

The Slow Apocalypse in *The Low, Low Woods*

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Abstract The comics series *The Low, Low Woods* is set in the fictional former coal-mining town of Shudder-to-Think, Pennsylvania. While the mines have long been abandoned, their variegated effects, from poverty to environmental destruction, still haunt the region. This article suggests that *The Low, Low Woods* identifies a convergence between the exploitation of the natural world, a coal industry on the brink of collapse, and a fragile form of (white) hypermasculinity that promotes a violent and race- as well as class-specific idea of local identity that two teenage, queer women from ethnic minority backgrounds begin to challenge.

Keywords Extraction. Ecocriticism. Ecogothic. Ecohorror. Comics. Trauma. Intersectionality. Appalachia. Mining. Coal.

Summary 1 Extraction, Gothic, and Fiction. – 2 Female Trauma across Generations. – 3 Labour, Health, and Community. – 4 Slow Apocalypse and Rhizomatic Networks.



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1 Extraction, Gothic, and Fiction

The human transformation of Earth's surface as well as subsurface environments has exceeded natural processes of geological change. Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, and Mark Williams have emphasised that 'anthroturbation' - which is how they refer to the human penetration of the planet's layers and the resultant geological transformation - effects "deep subsurface changes" that are "of long duration even geologically" (2014, 3). Extractive practices such as mining and drilling have "imprint[ed] signals on to the geological record" (3), which is one of the reasons why "[e]xtraction needs to be part of any and every account of our neoliberal present and of the politics required to address its inequalities and injustices" (Szeman 2017, 445).

Although the extractive industries rob raw materials such as gold and iron from the earth, energy production is the engine that drives anthroturbation. For the longest time, energy was "the great not-said" in the domain of culture, in no small part because of the availability of "abundant cheap energy" (Wenzel 2017, 11), which produced a "fiction of surplus" based on "the belief that there will always be plenty of energy to go around" (Szeman 2011, 324). Faced with dwindling natural resources as well as the environmental destruction and social disintegration caused by the extractive industries, a growing number of cultural products and practices has, however, begun to address the inequalities and injustices produced by extractivism. Matthew Henry refers to this type of cultural products, which "render visible the socioecological impacts of extractive capitalism and problematize extraction as a cultural practice", as 'extractive fictions' (2019, 403). More specifically, he explains, extractive fictions address "energy at *the point of extraction*" and thus "permit readers insight into the uniquely local dimensions of extractive capitalism" (406; italics in the original).

Although Henry is correct to emphasise the local specificities of the extractive industries' impacts and effects, they are nevertheless "local manifestation[s]" of a hyperobject that is decidedly "*nonlocal*" and "involve[s] profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to" (Morton 2013, 1; italics in the original). Combining Henry's definition with ideas from world-systems theory, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology, Sharae Deckard has developed the notion of extractive gothic, which focuses on how "the infrastructures undergirding extractive regimes" produce "eerie distortions of more-than-human environments" by connecting the vertical imagination of mining and drilling with deep time (2023, 133). In so doing, the extractive gothic articulates the "temporalities that reach far beyond the human" and "the chthonic elements of all that which lies below" characteristic of the Anthropocene gothic (Edwards, Graulund, Höglund 2022, X).

The comics series *The Low, Low Woods* (2020), written by Carmen Maria Machado with art by Dani and colour by Tamra Bonvillain, identifies a concurrence between the extractive industries and a fragile form of (white) hypermasculinity that has destructive effects on the natural world and marginalised human populations. *The Low, Low Woods* was published as part of DC's Hill House Comics imprint, which was curated by horror writer Joe Hill and features five limited series, with a sixth comic originally published serially within the other comics, two pages at a time. DC advertises the imprint as a collection of "cutting-edge horror comics" that "will terrify readers with a smart, subversive and scary lineup" (2019). As limited series, the Hill House comics combine typical features of serial(ised) storytelling (such as cliffhangers) with the coherence and finality of more traditional storytelling forms.

The Low, Low Woods draws on a tradition in the Anglo-American imagination that figures the natural world as an Other to civilisation. In so doing, Anglo-American culture has attempted to contain the (not only) imagined threats of the wilderness - thereby making it known (or, rather, creating the illusion of knowing it). After all, fear of the natural world, as Dawn Keetley and Matt Sivils have explained, was "born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or lack thereof, is central to the Gothic" (2018, 3). In this context, Jennifer Schell has concluded that the ecogothic is "very critical of human beings and their destructive attitudes toward the natural world" and "regard[s] environmental problems with a complicated mixture of anxiety, horror, terror, anger, sadness, nostalgia, and guilt" (176). *The Low, Low Woods* critiques the universalism implicated in the construction of humanity's destructive activities by singling out resource extraction (as a symptom of fossil fuel-based capitalism) and (white) patriarchy as drivers of environmental collapse. The comics series does so by combining the long-term ecogothic hauntings produced by coal-mining and white patriarchy with momentary eruptions of visual(ised) ecohorror.

Set in the fictional town of Shudder-to-Think, Pennsylvania, *The Low, Low Woods* focuses on teenagers Octavia Jackson (Vee) and Eldora Lourdes Alvarez (El), who try to navigate the various mysteries and hauntings as well as traumas of the region, including their own. Shudder-to-Think is a former coal-mining town whose main street is adorned with a banner saying "EVERYONE'S GOAL IS TO MINE MORE" (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, nos. 1, 3).¹ The slogan's visual design and wording (problematically) evoke the phrase *Arbeit macht frei* ('work liberates you') that welcomed Jewish prisoners to

¹ *The Low, Low Woods* is not paginated. We provide issue numbers for referencing purposes here.

