

(wet)lands

Lenny Rajmont



How are wetlands
a Queer landscape?

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(wet)lands
How are wetlands a Queer landscape?
An exploration of wetlandscapes through poetry and film

LENNY RAJMONT

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STUDENT ID: 23216401
MODULE COORDINATOR - DANIELLE HEWITT
THESIS SUPERVISOR - TOM DYCKHOFF

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INTRODUCTION

(1)

Swamps, wetlands, bogs. Areas without edges and without form. A wetland is an umbrella term, encompassing many different types of land: glades, dells, estuaries, swamps, marshes. The land in their territories is wet. Although, they are not bodies of water, neither are they land per say. The ground doesn't support weight without caving in. It is slimy, spongy, and mucky. (Karrow, 2010)

Queerness has been extensively explored through the body in many academic fields. Entire fields of study are dedicated to deciphering the experience of the body and the landscape. (Pullen et al., 2015) Namely, queer ecology, the study of non-normative sexualities and gender identities intersecting with environmental issues. This field highlights ways in which queer people engage and navigate ecology, taxonomic alignments and landscapes. In the key book *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*; the queer body is a place of experience and memory both individual and collective. (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010)

Ecofeminism, explores the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, highlighting the need for intersectionality in environmental and social justice. The body – seeking justice – is a site of resistance and resilience. (Adams & Gruen, 2014; Shiva et al., 2014) Ecofeminism: *Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth* pushes the resilience into the more than human world. (Adams & Gruen, 2014)

Queer geographies deal with spatial aspects of sexuality and gender, including how queer bodies navigate and interact with physical spaces and landscapes. Scholars draw on theories of performativity and embodied experiences to shed light on experiences of belonging and visibility. (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010)

Queer rural studies similarly to queer geographies builds on the embodied experience and performativity. (Nash, 2010) Additionally, in texts like *Another Country: Queer anti-urbanism*; queer rural studies aim to remove the conversation about queer identities from the urban conditions and reposition how queer bodies are perceived and positioned in rural environments. (Herring, 2010; Stone, 2018)

As it stands with existing theories as described above, a queer landscape is a conceptualization of space that is dependent on the queer human experience. Be it through the body, the embodiment, memory create a connection and a talking point between the body and the land. Although there is plenty of well-studied crossover between the Queer body and its interaction with landscape and how those landscapes shape queer identities, there is little to none that describes how queerness

forms the landscape and how the landscape can be read queerly. There is an opening to explore how queerness itself can impact the construction of landscapes. By challenging and rethinking traditional notions of space and boundaries, queer perspectives introduce new ways of understanding environments. Queer methods provide a gateway into working beyond the existing theoretical frameworks and therefore into the queer landscape. Unlike traditional research, queer methods center queer experiences and non-traditional frameworks, intersectionality and don't shy away from author's positionality in the work. (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019) It is an expanding field slowly applied to various corners of academic practice. For example, Halberstam introduced the scavenger method, highlighting the necessity of scavenging for unconventional material to uncover phenomena that are typically excluded from mainstream research. ¹ To Halberstam "queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence"(Halberstam, 2011)

By subverting traditional theories of landscape construction and queer identity studies, in combination with a queer research method, I set out a new perspective on how queerness and queer desire can be read into the land.

The wetland is an ideal landscape to start reading and understanding the land queerly. The connotations the wetland carries in western culture create starting points to start reading into the land outside of the cis hetero normative framing of nature. The cultural connotations I go on to explain, are also an opportunity to deploy queer methods and analyze the friction between them and the queer understanding of wetlands.

¹ These scavenged sources can range from typically sidelined ephemera like zines to poetry, film, social media, photography, etc. This piecing together of information reveals narratives and phenomena that expand the scope of research and understanding of queer experiences. There are many more queer methods, but to dive into them is beyond the scope of this study.

These landscapes in the western world have a cultural tradition of being a horrible place. They are associated with disease, rot and spaces for other-worldly monstrous beings to spawn in. (Giblett, 1996; McLean, 2011) As Giblett puts it in his book *Postmodern wetlands: culture, history, ecology*, they are 'black waters'. He puts this down to the materiality of wetlands – the uncertain edges of solid land flowing between open water, mud and everything in between. Erasure of binaries and strict boundaries is precisely what gives wetlands their undesirable quality in the western culture and is also precisely what makes them an obvious candidate for a queer ecological reading. The fluidity and ambiguity inherent in wetlands resonate with queer ecological perspectives that challenge fixed categorization. In *Queer Ecology: sex nature politics and desire*, the book calls to legitimize queer behavior and delegitimize the binary construction of animality that have informed scientific discussions about nature. Wetlands, with their clear resistance to binaries offer space for exploring queer ecological ways of understanding the relationship between identity and landscape. Further, ecophenomenology offers a philosophical way to break down the boundaries between the land and the body and between utilitarian dualities like land/water. Ecophenomenology deconstructs binaries like land/water by interrogating traditional views of nature and the roles they play in the shaping of identity. (Flórez Góngora & Riegner, 2020; Karrow, 2010)

Removing these dualities puts us into the territory of the wild as described by Jack Halberstam in *Wild Things: The disorder of desire*. He "theorizes the wild as an unbounded and unpredictable space that offers sources of opposition to modernity's orderly impulses", further solidifying what is brought by Queer ecology and phenomenology. These theoretical frameworks in combination open an avenue to look between the water and land and into the mucky and slimy quality of the wetland.

To inquire into the queerness of wetlands, I will be using a poem – *What we lost in the swamp* by Grant Chemidlin from a book of poems of the same name and *The Return of the Swamp Thing* a 1989 American superhero action horror film. Both cultural artefacts are by western authors, written and created under the same wide cultural assumptions about the wetland as a monstrous uninhabitable and undesirable land. This 'black water' reputation follows wetlands beyond the material in the western culture. It extends to the people and activities associated with the wetlands. (Giblett, 1996) The concept of wetlands as 'black waters' in Western culture, as articulated by Giblett, opens avenues for queer ecological readings that challenge traditional boundaries and offer alternative perspectives on the cultural significance of these landscapes.



Fig. 01 Swamp Thing being shot in the swamp.
Source: "The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshot, *Swamp Thing being shot in the Swamp*, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.

WESTERN ARTIFACTS AND SWAMPY-NESS

(2)

Though pop culture, social media and music, the queer community expresses a deep connection to other-lands, non-urban territories that are cloaked in mystery, peace and quiet. Through a variety of media, recent and old, the queer mind keeps escaping to these natural environments. The representation of wetlands in queer media is different from the expected dread-and-illness filled mystical land where only the bravest dare to go. On the contrary, as I will introduce through the first artefact, they can be a place of discovery and refuge. Even in media not by queer authors that subscribe to the notions of wetlands and swamps being deadly and uninviting, the presence of a queer character can drastically change how we view these landscapes.

