

**Green Smile, Interrupted: The Frustrated Ecological  
Possibilities in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing***

by

Alec Whitford

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I conduct an ecocritical reading of Alan Moore's tenure as writer on DC Comics' monthly superhero comic *Swamp Thing*, which spanned from Volume 2 Issue 20 (January 1984) to Volume 2 Issue 64 (September 1987). I explore the ways in which Swamp Thing's efforts to understand "the green"—a metaphysical network that connects all plant life in the universe—both challenge and reinforce the classical, Western division between *Culture* and *Nature*.

Richard Harrison claims that the tenure of each creative team on a superhero comic establishes that tenure as a novel built around a "'core cluster' of first principles that define the hero in time and place and set his or her story in motion" (26). Whereas the *core cluster of first principles* for Wein and Wrightson's run on *Swamp Thing* establishes non-human *Nature* as a physically violent force that unites with violent *Culture* to produce the monstrous body of Swamp Thing, Moore's run establishes a *core cluster of second principles* that posit a more peaceful *Nature* that is continuously in conflict with the violence of *Culture*. The primary image of Wein's *first principles* is Swamp Thing's face frozen in an expression of horror and agony, while Moore's *second principles* rely on a peaceful, smiling expression on Swamp Thing's face, which suggests that Swamp Thing's face is the face of ecology and an icon for the point at which humans can speak to the environment. Wein's Swamp Thing was the anguished face of the environment, the point at which humans experience the sublime horror of the swamp, but Moore's Swamp Thing is the smiling face of the environment, the point at which humans are invited to interact with the plants that comprise the swamp. For ecology to be possible in Swamp Thing's world, humans must engage the smiling face of the environment.

## **Preface**

The overwhelming majority of this thesis is unpublished work by the author, Alec Whitford.

The paragraphs in which I engage Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* appeared previously in a paper entitled "'this kid': David Wojnarowicz and the Crisis of Representing the Enigmatic Queer Subject," which I delivered at UBC's Endnotes graduate student conference on May 12, 2013. The entirety of this thesis constitutes original, independent work by the author.

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To Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson, thanks for creating my favorite green superhero, Swamp Thing. I also would like to express my enduring gratitude to the artistic team on Moore's run on *Swamp Thing*. Stephen Bissette penciled some of the subtlest, most powerful cartoons I have ever seen, everything seems to bleed into everything else yet remain completely distinct and separate. No small feat in the cartoon medium! Rick Veitch's pencils brought Swamp Thing's adventures back to the clear-cut style of Bernie Wrightson's original run, and I am in awe of that. Of course, none of the drawings would make any sense without the clear, steady inks of John Totleben. And Tatjana Wood's sublime colours deserve an entire Master's thesis devoted to them. I must curse Nature here, for I am colour blind and most of the time I cannot even see that Swamp Thing is green, so it is not my place to write that thesis!

Last, but certainly not least, no writer has ever affected my emotions or intellect the way that Alan Moore has. Everything I am today, I owe to Alan Moore, that most bearded and magical of Englishmen.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Donna Jane Yule Whitford (Jan 1, 1952 – October 7, 2005), who taught me to be at peace amongst plants and, above all else, that the earth is worth fighting for. And to my father, Richard Whitford who taught me how to identify all the plants around my hometown of Elkford, BC, and who showed me how to grow vegetables so sweet and succulent a man might cry. Together, my parents tended a beautiful yard of transplanted wild plants and a garden of flowers and vegetables. Sadly that yard and garden are no more, but this thesis began there with me as a child on my stomach on the ground for hours staring at the secret world within the rocks and grasses. To my parents and their garden, I give this thesis and the words of Swamp Thing, “I am of the clean Earth.”

## **Chapter 1: Introduction – The Nature/Culture Divide in Alan Moore’s**

### ***Swamp Thing***

#### **1.1 Swamp Thing’s Violent Body**

In Alan Moore’s first issue as writer on DC Comics’ *Swamp Thing* (January 1984), Liz Tremayne, a supporting human character in *Swamp Thing*’s world, remarks, “All we have in common is the horror in our lives ... that’s what holds us together” (Issue 20-7). *Swamp Thing*’s world is a violent one, as the horror that the characters constantly experience is often expressed as extreme violence of either the superhero or horror comic genre type. Violence permeates the world surrounding any American superhero, and Moore foregrounds that violence with Liz Tremayne’s comments. Horrific violence is the single binding element, the organizing principle, of culture in Moore’s *Swamp Thing* and the only thing that seems to connect the characters to one another. Violence is at the core of the idea of the American superhero. It would seem that all superheroes are spurred by violence to commit greater acts of violence because society requires violence to keep individuals in line with societal standards. Moore’s *Swamp Thing* is an analysis of the binding function and operational necessity of violence within the idea of the American superhero.

Most American superhero origin stories can be reduced to a simple narrative formula that is centered around violence: an individual experiences a trauma, a violent transformation from one state of being to another state of being that matches or increases the violence of the transformation. Superheroes then use violence to try to stop the violence that created them; in other words, superheroes inflict trauma in an attempt to heal the trauma that spawned them. In “The Dark Knight Origin of the Man of Steel,” Richard Harrison argues that most superheroes



have experienced trauma that can never be healed, and their decade-spanning narratives are propelled by the unattainable goal of soothing the psychic wound of that trauma (54). The violence that creates the superhero is almost always cultural and beyond the individual's control. The idea of the superhero depends on the notion that culture is violent and unsafe for individuals, so one individual must rise above the culture by employing more violence. Almost paradoxically, though, the superhero is separate from greater culture because of the violence that he or she must engage in. Violence at the cultural level creates the superhero, but violence distinctly marks that superhero as separate from the greater culture that surrounds him or her. Superheroes possess a consciousness and often a body as well that is afflicted by immeasurable trauma. The superhero's body is forever marked by violence just as the superhero's consciousness is permanently organized around violence. And Swamp Thing's body and consciousness are no different, but the violence that produces Swamp Thing is not merely an element of *Culture*. The originating act of violence in Swamp Thing's case extends into and influences the understanding of *Nature* as well.

In "A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," Donna Haraway argues, "nature is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans" (66). Haraway understands that process of *co-construction* as occurring at the level of discourse: "organisms are made as objects of knowledge in world-changing practices of scientific discourse by particular and always collective actors in specific times and places" (67). For Haraway, organisms are made through the "apparatus of bodily production, [a] discursive process," which produces "bodies as objects of knowledge [that] are material-semiotic generative nodes" (67-8). She insists that "organisms are not *ideological* constructions," but rather organisms constitute actors, agents, whose boundaries are constructed in a hybridized fashion between physical and

meaning-based properties (67-8). As Haraway states, the “boundaries [of organisms] materialize in social interaction among humans and non-humans, including the machines and other instruments that mediate exchanges at crucial interfaces and that function as delegates for other actors’ functions and purposes” (68). *Nature, Culture, objects, bodies*, etc. do not pre-exist for Haraway, and their existences are not purely ideological (68). In Haraway’s view, each category “is a commonplace and powerful discursive construction, effected in the interactions among material-semiotic actors” (68). Nature and culture for Haraway, then, are discursive constructions that exist on both material and immaterial levels. Bodies, themselves *material-semiotic actors*, can only exist by a process of emergent construction and interaction with other *material-semiotic actors*.

*Nature*, as a historical discursive concept, operates by a tension between the material and the immaterial, the physical and the ideological.<sup>1</sup> In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams asserts, “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” (184). Williams divides *Nature* into “three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings” (184). As Williams asserts, it is incredibly difficult to ascribe a clear definition to *Nature*, and he argues that especially within meanings (ii) and (iii), “precise meanings are variable and at times even opposed” (184). The presence of humans seems to be the primary problematizing factor, and that brings to mind a question that still garners much trouble in Western thought to this day: If humans truly are separate from *Nature*, is there something inherent to either *Nature* or humans that causes the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will use capital *N Nature* and capital *C Culture* when referring to the traditional, Western philosophical categories that are locked in the conflicted binary of *Nature* vs. *Culture*.

schism? The second problematizing factor brought to light by Williams is a tension between the physical/material world and the immaterial/spiritual or philosophical world. *Nature*, then, in traditional Western discourse is problematized by the presence of humans, and conceptions of *Nature* are forever oscillating between material and immaterial phenomenon. Swamp Thing dwells on the border of the classical idea of *Nature*. He is not human anymore, but he is separate from the swamp. Swamp Thing is fundamentally distant from both *Nature* and *Culture*.

*Nature*, of course, is locked within a classical binary with *Culture*. Though I invoke the work of Donna Haraway to help disentangle that archaic binary, I think that the *Nature-Culture* binary still informs both Wein's and Moore's visions of the world in *Swamp Thing*. Williams points out "three broad active categories of usage" for *Culture* in the twentieth century: "(i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development ...; (ii) the independent noun ... which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group; [and] (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (80). As Williams's understanding of *Culture* shows, there is an inherent sense of social processes shared by a group of people within the word, and it can mean either a system of beliefs or a physical activity, but it generally denotes something immaterial or abstract. Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin "*cultura*," which comes from the "*colere*", and *colere* had several senses, including "inhabit, cultivate, protect, [and] honour with worship" (77). Williams observes that *cultura* began to take "on the main meaning of cultivation or tending," and by the time it entered English from French in the early fifteenth century, "the Primary meaning was then in husbandry, the tending of natural growth" (77). In England, in the early sixteenth century "the tending of natural growth was extended to a process of human development" (77). From Williams's

understanding, *Culture* seems to be mostly human phenomenon, and the separation from *Nature* seems to be wrapped up in the idea of cultivation or containing the growth of the natural world. *Culture*, then, is the material behavior and the immaterial social beliefs shared by a large group of humans that separates them from the natural world: *Culture* cultivates *Nature* by way of belief, and it contains *Nature* by way of consciousness. In Moore's vision in *Swamp Thing*, agents of *Culture*—such as the US government, corporations, super-villians, Batman, and the Gotham city police—constantly strive to control Swamp Thing and contain his connections to *Nature* by committing acts of violence. The *Culture* and the *Nature* inherited from the Wein era that Swamp Thing must confront are dominated by violence. The most significant revision that Moore brings about within Wein's Swamp Thing is to change the idea of *Nature* from a force of violence to a force of peace and nourishment. But Moore retains, and even amplifies, the violence of *Culture* that permeates Wein's work on *Swamp Thing*.

Violence dominates or haunts all superhero fiction. Violence is the dominant apparatus of all discursive production within the fictional worlds of superhero comics; violence controls or influences all bodily production, subject emergence, and societal control in the superhero genre. Violent trauma is the *crucial interface*, to borrow Haraway's term, from which all superhero subjects emerge, and nearly all elements of *Culture* in Swamp Thing's universe are organized around violence. Within Moore's *Swamp Thing*, violence ensures that the human world remains dominant over and separate from the non-human world of plants, and violence re-enforces the traditional binary distance between *Nature* and *Culture*. Swamp Thing, as an icon, represents the face of ecology, the face of the environment. Swamp Thing is the entire plant-based environment drawn into an interface that humans can interact with and speak to, but he is only drawn into being because of a violent trauma inflicted on the environment and the human body.

Swamp Thing is the environment drawn through the crucible of violence and transformed into a subject. He represents the means by which humans can speak to the environment and use the violence of environmental destruction as an opportunity to stop any further destruction. Swamp Thing's face assembles the un-representable elements of the environment into an image that reflects the human psyche. He represents an opportunity that is impossible in the real world: the opportunity for humans to have a conversation with the environment. However, any conversation between humans and Swamp Thing in Moore's run is inevitably cut short by the inherent violence of the superhero and horror comic genres.

Before I fully tackle Moore's *Swamp Thing*, I think it is important to analyze the way violence organized both *Nature* and *Culture* in Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson's original run of *Swamp Thing*. Violence is the means by which *Culture*—a villainous, occult, and secret organization called the Conclave—produces the monster-superhero of Swamp Thing. Violence is the means by which *Nature*—the non-human world—is reduced from the level of immaterial to the level of material and simultaneously extended into the human body to create the monstrous bodily construction of Swamp Thing. Swamp Thing's origin story—as told by Len Wein and illustrated by Bernie Wrightson in *Swamp Thing* Issue 1 (Nov. 1972)—is a narrative of violent bodily construction and transformation at the hands of both human and non-human actors. In Wein's vision, Swamp Thing was a scientist named Alec Holland who—along with his wife Linda—was working on a “bio-restorative” formula that would “create gardens out of sweltering deserts” (21). The Hollands were working on a way to re-write the non-human world, thus controlling *Nature*, in order to make it into something that can be controlled on a material level by the US Government. But the Conclave assassinated the Hollands when they would not sell the bio-restorative formula. A bomb placed in their lab by The Conclave killed Linda, but Alec's

body was simultaneously engulfed in flames and splashed with the bio-restorative formula, and he fell into the mud and muck of the Louisiana swamp. Instead of dying, the bio-restorative formula fused his body with the algae and plants of the swamp and Alec Holland emerged as Swamp Thing, a monstrous body of plants assembled into a shape resembling a male human body. Alec Holland's body was simultaneously re-written by the violence of his murder and the altered *Natural* properties of the plants in the Swamp. In Wein and Wrightson's *Swamp Thing*, *Nature* and *Culture* are brought together in a discourse of violence, and Swamp Thing's monstrous, yet superheroic, body is the result.

