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Boston: “Tidal Flats and Marshes Once Surrounded the City”

Founded in 1630, Boston, like New York, is older than St. Petersburg founded in 1703 and one of the oldest cities in North America, certainly one of the oldest in the United States of America (Rawson, 2010: 15; Seasholes, 2003: 3; Teal and Teal, 1969: 241). As the “capital of New England,” Boston had both a marshy and a divine beginning as an earthly and heavenly city founded on watery earth. On his voyage in 1630 to New England, John Winthrop, drawing on Matthew 5:14, proclaimed in a sermon that the Puritans in the new world would be “a city upon a hill” (cited by Hall, 2014: 1; Rawson, 2010: 13). Boston was founded as one such Puritan city. Yet Boston was also established in an area surrounded by marshes and tidal mud flats. Boston was both a city on a hill, thus mirroring what the later Puritan John Bunyan ([1678, 1684] 2008: 17–19) called the celestial city in paradise, and a city in a swamp, thus also mirroring Bunyan’s Slough of Despond on the road from the city of destruction on earth. Boston was both a city upon a hill and a city in a swamp, a metropolis in a marsh. Both locations are redolent of Puritan and biblical associations, both of which were secularized with similar moralistic and nationalistic overtones, and both of which involved the destruction of wetlands.

In their justly famous and pioneering book on the salt marsh, John and Mildred Teal (1969: 240) begin the second paragraph of their chapter on “Human Destruction of Marshes” by relating how “old Boston set an example of marsh filling which was followed by many other cities as they grew up along the East Coast.” Perhaps that should be “bad example.” Other such

cities on the east coast of North America include New York and Washington. The Teals go on to relate the history of marsh filling in the Boston area in a marsh-by-marsh account spanning the next 250 years and over the following five pages until “all traces of the old marshes and mud flats were gone” by 1880 (245). The Teals’ account of marsh filling in Boston is curiously not cited in recent histories of Boston who both prefer the euphemistic “land making” (Rawson, 2010; Seasholes, 2003).

Rawson (2010: 1, 2, 15, 23, 196, and 197; see also 206 and 220) in his recent study of “the making of Boston” as the “Eden on the Charles River,” describes on the first page how Bostonians took down hills to “make new land by filling tidal flats” in a massive cut and fill engineering enterprise culminating in “the filling of the Back Bay” with its “shallow waters,” thereby “converting water into land.” Or in more Christian terms, converting pagan wetland into Christian dryland, early creation swamp into later Edenic garden. Rawson does not mention the destruction of the marshes as such, despite citing Edward Everett Hale who refers to “the marshes” of Boston (cited by Rawson, 2010: 1). Along similar lines to Hale in the 1820s, William Lawrence in the 1850s described the Back Bay as “water and marsh” (cited by Whitehill, 1968: 141). The Back Bay for Sam Warner (1999: 9) was “finished off by having its marshes converted into a handsome park (the Fenway)” by Frederick Law Olmsted in an act of both aquaterracide and landscape architecture, death and resurrection, the old life of the marsh converted into the new life of landscaping.

The process of marsh filling and destruction construed in evangelical Christian terms culminated with Frederick Law Olmsted, who, as we will see later and according to Whitehill (1968: 181), “converted the noxious flats of the Muddy River [to the west of the Charles River] into a healthy and decorative park known as the Back Bay Fens,” a park that was no longer a fen as park and fen are inimical to each other, a park that was a fen in name only. In the meantime, before it was converted, and as the pretext for its conversion, the Muddy River became what Whitehill calls a “Stygian morass” (180), a marshy river of the underworld as in Dante’s *Inferno* ([1314] 2006: 63; see also Giblett, 1996: 27–29). Boston wetlands went from underworld to overworld, from hell to Eden, and then to heaven, or at least the world of the blessed after death if David Gourlay had had his way. In Gourlay’s 1844 proposal the Back Bay was to be dredged and kept filled with clear water for “health, cleanliness and

beauty” (cited by Whitehill, 1968: 149). The dredged mud would be used for the construction of an island to be known as the Elysian Fields, the place of the blessed after death. As both “Eden on the Charles” and Elysian Fields in the Back Bay, Boston would have been paradise at both the beginning and end of divine history and at both ends of chronological time.

