

GRAPHIC ENVIRONMENTS: PERFORMING ECOCRITICISM
AT THE CONFLUENCE OF IMAGE AND TEXT

by

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation focuses on an ecocritical evaluation of environmental representation in contemporary comics and graphic novels. Ecocriticism and the graphic narrative share disciplinary similarities; both are hybrid forms that commingle seemingly incommensurable components (literature and the land, text and image), and both continue to evolve in complex and exciting ways. Using the familiar rubric of animal, vegetable, and mineral, my dissertation explores the theoretical underpinnings of ecocriticism's contemporary moment as it is illustrated in the graphic environment.

Ecocriticism today is marked by an increased interest in postcolonial theory and by a posthumanist turn that has culminated in various species of speculative realism and new materialist theory. Following an introduction designed to juxtapose the development of ecocriticism with the evolving graphic and narrative conventions of comics and graphic novels, I turn in my first chapter to a postcolonial ecocritical analysis of the graphic novel. Given the confluence of aesthetics and politics in a postcolonial theory, I invoke the work of French theorist Jacques Rancière as a necessary component of my ecocritical analysis of three graphic narratives featuring animal protagonists. My second chapter provides close textual and visual readings of two graphic novels whose vegetable-human hybrid characters provide models for applying Deleuze's theory of the rhizome and Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory to environmental representation. This

chapter introduces key concepts that ground much of new materialism and serves as a bridge to my third chapter. Here, I weave together the threads of feminist materialism and object-oriented ontology in an ecocritical reading of three graphic novels that consider things from a thing's point of view.

My conclusion shifts forward to an ecocritical reading of two graphic novels that provide global and local perspectives on the critical issues concerning environmental writers and theorists today, the ecological, social, and economic consequences of hyperobjects like global climate change and global financial collapse. Graphic narratives provide a uniquely effective representational medium for locating the contemporary environmental imagination and for illustrating the theoretical complexities beneath its surface. I argue that there is much work to be done at the confluence of image and text in the graphic environment.

For my superheroes, Katie and Steve

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INTRODUCTION: GRAPHIC ENVIRONMENTS

Ecocriticism and the graphic novel share an overlapping (and little noted) coincidence of attributes and arguments. Both are what Bruno Latour designated as *quasi-objects*, hybrid combinations assembled in the middle ground between well-established polarities: nature and culture, image and text (*We Have Never Been Modern* 77). Broadly sketching the outlines of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” Cheryll Glotfelty envisioned a chimerical blend of literary criticism and scientific theory, an interdisciplinary superhero with “one foot in literature and the other on land,” able to “negotiate between the human and the nonhuman” while exploring the nuances of their intersection as represented in literature (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). The graphic novel is likewise a shifting combination of authorial text and artistic image—“more alchemy than science” according to Scott McCloud—another kind of assemblage that relies on the tensions and affinities between its constituent arts to animate its content (161). Both are primarily concerned with representation; the graphic novel provides its creators with a medium for conceptual expression, while ecocriticism critically analyzes and evaluates the representational strategies of multiple media. In yet another display of similarity, the respective practitioners of each discipline appear to agree to disagree about preferred nomenclature. While yielding to the widespread and conventional use of the phrase *ecocriticism* by other ecocritics, Lawrence Buell argued that the description “environmental” criticism

“approximates better than ‘eco’ the hybridity of the subject at issue...as well as the movement’s increasingly heterogeneous foci” on a variety of environments represented within a far more interdisciplinary matrix (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* viii). Patrick D. Murphy also elaborates on the notion of disciplinary diversity, pointing out that there is an equal need to “distinguish between the terrain of ecological criticism...and the distinct terrain of the literature itself,” between Glotfelty’s ground rules and the multiplicity of texts and genres in which the representation of the human/nature relationship is centrifugally or centripetally present (*Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* 1). The descriptor “graphic novel” is a similarly slippery term: when does a “graphic narrative” (Will Eisner’s term for “any story that employs image to transmit an idea”) become a graphic “novel” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* xvii)? Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven express a preference for Eisner’s terminology because of its broader application: “We understand graphic narrative to encompass a range of types of narrative work in comics,” they explain, and their interest is aimed squarely at the medium’s visual and verbal narrative practices (767). Alan Moore suggests that “comic work of more than 40 pages is automatically equated with a novel,” and Roger Sabin seems to concur that “lengthy comics in book form with a thematic unity” is an adequate description, yet Sabin and other authors also point to industry binding techniques as the defining characteristic distinguishing the graphic novel from comics (Moore, *Writing for Comics* 3; Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* 165).¹

Both ecocriticism and the graphic novel suffer from (or benefit from, depending upon your perspective) the competing demands of their practitioners regarding the

adequacy of their respective representational strategies: the challenges inherent in trying to image the so-called natural world in terms of both its human and other-than-human participants, the relative predominance of image and/or text as the engine driving the graphic novel machine, and the questionable question of anthropomorphism in *any* form of environmental representation. And yet despite these and other similarities, to date there has been no sustained ecocritical exploration of the graphic novel as one of what Patrick Murphy notes are the “many ways of representing human engagement with the rest of nature in literary forms that do not descend from natural history, that are not written in prose, that are not nonfiction [and] that are not rhetorically structured as essays” (*Farther Afield* 2). When Buell makes his distinction between the terms “ecocriticism” and “environmental criticism,” he actually suggests that the “eco” prefix “still invokes in some quarters *the cartoon image* of a club of intellectually shallow nature worshippers,” conflating an overly simplistic definition of ecocriticism with what he clearly perceives as an equally unsophisticated representational medium not likely to be included in Murphy’s “literary forms” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* viii, emphasis added). Douglas Wolk suggests that comics “are *sort of* literary. But that’s not all they are...They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties” (14). Wolk offers this qualified description in order to suggest that comics criticism cannot rely solely on the language of literary or film criticism to adequately evaluate a medium that is neither wholly one nor the other. His caveat echoes Murphy’s, whose claim that “ecocriticism is very much a movement, however, rather than a method” celebrates the diversity inherent in an evolving critical

discipline that relies on multiple theoretical perspectives (and not a single prescribed and proscriptive stance) to respond to an equally multiple and heterogeneous mix of texts (17).

Wolk also wants to distance himself from Eisner's use of the term "graphic narrative," noting that "graphic" has unfortunate ties to "sexuality" and "violence" (60-62). Yet it is precisely these bodily (and embodied) graphic elements that I would argue make graphic novels more valuable to ecocriticism's purported study of the relationships between matters human and nonhuman, cultural and natural. Sex and violence are as materially present in ecosystems and in environmental writing as they are in the most graphic artifacts of popular culture. Leslie Fiedler, in an often-quoted article first published in 1955, suggested that for all their crudeness, comics "touch archetypal material...they remain close to the impulsive, subliminal life," and he readily concurs with critics who label comics and other "vulgar art" as "sadistic, fetishistic, brutal [and] full of terror" (126-127). Edward Abbey writes with avid detail about his encounter with mating gopher snakes in the (then) Arches National Monument; he describes himself as "a shameless voyeur" who crawls on his hands and knees to "to get a closer view" (*Desert Solitaire* 20). In *The Anthropology of Turquoise*, Ellen Meloy's chapter "A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry" celebrates the pulsing colors and sinuous shapes of desert plant life—"slickrotica" is her evocative neologism for the vibrant red flowers she describes as "visual aphrodisiacs" (224, 226). In *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape*, author Terry Tempest Williams and artist Mary Frank explore the erotics of an elemental embeddedness in an unexpectedly lush desert space. Frank's suggestive line drawings and color panels provide visual stimulation as Williams exposes herself to the mind's eye.

I dissolve. I am water. Only my face is exposed like an apparition over ripples. Playing with water. Do I dare? My legs open. The rushing water

turns my body and touches me with a fast finger that does not tire. I receive without apology. Time. Nothing to rush, only to feel. I feel time in me. It is endless pleasure in the current. No control. No thought. Simply here. (23-24)

Whether recording the first acts or the final ones of the cycle of life and death, both ecocriticism and comics *do* something—Glotfelty’s imagined ecocritic “negotiates” between literature and land; McCloud’s words and images “go hand in hand...like partners in a dance” (155-156). Like Abbey’s “living caduceus,” ecocriticism and the graphic novel “intertwine and separate, glide side by side in perfect congruence, turn like mirror images of each other and glide back again, wind and unwind again” (*Desert Solitaire* 20). In a passage that has considerable strength for my approach to an ecocritical analysis of graphic novels, Bruno Latour emphasizes the power of a quasi-object to act as a creative mediator, functioning between terms to produce something new even as it also re-presents its constituents—the hybrid’s transforming ability to make us see or hear or think about something we have not before (*We Have Never Been Modern* 77-78). Critical analysis that insists on teasing this partnership apart, that wants to evaluate each part using the conventions of either one or the other, runs the risk of neutering the power generated by their interweaving. “In this way,” Latour notes, “the middle was simultaneously maintained and abolished, recognized and denied, specified and silenced” (78). Subordinated to its individual components, the hybrid’s unique identity and powerful performance is cancelled out. Latour advocates instead that “we start from the middle,” focus our analysis on the hybrid quasi-object and how its resonating complexity enhances its constituents’ capacities as well as its own (81). His solution is to eliminate the borders or boundary markers between those dialectical poles, to identify the quasi-object in the fullness of its constituents: to abandon the impulse to

bracket off Nature from Culture because “[c]ultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison” (104). An ecocritical approach to the graphic novel should not begin by separating literature from land, human from nonhuman, image from text. Instead, the potential for each lies in the boundary blurring performance of these polyform, transgressive, mediating chimera. Where the graphic novel draws on the polysemic and heteroglossic synergies of image and text, ecocriticism, imagined as riding the gap between culture and nature, mediating between the represented and the real, likewise feeds on the productive dissensus among its assembled parts.

Ecocriticism: An Evolving Discipline

The time should come when we ask of any text, “What does this say about the environment?” (Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 5)

In their foundational 1996 collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty and her co-editor, Harold Fromm, prompted by increasing concerns about the negative impacts of human activity on the natural world, assembled a montage of scholarly essays on fictional and dramatic literature to celebrate critical engagement with environmental representation. This early anthology was soon followed by other likeminded and increasingly heterogeneous collections. In 1998, Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells published *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism & Literature*, a transatlantic anthology emphasizing the dialogic commingling of British and American authors “to see what old narrative forms made of environmentalism, and whether new ones are emerging” and valorizing boundary crossing between theoretical and textual practices (“Introduction” 5). Laurence Coupe’s *The Green Studies Reader:*

From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, published in 2000, combined traditional literary critique with Marxist, structuralist, and cultural theory, while broadening the array of ecocritical textual objects under consideration to include fantasy fiction and film. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001) explicitly challenged ecocriticism to increase its textual sampling to include "texts that might seem unlikely subjects because they do not foreground the natural world or wilderness," texts from multiple genres set in urban environments and degraded landscapes ("Introduction" 5).

At the same time, other ecocritical anthologies began to display a kind of specialized evolution; 1998 also saw the publication of Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy's edited collection, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, and the next decade would see an invasion of anthologies that similarly exploited a more specific theoretical or thematic niche. Murphy's *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (2000) brought narrative theory to bear on both multicultural and postmodern literatures. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (2002) was a watershed collection, in which editors Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein engaged with a wide range of authors and texts "to examine the issues, events, cultural productions, and educational initiatives emerging from the environmental justice movement worldwide" ("Introduction" 4-5). Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008) expanded the outer limits of ecocriticism, using prose fiction and science fiction to "point to ways of imagining the global that frame localism from a globalist environmental perspective" (9). In 2010, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin followed with

Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment, a conjoining of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism designed to “demonstrate the knowledge of *non-western* (non-European) societies and cultures” by “reaching out across languages and cultures” to address global exploitation of human and nonhuman peoples and environments (“Introduction” 16). 2011’s *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, added another dimension to ecocriticism’s polyvocal and multihued aspect. With its examination of such disparate textual species as novels, television shows, political movements, and community parks, this anthology exemplifies the kinds of boundary-crossing and genre-blending only imagined in those early visions of ecocriticism as a manifestly hybrid discipline.

Yet despite this optimistic portrait, ecocriticism’s evolution has not followed a smoothly linear (and vertical) trajectory. Much like comics’ Gold and Silver Ages, ecocriticism’s evolution can be thought of in terms of thematic iterations or, as Lawrence Buell notes in his 2011 article, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends,” imagined as a series of consecutive and yet overlapping waves. It is perhaps ironic that Buell, whose preference for the term “environmental criticism” over that of “ecocriticism” on the grounds that the “eco” prefix suggests a homogeneity of both content and intent not really in keeping with the diverse representational environments it critiques, would select such a monistic metaphor for his discussion of ecocriticism’s thematic stages. The difficulty with using organic metaphors is precisely their tendency to smooth over the centripetal and centrifugal tensions that continuously animate (and agitate) ecocritical discussion; Grant Morrison’s discussion of the various “ages” of the superhero comic recognizes more adequately the interpenetration of each aspect with those before and after it.

In its first flowering, ecocritical literary criticism (produced largely by Western authors and taking Western literature as its subject matter) focused on (predominantly nonfiction) texts in which nonhuman nature shared (and in some cases, overshadowed) the stage with human actors.² Ecocritics utilized the tools of literary criticism to evaluate those representational strategies and worked to expand the literary canon to include neglected/overlooked works of nonfiction nature writing. At the same time, some practitioners demanded that ecocritics demonstrate an increased environmental literacy, turning to evolutionary biology and ecological science to help shape a more scientifically informed critique of the adequacy of literary representations of local and regional ecosystems. Second-wave ecocriticism reflected the impact of the theoretical turn in gender studies, critical race theory, and cultural studies on literary theory in general and on environmental representation in particular, as theoretically inclined ecocritics called attention to the social and cultural construction of a Nature too often concealed beneath Baroque layers of mimetic representation. This heightened awareness of social construction also prompted some ecocritics to engage more fully with the political implications of issues of environmental pollution, political policies, and potential social injustice. Buell's overview concludes with a speculative discussion of what he anticipates as ecocriticism's third wave, which he bifurcates into two trajectories: an extension of Western environmental justice initiatives into a more global postcolonial environmentalism, and the simultaneous growth of interest in a more materialist engagement with transgressive environmental pollution, as exemplified in ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo's work with "trans-corporeality" (Buell, "Ecocriticism" 88-97). More recently, in the January 2013 online issue of *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, Scott Slovic,

editor of *ISLE*, heralded “a new fourth wave of ecocriticism” that has emerged around “the theoretical and practical aspects” of “material ecocriticism” (“The Roots and Branches of ASLE” 5).

Although Buell confidently asserts that from its inception, “most [ecocritics] would have granted readily enough that ecocritical work might comprehend any and all expressive media,” collections of environmental representation only gradually diversified their content (“Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends” 89). Early anthologies of nature writing reflected a sort of local homogeneity, predominately featuring the work of mostly Western-male-authored nature-oriented fiction and nonfiction. The 1990 *Norton Book of Nature Writing* was edited in 2002 to include a wider range of gender and ethnicity in its authors, but featured only prose texts. Lorraine Anderson’s *Sisters of the Earth: Women’s Prose & Poetry About Nature* (1991) attempted to balance this trend by featuring only female authors and by including poetry along with more traditional prose selections. Anderson, Scott Slovic, and John P. O’Grady’s *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture* (1999) attempted a more diverse collection, using prose, poetry, personal narrative, essays, and cultural commentary to flesh out a thematic array of nature-oriented and environmental writing. Volumes of ecocriticism have followed along similar lines, concentrating first on explicitly nature-themed or oriented prose fiction, then expanding the field’s coverage to embrace poetry, nonfiction, and a wider array of cultural voices and critical objects. Armbruster and Wallace’s *Beyond Nature Writing* concluded with critical essays under the heading “Expanding Ecocriticism across Genres and Disciplines,” evaluating works of science fiction, film, educational programming in our National Parks, and the virtual landscapes of online gaming. Ursula

Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* specifically challenges "current U.S. environmentalist discourse, ecocriticism included" to adopt a more eco-cosmopolitan perspective (59). 2011's *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* is, in this respect, a far more ambitious attempt to address a much broader array of "missing links" in its coverage of expressive media and materials.

Noticeably absent from the contemporary ecocritical scene, however, is a sustained engagement with the graphic novel as a platform for environmental representation, as an avatar of the various waves of ecocritical evolution, and as a compelling pedagogical vehicle. This is particularly surprising because comics seem to have responded to public concerns about environmental issues far sooner than ecocriticism's somewhat belated appearance in the 1990s. In *Supergods*, comics writer Grant Morrison points out that by the 1970s, "stories about Indian land rights, pollution, overcrowding, and women's lib...[t]he new anxieties of America and the West at the end of the sixties were stamped directly onto the pages of the comics" (152). By the 1980s, titles like Larry Marder's *Tales of the Beanworld* and Bob Burden's *Flaming Carrot* set the stage for Alan Moore's reboot of *Swamp Thing*, "an ecological fable" that resurrected its literally green hero as "a sort of 'god of vegetation'" and "used the comic to comment upon US gun laws, feminism and multinational economics" (Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics* 76-77). Raymond Briggs's *When the Wind Blows*, a 1982 graphic novel that poignantly depicts the insufficiency of an elderly British couple's dutiful (and doomed) response to a nuclear attack ("Well, we survived the last one. We can do it again...Yes, we must always look on the bright side, ducks"), is as viscerally compelling as Rachel Carson's "Fable for Tomorrow" in 1962's *Silent Spring*. Patrick Murphy notes that "postmodernist forms and

media technology have also increased the frequency of the appearance of hybrid forms, such as mixed-genre books and combination art and text works, as well as video, film, and mixed-media presentations,” and he urges ecocritics “to have a concept of aesthetic representations inclusive enough to be able to comment intelligently and critically on such works” (*Farther Afield* 54-55). Tim Morton, whose *Ecology Without Nature* is subtitled “Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics,” points towards art’s value as a critical environmental resource in his more recent book, *The Ecological Thought*:

Ecocriticism has overlooked the way in which all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its *form*. Ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art, isn’t just *about* something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth). Ecological art *is* something, or maybe it *does* something. Art is ecological insofar as it is made from materials and exists in the world...But there is more to its ecological quality than that...Ecology permeates all forms. (11)

As a literal and material “combination of art and text,” the graphic novel offers a doubled capacity for environmental representation and engagement. It can afford us a profoundly hybrid perspective on the world we share with multiple others. “What the *mixing* of the text and image often does,” Linda Hutcheon notes, “is to underline, through the use of direct verbal address to a viewer, the fact that, as a signifying system, pictures too represent both a scene and the look of a viewer, both an object and a subject” (131). It is time, then, that we move on to explore more precisely how the graphic novel performs to engage us more intimately with what Morton would claim is our always already interdependence in an ecology that is “profoundly about coexistence” (*The Ecological Thought* 4).

The Graphic Novel: At the Confluence of Image and Text

Put simply, art involves a new combination.
(Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* 146)

The graphic novel combines images and text to tell a story. Graphic novels come in a variety of lengths, formats, and genres, and, like ecocriticism, suffer from critical dissent over descriptions of precisely what constitutes this textual format.³ They are written for a variety of audiences, from juveniles to adults to “mature audiences only,” and their content ranges from original stories to adaptations of other primary texts, movies, television programs, and video games. Graphic novels evolved from traditional comics, and their aesthetic structure combines the artistry of cartoon art with the narrative strategies of the novel. Where ecocriticism concerns itself with the representation of the intersection of human and nonhuman in a range of different environments, the emerging discipline of comics criticism focuses on comics “as a site where words and images intersect” (Varnum and Gibbons x). Scott McCloud, whose *Understanding Comics* represents a landmark in American comics criticism (much like the Glotfelty and Fromm anthology of ecocriticism), mounts an argument that echoes Latour's. McCloud lauds what he describes as comics' “*silent dance* of the seen and the unseen,” their ability to “go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (92 italics original, 155-156). McCloud focuses his critical attention on the power of this assemblage of word and image *as both a combination of distinct elements and as a functioning system in its own right*; his impulse is to explore the power of this hybrid by emphasizing its collective functionality, rather than by redefining it in terms of its elemental constituents (92). Not all comics critics agree with McCloud's sentiments: Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons, in their introduction to the edited collection *The Language of Comics: Word*

and Image, specifically take issue with McCloud's both/and approach. They find his argument contradictory, and they suggest instead that comics must be viewed "either as a single, integral system of signification or as a hybrid (whether freakish or not) made up of the separate elements of painting and writing," and their useful collection presents essays that support each side (xi, my italics). I prefer McCloud's willingness to begin, as Latour does, "in the middle." His contention, that "no other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well," suggests one of the reasons why graphic novels, as a representational medium, might well serve as a productive and provocative source for ecocritical analysis (92).

Ecocriticism cannot evaluate the mere adequacy of environmental representation in the texts under its consideration, particularly now in the face of accelerating global warming, demands for corporate environmental stewardship and accountability, and dwindling nonrenewable resources. Ecocriticism also needs to consider how some texts reignite our environmental imagination, providing us with creative scenarios in which we actively rise to meet those challenges. Graphic novels do not simply invite their readers to observe their intricate dance of text and image, word and thing; comics readers become active participants, supplying what Will Eisner describes as "both visual and verbal interpretive skills" to connect multiple images and bits of text into a comprehensive whole (Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* 2). I have argued elsewhere that ecocriticism should incorporate some aspects of performance theory in its reading of textual artifacts in order to explore more fully the performances represented therein and to deconstruct the performative consequences of those representations.⁴ McCloud stresses that *closure*, the reader's compulsion to construct a whole from an observed series of fragments, to grasp

the narrative from a comic's juxtaposed sequences of pictorial panels and word balloons, is a critical component of comics' aesthetic experience. He believes that our capacity for closure is an evolved response to our embedding in an "incomplete world" where our survival (and that of our environment) is dependent upon our ability to make connections between actions and consequences—a kind of Darwinian instinct that demands that we actually *get* the picture rather than simply consume it passively (63). Douglas Wolk points to the "immersive experience of comics" as a key factor in the pleasure offered by this particular medium; comics readers actively enjoy "filling in *all* the blank spaces beyond each panel"—a kind of readerly wayfinding that maps performance onto text (132).

Wolk provocatively offers walking as a metaphor for readers' engagement with the distinctive progression of comics' sequential panels: "each step is a fall that's caught by the next" (131). The potential for one panel's content to arrest the assumptions we read into the panel adjacent to it (clearly, unlike film projection, comics panels can be read in or out of sequence—but more about that later) is a critical component of this metaphor. Thoreau devotes the opening paragraphs of his essay "Walking" to a discussion of "the genius" (and the genus) "for *sauntering*," for "the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks" (Emerson and Thoreau 71). Thoreau prefers as the likely origin of the term the French expression for medieval pilgrims walking towards the Holy Land, "*à la Sainte Terre*," over the phrase "*sans terre*, without land or a home"—he emphasizes the grounded performance captured in the former over the unanchored aimlessness suggested by the latter (71-72). Thoreau's Saunterer is no Everyman with no particular place to go, always already at home regardless of his surroundings. "Every walk is a sort of crusade,"

he argues, motivated by a need to “go forth and reconquer” the very specific and Holy ground beneath his feet: to renew and to re-know the environment as it reveals itself in the actual performance of walking (72). Readers of graphic novels find themselves in similar territory. Comics are “full of enticing blank spaces, in both space and time, for readers to decorate...but what they look and feel like when we flesh them out isn’t the same way we perceive our own environments” (Wolk 133). The realistic specificity of some pictorial panels can be interrupted by the words that precede or follow them; the seemingly straightforward claim in a word balloon can be belied by the image it accompanies. What we see on the comics page is not our own immediate (and notice that I do not mean here “unmediated”) perception of the world around us, but rather an overtly mediated representation of some world by some person or persons other than ourselves. We are not merely vagrants wandering a fully rendered imaginative world whose premises we accept without question, whose environment we fall into without pause. Instead, we are what French political, literary, and aesthetic theorist Jacques Rancière calls an *emancipated spectator*, able to “translate what she perceives in her own way” (*The Emancipated Spectator* 16). Comics readers go forth into these graphic environments and make them their own in an aesthetic and intellectual sense through their performance of closure; as a result of comics’ specific representational tactics, we renew our acquaintance with what Wolk describes as “a metaphorical representation” of our own “image-world,” one that can sometimes be more transformative than a more realistic, but perhaps more restrictive, presentation (134). “Images,” Rancière notes, are “operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to

meet them” (*The Future of the Image* 3). Rancière’s aesthetic theory discloses how images and text sometimes produce moments of destabilizing *dissemblance*, engaging the viewer in a suddenly unfamiliar experience that opens the door for a productive reimagining of relationships, a suggestion of alternative futures.

Take, for example, the graphic short story, “A Billion Conscious Acts,” included in the fifth collected volume of writer/artist Paul Chadwick’s long running series, *Concrete* (*Think Like a Mountain* 151-156). Chadwick’s half-ton hybrid hero has a mortal mind inside an alien (in both senses: utterly unfamiliar and constructed by interplanetary visitors) body. As the series develops, *Concrete* presents an evolving eco-consciousness that makes him an appealing subject for my interest (he will be a feature attraction in Chapter 3, “Mineral”). Also useful here is the fact that Chadwick is both author *and* artist of this comics series; image and text go hand-in-hand, proceeding from the *same* hand, and Chadwick’s comments on his own process and practice are often instructive. *Concrete* is an attentive and emancipated saunterer, whose alien-enhanced eyesight (he can see with extraordinary clarity, even from a great distance and at night) compensates for the sensory disabilities that come with his mineral-like exterior. Thoreau “would fain return to my senses” when he walks, but *Concrete* has no senses of taste, touch, or smell—along with great strength and endurance, his acute vision is his most valued almost-super power (*Walking* 78-79). Dislocated from his original human body, he sees everything anew...and we are invited to do so as well. In “A Billion Conscious Acts,” we take a walk in *Concrete*’s enormous shoes, seeing his oversized footprint on the ecological macro- and microverses in which we all coexist. Chadwick’s opening panels deftly juxtapose the irony of our inadvertent impact on the natural world (in the

unconscious consequences of our billion conscious acts) with the billion interactions that go on beneath our notice (*Think Like a Mountain* 151). Directly beneath his enormous descending foot, Chadwick strategically positions a tiny Concrete on the gutter between two panels, one where we look down on the footprint to come and one at ground level, where we are suddenly inside that same footprint. Concrete's now tiny legs cross from the macro view to the micro perspective, and we are invited to consider ourselves as simultaneously having an enormous impact on the world and as being influenced by it; little Concrete is on equal footing with the acorn in the second panel. In the next series of panels, Concrete walks unheedingly away while Chadwick's graphic eye takes us deep inside the billion intersections and intra-actions that pay Concrete (and us) no attention whatsoever. Chadwick also calls attention to the very constructed nature of this representation; wasp larvae are growing inside that acorn, "springtails...as small as the crossbar of the 'h' in this line," which "you will probably never see" (*Think Like a Mountain* 153). "Concrete walks on," Chadwick narrates, and steps into a puddle, an image poised at the lower right corner of the right-hand page, the point at which we will turn the page...and the point at which our ready anticipation that we will zoom into that puddle's ecosystem is fully arrested by the text and image of the succeeding panel. "But that's another story," the narrative cautions us, and the image is of some indistinguishable landscape, one where felled trees are burning and we can just make out tiny humans and tiny vehicles on tiny roadways (*Think Like a Mountain* 156).

Chadwick artfully uses this moment to segue into an argument about the vanishing tropical rainforest, and the ultimate consequences to the global ecosystem from a billion conscious acts of deforestation and resource extraction. "Perspective is

everything,” Concrete advises us elsewhere, because “we make decisions based on what we see around us” (*The Human Dilemma* 9). Perspective is an artistic choice, not a given; in a visual medium, it can shift quickly and radically as panel focus changes from the distanced third-person perspective of the traditional anonymous observer to close-up shots only available to one character’s point of view. Illustrators Steve and John Totleben repeatedly interrupt and overlay individual panels in Alan Moore’s *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, embedding one character’s viewpoint in that of another. They also experiment with the affective qualities of form, using diagonal panels rather than the linear and horizontal arrangements of traditional comics, to convey a sense of urgency and movement to reader consciousness and to the narrative situation.⁵ Constantly shifting points of view can produce a sensation of double consciousness in the reader, who must negotiate between seeing (and reading) a character as a subject in one panel, as an object in the next. Recall again Chadwick’s deliberate perspective shifts, from above and below, from within and without, from the local viewpoint to the global perspective in “A Billion Conscious Acts.” The reader *sees* the graphic environment in two different ways, as a participant and as a spectator, as a contributor to its ecological state of being and as the beneficiary (or victim) of those actions. In the briefest of spaces, only six pages, Chadwick has made the local unfamiliar, the global unsettlingly nearby. Using the power of image and text, he renders our consciousness a springboard for rethinking our relationships with the environment, and suggests that while saving the rainforests will not be a walk in the park, “it will be worth it”...for the environment’s sake and for our own (*Think Like a Mountain* 156). This is the hybrid power that an ecocritical consciousness can locate in the environmental imagination of the graphic novel.

Graphic novels, like their more abbreviated progenitors, comics, rely not on photorealism but on drawn images to suggest (rather than to “capture”) not “a direct representation of the world” but rather “an interpretation or transformation of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented” (Wolk 20). Tim Morton, writing specifically about environmental aesthetics and about ecocriticism’s limited engagement with artistic practices, proposes that “art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality” (*The Ecological Thought* 8). I believe that graphic narratives are an ideal art form for showing and telling us something more about our perceptions of our environments, our engagement with them and the extent of our impact on them—more, perhaps, than we consciously intuit from our actual day-to-day experiences. They would fain return us to consciousness; they invite us to pay attention to the billion tiny experiences we pass by unaware. They animate the very issues that Ursula Heise suggests must be interrogated in an ecocritical exploration of the “natural, urban [and] virtual” environments we encounter every day (“Unnatural Ecologies” 166). They vibrate with what Marion D. Perret identifies as “graphic liveliness”—that compelling urgency that flows out of graphic images set in motion by “the dialectic between word and image” when an artist “draws for the mind as well as the eye” (123).

Like any pictorial medium, graphic novels are subject to the hazards often associated with images: the reductive consequences of using stereotypes, the naturalizing effect of deploying myth to convey meaning, and the depoliticizing result of relying on “recognizable reproductions of human conduct” that assume a common readership with a shared pictorial vocabulary and a common sense of the world reproduced in the

visual/textual environment (Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* 11). At the same time, however, some graphic novels attempt a more nuanced negotiation of the interstices between the image and the text, exploring the genre's capacity for transgressing its apparent limitations. These texts embrace the immanent ambiguity necessary to produce an aesthetic experience that promotes the play of disparate identities, active self-reflexivity, and heteroglossic dissensus—an experience where politics might flourish. The graphic novel's capacity for germinating this aesthetic and political ecology deserves ecocritical attention. Globalization's long reach and monologic narratives produce the appearance of a discursive unity that occludes multiple persons, places, and things in the rush to represent a world consensus. Graphic novels invite their readers to experience the world through not only other, but Other senses, a repositioning that radically destabilizes assumptions, re-presents a virtual present, and gestures towards an alternative future. This creative web of words and images affords a lively zone of continuous play for imaginative anthropomorphism that invites new voices to the contemporary global stage.⁶ “Art's ambiguous, vague qualities will help us think things that remain difficult to put into words,” Morton claims, and “art can allow us to glimpse beings that exist beyond or between our normal categories” (*The Ecological Thought* 60). Part of ecocriticism's engagement with the graphic novel's particular power will be to consider more closely its aesthetic performance.

GRAPHIC Novels: The Aesthetics of Cartoon Art

Artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time.
 (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 43)

Scott McCloud's classic exploration of the aesthetics of "sequential art," *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, uses the comic book format to conduct an "examination of the *art-form* of comics, what it's capable of, how it works" (i).

McCloud's text provides a useful starting point for an exploration of the graphic milieu with and against which the narrative is read. As the precursor to the graphic novel, comics provide "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). Cartoon art's production of an aesthetic response depends in part on the degree of realism used in iconic resemblance; the more abstract an icon becomes, the less specific is its referent and vice versa (McCloud 27). McCloud suggests that the simplicity of comic characters is the source of their aesthetic power and that "the cartoon is a *vacuum* into which our *identity* and *awareness* are pulled" (36). This masking effect entices the reader to enter the comic story and to engage with the other elements represented in the sequential frames that depict the environment of the text. McCloud also contends that the juxtaposition of simplified cartoon characters with elaborate and realistic backgrounds creates an opportunity for identity, understood as *self-awareness*, to flow outward from the mind through the senses, extending that awareness to the body and to the enveloping environment (38-41). This somewhat simplified layering of Marshall McLuhan on Descartes nevertheless persuasively underpins McCloud's provocative notion that comics invite readers to inhabit a character-as-mask while "safely entering a sensually stimulating world" (43). Engaged both intellectually and sensually, we literally and physically experience the world of the graphic novel.

McCloud argues that cartooning is not “just a way of *drawing*, it’s a way of *seeing*,” a critical argument that I will return to repeatedly in my arguments (31). The graphic novel integrates the visual conventions of cartooning with its narrative forms to explore alternative ways of seeing and saying, surely a productive combination for environmental representation. Advocating the need for art forms that do more than simply re-present their subject matter, art theorist Simon O’Sullivan suggests, “We see only that which we are interested in. At stake with art might be an altering—a switching—of this register,” and he goes on to reimagine an art that accomplishes more than simple reproduction, an “art [that] operates as a form of play,” one “that takes the participant out of mundane consciousness” (47-48). The reader’s immersion in the sensory world of the graphic novel can produce something like the transgressive experience of virtual identity, the performance of what Walter Benjamin considered “the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (qtd. in Taussig 19). Graphic novels depend upon our “mimetic faculty...the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other,” and the writer/illustrator team provides the vehicles that accommodate these “Othering impulses” (Taussig xiii). The illustrator makes some characters available for role-play while denying that option for others; in the same way, some settings may be richly detailed, vital elements of the narrative, while others are merely sketches, reduced to backdrops foregrounding the actions of the graphic novel’s protagonists. Some characters immediately offer themselves as avatars, while others are more realistically drawn, foreclosing viewer identification because of their specificity; it is also possible to use a greater degree of detail to suspend the reader between empathetic assimilation and

disidentification, to interrupt our seamless desire to inhabit a character by making that character both inviting and disturbing, both welcoming and uninhabitable. In Paul Chadwick's *Concrete* series, the title character is an anomalous hybrid, "one hapless rock-coated fellow," with whom the author (and the reader) wants to ask, "What might really happen to someone whose life was so changed...What would I do in his shoes?" (*Depths* 4). Chadwick's title character is rendered with deceptive simplicity and surprisingly rounded contours, given his rocky exterior. In a sense, Concrete is colorless, odorless, and tasteless; if he is not without gender, he is decidedly without genitalia. This is not realism—Concrete's appearance and carefully crafted origin story make him the perfect Everyman. Instead of being repelled by his alien exterior, we are drawn into the seeming openness of his black-and-white outlines—Chadwick invites us to enter his experience, to share his point of view, and frequently to find ourselves, like Concrete, the brunt of a gentle irony that challenges his (and our) habitual assumptions.

Consider Chadwick's 1986 short story, "Under the Desert Stars" (*Killer Smile* 109-116). Concrete plans an overnight stay in a remote desert location, planning to use this time for contemplation (he is reinventing himself as an environmental writer and memoirist). In the opening panels we look over Concrete's shoulder (adopting at once his perspective) and then immediately shift perspectives to see him from a distance, waving goodbye to his human companions disappearing with the vanishing point. In the large title panel immediately below, however, Chadwick thrusts us outside of Concrete's consciousness. His diminished shape, too small for us to enter, approaches; he is wholly self-absorbed while we are invited to see in some detail the California desert. A condor soars overhead, and an iconic saguaro cactus anchors the panel, and if we look closely,

we can identify other iconic desert flora and fauna (the distinctive silhouette of the Joshua tree, rocky outcroppings, a road runner, a lizard, and a scorpion). One minute we see *with* Concrete, the next we look *at* him; Chadwick's drawings actively move us inside and outside the character, and we step into his body even as we remain aware of it. This is performance; like an actor donning a role, we are conscious that we are imaginatively performing *as* Concrete without actually *becoming* Concrete (Carlson 3). In this story, Concrete is consciously trying to perform as a writer, and much of his dialogue is concerned with thinking about himself performing a role he is not altogether successful in inhabiting. We do the same here—we are not Concrete, and yet again sometimes we are; sometimes we see through his eyes and at other times, we see with our own—and that sort of switching of perspectives performatively reinforces the graphic novel's value for thinking both ecocritically and environmentally. Concrete describes his trip to the desert as “transplantation to nowhere,” immersion in an environment where he thinks there will be little to distract him from his writing (111). Chadwick deliberately juxtaposes perspectives; Concrete's alien eyesight may be superior to ours, but the irony is that we see what he fails to notice, the others populating this anything-but-empty space (111-112). Concrete's imagination runs away with him (and ultimately with us) in this story. He sees someone dump a large bag on the side of the distant highway, and we are carried away with his speculations. When his trembling hands reach towards what surely is a body bag, we are Concrete, inside his massive body, seeing with those piercing eyes. We turn the page...and we are again looking over his shoulder, seeing something neither of us expected. Chadwick's tour de force here demonstrates the ability of image and text to entangle us in role-play that is both conscious and unconscious, challenging our

assumptions and yet making us aware of them at the same time. “I find the desert stimulates my imagination,” Concrete says self-consciously at the end of this story, and we know intimately what he means and how he feels.

Contrast this approach with the hyperrealism of Grant Calof and Eric Eisner’s *H2O*, a cautionary environmental graphic novel intended to dramatize the ultimate desertification of the Earth after years of global drought. Jeevan J. Kang’s meticulously rendered color illustrations provide little more than scenery for an on-location action-hero story whose muscular-but-sensitive heroes and busty-but-brainy women enact “a new chapter, a new evolution—a new consciousness.” One character offers a radical solution to the planetary water shortage whose potential side effects include planet-wide “volcanic winter.” His proposal is appealing only because, as he says, “Our way of life is already finished.” There’s no deliberation, no hesitation: in the next panel, the deal is done. The reader experience here is cinematic: we watch these characters but do not enter into their consciousness; we empathize with their dilemma, but in the end it’s their “new consciousness,” not ours, and what counts is decisive action, not deliberation. At issue here, I think, is also something Chadwick says about the intra-action between image and text. In his introduction to the 2006 reissued *Think Like a Mountain*, he talks about his frequent use of what he calls “occasional silent panels,” panels that achieve what he describes as “the quality of unique moments” in fiction, moments I would argue that invite that deductive and productive role-play. “Words tend to tie up the package with a neat bow,” he argues. “You ‘get it,’ so you don’t contemplate it, as you would a painting” (5). In their zeal to convey a message about the need for changing consumption patterns to avert the kind of global crisis that motivates *H2O*, Calof and Eisner resort to didactic

dialogue that tells us exhaustively what their characters think, but leave us little room to let our own environmental imaginations flow out of their actions. Their chatty hero cites his own authority (“Like I said...”), abruptly ending further discussion and engaged consideration. Chadwick, on the other hand, is a master of using simple line drawings whose lack of detailed realism gives us room to think. At the conclusion of “Objects of Value,” another Concrete short story included in the 2006 *Think Like a Mountain*, Concrete finds himself questioning the effectiveness of individual local recycling against the larger global scale of wasteful practices. In an image that is frequently repeated in Chadwick’s various stories, Concrete reacts in exasperated despair and is then depicted sitting motionless on a hillside, carefully considering his own response in a series of silent panels. He sees someone else picking up discarded cans; he thinks to himself, “You’re swimming upstream kid” (*Think Like a Mountain* 164). In the next panel, we see an aluminum can in the foreground, Concrete dragging a large sack in the background. Again, no dialogue, no narrative...he is thinking for himself, just as we are. In the final half panel, we see a hand (Concrete’s? Ours?) reaching for that can. The text signals “The End,” but the partial panel suggests that this is only a fraction of what must necessarily be a larger effort. No decision is made for us, but we certainly are invited to do our part.

These “artistic practices” perform what Rancière names a “distribution of the sensible,” the partitioning of what is seen and what is said, of who is included and who is excluded, in a specific time and space (*Politics of Aesthetics* 12 – 13). Rancière, whose aesthetic theory will animate much of my analysis in Chapter 1, implicitly distrusts consensus, which he defines as a mono-vocal overstatement (“Like I said”) that silences multiple dissenting voices, and his topographical approach to aesthetic analysis focuses

on identifying the ways in which representations are designed to present either consensual or dissensual voices. One of the weaknesses, I think, of Calof and Eisner's artistic practice, is to imagine that an environmental problem, no matter how pressing, could be so easily dealt with by consensus, by a single, authoritative voice that presumes to speak for all. The effect of Kang's illustrations in *H2O* is to show perspective without giving voice to it. One of the strengths of Chadwick's imaginary is his frequent representation of Concrete dwelling in the middle of some contradictory moment. Concrete tends to approach environmental issues like recycling or consumer choices or issues of population growth from a position of uncertainty, and Chadwick illustrates these issues as difficult problems composed of multiple factors that demand multiple perspectives. The power of comics comes from the intra-action of word and image: in the interplay between their unique strengths and weaknesses *and* in their collectively dynamic capacity. An over-reliance on realistic character depiction closes off our access to that sort of dynamism, and places us on the sidelines in the graphic environment—a stance we may too often inhabit in the material environment of our actual world. Aesthetic practices that do more to exploit that ambivalent openness in the heart of the icon, to access the vacuum at its core (instead of prematurely foreclosing it at its outlines), invite us to cross character boundaries and to both see and speak from subject positions which were previously unavailable to us. We may even find ourselves seeing and hearing others whose presence we never expected.

Michael Taussig suggests that there is yet another potential consequence of mimetic identification, an invitation to a further doubling. If I can inhabit the character as icon, it has also taken hold of me, and “now I too am part of the object of study” (Taussig

8). As the reader's gaze flickers from the level of participant to the level of observer, she experiences a kind of becoming-icon; she discovers that she is the object of her own gaze, an Other to herself. In moments like these, the graphic novel interpellates a subject position that is both co-performed and co-performative: neither one nor the other, the comics reader *becomes* hybrid, *is* chimera. Rancière notes the political and theatrical effect of this doubled framing of fictional subjectivities. He describes this recursive, twinned perspective as the "introduction of a visible into the field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible" (*Disagreement* 99). If politics emerges out of this startling visibility and audibility, what might this mean for readers who are made visible to themselves simultaneously as environmental object-subjects, as entangled subject-objects? I should point out here that Tim Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, mounts a very different argument about the ultimate failure of "ambience," an argument that seems to contradict Rancière's valorization of an artistic practice that confers visibility on the previously unseen. "Ambient poetics is about making the imperceptible perceptible, while retaining the form of its imperceptibility," he describes, "to make the invisible visible, the inaudible audible" (*Ecology Without Nature* 96). Discouraging the use of ambient poetics is part of Morton's larger aesthetic argument. His emphasis is on the idea of *retention*, on an artistic practice that brings something into the foreground while ensuring that we never forget that it is *really* always in the background. His argument is that ambient poetics is doomed to fail because even as it works so diligently "for a dissolving of difference between subject and object," it cannot help but reinforce it (*Ecology Without Nature* 63-64). I would argue that Rancière's interest in the political valence of aesthetic practice accomplishes something quite different. Rancière is not

invoking the materialization of a ghostly presence in order to posit some future equality of shared being; he is pointing to aesthetic practices that recall to our attention the visible *we do not see*, whose coexistence and ontological equality we have actively suppressed or unconsciously overlooked, the *disappeared*. Environmental aesthetics must restore our sense of the more-than-human collective of which we are a part and with whom our coexistence is inextricably entangled.

The aesthetic vitality of graphic novels is also derived from the performative demands that their artistic practices make on their readers. Reader literacy affects interpretation and requires a material investment from those readers; we have to learn how to read the graphic text. Panel borders often challenge traditional Western left-to-right reading priorities, and the overarching demand is that readers find ways to read images and texts together rather than prioritizing one over the other (Gravett 11). Hegel advocated art that demanded observer participation, noting that “interest only occurs as a result of fresh activity” that continued to “work away on an object so long as it still contains something hidden, not manifest” (qtd. in Potts 56). Engagement with the graphic novel involves effort at both the intellectual and the sensual level; dramatic shifts in perspective challenge reader participation—sometimes, our eyes deceive us, and sometimes, that is precisely the effect that is intended. On multiple occasions, Chadwick shifts perspectives on Concrete’s rough exterior to emphasize how easily we can be misled artistically: up close, we see a boulder or the surface of the moon—look again, and we see his familiar stone face.