The original conception of *Nature* within the *Swamp Thing* series accords with Williams's third meaning of *Nature*, as Wein's swamp belongs purely to the material world. Wein's writing maintains a register of violence when describing the material transformation that happened to Alec Holland's body. To describe Swamp Thing, Wein employs words like "encrusted" and phrases like "the twisted ruin of what was once a man," which convey a sense of the non-human world inflicting violence upon the human body (31, 94). Wein's Swamp Thing is the result of a purely physical, yet monstrously deformed, union with *Nature*. And that *Nature* has been forever rendered violent by *Culture*'s quest to control it. The discursive process of bodily construction described by Haraway is naturalized in Wein's *Swamp Thing* as a violently grotesque, yet natural birth from a swampy womb. Wein's Swamp Thing imagines his origins as "Alec Holland's body sinking into the depths of a Louisiana swamp ... there to be nurtured and fed like some misshapen embryo within a dark and muddy womb" (124). Wrightson's accompanying cartoons show Swamp Thing's body as a fetus nestled amongst other fetus-shaped nodes of weeds in a swampy womb. The swamp for Wein's Swamp Thing always remained a physically violent place, just as Alec Holland's fusion with the swamp was enacted by physical

violence. In Wein and Wrightson's *Swamp Thing*, the non-human world of the swamp, itself constructed by the discursive process of violence into a "twisted" and violent *Nature*, represents a physical force that creates Swamp Thing's monstrous body and separates that body from the general interactions of humans, a *Culture* that can never understand him. When Alan Moore took over writing on the series, he inherited a concept of *Nature*, the non-human world, as a purely material barrier that aligns with violent human *Culture*. Alan Moore inherited a *character* forever altered by the violence of humans and plants, and an *icon* for the point at which *Nature* and *Culture* meet in an act of violence.

In "Origin Issues: A Second Introduction to This Book," an introduction to *Secret Identity Reader: Essays on Sex, Death and the Superhero*, Richard Harrison examines the tension between *character* and *icon* in superhero fiction. Harrison claims, "neither 'character' nor 'icon' is a fixed quantity, even though a character is expected to change and an icon is not" (23). Harrison contends that "the superheroic narrative is caught, yet also propelled, by the tension between" icon—stasis of ideals—and character, the inherent change in an ideal that comes with narrative (23). Superheroes are undeniably icons, insofar as they represent unrealistic exaggerations of human ability in the service of expressing some hidden information about the historical moment that produced them. But icons that are represented serially over many years become, as Harrison puts it, "at one and the same time static and dynamic" (23). Harrison points out the tension imbued to icons by serial narrative: "An icon is motionless in that it is widely recognized to stand for a collectively held meaning. Yet an icon moves when that meaning collectively changes, even as it is represented by a consistent image" (23). Characters in fiction generally change as they progress through the narrative of their lives, but superheroes, as their narratives span decades, often go through changes wherein their entire biography or set

of powers change. Keeping track of the continuity of a comic book universe that contains several conflicting biographies for a single character is a monstrous task, and a major headache for anyone who undertakes it. Harrison proposes that each character biography be thought of as a *novel*, which is organized around the icon of the character or the creative team who produced it:

Each new biographical version of the character under the guidance of a particular creative team, in effect, becomes one novel (however many issues it contains) in a series of novels, each novel written around that ‘core cluster’ of first principles that define the hero in time and place and set his or her story in motion. (26)

Every superhero has what Harrison calls a *core cluster of first principles*, what the icon of the character stands for but also the biographical narrative of the character, and each story typically works within the structure of those principles. By this logic, the first narrative starring Swamp Thing constitutes one novel written by Len Wein and illustrated by Bernie Wrightson that establishes the character’s *core cluster of first principles*. Alan Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing*—illustrated by Stephen Bissette (pencils), John Totleben (inks), Rick Veitch (pencils), and Tatjana Wood (colours)—is not the second novel starring Wein and Wrightson’s creation, but it is the first novel to change the icon and the character of Swamp Thing. Moore does not leave Swamp Thing’s *core cluster of first principles* in tact, but rather he changes most of them utterly by rewriting the character’s biography and iconographic meaning. Moore’s Swamp Thing is so different from Wein’s that I think it is more accurate to refer to Moore’s iconographic meaning and biographical narrative for Swamp Thing as a *core cluster of second principles*. My thesis is an effort to map the changes in Swamp Thing’s *core cluster of principles* from Wein’s novel to Moore’s novel in terms of how each cluster encodes a message about humankind’s relationship



to the environment. Wein's Swamp Thing was the anguished face of the environment, the point at which humans experience the sublime horror of the swamp, but Moore's Swamp Thing is the smiling face of the environment, the point at which humans are invited to interact with the plants that comprise the swamp.

From the beginning of his run as writer, Alan Moore inverted *Swamp Thing's* prevailing trope of a monster violently *transformed* by elements of the non-human world that have been discursively inscribed by the violence of the human world. Unlike Wein's Swamp Thing, Moore's vision of the character is not underpinned by an eternal quest to return to human *Culture*. Moore himself saw his efforts on the series as a tool "for getting people to understand natural phenomena from the inside" (*the craft*). He sees the central question of *Swamp Thing* as "What would a mass vegetable consciousness be like? What would the concerns of a vegetable consciousness be?" (*the craft*). The central concern of Moore's run, then, is the quest to understand the non-human world. Moore's novel encompasses a narrative of Swamp Thing's transformation from a consciousness completely inscribed by the human world into a form of consciousness that allows for an inscription by the non-human world. The main theme of Moore's *Swamp Thing* is not the monstrous transformation of a human body into a grotesque swamp creature, but rather the idea of human consciousness attempting, and *failing*, to transform into vegetable consciousness.

Jason Woodrue, the first villain in Moore's run, effectively ends Swamp Thing's quest to re-join human culture when he reveals that Swamp Thing is not a man "somehow transformed into a plant" (Issue 21-12), but rather "he [is] a mass of plant fiber that had somehow been infected with the consciousness of Alec Holland" (Issue 22-5). Upon learning what he actually is, Swamp Thing stops "pretending to breathe," extends "taproots" into the soil, and he begins

learning to adapt his human consciousness to his newfound vegetable consciousness (Issue 22-5). Soon after, Swamp Thing abandons the “red and angry world” of animal and human life (Issue 23-1). At one point, Moore’s Swamp Thing gives up cultural interactions with humans—the most sought-after goal of Wein and Wrightson’s Swamp Thing—and submits himself to the consciousness of the non-human world. As he leaves his physical “body behind,” he finds his consciousness “somewhere green and timeless” where he can let his “awareness [expand] out through the forgotten root systems” and “drift ... [through] the cellular landscape” (Issue 23-1-2). In the accompanying cartoons, Swamp Thing’s body finds itself in a geometrical web of roots and plant cells called “the green” (Issue 24-12), where there is “peace” and happiness (Issue 23-1). “The green” is the *mass vegetable consciousness* that Swamp Thing must learn to negotiate. In moments of strife and conflict within the human world, Swamp Thing often finds himself engulfed in “the green,” and he lets the plant consciousness soothe and enlighten his human consciousness, which was originally the consciousness of Alec Holland. But the influence of “the green” upon Swamp Thing’s human consciousness is never total because he never submits fully to the “peace and silence” of “the green” (Annual 2-5). Soon after his first peaceful foray into “the green,” Swamp Thing is ripped from that happiness to battle a super-villain and to save Abigail Cable, the woman who will become his common-law wife later in the series: Swamp Thing is torn from the serene beauty of non-human *Nature* by the strife of human *Culture*. Eventually, Swamp Thing’s human relationship with Abby becomes more important to him than the peace of “the green.” Indeed, the conflict between the peaceful plant world and the demands of the human world is a central organizing principle of Moore’s series: this is a green “peace” that Swamp Thing, in his roles of superhero and husband, cannot enjoy. The underlying theme of Moore’s *Swamp Thing* is the conflict between *Culture* and *Nature*, which manifests as a difficult

transformation of Swamp Thing's human consciousness by the vegetable consciousness of "the green." Swamp Thing is an intermediary between human consciousness and the consciousness of the environment, but his conversation with and conversion by that environmental consciousness is never fully complete.

## 1.2 The Invincible Binary: Nature vs. Culture in Moore's *Swamp Thing*

Brian Johnson points out Moore's theme of consciousness as a tool to soothe the material exploitation of the non-human world by violently destructive elements of the human world:

Swamp Thing's reprimand of [Jason] Woodrue ... suggests that a genuine apprehension of nonhuman nature's ontological interconnectedness ('the way of the wilderness') may in fact provide the model for an environmental ethics that would displace, and not simply invert, instrumental reason's anthropocentric subordination of nature to the status of raw material (20).

As Johnson's phrasing of *nature's ontological interconnectedness* suggests, Moore's Swamp Thing conveys the difficulty of viewing the non-human world as an immaterial, interconnected network that entwines and underpins all material elements of the human and non-human world. Since Wein's understanding of the non-human world was purely material, Moore's run on the series encompasses Swamp Thing's transition from a material connection to the swamp to an immaterial, psychic connection. The tension between material and immaterial *Nature* underpins the entire narrative of Moore's run.

Swamp Thing undergoes three material transformations that change his conscious understanding of his relationship to the non-human world. With each transformation to Swamp Thing's material body, the series' underlying notion of *Nature* becomes positioned further away from the material and into the immaterial—"green"—realm. The first transformation is a

revision of Wein's swamp-birth origin, complete with images of Swamp Thing as a plant-based embryo in a swampy womb. But Moore's first transformation to Swamp Thing distinctly marks the series' transition from material *Nature* to immaterial *Nature*. As Jason Woodrue reveals, Swamp Thing only exists because plants ate "a powerful consciousness that [did] not realize it [was] no longer alive" (Issue 21-11). Swamp Thing awakens from this transformation with the realization that he is simply a human consciousness trapped in a physical body made of plants, made possible by the material law of the food chain. From his first transformation in Moore's run, Swamp Thing is no longer merely physically separate from *Culture*. His separation from *Culture* is a separation of the mind, and his material body houses the point where human consciousness meets vegetable consciousness. The second transformation occurs after Swamp Thing lets his body intertwine with the plants of the swamp and he learns that he can commune with "the green" by letting his "awareness... expand out through the forgotten root systems" (Issue 23-3). In the series' underlying notion of the non-human world, the material natural phenomenon of plants contains the vast, immaterial possibility of "the green." He finds himself in a purely immaterial space that manifests as a physical web of roots and plant cells, and he emerges as a material, physical being with a newfound ability to commune with "the green," the immaterial essence of the non-human world, which takes the form of a consciousness, a thinking mind that is alien to humans. Plants in Swamp Thing's universe are not merely material objects within *Nature*, for his discovery of "the green" reveals a vast immaterial consciousness within the material. Plants also represent a new *crucial interface* (to borrow Haraway's term) that can inscribe Swamp Thing's bodily existence in a process that is separate from the violence of Wein's *Nature*. From the second transformation, Swamp Thing's consciousness is in a unique

space of direct contact with the immaterial consciousness within the material, non-human world, and his body begins to become more plant-like.

Swamp Thing's third transformation occurs after his material body dies from drinking Nukeface's nuclear waste, which is an emblem of the violent, destructive power of industrial efforts to control the non-human world. Swamp Thing must then learn to regrow a new body by infusing his immaterial "green" consciousness into a single seed and altering its material properties. Swamp Thing's third transformation results in material control over the non-human world by using his human consciousness to manipulate the immaterial consciousness of "the green." With each transformation, the end result is the manifestation of a physical plant body, a material element of the non-human world, by way of the immaterial consciousness of "the green." And each transformation is the result of human violence that drives Swamp Thing's consciousness further into peaceful "green" consciousness. The third transformation is the most difficult for Swamp Thing, as it takes him weeks to regrow a new physical body, but from it he learns the true extent of the non-human world's immateriality. He learns that a material body is no longer necessary for his consciousness to persist and that only the constant threat to the material environment by violent human culture and his relationship with Abby make his physical body a necessity, as he must use his body to save both the environment and Abby. Within Moore's *Swamp Thing*, "the green" represents the point wherein the immaterial melds with the material. "The green" is a vast metaphysical force, a consciousness, that can only exist while physically connected to plant life, and humans cannot understand it but they are a constant threat to it. The violence of super villains and industrial pollution forces Swamp Thing to maintain a physical presence, yet that violence constantly threatens his body, his material connection to plant life.

The violence never threatens to destroy “the green” utterly, but the many images of Swamp Thing’s mangled plant body suggest a cautionary bent to Moore’s run. Swamp Thing’s body is the environment in miniature and each act of violence perpetrated against his body is a metaphorical assault on the environment as a whole. With each violent act, Swamp Thing’s immaterial presence, his consciousness and by extension “the green,” is thrown into uncertainty. Within Moore’s vision in the series, horrific violence’s organizing power over human *Culture* is ultimate, which is where Moore’s brand of ecology lies. It is as if he is saying that with each act of destruction, the potential to erase “the green” gets closer and closer. Moore repositions the discursive process of violence to be pre-dominately within the human world and not the non-human world: Moore reverses the barrier of monstrosity that separated Wein’s Swamp Thing from human culture. Violent cultural discourse is the monster, the barrier that keeps Swamp Thing from the profound immaterial consciousness that exists within the physical swamp. “The green,” as the manifestation of immaterial *Nature* in Moore’s *Swamp Thing*, functions as a counterpart to the violence of *Culture*.