Boston was not only “a city of hills” and a city in a marsh, but also a city that took down hills to fill wetlands in a great leveling of the land by cutting down the high places to fill the low places in order to produce a flat surface on which the inscription of the city could take place. Rawson (2010: 3) cites Henry Tappan for whom “life in a great city is, at best, a war with nature.” The life of a great city set in swamps or marshes was, at birth, a war against wetlands, the kind of war that the Fascist Mussolini liked to fight because it was so easy to win (Giblett, 1996: 115). Rather than a city in a swamp, Boston, as Rawson (2010: 13) cites later, wanted to be “a city upon a hill” (as we have seen), before many were taken down or reduced (as graphically depicted by Rawson to fill marshes [198–199]). Boston also wanted to be the “Athens of America,” the ersatz ancient Greek precursor to Washington, the Rome of America, the equally ersatz ancient Latin successor on the Tiber of the Potomac (as we will see in Chapter 13).

By focusing on tidal flats and neglecting the term “marsh” and preferring the euphemistic “making new land” and “landmaking” to marsh filling, Rawson is following in the muddy footsteps and repeating the conventional view of Seasholes (2003: 2), who, in her study of Boston entitled *Gaining Ground*, uses the term “landmaking” in which land is “created by filling in the tidal flats and marshes that once surrounded the city.” Landmaking is wetland unmaking; gaining ground is at the expense of losing marshes; gaining dryland means losing wetland; making land means unmaking wetland; landmaking is a euphemism for marsh filling. Boston not only began the dire tradition of marsh filling among east coast cities, but also probably kept ahead of all such cities in doing so. Boston for Seasholes “probably has more made land than any other city in North America” (2). In other words, Boston has probably filled in and destroyed more wetlands than any other city in North America, a dubious distinction.

The single biggest area of tidal marsh in Boston to be filled was Back Bay. Newman and Holton (2006: xii) begin their study of the wetland filling of Back

Bay by claiming that “this is the largest landfill project ever undertaken in the United States for residential and commercial purposes” and conclude that it was “the most ambitious landfill project and urban development effort of the nineteenth century.” Not just in the United States but in the whole world. Back Bay, according to Seasholes (2003: 154), “originally about 737.5 acres in extent, was a vast expanse of tidal flats interlaced with navigable creeks. It was divided into two unequal parts by a marshy ... promontory.” There is some dispute over this figure though. According to Newman and Holton (2006: vii; see also 11) “the original Back Bay tidal marsh ... covered about 850 acres.”

As Boston developed and expanded the backwater bay soon became black-water bay as “sewage was discharged onto the [tidal] flats surrounding the city, most notably in Back Bay, which by [the] mid [nineteenth]-century was described [in a report for the city of Boston] as a ‘great cesspool ... [with] a greenish scum ... while ... the surface of the water ... bubbl[es] like a cauldron with the noxious gases that are exploding from the corrupting mass below’” (Seasholes, 2003: 7 and 172; see also Whitehill, 1968: 145).

The same report for the city of Boston went on to say that into this “great cesspool is daily deposited all the filth of a large and constantly increasing population” (cited by Newman and Holton, 2006: 40). In accordance with the prevailing miasmatic theory of disease of the day, the cesspool of sewage breathed out “pestilential exhalations” that the west wind sent across the entire city. Newman and Holton conclude that “presumed health hazards caused by the pollution [of Back Bay wetlands] thus created a crisis that was one of the primary motivations for the filling of the Back Bay” wetlands (42–43). Instead of cleaning up the polluters at the top end of the pipe, the polluted wetland at the bottom end of the pipe was filled. This “bottom of the pipe” solution hardly solves the problem at the top end of the pipe. The health hazards posed by polluted wetland were misconceived in the mistaken view of the miasmatic theory of disease as being produced by the wetland.

As a result, the wetland became regarded as “a wasteland. And a wasteland it soon became” as the Teals (1969: 244) point out. Wetland to wasteland marks the sad and sorry history of many urban wetlands. This transformation took place in name and in fact. Yet as wetlands were often regarded as wastelands in name in the first place, the transformation of wetlands into wastelands in fact was a self-fulfilling and self-congratulatory prophecy with

wetlands being named as wastelands. If the wetland was wasteland, it was only natural that it became a wasteland. It was merely fulfilling its manifest or divine destiny.

The wet wasteland was unpleasant to both the eye and the nose, to the sense of sight and smell. "The mud flats on either side of the Charles" for Albert Matthews (cited by Whitehill, 1968: 156) were "an offense to the eye and a dire affront to the nose." The polluted Muddy River was described by E. W. Howe (180) as "the foulest marsh and muddy flats to be found anywhere in Massachusetts without a single attractive feature." The wetland was not only aesthetically displeasing but also olfactorily offensive, not in its natural, or precontact, state, but in its now cultural state. The polluted marshes of the Muddy River in the late nineteenth for Whitehill were "richly fragrant with sewage," not with the bouquet of living marsh (158).