Graphic art forms resemble film in this manipulation of perspectives from varying angles and standpoints, but they also differ from film in a key respect. Film relies on the

phenomenon of “the persistence of vision” to enable the viewer to read a series of discrete images as an uninterrupted “story of continuous motion” (McCloud 65). We apprehend film unfolding as a linear forward stream, unaware of our vision’s contribution to its apparent seamlessness. Sequential art, on the other hand, by virtue of its aesthetic structure, allows us to read its images bidirectionally and assumes our active connection of those separate panels; while the narrative may incline us to a linear reading, our eyes move more selectively through the panels on a page. Because comics’ sequential panels are all visible simultaneously, as McCloud points out, in comics the present, past, and future coexist on every page—a juxtaposition that can interrupt our assumptions about simple chains of cause and effect, or at least bring them more visibly to our attention (McCloud 104). On page after page, the graphic novel artist gives us a series of image panels separated by what is called “the gutter,” the space between those panels (McCloud 66). The gutter marks an interval between the dramatic action depicted in one panel and that of the next, an apparently uncoded and unstructured gap that our imagination must either complete or cross over. Comics theorists do not agree on the gutter’s functionality or its importance to the medium. McCloud suggests that there is “a kind of alchemy at work” in this empty space between panels, where our natural impulse towards closure prompts us to fill up the gutter with a kind of conceptual adhesive; closure refers to our almost irresistible impulse *to sequence*, to close the gap between sequential images, “endowing them with a single overriding identity” (73). Comics artists exploit our need for connection; they place possible disparate, random images side-by-side, clearly separated by this visual chasm, and “force the viewer to consider them as a whole. However different they had been, they now belong to a single organism” (McCloud 73).

Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen views the gutter as predominately a formal device that serves a separative function; he does not share McCloud's insistence that it "plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (McCloud 66). Groensteen argues instead that the gutter is merely a boundary line that indicates where one panel ends and another begins, a line of demarcation that can be literally just a line (112). McCloud argues that closure, "the agent of change, time and motion," can only occur in the invisible empty space between the panels, performed by the reading audience; his emphasis throughout is on the local effects of reader collaboration (65-73). In Groensteen's comics system, "the ultimate signification of a comics panel does not reside in itself but in the totality of relations in the network that it maintains with the interdependent panels" that make up the comic as a whole (53). The agency McCloud perceives in the juxtaposition of images, Groensteen attributes to what we might call the persistence of narrative. It is not the adjacency of images that engages my need for closure; instead, "it is the continuity attributed to the fictional world that allows me to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration" (11). My reading of the power that circulates at the heart of a hybrid suggests that they are both right; closure flows from (and is often interrupted by) both the graphic and the textual narratives.

Groensteen also imagines another kind of continuity flowing across the comics system he has elaborately analyzed. Included in that totality of relations is what he calls "iconic solidarity...the central element of comics," a multiplicity of relationships between independent images that he terms "arthrology," from the Greek word for articulation (18-21). In Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, comics "is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together"

(22). Repetition of iconic motifs across a graphic novel is, for Groensteen, the foundation for the phenomenon of “braiding,” which “manifests into consciousness the notion that the panels of a comic constitute a network, and even a system”; the effect of this repetition is that “images that the breakdown holds at a distance, physically and contextually independent, are suddenly revealed as communicating closely, in debt to one another” (Groensteen 158). He imagines comics as a kind of graphic ecosystem whose seemingly distinct and disparate fragments coexist in a complexly entangled mesh, dependent upon and impacted by each other’s actions. Comics are made up of images, images whose first relationship is “the sharing of space” (Groensteen 28). Comics use space to convey the notion of change, to deploy memory in the service of time, to represent motion in an intrinsically static art (McCloud 115). When we read a series of comics panels, changes in environmental details can subtly convey to us the passage of time; when Chadwick shows us Concrete mulling over the recycling problem, he also gives us clues about the duration of his thinking time. In the four relevant panels, the background shading progressively darkens, and in the two central panels we see the sun dropping in the sky behind him. Concrete is immobile, but we know that time has passed (*Think Like a Mountain* 164).

At the same time, there is something else present in this series of four small panels. Chadwick has woven into this specific and local story an image that resonates throughout his *Concrete* series. Look closely at Concrete’s body here, and you will see in his immobility the repetition of a familiar position. His hunched, seated figure graphically recalls Rodin’s “Thinker.” Concrete’s immobile mineral body could be read here as a metaphor for the mind/body dualism that has haunted our engagement with the natural

world since at least the time of Descartes. His body is alien-made; Concrete is an alien to himself. His mind is the only “human” thing left of his identity—it is only when he thinks that he therefore is still human. In this specific series of panels, Concrete is deliberating over his response to a very local problem, but I can argue that Chadwick is also deliberately linking us intertextually and intergraphically to multiple moments in the *Concrete* system; he uses the power of iconic solidarity to braid many discrete moments into a more global network of representation. “Braiding” can only occur if meaning does not stop at the borders of isolated panels (Groensteen 147). Groensteen’s meticulously enumerated dissection of the components of this comics ecosystem begins with the panel (as a specific local site) and widens outward to the relations between framed panels on the page (which can be thought of as a larger frame or region), and finally to a broadly global view of the comic as a whole. At the same time, he argues that graphic motifs are both local (viewed independently in their individual panels and on a single page) and global (repeated iteratively or perhaps with significant differences across multiple panels on different nonadjacent pages). His arguments harness the local/global tension that animates much of contemporary environmental writing. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise challenges ecocritics to embrace an environmental imagination that rethinks the global as “a kind of collage in which all the parts are connected but also lead lives of their own” (*Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* 64). Groensteen’s braiding is both a visual aesthetic practice and “an essential dimension of the narrative project,” one that “incites translinear and plurivectoral readings” (Groensteen 155). Graphic novels do not survive on image alone; their vitality depends on the work of a collage made possible by its distinctive components. “Graphic liveliness,” Marion Perret argues, “does not come

solely from physicality, but is intrinsic to the dialectic between word and image” (123).
 In the graphic environment, it is the confluence of image and text that matters.

Graphic NOVELS: Narrative as Aesthetic

Images and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together.
 (Paul Gravett, *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know* 11)

Graphic novel theorists expressly acknowledge the importance of narrative to this particular medium of sequential art, many citing the cohesiveness of the story line and the unity of its plot structures as the features that most distinguish the graphic novel from its comic book cousins.⁷ I should stress, however, that while graphic novels may rely more heavily on narrative to generate “a composite, well-organized structure whose construction implies careful textual design on the part of the author(s),” the increased proportion of text to image does not necessarily translate into linear plot structure or a single perspective (Di Liddo 20). Textual design works with and against the artistic design of the graphic novel to produce a structure that is both contradictory and complimentary, one that encourages a playful ambiguity to circulate through its narrative environment. Narrative in this context is truly hybrid, at once visual and verbal. Tim Morton argues, “Art’s ambiguous, vague qualities will help us think things that remain difficult to put into words,” while Rancière speaks to the other half of my equation, asserting that “words deploy a visibility that can be blinding” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 60; Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 7). Words can, as we have already seen, foreclose the multiple potential that flowers in the heart of the icon. Rancière, however, also emphasizes the aesthetic power of what he calls “the sentence-image.” Sentence and image together can also “undo the representative relationship” between the two, upsetting

our traditional assumptions about the power of the sentence to make visible the connections between actions, the power of the image to give “flesh and substance” to the actors (*The Future of the Image* 45-46). “When mute images begin to speak,” W. J. T. Mitchell speculates, “words seem to become visible” and “media boundaries dissolve” (“Word and Image” 60). The hybrid graphic narrative captures this ambivalent power and uses it to give a new twist to the novel’s heteroglossic potential.

Heteroglossia (the term is Bakhtin’s) often becomes visible in the graphic novel in narratives that are as historically and fictionally referential as the images that they accompany. Using intertextual references that link contemporary storylines with other graphic novels as well as with other texts, and with actual cultural and historic events, graphic narratives resonate with multiple voices. Grant Morrison’s *Animal Man* is based on a little-known superhero from the 1960s, a character he chose to reinvent “as a mouthpiece against cruelty to animals and the general degradation of the environment”; the character is now undergoing yet another iteration in the Jeff Lemire/Travel Foreman contribution to DC Comics’ “New 52” series of superhero reboots (*Supergods* 217). Alan Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing* had its genesis in a much earlier text, the original *Swamp Thing* series that first appeared in 1971, and Moore consciously deploys and distorts the earlier storyline in his reimagining of the classic monster comic (Di Liddo 50). Paul Chadwick’s *Concrete* series is purposively referential, interweaving the voices of canonical nonfiction nature writers (most notably Edward Abbey and Aldo Leopold) with his fictional hero’s budding environmental activism. Many graphic novels feature a mix of human and nonhuman characters, commingling the images of their respective actions and perceptions with anthropomorphic voices that compel/repel reader identification—I

will explore both aspects of this graphic heteroglossia in Richard Starkings's *Wounded Animals*, one of the graphic novels featured in Chapter 1. In the uniquely blurred space occupied by animal protagonists, the human voice emanating from a nonhuman character is doubled; as Bakhtinian translator/scholar Michael Holquist points out, a human voice ostensibly "gives the illusion of unity" to what it says, but in reality it expresses "a plenitude of meanings, some intended, others of which [the speaker] is unaware" (xx). Readers may read this species discourse as "a ready-made symbolic economy" that is deployed in narrative to stand in for human issues like gender and race, but the same double consciousness that impacts our response to the graphic novel's visual shifts also plays with our participation in the narrative (Wolfe 8). A heteroglossic narrative structure allows species discourse to both function as metaphor and to stand on its own, both as *our* human voice and as a *posthuman* voice that can "serve to generate and keep open those very possibilities of difference" that a purely metaphoric reading might conceal (Wolfe 13).

"Seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics," Morton asserts, and the graphic novel's play of images and texts simultaneously produces a heterogeneous focalization while keeping the reader aware of that very tactic (*The Ecological Thought* 14). Narrative theorist H. Porter Abbott's statement that "narrative, with all its powerful and distorting rhetoric, comes between us and the world" is not merely descriptive (154). Narrative organizes and directs our understanding of the actions and events in the world we inhabit: narrative is, by its nature, sequential. "All but the simplest narratives have some fairly complicated relationship between two kinds of sequentiality: the sequence of events happening (chronology) and the sequence in which

they are narrated (narrative line)”; yet the power of narrative is such that it can blind us to its construction of consequence as the “natural” outcome of some causal trigger (Bredehoft 872). It is narrative’s conveyance of “blinding visibility” that Rancière has in mind when he warns against the complicity of consensus; it is why Barthes argues that narrative’s “confusion of consecution and consequence” renders it no more than the “language” of Destiny (*Image-Music-Text* 94). Ecocritics in particular must be conscious of narrative’s tendency to create seemingly “natural” networks of cause and effect, agent and object, when assessing the limitations (as well as the possibilities) structuring a text. The value of the graphic novel’s particular aesthetics here is twofold: first, graphic novels make no secret of their representational strategies. “Graphic narratives...have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility [or blinding visibility] by taking the risk of representation” (Chute and DeKoven 772). Secondly, graphic narratives disrupt the forward progress of the narrative by the simultaneous presence of multiple panels on the page. Reading can be haphazard and random; panels may be read with or against each other, and may present multiple perspectives on a single page. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “placing elements of any nature in continuous variation is an operation that will perhaps give rise to new distinctions, but takes none as final and has none in advance” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 97).

“Fiction,” Patrick Murphy notes, “can generate a story that provides intellectual equipment for living and display the effect that such information can have on human lives as represented by fictional characters” (*Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* 25). Murphy labels as fiction those texts driven primarily by “narrative and its various aesthetic dimensions”—texts which are more interested in storytelling and

perhaps less driven by facts (or perhaps more willing not to be rigidly restricted by them) (*Farther Afield* 7). Concerned that “the nonfiction prejudice within the nature-writing critical tradition has impeded appreciation of representations of nonhuman nature and human-nonhuman ecosystemic interaction in literary works,” Murphy suggests instead a broader inclusion of multiple kinds of literature that does not “stylistically conform to canonical expectations” (*Farther Afield* 62-63). Graphic narrative, whether comic book or graphic novel format, “does the work of narrative at least in part through drawing,” and authors Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven emphasize that “the form’s fundamental syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page” (“Introduction: Graphic Narrative” 767, 769). The images may support the textual narrative but this is not a given; Chute and DeKoven stress that the comics medium (and by extension, that of the graphic novel) “is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together,” an aspect of this distinctively “cross-discursive” hybrid that I will pursue more specifically in my conclusion. There I take up the cognitive dissonance illustrated in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina’s impact on New Orleans and which resonates throughout Mat Johnson’s graphic novel, *Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story*. Johnson and artist Simon Gane juxtapose official narrative (“**Words** no longer suffice”) with telling images (“**Symbolism** is what matters”) that clearly demonstrate the gap between them.

Graphic narrative moves through and across time and space, both of key importance to an ecologically critical analysis.⁸ The evolution of environmental crisis and theories of risk assessment haunting the ecological discourse of our present moment places a premium on timelines; issues of environmental justice and global/local impacts

juxtapose notions of place that are both remote and close to home. Annalisa Di Liddo notes how McCloud's recognition of the ways that comics art visually "conflate space and time," critically connects to another of Bakhtin's theories, that of the chronotope (64). In fact, "the hybrid, verbal/visual nature of comics, and the fact that the narratives appear as sequential actions on the space of the page, make the space-time connection even more palpable than it appears in the prose novel" (Di Liddo 63). Bakhtin notes that time and space are inseparable; "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history," becoming a sort of visible time that is as open (or as restricted) as the movement of time that constructs it (84-85). If time is viewed as contained, as a past epic moment that is always already completed, embodied, and fully performed, then there are no options left to be explored: what will be is only what has already been. Ecocriticism's contemporary engagement with the speculative realism of object-oriented ontology must address the very different apprehensions of time and space put forward by theorists whose environmental imagination is challenged by the looming hyperobject, global warming. In the contemporary graphic novel, the fluidity of a narrative that transgresses over and through time with its conflation of events both real and fictional, past and present, supplements an artistic rendering of time made visible on the page; their juxtaposition opens the existential present to the possibility of a future not fully inscribed by the past. It is toward this opening proffered by the graphic novel that ecocriticism must direct its analysis.

"The study of iconoclastic representations of space and world recovers fresh ways of thinking and creating," Morton proposes, "demonstrating that there are, at least different sorts of fantasy images of the natural that would refresh environmental thinking"

(*Ecology without Nature* 18). His suggestion that it is the iconoclastic (rather than the referential) representation that can *recover* and *refresh* the environmental imagination restores the active nature of narrative representation and returns us to Rancière's theories of the politics of literature. Gerald Prince emphasizes narrative's *recounting* function; Latour describes a "good account as one that *traces a network*" (Prince, "On Narratology: Criteria, Corpus, Context" 75; Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 128-129). Rancière's notion of politics is critically grounded in "a way of framing...a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable" or in other words, a way of *recounting* that determines who *counts* at any given moment, a *reordering* out of which emerges momentary communities of sense that form networks of concern that disrupt the normative consensus ("The Politics of Literature" 10). Patrick Murphy suggests that one of the tasks of ecocriticism is to consider how to address and to encourage multiple ways of "negotiating the interanimating non-identity of humanity /nature," to highlight how those representations of the other-than-human "call on humans to perform in the world" (*Literature, Nature, and Other* 34, 24). Graphic novels have the ability to use text and image to disrupt those iconic pictures of environmental representation that have perhaps numbed us to the urgency of our present dilemma. Groensteen stresses that "comics admit all sorts of narrative strategies," providing a wealth of aesthetic resources for diegetic representation beyond simple mimetic display (117). Grant Morrison suggests that "the best comic stories never stopped delivering surprises," and notes that "writers and artists build by hand little worlds that they hope might effect change in real minds, in the real world where stories are read" (*Supergods* 224, 409). There is an ecological vision and environmental imagination embodied in the panels and pages of contemporary

graphic narratives, and it is to that distinctive medium that I intend to turn my ecocritical attention.

Chapter 1, “Animal: Overlooking the Post-Other,” explores the postcolonial turn in ecocriticism and uses it to read three very different graphic novels. Moving from the allegorical noir of Richard Starkings’ *Wounded Animals* (Vol. 1 of *Elephantmen*), through the ripped-from-the-headlines topicality of Brian K. Vaughan’s *Pride of Baghdad*, to Grant Morrison’s deeply poignant and affective *WE3*, I explore the affinities and tensions between postcolonialism’s commitment to exposing issues of social and cultural damage (racism, sexism) and the posthuman aspects that ecocriticism wishes to foreground in its analyses. I also turn to the aesthetic and political arguments of French theorist Jacques Rancière, in order to consider how his topographical analysis might inform an ecocritical approach to graphic texts that seek to represent the immediate and long-term consequences of colonial policies in contexts near and far. Rancière’s lucid and compelling arguments about the powerful redistribution of the sensible that can result from imaginative representational practices makes a powerful addition to what I hope to demonstrate as a politically charged postcolonial ecocritical aesthetic.

In Chapter 2, “Vegetable: Emerging Entanglements,” I again use a theoretical armature to undergird my ecocritical analysis, this time focusing on graphic narratives which feature human/plant hybrids as their protagonists. My use of theory to espalier my analysis serves two purposes. First, in keeping with my interest in hybrid texts that commingle multiple components, I believe that ecocriticism can only benefit from the diversity that an engagement with contemporary critical theory can supply. Ecocriticism is an evolving discipline, one that cannot become the intellectual equivalent of a

monocrop without limiting its opportunities for long-term survival. Second, I also believe that graphic novels have real value as a pedagogical tool, effectively providing a compelling visual frame on which to display the ways in which theory can be grafted onto representations and in some cases, to be teased out of them. To that end, I frame my ecocritical readings of Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid* in terms of yet another hybrid, Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory and its parent stock, the rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Assemblage theory, with its emphasis on the interactions of parts and wholes and on their individual and multiple agencies, provides a theoretical bridge between the concerns of postcolonial ecocriticism and the new materialism of ecocriticism's nominal fourth wave. Both *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and *Black Orchid* are reboots of older, less inventive series; in this chapter, the environmental imagination that fertilizes them both is exemplified in multiple aspects of the graphic novel's visual and verbal narrative.

Chapter 3, "Mineral: Dancing Like a Mountain," directs the environmental imagination to consider what a material ecocriticism might look like in the wake of the collision between the Deleuzean/Spinozist new materialism of Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, and Jane Bennett, and the Heideggerian-grounded object-oriented ontology (or OOO) currently being developed by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and ecophilosopher Tim Morton, among others. After an attempt to tease out the nuanced differences between the vitalist process-oriented new materialism that is especially prevalent in contemporary ecofeminist discourse and the resolutely anti process speculative realist ontologies of the OOO philosophers, I turn to Dan Walsh's eliminative revisions of Jim Davis's classic Garfield cartoons, collected in *Garfield Minus Garfield*,

to illustrate the strange strangers and real objects imagined by OOO. From there, I look at how *Taster's Choice*, the first volume collecting John Layman and Rob Guillory's imaginatively appetizing comics series *Chew*, successfully visualizes the pervasive materiality of Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality." Self-described material feminists are very focused on the smorgasbord of intra-actions involved in our body's ingestion of and interpenetration by the kinds of unseen and transformative unnatural elements in foodstuffs: chemical preservatives, genetically-modified crops, and a host of antibiotics and hormones in factory-farmed food animals bring issues of bioethics and biopolitics back to the table. Finally, I spend more time specifically considering Paul Chadwick's *Concrete* series, focusing particularly on Chadwick's ongoing development of *Concrete's* ecobiography, a material memoir that ponders in detail what it might be like to be a thing.

My conclusion, "Making Ecocriticism Matter," extends my interest in material ecocriticism by articulating it with Ulrich Beck's risk theory and with William Connolly's attempts to craft an affirmative ethics of becoming in the face of what Tim Morton calls the Age of Asymmetry. Escalating neoliberal discourse demands a reduction in government agency (and a simultaneous increase in privatization) just as massively distributed self-organizing systems like global warming and global economic collapse threaten to swamp national boundaries and local controls. I explore two very recent graphic narratives that consider what might happen in a post-disaster world where *laissez-faire* reads more like *laissez-fail*. Brian Wood's ongoing series, *The Massive*, provides the perfect opportunity to explore how Beck's assessment of the cosmopolitan moment that emerges in risk society actually plays out after risk becomes all too real. Shifting from the global perspective of this heterogeneous mix of protagonists adrift in a

world made unrecognizable by multiple disasters, I turn then to Mat Johnson's *Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story*, which takes a fictional look at that most nonfictional event, 2005's Hurricane Katrina and its effect on the city of New Orleans and on our national imaginary. Johnson's thoughtful narrative and Simon Gane's evocative artwork provide a very local context in which to consider the performances of individuals who find themselves in the viscous embrace of the hyperobject. Finally, I conclude with a brief look ahead, one that considers how an emerging ecocriticism might take shape in the time of hyperobjects.

My intention is to present a thoughtful and compelling case for the necessary ecocritical consideration of the graphic novel. Artifacts of popular culture reach a diverse and widespread audience who may not be the traditional readers of nature-oriented or environmental literature; at the same time, those artifacts can be invaluable resources for tracking how issues of the environment have penetrated the global imaginary. I am convinced that expanding the range of texts that ecocriticism addresses to include comics and graphic novels can only strengthen the analytical acuity of its tactics. Diversifying ecocriticism's engagement with a much broader range of theoretical voices also adds to its reach and prevents the too-narrow focus that has plagued our discipline in the past. Evaluating the material and discursive effects of the visual and verbal rhetoric that permeates our global coexistence might also help ecocritics to engage more thoughtfully with the artistic and representational strategies of other, non-Western cultures. Developing pedagogical strategies that engage a wider range of students in ways that disrupt old habits and suggest new alternatives for our environmental performances is surely a worthy goal for ecocritics and educators alike. At the confluence of image and

text, ecocriticism locates a medium that stages its own global and local entanglements and that illustrates for us the mesh of coexistence we cannot not be a part of—a performance I hope to have ushered onto a more public stage.

Notes

¹ See Roger Sabin (*Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* 165-167), Douglas Wolk (*Reading Comics* 60-64). I will be using the term to refer to square-bound volumes which may contain a single story or which may collect multiple comics issues under one cover.

² And note my elaborate use here of parenthetical commentary and qualification—the textual equivalent, I would suggest, of the graphic “gutter” that separates the visual panels of the comics’ page. That seemingly empty space will come to occupy a significant share of our attention...but that’s another story.

³ For a more detailed discussion of the critical history of the graphic novel, including a discussion of the multiple genres that contribute to the medium as a whole, see Roger Sabin’s *Adult Comics*, particularly Chapter 6, “‘Comics grow up!’: dawn of the graphic novel,” and Annalisa Di Liddo’s introduction to *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*. Paul Gravett’s *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know* also offers a more detailed look at various subgenres of graphic novels, categorized by subject matter and linked to related texts.

⁴ See “Reading Out Loud: Performing Ecocriticism as a Practice of the Wild,” in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19.1 (Winter 2012): 5-23.

⁵ I will address Bissette and Totleben’s remarkable graphic support of Moore’s imaginative reboot of the original Swamp Thing comic series in Chapter 2, but for now it is important to note that their sophisticated use of perspective is both distinctive and increasingly absent in comics illustration; my sense is that the use of computer graphics in comics design has prompted a return to the boxy, grid-like page layouts of earlier comics.

⁶ Currently, graphic novel critics do not seem inclined to identify a specifically “environmental” genre, one that consists of graphic texts that meet something like Lawrence Buell’s criteria for an “environmentally oriented work” where environmental issues and concerns are the central focus of the text and where issues of human accountability to and for the environment are also addressed (see *The Environmental Imagination*, pp. 6-8). I would argue that the heteroglossic nature of these graphic narratives actively resists the limitations of such a categorization.

⁷ Specifically see Will Eisner (xii), Paul Gravett (9), and Annalisa Di Liddo’s textual analysis of Alan Moore’s work.

⁸ Gotthold Lessing’s conflation of the word with time and the image with space is a well-rehearsed argument that serves as background to all engagements with the graphic narrative as a conflation of image and text. For a concise summary of his work as it relates to comics criticism, see Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons’ introduction to their edited collection, *The Language of Comics* (Jackson, MS: U P of Mississippi, 2001).

For an art-theoretical perspective, see “Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method” in W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

CHAPTER 1

ANIMAL: OVERLOOKING THE POST-OTHER

I begin my exploration of the confluence of image and text (graphic and narrative) from the vantage point of another site of hybrid negotiation: that of the “overdue dialogue that is belatedly starting to emerge” between ecocriticism and postcolonial theory (Nixon 231). Lawrence Buell identifies this disciplinary commingling as a significant component of ecocriticism’s third wave, and more recently, Ursula Heise succinctly notes that ecocriticism’s “global turn in the last decade” is “no longer news” (“Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism” 637). Ecocriticism and postcolonialism share concerns with those issues of colonial conquest, including issues of racism, sexism, and cultural appropriation/deformation, which materially affect the lives of the colonized and the colonizer in the environmental present. The colonized, in turn, have been variously imagined as the indigent, persons of color, women, animals, plants, and/or the material resources that have long been reduced to objects, exploited by some predatory or colonizing other. Heise stresses ecocriticism’s continued commitment to an inclusive theoretical perspective—one that “looks” at both human and nonhuman actors—and lauds its posthuman engagement with environmental and cultural alterity. “The question of difference in ecocriticism,” she argues, “is never purely human,” and therefore “the question of globality and difference plays itself out not only at the borders

of human communities but also at the interface of human and nonhuman systems (“Globality, Difference” 638).

The issue of the posthuman—a vital term for new materialists, as we will see in Chapter 3—is also at stake in ecocriticism’s turn to the postcolonial. Yet another heterogeneous term in the hybrid vocabulary I am invoking, posthumanism is the key word Cary Wolfe explored in 2010’s *What is Posthumanism?* Noting that the term emerged most noticeably in critical discourse in the 1990s (at about the same moment when ecocriticism made its debut), Wolfe’s posthumanism couples an appreciation for the multiple points of inter- and intrasection between the human and the “various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” with a deep concern for “the problems of anthropocentrism and speciesism” (xxv, xix). This emphasis on the affective power of nonhuman agency that displaces the human as the sole actant in our world narratives animates what Rosi Braidotti refers to as “the post-human predicament,” a state of uncertainty that troubles “our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” in a time when human mastery of the environment is no longer accepted as a given (*The Posthuman* 1-2). Wolfe identifies “the profound *ethical* implication for our relations to nonhuman forms of life” opening within this troubling indeterminacy; in what would seem to be a related argument, postcolonial ecocritics Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin emphasize that postcolonialism’s engagement with human exploitation of nonhuman nature under the guise of colonial governance provides an critical stage on which to examine “the very category of the *human*, in relation to animals and

environment” (*What is Posthumanism?* xxvi, Huggan and Tiffin 18). When the postcolonial invades the posthuman, then, ontological and epistemological boundaries begin to blur.

Yet despite their affinities, ecocriticism and postcolonialism have been reluctant dance partners. In their introduction to 2010’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Huggan and Tiffin suggest that postcolonial theory, like ecocriticism, is a heterogeneous field whose practitioners do not always concur, either ideologically or methodologically (2). Rob Nixon, whose thoughtful engagements with environmental justice span the globe, identifies four major points of divergence in disciplinary perspective that separate postcolonial theory from ecocriticism, which might be rendered graphically as follows (236-243):

Area of concern	Postcolonialists	Ecocritics
Discursive focus	Hybridity, cross-culturation	Purity, wilderness, preservation
Spatial focus	Displacement, diaspora, migration	Place-based, local loyalties
Community focus	Cosmopolitan, transnational	National, bioregional
Historical focus	Recovery of fragmented, “minor” histories	Transcendent, timeless, solipsistic

These differences in emphasis are not trivial. Postcolonial theory is grounded in the humanist tradition; the potential for traditional human/nonhuman dualism to overflow any smooth intermingling of postcolonial theory with that of ecocriticism is manifest in their opposing perspectives. Heise succinctly names *difference* as the turbulent location where these fields converge. Tensions between the discourses of the local and the global, the loss of vernacular history submerged in more holistic narratives, the variable impacts of environmental damage on local fauna, flora, and folk—each of these material differences reflect the centrifugal and centripetal forces reshaping the global/local

imaginary today. What also surfaces in the ebb and flow of disciplinary overlap between postcolonial and ecocritical theory, however, is yet another territory of shared concern. As postcolonial literary scholar Laura Wright argues, “both modes of inquiry find themselves facing challenges based on the decidedly political and potentially activist nature of their focus” (3). Wright specifically notes the effects of “mechanisms of colonial silencing” on “the voices of marginalized peoples” (Wright 2). Nixon identifies “the challenge of visibility” that complicates representational strategies engaged with the nuanced and temporally viscous effects of “slow violence” on the environment (Nixon 5). Representation and its spectral other, the *unrepresented*, recur in the considerations of both postcolonial theory and of ecocriticism. Homi Bhabha suggests that “the postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive ‘liberal’ sense of cultural community,” and emphasizes that “cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity” that also demands representation (251). Nixon asks how, in the face of private, corporate, national, and international contributions to global climate change, we can “convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making,” how to retell stories of “the long emergencies of slow violence” that will “rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention” in the contemporary era (3). The sense of political and representational urgency that subtends postcolonial ecocriticism requires an aesthetic attuned to what Huggan and Tiffin identify as its “utopian ambitions: to make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and nonhuman, *visible in the world*; and in so doing, to help make them obsolete” (“Introduction” 6, emphasis added).

A politically charged postcolonial ecocritical aesthetic, then, could effect a rethinking by mapping the ways we recount the stories that people our environmental imagination and that animate our reactions. Such an aesthetic demands of art and literature “not to render the visible, but to render visible,” to return to visibility that which has been overlooked and underrepresented (Paul Klee qtd. in Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 48). Huggan and Tiffin emphasize “the continuing centrality of the imagination and, more specifically, imaginative *literature* to the tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism” and stress, in a passage that Heise also quotes, that the “aesthetic choices” of this collaborative criticism “need to be understood as a particular *way of reading*,” rather than as a species/canon of texts (Huggan and Tiffin 12-13, italics original). Recall also Scott McCloud’s insistence that “cartooning isn’t just a way of *drawing*, it’s a way of *seeing*” (31, italics original). A postcolonial ecocriticism sufficient to the task of reading and seeing critically must be fully alert to the multiple aesthetic choices present in any work of literature or of art—or in that confluence of image and text, the graphic novel—and to the ways those choices function to either make visible or render invisible the constituents it chooses either to represent or deny representation to.¹

Tim Morton tentatively reimagines “unworking” the categories of human and animal as a step towards a “threshold that resisted the separation of human and animal,” that would “resist their collapse into each other” while simultaneously resisting the siren call of “the ‘posthumanism’ that all too readily dematerializes the nonhuman” (“Ecologocentrism” 79).² Morton rightly points out that representation is simultaneously a technology of inclusion and exclusion. My purpose here is to explore how the graphic novel can serve as a kind of aesthetic threshold, an artistic overlook: a place from which

to observe how/if graphic representation of the nonhuman (and in this chapter, specifically the animal) in a postcolonial ecocritical frame retains its singularity—its specificity—while at the same time encouraging readers to overlook species differences in the face of cultural and environmental exploitation in productive and consequential ways. To do so, a postcolonial ecocritical aesthetic must negotiate between multiple territories: the human and the nonhuman, the posthuman and the postcolonial, space and time. It requires an aesthetic, I would argue, that draws heavily on the work of French theorist Jacques Rancière, whose mapping of the intersections of literature, art, and politics offers a specifically topographical analysis for my use.

Connecting Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism Through Jacques Rancière

Rancière’s aesthetic-political theory has been decades in the making, and the texts with which he illustrates his evolving arguments range from literature to works of art, the static images of photography, and the moving images of cinema. Certain key terms or phrases ground his contentions, with the “distribution of the sensible” the most foundational, and certainly the most relevant for a postcolonial ecocritical analysis of the graphic novel. “A distribution of the sensible...establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared” while also serving to exclude some other parts (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 12). Specific arrangements of things spoken and seen repeated across various cultural genres establish social and sensory consensus. Rancière defines consensus as that heavily guarded common “sense” whose exclusive borders are maintained through a variety of what he calls “police operations”—practices and prescriptives that would include “the selective framing of issues by mainstream news

operations; the management of economic, cultural, and existential insecurity” and other similar activities designed to “limit political participation” (Tanke 45). The goal of politics, and the event of its occurrence, is “dissensus,” “the process of making manifest the gap between the sensible and itself,” between what is authorized by the policed distribution of the sensible and what is excluded from it (Tanke 4). “Politics,” Rancière reiterates in much of his work, “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13). Those in power determine the outlines of these distributions: these “apportionment[s] of parts and positions” that determine what is understood by public and private space and that delineate cultural order and social hierarchies, who can do what, when, and where (*Politics of Aesthetics* 12). Politics, then, “is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable...It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking” (Rancière, “Politics of Literature” 10). Politics, in the sense that Rancière intends, is both a doing and a happening; the event of politics occurs when something unexpected appears, disrupting the normal/normative order of the everyday—politics is not, in this sense, business as usual: that is the work of the police. In Rancière’s aesthetic theory, art and literature have the capacity to create political opportunities by altering “the distribution of the sensible through the creation of experiences that are opposed to it,” by countering the ways that dominant orders determine who or what “counts” as participants in the social order (Tanke 73).

Artistic and literary dissensus “reconfigure[s] the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought” in order “to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities” and by so doing, to restore the notion of equality to the field of the possible (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 49). In his extremely useful introduction to Rancière’s diffuse theoretical work, Joseph Tanke notes that in this context, “politics is the process of disrupting the distribution of parts and roles through a claim about the equality of anyone with everyone” (43). Equality, in Rancière’s philosophy, is that originary ground from which every distribution of the sensible departs; dissensus reopens the “natural” order of things to the possibility of equality in order to prompt a new sense of self and of the Other, to demand a recount of bodies and voices and capacities. “Equality,” he writes, “ought to be thought as wholly horizontal” (Rancière, “Politics of the Spider” 245). Eric Méchoulan’s perceptive reading of Rancière’s definition of equality is illuminating. “Equality is characterized not by universal unification (everything is equal to everything else), but by a way of unlinking ‘natural’ orders...Far from reducing everyone to the One, Rancière’s move is in the opposite direction—to multiply the One in each one” (Méchoulan 4). Equality, in these terms, is about singularity, not sameness.

While Rancière’s own work is resolutely focused on the human, I have no hesitation in extending it to a postcolonial ecocritical aesthetic. “Aesthetics is political because it introduces dissensus into the world of shared appearances and meanings,” Tanke explains, and globalization’s long reach and monologic narratives often produce a fiction of discursive unity that effectively silences dissenting local voices in the rush to represent a world consensus (85). Rancière counters this fiction of global consensus with

the political potential in dissensus, the appearance of the previously uncounted, unseen, and unheard either in eventful performance or in representational forms like art and literature. The manifestation of these Others ruptures dominant discourses and can even perturb our quotidian sense of the world in which we find ourselves; literature and art in this sense offer precisely the ground whereupon our naturalized, habitual responses are suddenly made intensely unnatural. Narrative recounting of a tale told countless times before suddenly shifts into a re-counting of Other actants; imagining a world filled with nonhuman Others can cause the previously unseen to strangely appear in provocative new ways. Graphic novels “have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation,” a risk that often means foregrounding animal as well as human protagonists (Chute and DeKoven 772). “The ‘aesthetics of politics’ consists above all,” Rancière insists, “in the framing of a ‘we’” (*Dissensus* 141). Dissensus prompts us to rethink the constitution of community, to refigure our understanding of who “we” are in an increasingly global world, and it challenges the idea that our embeddedness in place is our only starting point for community identity. Ecocritic Patrick Murphy proposed a new kind of environmental community when he advocated adopting “a ‘we and another’ rather than an ‘I and other’ orientation toward all life”—a post-Other image of coexistence that celebrates diversity without the very conflation or collapse of difference that Tim Morton decries (*Farther Afield* 88). Murphy advocates substituting the concepts of “relational difference and *anotherness*” for the notions of alienation and Otherness in our “human-human and human-nature interaction[s],” a radical shift that dissensus can make possible in the gaps it introduces in normative consensual discourse (*Literature, Nature, and Other* 35).

Expanding Rancière's aesthetic and political arguments to an explicitly postcolonial context, Ranjana Khanna investigates the consequences of globalization on a specifically national or local sense of community. Rancière, in "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," the essay which opens the edited collection which is the site of Khanna's essay, is quite specific about what he means by a community of sense: not an imagined community "shaped by some common feeling," but rather "a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning;" it is a "certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility," an aesthetic, an artistic production, a "partition of the sensible" (33). In "Technologies of Belonging: *Sensus Communis*, Disidentification," Khanna argues that modernism's key trope of exile, with its ready-made identifications linked to an originary, if now distant, homeplace, has been supplanted in the wake of globalization by the postmodern figure of asylum—a condition that "foregrounds not only the loss of one's sense of belonging to a homeland (exile) but, in fact, also the loss of belief in the possibility of an idea of community" (125). This wholesale loss of imaginary renders traditional (and normative) metaphors of community equally untenable; the simultaneous inability to relinquish an identity invested in the logic of community and the inability to see one's self otherwise (and Other-wise?) induces the nostalgic perspective Khanna identifies as "postcolonial melancholia" (111).

Globalization has weakened the ability of local and national metaphors to produce a sense of community drawn as one body, one family, earth as mother, place as home. Instead, it has produced *dismemberment* and *disenfranchisement*—a dislocation that is at the heart of "the geography of difference" that Heise suggests dominates postcolonial

ecocriticism (“Globality, Difference” 639). This sense of disorientation is not limited to those victims of diaspora forced to seek asylum in unfamiliar environments; Rob Nixon extends what he describes as “a more radical notion of displacement” to “the loss of the land and resources...a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable,” characteristics that in many ways defined those communities (*Slow Violence* 19).

Rather than conflating the notion of *sensus communis* with similar bodies united through shared space, Khanna suggests that a common ground could form around a sense of *disidentification*. The excluded could find common voice through their “de-metaphorization,” defined as the unraveling or untangling of the meta-myths that bind us, that suture over the dissenting ideas that might otherwise propel us into political engagement—in Rancièrian terms, a new community might realize its identification through dissensus (Khanna 130). Acknowledging the power of the novel to reimagine (and to re-image) the way readers perceive a world filled with multiple actants, Rancière notes that “fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales, and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (*Dissensus* 141). The aesthetics of the graphic novel, with its unapologetic mix of nonhuman and human protagonists, its montage of perspectives and its heteroglossic intertextuality, potentially gestures towards an alternative community by unworking some familiar metaphors, by using familiar literary forms (allegory and fable) to complicate the spatial forms that dominate our postcolonial ecocritical imaginary (the global, the national, the local).

**Welcome to the Postcolony: Unworking Animals
in *Wounded Animals***

I'm an animal, always you're bleating. I'm an animal, I don't have to do like the rest of you, laws of society don't apply to me because I'm such a fucking animal.
(Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* 87)

While it is possible to read Richard Starkings' *Wounded Animals* superficially as a straightforward postcolonial animal allegory, a topographical analysis of this powerful collection reveals multiple ways in which the graphic novel challenges globalization's colonization of persons, places, and species while simultaneously perturbing the unconscious parochialism that sometimes inhabits regionalist imaginaries. Volume 1 of the *Elephantmen* series, *Wounded Animals* collects the first seven comics issues of what a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer described as a "superior dystopian sci-fi tale" about a group of weaponized animal-human hybrids decommissioned into a uneasy human society—"the setting," as the review goes on, "for plenty of metaphor about racism, xenophobia and globalism" (<http://www.amazon.com/Elephantmen-Vol-1-Richard-Starkings>). While author Richard Starkings' own characterization of his series filled with "implausible ideas and impossible characters" is that of "Pulp Science Fiction," I believe his breezy introduction to this unpaginated volume underestimates the powerful postcolonial ecocritical valence of his imaginary.³ Extolling the narrative potential of graphic novels "to figure ...differences of experience," David Herman proposes a sliding scale along which to rank the degree of anthropomorphic versus zoomorphic representation in comics and/or graphic novels featuring animal protagonists ("Storyworld/Umwelt: Nonhuman Experiences in Graphic Narratives"). Certainly, Starkings' graphic narrative can be read as little more than allegory, in which, as Herman makes clear, "nonhuman animals function as virtual stand-ins for humans, by way of cultural associations that have

accrued around particular species” (167). It is possible, however, that dismissing allegory because of its inherent anthropomorphism overlooks the ways in which the relation between these particular human AND nonhuman creatures (for they are, in fact, genetically both) is visually and verbally troubled in this text. This play between human and animal tends to destabilize the boundaries between them. Cary Wolfe describes a similar effect, which he attributes specifically to “iterative technologies” like “thinking, writing, speech” that seek to close the human/nonhuman gap. “The relation between the human and nonhuman animals is constantly opened anew and, as it were, permanently. It is a wound, if you will, that can never be healed” (*What is Posthumanism* 91). *Wounded Animals*’ overt use of allegory can also be analyzed as a kind of demetaphorizing wounding that holds those contestable constructions open for a curious and indelicate probing. Ursula Heise’s call for “aesthetic forms...that deploy allegory in larger formal frameworks of dynamic and interactive collage or montage,” seems to me to speak directly to the creative power at work in this graphic novel (*Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* 10). Graphic novel illustrators shatter the linear trajectory of traditional narrative, layering multiple character viewpoints on a single page in dynamically shifting panels. Their writers are thereby freed from the normal constraints of expository time and space. This fluid narrative that transgresses scripted timelines with its conflation of events and characters both real and fictional, past and present, supplements an artistic rendering of time made visible on the page; their juxtaposition produces an excess that opens the existential present to its underlying historical currents and to the possibilities of a future not wholly dictated by the past—to an affective postcommunity no longer hide-bound by traditional associations.

The setting for *Elephantmen* is a fictional, yet recognizably urban and dystopian, future; in Volume 1's four-page prologue readers are plunged immediately into the streets of Santa Monica, California, in the year 2259: a familiar/utterly unfamiliar world fragmented by difference and desire. A disembodied voice ironically advises a lone human pedestrian, "Don't think about how the world changed...Don't think about the way they look at you...Think about something else, Joe...Don't think of an Elephantman" ("Just Another Guy Named Joe"). Moritat's somber color palette, gritty rain-streaked urbanscape, and distorted perspective make it clear that these are the words of the Rancièrian police order; in the block captioning typically reserved for an external narrator, our visual sense is preframed by an authoritarian voice that visually talks down to us while simultaneously hailing us into the tiny, huddled figure at the bottom of the opening panel. On the following two-page spread, we are assaulted by a barrage of images that carefully construct our experience: monstrous hybrids roam the city streets, an elephant, a rhinoceros, a hippo, all dressed in human clothing yet barely discernable against the glare of neon lights and blatant billboard hypersexuality. *Wounded Animals* plunges us immediately into a postcolonial nightmare where we cannot be certain of the place "we" occupy, where no character invites our identification, and where we are radically out-of-place in a graphic world we have no idea how to negotiate. "We" are the generic "Just Another Guy Named Joe," our face that of an insignificant common laborer, petty thief, jobless vagrant...and even as we register that this is not "me," this is no one "I" should identify with, we are forced to identify with this persona because "he" is the only *human* character available to us; surrounded by claustrophobic black gutters, we cling to the only visual metaphor we recognize. From the outset of this graphic novel, the technologies of

belonging are both apparent and disturbing, as is our own vulnerability to them. Welcome to the postcolony.

In fact, it is the very visibility of those technologies of framing that makes Rancière's topographical analysis so useful here, and that signals the graphic novel's tactical value as a representational medium. "Topographical analysis," Tanke notes, "sticks to the surface of things. It offers a description of the relationships between elements in the common world" (3). It also serves to call attention to the ways those relationships are made and unmade by aesthetic practices; to consider how in literature and art, metaphor and metonymy work to produce habitual associations between places, persons, and things that can as easily render invisible as visible, inaudible as audible, other/Other actants. In the graphic novel, the breakdown of the narrative into the specific panels that make up each page is an aesthetic distribution of the sensible. "Comics is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution," Thierry Groensteen notes, but "it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together" (22). We see what the author and artist want us to see, we make sense of this arbitrary arrangement by focusing our attention on what appears in each panel and on each page, but we overlook much of that intentional artistry if we do not also deploy a conscious reading/seeing strategy that explores those aesthetic choices that produce what Groensteen calls the "plasticity of comics, which allows them to put in place messages of every order and narrations other than the fictional" (19). To move too quickly to an exegetical reading of *Wounded Animals* as a purely postcolonial allegory is to assume a discursive unity that I believe is radically challenged by its artistic strategies.