However, violence re-inforces the traditional binary between *Nature* and *Culture* in Moore’s Swamp Thing because the non-human world does not seem to inflict very much violence. To an extent, I agree with Matthew Candelaria’s argument that “Moore establishes a dichotomy between what he labels as the red and green worlds” (29). In Candelaria’s reading of *Swamp Thing*, “The ‘green world’ is peace, growth, plants, and sap, while the ‘red world’ is violence, destruction, insects, and blood” (29). Candelaria is correct to place insects, a non-human element of the environment, within the red side of the dichotomy between “green” good and “red” evil. In Moore’s early issues, insects are represented as a horror genre element that is played up for all of the sublime terror that can be funneled into an image of an insect. When

Arcane—an evil sorcerer from the Wein years and Abby’s uncle—returns from the dead, he takes the form of a fly that crawls into Matt Cable’s mouth. In “Love and Death”, one of Moore’s darker issues, Arcane possesses Matt Cable’s body. Arcane then manipulates real insect life and uses a swarm of imaginary flies, spiders, and scorpions to torture and sexually assault Abby. Arcane refers to his insect swarm, both imaginary and real, as his “servants” (Issue 30-14). Insects are controlled on a material and immaterial level by Arcane. The metaphoric link between insects and horror-genre violence is so strong that it is as if insects are not part of the *Nature* that Moore’s Swamp Thing is trying to protect. Violent insects are not part of the non-human world that Swamp Thing wants to accept or experience, but they also represent a part of *Nature* that is operating out of the *Natural* order of things. The way that Swamp Thing describes Arcane’s plague of evil things suggests that violence disrupts the order of the world: “everything bad within two hundred miles finds itself heading for Louisiana without knowing why” (Issue 30-19). Arcane’s violence converts insects into a non-human agent of violence that must be overcome just the same as the destructive super villains and corporations.

In “Return of the Good Gumbo,” Moore’s final issue, when Swamp Thing eschews further violence upon the world to construct a peaceful home with Abby in the Louisiana swamp, insects only appear once in the images of plants and animal life that harmoniously surround Abby and Swamp Thing. Swamp Thing describes an ancient time before animal life, when plant elementals ruled as “earthgods,” as the “last non-violent era” (Issue 64-15). The insects, a prehistoric dragonfly and spider, appear in a panel directly before a panel that depicts an ancient swamp elemental fighting a dinosaur. The link between insects and violence does not remain as strong throughout Moore’s run as in the early issues when Arcane is in control of all insect life. But the panel sequence still suggests violence; it is just a slightly more *Natural* violence that

Swamp Thing learns to accept. Insects represent parts of the non-human world that can be inscribed by a discourse of extreme violence to become organisms that operate completely as agents of the violent aspects of human *Culture*. Insects transformed by violence represent elements of *Nature* that must be confronted, changed, and brought more in line with the peaceful *Nature* that Swamp Thing represents. There is no room for insects—violent or non-violent—in the small utopia that Swamp Thing constructs in Moore’s final issue, which suggests that the traditional binary of *Nature* vs. *Culture* never really stops functioning in *Swamp Thing*.

### **1.3 Straight Lines: The Transformative Power of Violence**

In “Morphing in the Order: Flexible Strategies, Feminist Science Studies, and Primate Revisions,” Donna Haraway elucidates some of the formidable operating power of the traditional *Nature* vs. *Culture* binary in Western thinking. As Haraway states, “conventionally in Western discussions, nature is both outside of culture and posited as a resource for culture’s transforming power” (202). It would seem that *Culture* would be nothing without a *Nature* to tame and contain, and *Nature* would be nothing without a civilized *Culture* to exist forever just outside of its wild borders. Those wild borders that distinguish *Nature* from *Culture* are of course difficult to observe. As Haraway claims, “culture is tropically layered onto nature in a quasi-geological sedimentation, [and] culture is [also] figured as the force that transforms natural resources into social product” (202). In Haraway’s reading of traditional Western discourses of thought, *Nature* functions as a foundation and *Culture* functions as “direction and progress” (202). Binaries seem almost inevitable in the system of thought that Haraway points out: “elaborate linked binaries are like stem cells in the marrow of this conventional discourse” (202). The *Nature* vs. *Culture* binary persists in Western discourse because there are myriad discursive constructions that are simultaneously dependent on the binary, generative of the binary, and



generated by the binary. Organisms and subjects are produced as discursive constructions within this web of thought that seems intrinsically linked to the binary between *Nature* and *Culture*. Superhero subjects can only be produced by violence, so violence serves as the organizing principle of any discourse that produces a superhero. In Wein's *Swamp Thing*, violence was the organizing principle of both *Nature* and *Culture*, so in a way *Swamp Thing*'s violent origin reduces the distance between *Nature* and *Culture*. But the only way the binary was overcome was to reduce the non-human world of all operating or agentive power and have it function simultaneously with the violent explosion of *Swamp Thing*'s origin. Moore infuses the non-human world with much more agency and discursive power than was present in the Wein-era of *Swamp Thing*. But violence seems to operate as the ultimate border between the destructive elements of human *Culture* and the peaceful, "green" aspects of non-human *Nature*. Binaries within Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* seem omnipresent and operational to the extent that they can never be replaced with any other discourse.

From the outset of Moore's run, the artistic team expresses the *Culture-Nature* divide as function of linearity: human *Culture*, and violence in particular, is represented by straight, clean lines that either divide the frame up or form the frame's borders, and peaceful non-human *Nature* is represented by messy, pattern-resistant lines that recall roots and often disrupt the panel frame. The straight lines of buildings and windows are in constant visual tension with the messy, root-like lines of plants and swamps. In Issue 21, Stephen Bissette and John Totleben establish the visual *Culture-Nature* distinction in a panel sequence that reveals that *Swamp Thing* "never [truly] was Alec Holland" and that his relationship to plants was much more immaterial than he had anticipated (21). The sequence opens with *Swamp Thing*'s body depicted as a tiny weed-like smudge beneath a giant cross-cut pattern of the straight lines of window panes within the

Sunderland Corporation office building penthouse (Issue 21-21). The panel signifies Swamp Thing's two-part entrapment by both the violent power of human culture and by a purely physical understanding of the swamp. As the panel sequence progresses, and Jason Woodrue's words reveal the truth of Swamp Thing's immaterial relationship to the swamp, the perspective zooms in on the messy, root-like details of his face. By the final panel of the sequence, which reveals that only Swamp Thing's consciousness is human and signifies the beginning of his journey to understand the consciousness of plants, no window panes are visible within the frame; however, the sides of the frame have become tilted to the right, bringing the panel edges more in line with the compositional angles of the window frames that divided the sky and entrapped Swamp Thing in the sequence's opening panel. The zooming effect on Swamp Thing's face seems to suggest that the swampy particulars of his face have overcome the threatening straight lines of The Sunderland Corporation. But the expression of extreme horror on Swamp Thing's face and the tilting, framing effect of the panels both show the impossibility of separating true immaterial essence of *Nature* from the violent, cultivating, and containing aspects of *Culture*. Just as the name, Sunderland, suggests, discursive violence will divide the land just as it contains it. *Culture* is dominated by violence and straight lines function to divide and contain the vast immaterial potential of the "the green." *Culture* contains *Nature* completely: the messy, immaterial details of the swamp are at the whim of the straight, cutting, material edge of the dominant corporate forces of American society. The violence of *Culture* in Moore's run can produce facial expressions in Swamp Thing that recall the horror of Wein's run.

Swamp Thing's face represents the ecological potential of the discursive transformation of his body into a monstrous body. Swamp Thing's face is his most recognizably human element, and it represents the point at which a body that has been transformed by violent

discursive process can retain a sense of the comforting and the familiar. His face is the means by which humans can speak and listen to the environment. Unlike Wein's *Swamp Thing*, which mostly featured Swamp Thing's face caught in violent expressions of anger and terror, Moore's run on the series is undercut by numerous images of Swamp Thing's peaceful smiling face. His smile symbolizes that it is possible to experience the peace of the "green" despite the fact that he only exists because of the violence that dominates all cultural discourse. "Nukeface," a hobo addicted to drinking nuclear waste who appears in Issues 35 and 36 (Apr. – May 1985), represents the threat to the immaterial world by physical damage from the material refuse of human culture. Nukeface's face—a face that has been nuked into something terrifying—represents the ontological opposite of Swamp Thing's smiling face. Nukeface's decaying facial features represent the dark remainder of *Culture*'s formative effect on *Nature*: Nukeface's face is the result of a transformation to a human body from which no peace or happiness can be found. He is the direct result of an industrial product that was hidden and forgotten within the earth in order for the processes of plants and soil to smooth over any memory of nuclear waste. Nukeface emblemizes *Nature*'s inability to cultivate *Culture*, to contain the byproducts of a destructive industry by transforming them into natural cycles; simultaneously, he symbolizes *Culture*'s ability to mimic *Nature* in order to harmfully transform nature. *Nature* does not have the power of *Culture* to be "the force that transforms natural resources into social product" (Haraway 202). Material social resources, nuclear waste, cannot be transformed into a natural product in Moore's *Swamp Thing*. Nukeface turns the straight, cutting lines of *Culture* into messy lines that harm the material and immaterial aspects of *Nature*.

Before his confrontation with Nukeface, Swamp Thing dreams of the town where the nuclear waste was buried:

I walk... through a bad place [where] something *bright* and *awful* kissed the world... and left... its smeared... blue... lipstick print. The soil is curdled... and all that grows... grows wrong ... There is a rattle... in the throat ...of the wind (Issue 35-11-12).

As Swamp Thing's dream reveals, the physical refuse of industry corrupts the immaterial properties of the non-human world. When the two finally meet, Nukeface's touch renders Swamp Thing's physical body powerless and burns a blue handprint onto the vegetation of his chest, and when the hobo pours the toxic waste down Swamp Thing's throat the physical pollution begins to attack his consciousness: "as [my body] starts to decay... my head fills... with ice-blue nothingness" (Issue 36-3). Visually, Nukeface's nuclear waste splashes on Swamp Thing's mouth, which obscures Swamp Thing's face and makes it into something terrifying. As Swamp Thing begins to grow wrong, his physical body can no longer house his consciousness: physical *Nature* cannot accept the destructive physical aspects of *Culture*, but "the green" remains a safe place for Swamp Thing's consciousness. When Swamp Thing regrows his body in the next issue (the third transformation I discussed in the previous section), he does so by locating a seed from within "the green" and imprinting his consciousness on it. Compositionally, the artists place the seed completely within the darkness of the mouth of an old soda can, which suggests that the physical aspects of human *Culture* will continue to enclose the physical aspects of *Nature* even as Swamp Thing learns to embrace *Nature*'s immaterial essence, "the green." The curved lines of the soda can frame and enclose Swamp Thing's body, which—like Nukeface—shows how *Culture* can transform its straight, cutting edge of containment to the messy, material aspects of *Nature*.

The Parliament of Trees represents the antipode of the process symbolized by Nukeface. Whereas Nukeface represents *Culture*'s adoption of messy, incoherent characteristics to harm

*Nature*, The Parliament represents plants' adoption of the perfectly organized and cultivating aspects of human social organization into a method of *Natural* order that Swamp Thing cannot accept. Alex Olsen, a swamp elemental that preceded the Swamp Thing of Alan Moore's run, points out the highly ordered property of The Parliament's idea of *Nature*:

Coincidence... is the pattern... of the world's bark. ... All... our stories... are subtly different... yet the underlying... pattern... remains constant... A man... dies in flames... a monster rises from the mire. ... That is always... our beginning. ... Our ending... is always here... in this grove." (Issue 47-15).<sup>2</sup>

The Parliament symbolizes *Nature* as a perfectly harmonious and organized system, because it is *Nature* that has completely contained its immaterial essence within the discourse of violence that permeates all superhero fiction. Much like the initial violent incident that produced Swamp Thing's body, to join The Parliament will take away his body completely so that his consciousness resides completely within "the green." But Swamp Thing never succeeds in following the order of the Parliament, for it is a system of cultivating *Nature*, of producing a body, which he cannot abide. He is an elemental, and thus part of the pattern of the world's bark, but he does not take up residence in the Parliament. Swamp Thing allows the Amazon deforestation to continue in Moore's final issue, and, since The Parliament is located in the Amazon, Swamp Thing's decision will ultimately lead to the destruction of The Parliament and the entire non-human world if *Culture* is allowed to persist.

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Olsen was the very first Swamp Thing to appear in the DC Universe. He appeared in a single story in the horror anthology *House of Secrets* #92 (July 1971), which was written by Wein and illustrated by Wrightson. The story is set at the turn of the twentieth century but contains the same central theme of Wein's run on the *Swamp Thing* monthly series.