The wetland became wasteland, which, like the mud flats, were so offensive "both to the eye and the nose" (cited by Zaitzevsky, 1982: 153) and potentially injurious to the health of Bostonians that it had to be filled, another step in the fulfillment of its manifest destiny. Yet the Bostonians in their wisdom, or lack of it, had created the unhealthy wetland in the first place as the Back Bay had become in the 1850s what William Lawrence described as "the city dump, where ashes and other refuse were thrown by tipcarts" (cited by Whitehill, 1968: 145). The Back Bay city dump in the 1850s was habituated by those denizens of the urban underworld, the rag pickers, or *chiffoniers*, beloved of Baudelaire and Benjamin in Paris and graphically depicted by Winslow Homer in Boston (155, figure 85; Seasholes, 2003: 185, figure 7.24).

By midcentury what Whitehill (1968: 150) calls "the unsanitary aspects of the Back Bay [including a common sewer entering it (145)] forced public action" with the filling of the Back Bay beginning in 1858 (Newman and Holton, 2006: 121). In the late nineteenth century, according to Whitehill (1968: 173), the city created "a new heart" in what "a few short decades before had been a stinking eyesore." In other words, the city created a new heart in its smelly nether regions, its grotesque lower earthly and urban stratum. It converted what Howe (cited by Whitehill, 1968: 180) went on to call "a body of water so foul that even clams and eels cannot live there," an uninhabitable place for nonhuman animals made into such by human animals, into a new heart for the city.

The Back Bay commissioners initially “envisioned the transformation of slime and sludge into ‘a magnificent system of streets and squares’ on solid land on one side of the Back Bay” (Mackin, 1999: 204), and the other side later into park and Fenway. City authorities welcomed the transformation. Seasholes (2003: 173) cites “an 1853 city report [that] stated, ‘if the improvements [in Back Bay] are consummated, a putrid and worthless marsh will be changed to solid and wholesome dry land.’” In other words, wet land was unwholesome and useless; only dry land is useful and wholesome. But the putrid and worthless wetland had been made unwholesome by the discharge of sewage into it. Wetlands without the excessive discharge of sewage into them are perfectly wholesome and worthy of conservation, and neither ready nor ripe for “gaining ground” and “landmaking.” The health hazards posed by the polluted wetland misconceived in the mistaken view of the miasmatic theory of disease were consummated in the use of the monstrous steam shovel and railroad to dredge, drain, and fill, or landscape in the case of the Back Bay Fens, the supine wetland (Newman and Holton, 2006: 79–92; Seasholes, 2003: 172–198; Whitehill, 1968: 152–153).

The transformation of the Back Bay marshes and tidal flats culminated in the 1880s when Frederick Law Olmsted, “the father of American landscape architecture” (Hall, 2014: 46) and “the nation’s most eminent landscape architect” (Zaitzevsky, 1982: 52) designed what he called the “Back Bay.” Seasholes (2003: 8; see also 215–216) emphasizes that the Back Bay Fens project, “which created the first park in Boston’s new public park system, was undertaken not to create a recreational area but to deal with the sewage that had been carried into” it. This “wetland-remaking” project eventually created an area in total of 397 acres of dry land, more than half the original area of Back Bay (423). Rather than “landmaking,” the Back Bay Fens project was more precisely wetland-remaking, or constructing an artificial wetland (perhaps the first in the world), as Olmsted designed “Back Bay Fens” (215 and 220; Zaitzevsky, 1982: 57). He did not design “Back Bay Park” as fens can’t be parks, and parks aren’t fens.

Without subscribing explicitly to the miasmatic theory of disease, Olmsted (1997: 226–277) wrote in 1881 that “the leading and only justifying purpose of the Back Bay Improvement, under the present design, is the abatement of a complicated nuisance, threatening soon to be a deadly peril to the whole city

as a propagating and breeding-ground of pestilential epidemics.” Olmsted does not say whether miasma or other vectors conveyed these “pestilential epidemics.” Yet the implication is clear that the Back Bay wetland itself was the breeding ground for “pestilential epidemics” and not that its now polluted waters were the breeding ground for “pestilential epidemics.”

Olmsted for Beveridge and Rocheleau (1998: 83) “had not been comfortable with the idea of creating a highly finished and decorative park on the mudflats and marsh of the proposed Back Bay site.” He was not comfortable with the idea of a park and came up with his own plan. Zaitzevsky (1982: 55–57; see also 186) argues:

The rationale behind the plan was very far from what was commonly understood as a park, as Olmsted painstakingly explained; the design was primarily a sanitary improvement ... A second aim was to restore the salt marsh to its original condition ... He therefore designed the area so that it would *appear to be a natural marsh around which a city happened to grow*. (My emphases)

This design enacted a techno-pastoral idyll of a city growing accidentally around a marsh, instead of, as in just about every other case, a city destroying a marsh in order to grow. Olmsted’s design amounted to nothing less than returning part of the city to its original state surrounded by tidal flats and marshes, except that the marsh surrounding the city was now surrounded by the city; the city that was contained originally by marshes now contained a rejuvenated artificial marsh.