Discursive unity is troubled here from the outset: the Elephantmen are unlike either their animal or their human progenitors, and they are not all elephants. Bio-engineered hybrids produced by implanting cloned human/animal embryos into the bodies of indigenous African tribeswomen, they do not even resemble each other except in their unhumanness. To humans they are all “elephantmen,” an identification that they refuse in what might be read as a stubborn insistence on an individual, rather than a singular, identification. In “Shock Croc!” Starkings and Moritat explore this aspect of postcolonial disidentification; when abrasive satellite disk jockey Herman Strumm (who bears a more than passing resemblance to real life radio “Shock Jock” Howard Stern) asks the human/crocodile hybrid, Elijah Delaney, “What *do* I call you...Do you guys get all *pissy* if we use the ‘E’ word,” Delaney replies, “*Elephantmen*? Because we all look the same, right?” That Strumm immediately counters by quipping, “next thing he’s gonna ask me if all Jews look alike...which, of course, we do!” raises two issues simultaneously: the overt speciesism at work in this graphic postcolony, and the implicit racism that Paul Gilroy argues is “a mode of exploitation and domination that is not merely compatible with the phenomena of racialized differences but has amplified and projected them in order to remain intelligible, habitable, and productive” (31). Gilroy’s postcolonial inquiry is firmly fixed on how racism produces race as its object; naturalizing “racial difference and racial hierarchy” in the postcolony is a deliberate distribution of the sensible, supplying a “vivid natural means to lock an increasingly inhospitable and lonely social world in place and to secure one’s own position in turbulent environments” (6).⁴ A postcolonial ecocritical reading would also see that the wounded animals of Starkings’ imaginary include both human and nonhuman constituents. In the aforementioned

illustration, there are noticeable similarities between Strumm's hand, his red-tinted glasses, and open mouth, and the image of Delaney immediately beneath him...they actually resemble each other more than do the very different-looking elephantmen.

Women are generally represented as hypersexualized commodities, as property, or as breeding stock. Humans and nonhumans are increasingly isolated from one another and denied a share in a more productive boundary-crossing new "we" because of the police operations of the media and other social and cultural technologies that manage to reinstate, even while purporting to eliminate, our "existential insecurities" in order to deter or "limit political participation" (Tanke 45). In the first chapter, "See the Elephant," the only truly part-elephant Elephantman has an illustrative encounter with a human child. Her instinctive desire to seek common ground with this enormous and imposing figure is undercut with a tripartite awareness that normative discourse renders this contact inadvisable, perhaps impermissible. "My friend Chase says you guys are monsters," she says; her mother's belated reaction is "Get **away** from him...You just **stay away** from her!" We are the third in this reactionary ménage: in her mother's emotionally overwrought reaction to her daughter's innocent contact with the Elephantman, we read racial fear and ambivalent hypocrisy in her "never mind what I said" response to her daughter's "But, Mom...he's an elephant...and *you* said animals are our *friends*." Yet our reading is also made more complicated by the images that preceded this chapter's conclusion. Starkings and Moritat juxtapose this child's tentative overtures of friendship and recitation of standard animal lore with Ebony Hide's graphic memories of his actual life as the vicious killing machine he was designed to be. Juxtaposed against the image of a wrinkled pachyderm gumshoe in a trench coat, we are also faced with a blood-soaked

weapon of mass destruction—as the chapter’s title suggests, we are forced to “See the Elephant,” in ways that may not fit our allegorical assumptions.

In this text, the various artists who supply the illustrations to Starkings’ developing story seldom invite his readers to step into these animal protagonists. Their elaborately rendered images are far too specific to admit easy identification; we are prohibited from inhabiting these characters whose “red-in-tooth-and-claw” animality defies easy anthropomorphism. Although the “Munts” are often depicted clothed in specific human roles (detective, urban businessman, blue-collar worker), in various issues they are also presented in little or no clothing, looming threateningly over us or over each other, eyes glowing with a martial redness. In these moments, we are reminded that these massive iconic African animals, the elephant, the rhinoceros, the crocodile, and the hippopotamus, can be weapons of destruction in their own right; their availability as mere ciphers for human actions and activities falls away in those moments when we are reminded of their material otherness. Illustrations by multiple artists also confuse our visual understanding of the primary characters (and actively undo the easy associations necessary for successful allegory): the Elephantmen not only do not look like us, they do not look like themselves from chapter to chapter. We constantly experience what Rancière describes as literature’s capacity for producing misunderstanding, which in this context could succinctly describe the work of the graphic novel—it “teaches us to choose between two interpretations: not two interpretations of the speech or actions of other, but two interpretations of our own perceptions and the feelings of affection that accompany them” (“Literary Misunderstanding” 101). We see the inhumanity of postcolonial appropriation and exploitation of the vulnerable, even as we recognize our own

vulnerability in the face of the unhuman—a predatory unhuman that is often institutional rather than animal.

Much of Starkings' postcolonial imagination is directed at representing the impact of corporate and capitalistic forces on persons, places, and things, foreign and domestic, human and nonhuman. His Elephantmen are the products and property of Mappo Corporation, operating in North Africa but with a clearly global reach. In "The Last Thing I Remember," Dave Hine's cartoonish sketches accompanying Starkings' bare bones rendering of the nameless indigenous women forced to bear these experimental products emphasizes the metonymic anonymity of colonized subjects throughout history. Reduced to bodies, somatic "specimens" and "vessels" whose only identity lies in their utility, these women have no voice represented in the panels that contain their images; instead, their captor intones, "You will not be missed." Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen notes that "the space reserved for the text is a space taken from the drawing," and I think this is fully consonant with Rancière's political aesthetic. In this chapter, text, as the voice of the dominant, overwrites the images of these women, subtracts from their vital materiality while it gives pride of place to the will of the dominant. His speech acts their erasure; he commands them to "Forget your own life" as he takes it from them. At the same time, we are drawn into the place of one of the colonized; we see her eyes, even as we also find ourselves pulled into the "I" that opens a rupture in his colonizing discourse. She and "I" remember (and re-member) "our" child and "our" humanity, but what that humanity might become is left for another issue to explore. With these scarcely visible women and their abject hybrid offspring, we experience a common sense of our radical disidentification through our mutual exclusion by a multinational corporate

worldview that dismisses them and us as “less than animals...nothing more than property.” With them, we refuse subjectification through our metaphorization as commodity, yet we acutely feel the lack of some unifying metaphor to ground our place in this post-global economy; something, it is to be hoped, other than the Mappo corporate logo inscribed over their anonymous bodies and blocking our vision of them.

Our sense of dislocation is compounded by Starkings’ elaborate use of intertextuality both within the chapters and between them; the reader is assaulted by real and fictional voices from multiple contexts and time periods. Biblical texts share a page with Charles Darwin, George W. Bush decries human cloning while the fictional scientist who created the Elephantmen celebrates it, and bytes of information from the Texas A&M Health Science website commingle with the “once upon a time” of a fairy story. From a visual perspective, Groensteen emphasizes the iconic power of comics images that recur throughout a text to draw the various denotative and connotative nuances of those images into new combinations that can narratively overflow simple representation (147-155). The technique he calls “braiding” serves to refigure time both synchronically and diachronically, encouraging us to “plurivectoral readings” animated by recurring motifs that produce their own serial relationships (155). Intertextuality produces a similar effect, bringing the past into conjunction with the present, the fictional into contact with the nonfictional, the historic, and the scientific. “*Presence and representation are two regimes of the plaiting of words and forms,*” Rancière contends, unmistakably echoing Groensteen’s definition of *tressage* (*Future of the Image* 78, emphasis added). In *Wounded Animals*, contradictory behavior is illustrated with words as well as figures, and the result opens a space in the institutional discourses that so often structure our

experience of the world. The discourses of bioethics and biopower are clearly pitted here against faith-based and partisan politics-inflected global conversations: in Rancière's terms, the making visible and audible of the coincidences and gaps between these disparate commentaries provide opportunities for emancipation. Freed from the binding constraints of seemingly expert and consensual testimonies, the emancipated spectator (or reader or member of the community) is given the opportunity "to translate what she perceives in her own way," to seize for herself "the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else" (Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* 17). Remembering, in this sense, is not about simply recalling old histories or recounting the same allegorical narratives. Instead, the intent of Starkings' intertextuality is to emancipate his readers, to give them the opportunity to re-member our "humanity" as something not simply posthuman but as more fully post-Other; emancipation is "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body" (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 19).

Rancière traces what he fears is the disappearance of "the dissensual forms of critical art" and notes particularly the emergence in postmodernity of "the *collection*...heterogeneous elements" that are randomly combined but that fail to "provoke a critical clash" ("Contemporary Art" 46). He sees the collection, "a recollection as well," as a concerted effort to assemble a community of objects in order to produce not dissensus but an often nostalgic consensus, the univocal death of politics ("Contemporary Art" 46). What he proposes as an alternative is art that seeks not to collect, not to combine in ways intended to outline (and therefore to contain) a community of the Same but rather art that unmakes by recombination, by "inventing

fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional,” by “undoing and rearticulating the connections between signs and images, images and times, or signs and space” (“Contemporary Art” 49). Critical art, as Rancière continues to argue, “is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects” (*Dissensus* 149). *Elephantmen*, I would argue, does precisely this by using the aesthetic resources of the graphic novel to destabilize our sense of security in the world we thought we knew, and by asking us to ask ourselves what space we really occupy in an increasingly unrecognizable chronotope. If there is no home like place, then what do we do when there is no longer any place called “home”?

The Elephantmen are not trying to get back to some real or imagined homeplace. Literally the products of corporate ambition, these bioengineered hybrids have been liberated by U.N. forces and given asylum in order to forestall community. As one Elephantman explains, “they keep the rest of us alive...as a demonstration of their compassion and humanity,” but this (un)freedom/salvation is contingent upon a system of containment and surveillance (“Tusk”). The Elephantmen are reminders of scientific and corporate misconduct. Politics is denied them: “They keep a close eye on all of us...They don’t want us meeting in big groups...They don’t want us getting any funny ideas” (“Tusk”). Not persons but products, they are not merely homeless—the Elephantmen embody the “profound distrust of any kind of comfort with the concept of belonging” that Ranjana Khanna associates with postcolonial melancholy (123). The Elephantmen are not merely *displaced*—they are always already *unwelcome*, eternally *unhomely*.

The exile's desire for belonging was often expressed in the modern novel as a search for origins, in the wish "to go home" frequently manifested in the trope of the primitive (Torgovnick 185-189). Acting locally, even if thinking globally, cannot provide an antidote to the postcolonial experience of pervasive melancholy if community is conflated solely with place; if *who* you are is contingent on *where* you are, then the permanently *dislocated* can never become anyone at all. Ranjana Khanna proposes instead that an affective community could form around a sense of *disidentification* (125). "Commonality," she concludes, "can only be found...as it is sensed, as coming undone through nonidentification, demetaphorization, unworking...the constitution of a...shared sense of belonging as...nonbelonging" (130). Starkings' stories work like slave narratives, providing an alternate discourse that recalls a space for deterritorialized bodies to be seen and heard uncoupled from the metaphors that seek to predestine their place. "This isn't the way it has to be," the pivotal human character, whose transgressive interspecies love is the fulcrum for this series, urges the tormented Ebony Hide, "Your world is not yet made" ("See the Elephant"). Yet it is here, I would also argue, that Starkings misses a politically potent opportunity to stage a graphic moment of dissensus.

Dissensus, Rancière writes, "means a conflict between one sensible order and another. There is dissensus when there is something wrong in the picture, when something is not in the right place" ("What Does It Mean to be *Un*?" 560). In *Disagreement*, he elaborates that "the assertion of a common world thus happens through a paradoxical mise-en-scène that brings the community and the noncommunity together," a performance that is also performative, juxtaposing seemingly incompatible images to provide an opening for what he has elsewhere described as "an impossible identification,

an identification that cannot be embodied by he or she who utters it” (*Disagreement* 55, “Politics, Identification, Subjectivization” 61). Rancière often uses the example of French activists in May 1968, who adopted the slogan “We are all German Jews” to protest police brutality against Algerian immigrants, to demonstrate how “the first act of politics is to throw off a policed identity” by embracing what he also calls “the heterogeneity of language games” (Tanke 49; Rancière, *Disagreement* 50). In his 2011 lecture entitled “Jacques Rancière’s Politics of the Ordinary,” political historian Jason Frank located the same moment of emerging equality in the dissensual claims made by sanitation workers marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Using Ernest Withers’ photographs of workers’ signs proclaiming “I AM A MAN,” Frank noted this potent moment of impossible identification, of the emergence into visibility of a minoritized group upon their asserting an equality that was, at the time, barely thinkable, much less visible. When Elijah Delaney rejects the inaccurate designation “Elephantmen” in a broadcast interview, we can read his response as a refusal of the strategic discourse of speciesism, of the effects of a naturalizing distribution of the sensible that is as demeaning as it is conservative of a policed order. On the other hand, we could read this as a foregone opportunity for political rupture—a failure of the text to “crack [this situation] open from the inside” (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 49). I wish that Starkings had chosen, in a move that both recalls and recasts John Merrick’s emphatic denunciation in the 1980 film *The Elephantman*, to have Delaney and the other hybrids announce in solidarity “I AM AN ELEPHANTMAN.” To do so, I think, would have opened the series to what Rancière would identify as a “political interval”—the creation of a political community founded not in “the realization of a common essence or the

essence of the common. It is the sharing of what is not given as being in-common” (*Disagreement* 138). He lists “the visible and the invisible, the near and the far, the present and the absent” as some of those critical not-being-in-common states of being; a postcolonial ecocriticism must surely add to that the human and the nonhuman (*Disagreement* 138).

If this moment for solidarity between the Elephantmen is foregone in Starkings’ imaginary, however, I would argue that his graphic novel does succeed in challenging our allegorical expectations. As material metaphors, these hybrid creatures succeed at bringing human and nonhuman into intimate contact without rendering either invisible in the other; we see the Elephant and the Man. In *The Ecological Thought*, Tim Morton offers this paradoxical observation: “Humans may be ‘animals,’ but ‘animals’ aren’t ‘animals’” (62). I would add that in this graphic novel, animals are not allegories, or not allegories alone. Unworking those categorical assumptions that structure the material worlds we live *in*, or the fictional worlds we think *with*, help us to keep the idea of a political community alive. What ultimately binds us to the Elephantmen is our disidentification with the “truths” of humanism and homecoming; we are all Wounded Animals here in a global postcolony offering neither refuge nor asylum.

Can I Get a Witness? Fable and Figure in *Pride of Baghdad*

Whatever I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies.
(Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People* 13)

If Richard Starkings’ *Wounded Animals* takes the form of an allegory, then Brian K. Vaughan and Niko Henrichon’s *Pride of Baghdad* is perhaps better described as a fable. Fables often feature animal characters and tend to “illustrate a moral;” the characters “are merely sketched, not greatly developed,” and are valued chiefly for their

ability to illustrate human qualities and predicaments (Kennedy and Gioia 23, 7). David Herman distinguishes *Pride of Baghdad* from animal allegory by designating it as “anthropomorphic projection;” while he accords this graphic novel a greater degree of zoomorphic focus, he contends that “human motivations and practices continue to be used as the template for interpreting nonhuman behavior” (Herman “Storyworld” 167). Also commenting specifically on *Pride of Baghdad*, Suzanne Keen notes that its anthropomorphized animal protagonists reflect the representational strategies of “imperial animal tales,” a technique that “predates comic books and graphic novels, calling upon a long literary tradition of moralized animal fables, political allegories, and myths of origin in folklore” (137). What distinguishes this graphic novel from Starkings’ purely invented tale, however, is its grounding in actual events—this graphic novel is based on a true story. On April 22, 2003, BBC News reported that “four starving lions which dug their way out of a Baghdad zoo have been shot dead by American soldiers” (“US troops kill Baghdad lions”). The nonhuman characters depicted here were among the “excess deaths” of noncombatants during the Iraq War. MIT’s website intended to rectify early (typically American) miscounts of those casualties—estimates that tended to overlook Iraqi bodies—is quite tellingly titled “Iraq: The *Human Cost*,” an unconscious gesture to Rancière’s emphasis on the political valence that underpins any kind of a count (<http://web.mit.edu/humancostiraq/>, emphasis added). In this emotionally loaded graphic novel, myth and history, fiction and nonfiction, human and nonhuman collide in ways that challenge readers to consider the place (and the displacement) of truth for “a community existing solely through being divided” (Rancière, *Disagreement* 32).

“The place of truth,” Rancière contends, “is not the place of a ground or an ideal;

it is always a *topos*, the place of a subjectivization in an argumentative plot” (“Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” 60). Achille Mbembe argues that “a true narrative” is simply one that is “believed true and so regarded by the person narrating it, hearing it, or accepting it...The question of truth is, effectively, resolved by the reader” (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 158). In his searing exploration of the effects of the Vietnam War on American combat troops, Tim O’Brien devotes an entire chapter to “How to Tell a True War Story,” observing that “you can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end,” and suggesting that “in a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning” (76-77). Keen’s perceptive reading of *Pride of Baghdad* certainly suggests that it provides more complicated representations of its animal protagonists than its more simplistic literary forbearers, but I would suggest that her concern that the “ambassadorial strategic empathy” produced by the novel’s “visual arts techniques” may not “necessarily translate into justice for peoples and nations” strays beyond the actual goals of critical art and of a postcolonial ecocritical reading of it (136, 149). Rancière argues that spectatorship is not somehow the opposite of action; spectatorship, and in this context, readership, is instead its own kind of action, “a form of inhabiting the world that follows traces, draws connections, and offers interpretations” (Tanke 93). *Pride of Baghdad* presents its readers with what Rancière describes as the intolerable image, an image that contains something intolerable in it and that produces in its viewers a response to its intolerability (*Emancipated Spectator* 83-105). It is an image that interpellates a witness, “one who does not want to witness” but who is nonetheless compelled to speak for the other whose represented body makes us “see what it tells us”

(*Emancipated Spectator* 91, 94). Steve Baker, whose lucid writing on postmodernism's representation of the animal is critical to my reading here, suggests that "the particular advantage of the genre," by which he specifically means the animal comic strip, "lies precisely in its adaptability and its slipperiness," its ability to move outside the boundaries of "orderly, rational narrative" (*Picturing the Beast* 131). To suggest that "talking-animal narratives are not really about animals—that the worthwhile ones, at least, must surely be about something more important than mere animals," he argues, trivializes the animal in a deeply anthropocentric way (*Picturing the Beast* 138).

Rancière argues that like metaphor, fable is one of many "modes of this power of fabulation, that is, the presentation of truth in images," and if *Pride of Baghdad* is a fable, it is surely more than just a human sketch clothed in fur (*Mute Speech* 62). It is also a very deliberate rendering of a truth, a truth that appears in the entanglement of myth and history, in the memories of multiple minds. Rancière insists on the aesthetic nature of memory: it is "an orderly collection, a certain arrangement of signs, traces, and monuments" that functions in a very selective (and political) way (*Film Fables* 157). "In comics," Scott McCloud argues, "the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities;" the contingent juxtaposition of seemingly disparate images, working with iconic solidarity's capacity for narrative power, provides those ruptures wherein new truths about old assumptions can emerge (104). "The image is valuable as a liberating power, pure form and pure *pathos* dismantling the classical order of organization of fictional action, of *stories*," Rancière elaborates. "On the other hand, it is valuable as the factor in a connection that constructs the figure of a common *history*" (*Future of the Image* 34). Meaning is therefore contingent on the image+text of

the graphic novel and yet capable of exceeding it.⁵ The fact that the graphic novel uses a sequence of images to tell a story raises concerns about the connotative meaning conveyed by those images. It shares the photograph's ability to join two discrete objects into one image that naturalizes a relationship that is not, in fact natural. Myth functions in a similar way, seizing on an image or sign and redeploing it in a new way that detaches it from its original time and place, context and history (Barthes 116-117). Barthes stresses that the mythic form "does not suppress...meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal" (118). Myth, with its deliberate structuring of the visible and the sensible, its specific inclusion (and therefore operational exclusion) of persons, attributes, and interpretations, serves a political as well as an aesthetic purpose. Yet even appropriated as mythic symbol, the sign is still inherently unstable; the ambiguity at its heart invites the graphic novel to use the power of the mythic symbol and simultaneously to disrupt it.

This is the project of Brian K. Vaughan's 2006 graphic novel, *Pride of Baghdad*. Vaughan's poignant story images these actual events as the intersection of multiple myths, entangling the nonfictional escape of the living lions with the legend of an ancient Persian statue, the "Lion of Babylon," and mapping it onto what an aging tortoise describes as "the **other** Lions of Babylon," Iraqi-built Soviet-designed tanks commissioned during the Gulf War by Saddam Hussein (and actually nicknamed "the Lions of Babylon).⁶ The parallel to Barthes' *Mythologies* is uncanny: his first example of myth's ability to shift the signifier "from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier," is the linguistic phrase, "*my name is lion*" (Barthes 117). Barthes argues that the phrase houses a linguistic richness of natural, behavioral, and historical

context that is lost in the shift to signification. The tortoise dismisses the cub's confusion over the collision of signifier and signified in his recounting of these mutable mythologies ("What **was** that/Those'll be the Lions of Babylon/Don't worry, they ain't **real** lions/ Babylon's a town downriver. Their lion's a **statue**"). "Everything's got a name," the tortoise argues in an earlier passage he now refers back to. "It's how we make crap **belong** to us." He emphasizes the political appropriation of the mythic by multiple stakeholders in this global context. These lions (the tanks, the statue) are "just, what do you call 'em...**symbols**. You know walkers [humans], never say what they mean." The narrative self-consciously deconstructs its own layering of myth and symbol, illustrating that meaning is both multiple and contested in this textual environment. At the same time, the use of bold text both emphasizes specific words and makes their graphic representation *as symbols* more evident to our reading of them. In *Pride of Baghdad*, we are asked to rethink not only the shifting connections between the past and the present, between history and myth. We are also placed in the position of asking whether these animals, in the language of images, truly mean what they seem to say.

Aesthetically, then, *Pride of Baghdad* manipulates the distinction between figure and figuration; between "the representation or characterization of the form of an object [which] is its figure," and to the viewer's interpretation of it (Shiff 480). "Figuration occurs to the extent that a simple act of visual attention—looking at something, becoming aware that it has significance—is interpretive" (Shiff 480). *Pride of Baghdad* opens with a panel of empty sky on the left page, while a raven on the right hand page cries, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Beneath the raven, a male lion questions the apparent hyperbole of such a claim. "The damn sky is never going to..." An inset interrupts our

perspective and the context of his argument; like a close up, it functions to localize our attention within the larger territory, to more narrowly align what we see with, in this instance, the lion's upward glance. Framed within a frame and located just at the lower right hand corner of the page, we are forced to pause our reading of this unfolding story until we turn the page—to a double-page spread that is nearly wordless. The lion's sky (and ours) is full of "falling" fighter jets. Another inset of his face, again positioned at the lower right, aligns our understanding with his...or does it? Do we see the same thing...or, more importantly, do we understand what each of us "sees" in the same way? Richard Shiff, one of the editors of *Critical Terms for Art History*, would say no. "What the thing viewed means to me is not necessary what it means to you," and the importance of this distinction between the figure and what it means *to be figured* seems to me to suggest the source of the graphic novel's slipperiness, its dance of image and text that, as Shiff suggests, "oscillates between the visual and the textual and between matter and sign" (479). Figures, like the figures of the various lions who "people" this pride of Baghdad, are both material and immaterial, real and imagined. And this leads Shiff to argue that when we view these seemingly "natural and unchanging" figures from "an ideological perspective other than our initial one," we can suddenly see them as "arbitrary products of a social process," as cultural chimeras reflecting "an instance of collective poetic figuration" that he also describes as *mythology* (480). From its opening pages, then, *Pride of Baghdad* warns us not to take anything at face value, not to be beguiled by the simplicity of its illustrations or its narrative into underestimating its meaning(s).

The lion's "Ah" is also ours, but in a way that seems less comprehensive than apprehensive, a kind of involuntary response that suggests that our expectations may not

be met precisely as we anticipate. Deleuze warns that narration “tends to slip into the space between two figures” in order to overdetermine them in some kind of relationship; Seymour Chatman argues that audiences feel compelled to complete a narrative, to “fill in gaps” (*Francis Bacon* 6; *Story and Discourse* 28). Deleuze’s solution is to interrupt those figural impulses (or “closure,” to recall Scott McCloud’s argument from my Introduction) through isolation: “to break with narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure” by, in the case of the artwork of Francis Bacon, enclosing the figure in some artificial framework that wards off the connectivity of a storyline (6). In the graphic novel, the use of a guttered or bordered inset accomplishes the same thing, emphasizing a relatively local perspective “to highlight a privileged relationship between two terms”—in this case between the lion and the reader—but because of its sequential arrangement of images, panels, and pages, that same relationship also begs to be “read and interpreted in taking account of everything that, upstream and downstream, can index or echo it” (Groensteen 89). Rancière embraces this “union of contraries,” as he puts it, in the work of the cinema; “the long work of de-figuration,” he suggests, “contradicts the expectation borne by the subject matter or the story” (*Film Fables* 8). In *Pride of Baghdad*, there is often both a local and a global context at work in the same image. Donna Haraway devotes considerable attention to the idea of the figure in several of her texts, from her famous cyborg to primates and, more recently, to dogs. “In every case,” she observes, “the figures are at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality; the dimensions tangle and require response” (*When Species Meet* 4). I believe that is precisely what Vaughan and Henrichon intend in this graphic novel,

which relies on the hybrid nature of its animal figures to multiply our reaction to the outlines of the text.

The multiple opportunities for viewer identification in this graphic novel provide resistance to the occlusive universal validity that mythic monologues speak through a cast of stereotypical characters. The aesthetic of the graphic novel encourages what Rancière valorizes as political art's "continuous process of border crossings" ("Contemporary Art" 43). The graphic novel's masking effect, the readiness with which some characters are drawn more iconically and less realistically, encourages us to inhabit a persona, to adopt a role that puts a face on the Other, and that allows us to face (an)other world freed of the specific constraints of our own cultural, historic, and organic myths.⁷ A mask "urgently calls attention to the need to enact (depending on the circumstances) a new or transformed identity" (Bouittieux 11). As Keen observes, in this graphic novel the aesthetic choice is not to produce an accurate ethological representation of animal behavior; to do so would subvert Vaughan's narrative commingling of human and other-than-human experience in this war-torn community. The multiple animal protagonists of *Pride of Baghdad* invite the reader to experiment with creative mimesis, to take advantage of an opportunity for "slipping into Otherness, trying it on for size" (Taussig 33). Yet at the same time, I would also argue that Vaughan and Henrichon constantly choose to remind the reader of these animals' distinctive materiality, of the very real distance that separates us from them, and of representation's always already distancing point of view. "Distance," Rancière writes, is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication. Human animals are distant animals who communicate through the forest of signs" (*Emancipated Spectator* 10). Tim Morton agrees, arguing "if

we try to get rid of distance too fast, in our rush to join the nonhuman, we will end up caught in our prejudice...our concept of ‘them.’ Hanging out in the distance may be the surest way of relating to the nonhuman” (*Ecology Without Nature* 205). Henrichon’s use of inset and perspective works to align our experiences with those of these lions of Baghdad, but we are always reminded that we are seeing *with* them or *past* them, never *through* them—we never fully appropriate their gaze. Even when the perspective is that of the lions, looking upward or downward, the lions themselves appear in the frame; we are looking over their shoulder, and they inevitably stand between us and the events that are occurring. Henrichon’s illustrations provide us with a distinctly third person overlook from which to hang back, to be reminded that lions *are* predators, that they do not gasp in awe at the beauty of a herd of Arabian horses—they flatten themselves into a hunting phalanx, the better to seize their prey. What is clearly at stake here is the presentation of multiple aspects of our engagement with alterity. This is not a failure of representation, but rather a demonstration of its strength and of its deliberate partitioning of experience; Vaughan and Henrichon experiment here with the graphic novel’s capacity for exposing how the potential disruption of any predetermined political subjectivity can also be undercut by the ability to slip out of, as well as to slip into, Otherness.

Marianna Torgovnick’s critical evaluation of the uses and abuses of the primitive in modernist art can be usefully expanded to an analysis of the graphic novel’s frequent use of the animal as the mask through which we are invited to investigate the Other. She notes, “Explorations of the primitive could thus potentially make us change our ideas about ourselves and change our social forms. Or they could support traditional values and arrest changes found threatening in contemporary culture” (46). Torgovnick emphasizes

the malleability of the category of the primitive, its iconic usefulness as a trope that can be deployed in multiple ways and its value as a negative measure of self, as that which we are not. Torgovnick is specifically concerned with definitions of the primitive that emphasize the naturalness of what are considered essential differences, with the seemingly organic support for species hierarchies that were used to justify colonial (as well as racial and gendered) projects of oppression and control (46). Animal discourse can be similarly deployed, made to serve a mythic narrative that promotes a political project that naturalizes a dominant order and silences subordinate voices at the same time. The animals of *Pride of Baghdad* display a constant awareness of their species difference, one that acknowledges predator/prey conflicts and questions whether social liberation could challenge instinctive hostilities. When Noor suggests a revolt against the zookeepers that would unite lion and antelope with monkey and rat, the antelope's incredulous "what would **we** do with **keys**?" risks the reader's assumption that all Iraqis (whether Christian or Muslim, Shiite or Sunni) are *merely animals*, incapable primitives who cannot function without their "keepers." Yet even as we recognize the larger metaphor at work in this narrative, the visual difference between the species and a narrative structure that continues to make the individual differences between the lions both audible and visible work to interrupt our easy assumptions about the nature of either lion or human. In this graphic novel, they and we are both predator and prey, never just one or the other.

"Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture," Baker argues, and the disfiguring work of clashing cultures at war with one another both locally and globally is restaged here (*Picturing the Beast* 4). The lions, one

male, two females, and a cub, represent distinctly different viewpoints whose individual experiences collide with the mythic meanings of freedom and with the naturalness of nature, the essentialness of instinct. The characters are drawn less with an eye towards realism than with an intent to make each recognizably distinct; we can freely shift our identification from one to the other while still distinguishing between them. Zill, the male, recalls a memory from his life in the wild, looking down towards a horizon “*devour[ing]* the sun in slow, steady bites, spilling its blood across the azure sky,” but rationalizes his captivity as preferable because of the regular meals the keepers provide. Ali, the cub, was born in the zoo, so he relies on the older lions for a description of a world he has never known. Safa, the older female, remembers “the old days” with loathing, describing “black, bloodsucking flies” as she pictures her rape by roaming males. Noor, the younger female, longs for a freedom whose outlines she vaguely remembers, but whose details she has supplied from her present desire, a longing to freely experience the thrill of the chase, the independence she believes was her birthright. The lions and the other animals in the zoo discuss the function of the zookeepers, debating whether being kept safe is more important than being kept from freedom and speculating on what an interspecies freedom might look like. Each offers the reader a different access point into the American discourse of Operation Iraqi Freedom, but the constant shifting between protagonists destabilizes any fixed standpoint, for the reader or for the subjects of this fictionalized reality, this realistic fiction. This instability represents a critical feature of Rancière’s concept of political art. “The main procedure of political or critical art consists in setting out the encounter, and possibly the clash, of heterogeneous elements,” he writes, and posits that this narrative disruption can “provoke a break in our perception,” one that

might then “disclose some secret connection of things hidden behind everyday reality” (“Contemporary Art” 41). Recall as well his argument that community is formed not from the simple sharing of space but from dissensus, from *disconnection*. Vaughan’s lions, like Rob Nixon’s displaced local populations, find themselves thrust out of their habitual environment when the literal ground beneath their feet is radically, and irrevocably, altered. Henrichon’s double page spread illustrates this by once again using the global backdrop of shared circumstance to contextualize a series of guttered insets focusing our attention on each lion’s separate reaction to their unexpected liberation from the zoo, a freedom born of explosive destruction that, as Noor notes, “isn’t right.”

This perceptual dissonance is staged across time and space, between conflicting ideologies and between multiple local and national identities, and it is embodied literally and graphically in the figure of the famed “Lion of Baghdad” sculpture. In this statue, the lion, “one of your kind,” is “trying to eat a man...but the man’s **fighting off** the big stone cat. Legend says that as long as that statue’s still standing, this land’ll never fall to outsiders.” The lions are mystified, confused by what is clearly a disconnection between this representation of their historic location and their contemporary moment. “Yes, but this is **our** land now, too. Who are **we** supposed to be in the statue...the lion, or the man? The tortoise responds, “Maybe you’re both. Or maybe you’re **neither**,” underscoring what Baker identifies as the figural’s dependence on a necessary isolation of the Figure—in this case, the animal—from “clues in its surroundings which would make it more readily meaningful in human terms,” more recognizably itself and less available as a semiotic reference for something else (*Postmodern Animal* 148). This moment in *Pride of Baghdad* stages the demetaphorization of a colonized minority emerging as a new “we”

precisely in the moment they experience their displacement and disidentification. The lions' uncertainty in turn underlines the instability Vaughan's readers experience over the course of this novel. What is our position in this war-torn environment, and where should our sympathies lie? Are we the lion or the man, the predator or the victim, are we other or Other, and as the tortoise asks, "What's it matter?"

Ultimately, there is no return to stability in the image+text environment of *Pride of Baghdad*. The stain of our slip into Otherness lingers long after we shift back into our own identities, now strangely less comfortable than before. The experience is "not a return to naïve mimesis," but rather an opportunity for a liminoid and "complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell *Picture Theory* 16). The final scenes of the novel reenact the killing of the pride by U.S. soldiers; like them, we see only identically uniformed, armed, faceless boots-on-the-ground. The disembodied voice of an officer absolves anyone of responsibility for the deaths, intoning "you didn't have a choice" against the visible evidence to the contrary. When an anonymous soldier asks if lions are native to Bagdad, if "those things are...wild out here," the same disembodied patriarchal voice responds, "No, not wild...they're free." Beneath this seemingly paradoxical claim, we hear the echoes of one of the key points of disconnection between postcolonial and ecocritical theory, ecocriticism's prioritization of the wild, the exurban, the indigenous juxtaposed with postcolonialism's affiliation with the hybrid, the cross-cultural, the impure. One of Rob Nixon's charges to a newly imagined postcolonial environmental literary study is that it must overcome its apparent "reluctance to engage the environmental repercussions of American foreign policy, particularly in regard to contemporary imperial practices" (33). Both *Elephantmen Vol. 1:*

Wounded Animals and *Pride of Baghdad* attempt to remedy that “ecocritical silence” that Nixon finds so “resounding” (33). Achille Mbembe clearly ties war to the colonial (and therefore imperial) enterprise; the colonies are “zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other” (“Necropolitics” 24). *Elephantmen* relocates its wounded animals within an American postcolony; in *Pride of Baghdad*, we are left with Mbembe’s assertion that “the postcolony is a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline” (*On the Postcolony* 102-103). *Pride*’s final panels present full-page aerial views of the burning city and of a more suburban landscape that could be Iraq, could be America, could be anywhere. Reportorial text, starkly inscribed above the image of the burning city notes the actual escape of four lions from the Baghdad Zoo; against the ambiguous landscape, the text pronounces, “There were other casualties as well.” The final panel is a backlit scene of the Lion of Babylon, the fabled statue of the lion poised above its human prey. In the background, the figure of a raven, bird of ill omen (and the first speaking character in this graphic novel), is about to light on the statue. We are back where we started, back in the colony, “where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end’” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 23). Are we the victors or the victims of this war? Are we the lions, or are we the humans?⁸

But would a truly postcolonial ecocriticism even make those distinctions? In his thoughtful response to postcolonial ecocriticism’s future, Anthony Vital suggests that in order to “attempt reconciling ecocriticism and postcolonial critique,” it will be necessary for scholars and critics to begin by recognizing “the complex interplay of social history

with the natural world,” to understand how “language both shapes and reveals such interactions” (90). Barbara Noske, animal studies scholar, notes in 1989’s *Human and Other Animals* that “humans have divided the entire world into nation-states,” and as a result, “all animals, even those living in very remote areas, have come to live in *countries* and are experiencing the impact (directly or indirectly) of human industries and human legislation” (1, italics original). Animals, no less than humans, find themselves postcolonial subjects, negotiating the same environmental issues, interpellated and interrogated by the same discourse. Vital suggests, “postcolonial ecocriticism might unfold through critical engagement with environmental discourses emerging in response to local conditions—and differing as local conditions differ” (100). Rancière concurs, I think, in his own rethinking of the political in a global age. “Politics,” he suggests, “is the art of warped deductions and mixed identities” (*Disagreement* 139). Undeterred by globalization’s claims to universality and homogeneity, he suggests that politics is resolutely “the art of the local...It is always local and occasional” (*Disagreement* 139). As yet another of Rancière’s places of subjectivization in an argumentative plot, the local is the last *topos* we will explore in our final graphic novel representing the animal—an/other place of mixed identities whose “language is always idiomatic” (“Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” 60). Gayatri Spivak, whose published conversation with Judith Butler about issues postcolonial and postnational explore questions and claims about “language, politics, belonging,” observes that “the nation-state requires the national language,” that a kind of homoglossia supports the image of a unified, single-minded, and single-spoken Being-as-Nation (74). How then, might the language of the

graphic novel, its confluence of image and text, convey a less holistic idiom? Who sings, to paraphrase Butler and Spivak's provocative title, the *local* state?

**Telling Tales: Novel Voices and Impossible
Identifications in *WE3***

If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it.
(Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* 12).

Can the Post-Other speak?⁹ The question of voice in the graphic novel speaks directly to its availability as a political practice. Rancière's demand for dissensus is grounded in his belief that "equality is...the condition required for being able to think politics" (*Politics of Aesthetics* 52). Equality is not, in Rancière's politics, a permanent condition; it "takes effect" and then "generates politics" only "when it is implemented" in "a particular case of dissensus" (*Politics of Aesthetics* 52) Elsewhere, as I have noted, Rancière argues that equality is the originary or founding moment of existence, but one always already departed from. Dissensus can give birth to moments of equality, but note that according to Gabriel Rockhill's *Translator's Introduction*, equality, in Rancière's terms, even when it does happen is not itself the goal. Rather, he suggests, that eruption of equality into visibility is "the very axiomatic point of departure whose sporadic reappearance via disturbances in the set system of social inequalities is the very essence of emancipation" (Rockhill 2-3). What happens next is politics.

Politics, then, "consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as *merely noisy animals*" (Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* 25, emphasis added). At issue in this argument is not the capacity *for* speech, but rather the

police operations that prevent Other voices from being heard; as in the case of visibility, politics does not make present that which was absent but rather *renders audible* that which has been suppressed. As Eric Méchoulan clarifies, “the original wrong consists in hearing ‘noises’ instead of voices, something ‘roaring’ in place of someone speaking. This is where politics emerges” (3). While Rancière’s early work focuses on issues of public speech and art’s ability to create those opportunities for new speaking (and clearly human) subjects to be understood, his more recent work with images expands this argument. He argues that images are not merely the pictorial version of human language; the image “is a way in which things themselves speak and are silent,” and it renders visible, if you will, “their silent speech” (*Future of the Image* 13). “Silent speech,” he elaborates, “is the eloquence of the very thing that is silent, the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth” (Rancière, *Future of the Image* 13). If “the process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being,” and if the silent speech of things is made audible and visible in the image, through art’s work, then I think Rancière’s arguments apply vitally to a postcolonial (and posthumanist) ecocritical analysis of the graphic novel (Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” 59). The aesthetics of the graphic novel as image+text (suggestively equated by W.J.T. Mitchell to Derrida’s “*différance*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation”) readily serve as a staging ground for the production of a heteroglossic excess that overflows any consensual (and in this situation, species-specific) discourse (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 106). “When mute images begin to speak,” Mitchell also specifies, “the ‘natural’ semiotic and aesthetic order

undergoes stress and fracture...[They are] put into question: ‘natural’ for whom? since when? and why” (“Word and Image” 60). In *Film Fables*, Rancière also elaborates that there are essentially two ways that we can make “mute things speak the language of their mutism”; either we open ourselves to “their intimate murmurings” or we “manipulate them to make them speak, we have to uproot them and put them in touch with all the things, forms, signs and ways of doing that are their co-presents” (179). We juxtapose them, in other words, with other words and images—we may even creatively use anthropomorphism to put ourselves in touch with them.

Anthropomorphic discourse, the attribution of human values and emotions to animals, has a long and troubled history for both the sciences and for literature. It ranges from the purely instrumental and overt use of animals as a symbolic language that illustrates human behavior, to a constructive attempt to empathize with another species by using a human perspective as the gateway to nonhuman understanding (Corbett 197-199). At its most objectionable, anthropomorphism, like primitivism, is understood as a perspective that always looks back and down at an Other understood as both prior to, and incommensurate with, contemporary civilized humankind. Even comics theorist Scott McCloud is not unaware of the appropriative and utilitarian impulse that often pervades anthropomorphism. “We humans are a self-centered race. We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist. And we make the world over in our image” (McCloud 32-33). Yet there is something compelling, something desirable, about that solipsistic gaze; something that compelled Michael Taussig to consider “*why* looking at the savage is interesting,” and something that led John Berger to ask, “Why look at animals?” (Taussig 75; Berger 259-273). Before industrialization reshaped the

environment in the nineteenth century, Berger argues, anthropomorphism “was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity” (264).

Animals and man encountered their differences in two ways, Berger contends—through their lack of language and through their reciprocal gaze. In the modern world, that silent but visible acknowledgement has vanished as animals have lost their place in human society. Animals no longer *partake* of that parallel copresence; they are now marginalized and frequently rendered invisible, “absorbed into the so-called silent majority” (266-267).

“Partaking” is another essential term in Rancière’s aesthetics; both Tanke and Méchoulan note that the English translation, “the distribution of the sensible,” somewhat mutes the double meaning of the French original, “*le partage du sensible*.” *Partage* “can have two almost opposite meanings, the first is ‘to share, to have in common,’ the second, ‘to divide out, to share out’” (Méchoulan 4). Partaking signals both taking part in something shared with others and also redistributing what was previously allocated in a different way; for Rancière, this doubled meaning emphasizes that “it is important to attend to the sensible, for its distinctions and divisions anticipate what becomes thinkable and possible” (Tanke 2). Attending to the sensible in terms of our communion with animals and other nonhuman things means that we grant them their materiality, their own experience of our shared world. “Although I do acknowledge that there is a sense in which we cannot know the Other (whether it be other species, other cultures, the other sex or even each other),” Barbara Noske writes, “we must remind ourselves that other meanings exist, even if we may be severely limited in our understanding of them” (160). Representing those meanings in our own words helps us to hear (or to see) theirs, not as

noise, but as speech. “All things and all meanings inter-express,” Rancière insists; anthropomorphism decodes that interexpression for us (*Film Fables* 179). Jane Bennett argues, “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world;” “a touch of anthropomorphism...can catalyze a sensibility” that our world is shared with not only different others but also with others who partake in our communities of sense (*Vibrant Matter* xvi, 99). Donna Haraway posits that anthropomorphism’s “philosophically suspect language” is “necessary to keep the humans alert to the fact that somebody is at home in the animals they work with” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 50).

In *Picturing the Beast*, Steve Baker’s response to Berger’s essay (in which he announces a desire to examine the history of animal representation in a way that resists the urge to “deny the animal” in its representation) parallels my desire to read anthropomorphism in the graphic novel not as a univocal discourse of the human, but rather as a productive doubling of the voices equally present within its narrative borders (Baker 15). Berger argues that as “man can surprise the animal,” so too “the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man” (260). It is that element of surprise that Baker embraces as the supplemental potential located in reading animal images for their animal content, against their use as metaphors for human actions. He observes, “it is the very instability of the anthropomorphized animal’s identity which can make contact or even proximity with it so hazardous for those with an overblown sense of their own importance, power, and identity” (*Picturing the Beast* 159). Berger, like Baker, recognizes the power inherent in animals who speak like humans (speak to them? speak for them?); “anthropomorphism,” he observes, “makes us doubly uneasy” (264).¹⁰ It is

precisely the productive destabilization inherent in talking animals that author Grant Morrison and illustrator Frank Quitely explore in their viscerally emotional graphic novel, *WE3*.

WE3 tells the story of three lost pets, experimentally altered into biomechanical weapons as part of a congressionally funded secret military project. The animals, a mixed breed dog, a domestic tabby, and a rabbit, have been surgically and chemically altered, encased in armored shells...and programmed with simple language skills. As with *Pride of Baghdad*, the story quickly shifts from the laboratory setting to an extended narrative that centers on the three biorgs' escape from their imprisonment; Washington has ordered the decommissioning of the biorgs in favor of a specific program designed to breed animals for weapons purposes, and a sympathetic female researcher, Dr. Berry, frees her protégées. The novel's tale of human/animal contact predicated on the invasion of borders and bodies that is the consequence of animal experimentation relies on typically postcolonial tropes. These "biorgs" have been developed as weapons, a pilot project for "replacing an expensive and outmoded **workforce** with efficient animal **slaves**...living **weapons**" whose primary efficacy is to prevent the deaths of "**countless** men and women in our armed forces."¹¹ Animal bodies clearly do not count in this policed distribution of the sensible; instead, they suffer the appropriation, the overfamiliarization, and the utilization of the animal/native by the human/colonist that typifies colonization, whether at the hands of individual or institutional (military or scientific) colonizers (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 5294-5308/6295). Morrison and Quitely also subtly link the practice of keeping domestic pets to the conditions of colonization. Each of *WE3*'s three chapters begins with a poster asking for help relocating one of the three pets who have been

altered from “Bandit,” “Tinker,” and “Pirate” into the team of automatons collectively referred to as **WE3** and individually known only as **1**, **2**, and **3**. The “friendly & approachable” mixed breed dog, a little girl’s “ginger-striped cat with a white nose & white tip of her tail” (each occurrence carefully dotted with tiny hearts), the “lost rabbit” who “likes lettuce and carrots” (penned in a noticeably childish hand)—these simplistic descriptions underdetermine these pluripotent creatures even as their reduction to numeric ciphers overdetermines the identities of “man’s **new** best friends.” Offended by what he considers to be Dr. Berry’s accusation of inhumanity, the head of the military’s “little pet project” defends his integrity by assuring his colleagues, “I don’t hate animals. I have two dogs of my own.” Mbembe succinctly defines colonization as “an enterprise of domestication,” as a strictly one-way and linear operation that would leave no room for the emancipation of any invisible or inaudible other into some kind of political equality—no manifestation of Rancière’s new “we” (*On the Postcolony* 5294-5308/6295). Donna Haraway, however, recharacterizes domestication as “an emergent process of co-habiting,” something approaching that threshold of human/nonhuman where species meet and where neither is either conflated with or fully subsumed by the other term; “co-habiting does not mean fuzzy and touchy-feely...Relationship is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 30). **WE3**, I think, responds to both perspectives in visual and verbal ways.

