Wilderness Theatre

Environmental Tourism and Cajun Swamp Tours

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Bayou Black is one of the myriad interconnecting waterways that flow through the lower Mississippi Delta in what is in essence a flat, swampy maze. Along its banks grow the usual plants (water lilies, elephant ears, and marsh grass), but on its surface a strange event takes place each day: two rows of tourists, seated back-to-back in a boat, gaze and occasionally point at the surrounding landscape, as if they were an audience taking in a show. But what show are they seeing? Has the natural environment taken to performing daily, twice on weekends? And two hours after the boat's departure, as it returns to the launch, why has the gazing and pointing stopped, as if the "show" has ended? After all, the lilies and elephant ears are still there, the same as before.

These were the impressions and thoughts that first stirred my interest in the performance aspects of Cajun swamp tours. It was in the fall of 1994, and I was a first-year doctoral student in theatre at Louisiana State University. Oddly enough, two fellow students and I had turned to swamp tours to escape such intrusive thoughts. Performance theory towered over us in that first year like a silo of grain over a trio of force-fed ducks, so unrelenting and dense were our assignments in it. But even deep in the swamps on a Saturday afternoon its influence stuck with us, and soon I set about "theorizing" the swamp tour.

The distinctive features of each tour, along with their unique locations, prevent my describing a typical tour experience except in general terms. They are usually located at a dock next to a Cajun restaurant, where restrooms, telephones, refreshments, souvenirs, and parking are on hand. Departure is in the late afternoon, when the heat of midday has abated (tours are in summer only, when alligators are out of hibernation). A boat typically seats 20 to 30 passengers, and has an outboard motor; most are pontoon boats with a canopy. The tour usually begins in a residential area, and then proceeds past marinas and isolated houses, and finally enters an area surrounded by water and subtropical vegetation. The guide narrates for about two hours, identifying the flora and fauna, relating the ways of local people, and stopping to feed alligators or to point out a gas well cap or a sleeping owl. The guide delivers a routine narrative, but allows spontaneous

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events and interactions among the tourists to influence the tour. In the end, the boat retraces its route back to the launch.

While my thinking about Cajun swamp tours has evolved with the years, I still use as my starting point that first impression, recorded at the beginning of this essay: tour passengers seem to reach (and then to lose) an excited state of awareness that resembles the behavior of an audience at a theatrical performance. This state is no doubt found at other intersections of tourism and the natural environment, and may help to explain why these sites are attracting tourists as never before.

Natural settings have, of course, been drawing visitors for decades if not centuries—Crater Lake, the Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls are classic American tourist magnets—but environmental tourism is now undergoing an unprecedented surge in popularity and, more importantly, its methods for presenting the environment have gained in sophistication, bringing it closer to a kind of theatrical performance.[1] Cajun swamp tours present, within the field of environmental tourism, an unusually complex case of this new stagecraft, for they not only organize an audience and maintain it for a period of hours, but they also feature elements of live performance: guide-narrators and lunging alligators. Other theatrical connections may surface in the design of the tour boats, in prepared routines, and even in the dramatic structuring of entire tours.

The first swamp tour company was founded in 1979 by Annie Miller, aka "Alligator Annie," whose idea for it came from the Terrebone Parish Chamber of Commerce (Miller 2000). Her tour departs from a wharf behind the Bayou Delight Restaurant on Bayou Black, which lies eight miles outside the small city of Houma, some 60 miles southwest of New Orleans. Other locals soon followed Miller's lead, and by 1991 there were 20 swamp tours in Louisiana; now they

1. Passengers wave from their swamp tour boat on Bayou Black. Annie Miller's Son's Swamp Tour, 1999. (Photo by Eric Wiley)

exceed 30, and new tours continue to open. These include—in addition to the small, rural tours such as Miller's—the large, air-conditioned boats that tour out of New Orleans, tours by seaplane, airplane, airboat, canoe, and even by foot.[2]

The Cajun guide has joined the ranks of other Cajun entertainers—stand-up comics, singers, storytellers, preachers, and televised chefs—as a solo performer of Cajun culture, drawing on regional dialects, stories, and music in the creation of a persona. The guide-narrator borrows particularly from the performance techniques and thematic material that are the legacy of Cajun storytelling, a major performance tradition. But the guides are not the premiere attraction of the swamp tours; it is the swamps themselves. And it is the incorporation of a natural environment into the performance that sets these tour narratives apart from those of the traditional Cajun raconteur.

