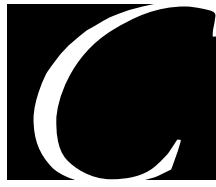


Kudzu: A Tale of Two Vines

by Derek H. Alderman and Donna G'Segner Alderman



Perhaps no other part of the natural environment is more closely identified with the South than this invasive and fast growing vine. Photograph by Michael Dibari Jr., ©1999.



ity leaders in Tallahassee, Florida, recently started a program that uses sheep to graze on large, troublesome patches of kudzu within the city. Several summers ago, Greenville, South Carolina, hosted the filming and theatrical debut of “Kudzula,” the story of a ten-year-old boy who saves a town from overdevelopment with the help of a forty-foot kudzu creature.¹ As these incidents suggest, the story of kudzu is a “tale of two vines.” Existing simultaneously in the realms of nature and culture, kudzu—like southern culture in general—is open to multiple interpretations and representations. In Tallahassee, kudzu is a pest. Like visiting relatives, the plant has overstayed its welcome. In Greenville, on the other hand, people not only pay \$19 to watch a play about kudzu, but in that play, kudzu saves the day.

Perhaps no other part of the natural environment is more closely identified with the South than this invasive and fast growing vine. Yet relatively few academics have examined kudzu and its place within southern culture and the larger American experience. And southerners both endure and embrace this pervasive part of life. Some wage an ecological battle against kudzu, while others use and market the vine in creative ways. Both southerners and nonsoutherners identify with kudzu as a symbol and incorporate the plant into daily cultural expression, including the language used to characterize and understand social and environmental change. As a national news wire reports, “So aggressive is kudzu that the word has entered American English as shorthand for out-of-control growth.”² In this respect, the plant illustrates the tremendous impact the American South has made, and continues to make, on national culture.

While kudzu may seem native to the South, it is an exotic species alien to the region and the country. The plant was introduced to America from Japan in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and to the South in 1883 at the New Orleans Exposition. For the next few decades, kudzu served primarily as ornamental shade for homes, particularly porches. Later, despite early warnings about the vine’s aggressive nature, the Department of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation Service, and other government agencies promoted kudzu as a public resource. Kudzu is comparable nutritionally to alfalfa and was first touted as a form of pasturage for feeding livestock—although cutting, handling, and baling the vine proved to be problematic. Kudzu reached the height of its popularity in the late 1930s as a tool in soil conservation, a means of replenishing nitrogen-poor soils and controlling erosion along fields and road banks. Historian Kurt Kinbacher has characterized the story of kudzu as “tangled” in the sense that the vine does not have just one historical role or identity in the region. Its value to humans has shifted with public opinion, advancements in science, and the changing demands of American agriculture.³

Kudzu rose in status through the careful cultivation of its image by several important individuals and groups. Kudzu's first promoters, Charles and Lillie Pleas of Florida, experimented with using kudzu as forage for animals in the early 1900s and later sold kudzu plants and rootstock through a mail order business. A roadside historical marker on Highway 90 in Chipley, Florida, recognizes their efforts in developing kudzu for agricultural use.⁴

Perhaps the most vocal and interesting of kudzu's supporters was Channing Cope of Covington, Georgia. Cope promoted the conversion of "wasteland" into kudzu pastures through his daily radio programs and articles in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He is credited with starting the Kudzu Club of America in the early 1940s, which had a membership of twenty thousand by 1943. The club embraced the goal of planting 1 million acres of kudzu in Georgia and 8 million acres in the South overall. In his 1949 book titled *Front Porch Farmer*, Cope equated the planting of kudzu on heavily eroded land to a physician's using strong medicine to fight a disease. Kudzu was the front porch farmer's life and perhaps even the reason for his death, according to Cope's friend Philip S. Cohen. Even after the government labeled the vine an ecological threat, Cope refused to let the county cut back the large kudzu patches on his property. The kudzu was so overgrown that it enclosed the road leading to his home, Yellow River Plantation. This dense kudzu canopy gave area teenagers the privacy to park and party without adult interruptions. Legend has it that when Channing Cope came off his porch one evening to run off these trespassers, he walked only three feet before dying of a massive heart attack.⁵

