

# Of Slaves and Other Swamp Things

## Black Southern History as Comic Book Horror

—Qiana J. Whitted

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.

—*Beloved*, Toni Morrison

Of the many captivating changes that British comic book writer Alan Moore brought to his run on the DC Comics *Swamp Thing* series from 1984–1987, two are especially significant. He began by reconceptualizing the character's physiological structure as sentient plant matter, rather than as the mutated and monstrous human being first developed by Len Wein and Berni Wrightson in 1971.<sup>1</sup> All that was left of biochemist Alec Holland after the bio-restorative formula explosion plunged him into the swamp slime was *consciousness*; Moore revealed that the creature was little more than living vegetation in the shape of a man, one whose “humanity” operated like phantom limbs on a mossy, hulking frame. With this transformation, Moore's Swamp Thing could move freely about his environment by willfully allowing his body to die and reanimate anywhere plants thrive. Swamp Thing, while still an aberrant presence among his human neighbors, developed a more interdependent relationship with the land and became a deeply compassionate guardian of the Green.

Even as Moore altered Swamp Thing's form to make him more versatile, mobile, and intellectually complex, a second major modification fixed the character more firmly in space and time by establishing the comic's setting in and around present-day Houma, Louisiana. After determining “which swamps he was the Thing of,” Moore told interviewer George Khoury that he researched the area's history and culture as well as its geographic features, “so that I could use the location, so that I could get interesting images or atmospheres from it” (Khoury 88). The results of Moore's research are vividly manifested through the artistic style of Stephen Bissette who, along with other artists including John Totleben, Alfredo Alcalá, and Ron Randall, brought a darker, more intricate realism to the series.<sup>2</sup> It is through these collaborative efforts to convey the regional “atmospheres” of *Swamp Thing* that we see a more focused engagement with United States southern history and its landscape of horrors, including storylines that grapple with the region's legacy of slavery.

This essay takes a closer look at Moore's depiction of the South and the manner in which *Swamp Thing* comments upon social and cultural histories of racial oppression. My analysis will focus, in particular, on two issues from the “American Gothic” story arc that employ well-

known comic book horror tropes to illustrate a tale of vengeful slaves and unrepentant masters: “Southern Change” (#41) and “Strange Fruit” (#42). These issues, published in 1985, adapt many of the formal and aesthetic qualities of early horror comics, yet my reading also connects the ideological thrust of *Swamp Thing*’s zombie tale with the post-civil rights era development of the “postmodern slave narrative”—a literary sub-genre similarly concerned with issues of historical recovery, cultural rebirth, and identity formation.<sup>3</sup> I maintain, for instance, that the concept of “rememory” that Toni Morrison develops in her 1988 novel, *Beloved*, is useful in framing an experiential understanding of the present as being physically and psychologically inscribed with traces of the past. Described by Caroline Rody as a trope that “postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present,” rememory is used as both a verb and a noun in Morrison’s novel to convey the lasting materiality of thoughts and emotional resonances. In *Beloved*, the main character regards places as entities stratified with “thought pictures” that, once formed by a person or an event, endure with an affective potency that can be perceived by others.<sup>4</sup>

These interminable “thought pictures” of rememory can also describe the way southern history is understood in *Swamp Thing*. Rather than simply exhuming the inarticulate monsters of *Tales from the Crypt*, Moore and Bissette complicate the discourse of zombification and spiritual possession to foreground a trauma that reaches beyond the grave. What is especially significant about Moore’s unearthing of the past in “Southern Change” and “Strange Fruit,” I argue, is the way in which the no-longer-human body of Swamp Thing is juxtaposed against the dehumanization of the enslaved blacks on the Robertaland Plantation. They, too, are objectified and physically bound to the land, and as their restless bones push up through the earth, they also clamor for freedom: “Freedom from this blighted soil, where buried grievances have poisoned the roots of the world and all its cultures. Freedom from these tainted lands that bear such sour fruit” (“Strange Fruit” 42:3). To be sure, Alec Holland’s past as a white American scientist never included generations of forced slave labor. Still, the subtle narrative correlations that Moore employs to heighten Swamp Thing’s encounter with the South ultimately furnish the material horrors of black enslavement with psychological resonance. Multiple codes of signification in the slave uprising coalesce around the discourses of nature, moral reciprocity, and memory that are central to *Swamp Thing*.

In his new form, as protector of the land and its residents, Swamp Thing must do more than empathize with the plight of the enslaved; his charge is to end the cycle of pain and injustice that will free the victimized blacks and allow them to rest in peace. His decision to destroy the Louisiana plantation in a fire that consumes most of the undead slaves reaffirms the idea of the southern past as a riotous, uncontrolled growth that must not be allowed to thrive in the present. Swamp Thing’s experience demonstrates that like a stubborn weed, history’s evils will be continually rehearsed—literally, in this case, by a TV crew using Robertaland to film a new southern soap opera—until the old growth is burned out. Such dangers are further manifest through anxieties over zombification, where “to succumb is to become, and once you have become a zombie, self is lost irrevocably to the other” (Boon 35). The comic makes creative use of metaphors of enslavement in zombie folklore to convey larger fears about the monstrous clamoring of history. As a result, while the story presupposes the importance of remembering

the past, the conclusion's anti-pastoral uprooting also warns against the dangers of being consumed (and enslaved) by it.

My reading of *Swamp Thing* seeks to contribute to emerging conversations in African American cultural and literary studies about racial representation in modern American comics. The last decade has seen a preponderance of critically acclaimed comics that explore African American history and legend in an effort to *demystify*—to expose misconceptions and reveal new dimensions of black subjectivity. In works such as *Nat Turner* by Kyle Baker and *King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Ho Che Anderson, the comics medium doubles as an archive for the creative exploration of key moments, figures, and evolving ideologies.<sup>5</sup> The push toward realism is understandable given the way black people and other ethnic groups have often fared on the comics page. From indecipherable buffoons and minstrels to the infantilized primitives of jungle comics, black comic book characters have been utilized as projections of white fears and fantasies since the Depression Era. Comics that seek to represent the inner lives of black men and women in a more nuanced and visually complex manner help to counter prevailing racial stereotypes while depicting a view of the past that will set the record straight. In his essay, “Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels,” Michael Chaney provides a cogent analysis of how texts like Anderson's *King* seek “to discover or invent a usable history” for African Americans through the comics medium (199). Yet even as the storytelling strategies in more comics cross genres and experiment with narrative and aesthetic innovations, their representations are largely mimetic, tethered to an understanding of coherent historical realities and often affirmed by “authenticating documents” (prefatory material, primary sources, bibliographies) appended to the comic.<sup>6</sup>

*Swamp Thing*'s evocative departure from these trends begins with its adaptation of fantasy and horror conventions. Moore and Bissette employ what literary critic Timothy A. Spaulding describes as a “non-mimetic approach to slavery” that foregrounds the supernatural and otherworldly, fracturing space and time in a way that dismantles totalizing narratives of history in a manner not unlike novels such as *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed (1976), *Kindred* by Octavia Butler (1979), *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson (1990), and more recently, Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003). At the same time, the relationship of “Southern Change” and “Strange Fruit” to the well-established *Swamp Thing* series offers an alternate mode of written and visual authentication, one that uses a fictitious monster and his physiological connection to the South as a conceptual metaphor for material and spiritual reconciliation. Readers are thusly urged to piece together intertextual historical, cultural, and artistic codes in order to effectively interpret the visual and verbal sequences of supernatural fantasy.