Olmsted tried to have a bet both ways in the inimical relationship of city and marsh. To try to do so, he designed “a marsh *in* the city” as Zaitzevsky (1982: 57; my emphasis) precisely puts it. Zaitzevsky relates how “Olmsted decided, for both practical and aesthetic reasons, to keep the Fens a salt marsh” (154). For Rybczynski (2003: 342) “the problem, Olmsted quickly realized, was not how to design a park.” That would have been easy for Olmsted as Central Park in New York demonstrates (as we saw in the previous chapter). The more perplexing problem was twofold, a sanitary and civil engineering problem of sewage and tides. To solve the sewage problem “in collaboration with the city engineer he devised a plan that diverted the sewage into underground conduits and solved the tidal problem by creating an

artificial salt-grass marsh. This was not scenic design ... It was not intended to be a work of art" (342–343). Nor was it intended to be a work of wetland rehabilitation and restoration as those terms were not in the nineteenth-century landscape architect's lexicon. But it was intended to be an artificial wetland, and it may have been the first artificial wetland to be constructed. Olmsted's Back Bay Fens for Anne Whiston Spirn (1995: 104) were "the first attempt, so far as I know, to *construct* a wetland" (her emphasis). The result was not only "unparklike," as Zaitzevsky (1982: 57) puts it, but also "wetlandlike." Zaitzevsky relates how "this choice committed him to a planting program so innovative that it literally had no precedent" as he had to research and plant wetland plants (186).

Zaitzevsky (1982: 57) relates that "the salt marsh design survived" for only fifteen years after the Fens project was complete at the time of Olmsted's retirement in 1895. She concludes that "the marshes are, of course, gone" and "it is futile to regret the original salt marshes." It is not futile, though, to mourn their loss, to commemorate their passing in retelling their history, and to hope that a marsh in the city will become more prevalent in the future in other cities in keeping with Olmsted's visionary design for the Back Bay Fens.

Olmstead participated in a nineteenth-century movement of urban nature, or more precisely urbane nature (as we saw in the previous chapter with Central Park in New York), whose prophet, poet, priest, and philosopher was Boston-born Ralph Waldo Emerson for whom "Nature [invariably with a capital 'N'] is sanative, refining, elevating" (cited by Mackin, 1999: 212 [citing "Progress of Culture"]). In his lecture and poem on Boston (excerpted at the beginning of the lecture or used in part as an epigraph), Emerson ignores the Back Bay Fens. Emerson (1904a: 213; 1904b: 182) begins his poem about Boston by describing how it "looked eastward" toward the sea, and not westward toward the Back Bay, and how "twice each day the flowing sea / Took Boston in its arms." Some residents complained that twice each day the tides of flowing sewage took Boston in its arms. Emerson (1904a: 215) later describes how "Each street leads downward to the sea, / Or landward to the West." Some streets also lead downward to the west to marsh and flats, and so more precisely lead wetland-ward to the west. Emerson (1904a: 215) invokes

and lauds Boston as "O happy town beside the sea." Boston is not also a happy town beside the marsh and flats for Emerson.

In his lecture on Boston delivered there in 1861 and first published in 1892, ten years after his death, Boston for Emerson (1904b: 188) "commands attention as the town which was appointed in the destiny of nations to lead the civilization of North America." The manifest destiny of the United States to conquer the continent resides for Emerson not in the nation but in the city of Boston. Emerson regards Boston as a better location for the foundation of European civilization in North America than Plymouth. He later lauds Boston's situation on "our beautiful bay with its broad and deep waters" (190) and ignores the broad and shallow waters of the Back Bay marshes and flats. "The best point for a city was at the bottom of a deep and indented bay" for Emerson (190) "where a bold shore was bounded by a country of rich undulating woodland," but where in fact a bold shore on the seaward segued into the moving boundaries of the Back Bay fen of rich flat wetland.