Arguably, the most influential kudzu promoter was the United States government, particularly the Soil Erosion Service, later renamed the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). Naïvely optimistic regarding the plant's benefits, the SCS established programs to plant kudzu throughout the South. The agency raised 100 million kudzu seedlings in its nurseries between 1935 and 1942. Workers with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) planted the vine on public lands. To overcome lingering public suspicion, the Department of Agriculture paid farmers and landowners as much as eight dollars an acre to cultivate kudzu. By the late 1930s, the "miracle vine" had been introduced to every state in the Southeast, and by 1946 the United States could boast of having 3 million acres of planted kudzu. Although the government stopped promoting kudzu years ago, this has not stopped the plant from spreading unintentionally inside and outside the South. Kudzu was discovered for the first time in Oregon in 2000. If sources are correct, it marks the first reported case of kudzu infestation west of Texas. In total, the vine has been sighted in at least twenty-eight of the fifty states.⁶



The Soil Conservation Service, empowered with a naïve optimism, established programs to plant kudzu throughout the South, and the agency raised 100 million kudzu seedlings in its nurseries between 1935 and 1942. Photograph courtesy of Jack Anthony.

In the 1950s, the status of kudzu shifted from that of highly valued resource to lowly pest. In fact, by the 1970s, the Department of Agriculture had declared kudzu officially a “weed.” In 1998 the federal government went a step further in demonizing a plant it once promoted when Congress placed kudzu on the “noxious weed” list, a designation that now makes the transportation of kudzu across state lines illegal if not approved by the Secretary of Agriculture. A year earlier, the county commission of Santa Rosa County, Florida, passed what is perhaps the nation’s first ordinance aimed solely at controlling the spread of kudzu. It fines property owners fifty dollars for letting the plant invade a neighbor’s property. Adding insult to injury, an end-of-the-millennium issue of *Time* magazine listed the introduction of kudzu to the United States as one of the one hundred worst ideas of the century.⁷

Although kudzu is an excellent soil stabilizer and drought-resistant forage, the vine’s early proponents underestimated the plant’s aggressive growth and extreme resistance to control. The Native Plant Conservation Initiative, a consortium of 10 federal government agencies and over 110 nonfederal cooperators, provides a graphic picture of the ecological threat posed by kudzu:

Kudzu kills or degrades other plants by smothering them under a solid blanket of leaves, by girdling woody stems and tree trunks, and by breaking branches or uprooting entire trees and shrubs through the sheer force of its weight. Once established, kudzu plants grow rapidly, extending as much as 60 feet per season at a rate of about one foot per day. This vigorous vine may extend 32–100 feet in length, with stems ½–4 inches in diameter. Kudzu roots are fleshy, with massive tap roots 7 inches or more in diameter, 6 feet or more in length, and weighing as much as 400 pounds. As many as thirty vines grow from a single root crown.

While our attention is often drawn to the vine's fast growing foliage, the kudzu root system is unbelievably tenacious and represents the real nerve center of the organism. Although the plant produces seeds, most growth occurs through vegetative expansion from the roots, which can lie dormant for several years—lulling a landowner into a false sense of victory—and then suddenly generate new vines. Diane Craft, an avid gardener from Indiana, contributed this incredible account of her experiences with kudzu roots:

I lived in Florida for twenty years. Before I knew how invasive it [kudzu] was, I collected a bag of roots and put them in a brown grocery bag and tucked them under the bottom shelf of a little closet thinking I would see if I could plant them the next spring. In the spring, while doing some cleaning, I decided to clean that closet, and after pulling a few things out, I noticed a white rope that I didn't remember having. I started pulling the rope, and pulling the rope, and pulling the rope, until finally I realized that it was not a rope at all. The kudzu root had grown to about fifty feet over the winter, in a bag and in the dark.⁸

Recognizing the problems associated with kudzu overgrowth, scientists and lay people continue the search for an effective means of control. Jeremy Farris, a whiz kid from Warner Robins, Georgia, discovered a fungal pathogen capable of destroying the weed. Farris's experiments parallel work by scientists at the U.S. Agricultural Research Service, who claim to have identified another common fungus that kills kudzu within hours. Scientists such as Kerry Britton, a plant pathologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, are investigating the potential for controlling kudzu through biological means. She and several other colleagues, for example, have been working with Chinese scientists to find insects that eat kudzu in China. These insects will later undergo intensive testing in the United States. In another attempt to find a biological solution, David Orr, an entomologist at North Carolina State University, has done research on the development of a kudzu-eating caterpillar.⁹ Despite these creative control measures—and conventional ones such as mowing, grazing, burning, and herbi-



Even in the harshest of environments, kudzu grows over houses, trees, utility poles, and junkyards, and there seemingly are no limits to what the ghostly vine covers or hides. Infrared photograph by David Day, ©1999.

cides—there is no easy way of stopping the march of what poet James Dickey called those “green, mindless, unkillable ghosts.”