David Herman includes *WE3* in his ranking of anthropomorphic versus zoomorphic animal representation in the graphic novel, identifying it as a model of what he calls Umwelt exploration, the visual presentation of “what it is like for nonhuman agents to interact with their environment on a moment-by-moment basis”

(“Storyworld/Umwelt” 166). Contemplating contemporary demand that environmental texts become more posthumanist in their aesthetic practices, Lawrence Buell speculated that nonanthropocentric literature might have to abandon “what would seem to be literature’s most basic foci: character, persona, narrative consciousness;” he asks, “What literature can survive under these conditions” (*Environmental Imagination* 145). *WE3* attempts to be that literature, demonstrating how the graphic novel’s ability to repartition both narrative conventions and visual representation simultaneously “allow[s] for the accommodation, rather than the subordination, of nonhuman experiences” and demonstrates “how a concern with nonhuman ways of encountering the world can reshape humans’ own modes of encounter” (Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt” 175, 167). *WE3*’s narrative repeatedly foregrounds the trope of communication, but emphasizes the failures of language rather than its efficacy. One military official wonders, “What kind of lunatic would teach a killing machine to **talk**” while discussing how to face “the media” once news of the escaped animals inevitably and disastrously overflows the military’s ability to contain it. The scientist in charge of the project, Dr. Trendle, apprehends Dr. Berry after she releases the biorgs, but only because he stops “to **talk** to her,” not because he was able to read her obviously distressed body language. The various human actors repeatedly confer with one another on cell phones and radio equipment, and Berry (ironically referred to in the opening scenes as “our very own ‘Doctor Dolittle’” for her work with robotic speech and for her inability to communicate with “us mere **humans**”) is forced to “do the talking” necessary to recapture the fleeing specimens. Denied a phone call, her desperate plea “to **talk** to someone about this” ignored, Berry is blamed for the release of “three dangerous biological weapons into the environment” and her scientific

expertise is dismissed. Her only worth is as a mouthpiece for containment—“We’ll need **you** to do the talking, Roseanne,” to respond to the media and to lure the escaped animals to their death. She is sentenced to participate in the destruction of the biorgs and her arguments to the contrary go unheard: “the time for talking is done.”

Humanist discourse and species discourse flow equally across moody, evocative illustrations guttered entirely in black. The human discourse is presented as utterly unaware of its own ironies: actively planning to hunt down and destroy the escaped animals, Trendle repeatedly expresses his concerns for “those poor men,” the human soldiers who will likely die attempting to terminate the escaped “things.” Like their military counterparts in *Pride of Baghdad*, the human actors decry their lack of choice and justify the execution of the animals—creatures described as “instinctual, amoral...lack[ing] the **fear** that sets limits on human behavior.” More often than not, the human faces in this drama are represented only as lips and teeth; from an animal perspective, the mouth is the source of human identity, a visual pun that turns our vaunted use of language into our only identifying feature, and that is sometimes ironized by speech bubbles that literally overflow the space of the image they overwrite. The species discourse, rendered rudimentary and mechanical, relies heavily on the visual panels to carry and to convey its messages. Quietly effectively uses a robotic font in the speech balloons attached to the speaking animals, one that resembles digital code and that contrasts with the less rigid lettering used to depict human speech. Truly amoral, the animals react to the hostile environment they find themselves in with a simple directness that neatly undercuts the hidden agendas and moral duplicity of the human characters. The canine biorg urges the others to seek “**HOME**,” and continues to offer aid to fallen

humans even when under attack. The feline asserts its independence retorting, “**2 SAY IS NO HOME**” and pronouncing “**NO WE! /SSST!NK BOSSS!**”

The visual contrast between the almost cartoonish renderings of the missing family pets and their technological reincarnations is also rhetorically effective. These manufactured weaponized artifacts are drawn in a noticeably realistic style; as Scott McCloud points out, the use of realistic detail not only closes off reader identification with characters, it is also used to “*objectify* them, emphasizing their ‘*otherness*’ from the reader” (44, emphasis original). The biorgs are not the familiar dog, cat, and rabbit they were, yet each of these altered creatures still embodies its species traits. The human characters similarly represent human types: the duplicitous politician, the naïve scientist, and the maternal female—a nod, I think, to how nonhuman perception might grasp individual differences located within the *human* species. Both human and animal participants in this aesthetic setting commit acts of horrific violence, acts of aggression as well as acts of self-defense, acts of interspecies, as well as intraspecies, murder. In these scenes, Quiety shatters the visual field into a series of fragmentary panels, where human and animal parts commingle as bodies are randomly and violently dismembered. The perspective challenges linear narrative conventions and produces what Herman identifies as a more zoomorphic perspective, but I would argue that aesthetically there is more going on here. This radical redistribution of the sensible also begins that unworking that characterizes Rancière’s notion of subjectivation in a heart-stopping excess of visual dissensus. This radical layering of capacities, both positive and negative, nonhuman and human, “crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible” (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 49). We

aren't in Kansas anymore: we are in a new world with a new "we" that we cannot envision from a purely anthropocentric point of view; this radical redistribution of the sensible demands a new aesthetic.

Both animals and humans transgress boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and struggle to find identification between the conflicting demands of the story's images and text. Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy describe what they call the convivial relationship that obtains between the colonized and colonizer in the postcolony. Mbembe likens conviviality to the condition of being-with that Heidegger ascribes to the human/animal relationship: "We do not live with them if to live means: to be in the manner of the animal. Nevertheless we are with them...This being together with the animals is such that we let these animals move about in our world" (Heidegger qtd. in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 27). We are not like them, and we certainly do not allow that their cries of pleasure and pain approach the speech of citizens; we permit them to wander in our world without ever according them a part of it. Conviviality, Mbembe notes, is a logic of "familiarity and domesticity," one that thankfully keeps public displays of resistance under wraps while encouraging postcolonial subjects to put on and take off multiple identities as the situation demands (*On the Postcolony* 103-104). Gilroy's arguments for conviviality (like Haraway's rethinking of domestication) tend toward a more open-ended interpretation; he describes it as a kind of "radical openness" present in "processes of cohabitation and interaction" that "make a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity," shifting instead "toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification" (162/3943). In *WE3*, Berry sacrifices her life to save these wounded animals. Regretting her "gift" of language that targeted them for exploitation

and destruction, she attempts to unwork the dog's military I.D., reminding him that "U . R . BANDIT." As Judith Butler asserts in conversation with Gayatri Spivak, "language becomes one way of asserting criterial control over who belongs and who does not," structuring local experience in specifically inclusive and exclusive ways; *WE3* brings that lesson home in a palpably emotional way (Butler 59). Saved from extermination by Berry's selflessness, the surviving biorgs escape their pursuers. 1 and 2 reject the "BAD COAT" that weaponized them, ultimately shedding their mechanical skins; by the novel's final panel, both Bandit and Tinker, dog and cat, have also shed their domestic identities. They are free of naming conventions and technological contraptions, and they are freed (or deprived?) of the burden of language as well. Instead, they have allied themselves with another creature whose lack of visibility and lack of voice renders him as politically mute as these abject animals—a homeless vagrant. Huddled together on the steps of the courthouse, they/we gaze mutely upward as Dr. Trendle enters the building to testify about the events that have just occurred. This is a new *WE3*, a new community formed outside institutional barriers and available only because of the creative anthropomorphism that has allowed both human and animal discourse to emerge on a common stage. The silence of Morrison's text in the final panel refuses to narrate its conclusion, resisting the urge towards a happy ending or even a satisfactory resolution. Politics hovers in the gap between the unspoken question and its unspeakable answer: "?HOME IS?"

The graphic novel's unique capacity for allowing image and text to work inter- and intra-actively together makes it possible, I think, to keep us, as Donna Haraway suggests, alert "to otherness-in-relation," to remind us that we are both and neither human

and nonhuman, that “we are not one, and being depends on getting on together. The obligation,” she continues, “is to ask who are present and who are emergent” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 50). Her use of the plural, I think, corrects Hamlet’s singular “Who is there” at the opening of Shakespeare’s most recognizable tragedy. Hamlet expects to hear a human voice and so he does, albeit a ghostly one. In the graphic novel, we are called to become what Rancière has already described for us as those “impossible identifications,” “impossible subjects” whose collective emergence (“Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” 61; Tanke 65) shifts us away from our individual local identities into something like an assemblage, radically open to a commonality with precisely those Others with whom being-in-common seems impossible. Yet even as Rancière’s intuition nudges us towards this posthuman collectivity, his arguments do not take us all the way there. “Rancière’s assemblage is in its preliminary stages,” Garneau notes; for a more in-depth consideration of what the capacity of these anonymous “new figures...these metamorphoses” might be and do, we must turn to DeLanda and Deleuze...and to the Vegetable (Garneau 115; Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 132).

Notes

¹ I first explored some of the ideas in this chapter in my presentation, “Visual Virtual Posthumanism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel,” delivered at the 2011 Popular Culture Association conference in San Antonio, TX, and in my presentation, “No Rest for the Other: Postcolonial Melancholy in the Graphic Novel,” delivered at the 2011 meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in Evanston, IN. I also had the opportunity to further refine my arguments while attending Northwestern University’s 2011 Jacques Rancière Summer Institute. I am deeply grateful for all those opportunities to receive critical feedback on my work.

² While Morton’s argument here is based on his claim that aesthetics is a kind of passive receptivity, a claim that counters Rancière’s conception of aesthetics as a more active, politically motivated practice of choice, both understand aesthetics in terms of openness; Morton emphasizes its openness *to* difference, while Rancière is clearly invested in its power to produce an opening *for* the appearance of difference.

³ Like many graphic novels that collect multiple comics issues into one volume, *Wounded Animals* is not paginated. Chapter titles typically refer to individual issues, and I will reference those to locate the quoted text. Narrative text is generally depicted in all capital letters, using a combination of italics and bold type for emphasis; unless otherwise indicated, all uses of italics and bold lettering in quoted text are original.

⁴ Interestingly, in this same exchange Strumm comments on the Biblical names that each of the Elephantmen was given at birth (Elijah, Ebenezer, Obadiah, Jedidiah) and suggests that “the Egyptians and the Jews looked upon crocs as gods.” He also notes that he “read that crocodiles and hippos are like, natural enemies,” an assertion Delaney dismisses (“I’m just saying, you can’t believe everything you read”) even though the storyworld clearly depicts that rivalry as ongoing since Biblical times and into the “present” of the year 2260. A 2013 editorial cartoon appearing in the *Salt Lake Tribune* satirized conflict between the Egyptian military and Islamic citizens, representing the respective combatants as a hippopotamus and a crocodile.

⁵ I will use “image+text” in the same sense that W.J.T. Mitchell proposes for “image/text.” The “image/text” is his neologism for a medium in which the juxtaposition of image and text cannot be appropriately analyzed from the vantage point of either one of the terms independently of the other. See “Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text and Method” in *Picture Theory*, pp. 83-107. My graphic equivalent, I hope, draws attention to the middle of this productive hybrid, staging their heterogeneous interaction even as it intentionally preserves their difference.

⁶ *Pride of Baghdad* is not paginated. Given the cyclical nature of Vaughan’s story, the interleaving of history and myth, time past and time future, I believe this to be a very deliberate aesthetic choice. This is in no way a linear narrative, and the lack of either first page or last would certainly underscore an intention to emphasize the immanence of a conflict that seems endless.

⁷ The catalog for the 2009 exhibit, “Persona-Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed,” sponsored by the Royal Museum For Central Africa, contains a brief but useful discussion of the term “persona.” It is derived from the French “personne,” which can mean either ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ and “refers to opposites, the presence or absence of a human being” (11).

⁸ The Lion of Babylon did not survive the Iraq War. The independent news agency Voices of Iraq reported on July 29, 2007, that it was completely destroyed by an explosive charge planted under the statue by unidentified gunmen (<http://www.uruknet.info?p=34894>).

⁹ My opening query is a play on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” It also reflects, I hope, my ironic use in this chapter of epigraphs all taken from Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, a remarkable work of postcolonial fiction in which the main character, Animal, is in fact, human—human, but forced to walk on all fours as a result of congenital disfiguration caused by a fictional environmental accident that bears a striking resemblance to the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. He names himself Animal and insists on telling his story from his own perspective from eye level—his. “Whole nother world it’s, below the waist,” he begins (2). Spivak contends that the subaltern cannot speak truly in the language of the colonizer; Animal becomes not subhuman but post-Other in order to achieve a greater honesty.

¹⁰ I should point out the operation here of yet another aesthetic technology: my software would have me replace “animals who” with “animals that,” yet another distribution of the sensible designed to partition the human from the Other.

¹¹ In *WE3*, as in *Wounded Animals* and *Pride of Baghdad*, the creators have dispensed with pagination. All emphasis is again original, unless otherwise indicated in parentheses.

CHAPTER 2

VEGETABLE: EMERGING ENTANGLEMENTS

On the face of it, plants seem unlikely protagonists for the graphic novel, oddly ill adapted to the demands of life as comic book superheroes and still less inviting as those metamorphic new figures of the coming assemblage I promised at the conclusion of my first chapter. After all, as Michael Pollan notes in his introductory remarks to *The Botany of Desire*, “the one big thing plants can’t do is move...plants can’t change location or extend their range without help” (xx). Assemblage theory depends heavily on the notion of capacity, and if plants “are beings that do only one thing—grow,” then they would seem to be impossible subjects indeed (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 68). Anecdotally, we seem more inclined to think of plants as either objects or as environmental window-dressing, as set decorations relegated to the background of our ecological *mise en scène*. “Our attitude towards plants is a singularly narrow one,” Rachel Carson suggested. “If we see any immediate utility in a plant we foster it. If for any reason we find its presence undesirable or merely a matter of indifference,” we simply weed it out (63). Yi-Fu Tuan also emphasized our instrumental approach to the vegetable matter of our environment, representing gardening as a model of colonial dominance in practice. “Gardeners alter the earth only a little,” he suggests in *Dominance & Affection*, “but they alter it” (3).

Yet both Pollan and Lawrence Buell turn this rather conventional metaphor on its head. Buell argues that “the ecological colonization of the Americas by disease and invasive plant forms” is as worthy of a postcolonial ecocritical analysis as our domination of the indigenous populations (*The Environmental Imagination* 6); Pollan suggests that while “we automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species,” it is equally plausible (and perhaps more fruitful) to also “think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us” (xvi). In other words, perhaps the way that we think about plants, about their capacities and about our relationship with them, might bear some judicious pruning, reshaping the ways we represent those relations and considering that we, as well as they, might be more hybridized than we think. In his foundational 1995 work of ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell claims, “How we *image* a thing, true or false, affects our conduct toward it, the conduct of nations as well as persons” (Buell 3, italics added). Buell’s titular “environmental imagination” refers to the creative and conceptual ways that literature represents the natural world; his admonition is that we must find “better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it” in the face of global environmental crisis (*The Environmental Imagination* 2). Pollan notes that “the metaphors we use to describe the natural world strongly influence the way we approach it,” just as Native American author Paula Gunn Allen conflates “our attitude toward our body and the bodies of other planetary creatures and plants” with “our inner attitude toward the planet. And as we believe, so we act” (Pollan 191, Allen 79). All three recognize the pungent entanglement of imagination, representation, and agency—the bouquet of capacities that animate what cultural anthropologist Eduardo Kohn describes as the “vast ecology of selves” (95).

While Buell was generally concerned with an American environmental imagination manifested in nonfiction literature (and specifically in the work of Henry David Thoreau), he admits that its creative germination could also be traced in “environmentally directed texts in other genres” (*The Environmental Imagination* 2). I am certain that Buell’s intent here was to acknowledge that works of fiction are equally valuable specimens for examining how and why literary “aesthetics can become a decisive force for or against environmental change”; I am less sure that he imagined his emphatic choice of the word “image” would seed an ecocritical exploration of the graphic novel (*The Environmental Imagination* 3). Yet just as Michael Pollan celebrates what he describes as the “coevolutionary drama” in which human and vegetable actors have engaged in “a dance of human and plant desire that has left neither the plants nor the people taking part in it unchanged,” I will argue that the graphic novel’s elaborate entanglement of image and text offers a profoundly useful stage on which to further explore the ramification of that dance. If “developing the environmental imagination” requires, as Ann Fisher-Wirth suggests, reconceiving “the boundaries between culture and nature, human and nonhuman,” then the graphic novel provides fertile ground where grafting language onto Others conjoins verbiage with verbena, creating an assemblage of mindful matter whose ability to “speak a word for Nature” puts Thoreau’s in the shade (Fisher-Wirth 185; Emerson and Thoreau 71).¹

The Rhizome and the Assemblage

The concept of the assemblage has its origins in Gilles Deleuze’s illustrative model, the rhizome—a model he cultivates over several of the texts he cowrote with Félix Guattari. Deleuze is careful to describe what a rhizome *is* purely in terms of what it

does: an operation of principles that emphasize connection and heterogeneity, rather than isolated essences or typical qualities. Like the grasses on which he bases his observations, rhizomes are horizontal and flat, forming assemblages in a continuous and contiguous bidirectional movement that is metonymic rather than metaphoric; a rhizome does not stand in for something else, but rather “fosters transversal connections and communications between heterogeneous locations and events” because of the relations that germinate between the points it connects—when Deleuze reads between the lines here, he is mapping routes, not roots (O’Sullivan 12). Deleuze and Guattari begin *A Thousand Plateaus* by describing their collaborative text as an assemblage, a rhizome complete with “lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification...all this, lines and measurable speeds” (3-4). In *Kafka*, they again use the rhizome as a model for a certain kind of representational strategy, likening Kafka’s body of work to a rhizome, a burrow—“one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12). The rhizome shares an affinity with Latour’s hybrid: “it has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows”; it has multiple ways to escape a singular interpretation (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21). “A rhizome,” Deleuze explains, “is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure,” hence its resistance to genealogy, its kinship with a kind of mapping; a rhizome is an agent in an additive process of conjunction, not the product of an equation, and it lends itself to something akin to Rancière’s topographical analysis (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12). The relations that manifest between the nodal points connected

rhizomatically occur as a result of their metonymic adjacency and are strengthened by their differences; they are not captures of identity or sameness. In another claim that recalls Rancière, Deleuze asserts that “there is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states”; the rhizomatic assemblage is yet another distribution of the sensible (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12; *Kafka* 22).

The rhizome is also, as Simon O’Sullivan suggests, “not just a critique of representation, but...an active attempt to think our own subjectivities differently” (16). Rejecting the image of a genealogical subjectivity modeled on the upright configuration of a tree—branches and trunk above ground, roots below, Deleuze imagines subjectivity as less linear and more horizontal, not be-ing but *be-coming*:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and . . .and . . .and.” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 25, italics original)

Subjectivity emerges out of this fluctuating solidarity with others, an active synthesis that renders identity’s “becoming” cooperative and social. Deleuze celebrates what he calls “the wisdom of the plants,” and he notes, “even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 11). His signature example is the joining of male wasp and female orchid in pseudocopulation, a process climaxing in pollination for the orchid and, apparently, gratification for the wasp; Deleuze describes this as “a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 10). Wasp and orchid are not transformed into one another in this becoming, but as heterogeneous elements in active synthesis they do experience a momentary solidarity. The result is a

conjunctive assemblage that is somehow more than simply the sum of its parts—an arguably social whole, even if only briefly.

It is this specific characteristic of assemblages, their emergence out of “relations of exteriority between self-subsistent components,” that both Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda have consciously selected in their work transplanting Deleuze’s assemblage onto social theory (*A New Philosophy of Society* 11). Latour defines “social” as “the name of a...momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes...a social world understood as an entanglement of interactions” (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 65). Latour’s Actor Network Theory germinates from his interest in science as the collaborative networking of man and machine; he argues that “no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call *non-humans*” (*Reassembling the Social* 72). DeLanda’s assemblage theory is more overtly anthropocentric, but his analysis of the processes out of which Latour’s entanglements emerge includes “cosmological and evolutionary history in addition to human history,” and his discussion of assemblages begins with species² before shifting to communities, cities, and nations (*A New Philosophy of Society* 28).

In her materialist engagement with both Deleuze’s assemblage and with posthumanism’s expansive acknowledgment of nonhuman (as well as human) actants, Jane Bennett argues, “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within”

(*Vibrant Matter* 24). DeLanda stresses that social entities—whether families, institutions, or communities, for example—have a distinct and durable identity that is neither reducible to nor fully accounted for by the attributes or agencies of its members, just as Bennett points out that while each assemblage member “has a certain vital force...there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage (*A New Philosophy of Society* 4, *Vibrant Matter* 24). Social *assemblages* emerge out of the constant flow of interaction between heterogeneous persons, places and things—interactions that invite the exercise of *capacities* made possible through those sometimes-unlikely alliances. These emergent assemblages exhibit new capacities not fully available to any of the components individually. Yet critically for both Deleuze and for DeLanda, the fragments collected in an assemblage are neither subordinated to it nor are they subsumed by it. Wasp and orchid are still identifiable as insect and flower; neither transforms into the other and their uncoupling is as likely as their joining. Their relations are those of exteriority rather than of interiority; “being part of a whole involves the exercise of a part’s capacities,” but *being a part* is neither an essential nor a constitutive property of that actant (DeLanda 10). Thus tied to agency, and uncoupled from organic essentialism, relations of exteriority return a measure of autonomy to individual components.

An assemblage, then, blurs the gaps between its components’ capacities even while its own capacity flowers as a result of those transgressions. Thoreau’s “determination to know beans” in his cottage garden at Walden Pond demands that he enter into a collective assemblage of man-hoe-beans, where “it was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans,” but a machinic assemblage of a becoming-bean of Thoreau

and a becoming-Thoreau of beans (*Walden* 200-204). Rebooting literature's environmental imagination in order to reexamine our own embedding in the global matrix requires this kind of messy entanglement of human and nonhuman, word and image. Thierry Groensteen describes comics as "not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together" (22). Graphic novels represent yet another kind of assemblage. Images and text, panels and pages, all are part of an ecology of representation founded on a principle Groensteen terms *iconic solidarity*: "comics submit the images of which they are composed to different sorts of relations" (21). This articulation of visual and verbal produces an assemblage where the intra-actions of its components' capacities produces something over and above the abilities of each on its own. As Kress and van Leeuwen observe in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, "not everything that can be realized in language can also be realized by means of images, or vice versa" (17). Images foreground space, while language conveys temporality. The confluence of these technologies of representation, however, can expand the abilities of both to pollinate the environmental imagination in surprisingly productive ways.

Indeed, the graphic novel can be described as a kind of double assemblage, doubled through the alliances between text and image (and writer and artist) in its aesthetics and doubled again in its thematic content: its conceptual focus on transgressive collaborations between the human and all Others that fall outside that delimiting frame. According to graphic novelist Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta, From Hell*), creating a graphic text breaks down into three major areas, "characterization, depiction of environment, and finally plot" (Moore, *Writing for Comics* 20). Moore ranks

environment as primary: “the nature of the plot,” he contends, “and the motivations of the characters will be largely determined by the world in which they live”—in other words, environmental imagination is a critical component of the graphic assemblage (*Writing* 20). And that “environment” consists of elements both material and social: Moore argues that “the imagined world” that author and artist conjure up should include material concerns like atmosphere and annual rainfall, along with social, political, and economic issues as well (*Writing* 21). In other words, Moore gestures towards Guattari’s three ecologies—“the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity”—“three ecological registers” Guattari argues must be fully cognized if we are to address the contemporary challenges to our existence (*The Three Ecologies* 27-28). Add to that an assortment of characters...and add the events that emerge out of their interactions...and then break that construction down into a series of frames and panels and pages...and add back “the correct stream of verbal and visual narrative...the flow of language...and the precise flow of imagery” and color and ink and. . . and. . . and you have the rhizomatic entanglement of interactions we know as the graphic novel (Moore, *Writing* 39).

**Minor Literature and the Mossy Man-Brute:
*Saga of the Swamp Thing***

So innocent and ridiculous the grass looked...You could not believe those fragile seeming strands would resist the impress of a careless boot, much less the entire arsenal of military and agricultural implements. It must have been this deceptive fragility which broke the spirit of so many people.

(Ward Moore, *Greener Than You Think* 92-93)

Alan Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, a reboot of the Len Wein/Berni Wrightson *Swamp Thing* comics, luxuriantly demonstrates the spread of the environmental imagination across and through multiple assemblages. Deleuze argues that

“it’s not easy to see the grass in things and in words,” to image a nonlinear interbeing that is without origins or endings; but that is precisely what Moore demands of his readers (*A Thousand Plateaus* 23). “Anyone picking up a comic book for the first time is almost certain to find themselves in the middle of a continuum,” Moore writes, and *Saga of the Swamp Thing* demonstrates the segmentarity of the rhizome and its rupture: Moore’s Swamp Thing is and is not the familiar vegetable superhero of the 1972 original, just as Kafka’s expression machine, for Deleuze, is and is not the rhizomatic assemblage he first represented in *A Thousand Plateaus* (*Saga* “Introduction” n.p.). Deleuze maps the components of the larger oeuvre that is Kafka’s body of work and considers the capacities, strengths, and weaknesses of each component and of the whole. In *A Thousand Plateau*’s “10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals” (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?), Deleuze identified what he described as *double articulation*—a doubling that I think supports my own vision of the graphic novel as a kind of doubled assemblage. Deleuze defines this term as the recursive intra-action of substance and form, content and expression, in geological and linguistic modes—in other words, in terms of both natural and cultural realms (*A Thousand Plateaus* 40-43). In a move that anticipates the arguments of the material feminists we will encounter in Chapter 3 (especially those of Karen Barad), while at the same time recalling Rancière’s distribution of the sensible I have already mapped in Chapter 1, Deleuze notes that while the distinction between content and expression is “*always real*, in various ways...it cannot be said that the terms preexist their double articulation. It is the double articulation that distributes them,” arranges them, and “constitutes their real distinction” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 44). In *Kafka*, Deleuze identifies the particular capacity that this double articulation affords what he

describes as “a minor literature”—a literature that deterritorializes the more consensual major language and in which “everything takes on a collective value...literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism” (17). Rather than follow major literature’s typically linear narrative, which inherits a specific or traditional content that dictates its forms and figures of expression, a minor literature “begins by expressing itself...Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and *new sproutings*” (Deleuze, *Kafka* 28, emphasis added). To do so, Deleuze argues, is to experiment with what he calls deterritorializations and lines of flight, ruptures in the normative distribution of the sensible that offer opportunities for creative becomings that unwork the “false genesis implied by these pre-existing forms” (essences, or in this case, contents) and that seize opportunities for unlikely alliances with impossible subjects (DeLanda, *Intensive Science* 6). On this account, an assemblage (whether a subjectivity, a text, or a social collective) is a collection of heterogeneous parts that are not ordered by some external or global criteria; instead, double articulation yields relations of exteriority between those parts that either stabilize the identity of the assemblage (territorialization) or destabilize it (deterritorialization) (DeLanda, *New Philosophy of Society* 12).

Lines of flight, chiefly illustrated in Deleuze by various “becomings-animal,” offer circuits of escape and capture, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of horizontal ruptures in the dominant distribution of the sensible. “To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold,” but at the same time, to do so is “never a reproduction or an imitation” (Deleuze, *Kafka* 13). In Kafka’s animal stories—and in the vegetable graphic novels under consideration in this chapter—“becoming-animal is a human being’s creative

opportunity to think themselves other-than-in-identity” (Baker, *Postmodern Animal* 125). Becoming, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, puts difference into play and summons incommensurability as an intensive pressure: DeLanda clarifies that for Deleuze, difference is conceived “not negatively, as lack of resemblance, but positively or productively, as that which drives a dynamical process” (*Intensive Science* 6). But Deleuze also argues that Kafka’s stories often focus too narrowly, and too concretely, on the metamorphosis itself; that metamorphosis then becomes “a no-way out of the animal way out, an impasse of the line of escape” that makes a promise it cannot keep (*Kafka* 36). It is only in his novels that Kafka is able to realize those emerging promises, dismantling those becoming-animal-machines and their representations in order to open them up to further becomings of a less specific, more *molecular* expression (Deleuze, *Kafka* 37-38). Significantly, Deleuze notes, Kafka “opens up a field of immanence” by expanding these assemblages and by using doubles or “triangles” of characters, or—in a move that has critical resonance for the graphic novel—by allowing the proliferation of a central figure across an expanded textual territory (*Kafka* 55). In Moore’s re-imagining of Wein’s iconic figure, the graphic novel achieves precisely that power of the multiplicity that Deleuze maps in Kafka’s novels. From Wein’s “muck-encrusted shambling **mockery** of life...a twisted **caricature** of humanity,” we finally come face to face with...*The Swamp Thing* (Wein 28; Moore, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* 98).

Swamp Thing made his debut in an eight page Wein and Wrightson graphic romance published in 1971’s *House of Secrets* #92. Told almost entirely in flashback, the omnisciently articulate (yet physiologically silenced) “loathsome monstrosity” that was once Dr. Alex Olsen recalls that he was murdered by a jealous colleague and buried in

the swamp behind the old mansion that served as his laboratory. Resurrected inexplicably as an algae-covered ape-like figure, “what once had been my flesh” watches in silent anguish as his former colleague weds Olsen’s comely widow (“Linda...my bright, golden lady”) and then tries to kill her; this never-named creature saves her life, kills the duplicitous associate, but then returns to the swamp, doomed to a lonely, Linda- and loveless future (*Swamp Thing: Dark Genesis* 5-12). Encouraged by the popularity of this eco-Frankenstein, but recognizing that their “original swampy protagonist” could not carry a series, Wein and Wrightson grafted their origin story onto a new “swampy monster,” now re-presented as the accidental progeny of idealistic science meets corporate espionage gone wrong (Wein, “Introduction” n.p.). Dr. Alec Holland, attempting to create a “bio-restorative formula” to enhance worldwide food production, is spectacularly reborn as the Swamp Thing and launched into a series of episodes in which he attempts to avenge his wife’s murder (Linda, alas, is also killed in the explosion that triggers Holland’s metamorphosis) and his own disfigurement, and, more importantly, “to retrieve his lost humanity” (*Saga* “Introduction” n.p.).

Over the next four years, Wein and Wrightson (and then successor writers and artists) extended this becoming-Swamp Thing into a series of stories fatally bound by its origins. DeLanda opposes the notion of essence with what he calls “singularities,” the “inherent or intrinsic *long-term tendencies* of a system, the states which the system will spontaneously tend to adopt in the long run as long as it is not constrained by other forces” (*Intensive Science* 14, italics original). The difficulty with the Wein/Wrightson concept as it was articulated is precisely those “other forces,” the kudzu-like reterritorializing of an origin story that overcodes a potential line of flight. DeLanda maps the genesis of an

assemblage along two dimensions or axes: the material and expressive roles that the assembling components play and the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization that either strengthen or weaken the boundaries that outline the assemblage as a whole. Throughout this series, Swamp Thing's human identity is deterritorialized by the conditions of his becoming-vegetable, by what is potentially a line of flight: the explosion that destroys his laboratory propels Alec Holland into the swamp—the oft-mentioned bio-restorative formula “mingled with my flesh...reacted with swamp ooze...turned me into...**what?**” (Wein, *Dark Genesis* 29). What, indeed? This distinctly green humanoid walks upright but cannot speak (although he continues to think in melodramatically overblown flowery dialogue), regenerates damaged appendages, demonstrates remarkable powers of strength, and is remarkably mobile for a plant, taking advantage of trains, planes, and automobiles to get from Louisiana to the Balkans, to Gotham City and to Appalachia. Materially, Swamp Thing's moss-encrusted body and repeated encounters with certain key characters reinforce our apprehension of his physical character and his social milieu. Most issues begin with a full-page depiction of this becoming-plant embedded in a physical landscape—in fact, in many instances he seems to be emerging out of some vegetative surround, straining to escape its embrace while gazing longingly at some more “human” scene. Most issues end with a view of Swamp Thing's usually massive body dwarfed by towering vegetation, shuffling dejectedly back into the landscape that will soon render him indistinct, unseen. In practical terms, Swamp Thing's increasingly nonhuman or extra-human powers further serve to deterritorialize him from the man he was, just as his technologically assisted mobility distances him from his original (and originary) environment. But Wein's Swamp

Thing never sees his becoming as an opportunity, as what Deleuze would describe as an escape into the world, into a field of immanence “where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them” and from the tyranny of that first story (*Kafka* 13). The expressive role of this mute creature’s flood of consciousness and proliferating thought bubbles provides a constant reterritorializing refrain: “**Alec Holland is dead...**and in his place stands only a ...**Swamp Thing**” (37); “nothing left for **me...anywhere!**” (41); “**Humanity...friendship...**they were almost **mine** again” (64); “must be logical...must gather my thoughts” (29); “have to **get away...collect my thoughts**” (47); “this body imprisons me in **more** ways than one...**refuses** to help me **rid** myself of it” (66). Far from grasping his becoming as a creative line of escape and an opportunity for new alliances and new capacities, the Wein Swamp Thing only desires to regain his original identity and his familiar status, to recapture his humanity and his lost love. His life is predicated entirely on what he lacks; his vegetable-becoming represents an absolute deterritorialization into a stagnant end state, an imprisoning finitude that overwhelms its hero and its narrative. As Wein remarks, the series finally “breathed its last,” by which time “the death was euthanasia” (“Introduction” n.p.).

By contrast, the Alan Moore/Steve Bissette/John Totleben’s 1987 *Saga of the Swamp Thing* represents a hybrid rhizomatic assemblage at once less linear and more immanent than Wein’s first branch off the old shoot. This revitalized Swamp Thing dwells in an imaginative intermezzo where it’s not easy being green OR being human, and where the singular capacities of each component are weighed against the capacities of their assemblage, with far more profound results. In fact, as Ramsey Campbell

comments in his Foreword to *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, “the character has never made sense as he was presented,” and Moore’s first issue is a clear challenge to Wein’s Green Adam (Campbell n.p.). Recall Deleuze’s assertion that it is by dismantling his animal-becomings in order to expand them in the novels that Kafka succeeds in realizing a more positive and productive line of flight. “Writing has a double function, “ he writes, “to translate everything into assemblages and to dismantle the assemblages” (*Kafka* 47). In *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, Annalisa Di Liddo mounts the perceptive argument that Moore uses fiction as a scalpel, both “to dissect Ripper mythology” in his graphic novel, *From Hell*, and “to deconstruct, manipulate, and reassemble the forms of tradition and narrative” in literature and in comics (15). Not coincidentally, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* begins with an autopsy: Moore immediately sets to work deconstructing Len Wein’s Swamp Thing in order to reconstruct a more functional assemblage. Graphically and verbally, this series begins abruptly in the middle; “The Anatomy Lesson” opens with a fractured scene that explodes our assumptions and demands a schizoanalysis of its polyvocal expressions of desire.

DeLanda clarifies for us that in assemblage theory, “a plant or animal species may be viewed as defined not by an essence but by the process which produced it” (*Intensive Science* 39). Deleuze’s process philosophy emphasizes the contributions of historical and social processes to the development of subjectivity, but cautions that “once a process of individuation is completed,” those intensive processes tend to “disappear or become hidden underneath the extensive and qualitative properties of the final product” (DeLanda, *Intensive Science* 68). In order to uncover those formative processes, then, it is necessary to rely on what Deleuze and Guattari call schizoanalysis—“the analysis of desire,” the

search for lines of flight, “*lineaments* running through groups as well as individuals”—to unwork the figure of expression in order to analyze the processes sedimented beneath it (*A Thousand Plateaus* 202-203, italics original). Book One of *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, “The Anatomy Lesson,” performs a feat of ventriloquism of power and desire absent from Wein’s original: we are no longer trapped inside Swamp Thing’s perspective, stifled by his desire for the life and love he lacks. Instead, the subject of this enunciation, the narrator, is Dr. Jason Woodrue, another figure from the assemblage that is the DC comics universe, and the subject of his statement, the thing he is talking about, is not the Swamp Thing but the head of the Sunderland corporation, which, tied to a quasi-military secret governmental agency, was responsible for the “death” of Swamp Thing in the closing pages of the old series. “It’s raining in Washington tonight,” he begins, and we are assaulted at once by multiple machines of power and desire, multiple assemblages that Deleuze would identify as “reified and isolated...abstract machines” that simply existed “outside the concrete, socio-political assemblages that incarnate [them]” in the old series, but which Moore activates here—with a vengeance (*Kafka* 48). In the Wein series, the confrontation of science with the acquisitive demands of both capital and corruption only fueled the explosion that produced the Swamp Thing; beyond that, Wein’s swampy protagonist battled improbable creatures from the horror and science fiction genres—nothing that might suggest the very real tensions produced in a real world shaped and shaded by Guattari’s three ecologies. With Moore’s reboot, we find ourselves in an entirely different place. Nature, science, capitalism, the government, and the military appear as functioning assemblages voiced in recognizable and affective ways; Moore’s environmental imagination is peopled with multiple desiring machines whose

connections and conflicts will serve to animate a graphic ecology that is far more than simply the sum of its agential and affective parts. Their entanglements pollinate the relations of exteriority that shape this emerging Swamp Thing.

Moore's deconstructed Swamp Thing is revealed to be a truly strange stranger, not just a bio-restored Alec Holland. The human Alec Holland is dead, his body (saturated with bio-restorative formula) decomposed in "a patch of swampland...teeming with micro-organisms...and plants that have been altered" by that same formula—which was never designed to work on human flesh (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 23). Literally/materially consumed by those plants, Holland's consciousness infects them, "reshaping the plant cells it now inhabits" into a new assemblage that is not Alec Holland and yet is not NOT Alec Holland either (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 24). In the original series, Alec Holland turns into Swamp Thing, a metamorphosis that forecloses the potential that Deleuze imagined for a true becoming. "Separate bodies enter into alliances *in order to do things*," Steve Baker explains, "but are not undone by it. The wasp and orchid, after their becoming, are still wasp and orchid" (*Postmodern Animal* 133). Like Deleuze's wasp-orchid assemblage, Moore's Swamp Thing is not simply a transformation of man-into-plant or vice versa. Moore restages this becoming as *transcorporeality*: Swamp Thing becomes the material embodiment of what Stacy Alaimo evokes as "the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature," an environmental assemblage from which, she argues, "potent ethical and political possibilities emerge" (*Bodily Natures* 2). Alaimo's critical point is that "thinking across bodies" raises our awareness of how our bodies are multiply transgressed; in the contemporary world, those "unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies,

nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” radically destabilize traditional notions about human subjectivity and its hermetically sealed identity in an environment where “Contact! Contact!” is a two-way street (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures 2*; Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* 95). In the world of Swamp Thing, artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben graphically provoke that same sense of transgression through their imaginative rupturing of traditional comics panels.

As I noted in my Introduction, Bissette and Totleben constantly play with the graphic novel’s traditional panel structures in order to layer different character perspectives on a single page. Where the original Wrightson illustrations predominantly featured a grid of rectangles of varying sizes that emphasized character action, punctuated with occasional single-page illustrations for “environmental” stage-setting, *Saga of the Swamp Thing*’s graphic structure is as varied as the intensive forces that produce its contexts and characters. In the sequence depicting Woodrue’s reconstruction of Swamp Thing’s “real” genesis, panels overlay other panels to capture events in sequence while perspective shifts from that of an observer to the detailed close-up of a microscope. We read (in italicized type, indicating that this is a *re-counting of past events*) from the upper right hand corner diagonally down to the lower left hand corner and then across to the lower right hand corner, our eyes drifting downward following Holland’s burning grimace (in flaming reds, yellows, and oranges) as it sinks into the murky (black and blue) depths of the swamp—a rictus of agony transforming into the fixed stare and hollow grin of a recognizable skull that then further disintegrates into its watery surround. On the next page, the diffusion of all that remains, Holland’s consciousness, is visually incorporated into what can just be identified as progressive

stages of a kind of vegetable embryo: a shape that replicates its remembered organs although their nonfunctional fibrous equivalents serve no real purpose. Meanwhile, Woodrue's voice continues its disembodied narration, not of what we see but of what "we" thought: "We thought that the **Swamp Thing was** Alec Holland, somehow transformed into a plant. It **wasn't**...It was a plant that **thought** it was Alec Holland" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 24). On the closing page, following a resurrected Swamp Thing's murder of his corporate captor and escape into the night, Woodrue again narrates, again in italicized type, but this time speculating on the future, on where the Swamp Thing might go. We see Woodrue in silhouette, staring out into the night...he peers back at us, his face broken into multiple panels, repeating both the visual and verbal sense of the first page. "It's raining in Washington tonight" closes Book One, just as it began...yet nothing *we* thought is the same (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 35).

And as altered as our founding assumptions are, so too are Swamp Thing's. He has, through Woodrue's machinations, discovered "hard, new scientific evidence concerning his origins," evidence that he is not "really Alec Holland," but "just the moss-encrusted echo of a man. Not a man at all" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 40). Just like that, Swamp Thing, and our carefully constructed image of him, is undone. In Book Two, "Swamped," Moore stages Swamp Thing's efforts to reassemble a new self in a series of dream-like scenes. Materializing from little more than a quiescent assemblage of exotic leaves, vines, and tubers, a thinly detailed sketchy green creature wanders onto Moore's imaginative stage (I think it is notable that on the splash page for the "Another Green World" issue/Book Three, Moore is credited with the "script"), carrying the bridal body of Alec Holland's dead wife into a macabre banquet where planarian worms consume

Holland's deceased but mortal flesh (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 60). They leave him "the **best** part," the humanity, his bony skeleton. "Try not to **lose** it," they chortle. "I'm...so **sorry**, Linda...but I just can't...carry...**both** of you" he stammers as he abandons his/Holland's wife in order to take up the burden of Holland's/his human outline (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 48). In a two-page layout parodying Hamlet's graveyard scene, this barely recognizable swamp Thing finally confronts his annoyingly vocal Humanity, whose nagging chatter culminates in questions and an ultimatum. "I'm still worth all the **effort**, aren't I? After all, without **me** there'd be no point in **running**, would there?" and "This is **the human race!** You **have** to keep **running** or you get **disqualified!**" The creature finally silences this dismembered and demanding Yorick, relinquishing Holland's humanity, seizing this line of flight ("It's dark. It's cool. It's green."), and surrendering to the intensive evolutionary process out which he emerged.³ He is "swamped" in the final panel, rendered indistinct, becoming imperceptible and molecular; he reemerges pages later in a series of panels whose aesthetic embedding in one another critically mirror his own entanglement with the green world: "Somewhere quiet...somewhere green and timeless...I drift...the cellular landscape stretching beneath me...my awareness...expanding out through the forgotten root systems...Am I at peace? Am I...happy? Oh yes" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 55, 61). Even his language has altered; visually, his speech patterns are no longer "human"—their rhythm has slowed, permeated with visual ellipses and verbal pauses that suggest the emergence of a new sensibility, new capacities.

With those new capacities, however, come new responsibilities, and Swamp Thing senses the presence of something disturbing his newly apprehended green

environment...some Other Thing foreshadowed with a carefully scripted and illustrated doubling interwoven in the pages I have just described. Paralleling Swamp Thing's evolution has been the de-evolution of Jason Woodrue. The botanist who orchestrated Swamp Thing's deconstructive autopsy, Woodrue claims a kind of environmentalist stance: an extremist commitment to vegetarianism and an utter disregard for the human race. "How cretinous they are. How frail and squeamish...But really, what can one expect from creatures made of **meat**?" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 41). What Woodrue "hungers for" is what the Wein Swamp Thing so explicitly bemoaned; he desires a specifically becoming-plant in order to escape his fleshly mortality, "giving up the illusion of meathood and sinking back into the soft and welcoming green" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 46, 41). He eats one of the tubers extruded from the mass of plant fiber that will become Swamp Thing, counting on it to feed his "hunger for that green and silent eternity," to deliver him to "that viridian state of grace" he desires (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 46, 50). He emerges, in an image that anticipates Swamp Thing's own metamorphosis, as the Floronic Man—a human/plant hybrid "engulfed...swamped" as Swamp Thing will be, but with a telling difference. Swamp *Thing's* steps to an ecology of mind are depicted as the result of an inadvertently harmonious symbiosis—his involuntary enmeshment in a paradoxically empowering vegetative state is imaged as a serenely productive deterritorialization. The Floronic *Man's* willed transformation is violently depicted as a kind of bloody cannibalism; his humanity is not relinquished but "consumed" and his mind is not peaceful but overloaded (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 58). Woodrue's line of flight illustrates not the creative and positive becoming of Swamp Thing, but an absolute deterritorialization, a devastating descent into madness. He

emerges with an appetite for destruction, claiming that his new capacity for connection and communication with the green world demands that he “destroy the creatures that would destroy us, that would destroy the ecosphere with their poisons and bulldozers” (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 79). Page for page, panel for panel, Moore/Bissette/Totleben demonstrate that assemblages have capacities for evil as well as for good; the “red and angry world” that “just keeps on eating,” the world that Swamp Thing believes he left behind with his human body, becomes visible as red invades green, blood seeps into chlorophyll, and insect eats insect (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 59). Woodrue reads green desire as a demand for purification; he expresses, in his rhetoric and in his posture, a vengeful ecofascism. Swamp Thing also intuits “a sense of something foreign among the green,” but his response to Woodrue’s chainsaw-wielding assault reveals the extent to which “the tangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual” can produce new varieties of the environmental imagination (Alaimo 3).