Emerson's Boston Brahmin and urbane view of "Nature" as "sanative, refining, elevating" can be contrasted with the swampy view of his fellow-Concordian and ostensibly fellow-Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, and his view of nature as equally healing, but also unrefined and lowering. Thoreau also upsets the usual dissociation between swamp and city by seeing the city as swamp and so subverting the unfavorable connotations of the swamp as a place of darkness, disease, and even death. Rather than the swamp, Thoreau saw "society," "civilization," and the modern city as bearers of disease, or perhaps more precisely he saw the modern city as swamp in the conventional sense of an uncanny and unhomely place of disease and horror, and saw simultaneously the swamp as canny and homely, as postmodern dwelling in the unconventional sense of a homely, but also wild (homely *because* wild) place. Thoreau (1962) could "see less difference between a city and some dismallest swamp than formerly. It is a swamp too dismal and dreary, however, for me." Although he would prefer the swamp as swamp over the city as swamp, he nevertheless goes on to make a finer distinction: "I would prefer even a more cultivated place, free from miasma and crocodiles" (II, 47).

Perhaps Thoreau was wise to prefer “a more cultivated place” free of crocodiles, though this did not mean that he preferred the city to the swamp, especially as the former could be as dangerous in common parlance as the latter. The city as swamp for Thoreau (1982: 350; emphasis in the original) had its own diseases and horrors:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place which we call *reality*.

Ironically or fortuitously, and probably unknown to Thoreau, the four cities he mentions were founded in, or next to, and expanded into swamps as we have seen. Thoreau’s hometown of Concord had its surrounding swamps as the topographic maps of the area of his time show and as he mentions (as we will see shortly and as his most recent biographer reiterates¹). Thoreau visited and wrote about these swamps, such as Gowing’s Swamp as will see shortly. His homoerotic search for a hard or tight bottom (in a number of senses) has been remarked upon by a number of critics (see Michaels, 1977). What has been less remarked upon is the fact that the hard bottom is primarily at the bottom of a pond or swamp, though “there is a hard bottom everywhere,” even “with the bogs and quicksands of society” (Thoreau, 1982: 568–589).

A deep- and hard-bottomed lake for Thoreau (1982) is symbolic of a kind of highly philosophical self-reflexivity, rather than of merely narcissistic self-contemplation. For him “a lake is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (435; see also 67, 339, 437, and 527). The swamp, by contrast, for Thoreau is shallow and soft, the first birth of nature:

That central meadow and pool in Gowing’s Swamp is its very navel, *omphalos*, where the umbilical cord was cut that bound it to creation’s womb. Methinks every swamp tends to have or suggests such an interior tender spot. The sphagnous crust that surrounds the pool is pliant and quaking,

like the skin or muscles of the abdomen; you seem to be slumping into the very bowels of the swamp. (524; and 1962: IX, 394)

The surface of the swamp is the soft spot of nature, even the breasts of the Great Mother or Goddess of the swamps when Thoreau (1962: IX, 38–39) refers to “the soft open sphagnous center of the swamp” as “these sphagnous breasts of the swamp—swamp pearls.” The soft center of the swamp is also related to the human body for Thoreau as “the part of you that is wettest is fullest of life” (X, 262). Thoreau not only resists the dominant patriarchal cultural paradigm, but also supports the alternative matrifocal cultural paradigm (for the two cultural paradigms, see Giblett, 2011: chapter 1). Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, who figured slavery as a swamp, slavery for Thoreau (1962: VI, 365) was the part of the body politic fullest of death: “slavery ... has no life. It is only a constant decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils.” Slavery, in other words, is the dead black waters of a polluted waste wetland, unlike the recurring decaying, death, and rebirth of the living black waters of a healthy wild wetland fragrant to Thoreau’s healthy sense of smell important in the alternative cultural paradigm.

Thoreau refused the miasmatic theory of disease by stating how “miasma and infection are from within, not without” (Thoreau, 1980: 261; 1962: V, 394). He countered the theory by suggesting how “the steam which rises from swamps and pools is as dear and domestic as that of our own kettle” (Thoreau, 1982: 61). For Thoreau swamps and stagnant pools were not the antithesis of, nor a threat to, the homely, but of comparable value. He did not valorize the wetland over the homely but gave them equal value unlike those of his (and my) contemporaries who denigrated and feared the wetland (and accordingly valorized the canny over the uncanny).

Rather than seeing the airs of swamps as bearers of disease, Thoreau (1982: 66) made a crucial distinction between fog and miasma, and even saw fog as healing.

The fog ... in whose fenny labyrinth
The bittern booms and heron wades;
Fountain-head and source of rivers ...
Spirit of lakes and seas and rivers, ...

Bear only perfumes and the scent
Of healing herbs to just men's fields!

In a poem devoted exclusively to the subject and entitled simply "Fog," Thoreau referred to it as "dull water spirit—and Protean god," as "incense of earth," "spirit of lakes and rivers," and as "night thoughts of earth" (237–238). Rather than a vector for disease and a cause of death like miasma, fog is a source of new life. Rather than regarding fog and mist as vapors bearing disease and death, why not see them as the visible manifestation of the exhalations of the earth, particularly of the trees, on which we are dependent for life? After all, we are in symbiosis with the oxygen-producing plants of the earth.