The selection of these two artefacts was deliberate, focusing on their Western origin and the author's western background. By choosing ephemera by Western authors and from Western territories, the analysis through queerness, phenomenology and wildness is anchored in a particular cultural and geographical context. This context greatly influences the perspectives and interpretations of the wetland, linking it back to the deeply rooted assumptions about wetlands as 'black waters'. This approach allows a nuanced exploration of the specific Western cultural narratives as well as their implications. Additionally, it allows for a critical examination of the artifacts interaction with these ideologies.

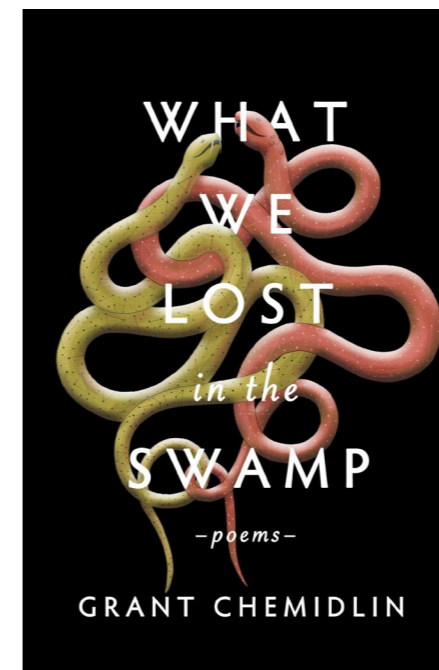


Fig. 02 Cover of Grant Chemidlin's book *What We Lost in the Swamp*
Chemidlin, G. (2023b). *What We Lost in the Swamp: Poems*. Central Avenue Publishing.

First one a poem from a poem collection book called *What we lost in the Swamp*. It is Grant Chemidlin's first traditionally published book, containing poems about exploring self-discovery and coming into one's true self. Grant Chemidlin is a queer poet and author. He was a finalist for the Gival Press Oscar Wilde Award and the Philip Levine Prize for Poetry. (Chemidlin, 2023a) The whimsical poems in his first book are lush and vibrant and examine various manifestations of 'green'. Nature, exploration of sexuality, jealousy, burgeoning love and inexperience. (Chemidlin, 2023b) The eponymous poem, *What We Lost in the Swamp* reflects on identity, inexperience and self-doubt. The poem tells the experience of two boys, catching frogs in the swamp, who are caught in a discovery of their sexuality. Here, *Queer Ecologies* in combination with Halberstam's work can offer insights into the intersection of queer identities, nature, and desire, aligning with the exploration of young queer desires in the swamp landscape depicted in Chemidlin's poem.

The poem doesn't directly describe the landscape in which this happens, but from the acts in the poem – catching frogs, references to ripples, water movement and comparing the fleeting kiss to ships departing, the poem presents an opportunity to peel its layers and look at how the landscape allowed the boys to express their young queer desires. Between the poem's descriptions and references to landscape elements like ponds, caves, rocks and hemlocks, we can start puzzling together the materiality, liminality and fleeting moments in the swamp. By examining the relationships between sexuality, nature, and political dimensions, this poem provides a framework for understanding how the swamp environment serves as a space for the boys to navigate their emerging queer identities.

Combining the perspectives from Queer ecological theory and study of the wetland's material definitions, a nuanced exploration of how the swamp landscape functions as a space for queer self-discovery and expression can be achieved.

The Return of the Swamp thing, an American superhero film based on a DC comic series gives a contrasting approach to exploring the wetland with a visual format. The film tells the story of Dr. Anton Arcane – the villain, who runs unethical experiments in the swamps in his mansion with an underground laboratory. His stepdaughter, Abby Arcane, comes to visit him, suspecting that her mother’s death in the previous film was not accidental and that her stepfather might be involved. In the swamps, Abby encounters Swamp Thing, who is Dr. Alec Holland transformed into a creature, half man half swamp and plant matter due to a lab accident. Swamp Thing protects Abby from her evil stepfather and helps her uncover his plans and what happened to her mother. Throughout the film, Swamp Thing battles various mutated non-human, non-animal creatures and henchmen created by Dr. Arcane. The story culminates in a showdown between Swamp Thing and Dr. Arcane, where Swamp Thing stops Arcane’s experiments and saves Abby.

The highly visual medium of the film and creative materiality of the set and Swamp Thing’s body – half man half swamp, gives way to a deeper analysis of the materiality of the swamp. Combined with the interactions between Abby and Swamp thing, the film opens a discussion of otherness in the wetlands, queer belonging and more-than-human desire. The writing of Fran Lock on monstrosity in *Vulgar Errors Feral Subjects*, introduces a queer view of beasts like the Swamp Thing. Lock’s writing is critical of the political framing of othered species and engages with imaginative creatures from pop culture like the “Slimer” from the *Ghostbuster* film franchise. For Lock, these non-human creatures strengthen their relationship to queerness and the political positioning of their writing, but also the existence and imagination of the creatures as a threat to hetero-patriarchal supremacy and a queer-crip liberation.² In this context, Swamp Thing’s existence and struggle against Dr. Arcane can be seen as a metaphor for a broader Queer fight against marginalization.

Additionally, to the analysis of the film, the Return of the Swamp Thing has been adopted by the queer community for its relatability and accessibility due to its seemingly “non-queer” format. Emme Lund, a trans author, reflects on her relationship to the film in her article “Everything I Know About Queer Community I Learned from Swamp Thing” In the article, she reflects on her own struggle to “figure out what I was”. For her, childhood experiences made her transness to be monstrous and undesirable. She says:

“I turned to these stories to confirm that if I did turn out to be a monster, everything would still be okay.”
(Lund, 2021)

By examining both Chemidlin’s poem and “The Return of Swamp Thing,” we can gain a deeper understanding of how wetlands function as spaces of queer potentiality. The intricate connections between queer identity, wetlands, and the politics of otherness, can be explored, revealing how natural landscapes can serve as spaces for queer desire, self-discovery, and resistance.