Even in the harshest of environments, kudzu grows over houses, trees, utility poles, and junkyards. Perhaps most impressive is the ability of kudzu to climb. There are seemingly no limits to what the vine covers or hides, including death. In December of 1998, a maintenance worker for an Atlanta golf course discovered a murder victim face down in a kudzu patch. In 1995 at another Atlanta golf course, two early-morning golfers found a dead man in a car partially submerged in a creek. The car had plunged off the road into a kudzu bank before rolling into

the creek. Perhaps the most infamous connection between kudzu and death is the early 1980s case of the Atlanta missing and murdered children, whose bodies were discovered in kudzu-covered vacant lots.¹⁰

On a less macabre note, kudzu can sometimes hide opportunities for development. When a couple bought an old apartment complex in DeKalb County, Georgia, they began the task of clearing kudzu overgrowth. They eventually found a two-acre garden park with stonewalls, walkways, waterfalls, and ponds. After this discovery, the couple decided to restore the gardens and upgrade the property. Rather than offer low-income housing as originally planned, they converted the buildings to condominiums.

The clearing of kudzu can, however, reveal uncomfortable truths about society. For instance, during the planning phase of Atlanta's Jimmy Carter Presidential Parkway in the early 1990s, controversy arose over the proposed displacement of a homeless colony hidden in a field of kudzu. A news report published at the time described their plight: "In huts amid honeysuckle and kudzu, where knives and forks hang from vines in the open-air kitchen and a sawed-off stump suffices for a dining table, a small colony of homeless people stands at a crossroad. Theirs is one in-town neighborhood whose residents are paying the price of progress. . . . Most of the colony's residents feel safer hidden in the kudzu, where they are out of sight of the police."¹¹ This case shows the centrality of kudzu to contemporary southern life and, in this instance, the politics of urban development. It also exposes the dual, contradictory place of kudzu in society: kudzu can be a barrier to development and "progress" for one group of people, a refuge and sense of community for another.

Clearly, kudzu is open to alternative interpretations. Recognizing this fact, sociologists Kathleen Lowney and Joel Best have documented historical shifts in scientific claims and opinions about kudzu. Currently, the hope of finding a productive use for the vine is challenging belief in total eradication. Biochemists at Harvard Medical School, for instance, have investigated its herbal and medicinal properties, noting that kudzu extracts curb the craving for alcohol in Syrian Golden hamsters. Herbal stores are presently marketing a Kudzu/St. John's Wort combination to help treat alcoholism. For the hamster or human who overindulges, starch from the kudzu root is supposedly a popular hangover remedy in Asia. Experiments have also suggested that kudzu derivatives might be useful in treating high blood pressure. Kudzu leaves and stems are being made into paper, baskets, jewelry, and other crafts, and kudzu flowers into jams, syrups, jellies, and even soap. The production and marketing of these kudzu products represent a growing cottage industry for some southerners. *The Amazing Story of Kudzu*, a video documentary produced by Alabama Public Television, showcases the work of kudzu entrepreneurs such as Nancy Basket of South Carolina, Diane Hoots of Georgia, Edith Edwards of North Carolina, and Ruth Duncan of Alabama.¹²



Kudzu has become almost synonymous with the South, as illustrated by this postcard that pictures the Confederate battle flag and the vine, despite the fact that the introduction of kudzu came years after the end of the Civil War. Postcard ©Photo Arts, Inc.

Kudzu also lends itself to visual and artistic interpretation. Capturing some classic shots of kudzu overtaking barns, houses, and equipment, Georgia photographer Jack Anthony finds the vine strangely beautiful. Of special note are his pictures of kudzu flowers, which offer an alternative perspective—kudzu as a sweet smelling blossom. David Day, a Georgian transplanted to Connecticut, has experimented with infrared photographs of kudzu.¹³ Because of the unique way foliage reacts to infrared light, infrared photography presents a very different world from the one we are accustomed to seeing. Day's photographs show kudzu with white leaves and vines, giving the appearance of clouds or snowfall rather than Dickey's "invading green ghosts." Long, thick expanses of kudzu may appear to take on the shape of animals or people. A kudzu formation—and local landmark—near Wall Doxey State Park in northern Mississippi resembles a crucifix.

