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The Vine That Ate The North? Northern Reactions to Kudzu, 1876-2009

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in
History

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Abstract

Kudzu, *Pueraria montana*, is a perennial climbing vine native to Japan that was introduced in North America in 1876. With little awareness of where the plant could thrive, people across the United States grew the vine wherever they could. As a result, kudzu was not considered northern or southern. New Deal era policies centered around soil conservation encouraged the widespread usage of kudzu vine and discovered that kudzu grew best in southeastern states. This led to an increased association of the vine with the South. During the Great Migration and with the vine's growing reputation as an invasive species, kudzu became a symbol used to represent the South as a wild space in contrast to the North. By the 1970s, with the rise of states' rights and religious conservatism, and the election of a president from Georgia, many northerners saw evidence of southernization. Northerners then characterized kudzu as a southern invader threatening the North. I argue that calling kudzu a southern invader reflected anxieties around southernization of the country and worked as a potent symbol for what northerners saw as unwanted southern influences.

Lay Summary

Kudzu is a vine from Japan that was introduced to North America in 1876. Gardeners, agricultural scientists, and farmers used it for various tasks, from decorating a terrace to stopping soil erosion. Kudzu grew most successfully in the South, though there were isolated instances of the plant growing northward. When the vine became more associated with the South, there also emerged problems with the plant growing over trees and plants. Meanwhile, the South began experiencing massive media attention due to crisis situations during the civil rights movement during the 1960s. As a result, northerners used kudzu as a symbol for unwanted southern influences. By the 1970s and 1980s when the entire country began to take on policies once restricted to only the South, northerners labelled the plant as a southern invader to reflect larger fears about southern influences, which persist today.

Keywords

Kudzu, vines, Invasive species, 20th century, Northern U.S., Southern U.S., Mason-Dixon line, Canada.

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Introduction: The Great White North with a southern twist

Ecologist Gerald Waldron first saw it on the north shore of Lake Erie in July 2009. He instantly recognized the plant with bright green leaves as kudzu, the famously nicknamed “vine that ate the South.”¹ A perennial legume from Japan, kudzu is a member of the *Fabaceae* family. It grows upward on whatever surfaces permit it and its leaves are broad and three pointed; the plant’s roots can run six to seven feet deep, weigh upwards of two hundred pounds and are rich in protein. When left alone, it grows very quickly, a trait that people have both celebrated and disdained. Introduced to North America as a garden ornamental in 1876, kudzu was later used to curb soil erosion in the southeastern states in the 1930s. The plant’s fast growth earned it the nickname, “Miracle Vine.” By 1946, over a million acres in the southeast were covered with the vine. But when it began overtaking plants and trees, southerners reviled its fast growth. Soon, it became known as an invasive pest. Ecologists, though, assumed that cooler climates kept kudzu vines from spreading northward. The sighting in Canada suggested otherwise.

Before this encounter, Waldron believed that the only kudzu growing in Canada was in his carefully monitored greenhouse in Toronto. He took great care in not letting the plant grow outside the area, not wanting to be responsible for introducing “Canadian kudzu.”² Many ecologists assumed that Ontario’s cooler climate and longer winter season killed the plant before it could grow. Waldron, in fact, had hypothesized in 2007

¹ Josh Wingrove, “Vine That Ate the South has landed in the Great White North,” *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2009.

² Anne Mcillroy, “It will grow over your house if you don’t keep it under control: Known as the vegetable cancer of the world, Kudzu is following a deadly path straight to Canada,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 22, 2007.

that kudzu would not reach Ontario for another ten to fifteen years.³ As far as he knew, no other strands of the plant existed in the country, so when he saw it at Lake Erie, he believed that he had made a new discovery.

Waldron was not alone. Ecologists and media outlets framed Waldron's find as new. The *Globe and Mail* declared that the "'Vine that ate the South' has landed in the Great White North,"⁴ while the CBC stated that this "invasive plant that has destroyed large swaths of land in the southern United States has been discovered for the first time in Canada."⁵ Rachel Gagnon, coordinator of the Ontario Invasive Plant Council (OIPC), claimed that kudzu was found "early."⁶ Waldron, meanwhile, wanted to know how recently this patch had "arrived" in Canada. Reports that emphasized kudzu's southern history suggested that it had recently arrived in the North.

Kudzu, though, had been established in states such as New York and Pennsylvania since the late nineteenth century. Not only that, but cottage owners around Lake Erie had issues with the plant since the early 2000s.⁷ Coverage of the plant growth on Lake Erie, though, mostly ignored this long history. So, how did kudzu reach the North and why is it characterized as a southern invader despite a long history outside the South?

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Invasive Plant Species Takes Root in Canada," *CBC*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/invasive-plant-species-takes-root-in-canada-1.815350> September 23, 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Better Farming Staff, "Kudzu Sighted In Essex 'Nothing New'," *Better Farming*, September 29, 2009.

First, kudzu, now widely seen in the northern United States as an invader from the South, was originally neither southern nor an invader. In fact, it was introduced to the North before the South. Moreover, Americans planted it intentionally, first as an ornamental plant and later as a crop. I will argue that the characterization of kudzu invading the North had little to do with ecology and everything to do with broader cultural and economic anxieties surrounding southernization, the process by which the United States took on economic, political, and social policies once associated with the American South.⁸

Southernization refers to an idea that the United States, as a nation, had begun to apply what northerners interpreted as southern values and beliefs to the rest of the country. These included an emphasis on state rights in place of national mandates, religious conservatism, and slashing of public services. Scholar John Edgerton explored this idea in his book *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, linking the spread of southernization directly to the Southern Strategy: Republican attempts to gather support among white southerners by appealing to racism against African Americans.⁹ Dan T. Carter also links southernization to the Southern Strategy in *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994*, arguing that the national conservative movement's rise was based on

⁸ Throughout this thesis, North (and Northeast) and South (Southeast) will be capitalized to identify the main culturally and ecologically distinct regions of the United States. They cannot always be differentiated with precision, but generally are defined by the Mason-Dixon Line, the demarcation line between Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia. When indicating only direction, a lower case southern or northern will be used instead.

⁹ John Edgerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, (New York: Harper Magazine Press, 1974): 126.

adherence to race baiting politics.¹⁰ Outside of political dimensions, scholars Bruce J. Schulmann and Peter Applebome also point to southernization's cultural history, through the popularization of country music and television shows like *The Dukes of Hazzard*. They argue that this cultural turn reflected a backlash against liberalism of the 1970s.¹¹

Like many anxieties, however, discussions of southernization mixed reality with imagination. Yes, there was the 1976 presidential election of Jimmy Carter who was from Georgia and the 1980s saw a shift in foreign investment to southern states as well as migration of Americans into the sunbelt region, but to assign the rise of right wing politics and economics solely to southern states requires a person to overlook the influence of institutions such as Wall Street and the Chicago school of economics. Moreover, while the new right was identified in one 1980 *Boston Globe* report as a "northward advancing peril," the face of that movement, Ronald Reagan, was born in Illinois and worked as an actor in California before entering politics.¹² In fact, linking the spread of kudzu to a southern invasion ignores how northern states also grew kudzu to curb soil erosion. Southernization helped perpetuate a long-standing myth that it was only the South that had white supremacy, poor economic conditions, and kudzu in contrast to the North, which was prosperous, free of racism, and able to control its environment. Of course, the North also had racism, poverty, and kudzu, but the story of

¹⁰ Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996): 27.

¹¹ For more information on this cultural turn, see Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture*, (New York: Times Book, 1996) and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: A Great Shift In American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (New York: Free Press, 2001).

¹² Lew McCreery, "March-March, munch-munch: Have You Seen Any Little Invaders with A Most Unusual Diet," *Boston Globe*, October 20, 1980.

southernization provided a convenient excuse for those problems. Like the vine analyzed throughout this thesis, the narrative of southern invasion obfuscated the messy reality of political and cultural trends in the United States.

Northerners have exaggerated the plant's "take over" as it is not the most invasive plant in the North. In fact, it is not even the South's most invasive plant. Asian privet, for example, covers far more acres of southern territory than kudzu yet receives less renown.¹³ Although other plants have an equal or perhaps even greater claim to representing the South, kudzu has overwhelmed understandings of the southern landscape, as seen in newspaper reports on northerners travelling to southern states and remarking on the kudzu walling them in on highways, or literature set in the South that used the vine as a metaphor. There exists, in fact, multiple souths from the Deep South to the Piedmont, but the South that northerners associated with kudzu was a largely imagined one. As a result, its history in other areas has been largely ignored.

With such a long and overlooked history, this thesis will start from kudzu's first recorded introduction to North America in 1876 and end in 2009 to show that the notion of the plant as a southern invader hides a much more complicated account of the plant's past. Newspapers, scientific journals, surveys and maps will be used to better understand significant shifts in attitudes towards kudzu throughout this 140-year study along with providing empirical information on the spread of kudzu in northern states. These will be used to prove that the characterization of the plant as invading northward

¹³ Bill Finch, "The True Story of Kudzu, The Vine That Never Ate the South," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/>

states had little to do with its actual range and more with cultural and social anxieties about what northerners interpreted as the northward spread of southern influences.

Thinking with weeds

This examination of northern reactions to kudzu fits into larger discussions around labels such as “weed,” “crop,” and “invasive.” Arguably, the most influential work on this topic is Alfred Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Crosby argues that European settlers successfully colonized the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand through both intentional and accidental introductions of diseases, animals, and plants. These introductions disrupted these continents’ ecology and killed off much of the indigenous populations, allowing European settlers to colonize those areas with their own plants and animals. In his chapter on weeds, Crosby argues that the creation of farms, which are over simplified ecosystems, created weeds since farmers would deliberately “produce quantities of plants that would grow rapidly on bare ground and would survive grazing animals and he got exactly what he tried for, but some of them he cursed: tufted vetch, ryegrass, cleavers, thistles, coriander, and others.”¹⁴ Plants that grow in a designated spot are labelled as crops.¹⁵ When they grow outside that space and encroach on other plants, they become unwanted weeds that must be eradicated. They may perform the same biological functions as crops, but weeds do not meet humans’ social demands.

Ecological Imperialism argues that weeds and crops are historically contingent.

Economic, cultural, and social factors influence which plants become weeds and which

¹⁴ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* 2nd edition (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 147.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ones become crops. Furthermore, these categories change. Crosby demonstrates this fluidity through the example of Georgia peach trees. Spanish settlers, upon arrival in what is now Georgia, regarded the peach trees as a bothersome pest, interfering with colonization of the area. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, when the state sought to diversify beyond cotton and tobacco, they welcomed the tree.¹⁶

Crosby's analysis reveals several important things about these labels. First, categorization is embedded in economic, social, and political circumstances. Therefore, they reflect power structures. In turn, these structural forces affect the landscape and plant life. Species labelled as weeds are killed off while crops can grow. The ecology of a bioregion, then, reflects biological factors along with political, economic, and social circumstances. Crosby shows that while a crop can become a weed, a weed may also turn into a crop. The plant's physical properties never change in this designation, but the perception of the plant does.

Weeds can also challenge the ambitions of farmers or even the state. Frieda Knobloch's *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization In The American West* meets this challenge while complicating the label "weeds."¹⁷ Whereas Crosby focused on the biological function of weeds as plants that compete with crops, Knobloch analyzes the intellectual history of weeds and agriculture through an anti-imperialist lens. Agriculture, Knobloch argues, is deeply tied to colonization, tracing it to the early modern period when European landowners evicted many peasants from it to create a cultivation system for elites. Similar patterns occurred in the colonization of

¹⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁷ Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1996): 130.

North America, which involved agricultural occupation and land ownership. Weeds, with their ability to interfere with attempts to control the environment, become species to be eradicated.¹⁸ This ability of weeds to evade the dominant system of agriculture suggests alternative possibilities in how farming functions.

Knobloch's focus on social forces, though, leaves out how weeds may adapt to and shape human societies. Clinton L. Evans' *The War on Weeds in The Prairie West: An Environmental History* highlights economic factors, arguing that plants become weeds because of agricultural systems directed towards increasing productivity. In fact, he argues that several weeds such as wild mustard, Canada thistle, and ragweed could benefit regions such as the prairies of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba because they can diversify economies that revolve around wheat and barley.¹⁹ When farmers in the prairies created an agricultural system centered around wheat, they created a system that was less labor intensive and more inclined to use herbicides. The aftermath of the Second World War and further developments of weed science encouraged eradication of plants deemed unwanted.²⁰

Weeds, then, are material and imagined things that have shaped societies. Evans' work highlights how plants adapted to the actions of human and non-humans. Some plants after being mowed down, for example, develop thicker stems to avoid being cut. Others may acquire resistance to herbicides.²¹ In addition, plants may spread seeds through pollination while birds can take seeds to other regions.²² The fact that plants

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Clinton Evans, *The War on Weeds in The Prairie West: An Environmental History* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002): 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 60.

²¹ Ibid., 30.

²² Ibid., 16.

adapt to and resist eradication efforts complicates notions of this species as simply something only humans act upon. Moreover, humans sometimes unintentionally aid in the growth of weeds. Evans' analysis of farm labor in Ontario, for example, shows that the focus on clearing forestland for farms meant that they were not clearing the land of weeds. Consequently, those plants became an even larger problem for farmers. Plants labelled as weeds challenge the ambitions of agricultural regimes; their ability to adapt and reach new locations shapes landscapes and human communities living on them.²³

Northerners' use of kudzu to represent a regressive South captured this entanglement of imagination and materialism. The economic switch from forage agriculture to forestry shaped opinions towards the plant. However, so did stories of the vine's growth and stereotypes of the South as a regressive region. Furthermore, as a material thing, kudzu shaped the landscape of the deep South: vines were planted on gullies and other areas as a tool to fight soil erosion and later grew out of control. In terms of imagination, writers hoping to depict "authentic" southern landscapes regularly used kudzu. Few plants demonstrate the entanglement of materialism and imagination better than kudzu.

The many lives of kudzu

What attention kudzu has received mainly focuses on its status as an invasive species and a cultural southern icon. Streets, businesses, and even festivals in the South are named after the plant while some individuals have sold the plant, claiming that it can function as an alternative source of food, clothing, and medicine. Still, stories of the vine overtaking trees, plants, and even buildings persist as strongly as the vine itself.

²³ Ibid.

Kudzu has shaped both the actual region and understandings of the South. Cultural geographer Derek Alderman has written most prominently on this subject. Through articles such as “When An Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital,” and “Kudzu: A Tale of Two Vines,” Alderman’s analysis has revealed that perceptions of this plant are as deeply rooted in culture as they are in scientific understandings.²⁴ When southerners began naming streets and businesses after the plant, using it for medicinal purposes, and depicting it in art representative of “authentic” southern landscapes, Alderman argues that this repurposing was an act of reconciling the vine’s impact. Alderman along with Anne Eskridge have also devoted attention to reactions outside the South with a focus on 2001 legislation in Missouri, a state that is identified as both southern and midwestern, regarding kudzu eradication. In this article, Alderman and Eskridge analyze how various drafts of the legislation framed kudzu in racialized language, first as a foreign invader and later as a thug, comparing its growth to gang violence in cities. In the final draft, this legislation framed kudzu as a curse from the South that threatened the state of Missouri.²⁵ The two authors argue that this portrayal of kudzu reflected less of an understanding of the specific biological threat of kudzu and rather a desire for security.

²⁴ Derek Alderman, “When an Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital,” *Southeastern Geographer*, 55, no. 1 (2015): 32-56.

Alderman, “Kudzu: A Tale of Two Vines,” *Southern Cultures*, 7, no. 3, (2003): 49-64.

Alderman and Anne Askridge, “Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and The Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses,” *Southeastern Geographer*, 50, no. 1 (2010): 110-129. Alderman, “Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine,” *Geographical Review* 94, no.2 (2004): 157-177.

²⁵ Alderman and Askridge, “Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and The Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses,” 125.

Alderman has also addressed the promotion of kudzu in the late 1930s and early 1940s in “Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine.” In this article, Alderman argues that businessman Cope’s promotion of kudzu was his way of making an environmental claim, which was that kudzu worked as a religious savior of states such as Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama.²⁶ Alderman examines how individuals like Cope promoted kudzu to people who lacked scientific knowledge.²⁷ Cope, through his radio show for farmers, talked about the plant “resurrecting” the land like Jesus Christ. Cope, fully aware that he could not rely solely on facts about kudzu’s nutritional and economic value, appealed to the religious values of those who would plant the vine on their farms.

Alderman rightly points out how southerners have repurposed kudzu both in its actual uses and as a symbol. What his analysis lacks, however, is the influence of the northern gaze in stereotyping the region as one overrun with the plant. My analysis of northern reactions to the plant shows northerners travelling to the region and commenting on the vine covering abandoned houses, trees, and fields, as well as comparing the ascendancy of southern politicians in federal positions to the growth of kudzu. With the vine, northerners could naturalize the political landscape of the region and the narrative of the South as a wild region. Focusing solely on how southerners made kudzu representative of their region overlooks how others used the plant to denigrate the South.

Other scholars have addressed attempts to grow kudzu during the New Deal era. Most prominent is Mart A. Stewart in “Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program” which examines a period when kudzu was

²⁶ Derek H. Alderman, “Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine,” 160.

²⁷ Ibid.

highly valued in the United States. Focusing on New Deal era conservation policies in the 1930s and 1940s, Stewart analyzes the initial support from farmers and the U.S. government in using kudzu to combat soil erosion.²⁸ Because many southeastern farmers engaged in forage farming centered around cotton, kudzu served as fodder for their cattle.²⁹ It held soil together and grew back quickly. Kudzu, therefore, promised to save a farmer time, labor, and money while also diversifying the region's economy.³⁰ Following the Second World War, farmers switched to forestry or move to cities. With no regulation, kudzu vines overtook forests, killing off trees and disrupted the economy of the region. Kudzu became known as a weed.