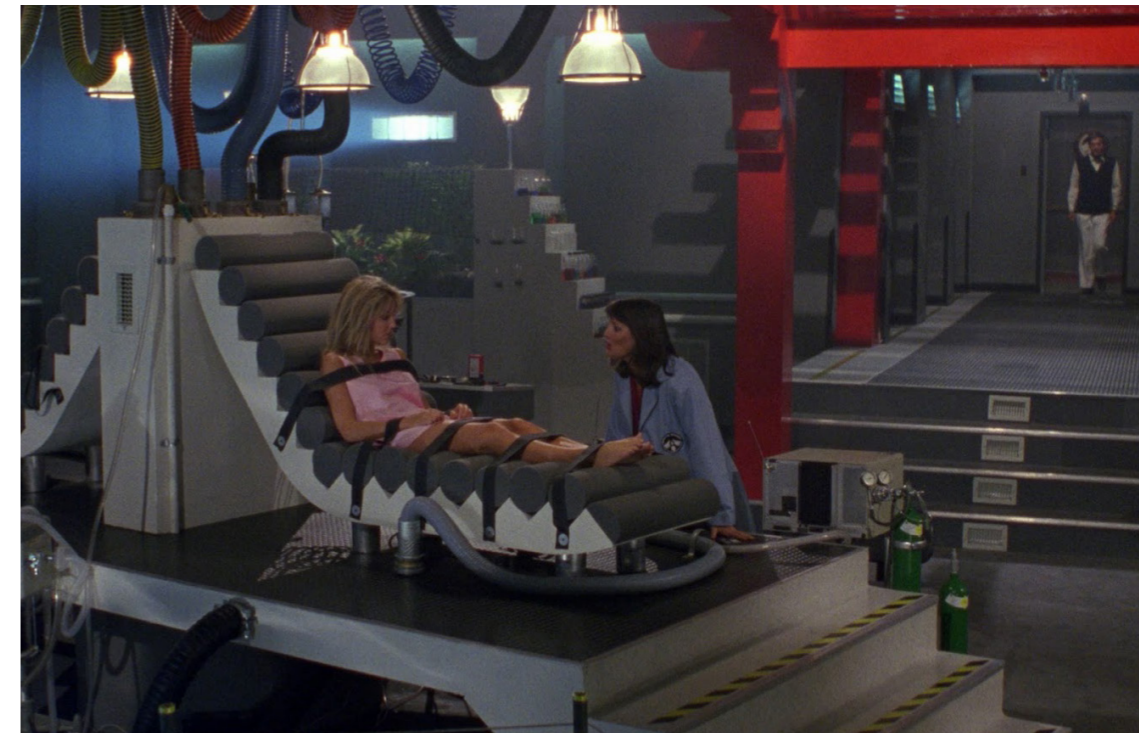


Fig. 03



Fig. 04

Fig. 03 Dr. Arcane’s underground laboratory
“The Return of the Swamp Thing” Screenshot, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.

Fig. 04 Characters from The Return of the Swamp Thing from left to right: Dr. Arcane, Swamp Thing, Abby Arcane, henchmen Gunn and Miss Poinsettia
Autor’s collage based on “The Return of the Swamp Thing” Screenshots

² Queer-crip liberation is a concept at the intersection of queer theory and disability studies. It challenges normative constraints that affect people who are both queer and disabled. (Garóia-Santesmases Fernández et al., 2017; McRuer, 2006) Fran Lock aligns with the idea and places the non-human and the queer body at the core of the liberation struggle as a direct opposition to the able bodied hetero patriarchal one.

WHAT WE LOST IN THE SWAMP POEM

(2.1)

WHAT WE LOST IN THE SWAMP

*Boys do not kiss boys. They catch frogs.
Is what I told myself the second it happened.*

*& there we were, hidden in the hemlocks of a secret swamp.
Your lips drifting away from mine like a silent ship*

*leaving harbor. Gone, as quickly as it came. I watched the shame
leap into the pond of your face. O the ripples.*

*How good we were at turning moments into paper,
into things we could crumple up & throw away.*

*You grabbed the frog squirming in my palms
& headed to the "cave," to the crack between the rocks,*

*where the black & white striped garter snake
slithered into shade. How I wish I could say*

*that I stopped you, that I didn't watch unhinged jaws
spring out like lightning, wrap around that poor*

*& unsuspecting frog, but I did.
Still too young to believe it, I wanted to see it*

*gone, eaten, that green & slippery part of myself
buried in the belly of a beast."*

What we lost in the swamp is a collection of poems by Grant Chemidlin. from this collection which examines manifestations of nature and budding love, a poem of the same name invites us into the author's swamp of youthful sexual awakening. The poem describes likely the author's experience with another boy amid the swamp landscape. Through the poem, he battles with the feelings this encounter brings up.

The poem opens with:

*Boys do not kiss boys. They Catch frogs.
Is what I told myself the second it
happened.*

Right from the start, the poem makes its geography clear. Even before naming the swamp as this poem's landscape, the reader understands the need for water through the activity of catching frogs. The frogs here almost feel like a distraction from the obvious. The act of catching frogs and engaging with nature here, is likely the way these two boys ended up discovering their fondness for one another. The frog is a mediator of desire, it created a bond between the boys before they could realize it and to the land the frog comes from. Halberstam describes a similar intimacy with nature in *Wild Things*: "commitment to nature and wildness...and a connection between the adolescent male outsider or rebel and the wild thing he seeks to know."

The wild frog exists outside of the bounds of class-sex-gender-race and patriarchal domesticity, there are no parameters imposed on the frog, like there are on domesticated animals in controlled environments. For the queer mind, this is freedom, and the frog becomes a creature representing exactly that rebellious and wild spirit. The desire to know the frog, hold the frog and interact with it is a redirected gay desire.

"For some, the proximity to wildness is erotic and compelling, and unlike relations to other humans, it is never subject to the domesticating tendencies of marriage and child-rearing" (Halberstam, 2020 pg.120)

The swamp, being the environment where the boys interact and catch frogs together, loudens the wildness and opportunity to let out the adolescent unruly mind. Similarly, the frog can be a cure or a distraction from grief and discomfort of the wild knowledge of inner queerness.

Wetland is a fitting place for this inner turmoil, the unsteadiness of untangling young queerness feels like treading in the swamp – finding places of steady ground followed by areas of sinking waterlogged goop. In *Postmodern Wetlands* Giblett compares the depth and its position in the hierarchy of land in western culture to the way "nether regions" on the body are treated. He says this association between the swamp and the lower body are usually "excremental, misogynist and homosexual" The western hierarchy of land is linked to reproduction and other forms of fulfilling and submitting to capitalist expectation in the same way as the 'nether regions' are. (Giblett, 1996) The expectation is clear- a heterosexual embrace, ideally resulting in a child. This clear-cut expectation of moving away from the uncertainty of swamps and into the agricultural and conforming way of life is described in *Black Goo: Forceful Encounters with Matter in Europe's Muddy Margins*:

"With agriculture, motherhood takes on a new significance, a higher form. The wild swamp generation, which eternally rejuvenates matter in everlasting self-embrace, which brings forth only reeds and rushes or the "swampy offspring of the sources," and which springs up uselessly without regard to man, is replaced by the act of the tiller of the soil, who opens the womb of the earth under his plow, who lays the seed in the furrow, and harvests nutritious fruit, Demeter's food. . . . The earth becomes wife and mother, the man who guides the plow and scatters the seeds becomes husband and father. The man is joined in wedlock with feminine matter, and this provides the model for an intimate, enduring, and exclusive relation between the sexes."