Bolstered by these claims, it is my hope that the strengths and weaknesses of *Swamp Thing*'s engagement with African American history can also serve as a framework for evaluating creative offspring such as the serial comic *Bayou* by Jeremy Love that advance the themes of Moore's postmodern slave narrative. Certainly, the mini-series *Hellblazer: Papa Midnite* by Mat Johnson and Tony Akins provides another, more direct connection with *Swamp Thing* and offers a northern view of black enslavement that complements Moore's bayou

stories.<sup>7</sup> I am more interested, however, in how Love's swamp tale reimagines the grotesque landscape of southern horror and folklore in ways that allow for a more fully realized African American perspective, one in which the South's "duality of attraction and repulsion" is ever-present and inescapable (Harris 2).

## American Gothic

The zombie uprising on the Louisiana plantation in "Southern Change" and "Strange Fruit" is best understood in the larger context of the "American Gothic" storyline in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* from 1985–1986. Described by Moore as "an odyssey through American horror," the series pays homage to the way Wein and Wrightson reformulated "stock cliché horror formats" in the original *Swamp Thing* by placing classic monsters such as werewolves, vampires, and zombies in contemporary contexts. Moore justified his choices by stating that, "if they could be made relevant to the world in which the readers existed, symbolic of things bigger than just another vampire story, another werewolf story, then that could yield rewards" (Khoury 93). The prelude to Moore's horror odyssey is "The Nukeface Papers" (#35–36) in which a traveling hobo, contaminated by the toxic chemicals from a Pennsylvania nuclear power plant, ends up fatally poisoning Swamp Thing with a touch of his hand. Having tracked the factory's waste dumping scheme to Louisiana, Nukeface's radioactive presence affects local residents, school children, and a pregnant woman's unborn baby, and yet the narrative makes clear that the story's villain is also a *victim*—a product of American corporate greed and carelessness. Bissette depicts a modern wasteland strewn with newspaper clippings that enumerate the human collateral damage of acid spills, gas leaks, and other hazardous waste accidents. Against such nameless forces, Swamp Thing, a plant elemental, is forced to find a new way to thrive and to safeguard his home and his loved ones.

Thus, "American Gothic" begins with a post-mortem Swamp Thing struggling to understand his regenerative powers. In his mind, Alec Holland's memories, his cognitive energies and desires, persist as the tangle of vines and earth that was once his "body" disintegrates completely. With the help of the British sorcerer and occult detective John Constantine, Swamp Thing acquires mastery over "instant transport" abilities and learns how to seek out a new corporeal home by sending his mind "out into . . . the Green" (36:18). Constantine's larger motive, however, is to enlist Swamp Thing's help in quelling the sudden increase of nightmarish eruptions across the country: underwater vampires in Illinois, werewolves in Maine, and zombies in Louisiana. As with his depiction of Nukeface, Moore conveys the circumstances of each monster's existence so as to invite Swamp Thing's empathy and in turn, the reader's understanding. In the issues "Still Waters" (#38) and "Fish Story" (#39), we meet vampires of the Midwest that had mutated and formed an underwater community after being trapped by Swamp Thing's own attempt to cleanse the town of the fanged creatures two years earlier.<sup>8</sup> Moore exploits the contrast between the grisly images of the vampire's parasitic craving for blood and the voice of their domestic yearnings: "Why must we be destroyed? We asked for so very little . . . Only a home that we could call our own [. . .] and a safe place to raise our children" (39:19).

Likewise, in “The Curse” (#40), the werewolfism of a housewife underscores the collective silencing and denigration of women. The controversial issue places the werewolf folk legend—with its central icon of the moon—in concert with the main character’s menstrual cycle. Citing the antiquated tradition of isolating “tainted” women during their menses in the tale of the “Red Lodge,” the story follows a woman similarly alienated by the objectifying delusions of pornography, sanitary napkins ads, and a society in which “the Red Lodge is everywhere” (40:17). Swamp Thing arrives in the New England town just as the wife has transformed into a werewolf and is lashing out at her abusive husband in a suicidal rampage. At the end of the comic, when the werewolf has transformed back into a woman, Swamp Thing is the one who lifts her body to its final resting place beneath the moon. Stories such as “The Curse” ultimately reveal that Swamp Thing’s strength lies in his compassion; he uses force defensively and each time he is poisoned, eaten, burned, or killed, the solutions to these problems lie in the creative use of his own body as an instrument of release. Ironically his heroism is misunderstood by the scene’s bystanders who see him only as a monster—the “it” that must be cast out: “Oh, God, it’s got a woman! Why doesn’t somebody do something?” (40:22). The onlookers’ fears in Maine extend to Swamp Thing’s return to the South where he moves, reluctantly and regretfully, from the liminal spaces of the swamp land to a Louisiana plantation’s heart of darkness.<sup>9</sup> The “American Gothic” story arc, with its emphasis on Swamp Thing’s character development, aids in what Charles Hatfield refers to as “the invocation of learned competencies” (135) that will allow readers to decode the approaching analogies between the title character and the undead slaves in “Strange Fruit.”