In the end, Swamp Thing's body, a cartoon icon that represents the containment of the ecological potential of the plant world by a discourse of violence, is far more important than tipping the scales of the binary in favour of plants and bringing the modern world into an ecological balance. Abby's imprisonment for her love of Swamp Thing, understood as "*crimes against nature*," shows *Culture's* power over *Nature* within Moore's *Swamp Thing* (italics in original, Issue 51-4). Plants and *Nature* are completely contained by the organizing violence of *Culture* in the world of *Swamp Thing*. Abby and Swamp Thing, in their eco-love affair, violate the order of *Nature* as defined by their human *Culture* and the order of *Nature* as defined by The Parliament. Swamp Elementals are supposed to lose their wives by fire not attempt to find new human wives. In the end of the narrative, Swamp Thing realizes that "the way of the wood," the true order of peaceful *Nature*, is "to watch the world wind by... and in its windings find content," and he reasons that humans would continue to destroy the earth "safe in the knowledge that [he] stood on hand... to mend the biosphere... endlessly covering the scars" (Issue 64-16). Swamp Thing realizes that to fully extend his human consciousness into "the green"—join the intersubjective consciousness of The Parliament—would bridge every divide between material and immaterial and between *Nature* and *Culture*. He would become truly just as Pog the tiny alien explorer in one of the series more lighthearted issues describes him: the earth's "guardiner," a protector and cultivator of the earth (Issue 32-11). To protect the earth from destruction is not the way of the Parliament; protecting the earth is purely a concern of superheroes, so to fully extend that aspect of human consciousness into the plant consciousness of "the green"—and achieve a hybridity that most critics assume Swamp Thing represents—would change the *Cultural* and *Natural* order of the world entirely. If Swamp Thing were to become a full hybrid, a blend of human and vegetable consciousness, he would successfully turn

the earth into its own superhero. But he realizes that would be an act of violence far too great: he “cannot mend the world... without committing greater wrong” (Issue 64-17). Swamp Thing cannot turn the earth into its own self-sustaining superhero without inflicting trauma upon the earth. To bridge the gap between *Nature* and *Culture* would destroy both as Swamp Thing’s world knows them, and since the gap between the two is big enough to destroy both if it is closed Swamp Thing lets the gap remain, and he lets *Nature* take its course. Human *Culture* “must stand or fall... by its merits alone,” and Swamp Thing gives *Nature* no choice but to wait (Issue 64-17).

## Chapter 2: Swamp Thing's *Limited* Interrelation With the Environment

### 2.1 Timothy Morton's Ecological Thinking – A Subject Embedded in the Environment

In *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton calls for a new understanding of ecology—a new way to think about and interact with the environment—that “will be unafraid to think about nonidentity” (5). For Morton, to think about the environment, and not an aestheticized and ultimately distant idea of *Nature*, is to think in a collective fashion and not an individual one. As he contends, “ecological forms of subjectivity inevitably involve ideas and decisions about *group* identity and behavior”; thus, Morton’s ecological subjectivity is non-individual subjectivity (italics in original 17). Morton’s process of anti-individuation is incredibly complex (so far he has dedicated two books to describing it), but he sums it up simply with the axiom: “when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground, [and] it stops being the environment” (1). Although the phrasing is simple, the ideological play and potential are complex because it highlights two very important questions: when the environment stops being the environment, what does it become *and* what becomes of the subject when he or she is no longer *distinct* from the environment or no longer *alone* in the foreground? To conceptualize the environment as Morton describes would completely change human culture and thinking forever, but it is massively difficult, perhaps impossible. As he maintains, “If we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we are embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it” (italics in original 64). Environmental destruction—like the typical way to think of the environment as “That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us”—hinges upon “subject-object dualism,” which itself “depends upon a distinction between inside and outside” (1, 64). As Morton makes clear, in Western thinking, the subject is the individual, the world of inner experience—and the object is the environment, the work of art, or the Other, that which is



truly outside the individual. For Morton, to think of the environment is to let go of the classification of environment as *Nature*—a fundamental essence or aesthetic that is distinct from humans—and embrace a notion of subjectivity that abandons individuality and allows the collective outer world into the subjective inner one. The traditional notion of aesthetic, in Morton’s view, props up this distinction between the subject and an object that is being experienced. He argues, “the aesthetic is ... a product of distance: of human beings from nature, of subjects from objects, of mind from matter” (24). To think in a profoundly ecological sense would be to experience the environment, objects, and others without distance, but Morton acknowledges that to do that is perhaps impossible. Ultimately, in Morton’s worldview, the traditional notion of the individual threatens the environment because it depends upon a fundamental separation from the environment. Morton’s ideal subject is a subject that experiences the environment with a constant awareness of the aesthetic and ideological devices that function to separate the subject from the environment.

In the Romantic-era conception of *Nature*, which Morton points out is still prevalent today, “philosophical and social [modernity] has sundered subjects from objects” (22). For the Romantics, *Nature* represents a fundamental essence or aesthetic experience that has been lost or taken from humanity by modern industry or thinking. Morton points out the same tension between materiality and immateriality as Williams does: “one of the basic problems with Nature is that it could be considered either as a *substance*, as a squishy thing in itself, or as *essence*, as an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation” (16). In Romantic thinking, *Nature* is either captured as aesthetic substance (i.e. a painting or a poem) or ever-present, yet hidden from humanity, as the fundamental essence within the environment. Morton observes that in Romantic thinking about the environment, “contact with

Nature, and with the aesthetic, will mend the bridge between subject and object”; thus, “art and Nature [become] the new secular churches in which subject and object can be remarried” (22-23). In the Romantic worldview, which still underpins our contemporary popular notions of *Nature*, the individual subject is tragically separated from the divine object of *Nature* and only true art or experience can heal the fissure. As Morton’s writing makes clear, the Romantic notion of *Nature* is paradoxically concerned with limits and distance. A limit has been imposed on the subject by modern society, and that limit can only be removed by experiencing the substance of *Nature* as an aesthetic object, which is itself a limited object that has been made distant from the essence of *Nature*.

The function of the limit seems to be inherent within the notions of subject and object. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams argues that the notions of subject and object in Western thought stem from “Descartes [who] proposed the thinking self as the first substantial area of knowledge—the subject—from the operations of which the independent existence of all other things must be deduced—as objects thrown before consciousness” (261). Morton appears to be acting out of resistance to the Cartesian assertion that all objects extend from the subject’s mind, but I think that Williams’s understanding of Cartesian subject/object dualism can help illuminate some aspects of Morton’s work on ecological subjectivity. Williams traces the Latin roots of subject as “*sub*—under [and] *jacare*—throw, cast” and object as “*ob*—towards, against, in the way of—[and] *jacare*, throw, cast” (260). The subject is the mind that thinks and the object is the thing that is thought about, “a thing ‘thrown before’ the mind: hence something seen or observed” (Williams 260). As I interpret Williams’s philological understanding of subjects and objects, both the subject and the object seem to be the limit of each other. I think that it is perhaps useful to reframe the relationship between subject and object as such: the subject is

limited by being cast under the object, and the object is limited by being cast against the mind of the subject.

I interpret Morton's understanding of the crisis of Romantic subjectivity as a crisis of being severed from the object, either in an aesthetic or environmental sense of *Nature*. The Romantic crisis can be understood as a crisis of needing to perceive *Nature* as a correct type of object. In Romantic thinking, *Nature* must be cast properly in front of the mind in order to achieve a proper way of thinking that has been lost. The danger in turning the environment into an object cast before the subject's thinking mind—which Morton believes is the fundamental operation of the term and concept *Nature*—is that it threatens to turn the environment into a passive object, and in that passivity it will become separate from the subject once again and open to destruction. I interpret Morton's project as an updating of the project of English Romanticism; he seeks a way not to bridge the gap between subject and object but to erase the distinction between the two. Morton does not seek to destroy the distinction between inner and outer—because “somewhere that is *neither* inside *nor* outside is strictly inconceivable”—but rather he seeks a way to establish subjectivity that allows “the environment [to] just happen around us, without our intention” (*Ecology Without Nature* 60). Morton's *Nature*—without being *Nature*, and being more *environment* or his preferred term of *strange stranger*—is a non-passive object that constantly surrounds and intertwines the subject. As the thinking subject intertwines with the environment, a point is approached, but perhaps never reached, in which the notion of object disappears and the human subject is enmeshed in a web with his or her non-human environment. The thinking subject, by the very process of thinking itself, is intermingled with the object cast before its mind. For Morton, ecological thinking constitutes an awareness of this intermingling between subject and object: the subject's perception is intermingling with a

non-passive object. Morton prefers the term *strange stranger* as a goal for ecological thinking because it assigns more activity than *environment* and does not objectify like *Nature*. As he puts it in *The Ecological Thought*, to perceive things in the environment as *strange strangers* makes them alive, a series of “life forms,” and ecological thinking “imagines a multitude of entangled *strange strangers*” (15). Furthermore, Morton defines ecological thinking as being aware of an “intimacy [and entanglement] with the *strange stranger*” within the environment (*The Ecological Thought* 46-7). As Morton’s work suggests, the answer to the Romantic crisis of subjectivity is to perceive the environment as an unique object consisting of an entangled web of strange life forms, organisms in Haraway’s sense, that are intimate but ultimately unknowable.

Morton is a cautionary thinker, and he warns against a certain type of *Nature* writing that draws attention away from intimate interaction with the *strange stranger* and that will ultimately re-contribute to the destruction of the environment: *Nature* writing that suggests that the environment is an intersubjective space where many minds become one beyond the notion of object. Many critics interpret Alan Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing*, and especially the scenes of Swamp Thing in “the green,” as promoting an intersubjective ecological utopia. For Morton, intersubjective *Nature* writing can be harmful because it takes agency away from the myriad organisms that constitute the environment. Morton argues that “some ecological writing aspires to the notion that the eco-system makes available an idea of intersubjectivity, an entanglement of minds with other minds and perhaps nonmental or inanimate things” (*Ecology Without Nature* 106). *Nature* writing that suggests this subject position, the position of entangled minds, relies on the potential for the subject to become an assemblage of other subjects. However, I argue that within the desire for this intersubjective subject position the old Romantic fissure between subject and object remains. The fissure just shifts slightly to become a fissure between subject

and subject who has merged with other subjects in intersubjective environmental space. Morton sees this “entanglement of minds” as an instance of “*objectified subjectivity* that is trying to be ‘environment’”; in other words, the intersubjective subject just becomes another object: “No sooner does the subject turn into the object ... than the object naturally starts to behave like a subject” (italics in original 106, 112). When the mind of the subject has submitted itself so fully to the influence of the object, it becomes the object and the object, having been cast before the mind of the subject so thoroughly, becomes the subject.

The type of *Nature* writing that Morton warns against, the type that describes the environment as an intersubjective space, haunts Alan Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing*. “The green” makes the type of intersubjectivity described by Morton possible for Swamp Thing and those other humans that he allows into “the green.” In the much cited issue, “Rite of Spring” (Issue 34), Abby and Swamp Thing declare their love for each other, and they consummate their relationship by having hallucinogenic sex that unites their minds within “the green.” As their minds leave their bodies they become one mind that encompasses the globe from within “the green”: “We... are... one creature... and All... that there is... is in us” (Issue 34-17). Critics tend to get hung up on the razzle-dazzle of this sex scene, and it is often construed as the organizing principle of the brand of ecology that Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing* promotes. Matthew Candelaria understands the desire for Abby as a central characteristic of Swamp Thing that enforces an idea of intersubjective ecology:

It makes sense that if Swamp Thing is vegetable, not human, then he would have no place for a human emotion such as love, but Moore chooses that Swamp Thing should be not only capable of love but driven by love. Love not as we might imagine it in human terms, but as a manifestation of our interconnectedness with all things, in which the loved

one becomes a catalyst who enables us to surrender our self to become one with the world, as becomes evident in “Rite of Spring”. (32)

Similarly, Brian Johnson interprets the sex scene in “Rite of Spring” as the series’ “most powerful image of ecological utopianism” because the sex scene collapses “the boundaries between human and nonhuman natures [and] implies a dismantling of the rational, anthropocentric subject of Cartesian humanism” (21-2). Johnson’s reading of an intersubjective ecology within *Swamp Thing* is based on his reading of Abby and Swamp Thing’s “sexual/intellectual union [that allows] an ego-dissolving flight into the sublime paraspace of ‘the green’ where [their] astral bodies merge in orgasmic rapture” (21). I agree with both Candelaria and Johnson that “Rites of Spring” conveys a sense of the ecological intersubjectivity that Swamp Thing is capable of unleashing on his world, but the fact remains that Swamp Thing does not unleash that sort of ecology on his world. Swamp Thing and Abby do not have time to dwell on intersubjective eroticism in the swamp because there are just too many different forces trying to kill them. After they have mind-body sex in “the green,” Swamp Thing leaves Abby sleeping in the swamp and proceeds directly to his altercation with Nukeface. This is one more instance where the violence of the superhero and horror genres—the violence that Moore sees as an unconquerable organizing principle of American culture—functions to stop the ecological possibilities of Swamp Thing. Swamp Thing cannot linger on intersubjective unions within “the green” because there are violent forces seeking to destroy him and the planet. But, as I argue in the next section, Moore’s characterization of Swamp Thing suggests that there are also perhaps inherent properties to the human psyche, at least that displayed as Swamp Thing’s psyche, that function against intersubjective unions with the environment.