KUDZU AND IDENTITY

It is easy to characterize kudzu as simply an ecological menace, a roadside photo opportunity, a novelty product, or, at best, a futuristic medicine. While the plant is all these things, we should not lose sight of the larger importance of kudzu within southern and even American culture. As historian Mart Allen Stew-



Kudzu also lends itself to visual and artistic interpretation: various forms of photography and natural “statues,” even the personal tattoo. Photograph courtesy of geographer Ronald W. Ward, who drew the line art for this, his own tattoo.

art declared, “Kudzu has become the stuff of folklore, joke, symbol, and metaphor.” For National Public Radio celebrity and cowboy poet Baxter Black, kudzu is fodder for *AG MAN*, his comic strip about the adventures of the only agriculturally correct superhero of the planet. In Black’s “Kudzu Katastrophe Series,” an evil urban developer is pressuring a farmer to sell the family land. The developer, appropriately named “Slick,” sabotages the farmer’s soybean fields by planting an extremely destructive strain of kudzu, “*pueraria tyranus*.” *AG MAN* and his sidekicks, Farm Boy and Cornsilk, discover that possum sweat kills this variety of kudzu. They herd 622 head of sweating possums into the kudzu-covered fields to save the day.¹⁴ The grateful farmer says, “Thanks, *AG MAN*. The Kudzu is controlled, my soybean crop will pay the loan, and my farm won’t become another subdivision.” In addition to playing with kudzu as a point of comic fantasy, Black involves the vine in a biting satire about the loss of agricultural land to development and the very real disappearance of the family farm in America.

Although *AG MAN* and others in the agricultural community scorn kudzu, some embrace the vine as an important point of identification. Kudzu has become almost synonymous with the South, as illustrated by a postcard that pictures the Confederate battle flag and the vine, despite the fact that Kudzu’s heyday in the South came long after the end of the Civil War. The card reads, “Southern Re-

venge: Plant Kudzu Seeds Up Nawth,” in effect making the plant a weapon in the continuing sectional animosity between North and South.

Some people identify with kudzu on a more personal level. Maxine Simmons of Georgia reserves a special place in her heart for the fast growing vine. One of her son’s first words was “kudzu.” In another family-related identification, Atlanta’s Jim Downing named his racecar “Kudzu.” According to a 1992 *Road & Track* article, “Downing’s reasons for calling his car Kudzu are sentimental and emotional. Sentimental, because Jim’s dad, a member of the Department of Agriculture in the Forties, was instrumental in reintroducing the kudzu vine to Georgia. Emotional because Jim and his wife, Connie, disliked ‘he-man, macho man names’ usually ascribed to racing cars and wanted a name they could be comfortable with. Kudzu, ubiquitous and practically a member of the family, was a natural.” In perhaps the most personal and permanent identification with kudzu, geographer Ron Ward had an image of the plant tattooed on his lower leg. Ward, who drew the line-art for his own tattoo, is, ironically enough, not a southerner but wanted the tattoo as a reminder of his time spent in the South studying invasive plants and animals: “Of course, I knew about kudzu before coming down from Minnesota. I remember on the drive down looking out the window and anticipating the first sight of kudzu. Sounds strange, I know, but it was a thrill the first time I saw it.”¹⁵

Patterns in naming further underscore the symbolic and cultural importance of kudzu. As sociologists such as John Shelton Reed and geographers such as Wilbur Zelinsky have observed, the names people attach to places, objects, organizations, and businesses provide insight into patterns of social identity and geographic location.¹⁶ While it is common to name streets after trees and other natural features, southerners have extended the practice to include kudzu. Nineteen streets in the country have kudzu in their names, all found in seven southern states. The streets appear to be almost entirely residential and, indeed, nine (or 47 percent) of these nineteen streets are named “Kudzu Lane.” This is not to suggest, however, that business owners do not identify or align themselves with kudzu. Perhaps seeing a commercial benefit in being associated with a widely recognized part of southern culture, thirty-three businesses in the United States have the word “kudzu” in their names. As with kudzu streets, these businesses are located entirely within the South, albeit the one in Maryland may provoke debate. Southerners may be reluctant to eat kudzu like collard greens, but they show little inhibition about naming food establishments after the land-hungry vine. Such eateries include The Kudzu Cafe (Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Atlanta, Georgia), The Kudzu Bakery (Georgetown, South Carolina), The Kudzu Grill (Sander-ville, Georgia), Kudzu on South Broad (Mooresville, North Carolina), and simply Kudzu’s (Memphis, Tennessee). While kudzu covers much of the landscape, its business namesake—a hat shop—in Phenix City, Alabama, specializes in cov-

