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## Afterword: swamp boy summer

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RUTH  
CLEMENS

*Afterword*

*(abstract)*



In this creative-critical afterword, the emancipatory potential of the transition zone of the swamp is considered through the author's experience as an autistic academic working at a Dutch university. In ecology, the swamp is a transition zone: a physical parameter in which the properties or the behaviour of something undergoes a radical change. A new ecosystem emerges, reaching symbiosis through murky processes and muddy materialities wherein to flourish and to decay become synonymous. The autistic academic is swamped, flourishing and decaying at the same time. Concurrently, the transitional zone of the swamp – the secret third thing that refuses modes of categorisation, instrumentalisation, and production – threatens ecological and neurological models of cognitive capitalism. The productive figuration of the swamp affords ways of being more attentive to potent human and more-than-human transition zones which refuse classification or instrumentalisation. In this way, swampy symbioses can help to collapse value systems of dominance which underscore colonialist expansion, patriarchal control, and capitalist forms of violence.

## “Swamp Boy Summer”

Lately you have been thinking and talking about ossification, petrification, and mineralisation. In particular, you are interested in how these processes are poetic in the ways they alchemise matter. Because of this, in summer 2023 you were approached by the editors of Soapbox to write the afterword for this *The Swamped* issue.



Right after you send an email saying yes, something uncanny starts to happen. You start noticing swamps everywhere. Your feeds are full of glittery green slime ASMR videos and pictures of frogs. Your favourite podcaster releases an hour-long episode about bog bodies. Your friend holds a themed birthday picnic, telling you the theme is “Swamp Boy Summer” to celebrate a year on testosterone. There must be something in the water. No matter. You just need to clear a few things off your plate before you can start writing.

Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Tue 27/06/2023 13:37

To: Soapbox Journal


Dear A,

Great to hear from you, and I'm delighted to be asked. I'd certainly like to write a creative-critical afterword. I'm just in the process of planning my summer work this week. What deadline did you have in mind for the first full draft?



## AFTERWORD

Best wishes,  
**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**  
Lecturer in Modern English Literature



Soapbox Journal Wed 28/06/2023 13:02  
To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Dear Ruth,  
That's wonderful to hear!

Really looking forward to reading it already. Deadline-wise we're fairly flexible, but would something like the end of July work for you?


Best, A



Clemens, R.A. (Ruth) Fri 30/06/2023 14:00  
To:Soapbox Journal

Dear A,  
Yes, end of July works.

Best wishes,  
**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**  
Lecturer in Modern English Literature



In ecology, a swamp is a transition zone. Being neither land nor water, it is a secret third thing. A transition zone denotes a physical parameter in which the properties or the behaviour of something undergoes a radical change. In this case, a new ecosystem emerges, reaching symbiosis through murky processes and muddy materialities

wherein to flourish and to decay become synonymous. As the biologist Lynn Margulis writes, “the human tendency to dichotomize – to divide things into either this or that – is very strong” [1]. This inclination has resulted in a conceptual hierarchy of life on Earth. Broadly speaking, we tend to think about all life on earth as either plant or animal. With the perceived dominance of one species over others – such through predation – positioning it as more advanced. For Margulis, this misses the simple fact that it is the so-called “lower” organisms which sustain life at large through the production of gases and recycling of waste. What if we viewed the swampy ability to sustain other forms of life as the most meaningful ecological relation, rather than the ability to dominate? This would reveal how life on Earth is a matter of mutually dependent diversity, an ecology of relation which is crucial to the wellbeing of humans [2]. Furthermore, this swampy symbiosis – in which the slime moulds inherit the Earth – also collapses value systems of dominance which underscore colonialist expansion, patriarchal control, and capitalist forms of violence.



Put simply, the transition zone of the swamp threatens the human tendency to dichotomise, to perform this epistemological cut. As a result, humans drain swamps. The draining of the swamp becomes a metaphor for homogenisation and control. Safe in the knowledge that there will be no radical change in property or behaviour, the primacy of man and the position of his many instruments is secured. Swamps

are unproductive – they cannot be used for building, farming, developing. Because of this, they have traditionally held very low monetary value. Globally, vast amounts of wetland have been drained to make way for less murky, indeterminate, and unproductive land uses (such as agricultural production).