## 2.2 Swamp Thing's Subject Position: the Individual in the Face of the Environment

Swamp Thing can only exist by using the material elements of *Nature*, plants, by transforming them into the shape of his body to house his mind. And he makes a conscious decision to maintain his mind's position within a single body, to limit his use of plants. Swamp Thing is an individual with a single consciousness that is devoted to using the plants in the environment in a limited way to house that consciousness. Moore's run begins with Swamp Thing's murder of an icon that represents the sundering, the division, and the misuse of *Nature* by the dominant forces of American culture. Swamp Thing's murder of General Sunderland (in Issue 21)—the head of Sunderland Corporation—coincides with his learning about his true ecological capabilities. This murder of a dominant force in the destruction of the environment symbolizes the end of Swamp Thing's sundering from the land, his Romantic healing of the fissure with the object of the swamp. Directly after Swamp Thing murders General Sunderland he lets his body physically dissolve into the swamp (the first transformation discussed in Chapter One). From that point on, the narrative takes on the theme of negotiating the relationship between the subject of Swamp Thing and the objects that comprise him and allows him to exist.

Swamp Thing does not need to mention the environment to make it an object—he is in constant physical and psychic contact with the swamp—but he struggles with psychic acceptance of “the green.” The narrative symbolizes just how far a subject can incorporate an object and still remain an individual subject, for Swamp Thing cannot remain a subject if he allows “the green” to take over his mind. If “the green” were to take over his mind, if he joined The Parliament of Trees, he would become part of the objects that comprise his environment. At one point in his process of discovering the extent of his environmental powers, his wife Abby points out the perilous characteristics of his subjectivity:

this *travelling* business... letting your body die in one place and growing a *new* one somewhere else... Doesn't it make you feel sorta *disconnected*? ... I've always thought of your body as *you*, but now it's just something you *dress up in* occasionally. ...

Sometimes I feel as if *you're* somewhere else and I'm hugging your jacket. (Issue 41-5)

Swamp Thing's love of Abby—the single emotional aspect of the character that Moore retains from the Wein era—causes him to maintain his human subjectivity in the face of the obliterating potential of “the green.” Swamp Thing's love of Abby initiates his maintenance of a single, coherent body, and throughout the series he remains faithfully committed to Abby and *not* to an intersubjective union with her, “the green,” and all life on earth. Swamp Thing is a subject that resists the obliterating potential of the psychic object that allows him to exist—“the green”—and commits, ultimately, to the maintenance of a single, bodily vessel in which his mind exists.

Swamp Thing's love for Abby may be the catalyst that initiates his maintenance of a single body, but his thinking and consciousness prove to be a much more important aspect of his existence that require a unique body separate from his environment. As Swamp Thing says to Abby a few pages after she implores him to maintain a single body, “you... were right ... I must restrain myself ... Lest I forget... what I am...” (Issue 41-8). The important words in Swamp Thing's assertion of restraint are “I am,” which enforces a sense of traditional, Cartesian subjectivity on Swamp Thing and not an intersubjective utopian subjectivity as Candelaria and Johnston assume. As Moore states in an afterword to a collection of Wein/Wrightson Swamp Thing issues that was released while Moore was working on the title, he loved the thought captions of the Wein era (*Roots of the Swamp Thing Part 3 of 5*). Swamp Thing's thoughts are the most important textual element of Moore's run on the series. When Nukeface kills Swamp Thing's physical body, there is an absence of the thought captions that Moore loved so much



from the Wein era. As Swamp Thing's body decomposes from Nukeface's toxins, the thought captions are all that remain, and when his body is no longer physically or psychically inhabitable, the final caption reads, "I die" (Issue 36-4). In the absence of thought captions it is unclear whether Swamp Thing still exists, and the narrative simply focuses on other characters. When Swamp Thing finally regrows his body (the third transformation that I discussed in Chapter One), a caption appears that reads "I am" (Issue 37-2). When Swamp Thing makes a Cartesian assertion that his thoughts guarantee his existence, his body only exists as a tiny seedling. His body has not yet developed its typical characteristics, but Veitch and Totleben place the seed directly in front of a green spotted caterpillar. When viewed together in the single composition of the "I am" panel, the seedling and the spots on the caterpillar resemble Swamp Thing's typical face almost exactly. His thoughts continue to ponder his existence: "But... where am I?" (Issue 37-2). The inclusion of the insect within an assembled image that resembles his face shows that his physical body does not need to confine his thoughts. His thinking at this point is within "the green," and the assemblage of different environmental aspects into a face suggests that it is possible for Swamp Thing to inhabit a body that encompasses the whole of the environment, and it is possible for him to include insects in his "green" utopian body if he chooses. However, Swamp Thing does not create such a body. Swamp Thing's caterpillar/seedling face—a face that encompasses the environment—is not a face that humans can interact with. Humans need a contained, iconic face to interact with. Ultimately, he must exercise restraint in his bodily composition; he must remain in an individual body because "the green" can destroy his psyche.

Swamp Thing must resist his destructive potential on the environment by learning to control his thinking while in "the green." His "green" thinking symbolizes the merging of the

psychic with the physical. Swamp Thing learns to control the physical aspects of the environment by controlling the psychic object of “the green.” Swamp Thing’s struggle, which is a struggle of thought, is to resist the complete environmental takeover of his mind and body by the psychic/physical object of “the green.” Swamp Thing first understands the extent of his psychic/physical control of the environment—his “green” thinking—when he destroys a dam that has flooded a town and caused an infestation of amphibious vampires. Swamp Thing created the dam himself in an issue before Alan Moore took over as writer, and the underwater vampires symbolize the dangerous potential of Swamp Thing’s psychic or physical alteration of the environment. Swamp Thing explains the process of destroying the dam as a function of psychic and physical coherence: “My consciousness... diffuses out... into the dreaming undergrowth... [and] my intelligence is a web... of filaments... and fibers..., I shape... the disparate facts... into a single coherent... image” (Issue 39-13). The act of controlling the environment corresponds to transforming the messy details of the environment into a coherent psychic object that can easily be cast before the mind. Bringing the object of the environment into the mind of the subject polishes out the incoherent aspects and shapes “the green” into “a single coherent image” by focusing the environment into the subject’s body: “I gather myself... into the heart... of the rootweb... its tendrils... become my sinews... my arms...are two miles long” (Issue 39-17). In both cases—making “the green” a “coherent image” and focusing his body into its “rootweb” center—Swamp Thing resists the physically obliterating power of “the green” by maintaining the humanoid shape of his body. The object has been brought into the subject, but the subject does not become the object. And “the green,” rather than being a “sublime paraspace” of ego dissolution as Johnson understands it, becomes a coherent image, a distinct icon that manifests as an individual body. Swamp Thing’s dealings with the

environment and the underwater vampires symbolize important things for him as a *character* and as an *icon*. As a character, Swamp Thing learns the importance of limiting his control of the environment in this scene. The idea of focusing “the green” into “a single coherent image” establishes Swamp Thing as an icon that represents the assemblage of the environment into a shape that is coherent enough for humans to understand it easily. Furthermore, Swamp Thing’s individual body is necessary to control the environment as a psychic and physical object: if Swamp Thing lets the entire physical body become his environment it will destroy the environment just as it destroys his psyche.

Swamp Thing’s exercise in object control has a cautionary bent because the amphibious vampires are the direct result of his previous physical manipulation of the environment. Immaterial *Nature*—in this case an unnamable force of evolution—has taken its course and made aquatic vampires, which are an instance of material *Nature* that is far more terrifying than the original vampires that he sought to destroy by flooding the town. Swamp Thing’s “green” thinking makes the environment into an object cast before his mind and brings it under the influence of his subjectivity as matter worked upon by his physical body, but to expand his body out to encompass the entire “green”—the whole of the earth’s environment—is a dangerous subject position that invites either the destruction of the subject or the entirety of the world itself.

In “My Blue Heaven” (Issue 56), Moore demonstrates the destructive potential of the intersubjectivity that “the green” makes possible. The issue occurs just after Swamp Thing has been banished from the earth by Lex Luthor’s weapon that renders his consciousness incompatible with “the green” as it resonates on earth. Swamp Thing finds himself on a planet where only blue fish, plants, and insects exist. When Swamp Thing realizes that he will never see Abby again—“he is alone in a place where companionship is not possible”—he makes a

version of Abby out of plants and controls the plant-Abby with his own thoughts (Issue 56-5). The phrase “where companionship is not possible” proves that Moore’s ecology is not the same brand as Morton’s, since Swamp Thing still has animals, plants—and therefore “the green”—to keep him company but he is the most alone that he can possibly be. Subjectivity for Moore means rational, thinking and individual consciousness, and for the subject to be not alone he or she must have other rational subjects to interact with. Swamp Thing initially passes off the idea of creating a plant-Abby as “dangerously irrational,” but Swamp Thing gets taken by plant-Abby’s beauty (Issue 56-8). Soon, Swamp Thing has manipulated the plants of the blue planet into an entire society of people for him and plant-Abby to inhabit. At one point, Swamp Thing looks through his and Abby’s eyes “in tandem,” and he says that “the world becomes a place... of charmed perspectives... and ambiguous depths... of solid space... unfolded as easily as an origami flower” (Issue 56-11). Swamp Thing has made the entire environment of the blue planet into a physical object through psychic control of its plant life. His experiment with creating an entire society of subjects out of his own subjectivity is a perverse extension of the intersubjectivity made possible by his erotic union with Abby in the swamp on earth. Swamp Thing’s experimental society is the logical extension of the axiom of his and Abby’s intersubjective love on earth: “We... are... one creature... and All... that there is... is in us” (Issue 34-17). Swamp Thing has succeeded in making an entire environment into an extension of his body: he has created a world of subjects that share the same consciousness in a single “twisted” body that manifests as many bodies. It is his love of Abby, the real Abby, which shatters his illusion. Swamp Thing’s experimental society is a caricature of the society and environment that he left on earth. He has recreated everything in a material sense, but the immaterial aspects are wrong. He realizes the flaw within his caricatured environmental society

when he realizes that he could never recreate the beauty of Abby's face. Swamp Thing experimented with making a caricature of the human body, much like the swamp did with his body, and he failed. He ends up yelling "your smile is wrong" at plant-Abby and punching her face (an act of violence), which causes the entire plant-society to self destruct (Issue 56-18). Even in an intersubjective utopia, Swamp Thing cannot be free from the pervasive, transformative power of violence. The destruction of Swamp Thing's experimental world is a metaphor for the destruction of the real world that would surely ensue if he and Abby united the entire world into the intersubjective, erotic space of "the green." Swamp Thing realizes that it is better to be alone as an individual subject than to be together in a collective of many subjects that share the same consciousness: "better to fling my intelligence out into the endless nothing ... than fall into the welcoming arms... of insanity..." (Issue 56-21). The subject would be destroyed because his or her mind would become the entire object that permits the subject's possibility. Any hope of an individually functioning subjective mind would be lost. To make the environment into an intersubjective collective would destroy the uniqueness of the *other*, the objects and other subjects that make up the environment, for the collective would still be a manifestation of Swamp Thing's mind. Swamp Thing must suffer the difficult balance of maintaining an individual psyche, a healthy control of the environment, and resisting, limiting, the pull of collective intersubjectivity.

### **2.3 Swamp Thing vs. The Parliament of Trees – The Individual vs. The Collective**

Swamp Thing's subject position is one of resistant individuality in the face of the entwined "green" mind of the Parliament of Trees. If, as I alluded to in the previous section, Swamp Thing's represents the shaping of the environment into a coherent image by way of an individual subject, then The Parliament of Trees represents the dissolution of that subject back into the

environment, the giving up of the subject's individuality. As John Constantine, a paranormal detective in the DC Universe, reveals, Swamp Thing is "not the first swamp elemental by a long shot" (Issue 47-8). But as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that he is the first elemental to resist the Parliament. When Swamp Thing first enters the Parliament's grove in the Amazon rainforest, the cartoons portray him as a small, barely discernable humanoid shape that is completely encompassed by trees, ferns, flowers, and animals of the rainforest (Issue 47-9, 10). The two-page splash panel visually encodes Swamp Thing's potential loss of self, the loss of his individual subject position, which will occur if he joins the Parliament. The splash panel shows Swamp Thing near the top left corner, his humanoid shape obscured by shadow, standing directly beside a tree with a humanoid face that has been obscured by overgrown moss;<sup>3</sup> the entire right half of the panel is made up of cartoon rainforest and trees that have absolutely no human resemblance left. By the left to right narrative logic of Western visual narratives, the panel shows that elementals, like Swamp Thing, who become part of the Parliament completely give up their humanoid form and become an indiscernible part of the rainforest around them; to become one with the Parliament is to give up the coherence of the image that represents the subject and allow the incoherence of the environment to take over. The face is the last humanoid aspect that the elementals lose because, by the iconographic logic of Swamp Thing, the face represents the point at which humans can interact with the elemental and thus speak to the environment. Just as the exchange with Abby suggests, Swamp Thing's body and face are too important to lose to the intersubjective "green" thinking of the Parliament; Swamp Thing is an individual that resists the collective.

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<sup>3</sup> It is revealed soon after that the trees with humanoid faces on them in the grove are the former swamp elementals that have taken root in the Parliament.