The wild swamp generation in an everlasting self-embrace can be read here as the queer and homosexual. The people who do not fulfill the expectation of a cis-hetero-normative family. The wetland as is, in its own everlasting self-embrace and rejuvenating matter doesn't fulfill the means of production either. No amount of plowing will result in clean cut lines in the wet goop of the swamp.

The unsteadiness in the poem (and the swamp) is confirmed and repeated in the poem in many ways. The reaction of the boy's face compared to ripples, a fleeting reaction that disrupts the surface of the water. The unsteadiness is amplified by most lines in the poem hinting towards leaving, departures or hiding. Heading away, leaving, slithering, drifting away, gone, eaten, buried. Though at no point does the poem imply the leaving of the swamp. Rather, the leaving and hiding refers to the queer realization. The feeling of distress by a seemingly "wrong" behavior is repeated in the poem multiple times, reinforcing the author's relationship to the swampy landscape as a place of hiding from the Queer desire or rather a landscape rid of the expectation. Talking about the relationship between queer people and the landscape couldn't happen without the mention of cruising. What is written in the poem, almost feel like the beginning of forming a long-term relationship with the land. "Gay men, lesbians, and other queer-identified groups and individuals have, in fact, created a variety of different spatial-political relationships to natural environments." (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, pg. 27) Like in *Cruising Utopia*, this relationship to land is not limited to sex (Muñoz, 2009 pg. 18) this relationship to land can be a utopia of what the land could be for the young queer mind. The swamp with its non-existent edges and nonconforming ecology provides a refuge for a budding queer sexuality.

I watched the shame leap into the pond of your face. O the ripples.

**You grabbed the frog squirming in my palms
& headed to the "cave", to the crack between the rocks.**

...gartered snake slithered into shade...

**gone, eater, that green & slippery part of myself
buried in the belly of the beast.**



Fig. 05

The poem's ending feels almost nostalgic, like the author is looking back at what he lost in the swamp. Green here can mean inexperience. In the poem's context, this would make sense. Slipperiness is a somewhat ephemeral innocence too. The slipperiness here feels exactly like the kiss does, like the holding of the frog and the slithering of the snake. The whole experience is fleeting and hard to grasp, but the slime of it will stay behind. It is a learning of being with the slippery wild in the swamp. Although green here likely refers to inexperienced, in combination with slippery can just be describing the material of the swamp. As introduced, swamps and their materiality don't carry many positive references and the confusion from the boy's queer awakening and possibly denial could correspond with the undesirable and "wrong" materiality of the swamp. Like queerness, it escapes physiological definitions of land and water.

In Chemidlin's poem "What We Lost in the Swamp," the swamp is not merely a backdrop but a crucial element that shapes the boys' experiences and emotions. The boys' interactions with the swamp environment, from catching frogs to experiencing a fleeting kiss, highlight how natural settings can facilitate moments of intimacy and self-realization that might be constrained in more conventional, heteronormative setting. By situating queer experiences within the swamp, Chemidlin's poem aligns with the queer ecological understanding of materiality. Queer ecological perspectives, suggest that the natural world can be a site of liberation and transformation for queer individuals. By being hidden in the secret swamp, the boys have the freedom from wandering eyes to let their desires grow and develop. The transformational quality is amplified by the liminality of the swamp here. The lack of specific description can only leave us wondering how hidden the boys in the swamp were and did they ever return.

Fig. 05 **Catching frogs in the swamp.**
Author's collage illustrating the poem, based on open source material.

THE RETURN OF THE SWAMP THING

(2.2)

The Return of the Swamp Thing opens with “Once upon a time..in the swamp” Opening with a stock phrase that puts us in a once existing or an entirely imaginative world. As viewers, we have already lost connection to the timeframe of the Swamp Thing, only anchoring its temporality and location in the swamp. Like Giblett points out, the wetland is an anomaly among landscapes, where it’s time is as vague as the wetland’s materiality. The tidal property is not clear, neither are areas of land that at any moment could give way to water. Seemingly, the time stands still in the wetland. This assumption likely comes from the imposed value on the landscape by western capitalist systems. The temporality of most landscapes is defined by seasons, crop rotations, harvests but also times of seemingly necessary interactions with the landscape like pruning, cutting, culverting etc. But ecologically, this couldn’t be further from the truth. Wetlands are one of the most dynamic ecosystems. (Giblett, 1996) In Queer ecology, this changing temporality of the landscape is celebrated. In this way, the wetland becomes the mediator between past and future, rather than being seen as static. Looking at the temporality of the swamp queerness allows the swamp’s processes to exist outside of those imposed value systems. The swamp’s queer value here is in its independence from human impact and imposed time frames. Through the fairytale catch phrase, The Return of the Swamp Thing creates a comfortable unknowing of time in the wetland, entirely appropriate for its queer existence.

The first encounter with Swamp Thing in the film is after he saves a soldier sent out to hunt for him. To the soldier’s question - where did Swamp Thing come from, Swamp Thing simply answers, “The Bog”. He makes the meaning of where he came from clear in the following frame, where he extends his arm. Not bog, not human flesh but an other-being. His materiality is a mix of green-tinted human skin, moss, twigs and sprouting plants. His flesh/soil/water/body wet and reflective in the moonlight.

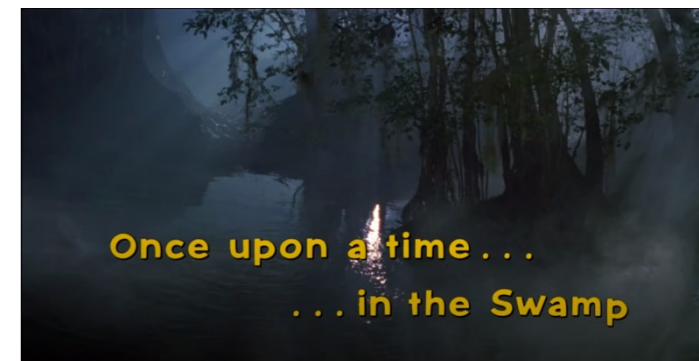


Fig. 06 Opening frames of the film “The Return of the Swamp Thing” Screenshots, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.



