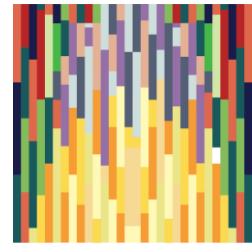


Draining a Swamp

Matt Horrigan



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Abstract

This essay narrates remembered observations of a construction site from a movie production. The figure of the swamp is explored—a real swamp, more populous than metaphor. When certain demagogues set forth to “drain the swamp” or “*drenare la palude*,” did they have industrial dewatering in mind? Also at work is the influence of animal books like *Tarka the Otter*, *Fünfzehn Hasen*, and *Watership Down*, in their scenes of flight.

Keywords: essay, creative nonfiction, memoir, swamp, production cultures

I observed these events in Spring 2019 while working as a Production Assistant, a type of moviemaking support worker whose tasks involve standing in unfamiliar locations for long durations. That day, I held vacant parking spaces for my Production’s work trucks. The below unfolded in a neighbouring lot.

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The labourer scrambles around, running power cables and water hoses. He works alone, dirt on his face, weathered yellow helmet fitting familiarly on his head. Maybe twenty-five, he has a short beard and grins at me watching. Then his radio crackles with an impatient voice. It is time to start the generator—

—which growls and pops; and the pump, which begins to drain the swamp.

Some small animal, a rabbit, darts in a circuit around the swamp. It doesn’t know where to go, so runs along the perimeter defined by a blue fence the labourer must have spent yesterday putting together. The fence is a safety device to prevent gawkers and pedestrians and curious youths from falling into the swamp; but now it also means that the swamp has been invested, and is under siege.

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Years ago, on Hadean Earth (the Earth as Hell), life began with a swamp.¹ Large molecules pooled in pits, tubes, and crevasses. The membrane of the first cell might have been a bubble (Subramaniam et al. 2011), liquid surface held in providential shape—*ribosomatic*. Organisms infiltrated each other, and behaved with coordinated movement, swarms wherein the part sensed the encounters of the whole. Our ancestors adapted to take water with us, in equilibrious, protective hides, each the progeny of the first swamp.

What mind can remember a swamp's birth? A suitable cratering—the accumulation of liquid; nutrients; silt and its dwellers and their predators—who could have lingered long enough to observe this whole process? The closest must be the turtles, like the Snapping Turtles out East, patrolling season by season, growing so old and large that they are microcosmic Turtle Islands, the water too shallow to shade their shells, which instead host protective lawns of moss.

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In the following two sections I am going to tell you two things. The first is what I was attracted to write, based on a notion I had this summer as a car passenger watching other vehicles. The second is what, after some fact-checking, is true.

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Draining a swamp is not easy. The water must go somewhere. It takes a big hose, a big tank, a big truck, to take a swamp's worth of water away. The truck will strain and rev its engine going up hills, and its airbrakes will hiss in the manner of steam trains going down. It will take the swamp's water to the river, or maybe to the salt sea.

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Draining a swamp is not easy. The technical term is “dewatering” (Powers et al. 2007); in addition to a pump, the apparatus involves a filter and holding tank for mud. Where the water goes depends on the locale: “discharge” (150) might flow into a storm drain or through a trench down a hill.

The silt has turned to black muck. Birds flush from sagging branches and some winged insects take off while they can. Methane is in the air, and the hour approaches for the labourer to turn the generator off.

Soon the bulldozer will plow the swamp, and complex life in the swamp will be destroyed. The ironworkers will come, and the forming carpenters; the parade of concrete-

mixers, and the superintendent and safety officers and traffic flaggers and more labourers. The trades will come, with tools locked in Knaack boxes on the foremen's trucks, and from time to time the tradespeople will shelter from rain or heat in trailers stacked up where the generator used to growl. Eventually there will be occupants, with clean clothes and laptop computers, who will join the other workers of this industrial park, to do business where once there was the swamp.

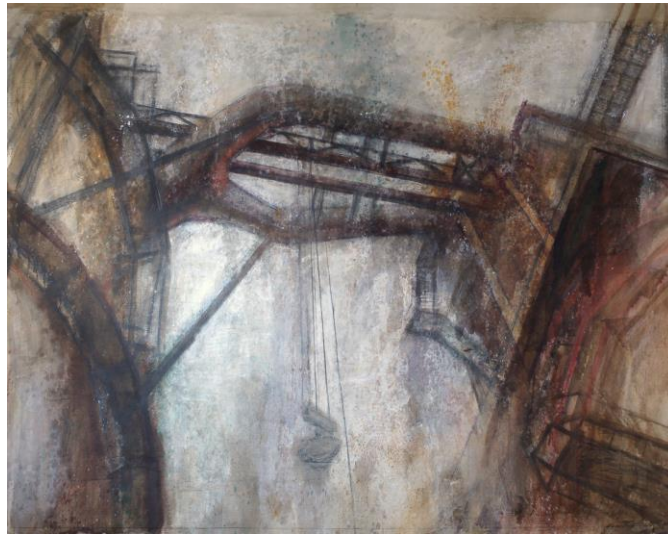


Figure 1: Otdelnov, Pavel Aleksandrovich, *Construction*, 2008, Russia, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>

Notes

1. The precise conditions and time(s) of abiogenesis form a much-studied lacuna. Do we owe our ancestry to mineral deposits (Wächtershäuser 1992), eutectic ice (Attwater et al. 2010), hydrothermal vents (Colín-García 2016), or some other meeting of matter? This essay attempts a gloss broad enough to accommodate what biologists will continue to discover.

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About the Author

Matt Horrigan (he/they) is a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University, living on unceded territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam nations. Matt's research considers cultures of audiovisual production, media subcultures, hauntology, and stage banter.