The swamp vapors were as equally homely for Thoreau as kettle steam because the swamp itself was better than a homely garden. Indeed, if Thoreau (1982: 612–613) had to choose between them he would have chosen the swamp every time: "yes, though you may think me perverse, if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a Dismal Swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp." Thoreau prefers a dismal swamp to a beautiful garden because he says, "I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village" (612). The swamps are "the wildest and richest gardens that we have. Such a depth of verdure into which you sink" (Thoreau, 1962: IV, 281). Thoreau was no mere walker by the wetland, but a wanderer in the wetland who was not afraid of sinking into it as long as he eventually found "a hard bottom."

Thoreau (1982: 613) makes his most memorable pronouncement on wetlands in his essay "Walking" in which he invokes and counters the dominant trope of "the Dismal Swamp": "when I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most impenetrable 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." Thoreau is not merely alluding to, and countering, the Great Dismal Swamp on the border between Virginia and North Carolina, but refusing and inverting (if not subverting) the solid citizen's, and the dominant cultural paradigm's, view that all swamps are dismal

by regarding them as the most sacred of places, as the holy of holies as viewed by the alternative cultural paradigm.

Rather than the Garden of Eden, for Thoreau (1993: 198) “some rich withdrawn and untrodden swamp ... is your real garden.” Yet this preference for dismal swamps over town gardens was no mere nostalgia for a lost pastoral paradise as “hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps” (Thoreau, 1982: 611). Hope and the future for me are not only in the native quaking zone of swamps but also in the feral quaking zone of cities, including their slums and suburbs, and their regions of rust and ruin. Thoreau prefers the resources of hope cultivated by the alternative cultural paradigm in the swampy quaking zone to the monuments to the past enshrined by the dominant cultural paradigm in the horticultural, agricultural, and architectural zones. Thoreau’s rhetorical tactic against the stratagems of standard swamp-speak within the dominant cultural paradigm was to displace and upset the usual or normative disjunction between swamp and garden by seeing the swamp as garden, and so exploit the favorable associations of the garden as a place of light and life.

For Thoreau (1962: IV, 449) “my temple is the swamp.” He sought refuge and renewal in the swamp as a sacred place, indeed as the inner sanctum, the holy of holies (Thoreau, 1982: 613), into which, like the High Priest, he would “annually go on a pilgrimage” (Thoreau, 1993: 197). He would perform the ritual of life-giving, self-baptism in the swamp whose waters were not rank poison: “far from being poisoned in the strong water of the swamp, it is a sort of baptism for which I had waited” (Thoreau, 1962: IX, 376–377). Thoreau was a swamp self-Baptist. He upset the conventional view of the dominant cultural paradigm that swamps were poisonous by parodying it in his reference to the “rank and venomous luxuriance in this swamp” (IX, 60).

Rather than a reason for avoiding the black swamp of depression and melancholia, Thoreau (1962: X, 150) suggested that “if you are afflicted with melancholy ... go to the swamp.” He did not subscribe to the miasmatic theory of malaria, nor of melancholy unlike some of his contemporaries, nor to the theory of the humors in the dominant cultural paradigm. Even at the worst of times he could prescribe a swamp cure: “when life looks sandy and barren, is reduced to its lowest terms, we have no appetite, and it has no flavor, then

let me visit such a swamp as this, deep and impenetrable, where the earth quakes for a rod around you at every step, with its open water where swallows skim and twitter" (IV, 231). When desire is diminished and life is dissatisfying, both figured here orally, the quaking zone of the swamp has depths and softness that the shallowness of its waters belie, and which the depths of the lake cannot dream of. Thoreau values precisely those usual pejorative connotations in the dominant cultural paradigm that attach to the "depth," or horizontal extension, and impenetrability of the swamp.

For Thoreau (1982: 613), the swamp is "the strength, the marrow of Nature." The strength of nature, for him, lies not in the hard bones of the dry land, but in the soft marrow of the wetlands, what he also called the liquor of nature that feeds the earthly body, the body environmental: "the very sight of this half-stagnant pond-hole, drying up and leaving bare mud . . . is agreeable and encouraging to behold, as it if contained the seeds of life, the liquor rather, boiled down. The foulest water will bubble purely. They speak to our blood, even these stagnant, slimy pools" (Thoreau, 1962: IV, 102). They speak to our blood because they contain water, which for Thoreau is "the most living part of nature. This is the blood of the earth" (XIII, 163). Water for Thoreau is the life-blood of the body of the earth. Thoreau sees the earth as body.