Stewart's article demonstrates kudzu's fluidity, showing that the plant was not always reviled. His analysis of New Deal conservation policies reveals enthusiasm around a "miracle vine" that served a practical purpose. Along with explaining why perceptions of the plant were so different in the 1930s, the examination of the New Deal era provides historical context behind the widespread growth of kudzu. Stewart's article demonstrates how economic changes, specifically the transition from forage farming to forestry, laid the groundwork for kudzu to become a problem in the South.

In addition, southeastern states such as Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida with their humid summers and high amounts of precipitation are particularly hospitable towards the vine. Other ecoregions in North America were less welcoming. The western states had dryer seasons and more intense droughts while the northeastern and

²⁸ Mart A. Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Distribution Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 81, no.1, (1997): 157.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 160.

midwestern regions had much more severe winters. As a result, kudzu could not grow as widely as it did in the southeast.

Stewart's analysis, though, overlooks how states outside the southeast experimented with the vine long before the Dust Bowl era. He also does not mention the interest that bureaucrats and agricultural scientists had in the plant before. This effort to introduce the plant to multiple states also reflected a lack of awareness of where kudzu thrived. Because it was not yet considered a southern plant, there was no belief that it could grow best in the South. As a result, the plant was introduced across the United States to combat soil erosion and some northerners even welcomed it for a time.

While kudzu became labelled as a weed in the mid-twentieth century, the 1970s and 1980s saw new debates about the vine's practicality. Kurt Kinbacher's "The Tangled Story of Kudzu" addresses the plant's status in the latter half of the twentieth century, arguing that debates around land use shaped perspectives on kudzu.³¹ When land use in the southeast revolved around forage farming, kudzu became a crop. Transitions to forestry, however, resulted in the plant becoming a weed, while the emergence of organic farming and alternative medicine in the 1970s opened up debates about the practicality of the vine.³² Individuals who advocated for organic farming used the plant and encouraged skeptics to "think creatively" instead of eradicating it, while those who adhered to traditional models of agriculture saw it as an invasive pest with no practical use.³³

³¹ Kurt E. Kinbacher, "The Tangled Story of Kudzu," *The Vulcan Historical Review* 4, (2000): 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

³³ *Ibid.*

Kinbacher complicates previous accounts of kudzu. Instead of telling the story of a plant once revered as a crop that later became a weed, Kinbacher shows that people have contested the plant's status throughout the twentieth century. Not everyone accepted the view of kudzu as a weed. Scientists who conducted experiments regarding the plant's utility suggested that it was people who believed the plant no longer benefitted them that labelled the plant as useless. This perception helped people decide whether the plant was a useful crop or not.

Such an analysis raises questions about kudzu's utility. After all, people have used the vine as an alternative source of energy, clothing, and even medicine with varying results. Instead of seeing the plant as a weed with no practical purpose, advocates have encouraged others to think creatively about the vine. Kinbacher invites further interrogation of traditional narratives surrounding the vine. With a different perspective, those who saw a vine reaching out to them and overtaking trees and buildings could imagine possibilities of living with the plant and not just eradication.

While Kinbacher correctly points out the influence of land use change in shaping perceptions, he does not connect them to larger political and cultural turns. Kudzu's transition from miracle vine to southern invader occurred alongside the turn from the New Deal liberal social order of the 1940s to the New Right conservative climate of the 1980s. In fact, its story has been constantly intertwined with some of the most significant events in twentieth century American history. Just as the vine seemingly grows over many acres of land, the history of kudzu covers and connects environmental history, political history, and cultural history. During the New Deal era, many heralded it as a savior of the land, then during the pinnacle of the Civil Rights movement, the

vine became associated with decay and white supremacy in the South. Northerners exploited the plant's status as a weed and southern icon to represent a larger fear of an entire country beginning to, in their eyes, southernize. Kudzu's status as a weed was biologically and socially constructed, reflecting a long political and cultural history of fearing any sort of influence seen as southern.

Other invaders

Species that are considered problematic may also be labelled as vermin, garbage, or trash to justify removing them. The collection *Trash Animals: How We Live With Nature's Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species* explores what assumptions people make about nature when they classify species as garbage.³⁴ The labels that humans assign, such as invasive, reflect attempts to anthropomorphize nature.

Kudzu fits into these discussions surrounding constructions of filth and garbage, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when the plant became increasingly associated with decay. As the South experienced crisis situations during the civil rights protests and dire economic conditions, sightings of kudzu growing over abandoned buildings and farms led to an association with a rotting culture. The increasing association of the plant with dirt, death, and decay helped northerners imagine the South as a regressive area not only overrun with white supremacy and poverty, but unable to even control kudzu's green tendrils.

Conversations around the South almost inevitably turn towards racial tensions between white Americans and African Americans. Moreover, the fact that northerners

³⁴ Kelsey Naggi and Phillip David Johnson II, *Trash Animals: How We Live with Nature's Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 8.

came to imagine kudzu as a problem largely restricted to the South during the 1960s is significant as it aligned with beliefs that racism was a problem restricted to the southern states. Northerners reporting on white supremacy also discussed kudzu. Some northerners regarded the decades long migration of African Americans from the South—a movement that increased to its highest rate in the 1960s – as a threat.

Ideas of race and foreignness have also shaped uneasy categories of invasive and non-native as well. Peter Coates' *American Perceptions of Foreign Species: Strangers on the Land* examines the introduction of thousands of species to America from the 1850s to the early twentieth century.³⁵ This mass introduction of species occurred alongside mass immigration, which led to similar legal language being applied to these species with terms such as alien, immigrant, native, non-native, and invasive. Through these labels, people personified nonhuman species while also humanizing nature and naturalizing human behavior.³⁶ Coates addresses measures taken in the U.S. to preserve its “Anglo-Saxon” heritage through the preservation of certain plants.³⁷ Racial prejudice was, therefore, part of the study of invasive species.³⁸ Descriptions of invasive species often stressed association with minorities and the need to regulate human populations, too. The desire to block plants and animals deemed problematic, then, was also rooted in attempts to regulate human populations as well.

Kudzu, being native to Japan, was also cast as part of an “Asian invasion.” The introduction of Asian plants to America created anxiety surrounding the “purity” of

³⁵ Peter Coates, *American Perceptions of Foreign Species: Strangers on the Land* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

nature and racial categories³⁹ Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam’s “Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions” connects these fears to larger anxieties concerning globalization and migrations of human populations.⁴⁰ Highlighting the influence of culture on perceptions of plants, the two authors contrast the perceptions of Japanese people towards kudzu while visiting the United States in the early 1990s to that of Americans in the same period. Japanese tourists loved the sight of kudzu in southern states while many Americans saw the vine as a pest, showing how social circumstances have shaped perceptions of plants and are rarely neutral.⁴¹ Moreover, the fact that terms like alien, invader, native, and non-native come from an era of mass migrations of humans invites consideration of whether these labels reflect an accurate scientific understanding of ecology or reinforce racist oppression.

The introduction of species, non-native and invasive alike raises questions surrounding public memory of ecosystems and landscapes and how other introduced species are recognized as native or invasive. Catriona Sandilands’ “Dog Stranglers in The Park? National and Vegetal Politics in Ontario’s Rouge Valley,” examines Park Canada’s aggressive actions towards *Cynanchum rossicum* (dog-strangling vine) in Toronto’s parks. Sandilands argues that the eradication strategies taken towards dog-strangling vine reflect a narrow understanding of the divide between nature and humans.⁴² She argues that instead of eradicating the plant, the species could be used to

³⁹ Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam, "Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 16, no.1 (2013): 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Catriona Sandilands, “Dog Stranglers in The Park? National and Vegetal Politics in Ontario’s Rouge Valley,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 47, no.3 (2013): 100.

explore how humans have shaped environments and tried living with the natural world.⁴³ This is especially important in urban parks, which involve encounters between human and non-human species. The dog-strangling vine in Toronto, Sandilands claims, can also demonstrate the complicated environmental history of the park through asking questions like: What has been lost because of the introduction of a species? What has been enabled by its spread?⁴⁴ By answering these questions, the introduction of dog-strangling vine and its impact can be traced to historical changes and events.

Like the dog-strangling vine, kudzu can show what northerners believe they have lost by seeing the plant grow in their region. Newspaper columnists who reported on the vine growing in local communities discussed the threat of the vine less as a specific ecological threat but as something that erased previous points of differentiation between areas. Southerners who moved from their homes before kudzu was planted and came back felt that vine had radically changed their surroundings. As the plant became more established in the region, northerners and southerners alike saw it as part of the South. In contrast, the North was constructed as somewhere kudzu could never grow, leading many to believe that the plant had recently been introduced. The study of northward reactions to kudzu, therefore, is a study of how the plant's history up north has been remembered and forgotten.

National identity is also worthy of consideration. Taylor Spence's "The Canada Thistle: The Pestilence of American Colonialism and the Emergence of an Exceptionalist Identity, 1783-1839," explores how the European plant *Cirsium arvense* became Canada thistle. American citizens who were eager to designate the plant as

⁴³ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 108.

unwanted named it Canada Thistle because it interfered with agricultural ambitions in the United States.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the plant's spread confirmed Americans' belief in the laxity of British North American farmers and their poor agricultural practices. Even though the plant did not originate in Canada and grew in both countries, *Cirsium arvense* became associated with Canada.

The formation of nation-states, then, helps people decide where nonhuman species belong. Nations become identified through perceived political and racial differences, but also natural elements. Take the maple leaf for example. Maple trees grow in Quebec and Ontario, as well as New England, New York, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Yet, it is a prominent national Canadian symbol as demonstrated by the fact that the maple leaf adorns the Canadian flag. This national identity does not extend to only flora. Beavers, another iconic Canadian symbol, have a natural range that includes much of the United States. The bald eagle, the national bird of the United States, also soars above Canada's prairie provinces and its west coast. In the interest of establishing some aspect of the nation's identity, the natural range of a plant or animal may not always be acknowledged. Therefore, the bald eagle is not perceived as American and Canadian, and the maple leaf cannot be both Canadian and American. When a species identified with another nation is seen elsewhere, that animal may seem out of place, or may simply be ignored.

Part of what makes hostile views toward kudzu so pervasive are ideas surrounding nativity and belonging. As a label, native, exists along a spectrum. When something is assigned status as a native, though, that label will generally become

⁴⁵ Taylor Spence, "The Canada Thistle: The Pestilence of American Colonialism and the Emergence of an Exceptionalist Identity, 1783-1839," *Agricultural History Society* (2016): 524.

permanent. “Belonging,” in contrast, is more subjective and much more ephemeral. In fact, discussions of kudzu “invading” were less about whether it was native or non-native, but rather where it belonged in America. When looking for a beautiful plant or a tool for preventing soil erosion, kudzu belonged in the North, but that changed as the vine became a prominent symbol for the South and one that northerners used to represent unwanted influences. This only became stronger when northerners wanted to further differentiate themselves from what they saw as a wave of southernization going across the country.

Defining the South

This examination of northern reactions to kudzu discusses how the South has been defined and imagined. There has never been one South nor one southern identity. Addressing this transition from an invader of the South to a southern invader will show that it reflected larger fears about the influence of southern culture on the North. This was an anxiety fueled by a myth of the South growing out of control and threatening to cover the country in kudzu.

As North American culture became more homogenized into the late twentieth century, so did many southerners’ and northerners’ idea of what the South was. Much literature has been produced addressing the construction of southern identity and how the North, in turn, has been constructed in relation to the South, which has often involved the issue of race. Comer Vann Woodward’s classic *The Burden of Southern History* stresses the role of alienation in the creation of the Southern identity. The South is said to be alienated from the nation as a whole by the burden of its past: slavery, Jim Crow laws of racial segregation, the devastation visited upon it during the American

Civil War, and – preexisting and outliving all these – its commitment to white supremacy rather than truly democratic ideals. These “burdens” make themselves apparent in the works of southern writers such as William Faulkner, and they also serve to perpetuate the notion of the South being fundamentally different from the rest of the country.⁴⁶

Southern identity is impossible to discuss without mentioning racism. Historian James Charles Cobb devotes much of his book *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* to how southerners have dealt with an identity that has been formed in opposition to the North, which southerners have long been told they must assimilate to in order to join the “mainstream America.”⁴⁷ Cobb also pointed out the role of racism in this construction of southern identity, as many Black southerners considered slavery and later Jim Crow laws to be part of the “essence” of southern life. The southern identity, far from being universal, has been contested by white and Black southerners throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.

This identity is also specifically regional and not national. A southerner is defined in contrast to other Americans and often in direct opposition to the North. However, as Cobb points out, since northerners have been acknowledged as being the “mainstream” of America, many of them simply identify as “Americans” instead of as northerners. Moreover, the southern identity is to quote Cobb directly, “not a story of continuity versus change but continuity within it.”⁴⁸ This continuity, however, has run

⁴⁶ Comer Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History updated third edition* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2008): 62.

⁴⁷ James Charles Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2004): 14.

⁴⁸ Cobb, *Away Down South*, 39.

up against the recognition that racism was not solely a southern problem as well as the general shift of the United States as a whole towards social, political, and cultural conservatism, which had previously been constructed as southern.

People outside the South have also helped create the southern identity. Karen Cox in *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* argues that while some southerners helped create what many understood as the southern identity, it was mostly non-southerners who helped disseminate and market what the nation came to understand as “Dixie.” Cox looks at how non-southerners portrayed the South through music, literature, and tourism. Through an analysis of these mediums, Cox demonstrates that “Dixie was not just a reference to the region,” but instead something shaped outside the South.⁴⁹

Southern as a firm, distinct identity also possesses a relatively short history. Intellectual historian David Moltke Hansen traces the construction of the southern identity to the 1830s. Hansen argues that it was linked to the westward migration of people from the older southeastern states and to the states of Arkansas and Alabama. Thus, figures such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, commonly imagined as being southern and northern respectively, might not have given those identities any thought.⁵⁰

When kudzu became a southern plant associated with growing over dilapidated buildings and sites, it occurred alongside the great migration of African Americans hoping to escape the conditions of the Jim Crow South with its racial segregation laws. Some northerners regarded the migration as an invasion of unwanted southern

⁴⁹ Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011): 36.

⁵⁰ David Moltke Hansen, “The Rise of Southern Ethnicity,” *Historically Speaking*, vol.4, 5 (2003): 37.

influences. Descriptions of kudzu that connected it to decay in that period, therefore, reflected racialized understandings of the region's economic conditions. By the late twentieth century, southern, as a label was becoming increasingly associated with right wing, Republican politics, which dominated several southern states by the end of the 1960s. In turn, the election of prominent federal southern and Republican politicians, as well as southern states attracting international investments triggered discussions about an imagined South ready to take over the country. Kudzu, despite being rooted in the North since the late nineteenth century, represented fears of southernization.

Kudzu in the North

My most significant contribution is showing that the fear of kudzu invading the North reflected larger anxieties about southernization in the latter half of the twentieth century. These fears were part of a longer history of imagining the South as a threat to the rest of the country. Northerners helped create and cement kudzu's southern identity, from world fairs in the northeastern states to experimentation with the plant, and then using it as a metaphor for southern regression and aggression. Kudzu got by with a little help from unlikely friends. When northerners saw the South as a problem worth solving, they saw the plant as tool. As the vine covered trees and telephone poles, northerners saw a metaphor for a dying region, and when the South seemed ready "to rise again," it was green and mean.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter covers the first recorded introduction of kudzu to North America in 1876 to 1950. In this period, kudzu was introduced to the North from Asia, disproving later characterizations of the plant as a southern invader. Northerners intentionally brought kudzu to their homes, first in

isolated incidences from 1876 to the 1910s and more systematically from the 1920s through the 1940s. Particular attention will be paid to nurseries based in the United States that sold kudzu seeds boasting of its ability to grow in a wide variety of climates. In the 1930s and 1940s, New Deal era soil conservation policies saw the mass planting of kudzu in primarily southeastern states, which also inspired similar attempts in northern states. Context will be provided into how kudzu came to occupy so much territory in the South.

Chapter Two examines how reactions to kudzu changed across North America from 1950 to 1980, arguing that the vine became associated with southern poverty and the region's racist past. This new characterization emerged when many abandoned the vine and alongside the civil rights movement. This image could be seen in press coverage and in Southern Gothic literature, the latter of which explored historical trauma in the South through landscapes covered with swamps, forests, and kudzu. As a result, kudzu became yet another lamentable reminder to northerners who believed the South to be the only region plagued by white supremacy, poverty, and invasive species. When they imagined the landscape of southern states, they pictured lush kudzu above a decaying region. Northerners who travelled to southern states contrasted the abundance of the vine against their own imagined North as free of white supremacy, poverty, and kudzu.

Following the election of southern politicians as well as Republican politicians in federal positions such as the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976, and the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, discussions occurred around what some northerners interpreted as the growing influence of southern politics. Chapter three will,

therefore, examine how these fears of southernization influenced northern reactions to the vine. Kudzu now strongly associated with the South became interpreted in northern states as a symbol of southern invasion, even though it had grown northward since the late nineteenth century. In addition, the Japanese economy reached its zenith in the 1980s whereas the northeastern economy was deindustrializing. Reports of kudzu as a Japanese and southern invader occurred alongside fears of southern influence and the rise of Japan as an economic power. With the declining power of the northeastern states, many northerners feared of the possibility of becoming weaker than southern states. Awareness of climate change also accompanied these discussions, which mentioned that the further migration of kudzu up north could change what it meant to be northern or southern.

The conclusion addresses the current state of kudzu up North. It will focus on the staying power of imagining kudzu as a wild, southern invader. Kudzu did not threaten the North's flora and fauna so much as it challenged northerners' sense of belonging. It offered a new and frightening possibility of the North as a place where a wild southern vine could grow. Northerners, interested in explaining away the presence of the plant up North, labelled it as a southern invader, allowing them to continue imagining their region free of the vine while also having it in their backyard.