State	Kudzu Streets	Kudzu Businesses	Total
Alabama	3	5	8
Arkansas	1	0	1
Florida	0	1	1
Georgia	4	15	19
Louisiana	0	0	0
Maryland	0	1	1
Mississippi	2	3	5
North Carolina	4	5	9
South Carolina	3	1	4
Tennessee	2	2	4
Texas	0	0	0
Virginia	0	0	0
Total	19	33	52

The practice of naming streets and businesses after kudzu seems an entirely southern one. The author collected the data for this table showing the number of kudzu-named streets and businesses by state from Internet phone directories (www.teldir.com).

ering heads. Only two of these kudzu establishments specialize in horticulture, Kudzu Landscaping (Lawrenceville, Georgia) and Kudzu Lawn Services (Madison, Mississippi). However, the name kudzu is connected with two other enterprises interested in the cutting and clipping of growth—beauty shops Kudzu & Cotton (Pine Hill, Alabama) and Kudzu Hair Salon (Jonesboro, Georgia). Despite the negative environmental reputation of kudzu, a public relations firm in Atlanta (Kudzu Communications) identifies itself with the vine. According to combined data on kudzu streets and businesses, the practice of naming appears strongest in Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina.

Kudzu has been identified, in name, with a host of things—including a gorilla at Zoo Atlanta (Kudzoo), numerous festivals across the region, a Georgia lottery scratch-off game (Kudzu Cash), a regular program on the Turner South cable channel (Kudzu Theater), a management style (The Art of Killing Kudzu), an alternative country-music band (Kudzu Kings), a 5K race in Birmingham (The Kudzu Run), a system of linked online library catalogs, and a southern comic strip by Doug Marlette, recently recast as a musical featuring the Red Clay Ramblers. A now defunct punk rock band named itself “Kudzu Ganja.” As historian Kurt Kinbacher observed, “The band’s image is a mixture of two noxious weeds. One chokes out competition while the other numbs the mind.” Amazingly, kudzu’s cultural importance is not limited to the terrestrial. The “miracle vine” also grows in cyberspace, as evidenced by the mass of kudzu web pages that have sprouted up in the last few years. Southerners are increasingly going online, using

the World Wide Web to construct what Stephen Smith called an “electronic folklore” about the region. Kudzu has a special place in these attempts to represent the South and southerners as culturally distinctive and unique. “The Kudzu Chronicles” web page clearly states, “For those who do not live in the South, the name ‘Kudzu’ means little. For southern landowners it means: Fear, holy terror, cancer in vegetation form.” The “Y’all.com” Internet site also strongly suggested that kudzu was a “southern thing,” going as far as instructing the nonsoutherner in pronunciation: “If you have to ask what it is, you aren’t Southern. . . . In case you’re not from around here and were wondering, kudzu is pronounced CUD-zoo, like what cows chew and where gorillas live.”¹⁷

TRANSCENDING TO METAPHOR

The importance of kudzu is not at all limited to the South, however. Aside from the botanical incursions of kudzu into other states (and the likelihood of these may increase with global warming), the vine has invaded the language and phraseology of the entire country. People use kudzu as a metaphor or point of comparison for talking about other issues and events. Metaphors convey meaning by linking together previously unrelated ideas or objects, which encourages a range of thoughts and associations while discouraging others. For example, when saying, “business is war,” people think about fighting for market share. At the same time, however, one rarely thinks of working cooperatively. According to sociologists Gary Fine and Lazaros Christoforides, metaphors take two forms. First, metaphors can connect similar phenomena. Second, metaphors can connect seemingly different phenomena.¹⁸ People employ kudzu in both these ways linguistically.