## Cultural Scripts

Interestingly enough, Swamp Thing has encountered the ghosts of slavery before in Wein and Wrightson’s original *Swamp Thing* run. In issue #10 from 1974, Swamp Thing saves the life of “Auntie” Bellum, an elderly black woman. She tells him the story of Black Jubal, a proud slave whose spirit came back from the dead to take his revenge on a sadistic master for sexually abusing an enslaved woman named Elsbeth. Soon after hearing the tale, Swamp Thing is ambushed in a nearby graveyard by his nemesis Anton Arcane, who threatens to steal and possess his body. Arcane boasts of his plans to enslave humanity and declares himself “the undisputed master of the world!” (10:15). With each reference to slavery, the graveyard winds become a “muffled cry of outrage and despair” until, in the climactic moment, Black Jubal and his cohort materialize from the spirit world to help Swamp Thing escape. The next morning Swamp Thing goes looking for the old woman and finds only Auntie Bellum’s crumbling tombstone engraved with her full name: Elsbeth Bellum. While the title of the issue—“The Man Who Would Not Die”—presumably refers to Arcane’s synthetic resurrection, an alternative reading of the title confers heroic manhood and spiritual immortality upon Black Jubal and underscores his determination to prevent *any* creature in *any* time from being enslaved as a “thing.” Moore and Bissette expand upon the model established by Wein and Wrightson by highlighting the existential implications of Swamp Thing’s being and by unearthing a toxic maze of oppression and violence in the South that is “concealed beneath the world’s skin” like restless bones in a graveyard (41:15) (see [figure 9.1](#)).



9.1. From *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #41 (October 1985). Written by Alan Moore with art by Stephen Bissette and John Totleben. Copyright © 1985 DC Comics.

“Southern Change” opens with a flashback to 1842 in which the plantation’s white owner, Wesley Jackson, has just ordered the flaying of an enslaved black man for becoming romantically involved with his wife. Over a century later in the swamps outside present-day Houma, we find Swamp Thing and Abby ruminating over the frailties of human nature as a TV crew has set up their cameras at this same plantation to film a new soap opera with celebrity stars and a cast of local black residents as slaves. Abby remarks on the irony: “So, like, all these descendants of liberated slaves are earning good money by becoming slaves again!” (41:4). Over the course of a few weeks—notably, on days marked by Voodoo ceremonies and feasts—the actors on the set become possessed by the restless ghosts of the area until the night of the climactic “zombie walk” when the plantation slaves rise up from their graves to take deadly revenge on the master that executed them before being killed himself.

In his discussion of an earlier *Swamp Thing* storyline that involved incest, Moore joked, “No offense intended to any Southern readers down there, of course; I realize that these comics stereotypes must wear thin after a while” (Khoury 90). The same could be said of the stock

characterizations in “Southern Change.” Comics stereotypes and generalizations about the South abound in the story, yet the self-referential absurdity of the TV show—along with other popular culture references to *Gone With the Wind* and Jimi Hendrix’s song “Voodoo Child”—also help to complicate these regional simplifications. Not only do the actors and their indulgent squabbles call attention to the performative nature of southern racial politics, but the soap opera’s frivolous approach to its historical subject also suggests a modern disregard for the profound psychic consequences of enslavement. The celebrities behave as if their status, professional training, and modern experience will distance them from their antebellum “characters.” Once the actors assume their roles however, they become spiritually inhabited by the past: the black actor, Billy Carlton, who expresses resentment and anger over “this Stepin’ Fetchit stuff” (41:9), ends up kneeling and cowering like his enslaved counterpart, while Richard Deal, the sympathetic liberal white actor who once complained that “thinking like a racist is so difficult” (41:13), transforms into Wesley Jackson in an instant.



9.2. From *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #41 (October 1985). Written by Alan Moore with art by Stephen Bissette and John Totleben. Copyright © 1985 DC Comics.

Consider how in [figure 9.2](#) the show’s script, rolled up in Deal’s hand in one panel, becomes in the next a whip—an instrument of force that acts as a metonym for a different kind of cultural “script” in which the roles of black and white southerners are defined by socially constructed racial hierarchies and institutional economies of power and production. Moore places these cyclical patterns of racial violence and oppression in concert with a discourse of tainted rebirth—of people and communities, of landscapes and spaces. Like the postmodern slave narrative, the *Swamp Thing* story assumes control of the historical record by employing “elements of the fantastic to occupy the past, the present, and in some cases, the future simultaneously” (Spaulding 5). The show’s director, unaware that the actors are possessed, praises Carlton for improvising new lines, not realizing that he and his counterparts are following a script that has already been written into the collective “rememory” of the region. In

other scenes, the shift between present and past is more understated; for instance, Carlton's transformation is indicated only by the way his shirt changes color from yellow to white (41:10–11). Deal's eyes shift from blue to brown (42:13). The local black residents who are hired to work on the film are also affected as they abandon their duties to begin silently preparing ceremonial offerings on the plantation grounds (41:16). This temporal schism is further marked in the comic narrative by parallel and mirrored images including the distorted reflection of Robertland in the pond surrounding the plantation (41:9).

Visual codes such as these demonstrate the way in which the narrative's subtext is further communicated by the form, artistic style, and design of *Swamp Thing*. Bissette frames the episode in measured, symmetrical panel arrangements in keeping with the cyclical nature of the plot and the dialectical tensions between past and present, life and death. By contrast, in and around Robertland, the plantation's gothic atmospheres are conveyed through overlapping panels that are often set at odd, unsteady angles (like tombstones) to intensify the temporal layers within a single moment. Indeed, time is set by a different calendar in "Southern Change"—through date stamps that alert the reader to Afro-Haitian ceremonies from July's *Feast of Papaogou* to August's *Mystere L'Orient* and through the intricate pictorial marginalia of Voodoo symbols, sacred animals, and somber black faces and skulls that surround each section. At times, the racial primitivism suggested by the artistic team's depiction of Voodoo appears at odds with Moore's efforts to reshape the cultural trope. Consider, for instance, the cover art of issue #41 that depicts an image of *Swamp Thing* as a small, mossy Voodoo doll stabbed with pins. Clutching the doll is a black hand with sharp, yellowed fingernails and a crude bracelet of teeth around the wrist. It is an image that does not correspond to the events within the story itself—not unusual in comic books where the cover art is illustrated separately—yet the Afro-Haitian iconography, rendered as a "frightening projection of white cultural fears and obsessions" (Rossetti 146), shapes the reader's first encounter with the narrative nonetheless.

Indeed, the cover is the gateway to the "clash and collaboration of different codes of signification" comics readers are compelled to parse in order to extract meaning from the work (Hatfield 41). Part of the knowledge base Moore and Bissette draw upon is the fraught history of Voodoo and zombification in horror comics since the 1940s, iconic images that were used to convey the hidden, racialized terrors lurking within the "everyman." With titles like "Voodoo Death" and "Drawn and Quartered," series such as the popular *Tales from the Crypt* often followed naïve white Americans to Haiti where they stumble across midnight rituals of "chanting, screaming natives" in the jungle (*Tales from the Crypt* 23:2) and seek out witch doctors to purchase Voodoo talismans. These earlier horror comics emphasized the soul-robbing power of possession as well as the dangers of using "black magic" to circumvent societal norms and moral codes. Stories like "Voodoo Death" brought the primitive mysticism of jungle comics to the suburban homes and city streets of post-WWII America and used the threat of zombification to underscore fears of an internalized Other.