The current interpretation of kudzu as a southern invader owes itself to a longer history of viewing the South as an issue in need of resolving. As the vine became an issue in the southeastern states, which also became the epicenter of the civil rights movement, the plant became a symbol of a rural anti-modern South. When the northeast experienced industrial decline and the country began to southernize, the vine that ate the

South turned into an invader that now threatened to consume the North. While the plant's actual spread was hardly a takeover, the sheer possibility of its growth frightened those who believed that there was a plan to turn the whole country into one South.

Chapter One: A New Home for The Vine

When kudzu reached America, it arrived first in the North at the 1876

Centennial Exposition World Fair at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From world fairs in the late 1800s to government agencies in the 1930s and 1940s, state and private actors fostered this vine's introduction into regions outside the South. Homeowners, gardeners, and nurseries purchased vines from world fairs, hoping to devote a space in their garden for this exotic plant, though most of the vines died come winter. A few, however, persisted. Government agencies later tried using the plant to restore soil in the North as they did in the South, though the vines only grew in isolated groups in the former. This history, however, has been overlooked in traditional narratives of the vine that treat it as inextricably southern. This chapter will show that the vine reached the North far before the South and that the plant's southern identity only emerged in the Dust Bowl period of the United States. The idea of kudzu as a plant that only recently arrived in the North by 2009, therefore, overlooks how northerners willingly allowed this now infamous invader into their homes.

Nursery advertisements, horticultural magazines, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) studies of kudzu, and newspapers from 1876 to 1950 provide a detailed account of the vine's introduction to the North. Kudzu was introduced in the North before the South as a desired plant through three distinct phases that will be examined in turn throughout this chapter: the late nineteenth century when Americans encountered kudzu at world fairs, and embraced it as an exotic ornamental decoration, the 1910s and 1920s, when botanists at the USDA researched the plant as a potential farm crop; Finally, the chapter will conclude with the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s and

1940s when kudzu became widespread due to New Deal policies, with over a million acres planted to curb soil erosion in the southern plains.

Introducing kudzu

The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia marks the first recorded introduction of kudzu to North America. Japanese workmen displayed the plant in the Japanese exhibit. According to *The Opelousa Journal* on August 25, 1876, it appeared alongside bamboo paper and leather from dyed deer skin.⁵¹ Japan's exhibit attracted more visitors than every other country, many of whom noted that the plant represented the exotic beauty that Americans associated with the country.⁵² The plant was also sold at the fair and gardeners were encouraged to use it as an ornamental plant.⁵³ This world fair represented an opportunity for non-Japanese visitors to purchase and consume items they associated with Japanese culture such as ceramic pottery, fans, screen doors, and kudzu. According to a leaflet summary of the event, it marked an important moment for Japan, which until the 1850s, had been isolated from Western European and North American nations.⁵⁴

The exhibit presenting the American South had no kudzu. However, it still presented a racist understanding of the region's landscape. It showcased a cotton plantation coupled with performers who, according to an exhibition guide, were dressed as "old time plantation darkies," and played songs on banjos for visitors.⁵⁵ Foreign

⁵¹ "Centennial Correspondence," *The Opelousa Journal*, August 25, 1876.

⁵² "Japanese Bazaar," Lithograph, item no. 090510, Free Library of Philadelphia. (1876).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Dennis T. Lawson, "Centennial Exhibition of 1876," *Historic Pennsylvania Leaflet*, No. 20 (1876): 3.

⁵⁵ Centennial Exhibition, *The Centennial Exhibition Guide*, (Philadelphia: Hamlin & Lawrence, 1876): 16.

visitors could touch the “hand from a cotton field,” which the guide promised would be an unforgettable experience.⁵⁶ The exhibit was built to remind visitors of the agricultural economy of states located in the Deep South. The fact that the exhibit also contained performers dressed as Black Americans on a plantation suggested that viewers expected a racialized caricature of the South wedded to white supremacy and an agrarian past.⁵⁷

Owners of American nurseries purchased kudzu seeds at this world fair and tried growing them, with mixed results. The most famous example was the Meehan nursery, owned by Thomas Meehan and based in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Outside his nursery stood a cedar tree over twenty feet high that, by 1893, was completely covered in kudzu vines grown from seeds purchased from the Centennial Exposition.⁵⁸ As impressive as the sight was, though, many of its vines died each winter.⁵⁹ It also took the plants fifteen years to cover the entire tree, much longer than it took for kudzu to do so in more humid climates. Meehan’s “success” with the vine was an exception, but it gave others hope that the vine could grow in colder climates.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 17.

⁵⁸ “Plant Notes,” *Garden and Forest*, Vol 6 (December 6, 1893): 505

⁵⁹ Ibid.,4

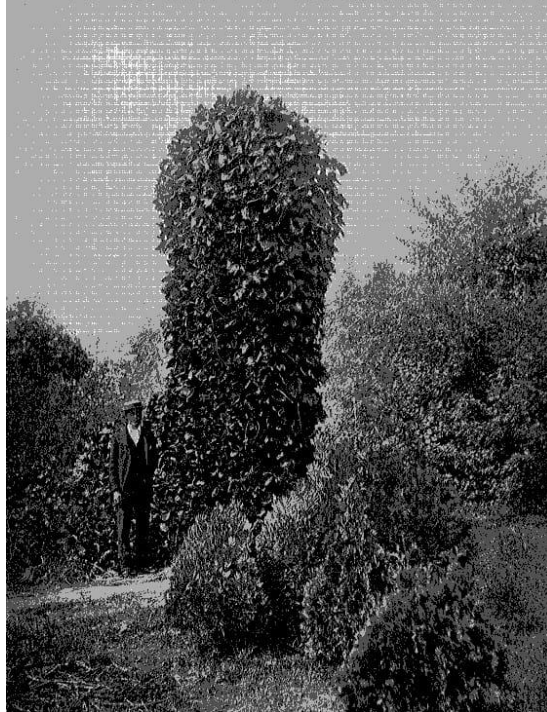


Figure 1-The Meehan Cedar Tree. "Plant Notes," *Garden and Forest Magazine*, Vol.6, (December 6, 1892): 505

News of Meehan's tree even reached overseas. William Watson, a botanist at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the famous botanical research and education institution in London, England, wrote a letter to *Garden and Forest* detailing his interest in the vine following the exposition and Meehan's own attempts. In 1889, employees at Kew requested and received seeds from Japan.⁶⁰ Within five years, they had vines standing thirty feet high. Workers at Kew, then, sent seeds to Scotland to see if the plant could grow there.⁶¹ Around the late nineteenth century, there was little regard for the

⁶⁰ "Foreign Correspondence: London Letter," *Garden and Forest*, Vol. 7, no.307, January 10, 1894, page 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* The Kew Gardens were not the only space in Europe that experimented with the vine. French gardeners Auguste Paillieux and Désiré Boise noted shops in France that sold kudzu seeds as well as plans to grow the plant in the French colony of Algeria, in their book *The Vegetable Garden of The Curious: History, Culture and Uses of 100 Edible Plants Little Known or Unknown* (Paris, Agricultural library of the Rustic House, 1885): 310. A writer for *Garden*

impact that an introduced species could have on other environments. Any negative impact on the environment was regarded as a curiosity rather than a major ecological problem. In the late nineteenth century, acclimatization societies were highly active. These were voluntary associations that purposely introduced species to new environments. Members of these societies saw the adaption of these plants and animals as proof that colonists could adapt to and conquer unfamiliar environments. As a result, kudzu reached locations as far as Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Algeria.

These efforts impressed another famous gardener, Albert Olmsted. Inspired by Meehan and Watson's effort, Olmsted, half-brother of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, tried growing the vine in Hartford, Connecticut. In a letter to *Garden and Forest*, Olmsted detailed his experience in growing kudzu in five locations around his house. There was only one problem: the plant grew with what Olmsted described as an "animal intelligence to embrace and cover everything."⁶² After struggling to contain the plant, he decided to simply let it be. It grew so well that he wrote to Meehan's monthly magazine about it. Meehan sent reporters to Olmsted's residence to take photographs of his home, the side of which was hidden beneath the vine. Olmsted said that the plant "would have grown to the pinnacle on top of the roof, if allowed to."⁶³ Olmsted made reference to the plant's quick growth, calling it the "Jack-And-The-Beanstalk-Plant."⁶⁴

and Forest magazine also noted kudzu vines growing in a garden in Italy. "Notes of a Summer Journey in Europe," *Garden and Forest*, vol.5, no.2, July 14, 1892, 14.

⁶² Albert H. Olmsted, "Japonicus," *Garden and Forest*, 249, no. 5, (1892): 574.

⁶³ Thomas Meehan and Sons, *Descriptive Catalogue of Ornamental Trees, Shrubs, Vines, Evergreens, Hardy Perennials and Fruit* (Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1900): 57.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 2-Albert Olmsted's home. Thomas Meehan and Sons, *Descriptive Catalogue of Ornamental Trees, Shrubs, Vines, Evergreens, Hardy Perennials and Fruit* (Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1892): 57.

Kudzu's own behavior lent itself to growing high on surfaces, since its leaves are paraheliotropic. This means that they move according to the sun's position to achieve photosynthesis. Because the vine cannot support itself in reaching light, it clings to plants, trees, or any surface that permits it to grow and receive sunlight. Such efforts to grow kudzu on walls and trees, therefore, depended on the plant's ability to cover buildings and trees.

While horticulturalists and gardeners did not express any awareness of these specific mechanisms by which kudzu absorbs light, they did give the plant a degree of agency when describing its growth. Olmsted's description of the plant covering things with "intelligence" suggested that the plant at least had grown intentionally on his building. By likening it to the bean stalk from the fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk," he communicated the fact of the vine's fast growth through an accessible cultural metaphor, mixing biology, ecology and folklore.

There was no mention of kudzu growing most effectively in the southern states in this era. In fact, there was no regional American identity projected onto the plant. Accounts of the vine growing over a tree or a building attracted attention based on their aesthetic value or to promote the “exotic” vine, which many Americans regarded as Japanese. Therefore, the region in which vines grew was not the focal point of these promotions.

In place of a regional identity, newspaper writers and magazine columnists racialized it as a Japanese immigrant. Newspapers and magazines promoted plant as a “Jap,” to entice potential customers; some ads contained promises that the plant would take people to “exotic” locations such as the mountain ranges in Japan.⁶⁵ Advertisements switched between describing the plant as Chinese and Japanese while also speaking of it as an “exotic” to the U.S. However, since most people did not recognize the plant as an invasive species, the racialization was not used to label the vine as an invader. Instead, it was something to welcome into their homes.

Photos of the vine covering buildings and trees were used to promote the plant. After receiving the letter from Olmsted regarding his initial attempts in growing kudzu, *Meehan's Monthly* in its 1897 catalog said that “great authorities” of the gardening world recommended this plant, citing the examples of Olmsted, Meehan, and Watson.⁶⁶ Alan Blanc and Company Nursery in its 1900 catalog, also attested to the vine’s growth

⁶⁵ “A Japanese Floral Calendar,” *Garden and Forest*, vol. 43, 138, (1890): 499. Darch and Hunter, “The Most Famous Chinese Vine, Kudzu: A Rare and Useful Japanese Vine,” *Selected Novelties for 1902*, London, Ontario, 1902. “That Kudzu Vine,” *Hershey's Weekly*, September 12, 1912.

⁶⁶ *Meehan's Monthly: A Magazine of Horticulture, Botany, and Kindred Spirits, Catalogue of Novelties and Specialties: Plants, Bulbs, Fruits*, Vol. 15 (Philadelphia: Meehan and Sons, 1892): 185.

based on these three “great authorities” in the horticultural world.⁶⁷ At least one Canadian nursery that sold the plant capitalized on these “success” stories. Darch and Hunter, a nursery based in London, Ontario pointed to these famous growers of kudzu in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶⁸ A general lack of awareness of kudzu’s environmental damage meant that pictures of the plant covering trees and buildings did not generate concern. Isolated cases of people struggling with the plant growing too quickly aside, most saw the plant covering surfaces as aesthetically pleasing. The growth of the vine, then, was celebrated and not detested.

Experimenting with Kudzu

In the 1910s and 1920s, we see that botanists developed an interest towards kudzu, marking an important period in land use patterns involving the vine. Kudzu started being introduced to the northeastern and midwestern states systemically at this time. An increased awareness of even just a few kudzu plants surviving colder temperatures inspired scientific experiments in these regions. This resulted in the introduction of more kudzu plants into these areas.

While many in North America saw an attractive ornamental, one southern couple imagined other possible uses. In 1902, Charles and Lillie Pleas of West Florida discovered that the kudzu they purchased at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 had potential as a farm crop. The story goes that the Pleas let the plant grow on their nursery and farmstead, Glenarden, in the West Florida town of Chipley.⁶⁹ The plant soon grew

⁶⁷ Alan Blanc and Company, *Catalogue of Novelties and Specialties: Plants, Bulbs, Fruits*, (Philadelphia: Henry G. Gilbert Nursery and Seed Catalogue Collection, 1900), 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Alderman, “Towards a Historical Geography of Human-Invasive Species Relations: How Kudzu Came to Belong in the American South,” 11

over everything on their property, and attempts to control it failed, so they decided to throw it in the trash. However, this attracted horses and pigs which grazed on the plant, which inspired the Pleas family to communicate their findings to the USDA. The agency learned that the vine contains high protein.⁷⁰ The couple became known as “kudzu pioneers,” but where they obtained the plant tells a more nuanced account of the kudzu’s spread into the South. Without travelling outside Florida, the Pleas family might not have received the seeds needed to grow the vine. The spread of kudzu in the South also owed itself first to events in northern and midwestern states, which were the first sites of kudzu’s introduction to the United States.

This period was also significant for kudzu since the Pleas family’s discovery led to inquiries regarding kudzu’s potential as a crop to feed livestock. When their discovery of kudzu’s agricultural qualities received press attention, members of the USDA reached out to the Pleas. The USDA in Washington, D.C. then took over the distribution of the vine and sent seeds to experimental farms across the country. Overseeing this operation was a man named Charles Vancouver Piper.

Born in 1867 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Piper had a strong interest in botany from a very young age. In 1877, he became president of the Young Naturalists, a society of youth that studied flora and fauna of Seattle, Washington, and in 1885, he received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Washington and his masters from the same university seven years later. In 1903, Piper joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture and oversaw Forage Crops Investigation. In this position, he conducted research into plants such as soybean and Sudan grass as possible alternatives

⁷⁰ Ibid.

to cotton, cereals, and other crops. After hearing about the success of the Pleas family, Piper developed an interest in kudzu writing in the 1908 *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture*, how the plant on their property grew “admirably.”⁷¹ Piper was excited that people had found a use for the vine to feed livestock, and believed that it had great potential elsewhere in the United States, noting that the plant could grow up to forty feet per season in Washington, D.C.⁷² In that same year, Piper sent packages of kudzu seeds to experimental stations in Illinois, North Carolina, and Indiana.⁷³ Piper believed that these experimental farms could successfully grow the plant; in 1913, he published his own report on the vine with the USDA claiming that it could grow in every single state in America and even mentioned rumors of the plant growing “as far North as Nova Scotia.”⁷⁴ As a USDA member, Piper contributed to the systematic introduction of the plant as well as interest in it as an alternative crop across the country.

Ohio experimental stations first tested 174 roots of kudzu in 1920.⁷⁵ Only 83 survived the winter. This did not stop those stations from conducting more experiments

⁷¹ United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1909), 250.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Charles V. Piper, “Kudzu.” Letter to Prof. W.L. Burlison, College of Agriculture, Urbana, Illinois, October 17, 1908, National Archives, College Park, Maryland Record group 54, Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils and Agricultural Engineering. Subgroup -Div. of Forage Crops and Disease. Series- Correspondence with State Agri. Exp. Stations, 1899-1928. Box 11- Illinois. Folder #5-Illinois Exp. Stations. Charles V. Piper, “Sending package of kudzu seed for growing.” Letter to Prof. C.B. Williams, Raleigh, North Carolina, April 6, 1908, National Archives, College Park, Maryland Record group 54, Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils and Agricultural Engineering. Subgroup -Div. of Forage Crops and Disease. Series- Correspondence with State Agri. Exp. Stations, 1899-1928. North Carolina. Box 26. P.I. 66, Entry 68. A.T. Wiancko, “Re. kudzu and soybeans in Indiana.” Letter to Charles V. Piper, Agrostologist, Bureau of Plant Industry, Washington, D.C., April 10, 1908, Soils and Agricultural Engineering. Subgroup -Div. of Forage Crops and Disease. Series- Correspondence with State Agri. Exp. Stations, 1899-1928, Box12- Illinois-Indiana. Folder-Indiana Experiment Station-#1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ “Legume Plants Get Trial in Ohio,” *The Williamson Sun and Sentinel*, November 16, 1920.

as Piper continued sending packages containing kudzu. When an experimental farm in Indiana failed to grow the vine in 1921, Piper sent a package containing more seeds in the same year. Piper said that he believed that the clay soil in Indiana should be ideal, citing success in growing the plant in Virginia and Florida, and to ignore “absurd articles” that demoted kudzu as a weed.⁷⁶

Setting this period apart from later ones was Piper’s borderline evangelism towards the vine. The introduction of the plant in the 1920s not only willingly brought the vine to northern and midwestern states but did so with confidence that it could diversify these regions by finding new ways to feed livestock. The growth of kudzu up North, then, reflected government policies and scientific experiments that were interested in the plant’s practicality and not just its aesthetic value.

When Piper worked for the USDA, there was still not yet the idea of kudzu as a southern plant. In the early twentieth century, the introduction and experimentation with the vine occurred in states throughout the midwestern and northeastern states. Without full awareness of where the vine could fully thrive, there were attempts to grow it anywhere.