This issue situates the conceptual figuration and material ecology of the swamp in plural particular, locational, and relational contexts. What is clear from these essays is a sense of how the swamp's plurality and instability make it a contested space. On the one hand, these qualities mean it threatens dominant modes of categorisation, which try to define, delimit, and control it. On the other, these qualities give it a capacious and emancipatory potential precisely in its ability to refuse to fit in, produce, or be contained. Molly Furey's critical analysis of peatland policy in Ireland reveals temporal shortcomings in forgetting that the bog is bound up with questions of memory and identity. The swamp is an archive that resists neat categorisation, and it also holds space as a hospitable environment for the displaced and marginalised. Moving from Ireland to Western Poland, Bogna Bochińska's essay examines the swamp as social and ecological site of movement, migration, and exchange. The way the swamp-terrain is represented and captured is also mired in contradictions. In Rianne Janssen's piece, the UNESCO policy, mediatization, and aestheticisation of the irrigated landscape of Battir, Palestine, has immediate consequences for Palestinian people's

resistance and political reality. Mixing film, walking, and writing, Lucas Rinzema's creative- critical piece considers the contradictions of the swamp through its submerged perspective of potential. The swamp is a temporally, ecologically, and spatially radical entity. Eva Garibaldi creatively attempts to chart the swamp in its unstable unchartableness, critically examining how stability is produced in map-making processes where stability does not in fact exist. In Simone Delaney's essay, reinhabiting the swamp becomes a mode of transcending categories to express a vision for Black Queer embodiment. The conceptual figuration of the swamp is an expression of body politics for Pat LeGates, who considers the psychic swamp created by forces of excess, achievement, and demand. Ultimately, the pieces in this issue illustrate what the swamp can do. Through the productive figuration of the swamp, they present ways of being more attentive to these potent human and more-than-human transition zones which refuse classification or instrumentalization.



Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Mon 14/08/2023 17:00

To: Soapbox Journal

Hi A,  
I hope you're doing well.

As you probably noticed, you haven't received my piece for the Swamp issue yet. Sorry about that! I had some holdups due to contract drama at Leiden and job precarity (a swamp in its own



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right...). As such, would I be able to send you my afterword in September?

I also wanted to ask if you could give me any more details about the content of the issue - I'd quite like my piece to be a kind of response to the other pieces, if possible.

Best wishes,  
**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**  
Lecturer in Modern English Literature




Soapbox Journal

Mon 14/08/2023 17:11

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Hi Ruth,  
Sorry to hear that - I hope all turned out okay in the end!



September is completely fine too; no worries at all. Will send you more info about the other pieces later this week!


Best, A

Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Wed 13/09/2023 16:37

To:Soapbox Journal

Hi A,  
Belatedly, many thanks for this!  
I'll send you my draft at the end of the month, if that's okay? Hope you're doing well



Best wishes,  
**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**  
Lecturer in Modern English Literature

Soapbox Journal

Wed 13/09/2023 19:29

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Thanks, that'd be great!

I'm good, hope your're well too! :)



You read the summaries of each piece that Anna sent you so that you can gather your thoughts and find a point of departure but it is like quicksand – each half-page excerpt consumes you. There is joy in this expansive territory: the swamp as guardian of memory and expression of displaced identities and as site of resistance and as psychic terrain and as submerged perspective and as unstable landscape and as Black fugitive territory... *AND... AND*. Once more, the impossibility of processing information; of distilling it into a clear and homogenous output that conforms to all of the expectations made of you.



You can feel yourself getting overstimulated, so you practice some regulation techniques. You end up scrolling on your phone. According to your Autism coach, this is dysfunctional. According to Murphy and Woodfolk, what is clinically defined as dysfunctional depends on a “cluster of normative *concepts, expectable, proportionate, appropriate, and normal*, which we suspect cannot be unpacked without making value judgments” (Murphy and Woodfolk 246). You scroll onto an image of a wild pig, eyes closed in sublime ecstasy, belly-up and floating in a pool of mud.

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The accompanying text reads THIS IS HOW YOUR EMAIL FINDS ME. A full hour has passed and you haven't written a word of the swamped piece. The demand sits, a knot in your stomach. You tentatively feel your way around it, getting to know it and learning to carry it with you alongside all the others. Sorry for the late reply. No worries.

Soapbox Journal

Tue 10/10/2023 17:50

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Dear Ruth,

I hope you're doing well! I just wanted to check in with regard to the afterword for *The Swamped*. On our current timeline, we're hoping to have all the contents edited and ready by Christmas, which includes some editing (though this will probably be minimal in the case of an afterword).

As such, it would be best for us to receive the first version by the end of this month - would that work for you?

Looking forward to catching up sometime!

All the best, A


Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Wed 11/10/2023 12:31

To:Soapbox Journal

Thanks for chasing me up! Teaching and deadlines have gotten a bit out of control... end of the month definitely works.

RUTH CLEMENS



This evening I'm going to be in Amsterdam, as it happens - I'm going to a Cookie Mueller book club/reading at post office, starting at 8pm, if you fancy it: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CxF0SKiNI-s/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>

Best wishes,  
**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**  
Lecturer in Modern English Literature


Soapbox Journal

Wed 11/10/2023 17:03

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Dear Ruth,  
That sounds like an amazing event!