Decades after the Comics Code and its prohibitions against the "walking dead" led to the demise of series such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *Swamp Thing*'s Len Wein wrote stories featuring Brother Voodoo for Marvel's *Strange Tales* and *Tales from the Zombie*. These and



other 1970s comics employed horror tropes in a manner similar to popular “zombie apocalypse” films such as George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). As mindless hordes of decaying human beings, the incoherent mobs in these stories are intent only on destruction. In her study of Romero’s work, Kim Paffenroth points out that zombies “straddle the line between living and dead” in a way that precludes survivors from grieving and moving on (12). Humans are forced to battle the animated corpses in these stories in order to remain alive and keep from becoming zombies themselves. Any apparent resemblance between the slow-moving dead in *Swamp Thing* and Romero’s malevolent mobs (or the soulless “Zuvembies”<sup>10</sup> of Marvel Comics) aids in the expression of a familiar horror aesthetic, much like the Voodoo doll cover art.

But just as Charles Chesnutt relied on his nineteenth-century audience’s knowledge of Uncle Remus tales to distinguish his own post-bellum narratives of slavery in *The Conjure Woman*,<sup>11</sup> so too are the monsters in “American Gothic” distinguished through the reworking of horror formulas that, as Bissette has stated, aim to “shatter the old ‘EC Comics’ mold” (Weiland). At times the zombies in *Swamp Thing* appear to lack a sense of consciousness, but in other instances they think and discern. They seek justice, rather than the kind of manipulation suggested by the image of *Swamp Thing* as a Voodoo doll. Moreover, the comic’s visual and verbal elements work together to break down what Kevin Alexander Boon refers to as the dialect of “the human self and the monstrous other” by unearthing the interior lives and longings of the slaves in the story (34).<sup>12</sup> By definition, of course, zombies *are* enslaved creatures, controlled corpses that have not been permitted to rest. Yet Moore’s zombies are bound not merely to a single master named Wesley Jackson, but also to a vicious master narrative—what *Swamp Thing* refers to as “emotions . . . so fierce and caustic . . . that they burned their imprint into the soil itself” (42:5).

## Return of the Repressed

What, then, can we learn from Moore’s adaptation of zombie horror in relation to cultural scripts of racial oppression and violence in *Swamp Thing*? Spaulding has argued that postmodern slave narratives such as Morrison’s *Beloved* “reject realism,” in part, as a way of conveying “a political act of narration designed to reshape our view of slavery and its impact on our cultural condition” (3–4). In “Southern Change,” the same kind of historical defamiliarization is initiated through the first panel of Moore’s story in which the reader, entombed in darkness, is repositioned from the perspective of the dead. “What do the dead people think about?” the narrator asks, and later as the images move up through the earth and into a view of the plantation: “. . . and which voices are the loudest?” (41:1). Readers knowledgeable of EC Comics-style horror may already be familiar with this kind of heightened identification with the monstrous Other. Yet Moore tempers this narrative strategy with a more empathetic transference, not unlike the memorable cross-racial twist in the last panel of the *Weird Fantasy* tale, “Judgment Day.”<sup>13</sup>

The technique is revisited at the start of “Strange Fruit”—with its nod to the anti-lynching song—when we are placed inside a coffin with a skeleton that is unable to “sleep.” Readers

follow the corpse as it rises from the grave in a two-page spread, sliced by vertical panels as shown in figure 9.3. In this pivotal scene, enslaved beings rise and reunite in an alternate history of the American South, “the history of courageous resistance and love and the expressive cultural practices of the slave community” (Rushdy 139). Skeleton lovers kiss, while others lift decomposed children into the air in jubilation. The narrator observes:

After the first exuberance of the resurrection had abated, they quietly discussed what they wanted to do most, now that they were alive again. Some wanted a job, and a home, and a right to vote. Some of the women wanted new clothes and some of the men joked about that. As always, there was an unimaginative majority who only wanted revenge . . . but they all wanted liberty, that much was unanimous. (42:3)



9.3. From *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #42 (November 1985). Written by Alan Moore with art by Stephen Bissette, John Totleben, and Ron Randall. Copyright © 1985 DC Comics.

These black men and women may be the “strange” fruit of the title, but as with his modification of vampires and werewolves, Moore’s so-called zombies resist the dehumanization of the monster trope by voicing familial affections, speaking “quietly,” and joking about new clothes. They embrace one another after emerging from their coffins and exhibit enough reason in these moments to deliberate upon their next step. Indeed, to the extent that the gratuitous violence of

multi-ethnic zombie mobs has been used to signify “the senseless brutality of racism, a hideous punishment for its continued presence in our supposedly ‘civilized’ society” (Paffenroth 18), the behavior of the zombies in *Swamp Thing* also underscores the image of black Americans as desiring subjects in their never-ending struggle for liberation. In these moments, Moore opens up a space for a different kind of script—what Rushdy, quoting James C. Scott, refers to as “the ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance to be found in those subordinated experiences of enslaved peoples” (227). As history’s repressed victims return, it is *their* voices that are the loudest. Just as *Swamp Thing*’s body of plant matter—the “*not* Alec Holland”—becomes an unexpected province of humanity, so are the Robertaland slaves more than decomposing monsters, more than objectified flesh. The brutality of the past prevents them from cultivating similar powers of “instant transport” however, leaving them spiritually bound to the earth without the ability to pass on.

It is important to note that *Swamp Thing* models a mutually productive relationship with the land and the life cycles of the natural world throughout the story. Early in the narrative he lifts a dying bird from the ground and whispers to the creature, “just let go . . . of the flesh . . . of the pain” before crushing its remains into his own body. He reassures Abby that he only wants to “absorb its riches . . . as it decays. . . . Death . . . shall nourish life . . . and nothing . . . shall be wasted” (41:12). The brief scene underscores the extent to which the idea of death as nourishment for the living is actually turned on its head in Robertaland’s old slave graveyard. As the zombie walk comes to a halt at the steps of the mansion, time and space collapse, and one of the black men declares:

The pain . . . cannot remain in the past . . . or hidden beneath the soil. . . . That which is buried . . . is not gone. That which is planted . . . will grow . . . [. . .] We want our freedom . . . and if freedom is not given . . . then we must all . . . repeat this night . . . of pain and suffering until freedom comes . . . even if that takes forever . . . . (42:14–15)

The hallucinating actor, whose flesh Wesley Jackson now inhabits, raises a shotgun to replay the massacre of 1842 once again. *Swamp Thing* steps in the path of the gun and with the words, “I will not . . . allow . . . this evil . . . to continue!” uses his own body as kindling to destroy the house and burn out the roots of a “bad tree” (42:18). The image recalls the banishment of the parasitic ghost woman in *Beloved* whose embodiment of the past was prevented from making a home among the living. As one outraged neighbor in Morrison’s novel reflects: “The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. Slave life; freed life—every day was a test and a trial. . . . Nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge” (Morrison 257).