Studies showed that the vine mostly struggled to adapt to the northward environments. Most of these plants could not survive in these regions all year round as they did in the southern states, so there were much fewer plants growing in the North than the South. Despite Piper and the USDA’s claims of the vine seemingly adapting to

⁷⁶ Charles V. Piper, “Kudzu,” Letter to Prof. J.C. Hackleman, Agric. Exp. Station, Urbana, Illinois, October 25, 1921. National Archives, college park, Maryland, group 54, Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils, and Agricultural. Subgroup-Div of Forage Crops and Diseases. Series-Correspondence with State Agric. Exp. Stations of 1889-1928. Box. 10 -Idaho-Illinois. Folder-Illinois-#4.

every single climate, it struggled in areas that were not consistently warm and humid. Later accounts that depicted the vine as a plant invading these colder regions ignored this reality.

The Dust Bowl and the “Miracle Vine”

Beginning in the 1930s, North America faced two events that prompted further use of kudzu: The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Regions in the South and the Great Plains experienced increased settlement and cultivation in the late nineteenth century, which disrupted each region’s ecology. Then on October 28, 1929, a major fall of stock prices occurred. Gross domestic product fell worldwide by 15 percent, and unemployment in the United States alone reached 23 percent while Canada nationwide had an unemployment rate of 19 percent; farming communities, in addition, faced drops in crop prices of up to 60 percent. Even though the United States experienced dust storms in the late nineteenth century, the clearing of grasses that normally trapped soil during droughts exacerbated the impact of dust storms in the 1930s.⁷⁷ After the 1920s, rainfall diminished significantly, with the summer months seeing a rainfall shortage of 60,000 tons for each 100-acre farm.⁷⁸ Along with this great drop in rainfall, states also had to contend with scorching heat. The state of Illinois experienced 377 heat-related deaths in 1934 alone.⁷⁹ Many farmers in the Great Plains and the southeast regions also lacked an understanding of their region’s ecology to curb soil erosion. As a result,

⁷⁷ Geoff Cunfer, “Scaling the Dust Bowl,” in *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, California: Esri Press, 2008): 102.

⁷⁸ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

certain grasses that trapped soil and kept it moisturized were removed, making this unusually dry period even harsher.

The United States had to revive not only its economy but its soils, too. Government agencies such as the Soil Conservation Service and the Civilian Conservation Corp knew from earlier research that kudzu vine grow rapidly and enrich poor soils. As a legume, kudzu introduces nitrogen to the soil through a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria. Its roots also ensure that valuable minerals from the subsoil travel to the topsoil; these roots catch water from deep underground sources, allowing kudzu to survive temperatures that are too hot for other plants. By 1934, over ten thousand acres in the South were planted with kudzu. Soil Conservation Service also directed multiple nurseries to grow over a hundred million seedlings of kudzu.⁸⁰ The first systemic farming of kudzu to curb soil erosion occurred in the southeastern states, leading to over a million acres of kudzu being planted in the region by 1944.⁸¹ Many farmers, who expressed skepticism towards the plant were enticed by being paid eight dollars per acre of kudzu regardless of the yield.⁸² With part of their farm devoted to the vine, the plant trapped essential moistures in the soil while also serving as fodder for their livestock to graze. Since the plant could grow back quickly after grazing, the area of land would save the farmer time, money, and labor since they would not have to purchase new feed for their livestock.

From 1935 to 1945, the South underwent one of its most significant makeovers. New Deal policies around minimum wages, tenant resettlement, relief measures, public

⁸⁰ Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu,"157.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*,156.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 158.

schooling, and improved public health encouraged what historian Pamela Tyler called a “nascent liberalism in the South.”⁸³ This was encouraging for northerners who imagined themselves as benevolent figures improving the impoverished state of southerners. For northerners who had regarded the South as a regressive area, the planting of kudzu like other New Deal policies brought a promise of progress to the region.⁸⁴ Although kudzu was also planted in states such as New York and Ohio to address soil erosion, the idea of a miracle vine saving only the South proved alluring for those who regarded the region as uniquely stricken by a lack of arable land.

Advocates for kudzu referred to it as the miracle vine that saved the region from intense drought. One of the more influential figures in promoting kudzu was Channing Cope, a businessman based in Atlanta, Georgia. Cope promoted kudzu after growing the plant in a gully on his farm in Yellow River, Georgia. He noted that the vine’s roots held the soil and kept the gully from expanding while providing food for his cattle. After this encounter with the vine, Cope believed that the plant could be used to prevent further soil erosion in the South.

Cope took to numerous Georgia magazines and hosted his own radio show. On his show, he described how the vine trapped moisture in the soil and “resurrected” the land, connecting kudzu in his listeners’ minds to Jesus Christ.⁸⁵ He even formed the Kudzu Club of America, which had 4000 members by 1944.⁸⁶ Its activities included planting the vine on private property and public land, resulting in planting kudzu on one

⁸³ Pamela Tyler, “The Impact of the New Deal and World War II,” in *A Companion to the American South* edited by John B. Boles (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 452

⁸⁴ Natalie J. Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and The New Liberal State* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2012): 138.

⁸⁵ Alderman, “Channing Cope and the Making of a Miracle Vine,” 160.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

hundred thousand acres in Georgia.⁸⁷ Channing Cope and other members of the Kudzu Club also wanted Atlanta, Georgia to be recognized as the “kudzu center” of the world.

A Place for Kudzu

It was in the 1940s when northerners and southerners began to connect the vine to the South. While many Americans regarded the plant in previous decades as an attractive ornamental plant from Japan that adapted more easily to the southern states, the efforts of Cope and the Kudzu Club marked an attempt to establish the South as the place for the vine. The Dust Bowl and attempts to mitigate its impact marked an important transition in the history of the plant, since the discovery of it surviving in southeastern states was largely by accident. This was also when people in the United States attempted to connect the region to the plant. In short, the 1940s marked the beginning of southern kudzu.

In one of his radio broadcasts, Channing Cope discussed kudzu’s origins in Asia, referring to it as “Japanese Kudzu.” A committee of Chinese agriculturalists visited Cope after hearing about the state of Georgia’s efforts in growing the plant. While they were pleased to see that the kudzu growing in Georgia matched Cope’s broadcast, they strongly criticized his characterization of the plant as Japanese, pointing to China’s 2400-year history with the vine as well as Confucius’s own writings on the plant.⁸⁸ Although the Kudzu Club tried making Atlanta the “kudzu center,” not everyone agreed on the plant’s origins and its identity. Such a reaction shows how public memory surrounding “native” or “introduced” plants continued to change.

⁸⁷ Channing Cope, Georgia Regarded as Kudzu Capital,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 13, 1945.

⁸⁸ Channing Cope, “What Town Deserves Title of Kudzu Capital,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 22, 1945.

In order to establish Atlanta as the place for kudzu, The Kudzu Club began distributing it across the United States from their office in the city. They sent shipments of kudzu seeds and roots to experimental farms in Britain and Colombia.⁸⁹ In fact, their office received over 2500 letters from across the United States and other countries. Letters of interest in kudzu reached Atlanta's Chamber of Commerce, its College of Agriculture, the USDA, and even the Soil Conservation Services and Extension asking for the club's mail address.⁹⁰ With the greatest success stories being attributed to the South and one of the largest distributors of the plant being situated in Georgia, it had seemed that the miracle vine had found a second home in the South.

Cope spoke of the plant as thriving in the South, but he knew of it growing elsewhere. When discussing the interest of scientists working in experimental farms in South America, Cope mentioned a letter sent from Edna C. Jones, a gardener from Rockland County, New York, who had planted kudzu in 1925. Twenty years later, her plants survived every winter season in New York's even when it dropped to twenty below Fahrenheit. Cope was surprised to hear this, saying that "all of us have been thinking that kudzu is limited to the South."⁹¹ Cope's statement aligned with a growing association of the plant with the southern landscape.

The belief that kudzu thrived and belonged in the South grew widespread. Adrian J. Pieters, a member of the USDA, wrote in a report in 1939 on kudzu's

⁸⁹ "Kudzu Shipped to England at Newspaper's Request," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 18, 1945 and Channing Cope, "Master of Kudzu Learns Something," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 5, 1945.

⁹⁰ Channing Cope, "Georgia Regarded as Kudzu Capital," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 13, 1945.

⁹¹ Channing Cope, "Master of Kudzu Learns Something," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 5, 1945.

agricultural properties and suggested in a section titled “The Place of Kudzu,” that southeastern states were most hospitable towards the plant because of their humid climate and mild winter season. Environments even only as far north as Kentucky and Tennessee, he argued, could not hold kudzu.⁹² Roderick Bailey’s booklet on soil erosion in the Southeast similarly cited kudzu as growing most successfully in the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, making no mention of it growing beyond the region.⁹³ To these writers, kudzu belonged to the southeastern states. It was not important that the vine came from Japan and was nonnative. There was value and so a place for kudzu.

A writer for the *Chicago Defender*, discussing their trip to Georgia to interview students from the Georgian Tuskegee University noted the states “familiar lush of kudzu pasture,” which suggested that northerners expected to see the vine when visiting the South.⁹⁴ People outside of Alabama who visited the Southeastern Fair in 1940, requested and received lectures on the virtues of planting kudzu and the chance to see the vine up close.⁹⁵ In an article written for *The High School Journal* in 1941, Barbara M. Clough, a teacher from Pennsylvania, spoke of kudzu and other leguminous plants as saving Alabama and Georgia from turning into barren land.⁹⁶ People who travelled to southern states expected to see kudzu. New Deal soil conservation strategies for the

⁹² Adrian.J. Pieters, *Kudzu: A Forage Crop for the Southeast*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1939): 8.

⁹³ Roderick Bailey, *Kudzu for Erosion Control in the Southeast*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1939).

⁹⁴ “Carver Paints to Help Uncle Sam Fool Axis,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1942.

⁹⁵ “Exhibits at Fair Tell Knowledge of Farm Youth: Youngsters Understanding of Needs Impresses Visitors,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 2, 1942.

⁹⁶ Barbara M. Clough, “The Cities Cannot Prosper If the Rural Areas Do Not Prosper,” *The High School Journal*, vol.24, no. 8. (1941): 355.

southeastern states had reached across the country, and news surrounding the “miracle vine” reached every state. The South was saved, and northerners wanted to see the miracle.

For *Washington Post* writer John W. Ball, 1947 marked the introduction of what he called the “miracle vine in the South” to Washington, D.C. Ball listed several locations in D.C. where the municipal government placed kudzu to curb soil erosion, the most prominent being alongside the Kennedy-Warren apartments on Connecticut Avenue. Elenore B. Coleman, the manager of the Kennedy-Warren apartments, had been searching for an item that could cover the steep bank in the photograph below. When a heavy rain came, the stones and mud would wash downwards onto the sidewalks and streets. Coleman considered using stones, but they were too expensive. After hearing about soil conservation in the Southeast that involved kudzu, Coleman purchased over a hundred kudzu plants from nurseries in D.C. to grow on this steep bank. Five years later, the plants grew over the site.



Figure 3- John W. Ball, “Miracle Vine Spells Doom to Washouts,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 1947.

Ball’s report nicely captures the plant’s dual identity as Japanese and southern. He said that it originated in China and that Chinese explorers introduced the plant to the “jap mountainsides.” Written just after the end of the Second World War, the report

reflects derogatory attitudes towards Japan and its culture. Moreover, he claimed that “its use is limited to the Southeast,” and that he wanted to see people try it out in states across the country. He noted that there were no successful attempts north of Pennsylvania to plant the vine as either a crop or ornamental.⁹⁷ Kudzu was firmly established as a southern plant.

The southern plant that came from the North

Kudzu’s introduction to the North was no accident. In fact, there would be no southern icon without the plant’s introduction to Philadelphia. World fairs in the late nineteenth century sold the vine to nursery owners and to individuals interested in an attractive ornamental. Most vines planted outside the southeast region, however, did not survive cooler seasons. The few that survived and received attention, though, were the ones that blanketed trees or city walls. Without awareness of the possible widespread damage it could do, images of kudzu growing high and seemingly without end appealed to those interested in trying out the plant for themselves.

While many northerners and southerners believe kudzu’s status as a southern icon to be deeply entrenched, this chapter shows the miracle vine at work in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and the rest of the country. The colder temperatures, however, interfered with the plant’s growth. Still, the world fairs in northern states were crucial for the discoveries that “kudzu pioneers” Charles and Lillie Pleas made as well as the spread of the vine throughout the southeastern states. Bureaucrats and agricultural scientists who experimented with the vine in northern and midwestern states also helped foster the plant’s association with the South.

⁹⁷ John W. Ball, “*Miracle Vine Spells Doom to Washouts*,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 1947.

The vine, though, mostly failed to acclimate to those colder landscapes, leaving only a few green spots on snowy land. Meanwhile, one could see fields covered with the plant in southern states. The South, then, became increasingly associated with the vine. Whatever kudzu grew in the North appeared in the odd garden or gully. It was an uncommon but welcome sight. A gardener who grew kudzu north of the Mason-Dixon attracted interest from other nearby residents hoping to replicate those results. As we shall see, however, the growing association with the South became less flattering.

Chapter Two: A Decaying Vine

In 1951, Edna Jones, the gardener who surprised even “kudzu master”

Channing Cope, once again put “Rockland County on the map” according to *Whitesville News* by growing 50 kudzu plants on her property. Her vines had been growing there since 1925 and survived every winter, surprising not only her entire neighborhood and agricultural scientists in the South, but even Jones herself. Although they had been growing there for over two decades, the level of surprise towards her efforts reflected an increasing association of kudzu with the South. Jones received letters from southerners wondering how she managed to keep the plants alive throughout the cold weather. Although she never explained to the public how the plant survived, she did reach out to experimental farms in New York to share her knowledge.⁹⁸

Twelve years later, *The New Yorker* published a poem by well-known author James Dickey, simply titled “Kudzu.” In its first five words, the reader experiences a foreign invasion: “Japan invades. Far Eastern vines.” The invader is a cluster of kudzu vines, the “green, mindless, unkillable ghosts,” looking to overtake a family’s farm. The vine forces itself down a cow’s mouth, suffocating it and hogs disappear wherever it grows.⁹⁹ The family barely escapes from the gluttonous vine, but the green ghosts now inhabit their old home. Surely, this was not the same vine that gardeners and scientists invited into their homes and fields. How could the miracle vine become a relentless invader?

⁹⁸ “Mrs. Edna Chase Jones, Former Resident, Puts Rockland County on Map,” *The Whitesville News*, January 25, 1951.

⁹⁹ James Dickey, “Kudzu,” *New Yorker*, May 11, 1963.

This chapter will argue that Northerners came to see the South as being overwhelmed with poverty, racism, and kudzu. It will start first by discussing economic changes in the southeastern states, which were less favorable to the vine. Afterwards, it will explore how the vine became associated with decaying landscapes and white supremacy through news reports of the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s and southern gothic literature. The chapter will then explore possible reasons why kudzu was so unsettling. It will conclude by analyzing reactions to kudzu and southern culture in the 1970s during the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976. Examining these themes will show how northerners used the plant to suggest that white supremacy and overrun kudzu covered the landscape, perpetuating the myth that both problems were restricted to the region.

Opinions of the plant remained largely favorable going into the early 1950s. Ads still promoted it as an ideal climbing vine.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the vine still had the reputation as one of the fastest growing vines in the southern regions of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey.¹⁰¹ As information spread concerning the plant's ability to replenish soil and cover gullies, more interest was devoted to kudzu as a potential solution to issues of soil erosion outside the southeast.

¹⁰⁰ Dorothy Jenkins, "Around the Garden," *New York Times*, January 15, 1950, and "A Few Of Our Hardy Vines," *The County Review*, March 16, 1950.

¹⁰¹ "Farmingdale Long Island Display Ad," *New York Times*, May 7, 1954. Frank K. Balthis, "This Week in the Garden," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1951, Frank K. Balthis, "This Week in the Garden," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1951, and Mrs F.R.T. "Kudzu Vine?" *The Sunday Star*, May 28, 1950, Prof Fax, "What's Your Question?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 27, 1954, Donald Wyman, "Superior Climbers: Widely Used Perennial Vines Play Many Roles in the Landscape," *New York Times*, September 30, 1956. Donald Wyman "Stately Screens: Columnar Trees, Shrub, and Vines Can Be Planted for Privacy," *New York Times*, November 8, 1959.

Forestry and Invasion Ecology

Structural changes occurred, however, to push the vine out of favor. States such as Alabama and Georgia transitioned from an economy based on forage farming to one based primarily on forestry. As a result, farmers who previously regulated the vine on their property, moved out, leaving behind those plots of land and letting the plant grow without restraint. The vine grew quickly over trees and onto roads. Highway engineers and foresters complained about the plant covering railroads, entangling powerlines, as well as covering and killing pine trees. While not yet recognizing it as a weed, the Department of Agriculture removed kudzu from its list of recommended cover crops in 1953. Americans grew less enthusiastic about planting the vine. This growing discontent, however, was not just the result of people dealing with the plant growing out of control. Economic changes in the southern region combined with a growing failure in planting the vine northward led to an increased disregard of the plant.

Highway engineers and foresters came to revile kudzu. As a plant trying to obtain as much sunlight as possible, kudzu needs things to cling onto. Trees and telephone poles helped the plant achieve that goal. Species that the vine covered received inadequate sunlight and died, causing substantial losses to foresters; likewise, telephone poles would sometimes collapse under the weight of kudzu.¹⁰² A change in economics in the southeast meant that there was no longer a home for the vine.