Unfortunately I'm a bit under the weather today, but I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time there!



Best, A



You are curious about what happens when you Google “autism swamp.” The first couple of results are for a fund-raising event called STOMP the SWAMP for Autism. Google asks did you mean: autism stamp. You scroll down and the next result is an article from the New York Times. It is a digitised version of an article from the print archive of the newspaper, more than 25 – no, almost 30 – years old. This is only two years after the publication of the DSM- IV, which recognised criteria for autism beyond having a significant language impairment or intellectual disability.

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In 1996 there were fewer than 200 clinical studies on autism, compared to the thousands today. In 1996 you were five years old. As a punishment for being disruptive in class, you would have to copy out the dictionary during dinner time at school. A task you secretly enjoyed.

*Autism No Handicap, Boy Defies Swamp*

**T**he New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com> › 1996/08/17 › autism-no-han...

17 Aug 1996 — 10-year-old **autistic** boy survives four days lost and alone in snake- and alligator-infested **swamp** on Eglin Air Force Base in Florida; [...]

The article tells the story of Taylor Touchstone, who was rescued by a fisherman after four days lost in the swamp. You keep searching, and find a number of articles about Taylor's adventure. In another article, published in the Tampa Bay Times in 1997, Taylor's autism is portrayed as a mystical power. There is disbelief that the boy did not panic and instead simply floated for fourteen meandering miles. His mother is quoted as saying "I don't think he ever suspected he was in real danger." The journalist follows this up with the claim that "his autism makes it difficult for Taylor to communicate, but it also may have prevented him from suffering the mental trauma that such an ordeal might be expected to produce" ("Swamp perils fade to

shadows of autistic child's memory"). Taylor's matter-of-fact responses to his rescuers are seen as evidence for his radically different experience of the world; an experience which is portrayed as illogical and unknowable: "His mother said he mentioned some of the dangers he encountered, but in a factual rather than fearful tone, as if they posed no risk" ("Swamp perils fade). The article continues:

His limited ability to communicate may have kept him from responding to rescuers but there is much about those four days, apparently spent entirely in the water, that no one will ever know. "They could never seem to find any evidence that he'd gotten out, but it just seemed logical that he would," Ms. Touchstone said. ("Swamp perils fade)

The only thing that seems to have bothered Taylor about being in the swamp was the sensation of the loose threads on his torn swimming shorts. The same year as Taylor's adventure, autistic self-advocate Donna Williams lay the groundwork for the *double empathy problem*, writing that

Right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism,' the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced. (Williams 14)

## AFTERWORD

The neurotypical responses to Taylor's story continue to astonish, speculative and fantastical as they are. There is a poem published in a 2001 issue of the *Southern Review* which imagines Taylor's mother weeping at his speech (Lodato 46). His story is repeated on a website of sermons, reminding the pious that fixating on details can block out fear and hunger ("Ten-year-old Taylor Touchstone..."). In the *Tampa Bay Times* story, closer to myth than journalism, it was the easiest thing in the world for the 10-year-old boy to get lost in the swamp. He was free from demands to communicate, unexpected changes, and social rejection. The swamp is the transitional zone; a physical parameter in which the properties or the behaviour of something undergoes a radical change. The swamp is a site of autistic liberation.

Soapbox Journal

Tue 21/11/2023 15:29

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Hi Dr Clemens,

I'm writing to you from Soapbox Journal for Cultural Analysis. I was wondering how the Afterword for The Swamped is coming along? We're aiming to have all the pieces completed and edited by the end of December, but we can push to mid-January. I'd be grateful if you could let us know when you expect to complete a first draft. From there, we can work out a rough editorial timeline. Please let me know if you have any questions/need any other information from me.

All the best, S

RUTH CLEMENS

Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Thu 30/11/2023 18:53

To:Soapbox Journal

Hi S,

Thanks for getting in touch, and I'm sorry for the slow reply! Could I send my first draft the end of next week?

Best wishes,

**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**

Lecturer in Modern English Literature



Soapbox Journal

Thu 30/11/2023 19:07

To:Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

No worries, thanks for getting back to me.

Yes, that would be great! Shall we say 08/11/23?

All the best, S



In the university, the institution of cognitive capitalism, the figure of the autistic is simultaneously mythologised and exploited. The tendency to adhere to rules and structure, hyperfocus on research areas, and synthesize overlooked details into new perspectives becomes captured by the machinery of academia. This is repackaged as a labour of love, a privilege, which maintains the precarity and adjunctification of neurodiverse academics in a sector in which career progression depends upon savvy interpersonal networking, impeccable executive function, and the continual management and branding of the self.