The same logic drives *Swamp Thing*’s decision to destroy the “grown-up evil” at the southern estate. In *Swamp Thing*’s first encounter with slave ghosts, Black Jubal rescued him; now in Moore’s version, his body’s “liberating flame” frees the enslaved men and women. Zombie tales have often depicted the undead as being afraid of fire, yet in their first and last willful act, many of the walking cadavers “embrace” the flame as freedom in an ironic reversal of southern lynching practices. And as Robertaland burns, *Swamp Thing* makes a personal

connection: “The fire consumes me,” he reflects, “For an instant . . . I recall . . . another man . . . who burned. His fear . . . his suffering . . . welling up from my borrowed memory . . . Holland” (42:18). Shortly after the blaze, amidst the blackened timber and bones, emerges the thrilling “SLUPP GWIP PWOC” of green shoots pushing up through the ground and taking shape as the reconstituted Swamp Thing (42:19).

As stated previously, the stories in the “American Gothic” thread develop alongside Swamp Thing’s growing realization of his own abilities as a creature of the Green. The first time Swamp Thing reincarnates himself, after being poisoned by Nukeyface, he struggles to come to terms with an identity that is divided between physical states: Man and vegetable. Human and nonhuman. Living and dead. “I . . . am. But . . . where am I? What . . . am I? The soil about me . . . rich and wet . . . half-swallowing me. I recognize . . . its texture. I . . . am in . . . the swamp. I am . . . the swamp thing. How strange . . . I thought that I . . . was dead” (37:2). His hybridized existence is not merely a common characteristic of monsters from the mythological Minotaur to the modern horror film zombie (Paffenroth 7), but also a living manifestation of how such divisions can be productively negotiated. In “Southern Change” and “Strange Fruit,” Moore’s fictitious creature—a monster whose flesh is literally composed of the roots and plant growth of the South—models the process of Duboisian “double-consciousness” through which African American slaves and their descendants are compelled to see themselves by an oppressive social and economic system. The intergenerational legacy of black suffering surfaces again and again like Holland’s “borrowed memory” to inform and overshadow the newfound potential of the present. As Swamp Thing straddles the boundaries of declarative subject (“I am”) and object (“the Swamp Thing”), his reality parallels the possibilities and limitations of the slave’s condition.

Oddly enough, this parallel may explain why one of the zombies refuses the cleansing flames of the plantation and finds comfort in a movie-theater ticketing booth in a town in Arkansas called “Springville.” Speaking with the same stilted dialogue that Swamp Thing uses, the black man delights in the free popcorn and asks, “This . . . is my box and my own . . . little window?” (42:23). Could it be that just as the Swamp Thing finds comfort in returning to his home in the swamp, the dislocated zombie is reassured by the confinement of a brand-new “box” surrounded by Hollywood monsters and the familiar “scripts” of Voodoo horror films? How are we to reconcile the irony and humor of this closing scene that juxtaposes the movie posters of *Night of the Living Dead*<sup>14</sup> with the mournful face of a discombobulated elderly black man in the window? There are places where the narrative suffers from not devoting more energy to developing individual African American characters and this epilogue, I would argue, is one of them. Moore, himself, has called the zombie issues “his least favorite,” saying only that “nobody’s fault but mine—I didn’t do a very good job” (Khoury 93). Perhaps the conclusion’s inconsistencies in tone and character development are part of the reason why.

Likewise, despite the poignancy and richness of the collective black voices that rise from the grave in *Swamp Thing*, the *living* African American characters remain exasperatingly one-dimensional, adhering far too closely to stereotypical images of the angry black militant and the mammy figure. When one of Abby’s co-workers, a heavy-set, dark-skinned cook named Alice, encounters her dead father among the zombie mob, she does not rejoice, but collapses in

tears over how she feels “all ugly and old” (42:11). The black actor Billy Carlton—who seems to speak only in angry platitudes when he is not snorting cocaine—is rendered incoherent and terror-stricken by the end of the tale. If we recall Swamp Thing’s understanding of “buried mazes” beneath the earth that “still determine the paths . . . of those who walk above” (41:15), then one might argue that characters like Billy and Alice are among those destined to remain trapped and broken wanderers. Such is the all-consuming power of the master narrative that enslaves generation after generation. Spaulding reminds us that, “far from the romanticized notion of individuality, postmodern slave narratives depict freedom as contested and wrought with conflict” (21). Likewise, the careless naiveté of Abby’s remark in the aftermath—“They’ll block out what happened here and get on with their lives. They’ll be okay” (42:19)—serves to reinforce the provisional nature of Swamp Thing’s efforts. In light of Moore’s strangely unresolved ending, one can’t help but wonder if there is any land below the Mason-Dixon Line not touched by “old and cherished horrors” (42:11).

## **Blood and Beauty in Jeremy Love’s *Bayou***

Of *Swamp Thing*, artist Stephen Bissette has said that “if we named any of the best horror comics from any particular era, they’re drawing from earlier work. Part of this is the fact that the more resonant archetypes are always reembraced and reinvented to suit a new generation’s needs” (Weiland). Such is also the case with *Bayou*, a serial comic by writer and artist Jeremy Love that re-embraces and reinvents the archetypes of black southern folklore in a way that deftly advances the themes of Alan Moore’s postmodern slave narrative. The comic debuted in 2007 through Zuda Comics, the webcomics division of DC Comics, and was the first Zuda publication to make the transition from the web to print in 2009. While *Swamp Thing* summons forth the southern past through a zombie netherworld, *Bayou* constructs a rich parallel reality where talking bloodhounds wear the hats of the Confederacy, Brer Rabbit works on a chain gang, and the dead guide a young black girl named Lee Wagstaff on a journey through the Jim Crow looking-glass. Love’s aesthetic choices are particularly attentive to the paradox of pleasure and pain that distinguishes the Deep South, once characterized by James Baldwin as “the great, vast, brooding, welcoming and bloodstained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart” (qtd. in Harris 2). Representations of racial violence and terror unfold alongside an appreciation for black southern culture and networks of community.