In "Performance As Metaphor," theatrical phenomenologist Bert States discusses the hypothetical ability of a framing device to unilaterally confer performance status on whatever falls within its scope. Adopting this notion of framing from the work of performance theorists Erving Goffman (1974), and Richard Schechner (1990), States argues that a park or farm may be transformed into a performance of a park or farm simply by virtue of its designation as a performance (1996:16). Leaving aside the problems of definition that concern States, this use of framing offers a valuable model of the tourists' experience on a swamp tour, since it speaks to the process of envisioning natural areas as performances.

The initial demarcation of swamps as something sight-worthy is key, but it is not the first step in the process by which the swamps acquire elevated status in the imagination of tourists. This singling out of the swamps relies, and builds, on the public predisposition to value some natural areas more than others. The assertion that the wetlands deserve special attention not only creates interest in them, but also reflects a widely felt preexisting interest. Thus tour advertisements appeal to popular views of swamps, even as they seek to awaken and direct the public's thinking about them. But presenting the swamps as sight-worthy and tour-worthy is nonetheless pivotal, for it frames them in a way that corresponds to the framing of plays, spectacles, and other performances. Such a touristic "marker" invites the public to apply (to wetlands) a specific and highly conventional mode of viewing.[3]

Tour operators not only frame the wetlands, they also establish, through advertisements, expectations that condition the reception of the toured area. These advertisements most often take the form of brochures, and are displayed and distributed at airports, train stations, hotels, and tourist centers throughout the region. The brochures display a complex set of representations of swamplands, the most recurrent themes of which, in order of prominence, are wilderness, natural purity, scenic beauty, and danger.

The "wilderness" theme defines the swamplands in fundamental opposition to civilization. Added to this are the secondary qualifiers: the swamps are non-civilized, non-socially constructed, ahistorical, essentialist "nature," and are characterized variously by virginity, beauty, hostility, mystique, amorality, and timelessness. As part of a marketing strategy, geared to tourists from urban and other dry landscapes of North America and Europe, these evocative motifs tap into the great Occidental tradition of perceiving wetlands as exotic and alluring.[4]

One persistent claim of the brochures is "natural purity," giving the impression that tourists may actually be among the first to enter the secluded, backwater environment. With phrasing such as "truly pristine," "untamed wilderness," and "primitive splendor," brochures awaken expectations of a place beyond the reach of human influence. The implied assumption is that the tourists, who have already left home, wish to venture still further into a space never before occupied by humans, playing on a popular yearning for escape not only from the personally

2. Ron Guidry's pontoon boat. A Cajun Man's Swamp Cruise, 1998. (Photo by Eric Wiley)

familiar, but from all that is known. This may be the same yearning that sustains the science-fiction industry, conditioned by a nostalgic longing to "go where no one has gone before." The rhetoric surrounding the swamp tours also resounds with echoes of traditional pastoral poetry, especially the pastoral dramas of the Renaissance. A more limited parallel to theatre practices might be drawn to the 18th-century English fad of staging rustic settings, such as Phillipe Jacques De-Loutherbourg's *Omai, or a Trip around the World* (1785), which presented the travels of Captain Cook. In any event, brochures for the swamp tours clearly promise an openly theatrical presentation of the landscape. Romantic imagery, playful hyperbole, and humorous names for the tours and guides prepare one for a staged version of the wetlands.