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Studies show consistently high rates of stress and mental illness and low rates of wellbeing and job satisfaction in academic staff compared to other professions (Kinman and Wray 2013). Commenting on this in his book *Academic Ableism*, Jay Timothy Dolmage argues that

In no other profession is this stress better camouflaged behind other, supposedly inviolable, and more important ‘values’ like autonomy, flexibility, and creativity. The result is a sort of boutique stress: faculty and staff may willingly or unwittingly trade in their happiness and ‘balance.’ (Dolmage 56)

The autonomy is disempowering, because its competition kills community. The flexibility is rigid, because it only moves in the direction of the institution. The creativity is destructive, because it not capacious. The autistic academic is swamped, flourishing and decaying at the same time. Concurrently, the transitional zone of the swamp – the secret third thing that refuses modes of categorisation, instrumentalisation, and production – threatens ecological and neurological models of capitalism. In a recent article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, founder of critical neurodiversity theory Robert Chapman proposes an ecological model for neurodiversity which is a “reorientation toward recognizing neurodivergence as part of humanity’s social ecology” (Chapman 1369). He argues that a neurodiverse society should be viewed through the lens of symbiosis: of cooperation and sociality rather than competition and

individual survival. You need help keeping on track of all these commitments, so you ask your HR manager for disability support. Your HR manager tells you how happy she is that you opened up about this, and how inspirational it is for your students to have such a role model as their lecturer. You ask for a reduction in hours and for an assistant to help with emails because they take all your energy. They have become the last thing you think about at night and the first thing you think about in the morning. Your HR manager doesn't understand. She asks you to explain why you need this help. You have to put it in an email.

Soapbox Journal

Wed 10/01/2024 18:23

To: Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Hi Ruth,


I'm just following up re the afterword you agreed to write for Soapbox? Would it be possible to send us a complete first draft by next week? Could we pencil in a submission date of 19/01/24? Please let me know if this is something you're still interested in/will be able to complete.

As our intended publication date is fast approaching, if we don't receive it in the next few weeks I'm afraid we'll have to approach another author. I hope we don't have to resort to this, however. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or need any other information about the issue? I'll be more than



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## AFTERWORD



happy to have a chat about what the afterword could look like.

Look forward to hearing from you.

All the best, S

Clemens, R.A. (Ruth)

Fri 12/01/2024 14:15

To: Soapbox Journal

Hi S,

Thanks for your patience again with the non-submission! The deadline bottleneck is real. Yes next Friday works - have a good weekend.

Best wishes,

**Dr. Ruth A Clemens**

Lecturer in Modern English Literature

It's late at night in the middle of winter on the day you have to submit this draft. You thought you would be done by now, but you got stuck in a quagmire of spurious Internet research and now you have twenty open tabs and a stubbornly empty page. You think back to last July, to your friend's Swamp Boy Summer picnic, held in the meadows of one of the four Lunettens – a series of nineteenth-century moated fortifications built with water drained from the Kromme Rijn in Utrecht. You brought veggie sausages and slices of fresh pineapple and you tended the barbecue and your friends threw balls for the dogs to chase and you did handstands in the grass and laughed and laughed.

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Back then, on the muddy banks of the Rijn, your Swamp Boy Summer friend told you they had a referral for an autism assessment and they asked you what to expect. They must have received their diagnosis by now, because it's the end of February and each renegotiated deadline for this afterword has passed and Swamp Boy Summer is long over. But you don't know how they are doing. You try to meet up to go swimming in between teaching commitments and job applications and writing deadlines, but you keep forgetting to reply to each other and find a time when your agendas line up. You text them about this piece you're writing and a week later they reply to your message with three exclamation marks and a URL. You follow the link and it opens a viral news story that broke a few days ago, on February 28th, 2024: "Video shows 5-year-old girl with autism rescued from swamp" (Keane). The sheriff in charge of the case is quoted in the article: "When you have to work with people that suffer from autism, there are a lot of obstacles that are created," he said. You suffer from a lot of things, you think. From emails, from demands, but not from autism. The sheriff continues: "One is, they're drawn to water."



(*bio*)

*Ruth Alison Clemens currently works at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, where she teaches Modern Anglophone Literature, Film, and Culture. Her research interests are varied, with throughlines of critical posthumanism, transnational and multilingual writing, genealogies of global modernism, and the materiality of culture. Ruth's work has been published in Modernist Cultures, Comparative Critical Studies, and Feminist Modernist Studies, as well as the books Posthuman Pathogenesis, More Posthuman Glossary, and Deleuze and Guattari and Fascism.*

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