Lee’s companion is the title character, a blues-singing monster named Bayou, who aids her in a quest to rescue a young white friend and save her own father from the lynch rope. Bayou’s immense stature, gentle manner, and green skin connect him to hybrid monsters like Swamp Thing whose physiology acts as an extension of their natural surroundings. Both creatures draw on their inextricable relationship with the land as they shift grudgingly from observer to plot participant. Love’s “black” swamp thing is considerably more implicated in Lee’s mission, however; helping the young girl means defying the oppressive power structures of “Dixie,” an alternate world in the comic “formed from the blood, war, and strife that plagued the South” (Arrant). There are even indications in the early issues that Bayou was once enslaved and forcibly separated from his own children, given that a fear of their master—Dixie’s unseen “Bossman” General Bog—hinders his every action. At one point, Bayou laments his decision

to involve himself in Lee's problems and in response she, arms thrown wide, shouts back:

*You kiddin' me! You a damn fool and I'm sick of your whining! I'm the little girl, I'm the one that should be whining and crying, not you! Look at you! You a big ol' monster with arms like tree trunks! You can whup just about anything in the whole wide world! Watchoo got to be cared of some Bossman fo? If I was big as you, I'd be the Bossman!*  
(1:149)

Bayou's knowledge of the area, his brawn, and even his skill in hoodoo magic are an asset to Lee, but it is clear that what he lacks is her audacity and courage—however untested it may be—to see Bog's master narrative for the calculated invention it is. Their exchange reveals the enduring psychological wounds of racial oppression that, in keeping with the non-mimetic speculation of postmodern slave narrative, seem to mar even the mythical potential of black folk legend. Why else, the narrative seems to ask, would “a big ol' monster with arms like tree trunks” have a back covered with scars and whip marks?

In turn, *Bayou* draws the reader into a fictitious Mississippi town during the 1930s by drawing on a set of intertextual codes and character-driven allusions that depart substantially from Moore's modification of zombie horror in *Swamp Thing*. Patrick Morgan's coloring and Love's artwork—which initially resemble a children's cartoon with warm tones, simple iconography, and traditional panel arrangements—diverge meaningfully from the story's darker themes. In an interview, Love remarks upon his investment in the comic as an act of recuperation:

I've always been interested in the mythology of America. The South, in particular, seems like a haunted place. You have this region that is covered with blood, but produces so much beauty. I never really felt connected to African mythology until I started reading Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales. Seeing how elements of African mythology were interwoven with American folklore was the spark. What led me to the Uncle Remus tales was Disney's *Song of the South*, a film I've always had mixed feelings about. I felt I as an African American creator could reclaim that mythology. (Arrant)

What results is a kind of blues comics pastiche, not unlike the prose of Zora Neale Hurston or the mixed-media collages of Romare Bearden that juxtapose “blood” and “beauty” by merging incidents such as the murder of Emmett Till with African and Greek mythology, “Uncle Remus” tales by Joel Chandler Harris, and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Few reviewers explicitly acknowledge a kinship between *Bayou* and *Swamp Thing*; nevertheless, I maintain that the pioneering horror series also offers an attractive interpretive framework for Love's work. Understanding Moore and Bissette's strategies in the comics medium allows us to better assess how *Bayou* amplifies the horrors of the commonplace through the fantastic, personifies southern landscapes, and invokes the legacy of African American struggle through spatial and temporal rifts of “rememory.” While *Bayou* does not take place during the antebellum era, it

follows the lead of other postmodern slave narratives in furnishing “a political act of narration designed to reshape our view of slavery and its impact on our cultural condition” (Spaulding 4).

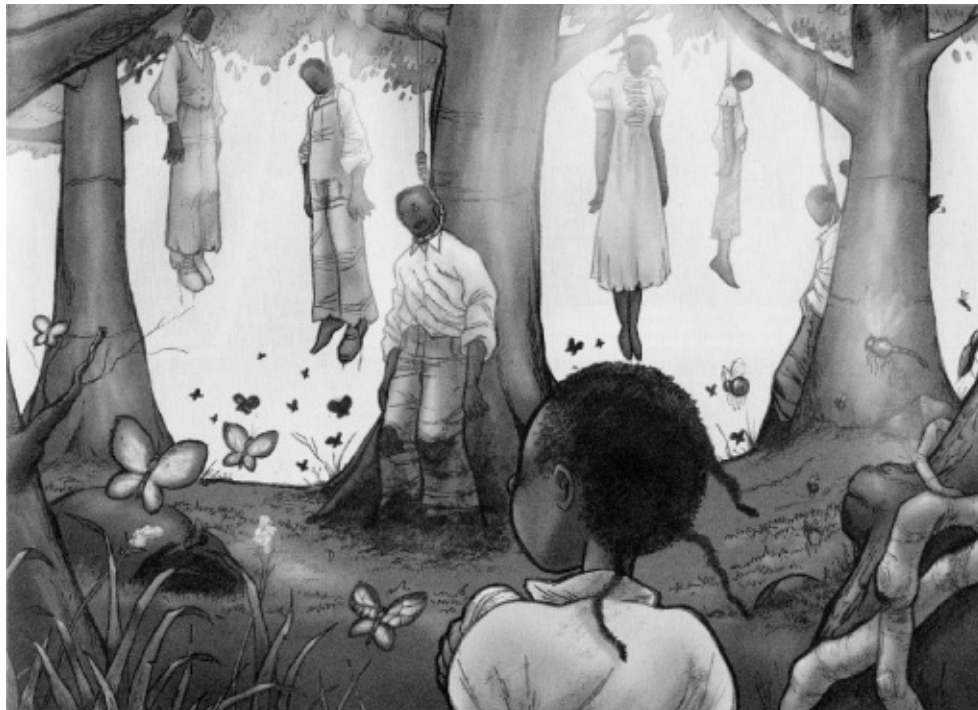
The politics of *Bayou* emanate, of course, from a preoccupation with place. Of special interest to Love are the social and psychological meanings attached to negotiated spaces and borders in places such as segregated facilities of Charon, Mississippi, or the delta land on which the sharecropper Calvin Wagstaff and his daughter live and work (but will never own). As Trudier Harris notes, “mental shackles control black bodies as aggressively as did legal sanctions in the South. In history and literature, therefore, the physical space of the South combines with the psychological implications of being on southern territory” (4). Even in the parallel reality, the comic’s swamp creature is trapped in a maze of boundaries—Bayou insists the woods in Dixie aren’t “safe” (1:95), but laments that the Bossman won’t allow him to leave the swamp (1:112). The complications of space extend also to the murdered body of Lee’s friend, a young black boy named Billy Glass whose death sets the narrative plot in motion. Later in the story, the reader is relocated behind the cruel, lifeless frame of a lynching postcard to see young Billy in the spirit world, refusing to part with the body he once inhabited as it is mutilated and abandoned in the Yazoo River. “It’s my body!” Billy screams, “I ain’t leavin’ it to rot in the bayou!” (2:73). In this scene, which resonates keenly with Swamp Thing’s meditations on the cycle of life and death, *Bayou*’s angel/ancestor figure, Mother Sista, consoles Billy by reminding him: “Honey, that body is just a vessel. If you cling to it, bad things will happen” (2:74).