This swamp theatre is an example of the "virtual reality" that pervades environmental tourism, a designation used by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in *Destination Culture* (1998) for many offerings in museums and heritage-based tourism. Her analysis of the various methods used to display museum objects and cultural traditions exposes the determining role these methods have in producing the meaning of exhibitions, and in creating "virtual" exhibits with only scant ties to any "actual" counterparts. It is in moments when the real swamps come into conflict with the imagined ones that a swamp tour produces a staged or virtual wilderness in the imagination of the passengers.

As one might expect, given the tour brochures' playfulness, tourists experience interpretive dissonance while on board, as when "a unique adventure by boat into the deep, dark swamps" actually takes tourists down an abandoned irrigation canal dug to hydrate the surrounding sugarcane fields. The "virgin swamps" were cleared long ago of their centuries-old cypress trees, which were hauled off through a network of canals dug by lumber companies in the 19th century. Tourists find an environment not "undisturbed by man," as claimed in more than one brochure, but visibly affected by introduced flora and fauna, such as the water hyacinth from Japan, which clogs up the canals and bayous, and the nutria, a rodent native to Argentina, whose tunneling contributes to erosion.

The gradual scaling back of expectations comprises one aspect of the tourists' experience of the framed environment; other setbacks are no doubt greater than

3. Annie Miller, aka "Alligator Annie," feeds skewered meat to a bayou alligator during a swamp tour. (Photo courtesy of Annie Miller)

the representational breaches just mentioned. The framing of the environment may itself prevent tourists from seeing the environment, in at least some senses of what it means to see something. Semioticians have proposed, along these lines, that the institutional authority that is implicit in the demarcation of sites can be blinding. According to Walker Percy, instead of directly observing an attraction, such as wetlands, tourists will find themselves merely seeking to confirm what it is about them that has been deemed sight-worthy. He argues, in discussing the Grand Canyon, that "the thing as it is [...] has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on" (1975:47). The swamplands presented on tours, following Percy's analysis, are concealed within what Percy terms a "citadel of symbolic investiture" (1975:51), and the satisfaction of a tourist rests not in "the discovery of the thing before him," but rather in the "measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the pre-

formed symbolic complex" (1975:47). Percy attempts to explain the process that triggers the perception of a "symbolic complex," which corresponds to the "framed performance" of States, Goffman, and Schechner and to the "virtual reality" of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

But there is always the chance that the framing of the swamps as wilderness will collapse, and with it the "citadel of symbolic investiture." A critical reinforcement of the frame thus appears in the theatrical structure of the tours, which creates a sense of journeying into danger. The swamp tours take place in steps or "scenes," which progress from exposition, to entry into a remote other world, to a critical encounter with a menacing antagonist, to survival and return. The structure is reminiscent of the archetypal Hero's journey described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Front and center in this drama, so to speak, is the toothy reptile, *Alligator mississippiensis*, otherwise known as the American alligator.

With its dramatic propensity for violence, the alligator stands out as the star of many tours, as evidenced by its prominence in tour names, road signs, and brochures. Some brochures announce "last but not least, the fierce and dangerous alligator," or "guaranteed to see live alligators." Like a head of state, the alligator embodies the particularity and autonomy of the wetlands environment, appearing as its peculiar, violent, and omnivorous ruler, akin to the bear, shark, and tiger, who lord over other environments. Tours invariably pay tribute to the "big lizard" by culminating in ritualized feeding sessions. These feature alligators have been conditioned, when called over to the boat, to lunge at chicken parts suspended above the water (the guide skewers raw legs and thighs, one at a time, onto a stiff wire attached to the end of a pole). When a 40-year-old bull alligator rises out of the water, jaws snapping, and its massive head bumps like a boulder against the aluminum hull, tourists are satisfied, especially if some on board have gasped or started in fear during the episode.