Soldier: “Thank you, If you hadn’t come along I... Hey, where did you just come from?”



Swamp Thing: “The Bog”



Swamp Thing: “They call me Swamp Thing”

Fig. 07 - 09 Swamp Things introduction scene 07:50 - 08:25 “The Return of the Swamp Thing” Screenshots, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.

1 These scavenged sources can range from typically sidelined ephemera like zines to poetry, film, social media, photography, etc. This piecing together of information reveals narratives and phenomena that expand the scope of research and understanding of queer experiences. There are many more queer methods, but to dive into them is beyond the scope of this study.

The film reinforces Swamp Thing's non-human bodily material, Dr. Arcane, when instructing his crew to go find Swamp Thing, highlights that they are not looking for a man but for a plant. He understands that Swamp Thing's non-human quality will impact how he interacts, moves, hides and ultimately avoids Dr. Arcane's crew in the swamp. The bodily material of swamp thing, neither man nor plant, aligns with the Queer and wild anti-identity and refusal of taxonomic limits. (Halberstam, 2020 pg. 30)

Abigail doesn't mind this taxonomic confusion; she is rather attracted to it. She expressed her longing for a "man to be more like a plant" early in the film in her introductory scene where she tends to her house plants (pots labeled with names and Abigail passionately explaining their personality and music preferences). Her biophilic desire for the more-than-human aligns with queer ecological views, where transcending traditional boundaries of connection is encouraged. The desire to know how other creatures experience the world and their environment is what brought her into the close encounters with Swamp Thing and culminated in a sensual scene where Swamp Thing and Abigail consume a (possibly hallucinogenic) flower, allowing them to experience attraction in a normative way. In the film, Swamp Thing and Abigail's attraction is, similarly to the poem, hidden in the cloak of the swamp.

The scene is misty, and though evoking imagination (or hallucination rather), its wildness and sensuality are undoubtable. Abigail twirling with Swamp Thing's chest-moss means Abigail is simultaneously twirling the moss of the swamp that is a part of Swamp Thing's body. This act challenges the status quo in pre-defined norms of engaging with sexuality. It removes the question of sex, gender, sexuality and race through which modern formations of nature are created understood and conceptualized. (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010 pg. 150) The proximity to wildness as erotic and compelling (Halberstam, 2020) applies to Abigail's relationship with the Swamp Thing (and by extension, the swamp). As a result, Swamp Thing's materiality bridges the sensual desire for the landscape. This interaction, likely normalized for the viewers of the film, is entirely abstracted in the original comic the film is based on. There, the erotic desire stays feral and non-human, embracing the slimy quality of sex, deeply situating it in the wetland and Swamp Thing's body.



Fig. 10 Swamp Thing's body is half man half swamp. There are roots, plants, mud and other plant matter in his bodily composition. *Autor's collage based on "The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshots*

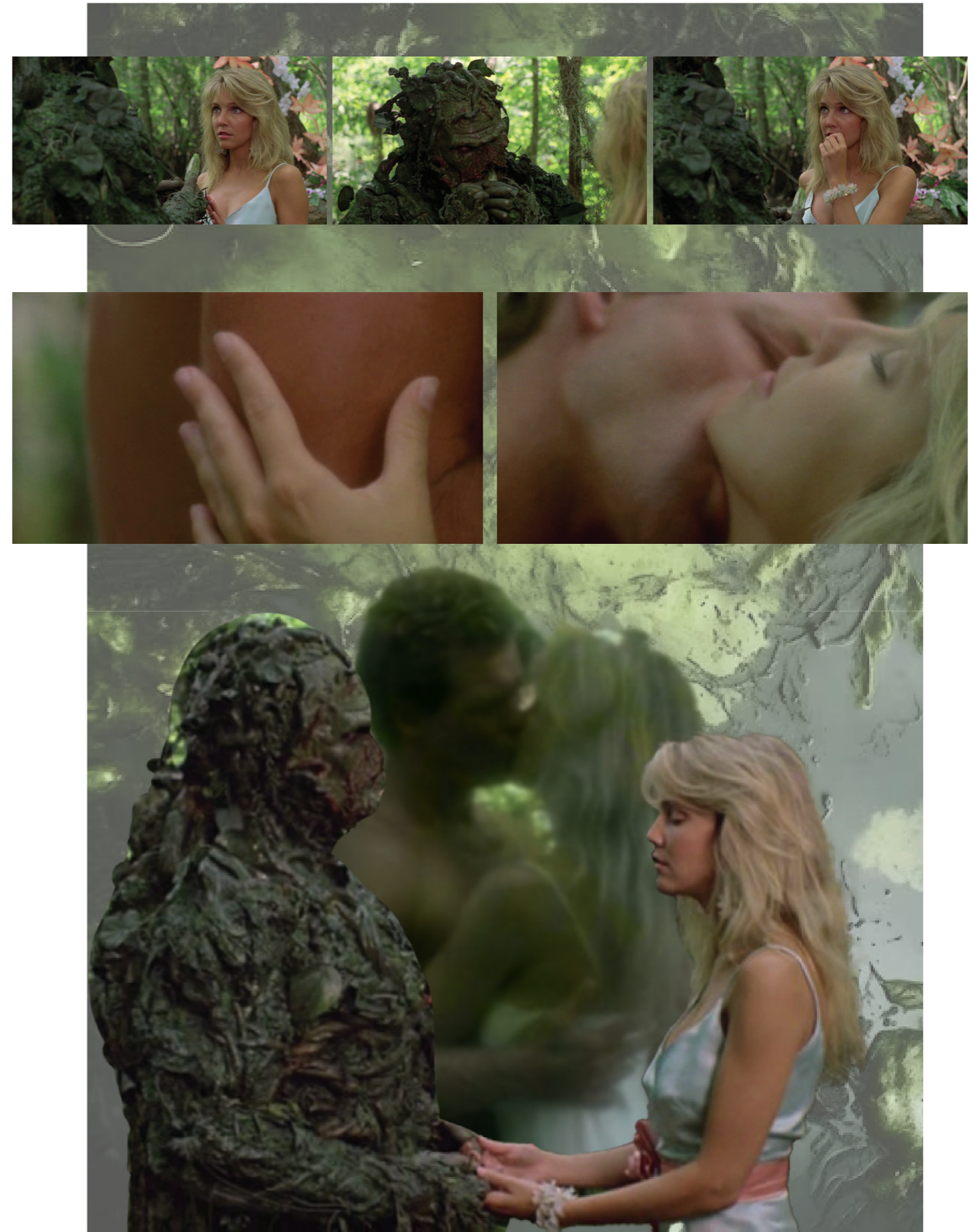


Fig. 11 Swamp Thing and Abigail's intimate scene. On top, Swamp thing presents a flower to Abigail that allows them to experience human-human connection. *Autor's collage based on "The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshots*