However it is Love’s heroine, Lee Wagstaff—uniquely endowed with the ability to access haunted places—who is situated at the center of *Bayou*. Lee remarks early on, “the Bayou is a bad place. Ain’t nuthin’ good ever happened around there” (1:4). Indeed, before Billy’s body was dumped there, Lee’s mother drowned when a storm washed her into the river. Her best friend Lily goes missing after being gobbled up by a monster named Cotton-Eyed Joe that emerges from its depths. The swamp mud forms tiny hands to grab Lily’s feet, while butterflies and ladybugs begin to consume her flesh, but Lee somehow manages to pass in and out of the Bayou unharmed (1:40). When her father has been falsely accused of kidnapping Lily, Lee marches past the town’s Confederate monument to the sheriff’s office where a gathered crowd of angry white men glare, spit, and wait for nightfall. Most importantly, Lee is gifted with a kind of second sight and appears to be the only human who can see Billy’s spectral aspect, glowing with amber-colored wings. With Billy’s help she continues to fearlessly negotiate unsafe spaces in her search for Lily and discovers the vast interdependency between the town of Charon and the surreal landscapes of Dixie. “What we do here makes a difference to our fleshly brother and sisters,” Mother Sista divulges to Billy. “We can throw their world in chaos if we do battle here. . . . That Girl comin’ done changed everything” (2:79–80).



9.4. From *Bayou*, by Jeremy Love. New York: DC Comics, 2009. Copyright © Gettosake.

Lee dissolves an even greater boundary after she is fatally injured in a forest trap and brought back to life by Bayou's blood and folk healing. In the purgatorial state shown in [figure 9.4](#), she learns of her own death from Billy. But after being told that monster's life-saving hoodoo won't last, she asks Billy how much more time she has on earth:



9.5. From *Bayou*, by Jeremy Love. New York: DC Comics, 2009. Copyright © Gettosake.



“Few days at best.”

“Daddy and Lily . . .”

“HA HA HA You got a few days to live and all you can think about is some damn white girl. Whatta bunch of horse s%\$\*!”

“Hush Billy Glass! If you woulda learnt to watch your mouth I wouldn’t ta had to fish you out that water!”

“That ain’t right to say Lee. Ain’t right at all. What them peckerwoods did to me was horrible. Just horrible. And they finna do the same to your Daddy if’n you don’t get your black a#@ movin’!” (1:108)

Lee is not a zombie and she is not quite the walking dead. But she is a kind of threshold figure that embodies the liminality of the postmodern black subject in her ability to bridge the literal and the allegorical (there is even some indication that Lee’s special abilities may stem from the mysteries surrounding her deceased mother, a sultry blues woman nicknamed “Tar Baby” whose full identity has not yet been revealed). Lee is armed both with a shotgun and a child’s doll; she doesn’t think twice about wringing a chicken’s neck for dinner (1:24) and boosting Brer Rabbit’s leg irons (2:85), but she feels self-conscious about what Mrs. Rabbit calls the “nappy mess” of hair on her head (2:21). In her traveling sack, Lee carries the ax of an ancestor descended from runaway slaves and Choctaw Indians as a kind of talisman, while the spelling of her name signals the famous leader of the Confederate Armies in the Civil War (1:51).

History intrudes further into Lee’s present through breathless moments of “rememory” that are not quite dreams or flashbacks, but material traces of the past. In the haunting scene shown in [figure 9.5](#), Lee stumbles through the woods into a cluster of trees sagging with the lynched bodies of half a dozen black men and women in various stages of decomposition (1:48). Golden butterflies and mosquitoes at dusk frame the interplay of life and death in a single splash panel. Man and nature converge, as the gnarled roots of a tree in the foreground resemble fingers and knuckles, while the feet of the dead body in the center of the panel appear to be rooted in the soil. It is clear that what Lee has stumbled upon is not a single moment, but a temporal dislocation of borrowed memories not unlike the overlapping panels of “Southern Change.” A chorus of unattributed voices calling her name intensifies the visual convergence. And Lee is not the only one whose actions are guided by someone else’s “thought pictures” in the story. In other scenes, Bayou struggles with flashbacks of his own in which he sees a young African girl named Nandi and a pair of children with shackles around their necks speaking in Lee’s voice (1:114, 140).

Such visual and verbal codes allow *Bayou* to signify southern history not merely as a series of cultural scripts as *Swamp Thing* suggests, but as a microcosm of competing fictions the reader is forced to negotiate. A staged lynching photograph, inflammatory newspaper accounts of Billy’s so-called assault, and Calvin Wagstaff’s crimes—even the crude police sketch of Lee’s father—are all exposed as cruel inventions and tall tales (1:77). On the other hand, in

*Bayou*'s parallel world, we encounter "real-life" trickster rabbits that frequent juke joints, greedy Golliwogs, and a villain disguised as a flock of carnivorous "Jim Crows" (1:130). This is how Love defamiliarizes traditional representations of history, by bringing such fictional characters and their mythical exploits to life in the hyperrealistic setting of Dixie even as their actions underscore the age-old power structures (and survival strategies) that drive mid-century American racial politics.

So we might read Lee's quest to find Brer Rabbit and confront General Bog, then, as a journey *into* master narrative, through the totalizing story once used as the taproot of American chattel slavery and maintained to control men like her father after Emancipation. Recall Swamp Thing's observation of the crumbling Louisiana plantation in "Strange Fruit": "And even though . . . its design is long since buried . . . It still guides the footsteps . . . of those who tread . . . the world above" (42:5). Lee and Bayou retrace Dixie's "buried mazes," breaking down one precarious boundary after the next and unraveling the authoritative fictions of southern oppression. And in one ironic twist, the young protagonist is confronted with just how fragile and indeterminate the stories that shape her worldview can be. "I sprung you from that chain gang cuz' I needs yo' help," Lee explains to Brer Rabbit after finally catching up with him later in the series (2:96). The anti-climactic exchange proceeds as follows:

"Lost my best friend and if I don't find her . . . my daddy will die. I now seein' you keep all the stories in dis wide world. I was thinking you can dig up a story out yo' noggin that tells you where my friend is."