Alongside these changes, invasive ecology received more attention as an academic discipline, resulting in more scrutiny applied to kudzu and introduced species. Nineteenth century naturalists such as Charles Darwin and geologist Charles Lyell were

¹⁰² Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu," 53.

aware of invasive species but regarded them more as curiosities rather than major ecological threats.¹⁰³ Increased chemical warfare and pest control in the Second World War encouraged scientists to treat these species more seriously, leading to further developments of invasion ecology.¹⁰⁴ Metaphors and language involving war pervaded the terminology that ecologists used as they labelled certain species as “invasive.” This etymological turn, according to environmental historian Libby Robin, allowed people “to reconceptualise biota as invaders, to give them agency, and to construct them as a worthy enemy to be managed.”¹⁰⁵ It also drew upon anxieties of foreign invasion and suggested that certain species did not “respect the borders” between native and non-native species.¹⁰⁶

Charles Elton’s *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*, published in 1958, was one of the most influential studies of invasive species. An ecologist specializing in population and community ecology but with an eye towards conservation, Elton grew interested in invasive species following the Second World War. In this book, Elton detailed the movement of these animals and plants, likening them to explosions. When outlining three possible solutions towards these species, he wrote that “You can tackle them before they get in or while they are trying, so to speak, to pass through the guard—this is *quarantine*. You can destroy their first small bridgeheads—that is *eradication*... Usually, if an invasion has got really going it can

¹⁰³ David M. Richardson and Petr Pysek, “Fifty Years of Invasion Ecology: The Legacy of Charles Elton,” *Diversity and Distributions*, no.14 (2008): 161.

¹⁰⁴ Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁰⁵ Libby Robin, “Resilience in the Anthropocene: A Biography,” in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from The Environmental Humanities*, eds. Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman (London and New York: Routledge, 2014,) 50.

¹⁰⁶ Coates, *American Perceptions of Foreign Species*, 164.

only be dealt with by keeping the numbers within bounds, that is by *control*.”¹⁰⁷ This approach emphasized hostility towards invasive species and not cooperation.¹⁰⁸

Kudzu, Decay, and the South

These economic changes coupled with the development of invasion ecology encouraged more hostile reactions to the plant. Northerners, when describing the South in the 1960s, mentioned the vine’s growth along with the region’s poverty. Edward Haynes, a writer and teacher from New York, captured these thoughts when discussing a trip to his family home in Mississippi. In fact, Haynes’ writing is so indicative of northerners’ association of kudzu with southern problems that it is worth mentioning at length:

Two things struck me right away going south on highway 61. First, the Mississippi roads are poor...The contrast between Mississippi and Tennessee is striking. In my northern ignorance I had thought of Tennessee as a poor state filled with hillbillies, moonshiners, the TVA, of course, but not much else. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tennessee looks prosperous as one travels through it... But once across the state line into Mississippi this evidence

¹⁰⁷ Charles Sutherland Elton, *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*, (Oxford, U.K.: University of Oxford Press, 1958) :154.

¹⁰⁸ As a result, some began to advocate for eradication of the vine. In 1961, Du Pont Chemicals put out an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* for New Yorkers interested in eradicating weeds using Trysben 200 and Zobar. Literature produced by the USDA and agricultural scientists in the 1960s reflected a more hostile reaction to kudzu. In a manual called *Control of Honeysuckle and Kudzu*, Ernst Brender outlined various eradication strategies in the American South. However, while he regarded kudzu as an ecological threat, he believed that honeysuckle posed a larger danger to the ecology of the region due to it occupying more forestland. According to Brender’s research, honeysuckle had a far wider range than kudzu, claiming that kudzu could not survive low temperatures without assistance and could only reach as far North as Virginia. For more information, see Ernst V. Brender, *Control of Honeysuckle and Kudzu*, (Asheville, North Carolina: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1961) and “For Long Term Least Cost Vegetation Control, Apply DuPont Weed and Brush Killers,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 1961

of prosperity changes. Mississippi looks poor. The second thing that caught my attention in Mississippi was the kudzu vine. ... Kudzu is planted alongside many roadways to control soil erosion. Not only does the kudzu grow all over the bare ground as it should, but it seems to grow all over everything else too. ... In places it seems to smother the countryside as though a gigantic green mantle had been laid over everything...I thought that I would be uneasy living in that house. I would be afraid that someday the kudzu would win and swallow up me and the house.¹⁰⁹

For Haynes, poverty and kudzu marked the South. A white news writer and supporter of the Civil Rights movement, Haynes reported on what he saw as the “backwardness” of the South since he expected to see “hillbillies” and moonshine operations in southern states. After he said Mississippi “looked poor,” he immediately defined the state by its kudzu. Moreover, it threatened to grow over houses and the people who lived in them. For northerners, kudzu represented the South’s poverty and regression. It was proof of a wild and poor region. Just as poverty spread throughout the area, so did kudzu. Northerners, afraid of the vine growing northward, then, feared what they saw as the South’s problems moving along with it.

Some reports suggested that racism and kudzu ran rampant in the South. Leon W. Lindsay, in an article for the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1970, described Mississippi as a place where “racial segregation grows as wild as kudzu, an agricultural cover crop that creeps over just about everything from Mississippi to South

¹⁰⁹ Edward Haynes, “A Teacher Recalls One Hot Summer,” *The Suffolk County News*, September 3, 1964.

Carolina....”¹¹⁰ Here, Lindsay used the vine to describe the spread of institutionalized racism. This reflected another imagined difference between the North and the South, which was the North as a site of racial harmony and able to control its nature in contrast to the South, which was plagued by its racial tensions and covered with kudzu.

The southern states also experienced a decades long migration of African Americans hoping to escape poor economic conditions as well as state and local Jim Crow laws of racial segregation. This migration of six million Black southerners reached its height in the 1960s, who largely resettled in northern and midwestern states.¹¹¹ Millions of people escaping the South for better economic and social opportunities confirmed northerners’ beliefs in the superiority of the North in contrast to the poverty of the South.

Many outside the South, however, opposed this migration. The resettlement of African Americans in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and others in the North, triggered a white flight as white Americans of European descent left cities for the suburbs. Agencies such as the Federal Housing Administration denied mortgages to African Americans to enforce unofficial forms of racial segregation.¹¹² This served to keep non-white Americans in low-income homes while helping white Americans

¹¹⁰ Leon W. Lindsay, “Mississippi Blacks Lean More Towards Second Boycott,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1970.

¹¹¹ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How It Changed America*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991): 6.

¹¹² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017): 40. Amanda Seligman points out in her analysis of West Side in Chicago that many whites also kept African Americans away from neighborhoods through violence or the threat of violence. For more information, see Amanda Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago’s West Side*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 213-214.

achieve affluence. Middle- and upper-class white northerners regarded the migration of African Americans as an unwelcomed element of the South moving northward.

These reports captured the changing connotations of kudzu and its relationship to the South. Whereas most people writing in the 1940s praised the plant as a “miracle vine” that saved states such as Mississippi, Haynes’ reports and others showcased a vine as a rural relic from the past at best and another lamentable chapter in the South’s history.¹¹³ For northerners, the issue of kudzu-like racism-was believed to be restricted to the South, a backwards region threatening the North with an unwanted “invasion” of African Americans. Such a metaphor was prominent for northerners who believed issues of racism to be unique to the South.

Kudzu and the Southern Gothic

One of the most extreme portrayals of kudzu came from James Dickey, an author from the state of Georgia who published a poem titled “Kudzu” in *The New Yorker*. The poem takes place in an unspecified rural location, but immediately the reader is told, “Japan invades. Far Eastern vines.” Dickey mentions that kudzu was used to keep soil from eroding, but that the vines became “green, unkillable ghosts.” The vine grows over the farming fields as “silence grows oriental.” Pigs disappear as the kudzu continues to grow until they almost reach the unnamed human protagonists who barely escape before the plant swallows the house whole.

The New Yorker was and is an international magazine. In the 1960s, its reader base encompassed American and international audiences. Stories of kudzu’s spread throughout the South and its history as a tool for soil erosion gone wrong reached

¹¹³ Field Trip Reports,” *Bulletin of The Torrey Botanical Club*, Vol.93, No.1 (1966): 70.

audiences across the country. By placing the vine in a farm, Dickey connected the vine to a rural landscape. This was not an urban setting and especially not a modern setting. The majority of *The New Yorker's* reader base would not have worked on a farm, but they may have seen the vine if they had travelled to Georgia or Mississippi. Dickey also relies on racialized phrases like “Japan invades” and “silence grows oriental,” for an audience who still held the Pearl Harbor attack and the war in the Pacific in living memory. The Korean War had ended almost a decade before this poem was published, and the United States was also engaged in the Vietnam War during this period. The idea of kudzu representing an invasion from Asia, therefore, would have appealed to white supremacist readers who regarded the plant as part of an “Asian invasion.”

Dickey's poem belonged to the Southern Gothic genre of literature. Southern Gothic stories focused on the macabre in decaying settings. These decaying locations were usually spaces associated with the South such as a plantation.¹¹⁴ Southern Gothic writers addressed the historical trauma of white supremacy, slavery, and poverty.¹¹⁵ In these stories, buildings in southern states were becoming absorbed into the environment. Southern decay, therefore, was made natural and inevitable. Alice Walker, in an article on the March to Washington, said that “in Mississippi, racism is like that local creeping

¹¹⁴ Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, “Southern Gothic Literature,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, June 2017, accessed June 24, 2020.

¹¹⁵ Elsa Charltey, “Monstrous Plantations: White Zombie and the Horrors of Whiteness,” in *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond In Southern Literature*, edited by Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015): 116. Decay of the South was a popular theme in this literature throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Flannery O’Conner’s book *Wise Blood*, published in 1952, details a soldier returning from the Second World War to his hometown in Tennessee that is now in a state of decay. In 1960, O’Conner released *The Violent Bear It Away*, which details a young boy raised in a backwoods cabin and taught to believe that he is the messiah. After moving to a city, the boy learns to shake off his irrational beliefs that he learned in the countryside.

kudzu vine that swallows whole forests and abandoned houses; if you don't keep pulling up the roots, it will grow back faster than you can destroy it."¹¹⁶ The image of kudzu and white supremacy taking over the South was a powerful metaphor. For these writers, it was hard to tell if kudzu or racism was a greater threat to the region or if such a difference existed at all.

Southern gothic literature demonstrates the interplay between the real kudzu and the imagined kudzu throughout the 1950s and 1960s. There is the vine that can grow aggressively over trees, but also the metaphor for the South's racist history. It is no coincidence that the image of kudzu covering abandoned sites happened while many saw the South as an impoverished site. The shift in attitude reflected imagined and material changes: imagined in that kudzu became a macabre metaphor in news reports and literature and material in that it covered parts of the southern landscape.

Kudzu as a monster

What made kudzu so unsettling? The vine belonged to a much longer history of plant monsters in U.S. literature.¹¹⁷ European colonists who interacted with new plant forms in North America throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century encountered plant life that challenged European conceptions of vegetation as motionless and nonthreatening to humans. Even though plant life was not carnivorous towards humans, the very idea of the plant threatening to swallow up the human and the animal remained strong.¹¹⁸ Descriptions of kudzu anthropomorphized its growth as it "consumed"

¹¹⁶ Alice Walker, "Choosing to Stay at Home: Ten Years After the March to Washington," *The New York Times*, August 26, 1973.

¹¹⁷ Timothy S Miller's "Timeline of Botanical Fiction" in <http://www.thefishinprison.com>.

¹¹⁸ Sightings of plants such as the Venus Flytrap that could be predatory and mobile challenged traditional European hierarchies concerning animal, plant, and human being. Moreover, the notion of a plant eating other species also suggested consciousness, a source of horror for

landscapes and “ate” certain areas. Plants were often considered the bottom of European and American hierarchies of nature, so a plant as an “invader” challenged understandings of plant life as something that only humans act upon.

As America entered the Cold War, the perfectly mowed lawn came to represent white American affluence. The need to control the lawn and prevent any “wild” plants from growing reflected a larger demand in the Cold War for conformity. In this context, horror stories of plant life that existed solely to proliferate threatened such attempts to control an environment while also challenging popular narratives told around American agriculture and science of control, power, and progress.¹¹⁹ A plant whose only intent seemed to be proliferation at the expense of all other species challenged a society that prioritized an environment primed for maximum production of crops for humans.

What also makes plants unsettling is how alien they are. A human, for example, can see themselves in a cat or a dog, but it is harder for them to say they share similarities with purple loosestrife or a kudzu vine. It is also generally easy to tell when an animal is relaxed, hungry, or ready to attack, while the “intentions” that a plant may have were even more mysterious to botanists in the mid-twentieth century than they are today. People who depicted unwelcomed plants through anthropocentric metaphors of invasion, ultimately, were projecting human instincts and human motivations to understand species even less like humans than animals. With no clear goal in mind, it

European botanists and writers as it showed that plants could be intentionally dangerous. For further information on plant monsters in American literature, see Monique Allewaert’s *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

¹¹⁹ Jill E. Anderson, “The Revenge of the Lawn: The Awful Agency of Uncontained Plant life in Ward Moore’s *Greener Than You Think* and Thomas Disch’s *The Genocides*,” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London United Kingdom: Palgrave & McMillan, 2016: 131.

became easier to cast a plant covering entire hillsides, trees, and buildings as a monstrous invader.

A Derelict Vine in the 1970s

The cultural landscape of the South as a wild, decaying space struggling with its racist past was firmly established, as was kudzu's ill reputation. Northerners drew firm connections between kudzu, racism, and rurality. By 1970, the USDA officially labelled kudzu a weed. Although the vine had already attracted criticism for its aggressive growth and was no longer recommended by government agencies, designating the plant as a weed made it officially unwanted.

As the vine became established as a weed, backlash against it intensified. Northern accounts outside of the southeastern states still used the vine to increasingly portray the South as a wild, poor area. When *New York Times* writer Drummond Ayers visited Atlanta, Georgia in 1974, he commented on the drive to the city. Kudzu vines walled in the highway, suggesting to Ayers that the plant reached deep into forested areas.¹²⁰ When he made it to Atlanta, he noticed that the vine seemingly "choked" the city and "wrapped itself around the southern psyche."¹²¹ Ayers noted the kudzu growing on downtown buildings in Atlanta, which city boosters wanted to remove to promote the city as "the enlightened oasis" of the South.¹²² Locals in Atlanta told Ayers that the

¹²⁰ Commentary on kudzu on roadsides was a very common sight by the 1970s. Some reports even suggested that the vine could reach out and grab people who were not driving fast enough. For more information on plants being anthropomorphized, see Theresa M. Kelly's *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012.)

¹²¹ Drummond Ayers, "Prolific Kudzu Vine Plagues The South," *New York Times*, June 11, 1974

¹²² Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 113. In fact, the city of Atlanta was committed to an intensive campaign of city boosterism beginning in the late 1970s that aimed to promote the city as not only a modern Southern city, but a modern American city. Part of this effort

spread of kudzu outside of the southeastern states owed itself to “Yankee tourists,” who saw the vine and thought it would look nice in their garden. Thanks to them, Ayers said kudzu might “clutter up Hoboken, Harlem, or Hartford if given the opportunity.”¹²³

Ayers immediately looked northward when describing the spread of the vine outside the South. Among the three communities that kudzu could “clutter up” one was of tremendous symbolic value to the North: Harlem. A neighborhood in New York City, Harlem was originally populated by mainly Jewish and Italian immigrants in the nineteenth century. However, as African Americans migrated from the South, Harlem gradually became populated mainly by African Americans and became the center of the Harlem Renaissance, a significant African American movement. Harlem, along with cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, became emblematic of the Great Migration. Connecting these communities to kudzu was migration. Harlem’s largely African American demographic owed itself to an attempt to leave the South. Some white Americans in the North regarded it as an invasion of unwanted African Americans and backwardness. It was not a coincidence, therefore, that there was fear

involved kudzu removal, of which corpses of African American children, victims of the Atlanta Child Murders, were found, which did no favors for city boosters desperate to promote Atlanta as a city “too busy for hate.” For more information, see, Timothy Lovelace Jr’s “Making the World in Atlanta’s Image: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Morris Abram, and the Legislative History of the United Nations Race Convention,” *Law and History Review*, 32, no.2 (2014): 385-429, Eric Avila and Mark H. Rose, “Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction,” *Journal of Urban History*, 35, no.3 (2009): 335-347. Carlton Basmajian, “Jimmy Carter and Joe Frank Harris: Creating Growth Management planning in Georgia, 1971 –1989,” *Planning Perspectives*, 29, no.4 (2009): 447-473. Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (London: Picador, 2010). Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of The Black Mecca: Politics and Class in The Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹²³ Drummond Ayers, “Prolific Kudzu Vine Plagues the South,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1974.

that kudzu, which was seen growing over abandoned buildings in southern state, might also “clutter up” Harlem.

Ayers’ use of “clutter up” compares to Haynes’ own report on kudzu in Mississippi that associated it with garbage. Clutter, after all, is used to describe a collection of things that are considered untidy. Calling kudzu clutter suggested that wherever the vine grew was wild, uncivilized, and decrepit. This belonged to a larger pattern of associating the vine with the decay of the South.

Note how Ayers connected death with kudzu by mentioning how the vine was choking the city of Atlanta. As the vine became labelled as a weed and the backlash against it continued, accounts gave the plant an extra agency. No longer simply growing over buildings or roads, it “walled in” highways and “choked” entire cities. When describing the damage done to the South, Northerners were talking about something both material and imagined, but where one ended proved difficult to untangle.

Several of the Atlantans whom Ayers interviewed felt that northerners stereotyped their city as regressive and uncivilized. Some of them wanted to prove to northerners that they were, “more than just Coca- Cola, Chain Gangs, and kudzu plants.”¹²⁴ Berner Weinraub, for the *New York Times* noted similar grievances. In an interview with the *Times* in 1977, an anonymous Atlantan commented on how “liberal folk up North”

¹²⁴ B. Drummond Ayres, “Meet the Real Georgia: You May Be Surprised,” Special to the *New York Times*, November 1976. Gene Thornton, a writer for the *New York Times*, wrote that when people think of the South, they often think about things such as the Ku Klux Klan and the “dreaded kudzu vine.” Glen Thornton, “Photography View: Is There Still a Southern Style?” *New York Times*, August 2, 1981.

imagined southerners as just “swinging in on the kudzu- that terrible vine that crawls in on the houses,” and “thought of us as primitives....”¹²⁵

Describing Southerners as primitive people “swinging in” on the vine also characterized the plant as a jungle and southerners as primates, a deeply racist method. Although jungle is a technical term for a specific environment, it is often informally applied to the continent of Africa and to predominantly African American neighborhoods.¹²⁶ The jungle, then, has been used to racialize certain spaces and to stereotype non-white groups as uncivilized. It has also been used to signify that an area and its denizens are dangerous. After all, in a jungle, a person may get lost or killed. Kudzu embodied a “jungle,” and a dangerous one at that.