Two characters in *Watchmen*, which Alan Moore wrote simultaneously with *Swamp Thing*, form a parallel to Swamp Thing's struggle of individuality against a collective. Michael J. Prince argues that "the struggle between the individual and the collective" constitutes the underlying theme of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (825). He argues that each superhero in the graphic novel displays fear about the cause of his or her individual action in the face of governmental organization, and he contends that the characters "are possessed by a personally driven vigilantism that manifests the autonomy and purposeful action attributed to the [resistance of the] liberal individual . . . in the face of ever more complex and technologically advanced systems" (817-26). Two characters exemplify the extreme difficulty of maintaining individuality in the face of the collective: Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias (Prince 826). I agree with Prince's reading of *Watchmen*, and in terms of my own argument, Dr. Manhattan has mastery over material forces but not the immaterial forces of his universe. Unlike Swamp Thing, Dr. Manhattan's ability to manipulate his environment stops with the physical, and his agency is at the whim of natural laws that he appears to have mastery over. But Dr. Manhattan's individuality is swept up into *Nature*, the material and physical laws of his universe, and he becomes a sort of conduit for the *Natural* laws of physics. At the end of the graphic novel, Dr. Manhattan submits his material body to what he cannot see or understand—the immaterial laws of physics—to become one with the concept *Nature* within his universe. Prince maintains that Ozymandias "iterates the primacy of the *individual* but in the face of the *collective*, . . . he has fused his individuality with a corporation for what he sees as a necessary plan to preserve civilization and human life" (826-27). In *Watchmen*'s universe, immaterial *Nature* manifests as the sublime physical properties of the universe—subatomic particles—and as the collective unconscious. Dr. Manhattan submits his body to sublime, subatomic *Nature* without

understanding it, while Ozymandias manipulates physics and the collective unconscious by creating a singular collective, a corporation, to act as his identity. Ozymandias turns the collective unconscious fear within his society, an immaterial essence, into a material object—the synthetic alien that he teleports into New York City—by way of submitting his individuality to a corporation. Together, Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan form a parallel to Swamp Thing’s struggle with “the green”: Swamp Thing’s material body represents his individuality in the face of immaterial *Nature* (like Dr. Manhattan), and the Parliament of Trees represents the loss of individuality in the face of a corporate, bodily, collective (like Ozymandias). In terms of a discourse of violence, both Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias end up inflicting great violence in *Watchmen*. By submitting fully to immaterial natural forces, Dr. Manhattan fails to stop Ozymandias’s plan of killing three million people, and Ozymandias shapes, rewrites his world in the only way that seems to be possible in Moore’s worldview—violence. The operational power of violence is ultimate in *Watchmen*, and submitting to the immaterial as an individual cannot stop that violence. In *Watchmen*, manipulating the immaterial as an individual transformed into the collective seems to increase the operational power of violence in *Watchmen*. In a sense, Swamp Thing seems conscious of the futility of submitting himself to the immaterial or manipulating the immaterial, and he makes every effort to maintain a sense of human consciousness that resists that fate.

#### **2.4 The Individual Subject vs. The “Unmappable Continent” of “the green”**

Raymond Williams maintains that *consciousness* entered English usage in the early seventeenth century from the Latin *consciūs*, which is comprised of “con – together” and “scire – to know” (320). As Williams shows, consciousness is a rich word with a long-held sense of coherence and a sort of binding awareness that can be present in individuals or groups. As



Williams makes clear, the meaning of consciousness seems to balance between individual and collective awareness: “knowing something *with* another or others”—the “mutual self-awareness of a group”—or “self-aware” and “active and waking” (320-21). The key components of consciousness seem to be awareness and activity, binding and coherence, and comprehension amongst either an individual or a group. Consciousness seems to be the arena of subjectivity, the special capability of subjects and not present within objects. Swamp Thing is the environment, a physical object, made into a self-aware, active, and waking subject, and at a glance he appears to be the consciousness of the environment. Moore’s vision of Swamp Thing seems to be charged with the task of unearthing the consciousness of an inanimate object, as inanimate as the non-human environment can be considered, which corresponds with an archaic sense of the word *consciousness* within English thought. As Williams contends, the earliest meaning of *consciousness* in English usage is “a kind of animism, in which inanimate things are described as aware of human actions” (320). As the manifestation of plant consciousness, “the green” seems to correspond with this idea of inanimate awareness; therefore, Swamp Thing is the nexus point between human and plant consciousness, the awareness of the animate subject and the awareness of the inanimate environment. Swamp Thing carries the burden of being the transition point between human thought—the immaterial individual awareness and collective consciousness of human culture—and the consciousness of the earth, an immaterial essence embedded within the material plants of the environment.

Yet there is always a part of plant consciousness that remains unknown to Swamp Thing no matter how far into “the green” he travels. In one of his early journeys into “the green,” he describes the plant mind as “infinite... emerald fathoms” (Annual 2-4). Within “the green,” Swamp Thing feels “the call... of the plantworld, [an] urge to let [his] consciousness dissipate ...

to drown in Peace... and silence” (Annual 2-5). “The green” is plant awareness, but it threatens coherence with its infinite fathoms. And coherence—the binding element of Swamp Thing’s consciousness—corresponds to his distinct humanoid face and body shape, which always remains distinct and undivided when he enters “the green.” Plant consciousness finds expression, coherence, and binding in “rootwebs and treespires,” but these root networks remain visually distinct from Swamp Thing’s body, which suggests a discord between his human consciousness and his ability to comprehend plant consciousness (Annual 2-5). Swamp Thing’s primary consciousness, his human consciousness, is the consciousness of the individual, while “the green,” is the consciousness of the collective, the inanimate, and the earth.

Swamp Thing’s human consciousness, his active awareness, has a limiting and organizational function. When he enters “the green” near The Parliament of Trees, he realizes “how limited... how human... [he has] been in [his] thinking” (Issue 47-17). His “limited” and cultivated human consciousness contrasts with the Parliament’s “unmappable continent of [a] mind” (Issue 47-17). The Parliament’s “green” mind is a consciousness that has embraced the infinite and obliterating potential of “the green.” Even within The Parliament’s collective mind, Swamp Thing retains his humanoid form, and the artists ensure that his body remains the most distinguishable feature within the disjointed, unmappable faces of the Parliament members. In a panel sequence depicting his single conference with The Parliament, Swamp Thing’s consciousness corresponds with the reader’s perspective, so, even in the heart of “green” plant consciousness, we—just like Swamp Thing—cannot focus on a single coherent image except for his humanoid body (Issue 47-17, 18). The members of The Parliament have faces, but none of their faces are presented in full, un-obscured fashion. The faces of the Parliament are either cut up by the framing of panel edges or turned away from the viewer. The Parliament, in its fusion

with “the green” in an intersubjective entangled mind, resists visual coherence and remains unmappable by human consciousness. The panel composition relies on Swamp Thing’s body as an organizing principle; iconographically, his body represents the individual subject and the conscious awareness of the plant consciousness of “the green,” but the subject remains ultimately separate from “the green.” This panel sequence encodes the entire series’ focus on the individual: Swamp Thing’s body is the organizing principal of consciousness, the point at which the incoherent physical and immaterial elements of *Nature* enter consciousness as a coherent visual icon. The true essence of “the green,” just like the collective subjectivity of the Parliament, remains unmappable and unlimited. Swamp Thing is the individual consciousness that we require to experience the environment: he is coherent subjectivity in the face of an environmental consciousness that can never be truly comprehended. Swamp Thing is an icon for the limiting, organizational element that human consciousness needs to experience the environment. Swamp Thing’s face is the point that breaches the limit between humans and the environment, and his face represents the possibility of ecological discourse. In a sense, Moore’s idea of the environment, made apparent by “the green” and The Parliament of Trees, does bear resemblance to Morton’s idea of the *strange stranger*, but without a face Moore’s environment is just *strange*. Without a face there is no potential for rational discourse, and no possibility of establishing a discourse amongst humans and the environment as a *strange* thinking subject.

## Chapter 3: The Icon of Swamp Thing's Body

### 3.1 "there are... no limits": Swamp Thing Breaks the Iconic Frame of His Body

In Issue 53 when Swamp Thing terrorizes Gotham city by causing its plant life to overrun its concrete architecture, he eschews his typical body-shape for a gigantic, monstrous body constructed of redwood tree trunks (Issue 53-24). As Swamp Thing stomps through Gotham's streets, he thinks to himself: "You thought that it could not get any worse... you imagined... that things... had reached their limits... Do not... delude yourselves... there are... no limits" (Issue 53-25). *Limit* is the keyword here, since the violence that dominates all cultural discourse in Swamp Thing's world depends on limiting Swamp Thing's ecological, bodily, and conscious potential into a single iconic frame: a body with clear definite borders and a face that is recognizably, and even comfortably human-like. *Imagine* is also a keyword, since Swamp Thing is pointing out the imaginative limits of human conscious thought. The dominant cultural discourse of Swamp Thing's world, in this issue represented by the concrete architecture of Gotham, has up until this point depended on an image of the environment that is as neat and contained as Swamp Thing's typical body. Discourse depends on icons to contain and perpetuate it, and it is as if Swamp Thing is conscious of that fact as he creates a new icon of his body that destroys the dominant discourse of his culture. In order to keep destroying the earth, the dominant cultural forces have used violence to contain Swamp Thing's body as a coherent, recognizable icon—a "twisted" body that transforms the ecological potential of the swamp into a distorted caricature of the human body. Swamp Thing makes it clear with his new body that "the green" has presented him with bodily and ecological possibility far beyond the limits that violent discourse has attempted to enforce on his body and thinking. In this final transformation of his body—final because it results in his consciousness being banished from earth—Swamp Thing

turns his body into a caricature of the environment that can crush humans with its sheer size, and his face has turned from a peaceful face of the swamp into one of terrible ecological horror and violence.

Swamp Thing extends the iconic frame of his body into something that reverses the violence of his culture and enacts that violence in favour of *Nature*. His eyes glow red, suggesting that any humanoid features of his body can give way to horror, and his mouth is a terrible black void, which suggests that he can unleash a transformative discourse of horrific violence if he chooses. I think it is important to point out that Swamp Thing is only in Gotham city because his wife Abby has been caught in an intimate moment with him and charged with “laws ... usually reserved for people who have carnal relationships with *farm animals* [or] *crimes against nature*” (italics in original Issue 51-4). *Nature* in Swamp Thing’s world depends on the world happening in a way that corresponds with networks of power, and to go against that order is a crime. The images of Abby’s imprisonment show her either in tight panel compositions, behind jail bars, or covered in crisscross shadows from window bars and chain-link fences (Issue 51-3, 4). Abby is a member of society that has gone against the *framing* devices of dominant discourse, and therefore she is punished by having a stronger frame placed around her. Swamp Thing’s terrorizing of Gotham shows that the frames placed around subjects and organisms by cultural discourse can be reversed. Swamp Thing’s breaking of the iconic frame of his body resonates with ideas put forth by Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought*. Morton contends that:

Naturalness is a temporal illusion: like seasons, things seem static because we don’t notice them changing, and when they do change, there is a rough predictability to the way they do so. Horror and disgust arise whenever that neat aesthetic frame breaks. (44)

Swamp Thing can break the ordered frame of Gotham's *Naturalness* easily. As Commissioner Gordon remarks of Swamp Thing's greening of Gotham, "Two hundred years of civilization [are] reduced to jungle in as many minutes" (Issue 53-3). "The green" gives Swamp Thing the power to break all frames, aesthetic or otherwise, and destroy the limiting principles of consciousness and materiality that the dominant cultural discourses depend on. As he remarks, "there is flora in the human intestinal track... do not tempt me" (Issue 53-25). The image of Swamp Thing as a giant redwood monster shows that he can create his own "twisted" body if he desires, just as he can twist the human bodies of Gotham into something monstrous. The internal monologue that I have been quoting is presented in a complex panel arrangement that is framed by a distorted version of Swamp Thing's face (Issue 53-25). The discursive process of violence that produced Swamp Thing's "twisted" body as a "caricature of humanity" can be inverted and unleashed upon the discourse that produced him in the first place. Swamp Thing is capable of turning the world—its culture, organisms, and subjects—into icons of horror by subverting the aesthetic frame that normally contains him. The panel composition of Swamp Thing's distorted face shows that to break the aesthetic frame produces a disorienting cartoon of ecological horror. It is in the dominant cultural forces' best interest to limit Swamp Thing as an easily recognizable and contained cartoon icon.

### **3.2 The Icon and the Cartoon: Recognition Through Simplification**

Cartoon style drawing can be understood as line drawing of reduced artistic complexity that depends on clarity of line, simple composition, and exaggeration of recognizable visible features. Cartoon style drawing has served as the primary mode of illustration within superhero comic books since 1938, when Superman, who is considered the first superhero, was depicted by Joe Shuster's clear, heavy lines on the cover of *Action Comics* Issue 1. To this day, the cartoon

icon is the primary form of existence for any superhero. As cartoons developed from simplified models of frescos in the Italian Renaissance, to simple newspaper drawings depicting political figures and finally to superheroes and funny animals, artists began to almost exclusively employ the techniques of caricature drawing when drawing cartoons (Harvey 77). Caricature can be understood as drawing in such a way as to exaggerate the “characteristic features of the human figure [for] amusement or criticism” (Wechsler, et al). As icons, cartoons function by simplifying their objects down to a series of lines that may exaggerate and distort the visual characteristics of the object being represented.