Swamp Thing perceives, as Woodrue in his madness cannot, the symbiotic relationship between the oxygen-producing plant world and its animal/human carbon dioxide producing counterparts in the global assemblage.⁴ Jane Bennett posits that “crossings,” her term for the transgressive deterritorialization of identity that a *becoming* like Swamp Thing’s imagines, “might play a role in cultivating an ethical sensibility” (*Enchantment of Modern Life* 30). “We are,” she elaborates, “*an array of* bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes...if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?” (*Vibrant Matter* 113, italics original). Woodrue’s Floronic Man misses this vital point; he assumes that he has shed his own difference and

demands that the world do so as well. Swamp Thing understands the need for difference, and in his own way asks the same question as Bennett; he concludes that “we” need carbon dioxide to survive and wonders whether “your people” will recognize their need for the oxygen that a healthy plant population can provide (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 95, 97). At peace with his hybridity, embracing this vegetable line of flight, this Swamp Thing performs in the final panels a simpler desire “to be alive...and grow...and rise up,” to continue his becoming another facet in the assemblage that has always already been Swamp Thing—a rhizome that is “to be continued” (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* 103-104).⁵

Flowers Have Their Own Agenda: *Black Orchid*

We want to smell like a rose. We want to smell like orange blossoms. We want to smell like jasmine. For their part, most flowers want to smell like food...

Flowers have their own agenda.

(Sharman Apt Russell, “Smelling Like a Rose” 14)

If Alan Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing* can be read as the inflorescence of Deleuze’s rhizome, then Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *Black Orchid* blossoms into DeLanda’s assemblage. Individual subjectivity is an assemblage, just like that of a community or a nation, and it can be mapped in the same manner. “All that is needed,” DeLanda contends, “is a plausible model of the subject that meets the constraints of assemblage theory...a model in which the subject emerges as relations of exteriority are established among the contents of experience” (*New Philosophy* 47). He proposes the same familiar axes on which to analyze what he terms a *pragmatic subject*, a “systematic entity” in which we can “distinguish those components playing a material role from those playing an expressive role, and those processes that give it stability from those that destabilize it” (*New Philosophy* 49). The body is the key material role player here,

producing those critical sense impressions; although he insists that there are both linguistic and nonlinguistic actants playing the expressive role, DeLanda does not rule out language's contribution to this emerging subject, but he places greater value on vocal and verbal expressions that help to stabilize identity through shared expressions, language, slang, and interpersonal conversation. Continuing to model his philosophy on Deleuze's, DeLanda emphasizes corporeal habit over language: repeated behaviors are the primary territorializing or stabilizing processes. Deterritorializing processes "include madness" and "sensory deprivation," along with "augmentation of capacities" or the "acquisition of new skills" (like the onset of super powers) or other alterations that "increase one's capacities to enter into novel assemblages" (*New Philosophy* 49-50). These processes contribute in various ways to subject formation, but DeLanda stresses that assemblage theory is not chiefly or solely concerned with "individuation;" instead, it assumes that these emerging individual assemblages "may become complexified as persons become part of larger assemblages" in an ever-widening outward ripple of entanglements (*New Philosophy* 33).

One of DeLanda's key assertions is that this proliferating sociality will also recursively enter into subject formation; "although a whole emerges from the interactions among its parts, once it comes into existence it can affect those parts," playing those expressive and territorializing roles that DeLanda's analysis is meant to identify (*New Philosophy* 34). Assemblage theory also reproduces traditionally conceived and lineally mapped family structures along more horizontal and rhizomatic lines. A species or family is an emergent phenomenon, an assemblage with capacities that exceed the given properties of specific members; likewise, individual members retain their singular

capacities even when they are fully detached from that family—they are always subtended by virtual capacities that they may yet exercise, either outside their identifications or even despite them. At the same time, assemblages can outlive their constituents, persisting in a consequential fashion despite changes in their underlying makeup—original parts leave, new parts combine. Grant Morrison describes the original Black Orchid as one of several superheroines who “explored the seismic shifts of women’s liberation” in the Dark Age of Comics, the 1970s (*Supergods* 161). Exemplifying the period’s backlash against more conventional superheroes, “Black Orchid had no secret identity, no core personality, but assumed a series of masks and wigs, trying on and rejecting a parade of possibilities, role models, identities. Who was this new woman,” he asks only partially tongue-in-cheek (*Supergods* 161). Neil Gaiman’s reinvention of that DC superheroine shockingly begins with her brutal execution...setting up a reincarnation that fully exploits the environmental imagination’s capacity for juxtaposing the individual against the species, and for radically filling in the gaps. Nature, as “they” say, abhors a vacuum.

Deleuze asserts, “the subject is defined by the movement through which it is developed,” and Gaiman’s *Black Orchid* cultivates its reimagined protagonist with both intention and with nuanced care (*Empiricism and Subjectivity* 85). This iteration of the Black Orchid emerges into consciousness following the graphically rendered firing (pun very deliberately intended) of a previous Black Orchid. Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” is dramatically imagined here in Dave McKean’s lush staging of Gaiman’s floral reincarnation (*The Second Sex* 267). Awakening in an urban greenhouse, this violet (clearly female/not so clearly human)

creature has no conscious identity: only questions pollinated by bits and pieces of memory [A dream? Perhaps...perfume? Warm] (Gaiman 24). Her thoughts are provided in lavender-tinged word boxes (here represented with brackets) overlaid on black and white panels heavily guttered in thick white spaces...we are forced to view her confused struggle from a fragmentary and mostly scopic point of view, assaulted by [television voices] that [**buzz** in the background, **words blurred** and **meaningless**] (Gaiman 25). Sensing that she is somehow both singular and yet multiple [Singing. An echo from the green dream...a voice] [**Us?**], the Orchid approaches a seated man [the **source** of the sound] [I know him (I don't know him)] in search of what she is aware that she lacks: [An identity] [Mine] (Gaiman 25). She begins to vocalize, her questions turn from “who am I” to “what am I” as she struggles to territorialize herself (Gaiman 27). As do we—thus far, there have been few clues to locate the reader either. Most of these opening pages are laid out in the same repetitive grid—six identically sized panels stacked three on three, separated by generous white gutters that flow across adjacent pages. The effect is at once disorienting and rhizomatic; there is little to add hierarchy or priority to any given panel or episode, and the only apparent connection between what appear to be different locations and events taking place at different times *is* their connection—those impossibly empty lines that flow from panel to panel, page to page, entangling us in a mesh of a middle. We see faces but cannot identify them, faces of anonymous men and an unidentified secretary exposed as the Black Orchid just before her execution. They do not look at us; with one exception, their glances are evasive, sidelong; the only reciprocal gaze is that of the Man, the Man who is the source of the sound.

Sound. Scent. Temperature. The Orchid turns first to her senses to answer the questions of where, who, and what she is. And the reader, who is desperately reading between the lines thus far, finds that the only thing that seems to have meaning in these opening scenes is color: color appears to signal something. The re-assemblage of this becoming-Black-Orchid begins in materiality but quickly shifts to the role of the expressive, particularly that of the power of language and of the powers of conversation, to produce what Julia Kristeva called *parlêtres*, speaking beings—those emerging subjectivities she also deemed *le sujet en procès* or the subject in process (McAfee 26-29). I find Kristeva particularly useful here, because her account of subjectivity is “one of a self that is always in process and heterogeneous,” not a “model of the self that is stable and unified” (McAfee 42). Despite her insistence that language produces the speaking being (which marks her difference from Deleuze), Kristeva also appreciates the force of *le sémiotique*, the expressive or “extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language” (McAfee 16). She theorizes subjectivity as coalescing or becoming coherent “in an open system,” recognizing the centrifugal (therefore destabilizing, deterritorializing) power of the semiotic along with the centripetal (and therefore territorializing) force of our relationships with other people (McAfee 41-42). Black Orchid represents, I think, that fragile self whose coherence is always shaped and yet threatened by that “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness” that is generated by the constant reminders of her “opaque and forgotten life” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 2). She is the product of intensive forces always challenging her coherence from without and from within, as is our reading of her manifestation.

Skillfully scripted as a ruptured assemblage of intersecting accounts and ethereally rendered in McKean's impressionistic artwork, the Orchid embodies desire and desiring. That plants, and especially orchids, have the ability to elicit human response is a pivotal point in Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire*. Indeed, he even goes so far as to say that "flowers have always borne the often absurd weight of our meaning-making, so much so that I'm not prepared to say they *don't* ask for it," thus parodying the age-old male defense against accusations of rape (52). "Flowers," he suggests, "by their very nature traffic in a kind of metaphor" proffering themselves (deliberately? innocently?) to our imaginative use and our material abuse (Pollan 70). Deleuze's perennial orchid-wasp assemblage also returns to mind here. Using powerful attractors like scent or taste, flowers *act* on the desires of others (insect, animal, and human others alike) *inviting them* to produce assemblages that have capacities beyond their own but which will also alter them in pronounced ways. Charles Darwin found them beautiful and perplexing, noting, "orchids are universally acknowledged to rank among the most singular and most modified forms in the vegetable kingdom" (*Various Contrivances* 1). Lacking the capacity of locomotion, orchids have seemingly compelled others to accomplish for them what they cannot accomplish on their own; Susan Orlean notes that "there is something clever and unplantlike about their determination to survive" (8). This Orchid is unselfconsciously naked (after all, she lacks a "self" to be conscious of) and delicately, alluringly beautiful. Her virginal innocence may be subject to the words of her creator/protector, but he seems equally subject to her defenselessness. "The words just don't work right for it," he stammers. "The first thing I remember about her is the first thing I *can* remember" (Gaiman 33). *Black Orchid* is about to become "a dance of human

and plant desire that has left neither the plants nor the people taking part in it unchanged,” a once upon a time that is always already recounting (Pollan 243).

Across Gaiman’s nomadically intertextual environment, this “Susan” (re-called after the first Black Orchid, Susan Linden) relies on other perspectives to remember (and to re-member) her in a graphic enactment of what evolutionary biologist John Thompson describes as “the role of outsiders in manipulating behavior and shaping evolution” (Pennisi 372). Manipulative partnerships “are a theme we’re coming back to time and time again” he concludes in what is an uncanny approximation of one of this graphic novel’s key themes. Philip Sylvian, her creator and Carl Thorne, her abusive ex-husband; Jason Woodrue, Pamela Isley, Alec Holland, and Lex Luthor (characters known to most readers familiar to the DC universe)—these are the voices who story the Orchid’s past.⁶ Gaiman’s environmental imagination is also subtly informed by facts about actual orchid growth and development, which results in a hybrid text, a fragrance compounded of botany and fantasy, underscored with spicy notes of ecofeminism. Sylvian is this Orchid’s rescuer, both from her abusive father and her equally abusive husband, but he is also her creator. Sylvian names himself as “Susan’s” father, albeit in constellation with Woodrue, Isley, and Holland—“I couldn’t have done it without the others,” he demurs suggesting that her DNA is due more to botany than to paternity (Gaiman 40). Like other specimen orchid seedpods that appear to be gestating in his greenhouse, she is, he informs her, epiphytic. “Epiphytic orchid seeds settle in a comfortable spot, sprout, grow, dangle their roots in the air and live a lazy life absorbing rainwater...They aren’t parasites—they give nothing to the tree and get nothing from it except a good place to sit,” and McKean’s images clearly capture this aspect of “Susan,” even as the very Platonic

nature of Susan Linden's relationship with Sylvian is also made apparent (Orlean 8). Hence the source of "Susan's" confusion; [In dreams we find only contractions] she thinks in sleep, [I dream my Sister]...[Further back, the dreams are Susan]...[Mother] (Gaiman 57). The appearance of a nearly identical child-orchid, "Little Suzy," escaping the greenhouse before its destruction and turning to this Orchid for comfort and protection, adds to "Susan's" confusion. [Little One]...[Little Sister]... "Can I call you 'Mommy'?"... "Uh...sure. I'd like that" (Gaiman 70, 80). Her "what am I" turns of necessity to "where did I come from?"

Charles Darwin's 1885 botanical treatise is an endorsement of precisely *Those Various Contrivances by Which Orchids are Fertilised by Insects* and for which orchids have been frequently and pointedly stigmatized. "Orchids, gorgeous and elegant, are also some of the most deceitful flowers," notes NYTimes.com writer Carol Yoon in an article titled "Tongue Orchids' Sexual Guile: Utterly Convincing." A recent *American Naturalist* study noted that while "most flowers attract and reward their pollinators with nectar...sexually deceptive orchids lure their pollinators with counterfeit signals" that suggest they are female insects, most frequently relying on "floral scents that mimic species-specific female-insect sex pheromones" (Gaskett et al. E206). This so-called pseudocopulation results in very real gratification; "male pollinators can prefer orchids to real females," thus reducing their own procreative potency (Gaskett et al. E206). In *Black Orchid*, Sylvian acknowledges his paternal role as pollinator and as progenitor, and his desire to be with his Orchids is constant until his death; Carl Thorne seems as attracted to Susan Linden's hybrid avatar as he was to his former spouse. Lex Luthor, "reinvented [here] as a ravenous mega-tycoon," wants only to possess the Orchid and her botanical

secrets—an understandable desire that penetrates our own world as well as that of the DC universe (Morrison, *Supergods* 185). Orlean notes that at the time of her research, “the international trade in orchids is more than ten billion dollars a year,” a different kind of green that is just as alluring as sex.

That the Black Orchid uses deceptive tactics to manipulate others is part of the repertoire of both the original character (recall Grant Morrison’s description of her role-playing, her use of cosmetic disguises, her mutable identity) and of Susan Linden, “Susan’s” predecessor. It is Phil Sylvian’s offer to “show you her computers, and the clothes, wigs, all that stuff...” that first prompts this new Susan to seek another model of identity elsewhere. “No...I need to be **outside**. In the *open*” she replies, a refusal of her spectral “forgotten life” that returns me to Kristeva (Gaiman 42). Kristeva’s subject in process develops in part through the process she calls abjection, a sort of self-territorializing that occurs when internal consistency is achieved by “jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself”—through such literally expulsive processes as spitting, vomiting, and fecal elimination (McAfee 46). Critically, that which is abject is “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 2). The subject produces herself through a process of subtraction, of elimination, but critically for Kristeva, “what is abjected” is at one and the same time, “radically excluded but never banished altogether,” never fully repressed or wholly absent from that burgeoning selfhood (McAfee 46). Kristeva points to the corpse as the exemplar of abjection, “there, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border” (*Powers of Horror* 3). If abjection reaches its most extreme limit or condition, the subject then experiences herself *as* abject: “nothing is familiar, not even

the shadow of a memory”; she confronts the realization that “who she is” is founded not on what she wants/desires but on what she wants/lacks (*Powers of Horror* 5). For most of this graphic novel, “Susan” is the image of the abject, a shell, an empty husk; [I walk like a ghost] she thinks at her resurrection and she is the ghost of (one? several?) Black Orchid(s), a corpse always there at the boundaries of this stammering speaking being she is trying to become. “Susan” knows that she is wanted, but she also knows that she is wanting. “If I could be what Phil wanted me to be...If I **knew** what he wanted...if I knew what we **were**,” she laments to Little Suzy, before taking flight to try to locate her present in her past (Gaiman 79).

“Of the many different types of social encounters we may single out a particularly relevant one: conversations between two or more persons,” DeLanda notes. “As an assemblage, a conversation possesses components performing both material and expressive roles” (*New Philosophy* 53). As his assemblage theory widens outward from individual persons to population networks, DeLanda focuses on the dynamics of conversation. *Co-presence*, the actual assembly in space of conversing bodies, provides the material dimension; the expressive roles lie not just in the contents of those conversations, but also in the gestures and body postures that accompany them. Conversations can be either reaffirming or destabilizing as participants are either reassured about the way others perceive them or find themselves *dismembered/deterritorialized*, perhaps through destabilizing affects like embarrassment or humiliation (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 53-55). “Susan,” in a series of wonderfully illustrated panels, goes to Gotham City’s Arkham Asylum in search of Woodrue and Pamela Isley. McKean’s inky gutters and darkly monochromatic palette atmospherically

renders Arkham's infamous reputation as "the jungle of despair," an abject assemblage of "other and others and others. Here are the obsessed and the anguished and the damned. It goes so deep" (Gaiman 93). These images express the dysfunctional lineaments of a subterranean root system from which "Susan" draws no sustenance; her extended conversation with Pamela Isley simply underscores the toxic consequences of an absolute deterritorialization into madness. "Becoming is anti-memory," Deleuze states unequivocally; "Susan" must find some line of flight that will help her escape the arboreal claustrophobia of this assemblage of the past before she can start her own becoming (*A Thousand Plateaus* 294). From an unlikely source comes an unlikely suggestion:

Batman: I would **suggest** that you **talk** to Alec Holland.

"Susan": Alec Holland is **dead!** He died **years** ago. **Everybody** knows **that!**

Batman: Most of the things that 'everybody knows' are wrong. The rest are merely unreliable. Go to Louisiana...If he **wants** you to find him, you'll find him. (Gaiman 99)

In *Black Orchid*, the Orchid's development only accelerates when she escapes the competing demands of the human men in her past lives, reterritorializing her own assemblage on her own terms. In a green dream of trans-corporeal and transtextual concupiscence, she shares an empathic exchange with another vegetable hybrid: Swamp Thing. She and Little Suzy are the last of their kind, females alone and without their traditional pollinators. He helps her reach within herself for the capacity to reproduce, then silences her seemingly endless flow of questions with a question of his own: "How the story ends...? That is your affair. What do you want?" (Gaiman 114-115). Like him, she opts to re-author herself by transgressing her limitations and (*e*)*merging* with/as the ever-changing assemblage that was and will be Black Orchid. "No flower is more

guarded against self-pollination than orchids,” Orlean writes, and “most never pollinate themselves” unless survival demands it (Orlean 5-6). Darwin specifically noted hermaphroditic reproduction in the orchid species *O. apifera*, considering it an extreme adaptation made only to “ensure a full supply of seed” in a species that clearly was, at some earlier point in its development, “adapted for cross-fertilisation,” but he repeatedly questions the threat to survival of “the evil effects of long-continued self-fertilisation” (*Various Contrivances* 57-58, 285). In this assemblage, however, I hear the voice of Deleuze: “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 257). The Orchid’s encounter with Swamp Thing constitutes what DeLanda would consider a deterritorializing event. “Eventfulness changes the distribution of opportunities and risks...[they] allow participants the expressive possibility of *displaying character*” (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 55). This is a new distribution of the sensible, one that I think helps us shift DeLanda’s anthropocentric assemblage theory towards a more posthuman environmental entanglement.

When Tim Morton suggests, “The trouble with vegetable growth is that it consists of sets of algorithms—iterated functions, often producing fractal shapes,” his intention is to shift our perspective towards “a strange and wonderful way to look at flowers,” an alien and *unnatural* encounter that puts us in conversation with the materiality of expression, with a de-natured nature (*The Ecological Thought* 68). We will spend more time on the new materialism and Morton’s engagement with object-oriented ontology in Chapter 3, but I feel that here, this is putting the Thing before the Swamp. Assemblage theory may seem strangely fractal and fracturing in the garden of the environmental imagination, but I believe its value is in the way it encourages us to map those significant

moments of our contact with the heterogeneous green world, of our need to better recognize our embeddedness in it, our entanglement with it. In a text that was eventful for my own environmental subjectivization, Neil Evernden captures precisely the boundary-blurring potential that animates the capacities of these transgressive assemblages. “There may be more going on in a plant than we can see,” he writes, and he comments on the way that symbionts like lichens “blatantly challenge our belief in firm boundaries” (*The Natural Alien* 41, 38). “Is a lichen a plant? A co-operative?” he ponders (38). Beyond our differences, and surely because of them, Evernden urges that “we must all invest ourselves in the world,” to find in assemblage the capacity to “regard ourselves as ‘fields of care’ rather than as discrete objects in a neutral environment,” and this is ultimately, I think, the fruit of our reading *Black Orchid*.

On the final page of this graphic novel there is a single declarative sentence set in bold black type over a delicate silhouette of orchid seed pods: “**There is no such thing as a black orchid.**” In the novel’s waning scenes, the Orchid and Little Suzy make a momentous decision. They choose to leave the solitary sanctuary of the secret Amazon location where the Orchid’s seeds have begun to germinate a new crop of hybrid plants. They elect to return to a world of messy humanity, to rejoin an assembly whose capacities and dimensions they cannot anticipate. “Make a rhizome,” Deleuze urges us. “But you don’t know what you can make a rhizome with, you don’t know which subterranean stem is effectively going to make rhizome, or enter a becoming, people your desert. So experiment” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 251). If there is no such thing as a black orchid, perhaps there is something in the environmental imagination that pushes us beyond the single, urges us towards singularity. “Art might name the mechanism of

reindividuating at a different level,” Simon O’Sullivan suggests, “precisely the constitution of new composites, new assemblages” (29). There is no individual black orchid; there are iterations and reiterations, a Black Orchid multiplicity. In a provocative essay to which I will return in my Conclusion, Bruno Latour urges us to think beyond deconstructive critique, to think about reconstruction in terms of composition:

Even though the word “composition” is a bit too long and windy, what is nice is that it underlines things that have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure: it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance...it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising,” retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Speaking of flavor, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of “compost,” itself due to the active “de-composition” of many invisible agents. (“An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’” 473-474)

Darwin concludes his *The Origin of the Species* recommending that we contemplate “a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth,” that we engage in an act of environmental imagination that offers us the opportunity to see “that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other” are yet “dependent upon each other in so complex a manner” (507). The Orchid does not make her decision to invest herself in the world lightly; “I need something to **do**,” she avows, but then adds, “Perhaps our kind **need** death” (Gaiman 135). Composing a hybrid assemblage is both messy and risky—we truly do not know what a rhizome can do—but cultivating becoming also seduces us with the promise of something strange and wonderful. Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean plant that seed when, in the closing panels of *Black Orchid*, the Orchid and her iteration turn their faces to the sun, their arms outstretched and expressing the final chapter’s title, “Yes.”

Notes

¹ The seeds of this chapter were first sown at the 2013 meeting of the Western Social Studies Association in Denver, CO, in my presentation, “Emerging Entanglements: Vegetable Voices in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and *Black Orchid*.”

² DeLanda makes it clear that he considers species to be an assemblage while Deleuze does not; Deleuze distinguishes between the assemblage and the *strata*. The key to the distinction is that Deleuze understands heterogeneity as an absolute determination of assemblage, while DeLanda is willing to consider degrees of heterogeneity in his definition. Deleuze would consider an ecosystem to be an assemblage, “but not the species themselves, since natural selection tends to homogenize their gene pools” (DeLanda, *New Philosophy of Society* 11). DeLanda, on the other hand, considers both species and biological organisms as assemblages. In a further note, DeLanda explains that while Deleuze distinguishes between a system and an assemblage, he does not. I tend to agree with DeLanda’s assessment that the difference between them is one of degree rather than of kind. See *New Philosophy of Society*, n9 (121) and n21 (123-124).

³ In his introduction to the first volume of *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, Ramsey Campbell also notes Swamp Thing’s conversation here “with his own skull playing Yorick to his Hamlet.”

⁴ Ecological complementarity also escapes the raging *Cynodon dactylon* (aka Bermuda grass, devil’s grass, or Deleuze’s couchgrass) that literally devours the world in Ward Moore’s 1947 science fiction horror novel, *Greener Than You Think*. Stimulated by the ultimate bio-restorative formula, “The Metamorphizer,” this rhizomatic symbol of the rampant spread of capitalism (another “green” assemblage, if you will) resists fire and nuclear attack and succeeds in both becoming *and* overcoming the globe. As to its ultimate fate in a world devoid of carbon-dioxide producing organisms, we are left in the dark. In this novel, the Green decidedly has the upper hand *and* the last word.

⁵ And the saga has, indeed, continued. As part of its celebrated “The New 52” relaunch of many of its signature comics series, DC Comics published in 2012 the first volume of the latest Swamp Thing rhizome, Scott Snyder’s *Raise Them Bones*. Dismantling the extraordinary work that I find so compelling in Moore’s graphic novel, this version begins again with “the real man himself,” Alec Holland, whose body resurrects and rejects both his remembered exploits as the Swamp Thing and the call of “the Green” to surrender himself again to its greater good. The astonishing entanglement with a more than human ecology promised in Moore’s graphic novel is, I fear, undercut by what I can only read as a more anthropocentric rendering. Here, Holland chooses to serve “the Green,” but, as the back cover promises, not as a “protector...This Swamp Thing will be a conqueror.” Not an assemblage, but a super-persona, this representation bodes ill for an ecocritical reading that demands a more posthuman environmental imagination.

⁶ Woodrue and Holland we encountered earlier in the *Swamp Thing* sagas; Batman readers know Pamela Isley as the infamous “Poison Ivy.” According to one of the few

detailed historical sources on comic book character histories, Wikipedia, Gaiman previously amended Isley's origin story, explaining that she and Alec Holland studied together under Dr. Jason Woodrue. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poison_Ivy_%28comics%29.

CHAPTER 3

MINERAL: DANCING LIKE A MOUNTAIN

Scott Slovic's Editor's Note in the Summer 2012 issue of *ISLE* begins with this provocative claim: "Material ecocriticism is really heating up" (443). *Après* significant theoretical developments like quantum theory and a troubling number of national and international "natural" disasters, ecocriticism is evolving beyond its initial concerns with representation and social construction to anticipate *le déluge* of new materialist critical and cultural theory. Material ecocriticism, then, is the discipline's latest iteration, taking its cue from a range of theorists with a variety of points of view on what is, at bottom, "the dull stuff of matter" (Bennett, "A Vitalist" 49). From the thing-power of Jane Bennett's vibrant matter to Karen Barad's agentic realism to Graham Harman's darkly withdrawn objects, a diverse group of philosophers, cultural and critical theorists, scientists and students of science studies are engaged in thinking and writing about matter and mattering, about things and our imbrication with them. Material ecocriticism now takes Laurence Buell's claim about the consequences of "how we image a thing" to a new level and with a new awareness; beyond considering the effects of our conduct ("nations as well as persons") on what were previously represented as the essentially passive direct objects of our environmental grammar, the multiple species of new materialism demand that we also acknowledge the transitive and

transgressive material agencies vibrating in “the happenings of things” (Buell *Environmental Imagination* 3, Scott 27).

The New Materialisms

In their introduction to the edited collection, *New Materialisms*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost clarify that “new materialist scholarship” represents not a unified theory but rather a diverse assortment of perspectives that they separate into three themes: (1) “an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or exhibiting agency;” (2) “consideration of a raft of biopolitical and bioethical issues concerning the status of life and of the human;” and (3) “a critical and nondogmatic reengagement with political economy, where the nature of, and relationship between, the material details of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures is being explored afresh” (“Introducing” 6-7). For my purposes, this provides a useful breakdown for a material ecocritical exploration of the distinctively different ways that contemporary comics and graphic novels are now evidencing their own materialist turn—one that will suggest, in fact, that the very assumptions incorporated in these three schema have always already been present in the graphic environmental imagination. Grant Morrison certainly argues that thing-power was already an agential reality in comic’s Golden Age. There was “a radical enchantment of the mundane” present in those early comics where “any person, thing, or object could be drafted into service in the struggle against darkness and evil—remade as a weapon or a warrior or a superhero” (*Supergods* 48). Latour insists that “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant,” and we have already seen that graphic novels have no difficulty “imaging” weaponized animals,

combative plants and superheroic hybrids of protoplasmic pre- and posthumanity (*Reassembling the Social* 71, italics original). Both the postcolonial animal subalterns of Chapter 1 and the biopolitical vegetable assemblages of Chapter 2 can also be read as exemplars of one or more materialist perspectives. Matters of posthuman agency, bioethics, and environmental activism certainly represent a substratum of each of the graphic novels I have discussed so far, but as yet I have not asked, with Heidegger, “What is the thing itself?” and “What are we thinking of when we now have the thing in mind?” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 165, 22). It’s time now to move resolutely in that direction—to consider the inanimate as the matter at hand.

Those Mute Materials: *Garfield Minus Garfield*

*We are here to witness. There is nothing else to do with those mute materials
we do not need.*

(Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* 90)

Proponents of new materialism focus first on things that matter, on an encounter with the stuff of the world in its active, material efficacy in our everyday lives—a reengagement necessitated by the seemingly dematerializing effects of the discursive turn in critical and cultural theory. Second-wave ecocriticism mined nature-oriented texts to expose social and discursive constructions of nature that imagined a pristine and originary space, a cultured nature that tended to neglect (or to elide outright) nonmale nonwhite nonhuman actants. In their deconstructive zeal to demonstrate those sedimented hegemonic assumptions, some ecocritics inadvertently shifted their attention too much to a transcendent anthropocentric model of discursive (and therefore fully human) agency while undercutting the multiple and meaningful performances of nonhuman things and forces. Matter, agency, and posthumanism: such is the bedrock of a materialist

orientation on which new materialists, material feminists, and even object-oriented-ontologists¹ seem to stand before they diverge into distinctly different trajectories.

Traces of these same elements can be identified in comics theory; Scott McCloud nods to the ubiquitous and subliminal powers of things. “Our identities and awareness are invested in many inanimate objects every day,” he notes and then elaborates, “Our clothes, for example, can trigger numerous transformations in the way others see us and in the way we see ourselves” (38). We tend to overlook the power of things, subsuming *their* agency in our extended sense of *our* own, but it is precisely that triggering capacity that “new materialists emphasize” when they foreground “the productivity and resilience of matter” in their analyses (Coole and Frost, “Introducing” 7). New materialists (Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, William E. Connolly, Elizabeth Grosz, for examples), and for that matter, even the “old” new materialists, like Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze, and Heidegger among others, emphasize that matter makes things happen (*to* humans as well as *for* them) and that matter endures, matter remains. Bennett, in particular, ties her investment in a more material engagement with the world in which we live to concerns about our consumer society’s lasting impacts on the environment. “How,” she asks, “would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or ‘the recycling,’ but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?” (*Vibrant Matter* viii). It is also important to note that the matter that matters is not only *naturematter* but *culturematter* as well; when material feminist Stacy Alaimo argues that “if nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality,” she turns equally to naturally occurring substances, industrial pollution, and material/cultural practices like foodways, race, and class to illustrate her points (*Bodily Natures* 2). As

Coole and Frost emphasize, new materialists “can hardly ignore the role of *social* construction,” even as they “stubbornly insist on the generativity and resilience of material forms with which social actors interact” (“Introducing” 26, italics original). Instead, the new materialist reality recognizes the imbrication and interpenetration of what Félix Guattari described as “the three ecologies” in his 1989 text of the same title. In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, Guattari linked “three ecological registers...the environment, social relations and human subjectivity” and declared, “the only true response to the ecological crisis is on a global scale,” a response he characterized as “an authentic political, social and cultural revolution” (28).

Today, following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, financial market debacles manifesting in 2007 and rolling across the United States, the UK and Iceland, and 2012’s Superstorm Sandy, it is clear that there are multiple agencies vibrating within and across the global village we inhabit, and those “mute” materials are making themselves heard. Jane Bennett observes, “Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other...an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” that is nowhere better imagined than in feminist physicist Karen Barad’s influential work, *Meeting the Universe Halfway (Vibrant Matter* 31). Barad performs her own interfolding of the work of Niels Bohr, Andrew Pickering, and Judith Butler to produce a material-discursive concept of “agential realism.” Barad’s ambitious “entanglement” of quantum theory, science studies, and gender performativity provides a sort of ground zero for materialist feminists’ rethinking of agency. Her contribution to new materialist scholarship is to recover the concerns of earlier feminists about the discursive construction of subjectivity that might otherwise be lost in a purely

“materialist” theory, one that emphasizes a *distributive agency* allocating critical performance capacities among multiple “real” human and nonhuman actants (an “object lesson” that ignores the material consequences of cultural, social, and political forces that Barad also perceives as agentic). In Barad’s account, discursive performativity has material consequences for and on bodies, just as bodies have material efficacy in the world. In *The Mangle of Practice*, Pickering (whose focus is on science studies) suggests that rather than beginning with a traditional empiricist approach to science (one that founds its representations on “facts and observations”), we can instead begin with the notion that “the world is filled...with *agency*,” and that “much of everyday life...has this character of coping with material agency, agency that comes at us from outside the human realm and that cannot be reduced to anything within that realm” (6). So far, so straightforward...even Lucretius, expounding on Epicurean thought circa 50 BCE, tells us that “whatever exists, will either do/Something, or it is itself, by other things, done *to*” (*The Nature of Things* 15, italics original). Science practices are wholly caught up in an engagement with “a field of powers, capacities, and performances, situated in machinic captures of material agency”; in other words, science devises and depends upon experimental apparatuses in order to produce or to capture that which it observes and measures (Pickering *Mangle of Practice* 7). Bohr’s chief contribution to Barad’s thought lies in his assertion that scientific apparatuses not only measure results but also contribute to them: the apparatus of measuring has what Gregory Bateson would term a recursive effect, entering into and conditioning the very measurements it makes.² Pickering focuses on something like self-reflexivity in his understanding of the “*dance of agency*” that takes place as scientists tune or recalibrate their experimental practices in response to the

expected and unexpected outcomes they achieve; Barad, relying on Bohr, moves in a dramatically more ontological direction (Pickering *Mangle of Practice* 21-22). Restyling Pickering's dance of agency as "entanglement," Barad posits that "to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another...but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* ix). Barad's move both relies on Pickering and moves far beyond him, with astonishing implications for an agent/actant that appears to be not simply posthuman, but *postaction*. Barad, like Pickering, begins her materialist theory with the idea that rather than "an assemblage of agents," what exists *a priori* is "an entangled state of agencies" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 23). Since individual agents do not, then, precede their entanglements, those activities cannot be between/*inter* separate agencies; instead, Barad proffers the neologism "intra-action" which "*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies,*" which then "emerge through their intra-action" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 33, italics original). The subjects/agents that emerge from Barad's "agential realism" are therefore relational, situational, contingent, and yet material: they are not discrete, concrete, individuated subjects prior to their intra-action, but they consequently have real, demonstrable effects on the world into which they emerge. Critically for Barad, and for the various material feminists who have extended her ideas well beyond scientific studies, agential realism "takes account of the fact that forces at work in the materialization of bodies are not only social, and the bodies produced are not all human" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 33-34). Material phenomena and discursive practices are entangled or mangled together ("mangled" is Pickering's

term); these “*entangled practices* are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter; different intra-actions produce different phenomena” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 58, italics original).

Another unexpected and yet illuminating result of Barad’s agential realism: because discursive practices and material phenomena (like the words and images of comics’ own representational entanglements) can combine in multiple ways with sometimes unexpected results, “re-membering and re-cognizing do not take care of, or satisfy, or in any other way reduce one’s responsibilities...The past is never finished” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* ix). Recognizing that subject positions are emergent phenomena also opens up room for an affirmatively posthumanist ethic. Recall that in Chapter 2, Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing* represented an always-evolving superhero whose identity was not confined to that of his previous iteration, and for whom re-cognizing himself as fully hybrid, rather than as simply an augmented human being, broadcast his responsibilities to a much larger world than that imagined by the first Swamp Thing. Barad and other material feminists, along with their new materialist colleagues, embrace an idea of posthumanism that expands our ideas of the “human” beyond the cyborg. “Posthumanism,” she contends, “is not calibrated to the human; on the contrary, it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving) (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 136). Introducing their edited collection of essays illustrating material feminisms, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman emphasize not only that “nature is agentic,” but also that feminist material theory is too, “redefining our understanding of the relationships among the natural, the

human, and the nonhuman”—emphasizing the “myriad ‘intra-actions’...between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological” (“Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory” 5-7).³ Material feminism is overtly concerned with female bodies and with “the materiality they inhabit,” a “co-constitutive materiality of human corporeality and nonhuman natures” that aspires, according to editors Alaimo and Hekman, to “the formation of unexpected political coalitions and alliances” informed by our mutual materiality and our shared exposure to threats from environmental pollution, unstable weather patterns, rapidly diminishing polar icecaps, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, mutating viruses, diminishing fossil fuel resources, on-going issues with nuclear accidents and waste disposal, and all the other vicissitudes of our deeply entangled intra-actions (“Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory” 4, 9).

Yet even as many feminists herald the potential of a renewed interest in materiality’s inherent vitalism to reanimate the female body, others caution that “we have *not* overturned...a horror of the inert, the unproductive, and the radically *different*: that which cannot be comprehended, enlivened, rendered fertile or dynamic” (Colebrook 59). Claire Colebrook suggests that “the true politics of matter lies...in a matter that *fails* to come to life,” matter that stubbornly refuses either to perform or to conform to human expectations (59, emphasis added). Specifically, Colebrook points to the powerful recalcitrance of literary materiality: language as art/literature is that which is inert, which stands outside the quotidian flux of everyday life—and which therefore resists our desire to incorporate it into ourselves, to force it to “get a life” so we can move along, nothing to see here. Instead, the stubborn materiality of the text serves as a kind of stumbling block

to our unexamined becoming, forcing us to stop and think. “Literature, like all art, allows matter to stand alone and vibrate,” and Colebrook argues that the result of this encounter with positive difference will be to “allow us once again to think ethically” (76, 66).

That literature about matter matters solidly registered on Edward Abbey. He concluded his Introduction to *Desert Solitaire* with the following advice to readers: “This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You’re holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don’t drop it on your foot—throw it at something big and glassy” (xiv). Material ecocriticism, which “comes from the idea that it is possible to merge our interpretive practices into these material expressions,” recognizes the text’s agential potential just as it also focuses on “matter as a text, as a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed” (Iovino and Oppermann 451). Serenella Iovino, evaluating the efficacy of material ecocriticism as textual analysis, emphasizes both the narrative potential of matter-as-text and also makes it clear that “material ecocriticism is not committed to a specific literary genre” (459). Comics and graphic novels, where “storied matter” often steals the show from mere mortals, offer a richly entangled environment where texts do not always act the way we expect them to. What happens when text as corporeal palimpsest works backwards, putting a significant bit of its “storied matter” under erasure, as it were? What happens to the human in a story where things go missing?

That’s precisely the question that artist Dan Walsh posed in his *Garfield Minus Garfield* comics. In 2008, Walsh began posting cartoonist Jim Davis’s *Garfield* comic strips online with one significant alteration: he erased Garfield. His website, www.garfieldminusgarfield.net, is “a site dedicated to removing Garfield from the

Garfield comic strips in order to reveal the existential angst of a certain young Mr. Jon Arbuckle.” Walsh claims, in his Foreword to the published collection of Walsh-altered Jim Davis strips, that by removing Davis’s titular cat, his edited strips make clear what has always been the case...that “Jon has always been talking to himself” because Garfield never speaks: his commentary has always been represented as *thought* rather than as *speech* through the time-honored comics tradition of a cloud-like word balloon linked to the character via a series of empty circles that literally bubble up from the character into view. Thinking is thus visually rendered as mute speech—and Walsh’s premise suggests that language that is inaudible is also materially impotent. Walsh contends that without Garfield’s organizing commentary, Jon’s existential insufficiency is made visible to his readers (“Jon needs some help!); that in fact, *Garfield* is a humanist fable—it has always and only ever been about Jon (Walsh 6). What I would like to explore here, however, is not how “with Garfield there you’ve been getting distracted from the truth,” but rather to consider how this selectively evacuated cartoon makes things, their ineradicable thing-power, and our desire for them, *more* visible, evoking a more materially posthuman take on the human condition.⁴

The materiality of things is made particularly visible on Walsh’s website, where his edited Garfield-absent cartoons are presented without the Garfield-present Davis originals (contra the book’s format). The website, I think, is more effective than the book precisely because the absence of Garfield’s (silent) running commentary is not restored by having the original strip run directly beneath it (a condition, I suspect, necessary for the publication of Walsh’s alteration of Davis’s copyrighted material—the book is, noticeably, published with Davis as author, while Walsh is credited with a Foreword).

Walsh's argument seems to be that lacking the ability to speak into the panels of Davis's cartoon, Garfield also lacks materiality; without a voice, his corporeal presence is simply a nonevent in Jon's life—John is the poster boy for the postmodern condition, always already alone. Scott McCloud acknowledges both the necessity and the power of the ubiquitous speech balloon in comics' narrative. Noting that Eisner called the word balloon a "desperation device," McCloud literally illustrates the need for a graphic, versatile, and material device that could represent sound in an otherwise visual medium (McCloud 134). Thierry Groensteen is even more specific about "the functions of the verbal" in the system of comics, naming two: a function of *dramatization* (which McCloud also notes, that of adding pathos to images, to "invest them with a wealth of feelings and experiences" 135) and a *realist* function as well (127, italics original). Groensteen's humanist bias is fully exposed here: this "reality effect...attaches to the verbal activity of the characters, for the simple reason that in life, *people* talk" (127, emphasis added). People talk, not cats or cups, dogs or desktops...their talk, even if "most of the time, nothing important is said, or at least nothing essential," functions "to identify and to interpret the represented scene" (Groensteen 127-129). In Groensteen's analysis, "the [comics] image does not often need a linguistic message to be anchored in a univocal signification"; images generally are "read" based on their "inscription in an iconic sequence" (130). Compare this to Barad's claims that "existence is not an individual affair" and that "individuals do not precede their interactions"—in comics arthrology sequential images are entangled in one another, and their meaning is best understood as immanent within those articulations, emerging like agency only after those entangled intra-actions (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* ix). Yet Groensteen allows that

occasionally the image can sometimes only be understood via the interpretive anchoring of text, specifically on those occasions when “the view alone does not provide much information,” in those circumstances when we become aware that “our different senses are channels of complementary information” (130). Here again, Groensteen’s analysis of how comics work can be juxtaposed with Barad’s agential realism, with its reliance on the philosophy of Niels Bohr. Groensteen suggests that images can simply be supplemented with words for greater clarity when their immanent relations leave meaning ambiguous, while Bohr reads “complementary” circumstances as supplemental *but* mutually exclusive. Bohr’s insight suggests that we cannot read *Garfield with* Garfield and *Garfield minus* Garfield simultaneously: we must choose one way or the other, because “the nature of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the apparatus”—there can be no “both/and” compromise (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 106). To that end, let’s read *Garfield Minus Garfield* minus the original strips (as the original website intended). What happens when Jon is “really” alone in Davis’s panels? Without a relation to Garfield, who is Jon?

What immediately becomes more visible in this world without Garfield is that Jon continues to invest his energies and attention in a variety of other things, mute materials that he appears to need to speak to and through. Socks and slippers as hand puppets, a pillow with a face drawn on it...Jon craves relationships, with things as well as with a series of imaginary and/or always deferred girlfriends. Davis’ cartoons are always composed of three identically sized panels, two outside bordered panels bracketing an always borderless middle; all three are typically linked by a low horizontal line suggesting a common “floor” or “grounding”—in *Garfield*, we are always in the same

place. Beginning, middle, and end, with the beginning and end seemingly fixed by their rigid outlines, the middle a more fluid and somehow indefinite space, open at the top...if Jon is going to escape his existential moment, he can only do so here, *in media res* so to speak, but he never seems to look up and never seizes the only line of flight open to him. In most of these strips, the bracketing panels on either side wholly overdetermine the middle panel; Jon's world feels more than a little claustrophobic. In one of the most arresting strips, both the left and right panels are empty, containing or imaging nothing (Davis 55). Only the middle panel offers us an image, Jon grasping a pillow, a pen behind his left ear suggesting that Jon is the source of the toothy grin and bulging eyes on the defaced (enfaced?) pillow. "I'm drawing faces on all the pillows!" his topless speech bubble proclaims, suggesting that his words could simply float away at any minute with no one the wiser, and with no apparent impact on the only panel that shows us *anything* at all.