The wetland in *The Return of the Swamp Thing* is clearly more than a setting, even the swamps' role in the story as a place for the storyline supports its queerness. The villain Dr. Arcane lives in a mansion surrounded by the swamp. His house has a basement with a laboratory in it. Though anything could be possible in a fictional film, Dr. Arcane's house is built on solid land with enough depth and stability to support the underground laboratory. Something that couldn't be done in a wetland without culvering, mounding and re-distributing matter. This implies that Dr. Arcane and his team made changes to the landscape to accommodate for the hiddenness and remoteness, whilst still subscribing to a modern western standard of living. The swamp is not home for Dr. Arcane, but a strategic choice. As Giblett points out, wetlands are easy to defend and hard to attack. (Giblett, 1996 pg. 205) For Arcane, the wetland and its inhabitants are undesirable and he shows this by repeatedly hunting down Swamp Thing. The wetlands value is in remoteness and it's hard to traverse quality. This value didn't just come with the wetland as is, it came after Arcane imposed a new order on it by strategically exploiting it for the laboratory's location. Dr. Arcane's exploitation of the wetland is a representation of the western desire to impose order on land. By using the swamp for its strategic location, he is conforming to the binary use of land and value systems imposed on wetlands as only useful after human intervention as described by Giblett.

Swamp Thing doesn't see the swamp as a land of no value or undesirability. For him it is home. It is where he took Abigail after saving her from her evil stepfather. The swamp in the film is captivating and with depth. The trees are populated with vines and blooming shrubs line the edges of large water bodies. Swamp Thing's interaction with the land – picking flowers, caressing and brushing trees, truly encapsulates him being part swamp. His true belonging and being the landscape is amplified by the contrasting presence of clunky security guards dressed in orange jumpsuits trying to hunt down Swamp Thing and other escaped 'mutants' with little success. Swamp Thing's blending in with the swamp is beneficial here, as mentioned before, even the villain understands that a creature half-man half plant will move differently. The wetland's depth and murkiness and ever-present fog in *The Return of the Swamp Thing* are qualities that make the wetland suitable for the runaway from oppression. Swamp Thing calls the swamp "My place" and adds "sorry it's so messy" acknowledging the landscape as his home nonchalantly. Abby accepts this in the film without question.



Fig. 12 Dr. Arcane's house with manicured landscaping, lighting and amenities to support a modern comfortable American lifestyle. *"The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshot, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.*



Fig. 13 Mutated creatures from the film as a result of failed experiments. *Autor's collage based on "The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshots*

Dr. Arcane also lets his 'failed experiments' creatures like Swamp Thing but with different genetic mutations (like being part fly or elephant), escape into the swamp. The narrative elements of other creatures like Swamp Thing underscore the idea that the swamp, with its dense foliage and murky waters, is a refuge for those who defy societal norms. The escaped creatures are clearly distressed, trying to seek help in surrounding villages but are deeply misunderstood, hunted and killed. Like the boys in Chamberlins poem, they are confused, unsteady and coming to terms with their new identity in the wetland. Fran Lock in "Vulgar Errors: Feral Subjects," is sympathetic with 'monsters' who are unloved. They critique the political framing of othered species and, rather, explores the potential for imaginative creatures to subvert hetero-patriarchal supremacy. Swamp Thing does exactly that by being content with his identity, though unsteady when confronted with a loving embrace with Abby; he proves his value and belonging both to himself and the world.

The Return of the Swamp Thing vividly portrays the swamp as a dynamic, queer space. The film positions the swamp as a refuge for beings that transcend traditional taxonomies many of which are relatable creatures to the queer community. In the swamp, their fluid identity and deep connection to the natural world truly belong. The swamp is also a site of resistance and refuge from human value systems and exploitation of the natural world from Dr. Arcane. This bond with the landscape is a sharp contrast to Dr. Arcane's destructive and highly controlling presence in the middle of the wetland.

BECOMING SLIME

(3)

Slime (noun)

a sticky liquid substance that is unpleasant to touch, such as the liquid produced by fish and snails, or the greenish-brown substance found near water. (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

Both in *What We Lost in the Swamp* and in *The Return of the Swamp Thing*, the liminality and materiality of the swamp play a key role in the storytelling. The setting in the wetland provides fertile ground for exploring themes like transformation, monstrosity, hiding, and belonging. The swamp with its dark, unkept aura becomes a character, shaping and reflecting the internal struggles of those in it. The swamp's physical properties—its murky waters, dense vegetation, and ever-shifting boundaries—reflect and situate the characters' struggles. The swamp's materiality and lack of boundaries present another point of finding queerness in the wetland landscape. The wetland is a liminal space, a threshold between worlds – between the water and the land. As described in the introduction, wetlands are characterized by their lack of clear edges. It is hard, if not impossible, to pinpoint using traditional mapping methods. This quality is amplified by the swamps shifting materiality, where the boundaries between the water and land continuously change and intermingle, rendering the wetland as a dynamic and unpredictable environment.

This environment is challenging for traditional mapping methods, which rely on clear, fixed boundaries and stable landforms. However, the wetland terrain is in constant flux, thanks to factors like water levels, plant growth, moving and shifting of earth and silt. This ongoing transformation means that any attempt at determining the wetland's edges and boundaries is outdated almost as soon as it's completed. Maps can't consider seasonal fluctuations in depth and, therefore, the surface area of the wetland. It reduces the depth to surface, and only at a certain moment in time. (Giblett, 1996) The wetland resists being pinned down, challenging traditional perceptions of space and geography. Much like wetlands, queer identities resist categorisation and defy rigid capital-centric structures. Capitalist systems favour clear definitions of boundaries and productivity; both queer identities and wetlands, challenge these norms. Swamps, much like queerness require recognition of their ever changing nature. Queer existence, characterized by its fluidity, nonconformity and resistance to binary definitions, parallels the edgelessness and sliminess of the wetland.

Just as the boys in *What We Lost in the Swamp* navigate the constraints and expectations of heteronormative society; wetlands escape conventional mapping in their true slimy material essence.



Fig. 14 Ledbetter Pond on Oatland Island in Savannah, Georgia. A filming location for the *Return of Swamp Thing*. (2016) *Roots of the Swamp Thing*. Available at: <https://root-softheswampthing.com/2016/05/11/the-return-of-swamp-thing-filming-location/>.