The word “kudzu” has become an important part of our vocabulary when characterizing the environmental threat posed by other invasive plants and animals. For example, in its report on the destruction of the Maryland Eastern Shore by nutria, aquatic rodents brought to the United States from South America, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called this new ecological invader the “kudzu of the marsh.” Although kudzu and nutria are indigenous to different continents and occupy different places in the natural order, people have proposed the same solution for controlling them—eat them. In some comparisons, people create a familial connection between kudzu and other nonnative species, a fitting use of language given the strong southern preoccupation with family relations and genealogy. “The Son of Kudzu” was the phrase used in a *New York Times* piece describing the problems surrounding the imported weed tearthumb. Called tearthumb because of the spines on its leaves and stems, *Polygonum perfoliatum* L. was brought to Pennsylvania accidentally in the 1930s and, in recent years, has crept south into Maryland and northern Virginia. Authors have extended the kudzu family meta-



While continuing to overtake the physical landscape, kudzu is firmly rooted in the fertile ground of our minds, words, and cultural images. Kudzu Road in Elbert County, Georgia, photographed by James O. Wheeler.

phor even to invasive water species. For instance, when representing the damage caused by hydrilla—a plant introduced to Florida in the 1950s—a *Los Angeles Times* article stated, “First there was kudzu, which cloaked much of the land in the South with its tenacious tentacles. Now, a rampant weed described as kudzu’s aquatic cousin is clogging Southern lakes.” Lynne Langley of Charleston’s *Post and Courier* described tropical soda apple (*Solanum viarum Dunal*), a pernicious shrub native to Brazil and Argentina, as “kudzu with thorns.” Cattle and wildlife have presumably aided in the invasion of tropical soda apple by consuming the plant’s fruit and spreading seeds through manure deposits. When asked to offer predictions on the impact of this new aggressive weed in the United States, a South Carolina extension service agent replied, “It will make kudzu look like a benevolent uncle.”¹⁹ As evident in these cases, the role of kudzu in environmental thought and dialogue stretches far beyond its natural characteristics. As a concept common to southern and even American culture, kudzu serves as a lens through which to view and understand other alien plants and animals. Like the proverbial older sibling, kudzu provides a yardstick by which to compare and evaluate the younger brothers and sisters—even when there is little resemblance.

It seems reasonable that kudzu would be used to frame the meaning of other, less well-known invaders. However, kudzu has made its way into conversations having little at all to do with the plant and animal kingdom. In a 1999 Capitol Hill hearing on urban sprawl, Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy testified, “Sprawl often steals unbidden in our midst, and it quickly wears out its welcome, much the same way our friends in the South have come to regard kudzu.” In another committee hearing a few years before, James Young of Bell Atlantic invoked the kudzu met-

aphor in pressing for changes in telecommunications legislation: “Although Senate Bill 652 can be improved in several ways, the bill is an enormous step toward eliminating the regulatory kudzu that has been strangling our industry for the past decade.” Newspaper databases yield numerous instances in which kudzu is used as a metaphor for characterizing the aggressive spread of business, housing, gambling, and even the Internet. Even lawyers and judges, famous more for legalese than flowery language, find kudzu to be a useful metaphor. In 1999 Judge James S. Sledge of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court wrote an opinion attacking the increased use of arbitration clauses in consumer contracts, comparing the practice to the creeping of kudzu vegetation across the South. Voicing concern over another area of unchecked growth in America’s legal system, lawyer David Apatoff used the invasive vine as a rhetorical tool in representing what he saw as unnecessary prosecutorial invasions by the Justice Department: “For the past 12 years, the False Claims Act has grown like kudzu. It has spread from the field of government contracts into environmental health care and many neighboring areas of the law. Its tendrils have been spotted in the most unlikely enforcement proceedings. Today, it flourishes, in the words of Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder Jr., as ‘one of the Justice Department’s most powerful tools.’”²⁰

If kudzu were a person, it would have a split personality. While landowners and other interests seek to outlaw the plant, curious observers from outside the region seek advice on how to plant and cultivate it. Expectations that kudzu would heal the southern landscape have waned, replaced with the hope of developing it into an actual medicine. The U.S. government reveled in kudzu cultivation in an earlier time and then later repudiated the rapid growth that it had set in motion. While continuing to overtake the physical landscape, the vine is firmly rooted in the fertile ground of our minds, words, and cultural images. Because the plant exists as a symbol and metaphor, it assumes a cultural presence in places and regions that may lie beyond physical or botanical thresholds. In this respect, kudzu is as much an “American” vine, as it is a “southern” one.

NOTES

This paper is a refinement and expansion of arguments found in Derek H. Alderman, “A Vine for Postmodern Times: An Update on Kudzu at the Close of the 20th Century,” *Southeastern Geographer* 38. (November 1998): 167–79.

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