4. Wary swamp tourists watch as guide Annie Miller feeds an alligator that has approached the boat. (Photo courtesy of Annie Miller)

Although the feeding sessions corroborate the promise of swamps as dangerous places, their impact on the tourists may be contradictory. The sight of large, discolored scars on the head and back of some of the alligators—the result of gashes inflicted by boat engine propellers, as one guide explained—prompts a sympathetic outcry from the tourists. The alligator is transformed from terrifying predator to tragic hero, arousing both pity and fear. In any event, the alligator functions as a thematic lightning rod for the theatricalization of the surrounding landscape. The act of snapping up chicken parts is also a perfectly tragi-farcical debasement of these consummate hunters—especially when, for the sake of photographs, the alligator is made to jump at the poultry several times like a trained circus animal performer.

Despite the hints of tragic grandeur, the alligator plays a role in the dramatization of the landscape that seems closest to that of the beasts of pastoral drama, which inhabit natural territories lying outside the civilized world. In both cases the "plot" centers on making contact with a beast that threatens, but then fails to do harm. Sometimes the potential threat of alligators, so crucial to the drama of the tours, is put to a test. One time, on Annie Miller's Son's Swamp Tour, as we were scanning the dark waters for our first glimpse of an

alligator, and having been warned to "keep your hands away from the railing at all times," we came upon a sight our eyes refused to believe: a man and two small children were in the water, far from shore, their heads jutting out of colorful life jackets as they treaded water, waiting while the mother circled back around in a motorboat to give each a turn to water-ski. The sight of these children smiling up at us from the water was an outrage, and it dispelled our "virtual" world, just as if, in a theatre, someone had brought up the house lights during a play.[5]

The water-skiers' challenge to the tour's "wilderness" illuminates the double function of a frame: it excludes as well as contains. The tours rely for their appeal as much on their exclusion of ordinary life as on their inclusion (or creation) of wilderness. Their dramatization of the swamps serves not only to structure a tour and to sustain interest in it, but also to divert tourists from their daily lives, and to displace temporarily the unsettling concerns associated with them. The tours are escapist entertainments. To succeed in this genre, the tour guides must prevent tourists from having thoughts that are disruptive of the virtual wilderness they have entered.

Another challenge to the tours' framing of the swamps as a wilderness is the stark presence of the oil and natural gas industry: pipes, pumps, transport ships, warning signs posted along the canals, and the intricate, metallic structures that cap the natural gas wells, called "Christmas trees." What could be more emblematic of modernity than pipes, fittings, bolts, and valves? This apparatus is emblematic of the systematic exploitation of nature. Consistent with its poor environmental record globally, the oil and gas industry has not spared the Louisiana wetlands. Its damage to the area's ecosystem has included a devastating intake of saltwater, caused by some 12 thousand miles of canals, an accelerated loss of land, and a profuse dumping of chemical wastes (Kennedy 1991:94–99). The tourists' vision of the environment as a dangerous wilderness zone must overcome the pervasive actuality of an endangered zone in urgent need of protection. On some tours, it is true, no visible signs of the petrochemical industry appear, but its operations heavily inscribe the surrounding region and access roads and condition the most remote wetlands, making its presence unavoidable.

When one is torn between having an enjoyable fear of alligators, on the one

5. A "Christmas Tree" capping a natural gas well is one of the attractions on a swamp tour. The wells are typically 16,000 feet deep. A Cajun Man's Swamp Cruise, 1998. (Photo by Eric Wiley)

hand, and a disheartening concern about seepage from toxic waste sites, on the other, the latter tends to prevail. Awareness of the oil and gas industry thus threatens to undo the framing of the wetlands as a sightseeing attraction. In addition to stealing the thunder of the "dangerous alligator," the scale of the industry's procedures for extracting minerals dwarfs the staged environment of water, trees, and marsh grass. The natural gas wells, for example, are about 16,000 feet deep, compared to grass that grows to a height of about eight feet, and trees that reach a maximum of 60 feet.