“gone, eaten, that green & slippery part of myself buried in the belly of a beast.”

The conclusion of *What We Lost in the Swamp* sums up the all-consuming and transformative nature of the swamp. The boundaries are blurred, and the boy's identity merges with the environment. The author also identifies the slipperiness inside him. This can be read in many ways, but the slipperiness of a young queer discovery is an obvious reading. The ending of the poem, knowing it is situated in the swamp, implies the merging of his formation of queer identity with the swamp. The belly of the beast can be the depths of the wetland where his queer desires can be hidden and “buried”. It feels like the sliminess and slipperiness are unsteady in the fresh queer discovery. Swamp Thing, on the other hand, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is content with his queer identity. For him, being partly made of the wetland's material and, through the film, becoming slime is another tool for beating Dr. Arcane and saving Abby. Swamp Thing deliberately chooses to run into the water in the wetland - his home, when threatened with guns and bullets, knowing that his form can stay intact when he inevitably ‘becomes slime’.

To Lock, slime is a “sensual revenge against capitalism, which in itself is a system with no outside, that operates through logics of incorporation and paranoid enclosure.” The example Lock provides is the necessity for slime to aid the reproduction of slugs. The slugs generate mucus and suspend themselves from the slimy web, copulating mid-air. This act of creation and connection facilitated through slime contrasts with the rigid structure of capitalism. Slime, with its fluid and unpinnable properties, represents a form of resistance. It is the refusal of solid and liquid that makes the material defiant and undesirable for the cis-hetero-patriarchy. (Lock, 2023) In the case of *The Return of the Swamp Thing*, where Dr. Arcane represents those capitalist and patriarchal ideals by imposing his living arrangements onto the wetland as described in Chapter 2, Swamp Thing's slimy form backed up by his actions agrees with Lock. Swamp Thing transforms into slime after being repeatedly shot and makes his way inside Dr. Arcane's mansion

through the piping. He then re-amalgamates his body in a bathtub, absorbing any water and slime back into his original form. Slime does not care about the borders Dr. Arcane erected in the land, same way the temporal wetland doesn't care about its materiality being defined. Unfortunately for Dr. Arcane, Swamp Thing embracing his sliminess ultimately leads to Dr. Arcane being defeated. A part of the horror (for Dr. Arcane, but by extension for the capitalist understanding and framing of land), the slimy substance occupies an unsettling position between two things. Slime occupies both extremes of solid earth and liquid water. (Giblett, 1996) Swamp Thing becoming slime and shifting his bodily composition put's the Western relationship with slime into question. Seeing Swamp Thing change his body into a substance we are equally made of (though not containing plant matter) is an exciting turn in the story. It is slime, that keeps our bodies running and it is what saved Swamp Thing from death. Slime lines our organs, acts as a protector, lubricator and home for bacteria. Slime is a part of our bodies, yet we are conditioned to be grossed out by it. Here, yet again, Swamp Thing's shifting of his form and accepting the materiality mirrors a queer experience of dissolving one's identity, regrowing, resolidifying and allowing it to become ‘slime’ again. This adaptability and resilience of slime reflect queer individuals' continuous navigation of Western cultural environments. In doing so, queer people, like slime, escape the rigid definitions and boundaries, just like the wetland does with mapping.

The identities the material of the wetland straddles, ultimately causing it to be unpinnable are horrific to the non-queer mind because slime is not being, but it is becoming. (Giblett, 1996) The slime upsets the solid roles of masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual like described in an example about agriculture in Chapter 2.1. This reinforces the uncertainty of the boys in *What We Lost in the Swamp* and re-connects to the western horror and framing of swamps as ‘Black Waters’. For the Western world, as described by Sartre, “to touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess”. (Sartre & Richmond, 2022) In other words, to touch the slimy and allow for it to consume oneself is to question existing narratives, something we have learned Swamp Thing in

his queerness, isn't afraid of. To Lock, being slime or ‘blob’ collapses binaries and borders, just like Swamp thing has shown. “Slime may be that portion of ourselves or of the other that we reject, but from which we can never absent ourselves. It is what we are all emerging from and dissolving into.” (Lock, 2023)

