts or foundational metaphors which surface in everyday discourse" (1991, p. 47). His examples then show how social spatializations such as the North–South divide in England can be broken down into a handful of common claims that are reproduced in many different situations. Yet, Shields' and other similarly informed investigations of place (e.g. Price, 2004; Hetherington, 1997) give us a place conception that relies as much on openness and momentary agency as it does on structuring representations like place myths. These arguments give us a formula for understanding how space is realized, yet problematically leaves contextual and processual specificity under theorized. Space is practiced, but specifically where and how? Performativity, however has been well theorized processually as the enactment of space and therefore can fill some of these voids in the process in spatialization.

Many geographers have focused less on either the influential powers of place myths or conscious struggles for space and more on the momentary poetics of the body and its habitat. As they would have it, places are created in the present tense; they are performed. Performance, as it initially was theorized by Butler (1990), allows subjects to reflect/resist their social position through embodied symbolism. The current turn in the geographic literature on performance is toward what Nash calls "a more generic and celebratory notion of the embodied nature of human existence" (2000, p. 655). Many works in this genre are inspired by Nigel Thrift's notion of performative geographies that take a critical stance in their instantaneity and allow, through politics of movement, a subjectified, transformative power (Thrift, 2000, 2005, 2007, 2008; see also Lorimer, 2008; Rycroft, 2007; Waitt and Lane, 2007). Affective performance in this sense is inherently productive and "concerned with cultivating political spaces through an awareness of the openness of the present time" (Cadman, 2009, p. 6). While power may lie in the hands of the actor, performances of space are not removed from the influence of social ideologies. Focusing on the enhancement of the present through experience commodities (such as swamp tours) or an accentuated experience of commodities (such as themed retail and dining) has been a hallmark of a culture of consumption. Thrift notes that, "whilst [capitalism] has its contemplative aspects, based in the time of learned knowledge, it is chiefly an order of the moment, and a means of crafting the moment" (Thrift, 2005, p. 11). What sets the swamp tour's crafted moment apart from music, theatre or other performance art is its dynamic "natural" setting and mobile stage. Further, this performance is concerned not as much with artistic expression, but with selling knowledge and experience of the swamp, or more appropriately, with producing a wetland 'natural resource', one that can be continually mined in pursuit of profits.

Performance gives us a way to understand how guides give meaning to the swamp landscape, as well as insights to how tourists play a part. Edensor argues that, to a large extent, tourism is not reflexive, but repetitive and predictable and transgressions of these expectations are threatening. "This is one of the central paradoxes of tourism, for while the confrontation of alterity is desired, the disruption this creates can engender self doubt or self-consciousness, not conducive to having a good time" (2007, p. 202). People want a packaged sort of exotic, one that conforms to their notion of place and person as 'other' (or worth paying to see) but does not make them reflect upon themselves or disrupt their comfort. However, Crouch has theorized the tourist not as a driver of the experience or the passive recipient of representations, but as a reflexive agent. This type of interplay between expectation and representation has been documented in particular reference to Atchafalaya swamp tours by Wiley (2002), who took several tours in the Basin and used perspectives from drama studies to analyze their performance. He finds that expectation plays a similar role in the swamp: "instead of directly observing an attraction, such

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