Thoreau's (1982: 187) blood circulates with the blood of the earth and with the liquor and marrow of swamps in the body of the Earth: "surely one may as profitably be soaked in the juices of a swamp for one day as pick his way dryshod over sand." Thoreau would prefer the problems of travel wetshod through the wetland, the marrow of the Earth, to the ease of passage over the dry land, the bones. Yet the problems of travel across the wetland are seasonal anyway in the higher latitudes as "the deep, impenetrable marsh, where the heron waded and bittern squatted [in summer], is made pervious [in winter] to our swift shoes, as if a thousand railroads had been made into it" (71). Thoreau sees himself as part and parcel of nature, as circulating in the body of nature not via the circulatory system of rivers, but in the stagnant system of marrow through immersion in the swamp by a kind of secular baptism.

Without the wetland, without wetlands, the world would fall apart. The wetland feeds and holds together, nurtures and coheres, the skeleton of the body of nature. Without the wetland there would be nothing to replenish the skeletal system of the dry land, the backbones of mountain ranges,

the ribs of ridges, the limbs of peninsulas and capes, and the fingers of land reaching into the sea all of which (including the marrow of the wetlands) supply and make possible the fertile plains, prairies, and steppes on which agriculture takes place, on which the dominant cultural paradigm relies, on which industry depends, on which cities “live,” or more precisely which they parasitically suck dry.

Instead of the standard rhetoric of swamp-speak in the dominant cultural paradigm in which the swamp is a place of death and disease, for Thoreau and the alternative cultural paradigm the swamp is the stuff of life and death. Indeed, for Thoreau (cited by Richardson, 1986: 114–115), “death is only the phenomenon of the individual or class. Nature does not recognize it . . . Death is ‘a law and not an accident—It is as common as life . . . The law of their [flow-ers]’ death is the law of new life.” The swamp, as with nature generally, upsets the hard and fast distinction between life and death. Thoreau (1993: 100–101; and 1962: XIV, 109) inverts the morbid Christian orthodoxy of the line from the Anglican/Church of England *Book of Common Prayer* that “in the midst of life we are in death” by maintaining how “in the midst of death we are in life.” In the midst of death in the swamp, we are in life. The swamp as marrow is constantly being renewed by the life-blood of the earth and constantly renews the bones of the body of the earth that give it structure.

One of the attractions of the swamp for Thoreau (1962: VIII, 99), especially in winter, was that here was a place on which no other “man” had left a trace, and so it was a place where he could leave his mark on a tabula rasa: “I love to wade and flounder through the swamp now, these bitter cold days when the snow lies deep on the ground . . . to wade through the swamps, all snowed up, untracked by man.” Unlike the snow of field, pond, or road, the snow of the swamp could remain untracked for a time in order to allow Thoreau (1962: VIII, 160 and 167) to write his own message on its clean sheet, its “blank page,” without fear of interruption or interference from fellow humans, especially citizens, those denizens of the city.

After wading around in a swamp Thoreau (1962: IX, 42) felt like an explorer: “I seemed to have reached a new world, so wild a place . . . far away from human society. What’s the need of visiting far-off mountains and bogs, if a half-hour’s walk will carry me into such wildness and novelty.” Thoreau explored swamps not just physically but also metaphysically. Indeed, he did

not even need to go on a half-hour's walk visiting bogs to be carried into wildness: "it is in vain to dream of wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bogs in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, that is, than I import into it" (IX, 43). Wild(er)ness is a cognitive, corporeal, and cultural experience, not a geographical category of (wet)land conservation or use, or lack of it, indigenous or industrial.

Thoreau (1982) saw the swamp explorer as a kind of Columbus of the new world of swamps not only without but also within. He asked rhetorically, "Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered." He then exhorts his readers also to "be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought" (560), and not of sewers. The interior is either a kind of swamp in winter, a frozen tabula rasa, to be explored, mapped, written upon, and so colonized or a swamp in summer with its quaking surface that could be decolonized and demapped.

For Thoreau (1982: 376) it is the screech owls, or more precisely "their dismal scream," that best express his view of wetlands as dialogic other

I love to hear their wailing ... as if it were the dark and tearful side of music ... They are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with their wailing hymns or threnodies in the scenery of their transgressions. They give me a new sense of the variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling.

Nature has just as much capacity for "evil" as it, or "she," has for "good." Nature is not all goodness and light for Thoreau but also has its dark and evil "side." Yet the owls are unlike the stymphalian birds of the Hercules myth in that they are not a monstrous deviation from nature that define and maintain the norm by contrast, but are a part of nature.