The icon resembles as it represents, but the cartoon icon exaggerates the objects it represents and simplifies objects down to a less complex series of recognizable and clear lines. As icons, cartoons are unique because the artists creating them deliberately display a transformation of the visual qualities of the object represented in cartoon form. Etymologically, icon derives from the Latin “*īcōn*, [which means] likeness, image, portrait, semblance, similitude, [or] simile” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1899). Imitation is at the heart of the English meaning of icon: “an image, figure, or representation; ... an image in the solid [such as] a monumental figure [or] statue; [or] a realistic representation or description in writing” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 1899). An icon, then, is an image and not the original. But cartoon artists deliberately subvert the qualities of realism and instant recognition that an icon typically requires. An icon, then, can be either an image of an object from reality that is recognizable as a representation of that object or a symbol that recalls an idea from the culture that produced the icon. As Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics*, there is a difference between symbolic icons and pictorial icons, or symbols and pictures. McCloud contends that symbols, such as a cross or Star of David, are “images [used] to represent concepts, ideas and

philosophies”; whereas pictures are “images designed to actually resemble their subjects” (27). Pictorial icons or pictures have a tangible object from which they originate. Pictures are inevitably re-creations, recognizable imitations, of the object that forms their subject. Symbols are icons with an abstract idea taking the place of object. The idea represented by the symbol does not have any other form of tangible representation besides the icon, so in a way the symbolic icon becomes the object of the abstract idea that it represents. Whether the depiction is pictorial or symbolic, icons require an object.

Pictorial icons represent their objects through a transformative process of abstraction and simplification. For Scott McCloud, a “pictorial icon” is “any image [that an artist uses] to represent a person, place, thing or idea,” which achieves the representation of its subject through various levels of abstraction (27-30). A picture is any represented image. Cartoon icons are a specific type of pictorial icon, and they depend heavily on abstraction as a function of simplification. McCloud argues that cartoon icons rely heavily on “abstraction,” which manifests as “focusing on specific details” or “amplification through simplification” (30). Amplification, simplification, visual exaggeration—the representative processes of cartooning—are processes of discursive transformation from one level of material-semiotic existence into another. In the process of cartooning, subjects, objects, and organisms are transformed and simplified by representative processes that hinge upon discursive processes. Interpreting the visual representative processes depends upon knowledge of cultural discourse. As a means of theorizing that discursive process of visual abstraction, Scott McCloud suggests a triangular continuum between the points of “reality,” “the picture plane,” and “language” (51). Since McCloud deals primarily in visual information, I think that it is best to swap his term *language*, which can exist without visual representation, for *writing*, which only exists visually or



materially. *Reality*—whose closest form of representation is the photograph—and *writing* contain the most discursive information, because representing an object in that spectrum of McCloud’s continuum requires subjecting, or abstracting, it to culturally agreed upon systems of representation (50-1). Within McCloud’s continuum of abstraction, cartoons can be anywhere from a slightly more simplified photograph to a smiley face drawn as two dots and a curved line, which is directly adjacent to *writing* (50-1), and they can only be understood by participating in a framework of cultural discourse (50-1). However, images that McCloud places within the *picture plane* are icons outside of a framework of cultural discourse. The *picture plane* is the realm of non-iconic abstraction: “where shapes, lines and colors can be *themselves* and not pretend [to be] *otherwise*” (italics in original 51). In McCloud’s view, pictures can be any image as long as they do not fall within the realms close to *reality*, *language*, or the *picture plane*. Pictures are abstract icons but not too abstract; cartoons are simplified pictures that transform what they represent into a series of lines in order to magnify some inherent meaning within that object that the artist is trying to represent by a framework of cultural discourse.

The line is the basic tool that the cartoon icon uses to transform objects and ideas into representations, and the line implies a reduction of the visual complexity of reality. Douglas Wolk argues that cartoon icons show “things and people, real or imagined, moving in space and changing over time, as transformed through somebody’s eye and hand” (118). In Wolk’s view, a cartoon drawing is a transformation of reality, “a manifestation of [an artist’s] style, [and] a personal interpretation of the world” (118). Drawing in the cartoon tradition operates differently from drawing in the fine art world, which is referred to as pencil rendering. Wolk suggests that rendering is concerned with objects’ “mass and interaction with light much more than their outlines” (119). As Wolk contends, “in the real world, objects do not have lines defining their

edges, they just end,” so, when an object is drawn through pencil rendering as opposed to cartooning, it must be drawn “as areas of light and darkness rather than outlines” (123). Cartoons, as Wolk points out, are “line drawings,” and “the cartoonist’s line defines the shape of the comics image” through a process of “interpretive distortion” (122-23). His phrasing, *interpretive distortion*, suggests the same participation in a framework of cultural discourse as McCloud’s *amplification through simplification*. Cartoonists do not realistically generate an image of an object from the real world; they reduce the complexity of that object down to a series of lines that is recognizable and reproducible. Exaggeration within a comic book character’s design can blend a culturally symbolic significance into that character’s iconic existence. The line—as the main operator behind simplification, amplification, distortion, and exaggeration—is the storehouse of discursive information within the phenomenon of the cartoon icon. Comic book icons are far from the complex, un-representable characteristics of reality, but they represent objects taken from reality, transformed through abstraction and symbolically simplified down to a recognizable and culturally significant series of lines and colours on a page.

### **3.3 Swamp Thing as an Icon for the Limiting of the Non-Human World**

Before analyzing the visual aspects of the artwork in Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing*, I think it is necessary to explore the compositional aspects of Bernie Wrightson’s artwork in Len Wein’s original run on the series. Wrightson’s artwork establishes three rules of composition that influence the presentation of Swamp Thing as an icon, a *core cluster of first visual principles* to expand Harrison’s term. First, Swamp Thing is always depicted as an exaggerated human form. In silhouette, Swamp Thing cannot be mistaken for an ordinary human because plants have exaggerated the normal features of the human body. It is clear from Wrightson’s artwork that plants have transformed Swamp Thing from a visually “normal” human into

something misshapen with monstrous proportions. This distortion of recognizable features is the visual expression of Wein's key phrase for Swamp Thing: "A muck-encrusted shambling mockery of life... A twisted caricature of humanity that can only be called... Swamp Thing!" (Wein 31-2). Swamp Thing is not typically recognized human body: he is a monstrous and visually distorted body that has been rendered monstrous by both plants and the violence of the superhero genre. Plants are the means by which the caricature of Swamp Thing achieves its exaggeration, distortion, and transformation. Second, of Swamp Thing's humanoid features (basic shape, arms, and legs), his face is the feature that is most visually recognizable as human. Swamp Thing has red eyes with yellow irises, a misshapen nose, a mouth by which he can speak, and Wrightson even goes so far as to give Swamp Thing ears. His face is the organizing principle of his body, without the face the body would blend in to the other plants of the swamp. Swamp Thing is the face of the environment. Third, Wrightson employs the superhero cartoonist's traditional thick, clear line method to draw Swamp Thing in such a way so that his body is deliberately and unmistakably separate from the swamp. Wrightson's lines are so thick that Swamp Thing's "twisted" body ends up being as distinct as his face. The line delineating the edge of Swamp Thing's body is always thick, clean, and well defined against the messy, visually incoherent swamp landscape that forms the background. The thick, black lines surrounding the shape of Swamp Thing's body visually enforce his separation from the environment. Adding to Swamp Thing's distinction from his environment, the colourists in the Wein/Wrightson era (un-credited in the original issues or the collected *Roots of The Swamp Thing*) always depicted Swamp Thing as a different shade of green than the other plants around him.

From the outset of Moore's run, Stephen Bissette (pencils) and John Totleben (ink) depict Swamp Thing as an icon that both works within and revises the three visual principles of Wrightson's composition. Swamp Thing's first physical appearance in Moore's run occurs after he realizes the truth of his existence in Sunderland's office (Issue 21-17). Bissette and Totleben depict the creature as a misshapen, humanoid form, but the visual distortion caused by the plant-life has been amplified. The thick, clear line of Wrightson's Swamp Thing has been replaced by messy incoherent line-work that recalls the swamp backgrounds of Wein's issues and amply fits Jason Woodrue's description of the creature: "a walking pile of mold and lichen and clotted weeds that thinks it's a rational man" (Issue 21-17). Swamp Thing's face is not recognizably human; in fact, his face is the furthest from human-like that it gets in Moore's run. Bissette and Totleben give visual preference to the plant life that remained in the background of Wrightson's artwork. The moss and lichens are depicted in such detail that they obscure Swamp Thing's most human feature, his face, because his head is barely discernable from his body and a shadow covers most of his face. His eyes are represented purely in red, which suggests a violent face of the environment and is far from the images of Swamp Thing's serene facial expression that appear throughout Moore's run. Swamp Thing's body appears against a completely black background, which represents the dark shadows of Sunderland's office, but if he were placed against a background of swamp, ferns, and trees, it would be difficult to tell where the swamp ends and his body begins. With Bissette and Totleben's vision of Swamp Thing, the three rules of Wrightson's composition become difficult to decipher. Swamp Thing is still a humanoid, but the increased detail of the plant life in his body increases the level of exaggeration and distortion applied to his humanoid form. Bissette and Totleben show that the human and plant forms that comprise Swamp Thing visually are in an inverse and conflicting relationship. The more

definition and detail that the artists give to the plants the less human-like Swamp Thing appears and vice versa. The image of Swamp Thing's more plant-centric body show that plants act as the *crucial interface* of the discursive process of production that results in Swamp Thing's existence. However, in Moore's conception of *Nature*, plants are in conflict with violence and not completely absorbed into violence's discursive power like in Wein's conception of *Nature*. The dark shadows represent tremendous operational power of the transformative discourse of the violence of the horror-genre, and the bright green that Tatjana Wood uses to colour Swamp Thing suggests his potential to transcend this violence.

When Swamp Thing first appears, his plant body resists all visual definition as a human form, yet the dark shadows impose definition as clearly as if Wrightson had drawn him. The Sunderland Corporation is the first of many symbols of genre violence in Moore's run, and this forced definition by the black shadows of the Sunderland office suggests a link between violent cultural discourse and the containment of Swamp Thing's immaterial, ecological possibilities within a single iconic body. In the image depicting Swamp Thing's first physical appearance in Moore's run, Bissette and Totleben employ a drawing style closer to rendering than cartooning; however, the shadows of violent culture simplify Swamp Thing down to the level of cartoon. This forced definition occurs at the very moment when Swamp Thing realizes the possibility of his immaterial connection to the environment, but the dark shadows contain him and enforce a clearly defined materiality onto his body. Though there are instances in the series when Swamp Thing's body is fairly indistinguishable from the swamp around him, he spends the bulk of the series as a man-shaped assemblage of plants that is clearly delineated from the environment by thick black lines. *Culture* is aligned with visual containment and limiting in Moore's run on the series. The transformative power of a discourse of violence imposes the humanoid shape on

Swamp Thing and contains his immaterial possibilities in a well-defined, recognizable humanoid body.

After he kills General Sunderland and escapes the office complex, the artists grant the dominant visual position in Swamp Thing's body to his plant features. This visual increase of plant features corresponds to Swamp Thing's extension of his consciousness into "the green" for the first time. In order to find peace from the violent discourses that dominate human culture, Swamp Thing must break the lines containing his body and dissolve the container that violent discourse places upon him. The adoption of a predominantly plant-based bodily composition at a moment of great refuge and peace for Swamp Thing suggests an alignment of human visual features with violent *Cultural* discourse and plant visual features with the peaceful, *Natural* discourse of "the green." In the scene, violent culture is encoded as the "red and angry world [that] eats your wife... eats your friends... eats all the things that makes [sic] you human" (Issue 23-1). Swamp Thing's description of the "red and angry world" shows how the violent culture that dominates the world of the series cuts just as it contains and fashions. A physical body is a requirement to take part in general human activity in Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and the violent discourses that dominate *Culture* threaten Swamp Thing's body just as they threaten the peaceful discursive processes of *Nature*: "I couldn't take being eaten... so I walked out... And I left my body behind..." (Issue 23-1). The cartoons of the panel juxtaposed with Swamp Thing's revelation that he walked out of general human interactions show his humanoid form giving way to plant visual features. To experience "the green," Swamp Thing must first let his physical body become barely recognizable from the plant life of the swamp. At this point, Swamp Thing is completely embedded in the peaceful *Nature* of "the green," and as an icon his body has no visual distinction from the environment.

Swamp Thing's first experience in "the green" shows that even while in "the green," the closest to the environment that he can become, Swamp Thing remains somewhat clearly defined and visually distinct (Issue 23-2). Bissette and Totleben's composition shows that the peaceful *Nature* of "the green" operates by different visual rules of composition than Swamp Thing's distinct, humanoid body. "The green," a vast "cellular landscape," manifests as a swirling pattern of plant cells and nodes that surrounds Swamp Thing who appears adrift in the center of the image (Issue 23-2). At the edges of the full page splash panel, the plant cells are more visually prominent, but they become less prominent as the image progresses towards the center where they disappear in the point of a green tunnel, the center point of the composition that is created by the shrinking perspective of the disappearing root. The splash panel has two main focus points that compete for the viewer's attention: the center point of the green tunnel and Swamp Thing's body. "The green" resists visual coherence and clear definition, while Swamp Thing's body remains distinct and clearly defined, offering easy recognition of his face. The green tunnel draws attention towards its center where all visual coherence disappears; all colours are replaced by green that obliterates a root that is depicted by a black line. The closer to the center of the green tunnel, the more "the green" erases lines until all lines become nonexistent. The clear lines that enclose Swamp Thing's body cause him to become the dominant focal point of the image and thus fundamentally separate him from the obliteration of the peaceful "green." Swamp Thing's physical body, occasioned by thick lines, and itself a cultural requirement to experience the environment, renders him forever separate from the environment. The dissolution of his physical body is the ultimate aim of "the green."