The racism implicit in describing a space as a jungle made itself even more pronounced when describing a region like the South, whose history northerners have commonly understood through racism. The racist histories of white southern Americans oppressing southern African Americans combined with the myth of the North as a place of racial harmony led northerners to believe that racism was largely restricted to the South and its environment. Moreover, the Vietnam War had only ended two years before these accounts were published, so the idea of a jungle as a space populated with a racialized other would have been prominent in many Americans’ minds.

Northerners who described southern landscapes, people, and cities as living in jungles served to establish the people of the region as wild. Any place with kudzu was cast as wild, dangerous, and outside of civilization and in opposition to modernity. The

¹²⁵ Bernard Weinraub, “Southerners Feeling New Influence in The Capital,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1977.

¹²⁶ Kelly Enright, *The Maximum of Wilderness: The Jungle in the American Imagination* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 25.

fact that kudzu grew in abundance in the South suggested that it was out of control in that region. As a place unable to control its nature, northerners regarded the South itself as untamed.

Northerners no longer saw kudzu as a savior. Now they saw a hungry vine that covered derelict buildings and hillsides. Whereas many heralded the vine as bringing the South into modernity, now it threatened to undo what remained of it. More than that though, it became yet another problem for a region that northerners had long regarded as one large issue to resolve. When northerners looked at the South, they did not see pastures of lush kudzu but instead a region past the point of saving.

Federal Elections and The South

In 1976, Democrat Jimmy Carter, a Georgian native, was elected president of the United States, which increased northerners' awareness of the South and its role in the country. A report done for the *New York Times* mentioned that the election of President Jimmy Carter helped somewhat lessen the amount of negative associations with southerners.¹²⁷ After addressing the national committee in 1977 and answering reporters' questions concerning domestic and foreign affairs, Carter was jokingly asked by a reporter about what he planned to do about the kudzu that "grew throughout much of Carter's native South." Carter responded by admitting that the vine was far from under control and joked that his administration was looking at the issue.¹²⁸ At this point, kudzu represented an environmental problem that was associated with a specific region.

¹²⁷ Bernard Weinraub, "Southerners Feeling New Influence in The Capital," *New York Times*, January 19, 1977.

¹²⁸ "Jimmy's White House," *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, February 15, 1977.

Many in northward states interpreted Carter's election as part of a wider southernization of the country. A report for the *New York Times* on Carter's victory commented on the increasing proliferation of southern style restaurants appearing in Washington, D.C. a place that the writer described as a "Southern town that has always seemed embarrassed by its origins."¹²⁹ Some southerners saw the election of Jimmy Carter as an opportunity to reform the image of the South. This was also part of a wider movement dating back to the early twentieth century known as the New South. The New South was a reformist slogan of the southern states and a promise to modernize the region, embrace industrial growth, and have a cordial relationship with the North. In this "New South," southern towns would become "hives of industry," whose residents would master nature, and leave behind white supremacy.¹³⁰

The vine still had a nasty reputation after Carter's election. In a report on any potential scandals in Carter's past for Ogdensburg's *Journal*, writer Tome Tiede mentioned how people traveled to remote locations "where the kudzu meets the magnolia" to find rumors about the president.¹³¹ Even just joking that the plant hid a person's past painted kudzu with a malicious intent. When kudzu became well known for ruining the southern landscape, northerners reacted to it with more hostility. They used it as an example of the various problems that the South faced to perpetuate the myth of the North as free of racism, poverty, and foreign botanical invasion.

¹²⁹ Bernard Weinraub, "Southerners Feeling New Influence in The Capital," *New York Times*, January 19, 1977.

¹³⁰ Stephen Price, *Stories of the South: Race and Reconstruction of Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 100.

¹³¹ Tom Tiede, "In Search of the Real Jimmy Carter," *The Journal*, July 7, 1976.

The labelling of kudzu as unclean grew more intense alongside this designation as a bothersome pest. Whereas previous writings on the plant exoticized it to entice potential customers, this period saw reports that drew comparisons between the spread of a vine and a region with a devastated economy. New Deal soil conservation policies that popularized the plant became an example of naivete, of welcoming a foe that they should have kept out. Hating kudzu was a slow, gradual process unlike the plant's fast growth. It took changes in economic structures and recognition from the USDA to convince most northerners that there was, indeed, no space for the plant. Kudzu became associated with decay and destruction in a region that northerners had long regarded as regressive.

As a result, northerners increasingly began to conceptualize the southern landscape, with its abundance of the plant as not only different from the northern landscape, but one that an invasive species overwhelmed. Travelling down to the South, tourists saw kudzu on the sides of the highway, swallowing trees whole, and trapping houses beneath its tendrils. It helped them understand the South with its abundance of kudzu as fundamentally different from the North. This was a region that could not control even the plants that presided in it.

The threat of this invasive species, however, was not restricted to the South. Kudzu was not only reported in Georgia and Mississippi, but also in Pennsylvania and New York. Northerners who thought of kudzu as solely a southern problem had an issue to resolve. They found themselves wrestling with the idea of their region not having the plant and the fact that the plant could grow there. They also had to contend with what they saw as a newfound influence of southern politics, economics, and culture. Eager to

hold onto former notions of what it meant to be northern or southern, they characterized kudzu as a familiar threat.

Chapter Three: A Southern Vine

In 2000 when Richard Gould, an ecology professor from Cornell University, saw kudzu growing in New York, he understood why people in California paid for fake snow on their lawns.¹³² Gould felt grief as he recalled the summers of his youth looking at sycamore trees.¹³³ The sight of the vine meant an end to those summers, because kudzu was more than just ecologically unsound. It was a sign of an admittedly distant future in which young New Yorkers eagerly awaited a summer full of blossoming kudzu in lieu of sycamores.¹³⁴

Gould's account captures how northerners from the 1980s and to the 2000s interpreted kudzu as part of a southern invasion that threatened to assimilate the North. Beginning in the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter's election led to discussions about the "rise" of southern influences across the country. Amidst the economic and political rise of the sunbelt states and the election of Republican president Ronald Reagan emerged reports of kudzu "invading" the North. Kudzu was already known for its voracious appetite in the South, so there was perhaps no better symbol of a southern "takeover" of style politics, culture, and economics than the vine that ate the South beginning to gnaw at the North. Japan's economic rise in the 1980s also shaped these discussions of the vine "taking over" as well as awareness of how global warming could change what people labelled as northern or southern.

This chapter will revolve around three interlocking fears and how they informed the characterization of kudzu as a southern invader: the "rise" of the South, fears of

¹³² Richard Goldstein, "The City That Never Sleets," *New York Times*, January 6, 2000.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Japan's rising economic influence, and the threat of global warming. It will be argued that fears of a waning political and economic influence fueled characterizations of kudzu as a southern invader and that the plant's naturalized range remained largely restricted to the southeastern states. Northerners understood the plant as representing what they feared most: becoming part of the South.

Republican dominance and the South's new rise

By the 1980s, the South seemed to be looking northward. Economic and social policies once only applied to states like Alabama, Texas, and Mississippi in the 1970s were now becoming nationwide. Low tax rates, significant reductions in public services, emphasis on military preparedness, along with a focus on states' rights in place of universal standards were being applied to the rest of the country.¹³⁵ As a result, there emerged talk of supposedly southern style politics and economics approaching northward.

States in the northeast, once known for dominating the automobile and manufacturing markets, struggled to compete against the increasing Japanese competition. Meanwhile, states in the sunbelt region attracted foreign investment due to lower labor costs and taxation. The investment in southern states coupled with a rise of automation caused factory layoffs in states such as Michigan and New York. This deindustrialization, in turn, led to population loss and unemployment in the northern states, resulting in discussions about whether the North was as influential as it was in previous decades.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: A Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001): 255.

¹³⁶ Paul Jargowsky, *Poverty and Place: Ghetto, Barrios, and the American City* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1997): 52.

Moreover, the year 1980 saw the election of President Ronald Reagan, a Republican president. As the Reagan administration committed to a platform of deregulation, slashing of public services, and investing into the military sector of the United States, a cultural shift also occurred. American country music became more popular, American football became a more popular sport for the country, and conservative values became part of the mainstream America.¹³⁷ It was the beginning of a decade of Republican governance.

It was in this context that more northerners spoke of kudzu as a plant invading the North. These discussions typically involved the South and right-wing politics as well. In an article for the *Boston Globe*, Lew McCreery spoke of a “growing pantheon of Northward advancing perils, such as the kudzu vine, the New Right, snuff movies, and the South American killer bee.”¹³⁸ Following the surprising defeat of Republican congressman Liles Williams and election of Democrat Wayne Dowdy in a district in Mississippi in 1983, Curtis Wilkie, a *Boston Globe* writer was shocked that a state where “kudzu vines are lusher than the land, and where racial animosities were once strong,” would elect a Democrat.¹³⁹

These reporters used kudzu to naturalize rightwing politics with the South. Although the connection between southern states and Republican policies seemed inextricably connected by the 1980s, Republican dominance in the South dated back only as far as the 1960s, long after the introduction of kudzu to the region. Yet, northerners saw places where kudzu grew in abundance as right leaning by the 1980s.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³⁸ Lew McCreery, “March-March, munch-munch: Have You Seen Any Little Invaders with A Most Unusual Diet,” *Boston Globe*, October 20, 1980.

¹³⁹ Curtis Wilkie, “Coattail effect not enough for Reagan backer,” *Boston Globe*, July 9, 1981.

Wilkie's description of kudzu covering barren land shows that ideas of the region as overrun with the plant continued into the latter half of the twentieth century. These writers declared the dominance of the Republican party in the South as much a part of the landscape as the kudzu.

As southern states seemed to possess more agency, writers turned to the most significant regional conflict in the country's history, the Civil War. The most popular form of communicating the vine's destruction was comparing it to William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea, the Union military campaign to destroy Georgia's economy. A *Hartford Courant* reporter on kudzu in Atlanta claimed that bitterness over the vine's damage to the region equaled that to the memory of General Sherman's march, "only this monster creeps."¹⁴⁰ Bill Knutson, the writer of this article, claimed that southerners looking to "settle a grudge against us Yankees for what they claim was some nastiness perpetuated by Sherman and Grant and the rest of the Union army," planted kudzu in northward states, while an anonymous person claimed that the northward migration of the plant was a plot "to save whatever remains of the South."¹⁴¹ For these writers, tensions between southern and northern states were as deeply rooted as the vine and therefore, natural.

Comparisons between kudzu's spread and William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the sea was a new way to communicate kudzu's destructive tendencies. Sherman's March ended countless human lives and was also ecologically devastating as it involved the destruction of farms as well as crops. It was logical to connect an ecologically

¹⁴⁰ "Kudzu Vine Strangling Southland," *The Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1977.

¹⁴¹ Bill Knutson, "Kudzu Is Marching on Yankee Land," *The Post-Crescent*, November 26, 1983. See also Ben Pryor, "Kudzu May Have Potential," *The Sun-Sentinel*, January 10, 1980. Patrick O'Leary, "Kudzu," *The Iowa Review*, vol.18, 3 (1988).

destructive plant with a scorched earth campaign of the South. The popular memory surrounding this event impacted discussions around kudzu's spread up North. To say that the plant resembled this past effort suggested that the plant could not only damage the North but destroy it. Claiming, even as a joke, that the plant's growth was an act of revenge for Sherman's campaign fostered the myth that southernization brought the vine northward.

Southern Revenge

It became increasingly common to speak of the plant's growth as an act of revenge against the North. Framing it as vengeance accomplished several things. First, it established that the vine belonged to the South. Most importantly, however, it suggested that in the vine, which was spotted growing over abandoned buildings in the South could, in fact, grow over abandoned northeastern sites. If kudzu was a joke, then the joke was surely on the Yankees. Lewis Grizzard, a humor columnist for the *Galveston Daily News* in Texas, noted that kudzu was "not supposed to grow in the North. It is a Southern thing," and attributed the northward spread of the plant to the Daughters of Confederacy, a southern white supremacist organization; he claimed that planting the vine would disrupt the North as a whole.¹⁴² Discussions of kudzu's place during the 1980s and 1990s revolved less around the plant's non-native status and focused more on where it belonged. Postcards of Mississippi showed highway roadsides covered with the vine along with information about the plant's history in the South. Others sold in North Carolina had kudzu covering houses and telephone poles with a Confederate flag and a caption at the top that said, "plant kudzu seeds up nawth." These

¹⁴² Lewis Grizzard, "Kudzu: Granny Terrorists' Favorite Weapon," *The Galveston Daily News*, August 13, 1993.

postcards explicitly identified kudzu as a southern plant threatening the North. The photos of abandoned houses and telephone poles covered with the now infamous vine and the order to plant them “up nawth” suggested that a similar fate awaited people who opposed the Confederacy. If southerners were still angry over the destruction of life during that conflict, then perhaps no better form of revenge awaited the North than the abundance of unwanted plant life.

This association with the Confederacy occurred even though kudzu arrived in the U.S. ten years after the Civil War ended. Kudzu’s origins as a Japanese plant or even its current status in the 1980s as an invasive species was not important when describing the plant growing outside the South. The strong association of the plant with southern states and politics now being applied to the rest of the country instead reflected concerns about where such markers of southern identity belonged.

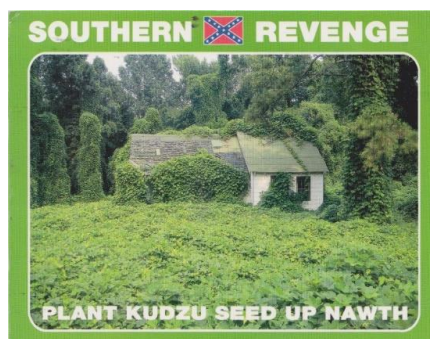
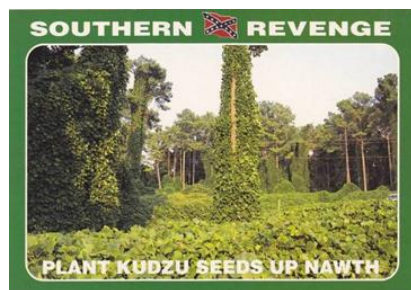


Figure 4-Southern Revenge Cards sold by Photo Arts Inc. in South Carolina

This usage of Civil War metaphors and comparisons to describe kudzu's spread suggested that the boundaries drawn between the North and the South in that conflict remained strong influences in the formation of regional identities. As an invasive species, kudzu was already associated with violence by killing trees and plants. Connecting it directly to the most devastating war in the country's history perpetuated what northerners saw as the destructive nature of the plant. It also suggested that these identities and tensions were as naturalized as the vine's own status in the South.

Connecting the plant to this conflict helped establish it as an unwanted plant. As a war that divided the two regions, anything associated with the South was normally looked down upon, if not outright despised. Identifying the plant as a southern invader labelled it as being outside the North, and something to directly oppose. There was no kudzu, then, that grew and occupied northward space with permission.

Most importantly, attributing the spread of kudzu to southerners who were angry over the Civil War's outcome served to keep kudzu as a southern plant and the North as a space devoid of the vine. At this point, kudzu had become strongly associated with the southern landscape and southern culture. Critics of the South used the vine to set the region apart from the North. In their eyes, the South was covered with kudzu, a plant gone wild. The North was kudzu free, at least most of the time. In order to reconcile the fact of the vine's existence in the North, the vine became a familiar enemy that northerners had fought in the country's most significant war. This was the vine that was part of the Confederacy that was determined to take over the rest of the country. It was an unwanted invader. Those struggling to conceptualize the North as a space with no

kudzu while seeing it grow in their own backyard found a convenient excuse in the narrative of southernization.

Japan Invades

The expansion of what northerners believed to be southern style politics was not the only contributing factor to kudzu's new identity as a plant invading the North. Alongside the growing prominence of the South, Japan emerged as a significant economic power. In the 1980s, Japan became one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Numerous items from Japan such as the VCR and Honda and Toyota automobiles entered the U.S. markets.¹⁴³

The South and Japan, though, had a long history. To Japanese citizens, American occupation of their country after the Second World War mirrored the reconstruction phase of the American South.¹⁴⁴ When invited to teach a course on reconstruction at the University of Tokyo in 1953, southern historian Comer Vann Woodward noted that many Japanese civilians felt a solidarity with the South since they believed their country also went through a reconstruction by "Yankees."¹⁴⁵ Some of the faculty members of the University of Tokyo even told Woodward that he understood anti-Americanism having been raised in it as a southerner. In addition, he noticed a fascination with movies such as "Gone with the Wind" and the work of William Faulkner.¹⁴⁶ Even Faulkner believed that deep similarities existed as expressed in a speech to Japanese students:

¹⁴³ Andrew C. McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 6.

¹⁴⁴ Comer Vann Woodward, "Haiku," *Southern Cultures*, 4, no. 4, (1998): 19.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

My side, the South, lost that war, the battles of which were fought not on neutral ground in the waste of ocean, but in our own homes, our gardens, our farms, as if Okinawa and Guadalcanal had been not islands in the distant Pacific but the precincts of Honshu and Hokkaido. Our land, our homes were invaded by a conqueror who remained after we were defeated; we were not only devastated by the battle which we lost, the conqueror spent the next ten years after our defeat and surrender despoiling us of what little war had left.¹⁴⁷

These connections between the American South and Japan were based on mutual feelings of having northerners disrupting their identity and sovereignty. Kudzu was one of several connections between the South and Japan. In addition, the lax taxation of the southern states attracted Japanese investment into the southern states. Following the actions of the Midwest US-Japan Association formed in 1967, the Southeast US-Japan Association formed in 1976.¹⁴⁸ This association was formed, in part, because southern governors feared that they had run out of northern investors due to northerners' own prejudices towards the South. Foreign investors were less likely to hold those beliefs. The association rotated its annual meetings between Japan and southeastern states, allowing for Japanese companies to invest and make purchases in the southeastern states. Agreements at these conferences led to the opening of 671 Japanese facilities in the southeastern states between 1976 and 1989, one of which led

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005): 607.