"HA HA HA HA! You, Ha Ha Ha, you fools came all the way here on the count of my stories? HA HA HA!! I lost dem stories in a dice game in Nawlins to Brer Fox!"(2:97)

Like *Swamp Thing* three decades earlier, *Bayou* effectively challenges the notion of the South as a closed, unified narrative by manipulating the representation of African American history and memory through speculative genres. These comics put forth a reading of the past as a place in which "its boundaries are fluid and provisional, its meaning plural and in play, circulating through the conscious and unconscious intentions of the writer, the reader, and culture" (Geyh xxii). Further manifestations of this open, fraught textuality can be found in hybrid identities of creatures like Swamp Thing, Bayou, the zombie mobs of the Robertland Plantation, and even the protean child, Lee Wagstaff. Through these characters, the postmodern slave narrative's struggle to reclaim the past, to explore the turmoil between the Self and the Other, and to unveil the deep consequences of an interdependent world are given new life in horror and fantasy comics.

## Notes

1. In his introduction to the trade paperback collection, *Swamp Thing: Dark Genesis*, writer Len Wein discusses the creative origin of the Swamp Thing character as he first appeared in DC's *House of Secrets* #92 and later in his own titled series. The issues written by Alan Moore as part of the second run were titled *Saga of the Swamp Thing* from #21–#45.

With issues #46, the series reverted back to its original title, *Swamp Thing*.

2. Bissette and Totleben joined the series in 1983, a year before Moore was brought on as writer.

3. By using A. Timothy Spaulding's term, "postmodern slave narrative," my conceptual framework highlights contemporary texts that experiment with form, narrative voice, genre, and other "postmodern aesthetics and politics" in a manner that differs from "neo-slave narratives" that revisit the conventions of antebellum slave autobiography more closely (Spaulding 1–4).

4. As Rody explains, for the main character of Morrison's *Beloved* "a 'rememory' (an individual experience) hangs around as a 'picture' that can enter another's 'rememory' (the part of the brain that 'rememories') and complicates consciousness and identity" (Rody 110). In the oft-quoted scene from the novel, Sethe tells her daughter:

"Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. Someday you be walking down the road and your hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else." (Morrison 35–36)

5. Other recent publications include *The Original Johnson* by Trevor Von Eeden (2010), *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece (2008), *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso (2007), *Stagger Lee* by Derek McCulloch and Shepherd Hendrix (2006), and *Bluesman* by Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo (2006–2008).

6. My allusion to "authenticating documents" mindfully connects the strategies of the aforementioned comic book creators to the rhetorical methods of the antebellum slave narrative, a genre that, as critics such as Robert Stepto and William Andrews point out, seeks to counter notions of black dehumanization through persuasive "fictions of factual representation" (Hayden White qtd. in Andrews 16). For more analysis on how a comic like Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* adapts and revises slave narrative conventions, see Conseula Francis's essay in this collection.

7. Papa Midnite, New York kingpin and Voodoo practitioner, is an associate of John Constantine, the character who was first introduced in *Swamp Thing* and later evolved into his own series, *Hellblazer*. Other recent black comics that experiment with fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction and parody include *The Hole: Consumer Culture* by Damian Duffy and John Jennings, and *Birth of a Nation: A Comic Novel* by Aaron McGruder, Reginald Hudlin, and Kyle Baker.

8. The Rosewood Vampires make their first appearance in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #3, "A

Town Has Turned to Blood.”

9. Although the events I examine in “Southern Change” and “Strange Fruit” do not occur in the swamp surrounding Houma, it is important to acknowledge the role this terrain plays in establishing the foundation of *Swamp Thing*’s uncommon strength. In his analysis of Walt Kelly’s *Pogo* in this collection, Brian Cremins suggests that the “imagined geography” of the swamp facilitates the exploration of alternate realities and serves as a province for more fluid psychosocial boundaries as well. Without question, Moore capitalizes on the dialectic of risk and renewal that the swamp symbolizes throughout his time with the series and in his development of the *Swamp Thing* character.

10. “Zuvenbies” was the term favored by Marvel Comics to circumvent the Comics Code’s prohibition against zombies and other monsters.

11. Obviously, the circumstances under which Chesnutt wrote as one of the first major African American authors to capture the attention of the white-controlled publishing industry were vastly different than for Moore in the 1980s. Yet the comparison is useful for the ways in which Chesnutt took advantage of the popular conventions of southern local color fiction to subtly condemn the system of oppression that served as slavery’s foundation. As Richard Brodhead notes in his introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, “All is compliance, so far as the surface appears of these stories goes. Nevertheless Chesnutt makes his adopted form carry other messages than it had in other hands— messages always obliquely conveyed behind an elaborate show of conformity” (Chesnutt 6).

12. Boon makes a crucial distinction between zombies and the walking dead, noting that “the reanimated dead are not proper zombies unless they lose some essential quality of self” (36). Nevertheless, my insistence on the term and discursive framework of the zombie is purposeful, not simply because Moore refers to the comic as a “zombie tale” but because I assert that the historical reality of American slavery and oppression, the act of reducing humans to chattel labor suggests an analogous loss of an “essential quality of self” that the story seeks to recover.

13. In *Weird Fantasy* #18 (1953) by Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando, an American astronaut refuses to allow Cybrinia, the Planet of Mechanical Life, membership in the Earth’s Great Galactic Republic because of the orange robots’ practice of segregating and oppressing their blue counterparts. It isn’t until the last panel—when the astronaut removes his helmet—that the reader discovers that Earth’s representative is a black man whose dignified expression and professional responsibility demonstrates the progress humankind has made in the future.

14. During the controversy over an earlier issue of *Swamp Thing* that was rejected by the CMAA’s Comics Code (#29), artist Stephen Bissette has noted that he sent editor Karen Berger clippings of zombie movie ads to convince her of the pervasiveness of the walking dead in popular entertainment (Weiland). The appearance of these movie posters in “Strange Fruit” not only normalizes the actual appearance of the walking dead in his story, but also marks the artistic limitations within the comics industry during the early 1980s.

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