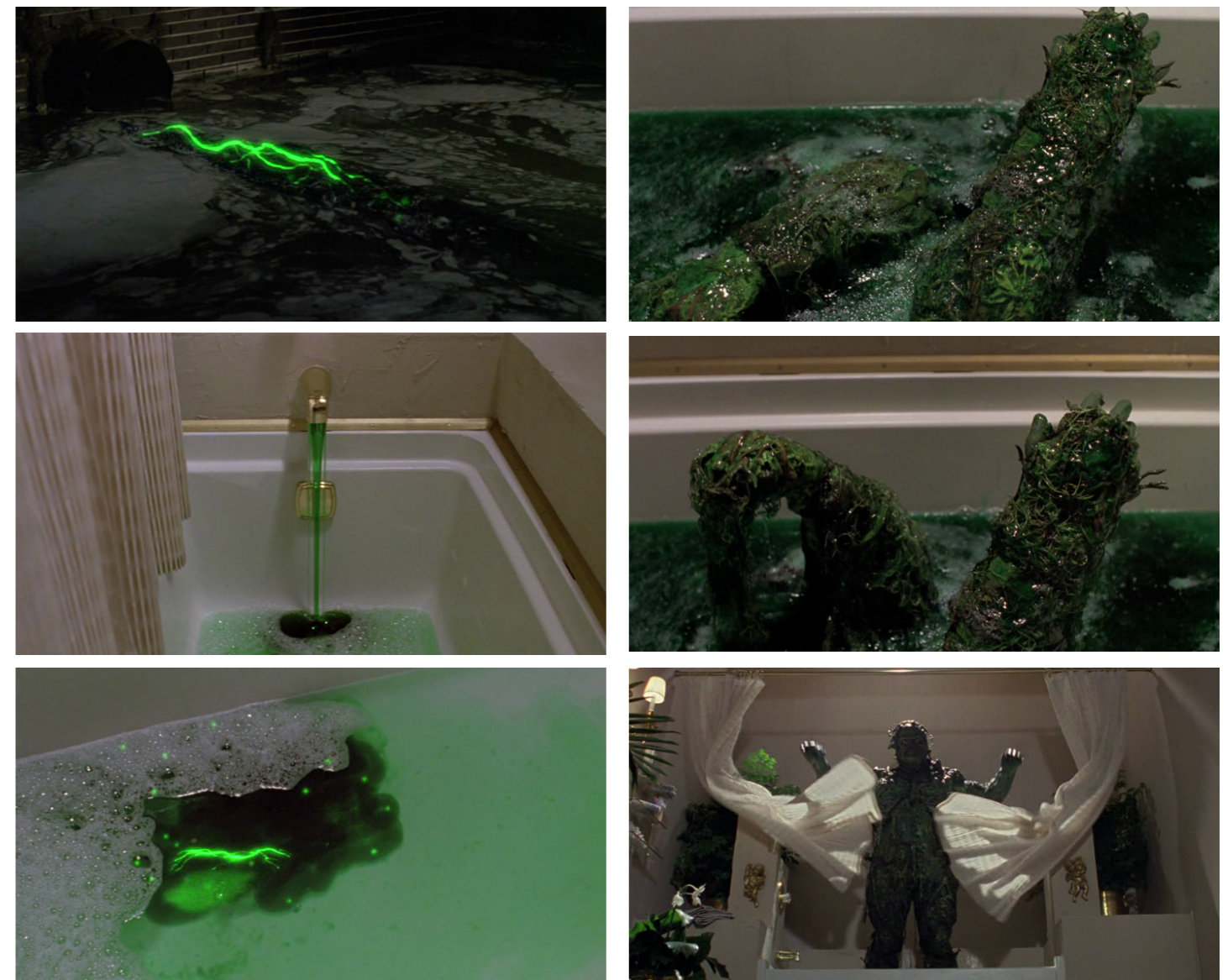


Fig.15 - 20 Swamp Thing transforms from slime to his typical form to get into Dr. Arcane's house
"The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshots, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.

CONCLUSION

(4)

In the context of landscape architecture theory, intersection of queer theory and the landscape is widely under researched. While there is a wealth of research on the interaction between queerness and landscapes, there is a notable gap in understanding how queerness itself can shape the environment and become a lens through which we understand landscapes. By integrating queer theory into the study of landscape construction and western 'traditional' ideals imposed on land, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of how queerness influences and is reflected in landscapes. Supporting theories about wildness, nature and ecology come from the area of gender studies and queer studies that overlap with the theory on nature and the body, and their cultural position. Though these theories address processes happening in the landscapes such as decomposing, growing, seeding and similar as well as the impact of those processes on the queer body as described in the analysis of *What We Lost in the Swamp*, none directly address the implications of queering those processes and the impact on the landscape beyond understanding it as nature. The main qualities the wetland provides to start building this connection are liminality and lack of edge definition, freedom and uncertain materiality.

To start reading into the landscape queerly though queer theory and subverting and queering the assumptions and cultural I used a poem -*What we lost in the swamp* by Grant Chemidlin and a 1980s superhero action film *The Return of Swamp Thing*. Both artefacts are positioned in the western world and by western authors. From this their position on the swamp can be assumed as corresponding to the western assumptions imposed on the wetland. These assumptions of wetland being a place of death, darkness, disease and monstrosity are confirmed by many scholars in various fields such as Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands* who describes them as 'black waters'. The vilification of wetland landscapes is a metaphor for the ideologically incorrect - in this case, the queer identity. The ideological mismatch between the wetland and the queer identity is supported by the capital-centric role of the 'masculine and feminine' in the productive landscape. In the eyes of this ideology, land is only valuable if it provides measurable value - monetary or otherwise. (Giblett, 1996)

The Return of the Swamp Thing, in contrast to the poem provided a visual way into the analysis of wetlands and swamps as a queer landscape. The character of Swamp Thing, because of being half man half swamp, bridges the gap between the relationship between the body and the land. The relationship between the body and the land, is further amplified by the more-than-human desire Abbey has for Swamp Thing. This desire, read through queer ecology and beyond the heterosexual framing of the film shows the extend of longing for the wetland as a place of queer belonging and comfort and safety from the imposed western standards for relationships. The comfort of Swamp Thing and Abbey in the swamp is representative of the privacy and freedom most queer people would seek like highlighted by Lund in her article "Everything I know about Queer Community I learned from Swamp Thing". Privacy is a theme that came up in *What we lost in the Swamp*. Contrasting with Swamp Thing, who has accepted his form and 'queerness' the boys in the poem haven't (yet). The poem has strong themes of hiding and being in the secrecy of the swamp, interacting only with it's inhabitants - frogs and each other. The young queer desire in the poem is full of shame and confusion and unsteadiness. Unsteadiness being particularly fitting and reflective of the swamps material quality of being between water and land. The material in betweenness mirrors the one of confused and undiscovered sexuality. The boys in the poem are battling with where to go from the kiss, ultimately ending in a loss of their innocence and a solid stance, metaphorically sinking into the swamp "buried in the belly of the beast".

Through the lens of queer ecology and careful consideration of the west's cis-heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions about the wetland, the layers of wetland's nonsolid quality start to encapsulate and mirror queer lived experiences like a non-normative more than human desire to connect with the land, the unsteady experience of a young queer sexuality, seeking a place of hiding and coverage and refuge. The fluid material quality of the wetlands and the ungraspable edges, are a representation of a queer experience which doesn't stop evolving, changing but most importantly doesn't conform to the expectations of where it starts and ends. The materiality of wetlands – consisting of slime, neither solid or liquid, represents the straddling of identities, being in between and non-conforming to edges and definitions. In the Return of the Swamp Thing, Swamp thing's transformation into slime is symbolic of his acceptance of his identity and rejection of Dr. Arcane's patriarchal and capitalist standards. By becoming slime, he can navigate through barriers others cannot ultimately defeating Dr. Arcane. Similarly, in What We Lost in the Swamp, the slimy essence suggests the merging of identities within its ambiguous landscape.

Overall, both stories and narratives use the swamp as a metaphor for queer existence when read through the lens of queer ecology and ecophenomenology. The slime and materiality in the swamp is an unsettling yet liberating force challenging pre-established binaries of liquid and solid. Slime embraces fluidity and continuous transformation.

The wetland provided a clear avenue into the question of queer landscapes, the existing theoretical frameworks of ecophenomenology, queer ecology and queer methods can be extended onto other types of land and the same analysis can be applied. By exploring diverse landscapes, these frameworks as applied in this thesis can uncover intricate relationships between the queer identity and space that goes beyond a traditional understanding. Following a queer method of working such as the scavenger method, furthers this opportunity to look beyond traditional methods of research which have typically excluded marginalized voices and opens narratives that are at odds with disciplinary boundaries. This approach does not only deepen our understanding of queer experiences of the land, but opens new possibilities for interdisciplinary research and challenges existing landscape construction theory.



Fig. 21 Swamp Thing giving Abigail the Thumbs up after exploding Dr. Arcanes house
"The Return of the Swamp Thing" Screenshot, directed by Jim Wynorski, 1989.

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