"Do you grant agency to inanimate objects because you want to unburden yourself of responsibility? Or because you need to mark how overwhelmed you are by your material environment? Or is it simply because you're lonely? Because, unlike a child, you don't have a toy to talk with?" (Brown 12). In *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown considers the interactions between humans and objects, particularly with an eye towards demonstrating the ways in which "things and thingness [are] used to think about the self" (18). Brown is unwilling to simply gloss the human/nonhuman intersection as little more than a metaphor for consumer culture's obsession with appropriating material things; instead, he notes a troubling metamorphosis that is bidirectional—"the metamorphosis of one into the other" that can be read either way (13). Walsh's panels seem to capture this

ambivalent moment while they eerily illustrate Barad's claims: Jon does not precede his intra-action with the pillow, and "his" agency emerges only in the arbitrary agential cut performed by the panel framing (and it vanishes just as quickly). In Walsh's distribution of the sensible, Jon is made visible and audible *only* with and through the two objects in the frame, and he comes into being for himself and for us as an auto-graph, verified here by his own ability to make a mark with an object on an object. In a sense, Jon is self-discursive, self-constructed out of his own one-sided and precariously anchored language...but he (and we) can only know this through and against the materiality of the objects he is assembled with.

I am also particularly drawn to several different strips that picture Jon with and against sock/slipper puppets. In one, Jon appears to be utterly still across all three panels...the only moving object seems to be the sock puppet, whose movement in the first two panels is represented by the quick flicker of small curved lines interrupting the otherwise neutral and homogeneous background (Davis 60). Like Jon, we "see" the vitality of the sock puppet while ignoring the fact that Jon's hand is the source of the sock's animation. Likewise the "tail" of each of the speech balloons located above and to the right of Jon in the first two panels clearly indicates that HE is the speaker, although the content in each suggests that it is the ventriloquized puppet that speaks. "Awww. Rough day, Jon?" "Cheer up, Jon!" Reading the first two panels, I realize that Jon is the object—the puppet is the agent/subject. Objects are often characterized by their stillness, their lack of mobility, and of course, by their lack of language...but here, the sock has the upper hand. This is a moment of what Jane Bennett describes as "enchantment...a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully

prepared to engage” (*The Enchantment of Modern Life* 5). It is likely that Jon and I both experience in this moment feelings of being “charmed by the novel” and yet “a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted,” taken out of our normal sense of our selves, our sense of things (Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* 5). In an odd kind of reverse anthropomorphism, the sock attempts to engage Jon in what Brown identifies as “something like a social relation between human subject and inanimate object, which in modernity’s ontological distinction between human beings and nonhumans makes no sense,” a relation that can be “deeply affective—it involves desire, pleasure, frustration, a kind of pain” (Brown 29-30). It is not a long-lived experience...by the third panel, Jon and sock, object and subject, have metamorphosed into each other, back to roles that seem more normative, less adventurous. Jon addresses the now immobile and objectified sock. “At least **you** care,” he concludes, in a simultaneously mocking and self-mocking attempt to restore a more “natural” social order. The strip exemplifies Bennett’s idea of “crossing” as a kind of “self-morphing” which invites the terminally human subject to re-image itself as simply an object among objects, or perhaps as an object subject to other objects. “Crossings bring new things into being,” she writes, new things that perhaps can help old things learn new tricks...like greater responsiveness and responsibility toward “cross-cultural and cross-species relations” (*The Enchantment of Modern Life* 31, 29).

This is not to say that Jon ever fully demonstrates a new ethical perspective toward the things that populate his apparently narrow existence. He does, however, seem to be at least momentarily (and frequently) called to a recognition that his own position as “human” is not the center of existence...or that if he positions himself in that fashion, that he is also forced to recognize that objects are in no way disposed toward him. In yet

another sock puppet strip, Jon appears in the first panel with a cloaked sock, smiling smugly on his upraised and mobile right hand (Davis 58). “It’s Socko the Superhero Sock Puppet!” he exclaims. A beat, as you negotiate the first panel’s hard right edge. In the second panel, his left hand flies upward from beneath the panel’s floor, covered with a fuzzy pink bedroom slipper (also marked with facial features). “And his trusty sidekick, Fuzzy Slipper Man!” Jon announces with a flourish. Another beat, as your eye registers the distinctive line of the third panel’s left edge. The third panel is all empty space above the image of Jon and his puppets. No word balloon, no interpretive text, although out of habit from the previous two panels you look for the words that will interpret the image for you. Jon stands somewhat sheepishly between Superhero and Sidekick. No one announces his identity—no one names him. He is an unmarked and unremarkable thing, in the empty space between two agents of mystery and magic, both of whom face away from him. Jon’s almost palpable desire for acknowledgement from the objects at hand, objects that *refuse to look at* him, recalls William Connolly’s summoning of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty to his new materialist arguments. “Perception depends upon projection into experience of multiple perspectives you do not now have,” Connolly explains, and he emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty couples an explanation of depth perception to the idea that seeing things also “makes it seem that objects see you” (“Materialities of Experience” 186). What happens then, when objects refuse to play along? Connolly suggests that “the anticipation of being seen by the objects you see is shattered by...images that refuse to support that sense”; the result is disorienting, as we suddenly find ourselves in an uncanny moment that undoes our customary sense of “belonging to the world” (“Materialities of Experience” 192). Connolly sees this uncanny

moment of perceptual dissonance—like Jane Bennett’s crossings—as an opportunity, one that might challenge our habitual and underexamined enmeshment with things that matter. I am not sure that Jon is ready for the kind of tactics of the self that Connolly imagines as emerging from these uncanny crossings that invite us to “sense the surplus of life over the structure of our identities” (“Materialities of Experience” 196). Jon is, after all, just a thing among things, a cartoon. He is just a placeholder, a cipher between the real actors in this sequence of images. And he is looking directly at you.

Or is he? There are multiple moments across Walsh’s provocatively altered strips when Jon certainly seems to be looking at, or listening to, or even seeing something or someone missing from the panels. It is time, now, to bring Garfield back into the picture, or at least to consider how Garfield’s absent presence, his present absence, seems to haunt the proceedings. It is almost as if Garfield has not really left the building...like Elvis, he seems only to have withdrawn from the seen/scene, gone but not forgotten. Garfield (or maybe “Minus Garfield”?) is the near-perfect metaphor for object-oriented ontology.

As I noted in an earlier endnote, philosophers of object-oriented ontology (or OOO for a graphically correct signifier, as we shall presently see...or not...) carefully distinguish themselves from materialists, both new and feminist. Object-oriented ontology is a “philosophical study of existence” which “puts *things* at the center of being,” according to one of its current practitioners, Ian Bogost. In *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost succinctly outlines the primary difference between its key figures, who call themselves “speculative realists,” and the new materialists I have been describing. OOO thinkers, originally Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, and

more recently, Levi Bryant, Bogost, and ecocritic Tim Morton, “share a common position less than they do a common enemy,” an ardent denial of “the tradition of human access” as the organizing center of and primary gateway to knowledge of the material world (4-5). In *The Quadruple Object*, Harman makes it clear that OOO is *not* just another perspective on materialism. Materialism, in his view, either (a) undermines the autonomous object (by reducing it to some smaller [in]different particle or monistic substance that is its true materiality), (b) overmines it (an opposite move, where the object is “reduced upward” such that its importance is correlated with its eventual presencing to or impact on another object or mind), or (c) actually does both maneuvers simultaneously. The result is the same, as the singular autonomous object is displaced from the center of being. Harman emphatically states his position: “Materialism is the hereditary enemy of any object-oriented philosophy” (7-13). Walsh’s erasure of Garfield from Davis’s strips reads as (c): a kind of super-undermining of Garfield, reducing him to the monistic and undifferentiated stuff of eraser crumbs AND an equally super-overmining; we cannot see Garfield, we can only dimly perceive him through Jon’s reactions and expressions. Garfield is no longer center-stage.

And then again, perhaps he is. In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, philosopher Graham Harman elaborated on the concepts he first approached in *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. “Object-oriented philosophy,” he states, “has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and causal relations” (17). Objects, on Harman’s account, lead two lives: one “secret inner life of tool-beings” that is what he later dubs the *real* object, and another “public life as well,” that *sensual object* which is its “colorful particularity” that we “know” through our senses (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 75,

83). Harman's ontology is not a unified theory of being; instead, it posits an essential gap that is *in* things, not *between* them in the way that we ordinarily understand the modernist dualities like nature/culture, human/nonhuman. Real objects have real qualities (Harman will later describe these as *notes*), while sensual objects have sensual qualities. Sensual qualities are the "ether of sensual traits" that flood our experiences and that light up our senses in our relations with sensual objects as particular things; real qualities are that "plurality of notes," that *je ne sais quoi*—which we quite literally cannot know because we cannot ever access it—that *is* the real object's "irreducible unity" and that can never be exhausted by our encounter with some or other of its sensual traits (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 153, 83).

In a single strip, Walsh inadvertently captures precisely the dual nature of object relations (Davis 65). In the first panel, Jon sits right of center, an empty plate on the table in front of him; for no apparent reason, he is staring fixedly and with no little ire into the empty space that takes up exactly half of the panel. In the middle panel, noticeably lacking a lower border as well as the customary open top, he is (apparently unselfconsciously) asking, "Do you really expect me to believe that "invisible friend" stuff?" The third panel is pure OOO. On the left side, a word balloon anchored to the top of the panel but with no apparent speaker, emphasizes not sense but sensation: "**BURP**," appears in emphatic bold type and a larger point-size, but the balloon's tail emerges from an "empty space"—an absent object? Jon's eyes widen in shock and surprise...he has clearly received a sensory impression, a sound (and surely an accompanying aroma), an ether of gustation and indigestion, suggesting a sensory object in some fashion responsible for the emptiness on the plate in front of him. That sensory object proceeds

ahead of the real object, one whose “actual reality...none of its manifestations can exhaust”—in other words, from Garfield, Garfield-the-Real-Object for whom gluttony is only one of many qualities Jon experiences despite Garfield’s always-withdrawing-absence from Walsh’s edited strips...a Garfield whose unseen presence in the Walsh strips we never actually fail to intuit, a being we grasp as singular even as we only “know” him bit by bit (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics* 55).

The way in which we relate to other objects (and we are also objects, objects among objects) reflects this idea that we can never fully grasp or exhaust *all* of the real object. Instead, “our body reduces objects, simplifies them, as a target of its own aims, needs, and desires” (Bryant 93). Put another way, out of all their myriad sensual qualities, we perceive them as caricatures, as cartoons...as Levi Bryant puts it, “we draw distinctions in particular ways,” and when we do so, “certain [other] phenomena and causal factors become completely invisible” (203). Framing and simplification of complex images into efficient recognizable images: in the act of perception, we all function like comics artists. Those distinctions that we draw, carving out marked and unmarked spaces, operate along the same lines as Bohr’s notion of complementarity; once we foreground one thing, the other thing disappears into the background. “In addition to the unmarked space of a distinction, the distinction *itself* is a blind-spot”—as soon as we make a distinction (in comics terms, this is the breakdown: the artist decides where to cut the action and what to include in a panel, while *everything* else is left out, outside the frame), we no longer see it, “thus [creating] a reality effect where properties of the indicated seem to belong to the indicated itself rather than being effects of the distinction” (Bryant 21). Walsh makes a distinction when he erases Garfield and leaves

Jon “in the frame” as it were...and then naturalizes that very circumstance by claiming that Jon was *really* always alone. Bryant’s point is that distinctions foreclose options; Bennett’s point in advocating crossings is to trouble those marks by inviting us to remark in new and surprising ways. By reading Walsh’s comics against the grain of his argument, we reopen the opportunities his argument shuts down.

Harman writes that “art differs from everyday life and speech by its attempt to reach what is inaccessible to all perception,” and that is why comics and graphic novels provide such a fertile ground for material ecocriticism’s efforts to engage more fully with the mute speech of things. Responding to articles by Harman and Tim Morton about what an object-oriented literary criticism might look like, Jane Bennett argues that OOO’s insistence that objects are not fully reducible to their relations or to their cultural elements fails to provide “an explicit account of the *virtues* or *stakes* of favoring mysterious objects over complex systems of relations” (“Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton” 226). Bennett’s own materialist scholarship is invested in what she perceives as “an affinity between thing-power materialism and ecological thinking,” and like other new materialists, she is committed to underscoring the entanglements between things and environments, to “the extent to which all things are spun together in a dense web” of relations (“The Force of Things” 354). New materialists are united in their vision that “material phenomena are increasingly being conceptualized not as discrete entities or closed systems but rather as open, complex systems with porous boundaries” (Coole and Frost, “Introducing” 15). OOO philosophers do not discredit the force of things manifested in those hybridizing relationships; Harmon specifically stresses that “when two objects enter into genuine relation, even if they do not

permanently fuse together, they generate a reality that has all the features that we require of an object” (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics* 85).⁵ Leaving aside the question of what a “genuine relation” might look like, it is important to note that Harman goes on to argue here that “the difference between objects and relations is not a difference between two specific types of things, but between two moments in *each* thing” (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 90). OOO philosophers share, as I have pointed out, a commitment to maintaining the equality, autonomy, and agency of objects, objects which “need not be natural”—the unicorn and the combine harvester, the color red and methyl alcohol, quarks and corrugated iron, Amelia Earhart and dyspepsia, all are fair game, none’s more primary nor more original” (Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 19; Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* 11). Bogost makes it clear that while “*all things equally exist...they do not exist equally*”; encounters between objects are not reducible to each other, nor are they the same...but they each have their moment (11). What OOO philosophers seem to resist is any desire to push the object aside in favor of some presumed holism...instead, both Harman and Morton suggest that an object-oriented criticism would instead analyze how textual objects “resist internal holism by attempting various *modifications* of these texts and seeing what happens” (Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 201-202). Harman suggests fooling around with editing *Moby-Dick*...but *Garfield Minus Garfield* works in much the same way. Two more examples should serve to further our appreciation of how an OOO ecocriticism, in Morton’s words, “forces us to acknowledge that we coexist with uncanny beings in a groundless yet vivid reality without a beyond” (“An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry” 222).

In a strip that certainly recalls Bill Brown's questions about why we grant agency to inanimate objects, we begin in panel one with Jon alone, pounding his fist on the table and declaring, "Nobody tells me what to do!" (Davis 94). In the middle panel, a still-solitary Jon is pictured motionless and masterful...the portrait of humanism, the absolute center of being (and of the panel, indeed of the *whole* graphic environment). The third panel represents the dénouement, the collapse of the folly of humanism, the exposure of the hubris OOO tirelessly works against. Jon has literally and figuratively collapsed, face down on the table, in surrender and despair. "And I wish they would! I have no idea what I'm doing!" His desire is not for the false holism that being master of his domain might yield, but for coexistence with uncanny beings, co-acting that also implies coresponsibility. OOO comes to his rescue here: as Morton suggests, to the charge that the human-centric desire for mastery of the environment is bad, OOO counters "Not at all...everything else is doing the same thing" ("An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry" 207). Notice that from the singular "nobody tells" Jon shifts to the plural "they." Annie Dillard writes, "The Chinese say that we live in a world of the ten thousand things. Each of the ten thousand things cries out to us precisely nothing"—and it is those silent cries that Jon both acknowledges and longs for (*Teaching a Stone to Talk* 87). In another strip similarly themed, Jon sits alone in the first panel facing stage left and rhetorically asking, "You know what I could use?" (Davis 24). In the middle panel, he is still seated along the left edge of the panel, looking down with surprise at what we see only as an empty table. In the third panel, his expression both nonplussed and resigned, he answers himself ironically, "Some time alone." The irony is that in the center panel, Jon finds himself in what Ian Bogost calls "the dense meanwhile of being," a place where he apparently

cannot avoid the recognition that, as Jane Bennett champions, “I live not as a human subject who confronts natural and cultural objects but as one of many conative actants swarming and competing with each other” (Bogost 59; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 122). Morton reminds us, in the same vein that “objects are unique but not necessarily singular. A crowd is an object; so is a loner. OOO is not a form of individualism” (“An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry” 209). The only way Jon can use some time alone is to ponder his place in the democracy of objects. “I am a rock” can just as easily mean “I am an island,” the color gray, a heap of stones, or a gravel truck.

**A World of Fleshy Beings: Trans-corporeality in
*Chew: Taster’s Choice***

Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use is in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions.
(Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2)

In *Bodily Natures*, ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo challenges the very logic of a claim to personal safe space like “I am a rock” by introducing the concept of “trans-corporeality,” the idea that the human body is a more fragile, permeable space “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). Alaimo redirects ecocriticism’s focus on human intervention in an external environment “out there” to a more intensive recognition that “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Bodily Natures* 2). We are living in—and intra-acting with—a material world, and trans-corporeal material ecocriticism “acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (*Bodily Natures* 2). Indeed, today’s media headlines featuring genetically modified organisms, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and global

pandemic emphasize that thinking across bodies is part of our everyday existence, and that those unwanted actions are proliferating across the local and global commons.

New materialists and material feminists alike identify food as one of the most visible of all trans-corporeal substances—visible, that is, until it is consumed and “disappears into the human body, which remains solidly bounded” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 13). Food is both transformative and agential; Jane Bennett stresses this thing-power of food: “Food will appear as actant inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using...and culture-making human beings, and as an inducer of-product of salient, public effects” (*Vibrant Matter* 39). Food, the conditions of its production and distribution, its consumption and its effects, is big business, economically, ethically, and ecocritically. In the Summer 2012 issue of *ISLE*, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment’s official journal—an issue devoted to material ecocriticism—four of the seven articles were either about or related to food. And, while it might seem odd that food-as-actant would appear in a medium more generally devoted to galactic superheroes and cataclysmic apocryphal events, comics and graphic novels once again demonstrate their engagement with topical environmental concerns. Without further ado, I invite you to pull up a chair and dig in to the gastronomical graphic imaginary of John Layman’s and Rob Guillory’s *Chew*.⁶

Volume One, *Taster’s Choice*, opens with a visual prologue clearly foregrounding food preparation and the trans-corporeal nature of restaurant culture: an anonymous hand prepping vegetables for “slow-simmered shredded chicken, vegetable, and three-bean soup” sustains a bloody cut while enthusiastically slicing and dicing with a large, gleaming Santoku...blood that drips onto the vegetables that are then added to the

steaming pot in a scene as cringe-worthy as the shower scene in *Psycho*. “End prologue,” reads the only other text on the opening page guttered in impenetrable black...this could be any restaurant, anywhere and anytime, and the ubiquity spills off the page and into your consciousness—“choice” will clearly be a contested term on this menu.

Appropriately, the prologue is placed on the right-hand side of the fold, so the reader is forced to linger on this image of culinary malfeasance...an image that will return to discomfit us and Tony Chu, the main character.

We meet him as soon as we turn the page, an unprepossessing, height-challenged and urban Ichabod Crane, who “is almost always hungry, and almost never eats.” A metaphor for rapacious consumer society? A postmodern *Bartleby*? No. Chu (savor, for a moment, the intentional homonym) is a vice cop in New York City who suffers from a singular malady: he is “cibopathic,” Layman’s neologism for someone who literally suffers from the food he eats. Tony “can take a bite of an apple, and get a feeling in his head about what tree it grew from, what pesticides were used on the crop, and when it was harvested,” expository text that is pasted over a monochromatic image of bountiful harvest. The other side of cibopathy, however, is not so beatific: the explanatory text box goes on “or he could eat a hamburger, and flash onto something else entirely,” and Guillory serves up an almost identical sepia image—almost, except this time it is one of slaughterhouse butchery, complete with bloody streams directing our gaze to the point of impact between a sledge hammer and a cow’s head. That bloody stream immediately recalls the previous page’s bloody finger, deploying image-power and iconic solidarity to braid the two together in our minds. There will be blood, it seems...and Tony Chu’s ability/disability is going to give all of us indigestion.

That this is and is not your average crime drama also becomes apparent quite quickly. Tony has a gung-ho macho partner and the story begins with the two of them on stakeout in front of a seemingly abandoned storefront. A suspect emerges, “carrying twenty five pounds or more. Uncooked.” It’s Chu’s brother, a local TV chef whose public “meltdown on air” cost him his job and landed him on the streets. So far, this is standard television cop fare, setting up the pursuit and capture of a law-breaker given greater affective depth because of his familial relationship to one of the “good guys.” But then the comic takes a dramatically unexpected shift that puts us in a not unfamiliar and yet radically alternate universe. In another black-guttered set of panels, we flash back to the night of Chu’s brother’s transgressive performance. His tirade is triggered by having to use Poult-Free® chicken substitute for real chicken in his recipe; we learn that following the outbreak of avian influenza, the U.S. Congress has ratified a constitutional amendment banning the use or sale of poultry products. Chu’s brother dismisses the whole thing as a hoax (“There was never any bird flu.... No disrespect to the people who died, but this was never about birds. The government has an agenda, and this bird flu hoax is at the heart of it”). The “twenty five pounds of uncooked” he’s carrying is CHICKEN, not heroin or crystal meth. Tony and his partner, vice cops-cum-food police, are concentrating on the rapid spread of an illegal “wingmeat business” but find their efforts stymied by deals cut between the local kingpin and the “feds”—in this case, the newly empowered Food and Drug Administration.

All of this elaborate exposition is accomplished through Layman’s skilled breakdown and use of dialogue intra-acting with Rob Guillory’s evocatively drawn artwork. In a scant six pages, we find ourselves in a messy casserole of leftover agencies

and narrative filler—deep in what Alaimo calls “the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual” (*Bodily Natures* 3). From here, the plot thickens. Chu and his partner, at the behest of the FDA, enter a “chicken speakeasy” (password: wishbone) where, despite his vulnerability, Chu orders the soup...“slow-simmered shredded chicken, vegetable, and three-bean soup.” He raises his spoon, tastes, and we turn the page...to a full fold spread, a prominent soup-spoon-wielding Tony superimposed over a gridded background of 374 images in varying red and “flesh” tones. The majority of the squares depict the substance of Tony’s tasting experience: the panels from the prologue (now miniaturized and fragmented), blood splatters, the knife, stirred together with dimly perceived images we’ve not seen before, human mouths fixed in a rictus of horror that uncannily (and deliberately) recall the open mouth of the bovine victim in the instant of slaughter—Tony’s imagined sensual response to eating a hamburger. The repetition of tiny squares, like tiles in a manic mosaic, subtly suggest some sort of rapid metastasizing; the narrow, vein-like gutters between them are neither daylight white nor obscure black...they are a muddy, murky brownish-red, colored like the bloody splatters depicted in the squares (or cells?) themselves. These are gutters that can barely hold the shifting ingredients apart: spaces that the squares themselves could easily slide through and across...these boundaries are permeable, not impenetrable. There are also a few prominent green toned squares randomly scattered across this fragmented image of gustatory experience; each features a different perspective on the anonymous hand from the prologue, the cut finger dripping blood into the soup Tony has just put into his mouth. The color choices are deliberate: artists have a much older understanding of Bohr’s notion of complementarity, and Guillory manipulates the flickering of

complementary colors, red and green, to maximum effect here. Either you look at the primary thread of the action or you look at its more subtle implications; you cannot really follow both plot lines simultaneously, even as you perceive that they are clearly enmeshed. From the bottom of the far right side of the fold, in a word balloon bordered with the same nauseous green as the random squares, Tony and reader confront the critical question du jour: “How’s the soup taste?”

In her carefully researched examination of changing cultural attitudes towards human health and its relationship to the environment, Linda Nash suggests that there is a kind of ambivalence present in how we experience our bodies. “The body seems to exist in two kinds of time,” she writes, medically and culturally defined by the time we live in, and yet also in some key ways—“including birth, death, fatigue, and symptoms of illness”—transhistorically, connected “to those who came before us” (Nash 11). Literature would seem to bear out her arguments that the definition of health, as a socially defined category of human experience, has certainly shifted over time. There is something about Tony’s visible response to that paragon of healthy choices, chicken soup (and about our visceral response to *Taster’s Choice’s* collage of entangled elements), which calls to mind the fears of Tobias Smollett’s eighteenth century protagonist of *Humphry Clinker*. Matthew Bramble is reluctant to drink the reportedly healthful waters at an esteemed British spa. He suspects “that there is, or may be, some regurgitation from the bath into the cistern of the pump,” and that the famed waters may consist of “sweat and dirt, and dandriff; and the abominable discharges of various kinds, from twenty different diseased bodies” (55). Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*, serially published in 1799, similarly reflected an American concern for “discord and evil smells,

unsavoury food, unwholesome labour, and irksome companions,” which were, in the narrator’s opinion, “the unavoidable attendants of a city” (24). Both texts display decidedly period sentiments that are nonetheless oddly (and unfortunately) familiar in today’s increasingly intra-active urban society. Nash contends that this pre-nineteenth century view of the intermingling of human, animal, vegetable and mineral elements in an environmental broth of health and (un)wellness was supplanted by modernity’s focus on disease etiology and prevention. “For the modern body, ‘health’ came to connote primarily the absence of disease,” which Nash sees as paradoxically deemphasizing the idea of trans-corporeal intra-actions and restoring confidence in the body as a pristinely retentive space; “health became a quality possessed (or not) by an individual body rather than a dynamic relationship between a body and its environment” (Nash 12). Only recently, in the late 20th century, does Nash identify another shift, claiming, “in many ways the most radical notion to emerge from the modern environmental movement was the idea that people were inescapably part of a larger ecosystem” (1). Does *Chew*, with its grisly revelations and jumbled plotlines, its mélange of economic, environmental, and bioethical ingredients, simmered with a soupçon of governmentality and with more than a hint of cannibalism, provide material ecocriticism with ample food for thought?

Chu’s response to the seemingly simple question, “How’s the soup taste?” is to cibopathically identify multiple elements present, but not visible, in the various body crossings he reads in a soup tainted with “just one drop” of human blood. That blood belongs to an at-large serial killer who is guilty of cannibalizing his thirteen victims—hence the gustatory miscegenation Tony tastes in a single spoonful. The remainder of the first chapter concerns Tony’s pursuit and apprehension of this criminal; the other four

chapters that make up Volume One of what is an ongoing series take Tony and his readers beyond the confines of New York City (and farther still beyond my critical comfort zone) to the edges of a plot to conceal the “true nature” of “what the government claimed was an avian flu.” For Tony, obtaining evidence requires repeated performances of “tasting” that Layman and Guillory relish providing; *Chew* devolves into a sordid smorgasbord of rotted flesh, human and nonhuman, which the FDA requires its new Agent Chu to sample in a series of increasingly violent, otherworldly and graphically rendered encounters. It seems that “good” taste must give way to “bad” in order to appeal to the jaded appetites of habitual comics consumers.

Yet *Chew* does offer some interesting tidbits for the discriminating ecocritical palate, particularly with regard to how biopolitics and bioethics intersect with a more materialist engagement with environmental discourse and practice. “Readers of Foucault...are well aware of the biopolitical interest the modern state has taken in managing the life, health, and death of its populations,” and material ecocriticism should certainly draw attention to the “incursions into the most intimate habits of daily existence” authorized by the state (Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms” 22-23). At the same time, bioethical concerns related to the everyday impacts and the potentially unpredictable and devastating consequences of those state practices also warrant our concerned critique. Catriona Sandilands points out that Foucault addresses both the disciplinary aspect of biopolitics and its pleasurable side; specifically, she suggests that institutional management of sexuality, diet, and group addiction are all examples of body politics which, while they have a distinctly regulatory effect on the subjects they produce, provide as well a space of performance in which those subjects also experience genuine

satisfaction as they participate in “practicing toward that normalized, controlled body” (18). Sandilands goes farther, citing authors Éric Darier, Tim Luke, and others who have identified “environmental governmentality” as a new kind of biopolitical power, in which “questions of human-nature relationship are increasingly organized by technologies of monitoring, prediction and regulation” (19). *Chew*, I think, allows its readers to experience for a moment the sense of discipline and pleasure implicit in contemporary issues about food choices and pandemic response that a focus on trans-corporeality makes material and meaningful.

In this text, food practices are clearly not presented through a solitary point of view or single ethical perspective. While you might want to use the opening scenes to support an argument for a vegan diet as a superior moral and ethical choice, the one least likely to have troubling trans-corporeal consequences—“the only food Tony Chu can eat and not get a psychic sensation from is beets”—Layman’s script resists that straightforward interpretation. He crafts a female love interest for Tony who does not serve to reinforce his beets-only diet; instead, she appeals directly to Tony’s ever-unsatisfied desire for physical fulfillment. Tony can safely eat beets, but he does not really want to; cibopathy dictates his consumption choices and practices—his body enacts an agency his desire is denied. Amelia Mintz is a “saboscrivner,” another Layman neologism “that means she can write about food so accurately, so vividly and with such precision—people get the actual sensation of taste when reading about the meals she writes about.” For her “normal” readers with “healthy” appetites, Mintz’s coverage of “D” rated restaurants is nausea inducing; for Tony, her descriptions are magical. “Reading her work...it was like I was actually tasting things for the first time...eating. Without

everything that usually goes along with it for me—the aftertaste and undertaste of slaughter and death—and cages and dirt and feces and hormones and pesticides.” His appreciation here echoes again Alaimo’s entangled material and discursive; for Tony, reading provides the sensory stimulation his body craves. Tony wishes he could eat like the rest of us, be like the rest of us, oblivious to the material and moral entanglements concealed within the food we consume so unthinkingly. Tony’s special ability is truly a mixed blessing, one that is both gift and obligation and which also paradoxically mirrors our own. We all eat to live, but some of us live to eat; in the face of mounting evidence regarding the environmental impacts of the intra-actions between consumer demand and consumer choice, it seems that some of us need to get no satisfaction. *Taster’s Choice* never addresses the ecologically negative side of our proliferating desire for instant gratification and for diversity in satisfaction of taste, but it does make that desire, a sometimes undertheorized aspect of consumer behavior in ecocritical analysis, viscerally present.

Tony would prefer not to be a culinary material ecocritic, endlessly reminded that “the ethical space of trans-corporeality is never an elsewhere but is always already here, in whatever compromised, ever-catalyzing form” with every bite he takes (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 18). His desire to be protected from trans-corporeal awareness sounds a lot like the gastronomical equivalent of safe sex: Tony wants to have his cake and eat it, too...an all too contemporary desire for both instant gratification and instant indemnification. Questions about food practices and food choices make us uncomfortable, especially in a nation where obesity lags only behind tobacco use as a leading cause of preventable death; Alaimo is right when she claims that “ethical considerations and

practices must emerge from a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the “human” is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world (*Bodily Natures* 16-17). Sandilands points to the ambivalent effects of an environmental disciplinarity that creates both guilt and pleasure in the emerging responsible environmental subject; greater awareness of our complicity with those responsible acts can reward us with the sense that we have joined a new group of confederates, while also prompting us to feel greater guilt about our failures to act responsibly all the time (19-20). Tony’s ambivalence is manifested not in terms of environmental guilty pleasures or reflection on the consequences of specific eating habits; instead, his ambivalence is tied to the morality of his need to “taste” the blood of various human and nonhuman body parts in order to “serve the greater good.” While cannibalism may represent the ultimate act of runaway consumption and, at the same time, the ultimate act of consumer inhibition through population control, it is never explicitly dealt with in Volume One’s plotline—a missed opportunity, I think.

Another significant point in Sandilands’s analysis inadequately developed in *Taster’s Choice* is the recognition that environmental governmentality’s “extension of disciplinary and managerial forms of power into the more-than-human realm” also “represents an increasingly dense web of scientized knowledge relations through which human activities are managed by states, apparently ‘for our own good’ but largely in the very particular interests of capital” (Sandilands 19). The government’s role in the Bird Flu pandemic is never made clear in this volume, but several of the stories plant intriguing seeds that bear out Chu’s brother’s contention that “this was never about birds.” Guillory cleverly inserts newspaper headlines like “Poultry Trade Protests Mar

President's UK Visit" and newspaper advertisements for "Poult-Free® - The Legal Alternative" into his panel details, visual appetizers for the main course to come. A visit to a top-secret government-funded operation in the Arctic Circle also suggests that Congressional chicanery is bankrolling poultry prohibition, but any resolution of these intimations is deferred. Jane Bennett suggests that "a theory of vibrant matter," with its recognition of multiple agents and actants, "presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their effects"; her intent here is not to absolve humanity of responsibility but to expand the scope of our inquiries to include "Other" likely suspects, both institutional and nonhuman (*Vibrant Matter* 37).

In his 1998 essay "EcoThrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers," Richard Kerridge pointed to Britain's recent outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, or "mad cow disease" as it was popularly referred to) and pondered why realist fiction had been relatively slow to feature environmental issues (243). Kerridge suggests that novels, with their "committed absorption in the details and cadences of individual perception," are not able to adequately represent environmental issues that "ask us to take into account the possible long-term results of present action" and that hinge on "indeterminacy" rather than on speedy arrest and prosecution (243-244). He takes issue with detective fiction as well, noting that while these stories "usually start with simply 'whodunnit' questions which grow into threads of connection, revealing that apparently separate events and characters are interrelated," at their conclusion they "tend to collapse that intricacy back into a single confrontation" (Kerridge 247). While Kerridge's scathing criticism of the overmining plotlines of popular disaster films is, I think, both warranted and well supported, I believe that the serial nature of the graphic novel, its unfinished open-

endedness, works especially well to counter his arguments. Volume One of *Chew* may not really satisfy my desire for a full meal of ecocritical themes, but it certainly does offer a buffet of entangled agencies at work in an environmental scenario that is not as straightforward as it might first appear—and while we may not want to take another spoonful, it seems we cannot stop at just one. *Chew* forcibly reminds us that in a fully entangled (and genetically modified) world, what we eat runs the risk of becoming “who” we eat, with some deeply disturbing implications for our responsibilities for those choices (or for our refusal to “face” the choices at all). The cassoulet of John Layman’s intricate plots and Rob Guillory’s strikingly memorable images does, I think, the same kind of work that pictures in cookbooks accomplish. It is one thing to read about a recipe—another to actually see the finished product, to be inspired and seduced by a picture that says something to our mind’s eye that text alone seldom produces. In *Chew*’s temptingly graphic imaginary, we cannot ignore that we are *all* in the soup.

**Material Memoir and the Ecological Body:
Paul Chadwick’s *Concrete***

And the rocks themselves shall be moved...So the rocks shape life, and then life shapes life, and the rocks are moving. The completed picture needs one more element: life shapes the rocks.

(Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* 127)

An emphasis on “the material details of everyday life,” specifically as those details reflect and refract contemporary social and environmental political issues, characterizes the third dimension of new materialism (Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms” 7). Material ecocritics must also recognize that “no adequate political theory can ignore the importance of bodies,” entangled material bodies in all their messy, fleshy corporeality (Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms” 19). Comics and

graphic novels rely on bodies to activate their narratives, and so far we have traced materialist representations in bodies “animal” (the absent body of a cartoon cat) and “vegetable” (the simmering soup of beans and bodies)...but what about “mineral”? How could immovable, immutable, and inanimate stone serve as the heroic agent of a graphic novel, a political actant whose manifestly material everyday life could hold our attention longer than our short-lived affection for the infamous Pet Rock? Over a span of nearly twenty years, from 1986 to 2005, graphic novelist and artist Paul Chadwick accomplished the seemingly monumental task of doing precisely that...with “one hapless rock-coated fellow,” former political speech writer and self-styled adventure-hungry couch potato Ronald “Ron” Lithgow—rematerialized (literally and figuratively) as the mysterious Concrete (*Concrete 1 - Depths 4*).⁷ In his legendary *Concrete* series, Chadwick developed a character whose everyday response to finding himself in an alien (again, in both senses of the word) body leads ultimately to the emergence of an environmental subject. Chadwick’s long-running and legendary series is not simply another graphic novel; collectively, it represents the *ecobiography* of a man who becomes the contradiction Edward Abbey dreams of: “a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock” (6). Concrete’s story, to borrow Ian Bogost’s subtitle for *Alien Phenomenology*, pictures for us “what it’s like to be a thing.”

Certain episodes of the *Concrete* series also exemplify what Stacy Alaimo terms “the material memoir,” specific autobiographical works in which “ordinary citizens are compelled to take on scientific expertise and epidemiological projects in order to contend with the dangers of everyday life” (*Bodily Natures* 23). She reads the memoirs of women

tracing the multiple and entangled threads of their own critical illnesses—environmental exposure, genealogy and genetics, lifestyle choices, often mystifying scientific jargon—and demonstrates the tropic similarities connecting them. These “strange, disturbing memoirs...dramatize life in risk society” and track the extent to which scientific discourse underwrites and shapes the way these women come to know themselves; in Alaimo’s words, “material memoirs forge new ways of knowing our bodies and our selves” (*Bodily Natures* 23, 87). She notes the affinity between her description of the material memoir and Cecelia Konchar Farr’s “ecobiography,” a term Konchar Farr coins to describe an autobiography in which “nature becomes an identifying canvas on which to write a self,” a particularly American genre in which “nature becomes us, and we begin to question who is constructing whom” (94-95). Alaimo distinguishes the material memoir from the ecobiography by referencing her analytical focus on the “emerging models of materiality” that shape these awakening trans-corporeal selves; in the material memoir, while environmental forces certainly demonstrate their own trans-corporeal effects, scientific discourse’s epistemological and ethical agency is equally her concern (n2, *Bodily Natures* 165-166). *Concrete* is best read as a hybrid of material memoir and ecobiography. Like Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge*, Chip Ward’s *Canaries on the Rim*, and Ellen Meloy’s *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, *Concrete* charts its protagonist’s struggles to acquire the scientific knowledge he needs to come to terms with his radically altered body...one that is the product of weird science in both the physical and the discursive senses. Like Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, which Konchar Farr references in her essay, and like Aron Ralston’s *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, *Concrete* the graphic novel also tells the story of *Concrete*’s “struggles to be born, to know himself,” and to “re-habituate, re-

familiarize, and re-materialize the body in relation to others” (Konchar Farr 95; Sandilands 32).

Concrete, in his episodic narrative, is never far from his two closest associates, his hapless assistant, (USC English grad student) Larry Munro and Dr. Maureen Vonnegut, a research scientist “for whom I’m an ongoing research project” (*Depths* 14). Vonnegut runs continual experiments on Concrete’s alien body in an attempt to discover its secrets, monitors his life signs and corporeal well-being, offers encouragement and advice, and unwittingly (at least, initially) serves as Concrete’s fantasy lover. Concrete crafts his initial understanding of himself, his “condition,” and its likely effects both now and in the future, entirely from the speculative answers he receives from Maureen—speculative, not proven, although her pronouncements ring with scientific authority. Concrete emerging from an alien science experiment, Concrete 1.0 as it were, is not a material self...at his genesis he is just material, a specimen, an object of curiosity. His lack of identity, initially, is striking; to the scientists who first examine him, he is known only as “John Doe,” and his corporeal status is somewhere between present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) and ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*)—Heidegger’s categories of human relation to matter, the starting point for Graham Harman’s move to an object-oriented ontology (Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 35). In a visually striking panel, Maureen stands above a prone Concrete using a ruler to write on his body, marking his rocky corpus off in numbered gridded squares, recalling a map parceling out the lots in a subdivision or diagrams that illustrate which parts of a cow equate to which cuts of meat (*Strange Armor* 43). A few panels later, Concrete tries frantically to rub off those markings, evidence of his objectification and of his abjection—he is cast out of humanity because of a crusty

exterior he cannot avoid seeing, subject to a scientific institution that weighs and measures him but has no regard for the subjective self he once was. In order to reform the way he is perceived by others, he must first reimagine himself, a project that is the substance of the material memoir. If the material memoir reveals “how profoundly the sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood” (an aggregation I would augment to include environmental systems along with those biological), then *Concrete* shows us a material memoir that matters (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 95).

Chadwick provides us with two accounts of the genesis of this half-ton hero whose “very secret origin” would have a “very public impact” upon “emerging into the world” (*Depths* 4).⁸ The first, “A New Life,” originally issued in 1989 as a stand-alone issue, was rereleased in 2005’s *Concrete 1 – Depths*. Chadwick also wrote a second version, “Strange Armor,” released in six comics issues in 1997 and 1998; after unsuccessfully attempting to bring *Concrete* to the screen, he recycled his unused scripts as a longer treatment of the story he first wrote and illustrated almost 10 years before. Chadwick claims, in his introduction to *Concrete 6 – Strange Armor*, that he thinks “the story’s better in this iteration,” and he also comments on his own improved artwork; like *Concrete* himself, it too has evolved.

“A New Life” is fittingly told through multiple frames, a literary device mimicking the graphic conventions of comics narrative. Chadwick economically and unobtrusively uses a limited third-person narrator to set up a story that is then told by *Concrete* to Larry Munro, belatedly supplying the details of “his true origin.” The “true

story” then unfolds as a visual sequence of events from the past recounted and reviewed in the present tense, beginning with a camping trip planned by best friends Ron Lithgow and Michael Maynard. “What follows,” the anonymous narrator tells us, “isn’t *exactly* what Concrete tells Larry, but it *is* what happened...” (*Depths* 85). Ron and Michael stumble into an alien laboratory, hidden beneath a local mountain; they awaken to find that the aliens have transplanted their brains (and those of deer and a bear, other local fauna) into rock-like bodies that look like those of the aliens. The hapless captives create a diversion and overpower their guard, making a run for the surface. “Michael” falls behind; “Ron” escapes. He contacts his former employer, Senator Douglas, and turns himself in to The National Science Agency. After surviving a series of humiliating and invasive tests, Concrete is finally allowed to reenter public society, equipped with the cover story that he is an experiment gone wrong (a man-made cyborg rather than an alien science project, because “we’re counting on the alien thing being more unbelievable”) and constantly chaperoned by Dr. Maureen Vonnegut (*Depths* 137). Because of his connection to Senator Douglas, any connection to his “brain donor,” Ron Lithgow, must be erased for CIA-mandated security reasons; “Concrete” emerges as a public persona carefully crafted through a scripted media campaign. “You’ll do the talk shows and be an inarticulate clown...you’ll endorse the silliest products...be the inspiration for the cheapest toys,” Douglas’s staffer enthuses. “When we’re through, the public will be so wearied of you they’ll not even want to *hear* speculations on your origins or bodily secrets” (*Depths* 138). In this Faustian bargain, Concrete is forced to “trade away [his] self-respect for freedom”—even his name is a label concocted by the PR liaison, but he is promised that he will “have the rest of [his] life to redeem [himself]” (*Depths* 138).⁹

“A New Life” closes with Concrete and Larry saying goodnight and with a fairy tale’s traditional “*THE END*” pasted beneath the final panel. Framed and distanced through three layers of narrative (re)counting, this version of Concrete’s story reads like a novel, not an autobiography. We follow the plotline, we understand that Ron and Michael encounter aliens, but we do not empathize specifically with Concrete’s personal experience. Chadwick chose this specific technology of representation in order to set up a graphic body to serve his original concept for the series. A concept, in Deleuze and Guattari’s account, is a philosophical response to a problem: “all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges” (*What is Philosophy?* 16). Chadwick explicitly devised this hybrid man/material to allow him to respond to the question of “what might really happen to someone whose life was so changed,” to really consider what it might be like to be a thing in a world made for humans (*Depths* 4). “A New Life” performs specifically to set up a character whose pre-hybrid life is simultaneously illustrated and erased, in order to produce a new protagonist whose new body can be put through an endless sequence of everyday challenges and everyday struggles. This is the stuff of a material memoir, but not its materialization. The breakdown facilitates the sequential emphasis on “what happened next,” purposefully not rendering the “who happened next” that will become the subject matter for Chadwick’s whole series. Recognizing that it is precisely that affective, personal dimension that is elided in “A New Life,” Chadwick returned to Concrete’s origin story, but with a notable difference. The six original issues are the first in which Concrete is the narrator. “The time has come

to tell my own story,” he begins, “this is what it was like to become Concrete” (*Strange Armor* 9).

And with its next sentence, we realize that this is both material memoir and ecobiography, and that Concrete is rock and not rock, Ron and not Ron and yet not-not-Ron either. “Understand first that I was always drawn to the wild places, even as a kid,” he begins (*Strange Armor* 9). Alaimo’s “self of the material memoir—a self that is coextensive with the environment, trans-corporeal, and posthumanist” (*Bodily Natures* 89) is made doubly visible as this memoir opens with a splash page on which Concrete’s distinctive head rises above a mountain range, above an open book on which rests a singularly human hand, and beneath the book, we see the smaller figure of a young boy, his head resting on one hand as his other hand turns the pages of that same open book. Concrete’s autobiography begins *biographically* with a virtuoso display of graphic ekphrasis; Chadwick’s aesthetic choice deploys the remarkable ability that graphic novels have to visually and verbally represent (and re-present) verbal and visual representation, to turn subjects into objects, objects into subjects.

In his oft-referenced *Ecology Without Nature*, Tim Morton questions the functional effect of ekphrasis (which he most often parenthetically defines as “vivid description”) when it is used in environmental writing (44, 65, 93). Morton argues against what he calls “ecomimesis,” a rhetorical device nature writers use to create atmosphere, “to evoke a sense of the reality of nature”—to somehow write their way out of representation and into the “real”—a device that Morton claims actually has the opposite effect (*Ecology Without Nature* 30-31). Rather than inducing in the reader the sensory reality of the trees and the forest, Morton’s argument runs, this kind of strong ekphrasis

overflows the very experience it intends to create, becoming not “less artful, but...more so” (*Ecology Without Nature* 31). The reader’s attention is pulled apart, drawn at the same time to an appreciation of what is being described while also appreciating the craft and apparatus of that description; the result is that “the dualism of subject and object reproduces itself,” *despite* the writer’s intention, which is that “ekphrasis erases the trace of writing” through this “outpouring of language” (*Ecology Without Nature* 129).