The serene, almost lifeless, expression on Swamp Thing's face suggests that the dissolution of his physical form operates as a counterpoint to the discursive processes of violence

that produced his body in the first place. Swamp Thing's face is the most prominent icon of Moore's ecology. Expressions of calm on Swamp Thing's face suggest that Moore is looking for a way to counteract the violent destruction of the natural world by the corporate and government forces that dominated culture in the 1980s. Swamp Thing's face is the face of ecology. His face the assembling of disparate, un-representable, elements of the environment into our own image, or an image that reflects our own psyche that can be understood and interacted with on the conscious level. The face is the primary technology of the icon of Swamp Thing's body. His face is the means by which his body can produce discourse. Swamp Thing's serene facial expression shows the change from the vision of *Nature* as an instrument of violence at the core of Wein's novel to Moore's vision of *Nature* as a peaceful dissolution of humanity's violence.

The cartoons representing Swamp Thing's learning to grow a new physical body from "the green" show how Swamp Thing's body functions as an icon and "the green" functions as a force of abstraction (Issue 37-12). The page is divided into two sections, a distorted cross shape in the foreground that contains Swamp Thing's face and four panels occupying the negative space of the cross's arms. The four panels make up the background of the image and they contain "the green" as represented by abstract shapes and curvy incoherent lines. The cross shape highlights the function of linearity in the series: Rick Veitch (pencils) and Totleben (ink) construct the cross shaped panel formation in such a way that ensures the visual recognition of straight, clearly defined lines (in this case the white lines that form the cross). Veitch and Totleben draw clear black lines between Swamp Thing's face, "the green," and the panel edge. The gutter, the white space between panels, attracts attention to the lines and establishes a distinct, concrete distance between Swamp Thing's physical body and "the green." The location of Swamp Thing's face in the center of the cross suggests a link between his face and linearity.



His face occupies the space of discourse and becomes the line that divides and contains “the green.” Swamp Thing’s face contains roots that are inked with thin curved lines, and, as the roots cross the straight lines of the panel edge into the panels containing “the green,” they become more abstract, curvy and less visually recognizable as icons. The two circular patterns in the bottom corners of the panels containing “the green” appear to represent Swamp Thing’s eyes but only because of their proximity to the icon of his body. The shapes that become his eyes are much more abstract than his normal eyes, and it is only due to the operating power of Swamp Thing as an icon that the shapes appear as eyes. The eyes in “the green” represent an abstract way of seeing that is beyond the visual coherence of Swamp Thing’s body, an ecological way of seeing that counters the violence in human culture that produces Swamp Thing’s body. The panel sequence reveals the underlying iconographic function of “the green”: “the green” functions purely as a space of abstraction, akin to McCloud’s “picture plane,” where recognizable icons transform into unrecognizable abstract shapes. Veitch and Totleben’s composition also reveals the underlying iconographic function of Swamp Thing’s body: his body is the cartoon of “the green,” and it is abstract shapes transformed into concrete recognizable icon. In order for Swamp Thing to exist as a recognizable icon that can be understood by the general discourse of violence in the world of the series, his body must be visually distinct from “the green.” “The green” represents a discourse that can only produce a body that cannot be understood by the general human population in Swamp Thing’s world.

### **3.4 Swamp Thing as a Statue: Global Environmental Consciousness as an Image in the Solid**

The story-line involving Swamp Thing’s takeover of Gotham city shows *Culture’s* violent, inevitable, and complete control over the icon of Swamp Thing’s body. Throughout

Issue 53, Swamp Thing destroys Gotham's concrete architecture by transforming all plant life in the city into a monstrous extension of his body. The plant life in Gotham would have normally existed in a peaceful sort of symbiosis with the citizens of the city, but it would seem that such peacefulness is only due to the city's dominance over plant life. Swamp Thing counters Gotham's complete material control over *Nature* by dissolving the iconic frame of his body to destroy the physical architecture of the city. In order for Swamp Thing to completely break free of the iconic container that houses him for the bulk of the series, he must embrace the violence of the type of cultural discourse that torments him. However, the DDI—the quasi-government organization that hunts Swamp Thing for Moore's entire run—defeats him by using a weapon designed by Lex Luthor that alters Swamp Thing's "bio-electrical pattern" (Issue 53-34). The DDI assumes the role of the dominant network of power in Swamp Thing's world as they are the organization that is willing to employ the greatest level of violence, trumping Batman and the Gotham City police. As Luthor explains to the DDI, Swamp Thing's consciousness "is attuned to the world's vegetation. If threatened, it shifts its consciousness to a bolthole in the undergrowth. Change its tuning and you close its escape route" (Issue 53-8). In the cartoons depicting the DDI's murder of Swamp Thing through manipulation of his consciousness, his body has transformed back to its most frequently represented form. Before the erection of the statue, *Culture's* ultimate act of violently discursive production reduces Swamp Thing's body to a coherent and contained icon, which is depicted clearly within thick black lines on a white background. As a result of Luthor's weapon, Swamp Thing can no longer travel into "the green." Once the agents of *Culture* finally succeed in freezing Swamp Thing into a coherent iconic frame, they destroy the icon by destroying Swamp Thing's body with Napalm. Despite all of Swamp Thing's transformative power, he cannot transcend the dominant order of violence in

American culture. *Culture* destroys him by containing his body as a coherent icon that is delineated by clear black lines.

“The green” also represents a global environmental consciousness, in other words an ecological perspective that takes global interconnectedness into account. The “eyes” of “the green” can see globally. Swamp Thing’s body represents the point where that global ecological consciousness becomes visible to human members of society. After Swamp Thing takes over Gotham city’s plant life in order to demand the release of Abby, he is killed by the DDI. Gotham City’s Administration and Batman both decide to surrender to Swamp Thing and let him and Abby move on with their life, but the DDI murders Swamp Thing anyway. To deal with their guilt, the city of Gotham erects a bronze statue of Swamp Thing. The issue “Earth to Earth” opens with a sequence that juxtaposes Abby’s monologue of mourning for Swamp Thing with panels that display a zooming effect from earth as a seen from space to the point in Gotham where the statue is erected (Issue 55-3). The title of the issue symbolizes the changing in the possibility of understanding the earth in Swamp Thing’s world once he is no more. The panel sequence goes from an earth understood as a global ecological network to an earth in which human beings cannot see beyond their own frame of bodily experience. The zooming effect on the viewer’s perspective encodes the shrinking of Swamp Thing’s ability to manipulate and enter “the green.” “The green,” as a mass consciousness that unites all plant life, has a global reach that provides Swamp Thing with the ability to see the planet from a global environmental perspective that is unavailable to human members of his culture. The effect of zooming from a global perspective to a distinct point in a city to a statue of Swamp Thing effectively freezes the abstract potential of “the green” into a single, recognizable point. At this point in the series, Swamp Thing has vanished from the earth, so “the green” is completely invisible to humans

again. The violent discourses that control culture in Swamp Thing's world have succeeded in producing a body for Swamp Thing that can be easily controlled. The statue *represents* "The green" as a single, recognizable, and definite image in the solid. The dark shadows that overtake Swamp Thing's face suggest an ecological possibility that is convenient and easy for violent discourse to process but ultimately more terrifying than the ecological understanding that is possible while Swamp Thing has control of his own body. The rain falling in sharp, controlled angles in front of the statue suggests that the entire natural world has been contained by the straight, cutting lines of violent discourse. The absence of Swamp Thing's friendly face and the disappearance of his "twisted" body leave the natural world open to the processing power and horrific violence of the dominant discourses in Moore's *Swamp Thing*.

Once Swamp Thing's disappears from earth his physical body only exists as a representation, and the general elements of culture (read *those elements that are not actively trying to kill Swamp Thing*) create a classical icon to mourn the creature. Just as the panel composition discussed above placed Swamp Thing's body within the symbolic icon of a cross, the general culture completely reduces his body to the level of icon in a classical sense. As a statue, his body becomes the exact definition of icon: "an image in the solid . . . , a monumental figure [or] statue" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Since Swamp Thing no longer exists as a subject, he exists only as an image in the solid, and the ecological possibilities of his face and body have disappeared completely. The ecology represented by Swamp Thing, through cultural violence, becomes the object of a symbolic icon, an object with no tangible existence beyond the icon that represents it. Since Swamp Thing is cut off from material and immaterial Nature, the entire environment becomes the object of culture. *Culture* persists as the statue, but *Nature* is given no material or immaterial manifestation, except for the single rose that Abby holds at

Swamp Thing's funeral. It too will die. It is a cut rose. The rose symbolizes the way all types of *Nature* within the series have been severed from their original form and taken up as objects of a culture dominated by violence. In the cartoon image depicting the Swamp Thing statue, the artists reduce the creature's visual complexity: he is one colour (a bronzy brown), whereas he would normally be composed of green plants laced with brown roots, and his body is completely enclosed by thick black lines. As a statue, Swamp Thing does not display the same increased visual presence of plant features that Bissette and Totleben brought into his composition. The statue is an homage to Wein's *Swamp Thing* novel. Swamp Thing appears almost exactly as if Bernie Wrightson had drawn him, and the page layout draws attention to this iconographic similarity. On the statue's base, it says "Originally Sculpted By Len Wein & Berni [sic] Wrightson" (Issue 55-3). When he is destroyed by violence, *Culture* transforms Swamp Thing into exactly what he was in the Wein/Wrightson era but reversed: a caricature but not a character of *Nature* and an icon for *Culture*'s inability to be healthily transformed by *Nature*. *Culture*, through the cutting and containment of violence, effectively entraps and limits Swamp Thing within the clear borders of the cartoon.

### **3.5 Conclusion: Swamp Thing's Thwarted Ecological Discourse**

Through the course of Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, Swamp Thing's greatest acts of ecological superheroism are acts of discourse. When Swamp Thing thwarts Jason Woodrue from destroying humanity, he does so by simply talking to the plant-man who is hell bent on using "the green" to produce so much oxygen that the world will burn up (Issue 24-14). Swamp Thing uses words to convince Batman to set Abby free from Gotham's concrete grasp (Issue 53-15, 16). And Swamp Thing even successfully uses conversation to thwart *the original evil*—a gigantic black blob—from destroying all *good* in the universe (Issue 50-30, 31). Swamp Thing

saves the world best when he does so by having a conversation with the villain attempting to destroy the world. This act of discourse is the core of the brand of ecology promoted by Moore on the series. The message is that the best way to stop destroying the world is to understand the complicated interconnectedness of the world, and the only way to achieve that understanding is to ask the environment. As I have shown in these three chapters, that conversation is most often one-sided. The binary between *Nature* and *Culture* is invincible in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and *Culture* is the dominant side of the binary. In one of Moore's final issues, *Swamp Thing*—during his exile in outer space—finds himself on a planet inhabited by sentient, humanoid plants. When *Swamp Thing* creates a body from the sentient plants, he nearly kills myriad sentient beings, which again suggests that Moore's brand of ecology is not an intersubjective utopia of all minds joining in "the green." Only after the Green Lantern of the sentient plant world, an anthropomorphic plant named Medphyl, succeeds in trapping *Swamp Thing*'s consciousness can *Swamp Thing* return to earth. Again, the important act that allows for *Swamp Thing*'s continued existence on earth is a conversation between him and Medphyl, who devises a way to reconfigure *Swamp Thing*'s consciousness to earth's frequency (Issue 61-17). Once reunited on earth, *Swamp Thing* and Abby withdraw from the violence that dominates all cultural discourse by building a plant house in the Louisiana Swamp (Issue 64-19). Moore's final issue contains the most important image of his brand of ecology: *Swamp Thing* and Abby smiling and gazing into each other's eyes, a human engaging the smiling face of the environment (Issue 64-4). Only by accepting the smiling face of the environment can one begin to understand the needs of the environment. As Abby leaves her human friends to live in seclusion with *Swamp Thing*, Chester says to not worry about their "eco-group" because new people are joining all the time (Issue 64-21). Chester assures Abby that "the environment's safe" because of the eco-group, and *Swamp*

Thing agrees with a peaceful smile (Issue 64-21). As I discussed in the first chapter, the Amazon deforestation continues to rage in the background of Swamp Thing's retirement to the swamp, so he lies to Chester with his smile. But Swamp Thing's smile achieves the most important function of the icon of his face. His smile produces a conversation amongst a group of people, a conversation that may one day become powerful enough to overtake violence as the dominant force behind *Culture*. For the *icon* of Swamp Thing to function properly, with a smile and not a visage of pure terror, the *character* must give up violence as a means of engaging cultural discourse. In a world dominated by the violence of environmental destruction, Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* suggests that violence, even *Natural* violence, is no way to initiate *Cultural* change.

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