Perhaps as a hedge against disillusionment, tourists are found overwhelmingly to prefer swamp tours that present nature through the hermeneutic of Cajun culture. Tourists are enticed not by swamps-as-swamps but by "Cajun swamps." "Alligator Annie," "The Cajun Man," and "Cajun Jack" are figures who interpret the wetlands through the medium of Cajun folk culture. This intervening personification is the key to transforming the wetlands into a theatrical experience. Swamp tours in other states, such as Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida—lacking anything comparable to a Cajun community—have not enjoyed the booming business of the Louisiana tours, although the Seminole-themed tours, now open in Florida, show some of the same promise. The appeal of the Cajun guide suggests that tourists desire a strong dose of theatricalization; the wetlands on their own would lure few people.

Anthropologist Marjorie Esman identifies the Cajun stereotype as one of "fun-loving, rustic, French-speaking folk with a noble peasant past that has not yet died" (1984:459). Since Esman's 1984 article, the Cajun image has been focused increasingly on Cajun cuisine, owing to the nationally televised cooking shows of Chef Paul Prudhomme, Justin Wilson, and Chef John Folse, and to the widespread marketing of Cajun cookbooks, restaurants, seasonings, and other comestibles. Swamps are accordingly presented on tours as a source of foodstuffs, with guides relating everything from old techniques for catching fish to recent trends in preparing nutria meat. Memorable meals and culinary approaches to game and fish are often woven into tour narratives.[6] Nearly all of the tours operate out of (and promote) a Cajun restaurant. The Cajun "proprietorship" of swamps unfolds further through a description of traditional uses for various plants. Spanish moss was used to stuff mattresses, and cypress trees were burned and carved into pirogues, small flat-bottomed canoes.

During the course of a tour, the guides integrate the swamps into their performance of Cajun culture. Their regional accent and figures of speech sustain this Cajunization. The tour boat itself provides a Cajun frame of reference, replete with such cultural markings as snake skins nailed to the canopy supports, laminated alligator heads prominently displayed (in one case, on a box for tips), posted Cajun bumper stickers, and folksy names for the boats, such as "Gumbo" and "Gator Bait." While most guides confine themselves to jokes and storytelling, Ron Guidry, aka "The Cajun Man," rams his boat mid-tour into a marshy embankment, and proceeds to sing songs in Cajun French.

The *cajunisme* of the tours is as theatrical, and as far-fetched, as their production of "wilderness." It derives from a narrow performance of the cultural idiom, cultivated and exaggerated beyond anything found in the local Cajun communities. Above all, the image of Cajuns as fun-loving people is deceptive. Veiled behind it are a people still reeling from a government-sponsored assault on their culture and language, which arose from a national effort, beginning in the 1920s, to bring subcultures into greater conformity with the Anglo American mainstream. General instruction in the French language was prohibited at Louisiana public schools in 1924, and in practice this meant that students who used French at school were punished. Over time, Cajuns came to feel ashamed of their language and heritage (Solles 1995:6). The Catholic Church stopped dispatching

6. Brochure for Cajun Jack's Swamp Tours (Patterson, Louisiana). (Courtesy of Jack Herbert)

French-speaking priests to the area, parents no longer spoke Cajun French to their children, and the language all but vanished (7). The stigma of the Cajuns lasted well into the 1970s, when, in the interests of tourism, the cultural heritage of the "coonasses," as Cajuns often refer to themselves, became invaluable to the state, which was then suffering economically from a devastated oil industry. The Cajuns were suddenly promoted as fun-loving, French-speaking people, and a futile effort was made to revive their language (9).[7]