Nature for Thoreau (1982: 376) is both "our common dwelling," our homely setting of steam rising from kettle and swamp, and "this vast, savage, howling mother of ours" from whose breast "we are so early weaned ... to society." Nature for Thoreau, unlike for his contemporaries and the dominant cultural

paradigm, is both homely and unhomely, both canny and uncanny. It is both a place of goodness and light perhaps exemplified by the clear “eyes” of the lake and pond, and a place of life and death, light and dark represented by the “marrow” of the swamp. Thoreau’s double vision, arguably postmodern *avant la lettre*, embraces and entertains both at once without any sense of contradiction between them. The swamp is not a place of melancholy and madness for Thoreau, but a place where melancholy and madness are mediated and alleviated.

The screech owls function for Thoreau (1982: 377) as a kind of post-Christian “scapegoat” (or more precisely scape-screech owls), which instead of being driven off into the premodern wilderness to bear the sins of “men” away from civilization and the city, are part and parcel of the postmodern wilderness (or in this case more precisely the scape-wetland of the wetland-scape), in which “men” can find the sacred and solace, and refuge and sanctuary from the rigors and stresses of modern city life:

I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men. It is a sound admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized. They represent the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have. All day the sun has shone on the surface of some savage swamp ... but now a dismal and fitting day dawns, and a different race of creatures awakes to express the meaning of Nature there.

The owls suggest a premodern, matrifocal wetland that has not yet been subject to a patriarchal, developmental, and industrial technological imperative, yet which is now subjected to that imperative in the very act of naming it as “vast and undeveloped” with its meanings expressed by owls.

The postmodern wetland is worlds away from the melancholic marshes and the slough of despond: “there can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still” (Thoreau, 1982: 382). The place par excellence in which to live literally in the midst of Nature, even up to one’s chin, is the swamp. Given the difficulties the swamp poses for travel, especially by modern, Western means of transportation, it is the perfect place to still the senses, and the limbs, and allow the swamp to write on them, not as a *tabula rasa*, but as a responsive surface. As for dwellings,

Thoreau enjoins us to “bring your sills up to the very edge of the swamp, then (though it may not be the best place for a dry cellar)” (612). The slimy edge of the swamp for Thoreau is not the place from which to flee for the bright and sublimed city lights, but the place to live for the bright swamp lights of ignited marsh gases that do not lead to madness, but could even lead to Thoreau’s ultimate goal: “unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o’-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no man nor firefly has shown me the causeway to it” (625).

Thoreau (1962: X, 252) seems to be developing a conservation language within the alternative cultural paradigm that would counter the standard Romantic perception that “unless Nature sympathizes with and speaks to us, as it were, the most fertile and blooming regions are barren and dreary,” in other words, are a modern wasteland. The postmodern wetland, by contrast, is where Nature does not necessarily sympathize with us, nor we with it, but speaks to us, as the screech owls do, in the most fertile and blooming regions of the swamp. The swamp may be bare, but certainly not barren: “in swamps where there is only here and there an evergreen tree amid the quaking moss and cranberry beds, the bareness does not suggest poverty” (Thoreau, 1982: 195). The bareness does not suggest barrenness but fertility. Swamp water is living.

The postmodern wetland may not be beautiful in the conventional sense of possessing appropriate qualities of form, texture, color, depth of field, and point of view. Perhaps that is why it has been regarded in and by the dominant cultural paradigm as barren and dreary. If the wetland had been regarded as beautiful, perhaps its perceived uselessness would not have been held so badly against it. Perhaps if the wetland could now be regarded as beautiful, the fact that it is “useless” as it stands for agriculture or urban development would not matter so much. For Thoreau (1993: 144), “whatever we have perceived to be in the slightest degree beautiful is of infinitely more value to us than what we have only as yet discovered to be useful and to serve our purpose.” The trouble with wetlands is that they have been regarded in and by the dominant cultural paradigm as lacking both beauty *and* utility. This lack has been held against them.

The swamp may lack the typical characteristics of beauty, but it does possess gradation, which Thoreau saw as one of the fundamental aesthetic and

ecological hallmarks of nature: “nature loves gradation ... the swamp was variously shaded, or painted even, like a rug, with the sober colors running gradually into each other” (cited by Richardson, 1986: 360). Rather than subjecting wetlands to an aesthetic and utilitarian, even capitalist, imperative, perhaps it would be preferable to see wetlands as fulfilling vital, ecological functions necessary for life on earth to be sustained. Nature not only loves gradation in color, but also gradation between land and water, life and death, light and darkness—living black waters of its wetlands.