¹⁴⁸ Samuel Lucas McMillan, *The Involvement of State Governments in US Foreign Relations* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 178.

to a Japanese food processing company called Sakae Bio Inc. that brought kudzu from Alabama to Japan.¹⁴⁹

As the Japanese economy grew more involved with the South, northern reports increasingly racialized the Japanese economy and kudzu as the “new Yellow Peril.”¹⁵⁰ In a 1979 report for the *Christian Science Monitor*, a writer commented that the abundance of kudzu provided “constant reminders of Japan” in the landscape of the American South.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, an article for the *Chicago Tribune* compared kudzu’s growth throughout the region to a Japanese monster devouring the landscape.¹⁵² Such descriptions represent a significant change in how kudzu was racialized. While the plant was cast as a Japanese immigrant in writings from the early twentieth century, now the landscape itself was scarred by foreign influences. Describing the vine as a monster from Japan invoked the image of Godzilla, a famous Japanese kaiju, and imbued the plant with agency not seen in previous decades.

It was not only newspaper reporters who labelled the plant as a Southern and Japanese invader. In a report on kudzu populations in Massachusetts in the late summer of 1981, ecologists Bruce A. Sorrie and William D. Perkins examined strands of kudzu on Hull Island and Kingston. They concluded by hypothesizing that a “soldier from the South” planted the kudzu on Hull Island to remind themselves of home while the kudzu

¹⁴⁹ Steve Harvey, “Japanese Plan to Harvest Kudzu Takes Root In Alabama,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 23, 1990.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Heale, “Anatomy of a Scare: Yellow Peril Politics In America, 1980-1993,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.43 (2009): 21.

¹⁵¹ Peter Gregson Reuter, “Japanese Kudzu Vine Puts Squeeze on South,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1978.

¹⁵² Timothy McNulty, “A Japanese Monster Is Marching Through Georgia,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 1977. For other comparisons of kudzu to Japanese immigrants and culture, see B. Drummond Ayers, “A Southern Menace That’s Fit to Eat,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1978, and “Checkback: Kudzu is a Creep in Kent,” *The Morning News*, April 28, 1977.

found in Kingston “adjacent to a Chinese restaurant may have been planted there, since the powdered root is used in cooking.”¹⁵³ Edward Frankel, a botanist, in an interview with the *New York Times*, concerning a 350 foot long field of kudzu along the Bronx River in Scarsdale claimed that kudzu had “slowly been moving North,” and suggested a number of possibilities for the plant reaching Scarsdale. These explanations included arriving by train, being distributed by birds migrating from the South “where kudzu is king,” to a “homesick Japanese resident of the village planted it as a reminder of home.”¹⁵⁴ Along with framing the presence of kudzu as a recent introduction to the landscape, Frankel also framed it in regional and racial understandings of the plant. Even Lewis Grizzard, the comedy columnist who jokingly attributed the spread of kudzu to the Daughters of Confederacy, said that they disguised themselves as “Chinese deportees, slipped into the North with kudzu. They planted it in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New York.”¹⁵⁵ With people moving out of northern states to head for the South and the rise of Japan, kudzu became a double threat: a plant determined to get its southern revenge and an invader from the Pacific.

This double characterization of Asian immigrant and southern invader accentuated kudzu’s status as an outsider in the North. Plants and animals that originated in Asia had a long history of being cast as part of an “Asian invasion,” that threatened the “purity” of the United States.¹⁵⁶ Once it was considered an invasive

¹⁵³ Bruce A. Sorrie and William D. Perkins, “New England Note: Kudzu in New England,” *Rhodora*, vol.90, 863 (1988) 341.

¹⁵⁴ Edward Frankel, “A Botanist Sounds the Alert: Kudzu Is Spotted in Scarsdale,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1988.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ For more information on how plants and other species have been labelled as Asian invaders, see Jeannie N. Shinozuka, “Deadly Perils: Japanese Beetles and the Pestilential Immigrant, 1920s-1930s.” *American Quarterly* 65, no.4 (2013): 831-852, Cardozo and Subramaniam,

species, northern reports relied on older racist views towards ethnic groups in Asia to label its spread as a threat. With Japan emerging as America's biggest rival, next to the Soviet Union, it proved easy to generate fear towards a plant from a country that threatened America's geopolitical prestige. As kudzu became more intensely racialized, so did the characterization of it as a southern invader. Merging the narrative of an Asian invasion with that of a southern invasion allowed northerners to characterize the plant as unwanted and not belonging to the North.

Kudzu's Actual Range

Despite accusations of invasion, kudzu's growth throughout the North was underwhelming. Take the state of New York for example. In a survey conducted by botanist Edward Frankel, counties that neighbored Staten Island such as Westchester, Rockland, Nassau, and Suffolk had the vine growing in mainly urban areas, which Frankel believed spread through city residents purchasing the plant from "oriental" markets.¹⁵⁷ However, like his earlier research, Frankel found that most kudzu in New York grew in isolated spaces and not large areas like in southern states. In fact, the range of the plant in the Bronx actually shrunk since it was first reported in the late 1970s, while the kudzu in a Scarsdale neighborhood that was the subject of a *New York Times* report on plants "taking over," had been growing there for a few decades, and increased very little in size throughout the years. Meanwhile, the only kudzu spotted in Manhattan was on an abandoned house and adjacent lot. Frankel believed that it would

"Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions," 1-23, and Coates, *American Perceptions of Foreign Species*.

¹⁵⁷ Edward Frankel, "Distribution of *Pueraria Lobata* in and Around New York City," *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*, Vol. 116, 4 (1989): 392.

be a long time before the state of New York would be overrun with the plant but advocated for eradication in the city anyway.

Although kudzu occupied very little territory in the city, reports described areas with the plant as unruly and wild. Reporter Joan Lee Faust likened the kudzu in New York to a “jungle-walk.”¹⁵⁸ Frankel, in his article for the *New York Times*, compared the plant covering trees in New York to Medusa and said that the city could be overrun with “crazy kudzu.”¹⁵⁹ As a plant associated with a region stereotyped as largely rural, kudzu stood in contrast to the highly urbanized metropolis of New York City. Even though the actual threat of the plant was minimal, it represented a lack of civilization and a lack of modernity. Its presence, therefore, threatened the image of the city as a modern space.

Reports on kudzu’s spread in other northeastern states also showed the plant covering very little territory. Charles Anderson, a botanist in New Jersey noted several cases of kudzu vines covering a large tree or an abandoned house, leading him to theorize that vines had been planted there thirty or forty years ago.¹⁶⁰ By 1988, the only kudzu growing in New Jersey occupied virtually no acres of land, growing either in abandoned houses or in a small areas impacted by soil erosion in the early 1940s.¹⁶¹ Small kudzu stands were spotted in six different counties in Massachusetts, with some having been there since 1938.¹⁶² Two groups of kudzu were spotted in two counties in

¹⁵⁸ Joan Lee Faust, “A Growing Problem: On the Trail of a Growing Problem,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 1982.

¹⁵⁹ Edward Frankel, “A Botanist Sounds the Alert: Kudzu Is Spotted in Scarsdale,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1988.

¹⁶⁰ David. B. Snyder, “Notes on some New Jersey Adventive Flora,” *Bartonia*, 53, (1987): 20.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶² Alan Raver, “Attack of the Creeping Kudzu,” *Newsday*, October 22, 1987.

Connecticut, growing on vacant lots and abandoned buildings.¹⁶³ Conflicting information existed on the spread of kudzu into Canada. While there were reports of kudzu in Nova Scotia, a member of Nova Scotia Agricultural College in 1989 noted that “Flora of Nova Scotia,” “Flora of New Brunswick,” and “Flora of Canada,” contained no mention of the vine.¹⁶⁴

These reports show a plant that rarely grew beyond where people introduced it to. Some were planted in these locations in the 1930s and 1940s to address soil erosion. Others owed their existence to gardeners and nurseries selling and growing the plant. To suggest that these plants had arrived with the aid of southerners or Asian migrants was mistaken at best and prejudiced at worst. These were also likely the few survivors of a larger cluster that died in previous years. If kudzu was participating in an invasion of the northern states, then it had not prepared adequately for the winter season.

Even scientists who were concerned about kudzu believed that other plants had a far greater range. In 1990, botanists Thomas W. Sasek and Boyd R. Strain published an article concerning the rise of CO₂ emissions and its implications for the distribution of Japanese honeysuckle and kudzu. They argued that the gradual increase of the earth’s global temperature would make it easier for kudzu plants to reach into northern regions and grow successfully. Their study reported that annual stem growth rate of kudzu in central Maryland of 50 feet was not uncommon while states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut witnessed in some locations 32 to 50 feet of annual stem growth even after facing the colder winters experienced in those states; however, those plants were also

¹⁶³ Steven Bialeki, “Pueraria lobate in Connecticut and Fishers Island,” *Connecticut Botanical Club*, (1984): 4.

¹⁶⁴ Edward Frankel, “Distribution of Pueraria lobata in and around New York City,” *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*, 116, no.4 (1989): 393.

introduced from earlier decades.¹⁶⁵ In their publication, they released a map showcasing the approximate naturalized range of kudzu.¹⁶⁶

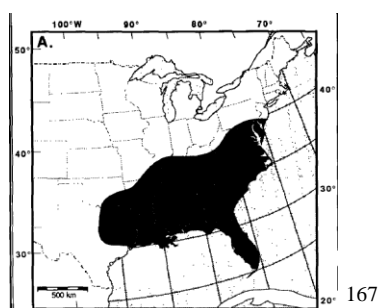


Figure 5-The naturalized range of kudzu in 1990. Taken from Thomas Sasek and Boyd R. Strain, “Implications of Atmospheric CO₂ Enrichment and Climatic Change for the Geographical Distribution of Two Introduced Vines In The U.S.A.,” *Climatic Change*, vol. 16, (1990): 33

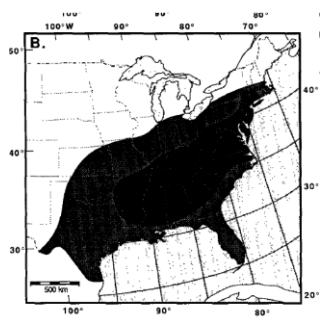


Figure 6-Naturalized range of honeysuckle in 1990. Taken from Thomas Sasek and Boyd R. Strain, “Implications of Atmospheric CO₂ Enrichment and Climatic Change for the Geographical Distribution of Two Introduced Vines In The U.S.A.,” *Climatic Change*, vol. 16, (1990): 33

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Sasek and Boyd R. Strain, “Implications of Atmospheric CO₂ Enrichment and Climatic Change For the Geographical Distribution of Two Introduced Vines In The U.S.A.,” *Climatic Change*, vol. 16, (1990): 34.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* For more information on the naturalized range of kudzu, see “*Pueraria montana* var. *lobata*,” in *Invasive Species Compendium*, <https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/45903>, last modified November 19, 2019, Jonathan Hickman, Shililang Wu, Loretta J. Mickey, and Manuel L. Lerdau, “Kudzu (*Pueraria montana*) invasion doubles emissions of nitric oxide and increases ozone pollution,” *Environmental Sciences*, 107 (2010): 10115-10119, and Cory J. Lindgren, Karen L. Castro, Heather A. Coiner, Robert E. Nurse, and Stephen J. Darbyshire, “The Biology of Invasive Alien Plants in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Plant Science*, vol. 93, 1 (2013): 71-95.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

The approximate naturalized range of kudzu, by the 1990s, stayed largely in the South. While there were sightings of kudzu and attempts to plant the vine in the western half of the country, long droughts and a lack of precipitation prevented the vine from growing all year long.¹⁶⁸ In addition, the map shows that the plant adapted more effectively in areas with more precipitation and humid summers. Plants such as honeysuckle had a considerably greater naturalized range than kudzu. Yet, honeysuckle was not framed as a threat to the North like kudzu.

Nevertheless, Sasek and Strain's article attracted attention from other members of the scientific community who feared kudzu would reach the North. In the "BioBriefs" column for *Bioscience*, the anonymous author commented on their research and said that "the scourge of the South may spread to become the nuisance of the North because of environmental changes associated with global warming," and added that the plant could potentially reach the Great Lakes by 2030.¹⁶⁹ Biologist Peter Curtis shared similar concerns in regard to the rise of CO₂ emissions and the spread of kudzu, noting that kudzu, along with having few natural enemies in the United States and a fast growing rate, could reach new areas in North America in a much shorter time than before.¹⁷⁰

These studies of kudzu's range and impact show that kudzu's growth up North was not a vast takeover. News writers were, instead, reporting on much more subjective ideas related to kudzu. They focused on what it meant to belong to a region once believed to be free of the vine. News reports of kudzu told of a plant that was out of

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶⁹ "BioBriefs: Creeping Kudzu May Migrate North," *Bioscience*, vol. 40, 5, (1990).

¹⁷⁰ David Stipp, "Environment: People Discover Energy in Their Backyards," *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 1993.

control and far reaching, reflecting a larger trend of framing southern influences as a rapidly expanding problem. These reports on the actual range of the plant, in contrast, showed a plant with a range that remained largely restricted to the southern states.

Fears of southern influence likely inspired people who associated the plant with the South to imagine its growth as a takeover.

The Threat of Global Warming

For some northerners, the threat of global warming confirmed that fears about kudzu and other species from the South were more than just paranoia. Conversations in the 1990s about encroaching kudzu, though, left out the narrative of the vine as a Japanese invader. Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, America's next biggest rival Japan entered its period of stagflation in the 1990s. In wake of this stagflation, kudzu was discussed less often as a Japanese invader.

The threat of kudzu migrating because of global warming was connected to larger fears about what it meant to be a northerner. There were still feelings among the general population of a southern influence on American politics in the 1990s. Nineteen ninety two saw the presidential election of Bill Clinton, a politician from Arkansas who relied heavily on his image as a southerner to appeal to "the people" and a vice president Al Gore who was born in Washington, D.C. and raised in Tennessee.¹⁷¹ Even

¹⁷¹ It is worth noting how Bill Clinton used race in his campaign. As Toni Morrison pointed out, Clinton seemingly exploited "every single black trope imaginable with his public image: born in a single parent household, born poor, loves McDonalds, raised working class, and plays the saxophone." Comedian Chris Rock said on an episode of Saturday Night Live that he supported Bill Clinton because he had "real problems. Running out of money, wife's a pain in the ass, all his friends are going to jail. I know Bill Clinton. I *am* Bill Clinton." For more information on Bill Clinton, race, and southern identity, see John N. Duvall, *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction: From Faulkner to Morrison* (London: Palgrave & MacMillan, 2008) as well as Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

after a Democrat had won the federal election, the political consensus in the United States had moved to the right as part of the “reddening” of the country. After all, it was Clinton who ended “welfare as we know it,” and not the Reagan administration.¹⁷² As a result, discussions of a plant long thought to belong in the South potentially moving northward stayed relevant for those who bought into the narrative of a country in danger of becoming southern.

Commentary on global warming now accompanied the kudzu imagined as a southern invader. *Washington Post* in 1998 framed kudzu, the “green menace creeping up North” as a visible consequence of climate change.¹⁷³ In the words of *New York Times* writer Peter Applebome, many southerners defined southern areas as wherever “kudzu grows, cotton is cultivated, Baptists churches are found.”¹⁷⁴ However, as reports of kudzu growing in areas once seen as untouched increased, it became more difficult to characterize the South as simply where kudzu belonged.¹⁷⁵ The writer also made sure to characterize the South as agrarian and that the plant made landscapes look unmodern.

These reports of the plant in connection to global warming and a fear of an increasing southern influence continued into the 2000s. Upon moving to New York City, Atlanta native Tom Junod hoped to never experience an “Atlanta summer,” again. However, as each summer became hotter and hotter, Junod worried that the exact thing he tried to run away from had come back to haunt him. The sight of kudzu vines to him

¹⁷² William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 63.

¹⁷³ Sue Anne Pressley, “Plan of Attack for an Attacking Plant: Researchers Hope Hybrid Bugs Can Slow Spread of Green Menace Kudzu,” *The Washington Post*, July 29, 1998.

¹⁷⁴ Peter Applebome, “Region Whose Borders Are in Eye of Beholder,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1994.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

meant that “the South was on the rise again.” Part of this rise, he claimed, was in the fact that summers in New York got hotter with every year, which reminded him more and more of Atlanta. With a rise in temperature, Junod wrote that soon “Atlanta’s weather will become New York’s.”¹⁷⁶ Junod could not have comprehend how prescient this sighting would be for the year 2016 and beyond.

Junod’s account of the kudzu growing on Trump Tower is important for several reasons. The first is that Junod links kudzu with an “Atlanta summer.” As a city located in the southeastern state of Georgia, Atlanta has had its share of kudzu growing in and around it. The connection between a summer in Atlanta with the vine suggested that the plant could only thrive in a southern climate. The article explicitly stated that global warming caused an infamous southern plant to grow on the tower of a man strongly associated with New York City.

Despite evidence suggesting a minimal spread into the 2000s, northerners still saw kudzu as an encroaching wilderness into northern urban spaces. In 2002, Jerry Degen, a retired chemist living in Brooklyn, walked past a vacant lot with kudzu that he interpreted as a sign of global warming and also, in his own words, reminded him “more of rural Mississippi than the concrete cityscape”¹⁷⁷ Once again, the early metaphor of kudzu as a symbol of the South and rurality appeared throughout reports of sightings of the plant up north. Northerners continued to strongly associate the vine with a lack of modernity and the region with an agrarian lifestyle in contrast to the daily hustle of a person living in New York.