The swamp tours feature a Cajun subtype, the so-called "swamp Cajun," whose lifestyle allegedly results from a long interrelationship with the swamp environment. The brochures present Cajun guides chiefly as swamp dwellers with little knowledge of the outside world; one invites visitors to "meet Cajuns who have never lived in a town." But, here again, the advertised image reveals only part of a long and bitter history. For much of what is identified as swamp Cajun—strong family traditions, communal values, religious devotion, superstitious beliefs, and love of cooking, music, and storytelling—predates the late–18th-century arrival of the Cajuns in Louisiana. The complex identity of the Cajuns first took root in the Acadian settlements near Nova Scotia in the 17th and 18th centuries. Comprised of villagers from western France, these remote settlements thrived in their isolation, and enjoyed self-rule in most matters for almost 150 years. The distinctive character of the Cajun people thus springs from their preservation and adaptation of early modern (and perhaps medieval and pagan) cultural traditions (Rushton 1979:71–72).[8]

The swamp tours emphasize the relationship of the Cajuns to the swamps, excluding not only Acadian history, but also many other historical and contemporary influences on the Cajun people (including Native American, African, English, Creole, Spanish, German, and Sicilian) (Ancelet 1992:261). This sweeping omission of influences is in keeping with the exaggeration of the "natural purity" and "wilderness" motifs, which extend in the brochures to a definition of local inhabitants as swamp dwellers. But during the tours this expectation, too, will have to be significantly scaled back, since the guides know, of course, about current affairs, and are in possession of the technological wizardry of modern life, such as cellular phones. I remember how "The Cajun Man" burst my own interpretive bubble by casually mentioning that he had performed his songs in Japan. Another guide lamented the loss of the *veillée*, the traditional evening visit with neighbors, explaining that people prefer to stay home nowadays and watch television.

Tourists soon realize that swamp Cajuns exist only in the tours' production of a virtual wilderness. The real guides are performer-narrators, whose well-worn stories, jokes, word choices, and gestures have evolved over years of repeatedly pointing out the same things. As locals, they do display regional manners and habits of speech. But the guides do not commit deeply to their "swamp dweller"

roles, as would be expected of employees, for example, at the nearby Acadian Village, a heritage park that "re-creates" the life of an imaginary 19th-century Cajun settlement. Unlike the costumed "villagers," the guides on the swamp tours generally shirk the part assigned to them in the shiny brochures. None wears a costume or adopts the role of a rustic "character," except in the telling of a story or joke. Instead, they "are themselves," and never refer to the brochure images or pronouncements about "wild" Cajuns.

In fact, most guides seem discomfited by the scrutiny of the tourists, perhaps feeling themselves prejudged according to stereotypes, including those in their own brochures. There is, of course, a general legacy of condescension in the West toward people indigenous to so-called noncivilized (or simply non-Western) areas of the world. "Native" peoples frequently have been put on display for tourists interested in their "exoticism," and the Cajun guides operate partially in this tradition. Due to their French origins, however, Cajun guides are spared some of the more racist and colonial overtones associated with the display of non-European "natives." The Cajun swamp dweller is really more of a Tarzan figure, a European who has become semi-wild due to an unfortunate overexposure to wilderness and native cultures. Although the condescension is comparatively mild in relation to the heritage industry at large, it nonetheless seems to provoke some awkward moments and periods of strained silence, especially when an inexperienced person is filling in as a substitute guide. The guides also appear slightly embarrassed about their role whenever locals greet them from the shore or from another boat.

7. Brochure for A Cajun Man's Swamp Cruise (Houma, Louisiana). (Courtesy of Ronald J. Guidry)

When tourists discover that their "authentic Cajun guide" has a web site or a satellite dish, the hope of escaping civilization may seem dashed, leaving them feeling more entrapped than before. To mainstream society, folk cultures such as the Cajuns or the Amish function as a kind of rear guard, occupying a fallback position against a deepening alienation from nature. But if the "authentic Cajun guide" sits home at night watching national television, where does one find people who still identify with nature? And what are the consequences for a tour whose host is a "compromised" swamp dweller?

The short answer is that, fortunately for the tour operators, tourists have bought their tickets and are underway before fully realizing that the brochures contain only the proverbial grain of truth. The long answer might begin with the observation that the guides do not really relinquish their roles as intermediaries between civilization and the wild until after the feeding sessions, during which they meet the expectations of this role—in the way they call over and feed the alligators—more than at any other time on the tour. The demotion of a tour guide from fabled swamp dweller to reluctant actor-as-swamp-dweller comes late in the tour, when the wilderness fiction as a whole is on the wane.