Morton effectively argues and supports his claims about why rethinking environmental aesthetics requires a shift beyond ecomimesis, but I think his arguments about “literary” ekphrasis fail to recognize the alternatively transgressive potential inherent in a graphic ekphrasis that can be used to accomplish precisely the effect he categorizes as unintentional. Thinking visually, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that ekphrasis produces a disorienting and *unheimlich* “ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation” (*Picture Theory* 163). Ekphrasis expresses “our anxieties about merging with others”; Mitchell goes on to ask a question that I would argue is Concrete’s own: “What would it mean for the ekphrastic “object” to speak of and for itself in a former time, from the standpoint of a present in which it is no longer an object, but has become a subject?” (*Picture Theory* 163, 185). In panel after panel, tinged with memory’s darker register, Concrete recounts the hopes, dreams, and very human desires of Ron Lithgow, whose brain is now encased in this rock-like exterior. Deleuze and Guattari note “every concept always has a *history*,” and it also “has a *becoming*” that is characterized by its relationships with other concepts; Elizabeth Grosz writes that “life is the protraction of the past into the present, the suffusing of matter with memory” (*What is Philosophy?* 18; “Feminism” 153). Jane

Bennett asks whether “nonorganic bodies [can] also have a life,” whether “materiality itself [can] be vital”; Concrete asks us to embrace the possibility that life *is* memory and that matter *has* memory, that “no rock is ever finished, all stones are continually being remade, until they vanish from the face of the earth...even then, once reduced to windblown dust, they are reforming” (*Vibrant Matter* 53; Bass 97).

In *Concrete*, the intra-action of memory and matter recalls Barad’s agential realism as the bedrock on which Concrete stands. Mineralization has a re-forming effect on this pudgy dreamer who “could never truly picture [himself]” at home in the wild places he read and dreamed about; emerging out of the agential cut performed by alien apparatuses, Concrete discovers that his stony exterior is both nearly impenetrable and yet strangely unwieldy; he weighs in at nearly 1200 pounds, he lacks both a nose and genitalia, and he has almost no sense of touch but discovers a compensatory and greatly increased visual capacity. “Strange Armor” invites us to awaken with him, to discover through Concrete’s visual and aural capacities the astonishment of finding in oneself the unexpected, of coming literally and figuratively face to face with the strange stranger, that “something or someone whose existence we cannot anticipate” (*Strange Armor* 18; Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 42). It is an astonishing experience—astonishing in Charles Scott’s sense that “in astonishment or wonder” we experience a kind of perceptual dissonance in which we “perceive something not quite perceptible,” an experience that could only occur *in* intra-action, “I am before no meaningful thing at all at the same time that I am with meaningful things” (13). Chadwick captures Bruno Latour’s advice to “start from the middle” by locating us inside Concrete’s becoming, using two rows of four identically sized small panels placed above a larger one-panel

third row (*We Have Never Been Modern* 81; *Strange Armor* 18). In the top two-thirds of the page, the panels' identical size and narrow white guttering encourage us to read across them quickly and in order. In the first three, left to right, what appears to be a somewhat featureless rocky plane anchors the panels; above it, bold lettering repeats a harsh and inexplicable **CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH** that is part of the background but manages nonetheless to dominate it, a sound Concrete's narration describes as "like a mouth chewing bits of glass." Speech balloons seem to emanate from the plane at the bottom of each panel, the voice of a confused Ron Lithgow. "Did I fall? I'm not working right. I can't feel—" "I can't open my eyes!!" we read in the fourth panel, when, impossibly, an eye opens in what had seemed to be the solid rock at the bottom, an eye perfectly lined up beneath the narrative text box pasted over it: "Then I did," Concrete narrates. The next row of four panels employs a series of rapid perspective shifts to emphasize Concrete's disorientation as Ron's brain tries to organize the scene in front of him. "I tried to look at my hand," Concrete narrates in a textbox overlaying an image taken straight from an OOO nightmare. We see a real object, a human hand, hovering above its shadow (a sensual object or quality?), which is pierced by that lonely eye peering upward from a stony mask. "All I saw was a moonscape," Concrete narrates, and the second panel contains a coruscated and corrugated surface that is unrecognizable and yet elaborately detailed. In the third panel, perspective shifts again, panning out to allow us to see not with Concrete's eye but with our own, and we see what Ron cannot: a faceless alien shape peering at its extended humanoid hand, speaking with Ron's voice. In the fourth panel we, like Ron's brain, are back *inside* this alien body, seeing "a weird being with Michael's voice" rocking back and forth, the source of the endless crunching

background noise directing us to “Look at the rest of you.” The bottom third of the page is a single, shocking image, shocking for Concrete, shocking for Ron, shocking for the eye/I that is all three of us: we see Concrete as Ron sees Concrete as Concrete experiences himself for the first time. The intra-actions of verbal text and visual image make the idea of a first-person narrative into a shockingly arresting pun; in a single page, we are folded into the material self, experiencing and performing trans-corporeality in nine astonishing panels.

This is, I believe, the strength that the graphic novel lends to Alaimo’s notion of the material memoir. It is her conviction that a more material ecocriticism, with its emphasis on the interactions between multiple bodies and their intra-actions with their always already entangled environments, will prompt us to recognize our own imbrication in the world we share with them and that that recognition “makes it imperative that we be accountable for our practices” (*Bodily Natures* 156). Concrete certainly models that recognition and that desire for accountability in his place in the local/global community. In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey may intone piously, “For my own part I seldom take rocks home, no matter where I might find them; in my opinion they are best enjoyed *in situ*” but he typically subverts his own moralizing by noting that rocks are far from stationary and that *in situ* simply means wherever God “so to speak” or Nature “have seen fit to deposit them” (61). As the intelligent designer of the *Concrete* universe, Chadwick deposits Concrete first in Los Angeles and later moves him to suburban Eagle Rock, California, deliberately staging a messy mesh of persons and practices that the evolving Concrete persona must adapt to. Almost from the beginning of his story, Concrete is forcefully made aware that his new and alien body has an enormous impact

on his environment, in the most mundane and everyday sense. He needs a custom chair built of concrete blocks because his weight is more than most made-for-mankind furniture can bear; he needs a pickup truck with power and a wide bed because he cannot readily fit his oversized body into a normal passenger vehicle. The environmental adage to “tread lightly” is massively difficult for this monumental character, and yet paradoxically because his carbon footprint is so outsized, he is hyper-concerned with environmental issues. In the short story “Objects of Value,” Concrete tries to connect his alien diet (he does not need traditional food but must consume an inorganic diet of rock and metal in order to replenish his rocky exterior) to a personal recycling commitment (*Think Like a Mountain* 157-164). He wonders if he can simply ingest the waste lying around that is not suitable for recycling...but then realizes that toxic substances like heavy metals would simply precipitate into his crust, which he continually sheds back into the environment (*Think Like a Mountain* 158). Even his seemingly impenetrable body is less fortified than you might think; trans-corporeality is a material reality for Concrete’s body like any other. “Fragile Creature” opens with Concrete’s frustration as he copes with the rising costs of trying to convert his home to solar power; economic pressures make individual environmental compliance hard for Concrete and for all of us (*Fragile Creature*). “A New Life” and “Strange Armor” may represent two iterations of Concrete’s emerging material self, but there are other stories that serve more specifically to document Concrete’s maturing environmental consciousness as well. *Think Like a Mountain* is Chadwick’s most sustained effort to show us Concrete’s struggle to reinscribe his material body as the subject and the substance of an ecological body.

Think Like a Mountain first appeared in 1996 in comics format, in six issues sequentially numbered and titled “Green Fire,” “Hidden Graveyard,” “Arms and Boxes,” “Weight of the World,” “Nightwork,” and “Charismatic Megafauna.” The series was republished in 1997 as a square-bound single-volume graphic novel, without pagination or the individual episode titles, and rereleased again in 2006 as *Concrete 5 – Think Like A Mountain*. *Think Like a Mountain* reflects Chadwick’s own environmental sensibility even as it documents Concrete’s political radicalization, a trans-corporeal dance of art and life, author and text (just as Grant Morrison writes his own concerns about animal cruelty into the texts of *Animal Man* and *We3*). Chadwick introduces the 1997 graphic novel with an essay, “The Sea Around Us,” recalling his childhood summers spent on Puget Sound and sharing some insights about the intermingling bodies and practices of the marine ecology he first encountered there...and which return, visually, in this text. His introduction to the rereleased collected volume, dated February 2006 from his home in Friday Harbor, Washington, betrays a darker, less holistically hopeful sensibility. “There are many injustices, gathering threats, and ongoing atrocities in our wounded world,” he writes, and goes on to claim “If humanity endures (I’d say global climate change and the famine it threatens are its greatest threat), it will be in an ever-more-ragged world, with fewer organisms sharing it, more deserts, more social breakdown, a vast catalogue of loss” (*Think Like a Mountain* 4). In *Think Like a Mountain*, Chadwick illustrates the evolution of a rematerialized environmental activist out of the elemental matter that Catriona Sandilands locates in the “*ecologically* docile body of modern environmentalism” (20).

Sandilands begins, as I noted in my discussion of *Chew*, by expanding Foucault’s biopolitics to a consideration of how environmental rhetoric produces what she identifies

as ecologically docile bodies, “a new subject-body cultivated by environmentally-oriented disciplines,” one that “reduces, reuses, and recycles as acts of personal, not only planetary, salvation” (20). If, as Vladimir Vernadsky claims, “We are walking, talking minerals” because of our trans-corporeal entanglement with the material world (qtd. in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 60), then our mineralized ecological bodies “walk to work, now, with the taste of ethics in our mouths” (Sandilands 20). This modern environmental self is not simply molded by the disciplinary constraints of trying to live more sustainably in a rapidly expanding global village; its docility in the face of sometimes stringent restrictions on personal behavior is also motivated by the rewarding and pleasurable sense of becoming a member of “an ecological body politic” (Sandilands 20). Sandilands fears that a dormant discourse of normativity is buried beneath this rhetoric of environmental governmentality; writing from the perspective of queer theory, she calls on “critical ecological thinkers [to] focus on the “queer” question of the modes by which bodies are *materialized* in the midst of conflicting ecological desires,” to resist the ways that “dominant environmental discourses continue to produce *ideally bounded* bodies in the midst of the increasingly obvious reality of their leakiness and vulnerability” (30).¹⁰ What I propose here is to examine how Concrete’s materialization in the 1997 full-color *Think Like a Mountain* is both normative and queer, materializing and rematerializing, in ways that explore the potential in becoming an ecological body while resisting a normative ideal.

Concrete’s ecobiography begins with our hero at home alone, sitting in front of his television set, watching a fictional show set in the afterlife; tonight’s episode is about environmental civil disobedience, and an activist’s tale of how he died using his body to

halt a munitions train. “Nothing boosts a movement like a martyr,” the dead activist concludes. “So damn smug,” thinks Concrete. In a succession of panels, Concrete rationalizes the personal, local, and global effects of environmental damage against its costs. “Everybody compromises,” he thinks, “you just have to live.” Evoking Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, the canonical environmental text in which Leopold famously proposes his land ethic—“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”—Chadwick deftly renders the normative simplicity of Leopold’s earnest statement pragmatically and morally complicated (Leopold 224-225). “Wish I could bury myself,” Concrete’s thought balloons drift away on the night air. “Be part of this hill, aloof...See the pain of the world as transitory, trivial...Just lie here, thinking mountain thoughts.” After all, he thinks, “the aliens buried me, my brain, in this stone body.” His physical immobility is replicated here with a further artistic flourish; Concrete’s head breaks the wall of the panel, indicating that, perhaps, he thinks too much. “I am,” he muses further, “drawn to the earth,” a pun that disrupts the deepening mood of futility just as Concrete remembers that he has places to go, people to see. His loneliness and alienation are deeply etched in the opening of this novel—setting the stage for his slow seduction and incorporation by a group of environmental activists who approach him to join them in protest against a massive logging operation in northern Washington State. Ambivalent about the effectiveness of environmental rhetoric and tactics, Concrete’s skepticism first leads to his rejection *by* the group; Chadwick uses text and image to make it clear that Concrete *feels* this both ideologically and corporeally—he is rejected for his intellectual attitude and quickly sinks into a catatonic state. He maps his rejection onto his alien

immobile body, but he also realizes that this same body could be instrumentalized, gaining him acceptance into this “activist family.” On the facing page, we see that this is the case: against a bright white background, Concrete is now buried under human bodies, part of the group instead of opposed to it. Sandilands certainly recognizes the pleasure of belonging, of being incorporated into “the environmental body”; her concern is what she outlines as the price of this belonging: a willing submission to a set of doctrinal and disciplinary codes and intrusive behaviors in order to sustain membership (20-21). She argues that “we thus become ecological bodies in return for a certain sense of *security*, a bourgeois wellbeing produced the by knowledge that we have made the ‘right’ corporeal choices,” and initially I would agree that Concrete certainly seems to have traded one set of rhetorical discourses (scientific and technical) for another (the activist rhetoric of a group that describes itself as the radical Other of Earth First!).

Much of Concrete’s initial enlistment by these four young activists consists in his steadfast refusal to do more than observe and record their activities; he questions the negative effects of their “extremism and tactics,” and wants to indemnify himself against the public and legal consequences of their “monkeywrenching.” Concrete finds himself backed up against his own wall, protesting precisely the rhetoric he must take on if he is to be one with them. “If I was so much as associated with you, I’d be typed as a radical environmentalist. I’m not. I’m a moderate environmentalist, one who hates confrontation” he emphasizes. His tendency to watch events rather than participate in them has been well established over the course of the series; his collection of large nudes frequently serves as the backdrop for his daily living—a collection he somewhat defensively justifies by pointing out that “the graceful, nude female form will always represent for me

the ideal of perfect beauty (perhaps because of sheer oppositeness to my gross unloveliness" (*The Human Dilemma* 29) —and, as I noted, this ecobiography begins with Concrete cemented to his version of a recliner in front of the TV. In the first fourteen pages of this issue, Chadwick depicts Concrete either sitting (in poses deliberately reminiscent of Rodin's "Thinker" and the Buddha) or lying down over two dozen times, rising and reseating himself each time his mind changes.

Yet ultimately, he knows that his body will be the price of admission to this activist assemblage (and we have come to know this as well...looking back to the warm scene of Concrete surrounded by supportive activists, we notice that one of them is saying, "Night vision! Man, what you could do..."). "A choice isn't real when it's merely in your mind," he realizes. "Your body makes it real. An action." He commits to participating in an act of outright sabotage, destroying logging equipment, and goes on to "star" in an act of creative ecomythology. Concrete becomes Sasquatch, disguising his own alien body with a fabulous one, complete with furry genitalia to misdirect the skeptical media gaze this stunt is designed to attract...but then Chadwick's story takes a sobering and cautionary turn. Precisely as foreshadowed in the opening pages of this graphic novel, one of the activists is killed; his martyrdom accomplishes the goal of prompting permanent protection for the endangered forest. The leaders attribute Concrete's actions to their fallen comrade; he sits concealed by the trees his actions helped to protect, alone again, watching the public memorial service and pointing out the distortions, as well as the strengths, of the rhetoric he hears in the distance. The final page of *Think Like a Mountain* shows us Concrete seated again, at home with his books and with Maureen and Larry, chatting on the phone with one of the surviving activists. In the

concluding panel, he rises again, wholly in silhouette...an anonymous body but not a docile one; refusing to join an offshore whaling protest, he closes this ecobiography with clear and convincing commitment. “If you get something going, land-based...and you think I could make a difference...*call me*.” It is a moment that suggests that bodies truly are the foundation of activist work, not individual bodies but an amalgam of singular bodies working together. Concrete’s indistinctly rendered figure rises here to suggest a readiness to exercise its capacity in the future, a capacity that is everyone’s and anyone’s. It is a moment that solidifies Chadwick’s identification of the more-than-normative interpretation of Leopold’s familiar phrase. “Thinking like a mountain,” he concludes, in a rare postlude to the graphic novel, “suggests we take the long view.” For Concrete, that long view includes looking beyond “my gross unloveliness” to see instead that difference can make a difference (*The Human Dilemma* 29).

Sandilands concludes her essay by proposing a vision for an alternative to an ecological body turned inward and made docile by fear: fear of the very trans-corporeality that material memoirs understand as both transformative and productive. She suggests that the diversity valorized by both expanded posthumanist materialism and queer performance theory might encourage the imagination of a less inflexibly drawn ecological body. “Not only do we bear the traces of the other in our bodily rituals of repetition,” she suggests, “but we can expand phenomenal experience by *taking in and taking on* the other, an intentional and ethical act of opening to its possibility” (Sandilands 26). Sandilands’s essay is underscored by her participation in and appreciation of the principles of Japanese Butoh dance. “Dance,” she writes, “is the animated tension of the body held between external and internal influences. The dancer

doesn't perform an image, say, as an act of willful mimesis; he practices *taking it in and taking it on*" (Sandilands 34). Comics, recall, is also a dance, a dance of words and images animated by a hybrid tension deep in its center that both says something and does something at the same time. For me, the capacity of the graphic novel to invite its readers to enter and perform with and as the characters whose perceptions we share in the intra-actions between panel and panel, panel and page, holds much the same promise. In "Fiber," his heartfelt plea for protection of the forests of Montana's Yaak Valley, writer and activist Rick Bass queries, "Who knows what's inside anything? More and more I'm trying not to look back at who I was, or even who I am, but at the land itself. I'm trying to let the land tell me who and what I am" (127). At a moment of deep frustration over whether or not to become a performer on the environmental stage, Concrete asks himself, "Why can't my mind catch up with what my body has become?" Chadwick concluded the 1997 graphic novel edition of *Think Like a Mountain* with six pages of text, the aggregate of his Author's Forums from the start of each of the original comics issues. In "Background," he traces the history of Earth First! and its similarities and differences with the more radical Earth Liberation Front. He quotes from popular ecobiographies like Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Dave Foreman's *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (Foreman was one of four cofounders of Earth First!). He includes photographs of seven different sources for information about environmental activism and the various organizations that have emerged from it, along with commenting generously about his own uneasy feelings about the range of rhetoric and tactics these groups employ. He emphasizes that he spent five years researching the story behind his story, and he stresses, "It educated me mightily." In *Concrete*, I think Chadwick shows us that becoming an

ecological body clearly also requires that we bring our minds and hearts to the task, along with our multiple and various bodies. We take on and take in the Other, not leaving our material selves behind but opening our docile bodies to their contradictory, animating energies.

Greg Garrard responds to Catriona Sandilands's essay with a well-argued concern that linking rhetoric about pollution to normative discourse that demonizes other-than-heterodox bodies could inadvertently "be toxic to environmentalism itself," he concludes his essay suggesting that "if environmental critics don't enact an ecocentric bias, who will?" (512). Concrete, I submit, illustrates one of the most provocative and productive claims of material ecocritics: that nothing is set in stone, and that there are no normative bodies, really...just silhouettes of trans-corporeal intersections (and inter-sex-ions?) with astonishing capacities for commitment to our radically more-than-human existence. His ecobiographical material memoir firmly demonstrates that when Concrete finally *(be)comes* into his own, his material ecological self emerges from the tensions immanent in those intra-actions, between mind and body, human and Other. What could such an ecological body do? We will just have to wait for the next installment to find out.

Notes

¹ Philosophers of object-oriented-ontology (OOO) carefully distinguish themselves from materialists by calling themselves “speculative realists” and by disavowing materialist interests in monism, vitalism, or what is sometimes considered “process theory.” Nevertheless, like materialists, speculative realists place the being of objects at the center of their ontology, displacing the human from the center at the same time. Clearly OOO shares new materialism’s focus on matter and material feminism’s interest in posthuman agency...but there are significant differences as well. I will delay those explanations until later in this chapter.

² In Chapter 3 of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “Niels Bohr’s Philosophy-Physics,” Barad expands Bohr’s questions about the accuracy and adequacy of experimental practices and their relationship to scientific knowledge production to support her own theory of agential realism. To oversimplify, Bohr’s claim that measurements designed to determine whether light manifests either wave-like or particle-like qualities are in a sense tainted by their own purposiveness and that both behaviors “are exhibited under *complementary*—that is, *mutually exclusive*—circumstances” (106). It is a bit like Latour’s arguments that a hybrid ought not to be analyzed in terms of either one or the other of its constituent parts; the same complementarity will lead to one part being under-analyzed as a result of its incompatibility with the terms of the other. For Barad, Bohr’s critical insight is that “*concepts are defined by the circumstances required for their measurement,*” that experimental apparatuses construct the results they obtain (109). In *Mind and Nature*, biologist, psychologist, and cybernetics pioneer Gregory Bateson used this same notion of *recursiveness* to forecast the effects of “calibration and feedback” in a “world of adaptive action,” where outcomes are potentially (and sometimes dangerously) affected by the unintended consequences of amplifying relays of trial and error (188). Barad’s interest in Bohr’s contribution is that it provides a material dimension for something like social construction—that “in Bohr’s proto-performative account...theorizing must be understood as an embodied practice” (54); Bateson’s concern is that our learn-by-doing approach to environmental problems is problematic in itself. “We are not outside the ecology for which we plan,” he cautions, “we are always and inevitably a part of it” (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 512).

³ Alaimo and Hekman make it clear that while “new materialism” and “material feminism” overlap, “materialist” feminism is distinctly different. Closely aligned with the projects of Marxist feminism, “materialist feminism” is keenly concerned with issues of “race, sexuality, imperialism and colonialism, and anthropocentrism” while also sharing Marxist feminism’s focus on issues of class. See note 3, pp. 17-18, for a detailed discussion of these subtle distinctions.

⁴ Artistic erasure and its connection to the invisible desired is not limited to Walsh’s imaginary. One of my husband’s junior high classmates was infamous for bringing his younger brother’s coloring book to school and displaying typical black and white pages celebrating the First Thanksgiving, cartoons from which he had erased all the details of

the *female* pilgrims' clothing. Once only their "embodied" outlines remained, he creatively filled them back in with those desired but previously invisible *assets*...a distribution of the sensible that still renders my husband helpless with laughter when he recounts the story.

⁵ Emphasis on the reality of object assemblages animates much of Timothy Morton's turn to OOO; in fact, it is his focus on what he calls "hyperobjects" (vast objects like climate change and superstorms) that Bennett finds most provocative and that I will return to in my concluding chapter. See Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things," 229-230 for her response to Morton's argument.

⁶ Tony Poulson recommended the *Chew* series to me, for which I am appropriately grateful.

⁷ I am indebted to Walter Biggins for suggesting Chadwick's *Concrete* series as a site of the graphic novel's engagement with the "mineral."

⁸ In 2005 and 2006, Dark Horse Books began rereleasing Paul Chadwick's *Concrete* in seven collected volumes. Each volume begins with one of Chadwick's six-issue series and typically, although not always, also bears the title of that first series (Vol. 1, *Depths*, is an exception: 1987's *Concrete #1* was titled "A Stone Among Stones," which is the first story in the collected volume). These rereleased collections contain black and white versions of the original color issues (sometimes identified as chapters), followed by some of the many graphic short stories that Chadwick also produced. The collections are arranged thematically rather than chronologically, and they are paginated, unlike the originals. My reading will rely on both the rereleased collections and the original issues where I have been able to obtain them, and I will distinguish between them as necessary.

⁹ Never able to resist his own puns, Chadwick finally does provide *Concrete* with a chance to *redeem* himself in *Strange Armor*. Embracing this new persona as the necessary condition of his freedom, *Concrete* *deems* himself in this second iteration of his origin story. "I'm...Concrete," he announces to a large public gathering. The expository text box that follows notes, "That pretty much cemented the name" (*Strange Armor* 75).

¹⁰ For a thoughtful analysis and response to Sandilands, see Greg Garrard, "Nature Cures? or How to Police Analogies of Personal and Ecological Health," in *ISLE* 19.3 (2012): 494-514. Countering Sandilands's concerns about the normative effects of pollution or immune discourse, Garrard hazards that "it does not seem impossible that we might be able to depathologize and destigmatize queer bodies without having to (rhetorically) detoxify pollution" (512). I think this is precisely what Chadwick attempts in *Concrete*.

CONCLUSION: MAKING ECOCRITICISM MATTER

Don't picture this: portions of the Cook Islands disappear entirely during a catastrophic storm in January. More storms decimate major Atlantic shipping lanes. Oil platforms off the coast of California erupt into flames following a seismic event and burn out of control continuously. Underwater marine geography off the North American coast is inexplicably and irrevocably altered; in North Africa, there is a wholesale die-off of Bluefin tuna, and whales have vanished from sanctuaries in the southern oceans. Changes in weather patterns have caused wind farms in China to cease production. "Landslides, oil spills, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis" have become commonplace planetary events, "exploding the global economy, killing untold millions, and destabilizing first- and third-world governments alike" (Wood, *Black Pacific*). Don't think about those spectacular Hollywood blockbusters like *The Road* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, inviting you to witness the dramatic end of the world. This is not, as Jamais Cascio notes in his introduction to *Black Pacific*, "a disaster movie"—it is "a true disaster," one in which "millions have died, in dirty, tragic, and decidedly noncinematic ways." I am asking you not to visualize that true disaster, not to take time to smell the *schadenfreude* that lingers in the aftermath of a catastrophic event when you and yours escape unharmed; instead, I want you to picture the painstakingly slow iterations of what happens next in the days and months and years after a series of events that are affectively,

if not demonstrably causally, connected. You are not safely outside those events—you are inside their viscous immediacy, intimately implicated in their materiality. You are at some time in the future present, location 55.153766, 167.827148 or 54.521081, 170.793457 or Gromsvötn, Iceland, or Firenze, Italy, or New York City.

This is the world of *The Massive*, Brian Wood's recently launched comic series about that disorienting (un)imaginable postevental life. Tim Morton would call this the time of the hyperobjects. It is also Ulrich Beck's risk society, "a *catastrophic* society" in which "the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm" (*Risk Society* 24). In his evolving theory of world risk society, Beck ponders how pluralistic communities of fate that cohere in anticipation of global risks (and in the aftermath of their materially consequential manifestation as catastrophic events) might evolve politically and socially. Material ecocriticism, resonating between the Deleuzean discourse of the new materialists (Jane Bennett, William Connolly, and Rosi Braidotti, for example) and Morton's object-oriented ontological engagement with hyperobjects, analyzes how the environmental imagination copes with an ecological present that is increasingly contingent not only on past practices but on the lengthening shadow of a conditional future. "In risk society," Beck suggests, "the past loses the power to determine the present. Its place is taken by the future...we become active today in order to prevent, alleviate, or take precautions against the problems and crises of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow" (*Risk Society* 34). Morton similarly speculates that hyperobjects, "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," like global warming, radiation, and air pollution, are "messages in bottles from the future" (*Hyperobjects* 1, 138). At the same time, however, postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon urges ecocritics not to

elide the past in this necessary apprehension of future consequences.¹ Citing William Faulkner's pronouncement in 1951's *Requiem for a Nun* that "the past is never dead. It's not even past," Nixon rightly argues that ecocritical attention must comprehend the temporal magnitude of ecological risks along with their massive spatial scale (*Slow Violence* 8). In Chapter 1, I noted Nixon's emphasis on the need for representational strategies to make visible the environmental imperceptible; in Beck's proposed world risk society, representation is just as critical. He emphasizes that it is "only by imagining and staging world risk" that a future event can be made real (thus encouraging us to act upon it) before its actual occurrence (*World at Risk* 10). "Because this constant danger shapes our expectations, lodges in our heads and guides our actions, it becomes a political force that transforms the world"; because representation of risk shapes our perception of it, representation has material and affective power as well (Beck, *World at Risk* 10). "Sometimes it happens," John Berger argues, "that a question is for a moment more pertinent than answers or explanations" (*Hold Everything Dear* 113). Ecocriticism reads the intersections and intra-actions of objects human and nonhuman in contexts local and global, and it queries the particular (and political) distributions of the sensible that structure how specific texts image the thing. Its analysis of the aesthetic technologies of graphic novels and comics—the horizontal (as well as vertical) movement of storylines, the distinctively concentric enmeshment (from panel to page to storyworld) of a medium that is both local and global, and the commitment to closure it both solicits and resists—dramatically challenges the strengths and weaknesses of image+texts in the time of hyperobjects and global risk. Ecocriticism matters, precisely because it asks those critical

questions and because it challenges those representations; in the process, I believe, it moves us to do so as well.

**Performing Ecocriticism After the Narrative is Over:
Chasing *The Massive***

The only question is: How do we deal with nature after it ends?
(Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* 90)

What does it mean to live on after the end of nature, after the end of the world? Who is this “we” that coheres after the risk hits the fan? These are the questions lying just beneath the surface of the contemporary comics series, *The Massive*, from which my opening paragraph draws its graphic content. In twelve issues to date, collected into two volumes (*Black Pacific* and *Subcontinental*), author Brian Wood and an assemblage of artists reconstruct (and subsequently deconstruct) what Beck calls “enforced cosmopolitanism,” a radically plural community of survivors “lost and adrift in the chaos” of “a post-war, post Crash, post-disaster, post-everything world” (*The Massive* #1).² Beck posits that “an incomprehensible community emerges corresponding to the incomprehensibility of the problem,” a disparate collection of bodies defined more by their need for survival than by the desire for equality that united the proletariat, modernity’s first plural political subject (*Risk Society* 49). This community-to-come of what we might then call the political subjects of risk society results from what Beck describes as *enforced cosmopolitanism*. “Global risks activate and connect actors across borders who otherwise don’t want to have anything to do with one another,” he suggests (*World at Risk* 61). Beck wonders whether such an inconvenient troop, “trapped in a shared global space of threats,” largely assembled by shared anxieties, shared fears, and shared traumas, could effectively reorganize politically and ethically (*World at Risk* 56;

Risk Society 49). He hypothesizes that “the tendency is towards the emergence of individualized forms and conditions of existence, which compel people—for the sake of their own material survival—to make themselves the center of their own planning and conduct of life” (*Risk Society* 88). An attentive reading of this passage suggests that Beck is not dismissing this tendency as a conservative refusal to explore new possibilities while nostalgically preserving the habits of a life that ended with the familiar world. Instead, Beck emphasizes the productive potential of an emergent subjectivity that is responsively and recursively interpellated by equally emergent—and radically unfamiliar—clear and (future) present dangers. Speculative political theorist William Connolly, whose writing is frequently affiliated with that of contemporary new materialists, has also dedicated much of his recent work to crafting an image of this “world of becoming,” which he anticipates as “a world in which changes in some systems periodically make a difference to the efficacy and direction of others” (*World of Becoming* 27). “A predicament,” he argues, “is a situation lived and felt from the inside. It is also something you seek strategies to ameliorate or rise above” (*World of Becoming* 97).

Certainly the crew of the conservationist ship *Kapital*, the communal risk subject of Brian Wood’s *The Massive*, provides us with a heterogeneous yet singular subject for material ecocritical consideration. A divergent group of nomadic maritime eco-activists find themselves trapped at sea in their relatively smaller craft, cut off from their larger sister ship, *The Massive*, because of the proliferating series of ecocatastrophes I asked you not to picture as this chapter opened. The first panels represent an oddly static scene positioned inside an already in-progress story, inside a shared space of eventual threat,

inside an approximate location, and inside the close quarters of the *Kapital's* bridge. We are abruptly entangled with an assortment of unidentified individuals whose attention is focused outward, on a weak radio signal that could be from *The Massive*...or not; they cannot be sure because *The Massive* is always withdrawn, an object that beckons from the past and from the future simultaneously, like the swarm of risks that have already conditioned the ecology of this text (although we, as readers, do not even know that yet). Knowledge comes to us in fragments, dispersed across the panels on a “need to know” basis, suggestive again of the immediacy of this situation, and confirming another of Beck’s speculations: in risk society, there is a widening gap between “those *afflicted* by risks and those who *profit* from them,” so knowledge becomes a key commodity (*Risk Society* 46). What we need, as Beck suggests, are “ideas and theories that will allow us to conceive the new which is rolling over us in a new way,” but for the moment we do not know who these people are and we do not know if we want to know them (*Risk Society* 12). *The Massive's* imaginative confluence of image and text stages the problematic assembling of strange strangers emerging after our familiar world ends, “after the narrative is over,” in the new world risk society (Beck, *Risk Society* 12). An ecocritical reading of its image+text confluence must consider how and why it conceives the new as it does.

Specifically acknowledging the work of Beck and other risk theorists, ecocritic Ursula Heise argues the need for a crucial expansion of contemporary “ecological awareness and environmental ethics” in a world that is increasingly global in its social, economic, and environmental experiences (*Sense of Place* 55). “The challenge for environmentalists,” she states, “is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense

of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet” (*Sense of Place* 56). With particular emphasis on the largely local, place-based rhetoric that characterized U.S. environmentalism (particularly in the latter half of the 20th century), Heise proposes a turn towards a more deterritorialized “eco-cosmopolitan subject,” specifically relying on an anthropological and sociological use of the term *deterritorialization* to highlight “the detachment of social and cultural practices from their ties to place that have been described in detail in theories of modernization and postmodernization,” especially in conjunction with analyses of the interpenetration of the local by the global that circulate within theories of world risk (*Sense of Place* 51). In her thoughtful critique, Heise applies deterritorialization beyond the mobile, diasporic, nomadic subject increasingly distanced from some home base or territory; she also uses sociologist John Tomlinson’s work to highlight “the paradigmatic experience of global modernity for most people,” which is “that of staying in one place but experiencing the ‘dis-placement’ that global modernity brings to them” (Tomlinson qtd. in Heise, *Sense of Place* 52). The various issues of *The Massive* irregularly but frequently interrupt brief exchanges of dialogue with stark depictions of the material effects of multiple catastrophic events on familiar places, indigenous peoples, and an array of animate and inanimate objects. Heavy use of a didactic, impersonal third person narrative emphasizes the global scale of the storyline and tends to obscure the rare use of local dialects at specific sites of encounter. Character development is episodic and insufficient. *The Massive*’s protagonists are doubly deterritorialized—they are literally and nomadically at sea, repeatedly encountering radically altered environments that should be familiar but are not, and their origin stories are excruciatingly slow in coming. Their social anchor and supply base, their sister ship

The Massive, has vanished, location unknown. Kristian Donaldson illustrates the primary storyline, but J. P. Leon provides chapter art; the noticeable differences in their styles support this contradictory overlapping sense of familiar and unfamiliar territory. The artists represent location using decimal degrees, an expression of latitude and longitude in decimal fractions used to accurately identify locations in GPS devices and in web mapping applications like Google maps. The story opens at 55.153766, 167.827148, “near Kamchatka Peninsula.” We can, with some accuracy, pinpoint where the action is taking place, but in most instances, what is familiarly local about those locations has been utterly *displaced* by the environmental catastrophes of the preceding year.

Other technologies of graphic representation further enhance *The Massive*'s sense of random and inscrutable threats that continually destabilize the familiar. Voiced impersonally, in a flatly omniscient narrative using clearly machinic type in blue boxes superimposed over three thinly separated monochromatic sepia panels, disparate locations are metonymically conflated, vertically and horizontally. All have been affected in some fashion by this series of catastrophic events; boats, fish, water, Third World indigenes, factory, wind turbine, First World environmentalists, glaciers—Donaldson shows us not the event but the flat ontology of its affects. Flat ontology is a term that OOO philosopher Levi Bryant borrows from Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory; asserting that “flat ontology argues that all entities are on equal ontological footing,” Bryant stresses that “the broader strategic import of the concept of flat ontology is to diminish the obsessive focus on the human, subjective, and the cultural” in order to “cultivate a greater appreciation for nonhuman actors such as animate and inanimate natural entities, technologies, and such” (*Democracy of Objects* 246-247). Bryant makes

two claims for flat ontology that seem largely consistent with new materialism's interest in posthuman agency: "humans are not at the center of being, but are *among* beings," and "objects are not a pole opposing a subject, but exist in their own right, regardless of whether any other object or human relates to them" (*Democracy of Objects* 249, italics original). Donaldson's artistic choices achieve precisely this sense of the democracy of beings that Bryant wants to convey in his object-oriented arguments and that Beck also claims for risk society in his often-quoted phrase, "*poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic*" (*Risk Society* 36, italics original). Beck argues that in the face of "modernization risks," an emerging risk society displays little class stratification. Instead, "social differences and limits are relativized. *Objectively*, risks display an *equalizing* effect within their scope and among those affected by them" (*Risk Society* 36, italics original). In the graphic risk society of *The Massive*, catastrophe clearly does not discriminate in its spatially and temporally dispersed effects—animal, vegetable, mineral, and machine, city and citizenry, air, land, and sea, all feel its strange embrace. Later on in this chapter, I will examine Beck's assertion about risk's equalizing effect more closely. For now, however, I want to focus on the confluence of aesthetics and experience and of representation and risk that Tim Morton's extensive engagement with hyperobjects makes visible. Do the emerging risk subjects we follow in the pages of *The Massive* display democratic equality because risk's ontologically inherent flatness affects them equally?

Jacques Rancière grounds his topographical analysis on mapping those moments when representation confers visibility on the previously unseen, when we experience an apprehension of the equality that he posits as an a priori condition, disordered over

ontologically and politically entropic time. Equality in Rancièrian terms is distributed unequally. Displacement, in the time of hyperobjects, describes how the emergent subject/object of risk society experiences this asymmetrical encounter with an inscrutable and always withdrawn other, with what Tim Morton calls the *strange stranger*. In the opening scene of *Black Pacific*, the experience of the just-out-of-range, barely audible signal that may or may not be *The Massive* conveys that destabilizing uncertainty that displacement induces. “**Is it *The Massive*?**” asks one character, “Give me your gut feeling.” “It feels the same as last time...I think it’s them again,” responds another. “The overall aesthetic ‘feel’ of the time of hyperobjects is a sense of *asymmetry* between the infinite powers of cognition and the infinite being of things,” Morton argues, and his explication of these massively distributed objects, of their sensual qualities, their appearance-for others, and their resistance to anything like total or complete comprehension must inform any ecocritical reading of *The Massive* (*Hyperobjects* 22). While acknowledging that “humans have been aware of enormous entities—some real, some imagined—for as long as they have existed,” Morton clarifies that by hyperobjects he is specifically exploring those large entities (like climate) that have only recently drawn our attention, entities that “cause us to reflect on our very place on Earth and in the cosmos”—those very things that Beck’s modernization risk apprehends (*Hyperobjects* 15). Beck insists that “risk is not a thing” and that “risks do not exist independently, like things,” but I suspect he protests too much (*World at Risk* 140, 195). As I noted earlier, he certainly acknowledges risk’s agency, its power to shape reaction and response. Morton is less inclined to disentangle hyperobjects from the risks they pose, and he is quite emphatic that hyperobjects *are* real things, autonomous objects with real agency

that accomplish “what Sigmund Freud considered the great humiliation of the human” (*Hyperobjects* 16). Hyperobjects accomplish a kind of “double displacement,” radically preempting humans from their perceived centrality in the signifying world and also denying them the ability to take up a position outside it; in the Age of Asymmetry, Morton contends, “*we are always inside an object*” (*Hyperobjects* 17). This gives hyperobjects a kind of sticky, viscous quality—“like faces pressed against a window, they leer at me menacingly: their very nearness is what menaces” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 27). The cramped quarters of the *Kapital* are filled with too many unidentified characters, crowding into panels that abruptly shift perspectives; faces are suddenly too close, staring directly at us and invading our personal space. Hyperobjects subject us to an uncanny and uncomfortable aesthetic, a redistribution of the sensible that makes visible an enforced intimacy: “objects thrust themselves towards us in a cramped or claustrophobic pictorial space”; hyperobjects make it “clearer with every passing day that ‘distance’ is only a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect me from the nearness of things” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 76, 27). We want distance, therefore we create it, by unconsciously deploying something like comics’ breakdown to produce a little space (the gutter!) between our panel and theirs. To repartition Scott McCloud’s description of comics, it’s a way of seeing *and* a way of drawing: drawing distinctions between us and those other objects whose nearness we would rather not acknowledge (31). Morton uses the hyperobject global warming to illustrate other aspects of hyperobjects, qualities he identifies as nonlocality and temporal undulation. Local manifestations of global warming are simply “false immediacies,” the hyperobject’s appearance-for some other entity in what it perceives as this place, now; global warming “is an object of which

many things are distributed pieces” (*Hyperobjects* 48). Snow in Florida, no snow in Utah—these physical symptoms are ontologically aesthetic effects, a meteorological distribution of the sensible [qualities] of a real object that is always, in an object-oriented ontological sense, withdrawn from us. So withdrawn, in fact, that we experience a kind of temporal backwash in the gap between us and the hyperobject as well—in Morton’s terms, “time is not a neutral container in which objects float, but is instead an emission of objects themselves” (*Hyperobjects* 67). Global warming has a kind of nonteleological vectoral effect, he argues, noting “plant and animal life events have gone out of sync” as a result, but our apprehension of these kinds of effects is only partial—“we can only see pieces of hyperobjects at a time,” never the whole (*Hyperobjects* 67, 70). He likens this “strange mereology” to a kind of indexical metonymy—just as a weathervane is an indexical sign that is not the same thing as that which it indicates (it is not the wind, it is the wind-driven sign of the wind), so too the various effects of global warming that we experience (altered weather patterns, rapid glacial melting) are indicators of it, not the whole of it (*Hyperobjects* 77). Hyperobjects, therefore, make us hyperconscious of what Morton describes as *the mesh*, his graphic metaphor for “the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences” (*Hyperobjects* 83). In *The Massive*, the braiding of images, gutters, and narrative text that jumps abruptly through space and time convey this strangely disconnected connectivity in its graphic mesh.

In *Black Pacific*, we experience again and again the strange intimacies and repeated displacements that characterize this Age of Asymmetry. Separated at sea from *The Massive* in November of the year of the crash (but *which* year, we never know), the

Kapital makes for Hong Kong, hard hit by massive seas and financial devastation, but which “at a distance appeared to be a viable alternative. The only alternative at this point.” When they arrive, however, that distance gives way to the intimate viscosity of the time of hyperobjects. “Where’s the port?” “There **is** no port. It’s **all** the port” (*Black Rain*). This is a strangely contradictory and claustrophobic environment; ten stories of Hong Kong are now fully submerged. “This is probably the greenest and yet the most toxic project I’ve ever seen. Everything is locally sourced and recycled,” Mary notes, to which Callum replies, “But a million tons of garbage floating in the ocean is still a million tons of garbage floating in the ocean.” This interlude, rendered in monochromatic sepia tones to indicate we have slipped backwards in time, gives way to color pages filled with actions that take place in Kamchatka “now,” which are interrupted by a sideways shift to monochromatic representations of environmental events in Greenland, Manitoba, and Port Said (here and here and here, but not now), back to the future in a (still sepia) Hong Kong, where other actions have transpired and then forward to the present (but still in Kamchatka). The effect is dizzying, disorienting, strangely familiar, and yet familiarly strange. Defying the typical linear storytelling characteristic of most action comics, Wood’s fragmented narrative and Donaldson’s use of color subject us to that vertiginous temporal metonymy and piecemeal now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t that is so characteristic of hyperobjects. We cannot seem to get out of this place, whether we move forward, backwards, or sideways. We cannot get a handle on the events or the characters because neither Wood nor Donaldson ever reveals the whole story to us; we only get fragments of information, delivered out of sequence and often nearly concealed in the “surging crowd of beings” that fill the various panels (*Morton Hyperobjects* 80). We

know that the crew includes “Mary b. unknown,” “Mag Nagendra b. 1974, Sri Lanka,” “Callum Israel b. 1966, Bangladesh”—but we do not know the present year—“now” is just the negative of the positive images of the past. The lack of a specific time signature conveys, I think, that sense of nonlocality that Morton suggests. Past, present, and future are familiar technologies that produce a temporal and ethical breakdown—we can distance ourselves from present day concerns if we can nostalgically imagine a more perfect past (those golden days of yesteryear, untrammelled by current disasters) or if we locate their consequences in the future (for our children, for our children’s children). *The Massive* stages that inescapable viscosity of the time of hyperobjects that Bill McKibben conveys in the opening chapter of *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. He alternately argues that the planet we inhabit is no longer “our cozy, taken-for-granted earth” and that global warming, the hyperobject in the room, cannot be rhetorically converted into “a future threat” (1, 11). Instead, it is an imminent and immanent future present we are inside of and implicated in: “Hasta la vista, grandchildren!” (McKibben 12). In *The Massive*, we are assaulted by time’s arrival in uneven episodic bursts that seem to precede something lurking just outside the panel, just beyond the turn of the page, a menacing absent actant that troubles any straightforward reading. *The Massive* is not an easy comic to stay with; I find myself longing for the simplicity of a linear action narrative that begins somewhere and that has some particular place to go. Instead, I am adrift in enforced intimacy with “a multitude of entangled strange strangers” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 15), buffeted by a series of what Beck describes as “conflict scenarios” in which as he points out, “in the storm of threats, ‘we are all in the same boat’” (*World at Risk* 37).