¹⁷⁶ Tom Junod, “Yes, That’s Kudzu on Trump Tower,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2000.

¹⁷⁷ Tara Bahrapour, “Neighborhood Report: Weed That Ate the South Comes to Nosh in the City,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2002.

In their reports on kudzu sightings in the North, northerners addressed an imagined kudzu. This was not the vine that reached Philadelphia back in 1876 and it was not the vine later used to solve soil erosion in New York. This was the plant that covered a dying land and threatened to swallow up anyone in its way. The imagined kudzu was the one believed to be from the South, a traveler that only recently arrived in places with colder winters.

When northerners believed that the South threatened to take over the country politically, culturally, and economically, kudzu joined the invasion, too. Northerners largely overlooked the vine's early history outside the South in place of imagining a plant that had only recently arrived. At the same time, America's economic rival Japan became more influential on the global market and the threat of global warming fed into a narrative of the North losing hegemony over the country.

Fears of kudzu invading the North had little to do with actual ecology. As a form of politics imagined as uniquely southern was applied to the rest of the country, there emerged talk of southernization. There existed in the 1950s and early 1970s, a vine that existed solely for the purpose of growing over dilapidated farms and plantation buildings. Now, it threatened to cover an abandoned factory in Detroit. Kudzu represented what northerners feared they were becoming since the 1970s: southern.

Conclusion: A Starving Vine

On June 26, 2020, I received a phone call from a friend. She told me that her father Stephen, who lives in Toronto, had a story to share with me. For several years, Stephen had kudzu growing in his backyard. He recognized the broad leaves of the vine from a book he had read about invasive plants. The plant had been growing on their property since their grandmother lived in the house. Every year, Stephen pulled the vine out from its spot, but the plant never permanently left. Back in the 1940s, Channing Cope likened the spread of kudzu to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, it resembled a slasher who the heroes have somehow not killed permanently. After an excavation last summer, the vine finally stopped growing. One day, though, it might return.

For those aware of the plant's history in the southern states, it seems remarkable that the plant could grow in Canada. However, newspapers and advertisements from the early twentieth century show evidence of people in Ontario growing the vine.¹⁷⁸ So, here we are again: the great white North with the southern twist. What this thesis has shown, however, is that northerners have manipulated the meaning of kudzu to push a narrative of the South as a region that cannot control its expanding environment.

As kudzu continues to be spotted northward, so do reports that label its presence as a southern invasion. A 2007 report on kudzu in Pennsylvania reported that the plant,

¹⁷⁸ People could also purchase the plant in Durham, Ontario as an ornamental plant for a homeowner's wooden wall, as mentioned in "Your Problems Conducted by Mrs. Helen Law," *Durham Review*, (1897). For more information on gardeners growing kudzu in southwestern Ontario, see "Special Articles," *Public Health*, Vol.3, No.8, August 12, 1912. Peter W. Pawa, "Arbour Vines," *The Canadian Horticulturalist*, vol. 114, no.12 (1913): 290. "The Pea Family," *The Canadian Horticulturalist*, vol. 114, no. 12 (1917): 252, and "The Soil Survey -Between The Niagara Escarpment and Ontario," *Durham Review*, February 19, 1925.

that “ate the South is turning up in Lancaster County.”¹⁷⁹ Twelve years later, a report on kudzu in New York opened with a headline, “Kudzu The Plant that Ate The South is Now Nibbling On the North.”¹⁸⁰ Sightings of the plant in the Canadian province of Ontario likewise invoke the idea of the plant as being part of a southern invasion.¹⁸¹ The vilification of the plant remains the same. Though its tendrils only reached so far, kudzu as a metaphor for southernization travelled a much greater distance.

Kudzu will likely appear in these areas in greater numbers. As global temperatures increase, these environments will become more hospitable to the vine. Kudzu, therefore, may be able to reach these areas without human aid. However, if the vine continues to grow randomly, spots can be removed with relative ease. Despite a likely increase of kudzu in northward locations, the vision of a continent covered in the vine is a long way off. The characterization, though, will not end soon.

Northerners today have inherited a legacy of hating kudzu and imagining a south that is filled with an untamed vine. They have heard stories of kudzu, the “miracle vine” that southerners foolishly let grow, while ignoring the New Yorkers who did the exact same thing. They know of a plant that has ruined much of the South with no plans for stopping, that has consumed the region and is now moving towards the one place it has not yet eaten: the North. They have inherited a way of imagining kudzu and a way of imagining the South.

¹⁷⁹ AC Crable, “Kudzu Unfurling Its Fast-Growing Vines into Lancaster County,” Lancaster Online, July 17, 2007, https://lancasteronline.com/outdoors/kudzu-unfurling-its-fast-growing-vines-into-lancaster-county/image_0f0a0251-c1ae-53be-9347-75506433cd70.html.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Young, “Kudzu: The plant that ate the South is now nibbling on the North,” New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, January 10, 2019, <https://www.nynjtc.org/news/kudzu-plant-ate-south-now-nibbling-north>.

¹⁸¹ Mary Beth Breckenridge, “Aggressive Vine Migrates Northward,” *Time Colonist*, October 12, 2012.

In *Of Wolves and Men*, nature writer Barry Lopez noted that “in the wolf we have not so much an animal that we have always known as one we have consistently imagined.”¹⁸² The same can be said of kudzu: it has been frequently imagined as the vine that ate the South.¹⁸³ Kudzu, the unstoppable invader, reflected fears of southernization more so than any actual ecological threat. It reflected the idea of the South as a problem to solve before it spread to the rest of the country. As a plant associated with the South, which now seemed poised to take over the country, the idea of rural decay now moving northward became a powerful metaphor for northerners who looked down on southern states.

Casting kudzu-filled areas in southern states as dangerous and wild spaces remains a powerful way to describe southernization. In a Reddit forum that revolves around science fiction and speculative evolution, one subscriber posted about a hypothetical future region called “The Kudzu Jungle” whose range goes from the southeastern states and has now started to reach into southern Illinois. Any human walking through The Kudzu Jungle must exercise great caution unless they wanted the vines to come down and trap them.¹⁸⁴ Although largely facetious, this scenario showcases the power of labelling the region as uncivilized and unwanted. It also shows how northerners have both seen and imagined the growth of the plant. Associations with kudzu and lack of humanity can even be seen in the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering* with one card titled “Kudzu” that showcases a man sinking into a growth of the vine beneath him. Another one called “Vine Lasher Kudzu,” presents a man holding

¹⁸² Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men 2nd edition*, (New York: Scribner, 2004): 4.

¹⁸³ James Dickey, “Kudzu” in *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1963, 44.

¹⁸⁴ Sparkmane, “The Kudzu Jungle,” Reddit, January 11, 2020.

an axe ready to fend off fast approaching kudzu. Beneath the picture reads a caption: “It grows to hate you.”¹⁸⁵ This is a plant determined to grow over buildings and people with extreme prejudice.

Season 4 of the *Walking Dead*, a TV show on AMC had an episode placed in a post zombie apocalypse Georgia. In this episode, the protagonists come across an abandoned gas station covered in kudzu that also hides the undead. The episode itself was filmed in an actual abandoned gas station covered with kudzu, since the production staff agreed that the potential for a scene with the vine was too great to ignore. For them, a Georgia without humans would be one where “nature would take over... kudzu would be everywhere.”¹⁸⁶ Kudzu represented not only the absence of civilization, but also the complete annihilation of it.

Kudzu, however, is not an unstoppable menace. In 2015, the United States Forest Service conducted a survey of kudzu and found that it covered 227,000 acres of forestland across the entire United States.¹⁸⁷ This is the size of a small county. There is every reason to suspect that the amount in Canada is much smaller. It is also important to point out that most of the northward areas where kudzu survives are places where the plant was intentionally introduced.¹⁸⁸ Those plants were likely the few survivors of a larger group. The kudzu that grew also relied on people who spent years protecting the

¹⁸⁵ “Kudzu,” Magic: The Gathering, “Vine Lasher Kudzu,” Magic: The Gathering, <https://gatherer.wizards.com/pages/card/Details.aspx?multiverseid=83559>.

¹⁸⁶ The *Walking Dead*, “(SPOILERS) Making of Episode 404 The *Walking Dead*: Indifference,” YouTube Video 4:18 November 3, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-Y-xTYnivs&t=138s>.

¹⁸⁷ Bill Finch, “The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine That Never Truly Ate the South,” *The Smithsonian*, Last modified September 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/>.

¹⁸⁸ J.E. Hickman, et al, “Kudzu (*Pueraria montana*) invasion doubles emissions of nitric oxide and increases ozone pollution,” *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. Vol. 107, 22, (2010): 10118.

plant before it could survive winters independently. Without the aid of humans, the vines could not have survived in these climates.¹⁸⁹

Although it has grown aggressively in some areas, the characterization of it threatening the North is indebted to economic, political and social changes that fueled the narrative of the South as an expanding problem and wilderness. As kudzu became abandoned in the South, it was no longer a plant with economic value but with tremendous symbolic value. With nothing holding it back, the vine began overtaking other plants and trees, covering them with its distinct bright green hue. Much of the South seemed to be blanketed in the vine, a widely noticed change in the landscape of a region that was widely criticized for being unlike how many northerners imagined themselves: modern, progressive, and prosperous. In the 1970s and 1980s when prominent southern politicians were elected in federal positions and the Japanese economy expanded, the plant became part of a southern invasion. Even with the threat of global warming, northerners feared that these changes to the environment would change their relationship with southern states. The spread of the vine threatened long held assumptions and myths about what it meant to be northern or southern.

Ultimately, these are not timeless categories. Kudzu, after all, was not always southern. But as it became southern, reports of it up north changed. Instead of as a rarity or a beautiful ornamental, kudzu in states belonging north of the Mason-Dixon line was understood as a recent, unwelcomed occurrence. The plant's growth was part of an invasion of southern ecology and culture. Although southerners and northerners may have acknowledged the Mason-Dixon line, plants simply grew wherever they could

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

with no regard for the boundaries set up between regions and nation-states. Like any other species, kudzu survives wherever it can grow. The intentional introductions by world fairs, gardeners, and scientists aided in the spread of this species to grow in the North, first as a welcome guest and later as a plant that challenged what it meant to live in the North or South.

When it was introduced, kudzu was not a southern plant. However, it was not just southerners who helped establish this status. Northerners describing what they saw as unwanted southern influences used comparisons to kudzu to make the point that they were unwelcomed. When they travelled to states such as North Carolina and Georgia, people expected to see kudzu up close and made sure to remind others back home of the vine becoming a problem.

In contrast to the implication of kudzu arriving through a southern invasion, many northerners introduced the plant in its early history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, world fairs and nurseries were the primary distributors of these plants, which homeowners purchased from to grow in their own backyards. State governments interested in alternative crops sought to introduce kudzu systematically into the northeast throughout the 1920s and 1930s, especially in attempts to curb soil erosion. These later accounts that vilified kudzu in those states as an invader were often dealing with kudzu planted in earlier decades. The idea of kudzu as a southern invader, therefore, hides a much more complicated story of the plant's arrival and spread throughout the region.

The early history of northern state governments and individuals introducing the vine to their region is long forgotten. Mentions of this early past appeared sporadically

in reports of the plant's growth throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but it disappeared almost entirely into the 1990s and 2000s. It may have been because the vine covered hundreds of thousands of acres in the South in contrast to the North, which had, at most, tens of thousands of acres with kudzu. Nevertheless, as the characterization of the plant as a southern invader grew more common, this early history became mentioned far less.

This lack of awareness also reflected how northerners imagined their environments. Many characterized their region as a civilized, progressive area of the country. Kudzu, in contrast, never simply grew. Instead, houses and streets found themselves being swallowed up by a "jungle" of kudzu, a vine that began "creeping" into their region. The plant was typed as not only an invader, but a wild plant associated with wild spaces like a jungle and with the South that had long been stereotyped as regressive.

As a wild plant from a region that many northerners stereotyped as regressive, kudzu challenged the orderly image many northerners had constructed of their surroundings. Many northerners believed their home region was filled with prosperity, modern ideas, and less of the problems that plagued Dixieland. But northerners still thought about the possibility of kudzu growing even if only in random spots, into states like New York and Pennsylvania. The very possibility that the plant could grow northward threatened to challenge assumptions about what separated the two regions.

A look at this early history and similarities with a region long looked down upon would likely produce discomfort for northerners. It shows the vine growing on both sides around the same period, betraying later explanations that framed its growth as recent. It shows northerners bringing the now infamous vine to their homes, willingly

and with great enthusiasm that the same plant that could beautify a garden in North Carolina could do the same for a garden in Maine. It would show that what saved a gully from expanding in Birmingham, Alabama could also be used in The Bronx. It would show kudzu as not only a southern problem, but a shared one.

Rather than admit to a history with the plant going back over a hundred years, kudzu's history was reimagined. Gone was its early introduction. A new story emerged. In this account, northern gardeners and government agencies who brought the plant to states like Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York were not mentioned. For writers hoping to discuss sightings of the plant while mocking the South, they linked the spread of the vine to southerners with a score to settle regarding the American Civil War's outcome, a characterization that exploited regional tensions going back to the late nineteenth century. By assigning blame anywhere but home, northerners could still have the vine growing in the area while keeping it southern.

The problem of kudzu growing in the North was then solved for those trying to reconcile its appearance. With this narrative, the only kudzu growing in the North owed itself to outsiders. Thus, the vine did not belong in the region. Even though the vine could grow outside Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida, the southern invader narrative suggested that it belonged solely in those states. As a result, northerners could still consider their area *normally* deprived of kudzu even if reality regularly challenged that belief.

Kudzu certainly represented a threat to northerners, but not an actual ecological threat. Instead, it challenged how they differentiated their region to the South. While other plants such as Asian privet and Japanese honeysuckle cover far more of the south

and pose a larger ecological threat to the North than kudzu, those plants were not imagined as southern invaders despite perhaps having a better claim to being southern. With kudzu being used to differentiate the southern landscape from the northern landscape, the fact that it *could* grow in a region where it does not “belong” suggested that “northern” or “southern” required reconsideration.

As southerners move northward, so do stories of the vine. When queer artist Aaron McIntosh moved to Baltimore, Maryland, a place he considered to be northern, he began producing artwork involving crafts made to resemble kudzu leaves that told stories that were not traditionally associated with his home state of Virginia.¹⁹⁰ George Mitchell, a businessman from Alabama who moved to Markham, Ontario in 1986 formed a company named KUDZU as a reminder of his roots.¹⁹¹ The fact that some southerners saw in kudzu reminders of where they came from demonstrates how the vine covered hillsides, trees, and even people’s understandings of their own surroundings.

Examining reactions to kudzu up north has important implications for binaries of north and south, as well as native and non-native. Kudzu’s reach into the North has been exaggerated. That much is clear. But as global temperatures increase, the northeastern and the midwestern ecoregions will likely see more kudzu. Species will shift their ranges toward the poles, higher into the mountains, and deeper into the seas.¹⁹² While

¹⁹⁰ Monica Moses, “Invasive Queer Kudzu,” *American Craft Council*, September 29, 2007 <https://craftcouncil.org/post/aaron-mcintosh-invasive-queer-kudzu>.

¹⁹¹ Ashley Joannou, “Funeral For Jazz Festival President,” *The Stouffville Sun Tribune*, December 22, 2001.

¹⁹² Franz Essl, Stefan Dullinger, Piero Genovesi, Ingolf Kühn, Bernd Lenzner, Aníbal Pauchard, Petr Pyšek, Wolfgang Rabitsch, David M Richardson, Hanno Seebens, Mark van Kleunen, Wim H van der Putten, Montserrat Vilà, and Sven Bacher, “A Conceptual Framework

historians have examined the conflicts of species “belonging” to one nation migrating to another, the regional responses to species migrating from one side of a country to another remain overlooked. Moreover, reactions to the spread of kudzu up north often reflected earlier conflicts between the two regions. A belief that the spread of kudzu was a southern problem led to northerners to fear that the plant might become a shared problem.

We are unlikely to know when and how kudzu reached Lake Erie in 2009. Frankly, this is not even a worthwhile question to consider, since kudzu would have likely arrived sometime or another. The moment a meeting is held concerning the recent “arrival” of an invasive species is already far too late to prevent that arrival. In the case of kudzu arriving up north, the meeting is late by over a hundred years.¹⁹³ Given the ability of kudzu to resist quick eradication and the scattered distribution of the vine throughout the province, it is unlikely that Ontario will rid itself entirely of the vine, though a complete takeover is unlikely.

Studying these reactions, however, points to other changes. Kudzu’s spread has caused disruptions that are novel both ecological and social. It has brought changes to subsets of landscapes and challenged constructed categories of North and South. While kudzu, like any other invasive species, threatens local agriculture and forestland, stories of its fast growth and its history in the South, much like the threat of southern states, has been distorted. Such distortion has come at the expense of other plants that are even more dangerous and occupy far more territory including honeysuckle vine, Asian privet,

For Range Expanding Species That Track Human Induced Environmental Change,” *Bioscience*, Volume 69, No. 11 (2019): 909.

¹⁹³ Leslie Anthony, *The Aliens Among Us: How Invasive Species Are Transforming the Planet and Ourselves* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017): 3.

and Norway maple. None of them, though, have ever been accused as being part of a southern invasion. As the vine distorts understandings of regions, however, so does it distort the threats of other species.

Examining accounts of kudzu is a study of how northerners have imagined the South and themselves. They depicted kudzu as a problem unique to the South in order to perpetuate the myth of the region as the birthplace of the country's gravest sins. Consequently, it grew increasingly difficult to tell apart the imagined kudzu from the genuine vine just as it became hard to tell the real South apart from the land that came from northern paranoia. In the case of kudzu, it never ate the North and even its southern appetite was largely exaggerated.

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