8. Ron Guidry banks his boat to stop and sing in Cajun French during a tour. A Cajun Man's Swamp Cruise, 1998. (Photo by Eric Wiley)

What's left is not "real wilderness" as promised in the brochures, but theatricality and virtuality. When both guides and tourists willingly suspend their disbelief, the swamps can function as pure wilderness, as home to rustic folk, as dangerous, mysterious, and colorful. This alluring narrative is loosely organized as a journey, providing the tours with a core "script" that can accommodate participation and improvisation. The journey structure whets the tourists' appetite for adventure in the early going, and then *en route* builds up their anticipation of fearful alligators. The script climaxes in the feeding session, when the two most theatricalized figures in this drama—the guide and the alligator—enact a staged encounter.

The basic mission of locating and paying tribute to the alligator provides structure to the tours' swamp "theatre." But once it is accomplished, and the dramatic question resolved (will we find and safely escape from alligators?), the virtual swamps begin to dissipate. The guide gives up his or her role as interpreter, and will typically fall silent and concentrate on driving the boat. This helps to explain why tourists act, near the end of a tour, as if the "show" is over. Indeed, after the feedings, the tours become little more than a return ride retracing the route used to get to the feeding site. On the journey back, the tourists are left to watch the landscape pass again before their eyes, like a slowly rewinding tape.

Fatigue sets in, further draining the tour of drama. The tourists enter the wetlands in a high state of excitement and interest; they return subdued and weary of gazing. The first sighting of a turtle sunning itself on a rock sends ripples of interest throughout the boat, but on the way back to the dock, the same turtle draws barely a glance. The sudden flight of a white egret is pointed at with delight

by an outbound tourist, but warrants only a flatly delivered, "there's another one of those birds" on the return leg of the tour.

The subdued state of those returning from a tour is a common feature of environmental tourism, stemming in part from the traveling required between sites. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes: "one problem with the lifespace is its low density, the dead space between attractions" (1998:145). In theme parks and cities, by contrast, one passes quickly from one interesting spot to another. To counter the low density of its rural attractions, Louisiana has created "Cajun country"—a network of tourist attractions, restaurants, and overnight accommodations throughout the southern parishes. But density also arises from the internal richness of an attraction, from the variety, depth, and range of offerings. In virtual realms such as the "Cajun swamps," sites may achieve high, internal density through the power and reach of the illusions they generate. The tours' production of "Cajun swamps" morphs everyday stuff, such as trees and rocks and clouds, into "Cajun trees" and "Cajun rocks" and "Cajun clouds." The weariness that develops late in a tour is thus attributable in part to the open-ended scope of its virtual realm. This tiredness resembles that which overcomes people whenever offerings are open-ended, such as in "famous" cities, theme parks, museums, zoos, music festivals, and all-you-can-eat buffets.

As the touring continues after the "show" has ended, the tourist audience passes through an in-between world, neither fully real nor fully virtual. Perhaps this homestretch of downtime and dead space provides the escape that tourists wanted all along. The environment theatricalized as wilderness finally is more of the same media glut that people ordinarily experience at home. The trip back may be, in contrast, what the wetlands really are: beautiful and compromised.

Once the boat tour is over, what awaits the tourists? Parked on the gravel lot beside the dock are the rental cars that brought them out to Bayou Black or to other waters; on the dashboards and front seats lay the colorful brochures and tour books, which may revive in them the tourism industry's theatricalization of the entire region. And in their memory is a theatrical experience that involved, with the help of a swamp dweller, looking for, finding, and feeding alligators. Viewed within the broader context of regional tourism—that is, regional theatricalization—the swamp tours are vacations within vacations, escapes from escapes, theatres inside theatres. During the boat ride back one floats within two theatrical frames: one separating wilderness from civilization, and the other separating two hours of touristic theatre from a much larger show called "Cajun Country."