So how does the *Kapital*'s enforced cosmopolitan risk community cohere out of the conflict scenarios that motivate this graphic series? Over the course of the extant twelve issues of this unfinished series, we come to identify some but not all of the crew of the *Kapital*. The captain, Callum Israel, is a former mercenary turned ecowarrior, the founder of the Ninth Wave Conservationist Force, a marine environmental group "fighting since 2001" (*Black Pacific*). His first mate, Mag Nagendra, once a Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger child soldier, is also ex-mercenary. Mary, a student activist from Harare, was a member of the original activist group made over by Israel into Ninth Wave; Ryan, a student activist from Vermont, is its newest member. In his environmentally aware 1882 drama, *An Enemy of the People*, Henrik Ibsen presciently suggests that community is not about location. "We *are* a community," the unctuous Mayor of a small town pontificates, "We have a common interest that makes us one" (11). Prior to economic and environmental events referred to here as the crash, the assembled and motley crew of *The Massive* illustrated "the pluralistic structure of interest group organizations" that Beck imagines will be rendered incomprehensible by "the commonality of dangers" that arrive with the actualization of risk (*Risk Society* 46). This is not a randomly collected group subject; each of the members chose to join Israel in what he insists is a pacifist organization dedicated to the conservation of marine habitats. "But in this new world..." the narrative cautions us as we turn a page that captures Israel at prayer (Muslim prayer, despite his surname), only to reveal a blindfolded Israel kidnapped by extremists "...Who can truly be certain of anything?" (*Black Pacific*). Beck speculates at length on how "the *quality of community* begins to change" in the emergence of risk society. "Its normative counter-project, which is its basis and motive force, is *safety*," he claims, and he argues

that “the *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the *commonality of need*” (*Risk Society* 49, italics original). In the collected volumes of *The Massive*, Beck’s questions—“To what extent can anxiety communities withstand stress?,” “What motives and forces for action do they set in motion?,” “How capable of compromise are anxiety-producing communities of danger?”—become a kind of subtext for a material ecocritical analysis (*Risk Society* 49). Israel wants to act affirmatively in the face of multiple risks and rolling disasters. “This is a new world. **Reinvent yourself**,” he admonishes an old enemy (*Black Pacific*). Yet his actions seem to contradict that intention. He jettisons the *Kapital*’s environmental mission for one that is equally conservative, though ideologically quite different. He tasks the crew with finding *The Massive*. “No side missions, no distractions. Just stay on signal, no matter what,” he repeats over and over again (*Subcontinental*). It seems that for Israel, anxiety translates into the desire to preserve social and cultural identifications, to preserve the group against its disintegration.

Each crewmember’s response illustrates Beck’s intuition about the risk community’s tendency to produce distinctly individual performances. Mag is clearly motivated by safety concerns, as evidenced by his almost immediate recourse to weapons and to violent defensive tactics, in direct contravention of Israel’s nonviolent stance. “You know what I **am**, Callum,” he uncompromisingly states (*Black Pacific*). “I really didn’t sign up for this,” Ryan confesses to Mary, “It’s not **fair**” (*Black Pacific*). Survival trumps ideology for this American student, and she repeatedly denies her nationality in the face of growing global antipathy towards an America that has basically closed its doors to all other affected nations and groups. Mary, who free dives and swims with sharks, described throughout as “origin unknown,” clings to the substance of her own

precarious biography. She knows, the narrator informs us, “the sea still had a use for her.” “This planet’s **dying**, Ryan. Nothing’s **fair**. What makes you think you’re so special?” (*Black Pacific*). What was once a cohesive collection of environmentalists is becoming, in the face of the crash, Beck’s incomprehensible community. I am reminded of Rancière’s distaste for the notion of the collection, an aesthetic assemblage of otherwise heterogeneous objects under some common rubric designed to produce the impression of consensus: a particular distribution of the sensible that he described as the univocal death of politics, a contrived equality that uses inclusion to suppress difference and to conceal its own exclusionary tactics (“Contemporary Art” 46). Instead of a collection, I would argue that *The Massive* stages the emergence of what Levi Bryant describes as a collective, “an entanglement of human and nonhuman actors or objects...in a network or mesh” (*Democracy of Objects* 271). Man, woman, ship, shark...*The Massive* imagines the *ecological thought* of Tim Morton’s 2010 book so titled. “The ecological thought,” he explains, “consists in intimacy with the strange stranger,” those intimate other objects thrust at us and next to us in the claustrophobic space and time of the hyperobjects (*The Ecological Thought* 46). “This isn’t a democracy,” Israel responds to Mag’s demand for an equal say in the *Kapital*’s affairs, echoing Morton’s assertion that “democracy is based on reciprocity—mutual recognition,” a degree of knowing that is never possible with the strange stranger who “is not my mirror” (*Subcontinental, The Ecological Thought* 80-81). The collective figures the interconnectedness of the mesh, boundaries shot through with gaps and crammed with other beings who “the more intimately we know them, the stranger they become” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 94).

Feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti finds her affirmative (and decidedly Deleuzean) notion of “nomadic subjectivity” in her oft-repeated claim, “that ‘we’ are in *this* together”; she goes on to stress that her use of the first-person plural is intended to be a “non-anthropocentric construct” that includes “nonhuman agents...animals...and the earth as a bio-sphere as a whole” and that by her emphatic *this* she “refers to a commonly shared territory or habitat” (“Affirming the Affirmative” par. 28). While I find her posthumanist inclusiveness appealing, her positive assertion of a heterogeneous and nonunitary subject moves too quickly to presume a consensual response to global trauma—like Rancière, I am uncomfortable with the erasure of difference that consensus accomplishes (“Affirming the Affirmative” par. 27). Beck also appreciates the ubiquity of difference, acknowledging that “risk positions create dependencies which are unknown in class situations” (*Risk Society* 53). “We” might be in “this” together, but our assemblage does not erase the fact that we bring different skills (and different knowledges) to the table. Earlier I noted that both Beck and Connolly imagine that out of risky predicaments, “new communities and alternative communities arise, whose world views, norms and certainties are grouped around the center of invisible threats” (Beck, *Risk Society* 74). Risk societies might begin by collecting a multitude of strange strangers in the time of hyperobjects, but Beck’s more nuanced reading is that the individual at risk might find it necessary to elect “which group or subculture one wants to be identified with,” to “choose and change one’s social identity,” and “to take risks in doing so” (*Risk Society* 88). Marry this to Jane Bennett’s assertion that the turn to vital materiality “tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota,” and we are reminded that “the human is not exclusively human, that we are made up of its,” and that this

expanded notion “forms a key part of the newish self that needs to emerge, the self of a new self-interest” (*Vibrant Matter* 112-113).

This is a more satisfactory vision of a nonunitary yet polyvocal subject—a posthuman assemblage that expands Beck’s emergent individualized form while still retaining something of Rancière’s dissensus. It is also a fair approximation of the risk collective that coheres across the pages of *The Massive*. Modernization risks may “possess an *inherent tendency towards globalization*,” but the responses to them remain more individualized; despite their overtly nomadic and eco-cosmopolitan collective, the *Kapital*’s crewmembers “have to make their own decisions” (Beck, *World at Risk* 54). By the second volume of this series, there is an evident fissuring within this deterritorialized community. “There is a feeling growing amongst the crew that *The Massive* is lost for good, and that Ninth Wave is powerless...that the greater good can be best served in their home countries, helping to rebuild”; more narrative points out that “there are nearly twenty-two separate nationalities aboard the *Kapital*, and within that number, ten ethnic groups represented” (*Subcontinental*). Ostensibly politically neutral, the Ninth Wave volunteers begin to weigh local loyalties against their commitment to global environmental issues. Whether their next decisions will include seizing the opportunity to remake the world in a new image is left open in this comic series. Global risk and the shared experience of vulnerability, of our fragility in the face of potentially catastrophic events, can forge unexpected allegiances across racial, national, religious, and species boundaries. Beck argues that “global risks open up a moral and political space that can give rise to a civil culture of responsibility that transcends borders and conflicts,” but *The Massive* makes no promises (*World at Risk* 57). *Subcontinental* begins at Moksha Station,

an assemblage of “political refugees, engineers, and roughnecks [who] commandeer a mobile drilling rig and declare themselves a sovereign body,” a “rig nation” in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Conceived as a social utopia, “pacifist, politically neutral, **and** green,” the crew of the *Kapital* discover that Moksha Station is more a fascist police state than Beck’s imagined community. The Director claims that it is a place of peace, “**open to all**,” but then attempts to conscript the *Kapital* and its crew; as Mag wryly notes, “what it **feels** like is a crappy, industrial port town before the crash, except that it’s **not**. It’s some utopian fantasy on top of six miles of ocean with a shitload of stolen hardware.” Moksha Station is no culture of responsibility; it harbors not refugees but a nuclear submarine. Clearly, nation building in the new post-crash world is tainted with the imperialist overtones of nation building from the past, which Wood stages in the Director’s rhetorical response, “What is a **utopia** without a guarantee it **stays** that way?” The *Kapital* ultimately escapes this failed experiment in world risk society governance, but the storyline does not. We are visually reminded of the potential proliferation of these kinds of repressive risk responses—a white page on which the graphic outlines of yet another embryonic rig nation appear is the icon signaling major storyline breaks.

This use of image repetition also supports Wood’s narrative in another way. It is notable that Wood never uses the phrase “global warming” to either identify or to connect the series of environmental and financial crises that comprise what his storyline refers to simply as the crash—instead, he lets closure, the “phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*,” do that work (McCloud 63, italics original). We make the connection that the catastrophic events periodically interrupting *The Massive*’s narrative must surely be related because of their repetitive rupturing of the narrative. Most

prevalent in the issues collected as *Black Pacific*, these three-panel pages typically conflate natural and economic disaster, often including images of either animals or indigenous persons to suggest that the scope of this catastrophic fallout reaches far beyond its immediate perpetrators. Wood and his artists also use closure “to produce *suspense* or to *challenge audiences*” (McCloud 63, italics original). Each section of *Black Pacific* comes to a close with a double page spread, the left page on which the images and narrative come to a close, and the right page that contains only a grayscale sketch of the *Kapital* on an otherwise empty white background. The tiny ship is positioned in the lower left corner, angled slightly downward and to the right; it appears to be moving, about to sail beyond the page’s borders and into empty space. Closure invites us to supply the sense of linear progress that the narrative’s random iteration seems to lack, to assume that this small ship is moving purposefully somewhere, to make those connections across the panels and pages. Yet at the same time, *The Massive* also resists our efforts to supply those links that would suture over the gaps in the mesh: that small ship always seems frozen, becalmed in the same place, and it is difficult for us to find a pattern in decimal degrees and in the seemingly random events that are sometimes environmental, sometimes financial.

“Global risk,” Beck asserts, “has the power to confuse the mechanisms of organized irresponsibility and even to open them up for political action” (*World at Risk* 59). In *The Massive*, the fictional crew of the *Kapital* engages in no political action; their encounters with strange strangers are usually precipitated by the need for resources, for essentials like food and fuel. The series itself is unfinished; *Subcontinental* ends on an ambivalent note. A spectral Israel staggers into an Arctic whiteout and attempts suicide,

which Mary prevents. “It doesn’t end here,” she tells him, and although he tries to achieve some kind of closure by telling her his whole story, she, like the narrative, refuses his gesture. “It doesn’t matter now,” we are told and we find ourselves at another impasse, a white page with the outline of an oilrig platform that punctuates the gaps in the mesh that is *Subcontinental*. There is also, for me, something notably absent from *The Massive*, a text littered with the detritus of a world in which the agential power of objects continues to manifest itself in multiple locations throughout a truly global imaginary. Concerned by OOO’s emphasis on the “apartness of objects,” Jane Bennett claims “the frame of subjects and objects is unfriendly to the intensified ecological awareness that we need if we are to respond intelligently to signs of the breakdown of the earth’s carrying capacity for human life” (“Systems and Things” 225, 231). Bennett, like many other new materialists (Braidotti among them), is concerned with how “the turn to things in contemporary theory...might help us to live more sustainably, with less violence toward a variety of bodies,” bodies that include the animate nonhuman (“Systems and Things” 232). In the surging crowd of man-made objects and massive hyperobjects that populate *The Massive*’s claustrophobic narrative space, only one *Subcontinental* episode, “Polaris: ‘Megalodon’,” gestures beyond human survival concerns towards the environmental damage to marine ecosystems that was arguably Ninth Wave’s mission. It imagines an unprecedented accumulation of Great White sharks not in some exotic waters, but just off the coast of California. The narrative records the impact of human-caused noise pollution on a marine species that is a model of evolutionary adaptation and survival; the accompanying illustration juxtaposes the massive mythical Megalodon against Mary’s almost insignificant body. The message is clear: in the Anthropocene, size doesn’t

matter...human-caused damage seriously threatens the survival of multiple natural, social, and economic systems. I hope that this episode signals that Wood and company will begin to demonstrate a greater ecological awareness in the forthcoming issues of this promising series. Until then, ecocritically, “*The Massive* refuses to be lost...Or be found” (*Subcontinental*).

Something Darker: Practicing Dissensus in *Dark Rain*

We took weather to be real. But in an age of global warming we see it as an accident, a simulation of something darker, more withdrawn—climate.
(Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* 102)

To illustrate more specifically what he calls the emerging “cosmopolitan moment” of world risk society, Ulrich Beck turns to a discussion of a real world local catastrophe—the same “horrifying act of nature” that provides both foreground and background for Mat Johnson’s graphic novel, *Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story (World at Risk 57)*. In *World at Risk*, Beck identifies six “conceptual components” that subtend this cosmopolitan moment, among them “enforced enlightenment, communication across all divides and boundaries, the political power of catharsis, enforced cosmopolitanism, risks as a wake-up call in the face of the failure of governments, and the possibility of alternative forms of governance” (55-56). August 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, while not an exemplar of every aspect of this cosmopolitan moment, certainly made visible human fragility in the face of climatic agency, as well as the insufficiency of state and national resources to respond to that agency. Communication issues were a frequent theme of the national and international media coverage that also endowed Katrina with what Beck describes as “an involuntary and unintended *enlightening function*,” showing the world “the voices and images of the repressed *other* America, the racist face of poverty in the

sole remaining superpower” (*World at Risk* 57). Despite his earlier claims that, viewed objectively, modernization risks like global warming affect rich and poor alike, Beck’s emphatic position here—that “*the risk of catastrophe haunts the poor*”—reflects more clearly Rob Nixon’s flat statement that “discrimination predates disaster” (*World at Risk* 58; *Slow Violence* 59). Nixon’s concerns for environmental justice, and his plea that the insights of postcolonial studies not be submerged in the current wave of “the more ambitious, more contemporary-sounding global studies,” emphasize that representation of the local effects of globally nonlocal hyperobjects deserves ecocritical consideration (*Slow Violence* 38). Nixon’s Rancièrian assertion that “by laying claim to the mobile rhetoric of environmental justice, the dispossessed may enhance their prospects of becoming visible, audible agents of globalization from below” reiterates representation’s capacity for bringing ecological awareness back to the surface (*Slow Violence* 37). Mat Johnson’s *Dark Rain* attempts to resuscitate the story of Katrina’s impact on the Crescent City, graphically rendered in a murky bluish-gray palette that is neither black nor white but somewhere in the middle, in order to illustrate a viscous hybrid ethics permeating that visibly imperfect storm.

“Not so long ago,” Naomi Klein suggests, “disasters were periods of social leveling, rare moments when atomized communities put divisions aside and pulled together” (522). Not so today, she argues, in *The Shock Doctrine*, her extensively researched exploration of neoliberal capitalism’s exploitation of catastrophic events. Instead, “increasingly disasters are the opposite: they provide windows into a cruel and ruthlessly divided future in which money and race buy survival,” a conflation of discrimination and disaster that she locates specifically in Katrina’s impact on New

Orleans (522). Despite Morton's hope that "the effect of the climate disruption crisis is not upgraded capitalism but a long hard look at why we're alive and what we want to do about it, together," OOO's rather resolutely anti process and quite literally object-oriented focus does not serve me well here (*The Ecological Thought* 102). Instead, I want to draw on new materialism's emphasis on process and relationships, particularly its engagement with multiple and diverse assemblages, to inform a material ecocritical reading of *Dark Rain: A New Orleans Story*.

The first page of Johnson's narrative and Simon Gane's atmospheric artwork illustrates the confluence of race, class, global capital, and local circumstance that will flow across this tale of two cities that are really one and the same. It is 2003, and we are quickly introduced to our unlikely protagonists, Dabny Arceneaux and Emmit Jack. Gane's breakdown puts the two protagonists on equal, if not identical, footing: the upper three panels show us Dabny in Houston, an African American customs officer with child support problems and a tempting offer to make a fast buck; the lower three depict Emmit in New Orleans, a Cajun assistant bank clerk with a thirty minute lunch break and access to the bank's safety deposit boxes. Dabny, a decorated military veteran, and Emmit, a chronically disenfranchised New Orleans native, end up in prison—Dabny for accepting a bribe, Emmit for alleged theft of property. Gane's careful attention to panel size equivalence and minimal guttering combine with Johnson's balanced use of narrative boxes and speech bubbles to give Dabny and Emmit parallel tracks to a shared present—they wind up roommates at a Texas halfway house two years later, embarking on what the justice system optimistically describes as a "**second chance**." Neither one can find work or borrow the resources necessary to turn his life around, and just as Emmit

grumbles, “if this is a second chance, it ain’t a very **good** one,” Hurricane Katrina is forming in the Gulf. “Hurricanes don’t follow any rules. Just like everything else that can hurt you in life,” Dabny muses. “You never know if it’s come for you ‘til it lands.”

In her thoughtful article, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,” Nancy Tuana bends a new materialist ecocritical perspective around the events of August 2005. She notes “the urgency of embracing an ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural*” in order to “better understand the rich interactions between beings through which subjects are constituted out of relationality” (188). “Viscous porosity,” her metaphor for what she elsewhere defines as “an interactionist attention to the processes of becoming” that emphasizes the “*emergent interplay*” (think Karen Barad’s intra-action) between biological and social processes and out of which things (think Latour’s actants) are precipitated (188-190). “*Viscosity*,” she goes on to reiterate, “is neither fluid nor solid, but intermediate between them...[it] retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form,” while “the *porosity* of interactions helps to undermine the notion” that there is something natural and unbreachable about some kinds of social boundaries (193-194). To me, Tuana describes something more vividly affective than the viscous materiality that Morton attributes to hyperobjects; the ontological ethics of dwelling in and with the risks that haunt our material world have a viscous porosity that overflows the higher ground we sometimes believe we occupy. In *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, Michael Dyson considers how the narrative that accompanied much of the national media coverage of Katrina’s aftermath performed precisely the kinds of aesthetic partitioning that Rancière is critically attentive to. Referring to Associated Press photos widely distributed in national

and international papers, Dyson notes that “the captions say it all: the young black man *loots* his groceries, the white youth *find* theirs...the identical character of their experience is shattered by the language, which casts their actions in contrasting lights” (164-165). What *Dark Rain* actively stages, I think, is what William Connolly has elsewhere described as “the shape and quality of desire in its individual and institutional manifestations” (*World of Becoming* 121). In *Dark Rain*, everybody wants something and everybody needs something...what emerges out of the interplay between them is the story that follows.

Dabny wants a small business loan; Emmitt wants his own bank, “for the people. Micro-lending.” Sarah, a pregnant single resident of the Lower Ninth Ward does not “have enough money to buy a bus ticket” out of the hurricane’s path “even if I **wanted to.**” Emmitt’s former employer, the African American manager of the Ninth Ward Banque de Congo, wants to safeguard his clients’ assets and his own interests; Colonel Driggs, Dabny’s former military commander and current head of the privately owned Dark Rain Security, wants to seize the “opportunity” that deployment to Katrina’s state of emergency provides for “compensation.” Each of these characters is entangled in the viscosity of this hyperobject and in the muddy ethical waters that flood its normative levees. Gane’s nuanced illustrations and Johnson’s detailed characterization render the cast of *Dark Rain* as believable types, not reductive stereotypes; the intention here is to suggest a multiplicity of perspectives that unwork some of the erasure that the AP captions produced. Unlike *The Massive*, *Dark Rain* relies far more on dialogue to convey its largely local storyline. There are no one-dimensional protagonists in this story, and each serves to contradict some of the classist and racist generalizations that circulated in

American discourse during the events that followed Katrina. Dabny is an articulate Iraq war veteran whose marriage failed because of his deployment overseas; his child support payments fell into arrears because no jobs awaited our “war heroes” on their return—Johnson ironically emphasizes that Dabny’s military service is “honored” by the lightness of his sentencing and by the “awarding” of his parole. Emmitt’s character and motives are less neatly drawn; his version of his conviction veers from unconvincingly proclaiming his innocence—Emmitt is the prototypical crimeless victim—to assuring Dabny that liberating the contents of long-forgotten safety deposit boxes would amount to “a **victimless** crime.” Emmitt is the embodiment of social Darwinism’s opportunistic underdog in this ambivalent ecology. “Most folks, they only get a few opportunities in life. But guys like us get **one**. I know when my one chance comes knocking, that I’m gonna **answer**.” Emmitt claims his only regret is *not* taking from the rich to give to the poor (himself included). Here, Johnson’s narrative echoes Dyson’s claims regarding the reported looting that took place during the days following the levee failures. “Desperate people do in desperation what capitalist and political and cultural looters do daily—steal and give little thought to its moral consequences” (168). Emmitt voices white-collar crime’s most frequent justification. “They deserved it,” he insists, claiming the bank’s management has always allowed unsavory and potentially criminal clients to hide their ill-gotten gains in the bank’s vaults—and that management’s off-book borrowing motivated his arrest just before he was able to dip into the till himself.

The Banque de Congo’s manager, M. Ardoin, whose family may indeed have treated their clients’ assets as their own private venture capital fund, is an equally paradoxical figure. He dismissively refuses what little assistance was offered to those

residents who were trapped by rising floodwaters after the levees failed. “The **Superdome**? Of course not. Mother, did you raise me to be a welfare cow, sucking on the government teat? I don’t rely on the **State**...” In the next panel, Johnson again demonstrates how the aesthetic distribution of the sensible can cut both ways, staging neoliberal dismissal of big government on one hand while invoking necessary big government in the next. Informed that the levees have broken, Ardoin visibly changes his tune, assuming that federal troops and aid will be shortly dispersed to protect taxpayers’ property rights (even though the narrative repeatedly suggests that no taxes have ever been paid on the hidden assets in Banque de Congo’s vault). Another African American character, Flash, makes his way to the New Orleans Convention Center, joining Emmet and the nearly 100,000 people who fled to the Superdome and the Convention Center pending their unconscionably delayed evacuation (Dyson 66). Johnson and Gane combine narrative development and pictorial representation of iconic scenes (familiar from news coverage of the disaster) to make visible and audible the inhumanity and incomprehensibility of enforced cosmopolitanism. Money has no currency in the anxious present of this community of fate; the most valuable commodity at the Convention Center on August 31, 2005, is water. Flash and Emmet eye a group of young black men, whispering in the shadows in their baggy athletic shorts, with that mixture of contempt and distrust that is often directed at society’s Others. “Hood rats. **Animals**. Like they just got out of their cages,” Emmet sneers. “I’m not trying to be a **racist** or anything, but some folks just ain’t civilized.” Flash concurs, demonstrating that while risk can interpellate a community, it can also recall the exclusive partitioning off of some from others, whether on the basis of race or class. Just outside his line of sight, but horizontally within his

panel and our perspective, one of the young men approaches. “Can I **help** you?” Gane places this exchange at the bottom of the page, so we are forced to pause here before we turn to see what happens next. The young man wears a baseball cap turned backwards over the ubiquitous do-rag that identifies urban Southern youth—and not in a good way. His muscular frame is clearly visible under his sleeveless tank top, in pointed contrast to Emmitt’s unkempt lankiness or Flash’s manifestly overweight paunch and dapper button-down safari shirt. His question reads like a confrontation: conventionally, such a demand translates into “What do you want,” and the expectation is that what you may receive will not be what you anticipated (and again, not in a good way.) Closure’s viscous action actively resists any interpretation other than the obvious: nothing good can come of this.

Yet surprisingly, when we turn the page we find that astonishingly, something can. What these young men are offering really *is* help, material, measurable help in the form of “water, bottles of soda, a bunch of stuff” intended to ameliorate the shared misery of their circumstances. William Connolly devotes a considerable portion of 2011’s *A World of Becoming* to considering how, in this risky time of environmental and economic asymmetry, we can “negotiate life, without hubris or existential resentment, in a world that is neither providential nor susceptible to consummate mastery” (98). Replacing what he deplores as the negative “existential resentment” that he sees in contemporary “practices of capitalist greed...authoritarian strategies, sexual narrowness, and military aggression” (and to which I would add the increasingly bellicose conversations about first and second amendment rights percolating through our national discourse) with something he calls “existential affirmation,” Connolly calls for an intimate and immanent confrontation with “patterns of consumption in the face of climate change” along with a

necessary change of orientation, “the cultural distribution of existential orientations to the future” (*World of Becoming* 66, 98-99). This turn to the future unworks the past without undoing it: Connolly argues that “the inheritance of fate can also be worked upon so that you modify not it but the effect it has on your future actions” (*World of Becoming* 113). He supplants the question of “can I help you” with something more along the lines of “what can I become?” “To embrace without deep resentment a world of becoming is to work ‘to become who you are,’ so that the word ‘becoming’ now modifies ‘are’ more than the other way around” (Connolly, *World of Becoming* 114). In *Dark Rain*, I would argue, Johnson tries to imagine what *becoming* after Katrina might look like.

Sarah may not be barefoot, but she is pregnant and at the mercy of both her past and present circumstances. She is also realistic, and clearly concerned with finding a positive solution to her chronic poverty. To Dabny’s suggestion that she go to a shelter, she retorts, “Eventually, you got to **leave**. And you got to have money to eat, get a **place**. How do you get a job when you’re living in a shelter? How do you get there?” Dabny too is overtly concerned with taking responsibility for his bad choices while opening up some kind of space for alternative ones in the future. “I’m not good at **risks**. I tried to break the rules **one** time, look where that got me. Never **have** known when to double down and when to fold,” he admits, but like Sarah, he recognizes that for either of them to escape the material-semiotic slow violence of racial discrimination and environmental neglect that characterizes this cosmopolitan moment, “we have to get the hell out of here.” Nancy Tuana uses Donna Haraway’s concept of the material-semiotic to point to how “material agency in its heterogeneous forms, including irreducibly diverse forms of distinctively human agency, interact in complex ways” (196). In New Orleans, Katrina was

“emblematic of the viscous porosity between humans and our environment, between social practices and natural phenomena,” a complex systemic interaction that culminated in material levees that failed to protect the environmentally, economically, and socially disadvantaged lower wards (Tuana 192). The storm’s manifest materiality resonated with poverty and racism’s culturally constructed social environments, meaning that one system perturbed or irritated the other (Bryant, *Democracy of Objects* 222).³ Tuana argues that “Katrina interacted with poverty in relatively predictable ways,” like the inability of the poor to evacuate the city, their lack of financial resources both before and especially after the catastrophic event, and the consequent limiting of their future options so clearly illustrated in *Dark Rain* (205). There is however, I would interject, both a double bind and a double blindness at work here that Johnson and Gane make more visible than does Tuana’s thoughtful analysis. Thinking strictly from an OOO perspective, Levi Bryant argues that “individuals or psychic systems” possess a viscous internal consistency, a “regime of attraction” that can seriously “limit or impede their capacity for action” (*Democracy of Objects* 221). A subject trapped in a low-paying job that he cannot quit because he cannot survive without it, even while it keeps him mired at a subsistence level he desperately wants to escape, is the example he suggests (and which is embodied in so many of Johnson’s characters). Bryant relates this to “how people are dragging their feet with respect to responding to the growing environmental crisis,” noting

Here we are trapped between an awful knowledge that the environment is changing in ways that might very well affect human existence in a radical way and a social structure that is organized in such a way that nearly everything required for mere existence carries a significant carbon footprint. (*Democracy of Objects* 221)

Environmental damage and social discrimination irritate and perturb one another, but as Bryant makes clear, “while substances can enter into exo-relations with other substances, they only do so *on their own terms* and with respect to their own organization” (*Democracy of Objects* 147). In post-Katrina New Orleans and in the pages of *Dark Rain*, we see system failures that are largely blind to those other systems that trouble their internal waters. Connolly’s suggestion, that “one key response to the human predicament becomes the nobility to make reflective wagers when the future is uncertain,” surely recalls the sort of double down that Dabny hesitates over in his own moment of becoming (*World of Becoming* 112). Part of that wager, for Connolly, centers on the question of “how to fashion a positive frugality of material desire,” a question that haunts the various protagonists of *Dark Rain* (*World of Becoming* 121). In almost every case, these diverse individuals echo neoliberal strategist Milton Friedman’s observation “in his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed [that Katrina was] ‘also an opportunity’”(qtd. in Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* 518). Beck notes that risks are not just threats; they “are also *market opportunities*,” and Klein’s abiding concern is to parse through “disaster capitalism,” neoliberalism’s “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (6). Driggs and Emmit plainly see Katrina’s devastation as an opportunity to be exploited. Driggs plans to use his position as a private security contractor as a cover for robbing the Banque de Congo—the fictional “Dark Rain Security” is a thinly veiled allusion to the infamous Blackwater Security team “hired to protect FEMA employees from looters” (Klein 519). Johnson and Gane include an episode in which Driggs seizes control of a drugstore, ostensibly to secure it against looters but actually to withhold badly needed medical

supplies from injured local residents in order to take care of his own people—because for Driggs, charity begins and ends at home. Michael Dyson’s insight that “what is needed are structures of justice that perpetuate the goodwill intended in charity,” not short-lived handouts that fail to address deeper structural inequities (203), counters Emmitt’s imagined identity as the Ninth Ward’s Robin Hood. “I could be like a **savior**,” he argues, defending his misguided vision of redistributing the bank’s assets that he can only access by theft. “It’s the **only** way,” he insists to Dabny, “I tried changing things the right way...if you get their money, that’s how you really hurt them.” It is significant that Driggs and Emmitt die in their explosive attempt to rob the Banque de Congo, crushed by the collapse of the financial edifice that symbolizes the limits of their imagined identities.

Only Dabny seems to want to embody something like Connolly’s affirmative becoming that turns toward the future in a positive way. “We can do the wrong thing. But at least we can try and do it for the right reasons.” He escapes with his life and a bag full of confederate money, “the antique money of a failed government,” which he sells to a collector for \$17,000, enough to make a down payment on a boat—a subtle reminder that much of New Orleans was built on the archetypal edifice of racial discrimination, slavery, and its clearly counterfeit profits. The novel ends on a positive note, but not, I think, with the new beginning or alternative future that either Connolly or Beck envision in the world of becoming that world risk society could usher in. In *Risk Society*, first published in 1986, Beck predicted that “traditional and institutional forms of coping with fear and insecurity,” like “the family, marriage, sex roles, and class consciousness” would “lose meaning” in the face of global risk, and that alternative social and political forms would emerge as a result (76). In 2007’s *World at Risk*, he specifically notes that part of global

risk's wake-up call in the wake of government failures is the "refutation of the neoliberal conception of the minimal state" (63). Both Klein and Dyson document the abysmal failures of local, state, and federal responses to Katrina's devastation, which they attribute to program cuts, poor communications, and inadequate staffing resulting from several years of increasing privatization and reduced government. Yet *Dark Rain's* concluding panels present us with the triumph of the nuclear family (albeit a nontraditional family composed of Dabny, his daughter from his first marriage, Sarah and her baby) and of equal access to the market. Dabny's final words celebrate the mythological power of the one thing neoliberalism offers to bind us all: free-market capitalism. "This boat is **mine** from now on," he asserts from the helm. "I can salvage on this, for now. Try to get some charter jobs as time goes by. Some fishing. Diversify."

Naomi Klein quotes Adolph Reed Jr., a political scientist and native of New Orleans, as arguing that Katrina's ravages "exposed the consequences of neoliberalism's lies and mystifications, in a single locale and all at once," but I fear that is not illustrated here (qtd. in Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* 516). *Dark Rain* closes with Dabny and company sailing blissfully off into the sunset on the newly christened "Second Chance" atop a pristine sea untouched by the environmental devastation that continues to haunt the Gulf Coast. "Start again," are his final words; ecocritically, while I am deeply sympathetic to Johnson and Gane's socially imaginative staging of the material-semiotic affects of racial and class discrimination, "End again" would be mine.⁴ "Denial is a powerful force," Tuana writes, and her plea for an interactionist approach critically notes its power to "speak of the biological aspects of phenomena without importing the mistaken notion that this biological component exists somehow independent of, or prior to, cultures and

environments” (209-210). I wish that Johnson and Gane had managed to overcome that kind of systemic blindness that tends to obtain even between systems that constantly intra-act with each other. I want to see graphic interactionism at work in an image+text that represents the multiple perspectives of its affective aspects.

Coda: Looking Ahead, or I Need a Superhero

Just at the point when the battle between Swamp Thing and Jason Woodrue’s Floronic Man in Alan Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing* reaches its crisis, Moore interrupts his storyline for a word from the Justice League, that ever-shifting community of superheroes from the DC Comics universe: “There is a house above the world,” a narrative voice intones, “where the over-people gather” (Moore, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* 82). Superman, Firestorm (the Nuclear Man), Wonder Woman, the Flash and assorted other caped crusaders look down in dismay as they realize that while “it looks like he’s controlling the world’s **vegetation**,” this is not your garden variety of threat. “No! That we could **handle**...But the world’s vegetation is controlling **him!**” (Moore, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* 84). The Superheroes find themselves incapacitated by this unprecedented (“Our planet has declared **war** on us”) and unanticipated (“We were watching out for New York, for Metropolis, for Atlantis...But who was watching out for **Lacroix, Louisiana?**) problem—this “*super wicked problem*, a problem for which time is running out” (Moore, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* 84; Morton *Hyperobjects* 135, italics original). Tim Morton argues that “the time of hyperobjects is a time of *hypocrisy*, *weakness*, and *lameness*,” and it would seem that even Superheroes are not exempt—flat ontology, it seems, has penetrated even the other world of the over-people (*Hyperobjects* 148, italics original). Hypocrisy refers to the fact that like the Superheroes, we never see

the hyperobject coming—we can only see bits and pieces of its local manifestation, but they never simply add up to the whole of which they are sensual parts. In the face of hyperobjects’ sheer massiveness and withdrawn nonlocality, even superpersons must acknowledge their own weakness. As for lameness, all our purposiveness, our sense of identity and mission, simply drains away—powerlessness is part of that viscosity from which none of us are exempt (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 153-157). In the time of hyperobjects, superheroes simply will not cut it anymore; “Nobody was ever going to come from the sky to save us,” Grant Morrison accurately predicts. “No Justice League; Just Us League” (*Supergods* 397). The Just Us League captures the idea that we are all in this together; no one and no thing escapes the time of the hyperobject. “Art in the Age of Asymmetry,” Morton argues, “must thus be a *tuning* to the object,” consciously listening to what things have to tell us, recalibrating the concepts of subject and object and recomposing what those *things* might look and sound like (*Hyperobjects* 174, italics original). “Hyperobjects profoundly change how we think about any object,” changes that I believe are already rippling through contemporary comics and graphic novels. If ecocriticism is to be attuned to these new texts, it too needs to change its ways of *seeing*, its ways of *drawing* distinctions, *drawing on* hyperobjects in order to *draw from* them (Morton *Hyperobjects* 201).

My own wish for ecocriticism is something like what I would call, borrowing explicitly from Bruno Latour, *compositionist ecocriticism*. In “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’,” Latour proposes what he labels *compositionism*, which he illustrates by way of a series of comparisons (“Compositionist Manifesto” 474). Broadly then, what Latour has in mind is a kind of thoughtful and creative bricolage, a

constructive assembling that begins with the bits and pieces on hand and then puts them together “while retaining their heterogeneity” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 473). His instincts here seem to me to be fully consistent with his arguments about hybridity, which I discussed in my Introduction. The component parts of a hybrid also retain their differences; it is important to resist the inclination to analyze either part solely in terms of the other; instead, composition and ecocriticism must begin in the middle...as Latour says here, “it is all about immanence” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 475). For my purposes, then, ecocriticism would take up the bits of postcolonial theory, economic and critical race theory, new materialism, and OOO, and reassemble them with the ready-to-hand pieces of popular culture and more traditional environmental texts—sort of a carpentry of texts, if you will (an ecocritical version of Graham Harman’s “carpentry of things”), which is what I have tried to perform here (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 254). We need not jettison the insights that have helped ecocriticism evolve to this point; instead, we should be realistic about the kinds of blindness that self-organizing systems are heirs to. William Connolly defines self-organization as “a process by which, say, a simple organism restlessly *seeks* a new resting point upon encountering a shock or disturbance. Such activity may periodically help to bring something new into the world” (*The Fragility of Things* 8).⁵ Objects and systems, as we have seen, tend to translate one another in their own terms and for their own purposes, often to their detriment (and to ours). Latour is sensitive to this tendency, I think, and his assertion that “for a compositionist, nothing is beyond dispute” registers the need for intellectual disturbance even if ultimately, “closure has to be achieved...achieved only by the slow process of composition and compromise” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 478).

Out of that slow process, however, it is possible for something new to arrive, and that, I would argue, is what a compositionist ecocriticism can open itself to by combining political, cultural, environmental, and economic theory with a far more open assortment of textual resources. Latour is much taken with the notion not of progress but of the “*prospect*: the shape of things to come,” and his manifesto turns to a consideration of what he describes as a kind of outmoded Modern hero (“Compositionist Manifesto” 486). “The ecological crisis is nothing but the sudden *turning around* of someone who had actually *never before* looked into the future, so busy was He extricating Himself from a horrible past,” a description that draws on Beck’s distinction between those risks that characterized early modernity from those modernization risks that now cast their long shadows in the time of hyperobjects (“Compositionist Manifesto” 486). This tragic hero is not headed back to the future; he is backing into the future, so he never sees it coming. What Latour wants—and what ecocriticism should also look for, and what the graphic novel needs—is a new hero: a hero who can “finally *look ahead*” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 487), one suffused with “a positive frugality of material desire” (Connolly, *World of Becoming* 121) and a “thirst for the Common World” (Latour, “Compositionist Manifesto” 488).

Our hero need not meet Judge Learned Hand’s 1952 ruling on the definition of a Superhero: our hero need not be heroic, possessed of superpowers, a codename, an iconic costume or a dual identity (Coogan 77). In the Age of Asymmetry, “weakness ends the search for ultimate men and supermen”; hyperobjects put the “super” in “superhero” under erasure (~~super~~hero) (Morton, “Ecologocentrism” 77).⁶ Our hero also cannot be Latour’s tragic hero, “fleeing His past so fiercely that He cannot realize—except too

late—that it is precisely His flight that has created the destruction He was trying to avoid in the first place” (“Compositionist Manifesto” 486). Denying his past will not change our hero’s future, crowded with objects and hyperobjects, nor will it be possible for us “to demonstrate that man is equal or superior to his conflict” (Meeker 157). In 1972, Joseph Meeker delightfully compared the tragic view of life with the comic view, coming to the conclusion that an ecological view of life must also be a comic one (168). “Comedy demonstrates that man is durable even though he may be weak, stupid and undignified,” he argues, and “as the tragic hero suffers or dies for his ideals, the comic hero survives without them” (158). “Modest and unheroic,” the comic hero’s “victories are all small, but he lives in a world where only small victories are possible” (168, 159). Here I would suggest that while Callum Israel’s tragic turn in *The Massive* renders him ineligible for the new hero, Mary’s far more adaptable durability suggests that her role deserves greater attention.

Meeker’s analysis reflects the common prejudices and ecological beliefs of his time—he presumes a male, human hero, and his argument is predicated on a belief in the kind of steady state ecological holism that has since been discarded. But I am still drawn to his insights because I want to think about the roles that heroes have played in our environmental imagination thus far and to consider how that role might be seen and drawn in the comics to come. “We engage life in the middle of things,” Connolly writes, and he tries to illustrate the role that an affirmative micropolitics of the self might play in his affirmative world of becoming (*Fragility of Things* 192). “A role is neither reducible entirely to the individuals who inhabit it nor thoroughly assimilable to the larger assemblages that help to share and manage it,” he posits, and I am immediately struck

with how this resonates with the mutable iterations of Swamp Thing and Black Orchid (*World of Becoming* 143-144). Peter Coogan argues that “the characteristics of mission, powers, and identity are central” to the superhero definition Learned Hand adjudicated and which depends on a certain unambiguity of thought to sustain: a superhero has *a* mission, to which he dedicates himself and from which he never swerves (77). Both Swamp Thing and Black Orchid demonstrate a wide range of perspectives and their identities are as adaptive as the trans-corporeal vegetable matter entangled with their human DNA. Connolly’s description not only refuses to contain the notion of role, he expands its range; a role is “the site of strategic ambiguity, periodically susceptible for that reason to creative political deployment” (*World of Becoming* 144). Role play has political potential; it allows actants to perform their own distribution of the sensible, to make themselves audible and visible in ways that recall Rancière’s examples of workers made suddenly visible because they performed in unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary ways, celebrated in 1981’s *La nuit des prolétaires* (most recently published in English as *Proletarian Nights*). Both the Elephantmen in *Wounded Animals* and the engineered biorgs of *We3* act out in ways that draw them into visibility, even if only fleetingly. Connolly notes that social and cultural expectations about appropriate and available roles “tend to express and support the priorities of an established regime,” enacting that sort of aesthetic erasure or disappearance that is at the heart of Rancière’s arguments (*Fragility of Things* 184). “Role experimentation,” Connolly suggests, “can disrupt and redirect the flow of authority, habit, institutional regularity, and future projection. It can also encourage others to look more closely at their own performances in this or that domain” (*Fragility of Things* 185). Dabny Arceneaux’s reinvention of himself as an entrepreneur

may not ultimately make a difference in a world where consumerist desire underwrites much of the environmental crisis we face today, but it at least stages an interruption in habitual performances and institutional interpellations—the staging of economic equality, even for a moment, does help to make the slow violence of poverty and racial discrimination visible, and to encourage us to look again at our prejudices and at our own habitual (and unexamined) actions. The iconic characters of comics and graphic novels invite readers to engage in acts of environmental and performative imagination; “minor moments,” Connolly admits, “but,” as he goes on to insist, “an accumulation of minor moments can jostle settled habits of perception” (*Fragility of Things* 186). For Ronald Lithgow, erstwhile couch potato and environmental Walter Mitty, finding himself in *Concrete*’s shoes meant overcoming the resentment that comes with discovering yourself a stone among stones, an object inside an object. Alternatively, *Concrete*’s becoming accomplishes, for me, more than any other protagonist—animal, vegetable, (hu)man or mineral—we have encountered this far. Truly dwelling in the middle of things, at the confluence of image and text, *Concrete* epitomizes that minor moment ecocriticism must be tuned to. “We inhabit an entangled world,” Connolly contemplates, “in which the best hope is to extend and broaden our identities, interests, and ethos of interconnectedness as we multiply the sites of political action” (*Fragility of Things* 193-194). A compositionist ecocriticism does not merely excavate those entangled sites; it builds on them...and that matters.

Notes

¹ My use of “apprehend” here intentionally echoes Rob Nixon’s use of the term. Nixon describes it as “a crossover term that draws together the domains of perception, emotion, and action,” a particularly valuable concept for use in my arguments. See his Introduction to *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p. 14.

² The quotes here are from the inside front cover of the first issue of this comic book series, *The Massive #1: Landfall* “Kamchatka,” first released in June 2012. Most of my references will come from the collected square-bound volumes of *The Massive*, *Black Pacific* (reprints *The Massive #1 - #6*) and more recently, *Subcontinental* (reprints *The Massive #7 - #12*), published in March and December 2013. Neither the original comic issues or the graphic collections are paginated; as a result, I will indicate sources parenthetically with volume names or issue numbers for clarity.

³ For a compelling argument that also considers the material-semiotic valence of race, see Michael Hames-Garcia’s thoughtful article, “How Real is Race,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, pp. 308-339. Hames-Garcia’s suggestion that “what is needed now is creative experimentation with racial identities, rather than their abandonment,” resonates strongly with William Connolly’s consideration of what might be called the role of role experimentation, which I address in the concluding section of this chapter (308).

⁴ This is not Mat Johnson’s first graphic novel that deals with the material-semiotic of raced bodies and racism in America. His 2006 *Incognegro*, art by Warren Pleece, is a remarkable text that demands a close reading on its own.

⁵ Connolly specifically attends to how self-organizing systems (he includes “hurricanes, organisms, the Earth’s biosphere, species evolution, and economic markets” in this description), in constant interaction with other self-organizing systems operating at variable scales, speeds and intensities have the potential to “support, amplify, or destabilize one another.” His insights about the destabilizing effects of the interaction between neoliberal capitalism and global climate change have critical implications for contemporary ecocritical analysis, but they extend far beyond the scope of this conclusion. For now, those considerations must be left, “to be continued” in a later reading (*The Fragility of Things* 82, 25).

⁶ Morton, in the style of Heidegger and Derrida, puts the term “animism” under erasure in “Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals,” which I reference in Chapter 1. Here, I am simply making visible what his own words in *Hyperobjects* perform.

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