Notes

1. A study by R. Tapper reports: "while tourism is growing on average at about 3 percent per year, growth in nature-based tourism is between 5 percent–10 percent per year" (in Mowforth and Munt 1998:99). On the use of theatrical methods by the tourism industry, performance theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has astutely observed: "Much that is familiar from theater is deployed in some fashion within the tourism industry. Indeed, the industry is a kind of museum of theater practice, even as it innovates new variations and forms" (1997:5).
2. On the number of tours in 1991, see Kate Alexander (1991). The figure for 2002 comes from the *Tour Guide Book* of the Louisiana Office of Tourism. This essay covers tours based in rural areas only; those in the vicinity of New Orleans are not discussed.
3. In studies of tourism a great deal has been made of the particular manner in which tourists regard and decode designated tourist attractions. Sociologist John Urry has argued that people view tourist attractions with a distinctive "tourist gaze." He contends that the designation of an attraction begins with an ascription of "otherness" to a site: "tourism results

from a basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary" (1990:11).

4. For most of Western civilization, wilderness has meant forests, but in North America, with its vast wetlands, swamps have an exceptional place in the cultural imagination. For further reading see Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992) and David C. Miller's *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth Century American Culture* (1989).
5. European explorers were similarly shocked when they came upon Native Americans swimming with alligators. Father Paul du Ru wrote of his travels on the Mississippi River in 1700: "This beast, which passes for something so terrible in Europe, is seen here as another fish, the Savages, while bathing, play with it, without coming to any harm" (in Glasgow 1991:1). Even without such "reality checks" it is difficult for tourists to maintain an inflated fear of alligators, given the social climate of fear that enshrouds Louisiana. Violence in great variety (environmental, racial, economic, domestic, criminal, and vehicular) strikes daily at residents and visitors, making an area with alligators as its greatest threat seem like a safe haven by comparison.
6. I am reminded of a joke told during a walking tour (Swamp Gardens in Gibson, Louisiana), according to which, at a regular zoo, you have a cage with an animal inside, and in front there's a plaque, saying what kind of animal it is and where it comes from, and so on. But at a Cajun zoo, you have a cage with an animal in it and, on the plaque in front, a recipe.
7. "I'm a coonass, Daddy," said a young woman in our group to the elderly guide during a walking tour, after he had discussed the flat, black turtle in his hands, "but I didn't know you could make soup out of them." "Coonass" is a regional term for the Cajun people that ranges in modern usage from the affectionate to the denigrating. Of uncertain origin, the term reflects the shifting identity of Cajuns over the past half-century, both intra- as well as inter-culturally, with its mixed and sometimes provocative meanings. First popular in the 1940s, "coonass" appears originally to have been a term of derision used by outsiders, but the Cajuns themselves later adopted it, and in the 1960s it became, in some circles, almost a rallying cry for ethnic pride. The leaders of most Cajun cultural institutions deplore the term and discourage its use (Ancelet n.d.).

   As to efforts to revive Cajun French, this began with the founding in 1968 of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, which was approved unanimously by the Louisiana State Legislature "for the cultural, economic and tourist benefit of the state" (in Solles 1995:9).
8. The story of the migration of the Acadian settlers to the swamps of Louisiana is scarcely mentioned in the tourism accounts of Cajun history, perhaps because it involved a diaspora encompassing decades of hardship and grief (and so detracts from the fun-loving image). They were dispelled from Acadia by the English in 1755, shipped out by force and often without warning, so that parents were separated from their children, and siblings from each other, and so forth, and then dispersed to seaports hundreds and even thousands of miles apart—Maine, Maryland, South Carolina, England, and France were major destinations—where typically they lived in destitute camps. Only after some 20 years was Louisiana made available to the Acadians as a new home; their survival as a people under these conditions is evidence of their firmly established cultural identity.

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