Auschwitz, suggesting that the comics series critically investigates the tension-loaded notions of social and economic progress driven by fossil fuel-based energy and gaining freedom through the violent oppression of particular groups, who are trapped in a certain way of living. In this way, the comic situates itself in the U.S.-American gothic tradition, as it questions the “narrative of social, economic, and technological progress” that defines the self-image of the United States by highlighting the “fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness” that are all-too often concealed, if not erased entirely from, the dominant national narrative (Crow 2014, XVIII). This aspect also echoes in the implied role that the slogan – through its prominent display in the town – plays in forming Shudder-to-Think’s communal identity by anchoring it in coal-mining, providing “a shared sense of identity rooted in place and body of work” (Cory, Wright 2023, 6). Although coal might be the glue that holds together the local community, such imagined communities, intertwined as they are with a selective discourse of fossil fuel-based progress, produce “unimagined communities” that “inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent” (Nixon 2011, 150). Such unimagined communities, in turn, haunt the national (and/or local/regional) psyche, as they tend to “appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously”, as Renée Bergland has remarked in the context of the role of Native American spectres to the U.S. national identity (2000, 1).

Appalachia occupies an ambiguous role in the U.S. imagination: a region rich in resources that purportedly produces “the most authentic of Americans” (Satterwhite 2010, 70) who are, at the same time, frequently stereotyped as backward country-folk who are hostile towards strangers and have deep-seated misgivings about anything that might be considered ‘different’ and/or ‘new’. Indeed, while challenging essentialist conceptualisations of Appalachianess, Emily Satterwhite outlines traits usually associated with Appalachians: “white, God-fearing, patriotic, straight, humble, simple, rural folk” (70). Most of these generalisations do not apply to the main characters in *The Low, Low Woods*, Vee and El. They are members of ethnic minorities (El is brown and Vee is black), queer (“I don’t get [...] the idea of loving a guy”, El asserts at one point [Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 1], while Vee is in a secret relationship with blonde high-school darling Jessica), and question what roles society traditionally assigns to women (“I don’t get being a wife or mother”, El remarks early in the story [no. 1]). Perhaps most prominently, though, El is unwilling to accept the local myth of “environmental dementia” (no. 1) that purportedly only afflicts women and leads to women forgetting things. In *The Low, Low Woods*, this focus on characters representing groups that are traditionally excluded from Appalachian identity is not a matter of defining what Manuel Castells (2010, 9-10) has called an “identity for resistance” that is positioned in opposition

to the hegemonic identity and reconfigures the value system while nevertheless insisting on difference; instead, what emerges at the end of the comics series is a “project identity” that seeks to transform society by giving the oppressed the choice to reclaim their (horrifying) pasts in an attempt to shape a more just future.

The significance of the past to the unfolding mystery is introduced in the comic’s opening panels. When the two teenagers wake up in a movie theatre one night, not remembering anything about the film they (might have) watched, El (who is likely to spend the rest of her life in Shudder-to-Think) wants to understand what happened while Vee (who expects to leave the town for college in the near future) would prefer not to know. However, as the two teenagers begin to uncover the town’s dark secrets and its haunted history (which are sometimes literally hidden underground), the comic’s readers come to grasp that the people of Shudder-to-Think might “still t[ell] the old stories [...] in the spirit of local community celebration”, but that the “‘handing-down’ of cultural knowledge from one generation to another” (Miller, Hatfield, Norman 2005, XII-XIII) aims at maintaining violent, white, patriarchal, capitalist structures.

In a review of the comic’s first issue for *AV Club*, Caitlin Rosberg rightly notes that *The Low, Low Woods* is pervaded by a sense of dread

that comes with the day-to-day existence of anyone who isn’t male, the fears large and small that come with interacting with men who feel entitled to the bodies of women, but also their time and attention – extracting a long death instead of a quick, violent one. (2020, paragraph 2)

On the one hand, Rosberg’s observations emphasise the “insidious trauma” (Brown 1995, 107) resulting from the “ongoing, everyday forms of violence and oppression affecting subordinate groups” (Craps 2010, 54); on the other hand, this type of ongoing violence not only concerns humans, as the natural environment in and surrounding Shudder-to-Think also dies a slow death. Rob Nixon has referred to the drawn-out violence inflicted upon the nonhuman world and the related increasing impoverishment of already oppressed human populations as ‘slow violence’, explaining that it (largely)

occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, [...] a violence that is [...] incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (2011, 2)

The Low, Low Woods illuminates these processes, as the comic identifies a convergence between environmental destruction, a coal industry on the brink of collapse, and a fragile form of (white)

hypermasculinity that coalesce in a particular type of “carbon-heavy masculinity” (Alaimo 2016) which promotes a violent and race- as well as class-specific notion of what it means to be a Shudder-to-Thinker. However, the combination of their inquisitiveness, witchcraft, and the extractive industries’ unintended effects on the natural world allow El and Vee to take control of parts of their lives while also effecting change on other women’s lives.

2 Female Trauma across Generations

The comic’s opening scene establishes the central mystery driving its plot. El and Vee wake up in a movie theatre as the film’s end credits begin to roll. Whereas El is certain that “[s]omething happened to us” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 1), Vee instantly tries to allay her friend’s fears, but fails to do so. Josh, who works at the theatre, acts strangely as the two teenage women are on their way out. The comic’s visuals emphasise his odd behaviour: in one panel, in particular, the angle in combination with the shape of Josh’s ear, the half-open mouth that shows his predator-like teeth, and his facial structure create an animalistic image. Overall, the comic’s first three pages not only raise the question of what happened to El and Vee but also strongly imply that they were raped. Toward the end of the first issue, the verbal narration connects El and Vee’s experience to a longer history of female victimisation and forgetting in the town and the environmental toll that the extractive industries have taken:

[I]t was just your regular piece-o-shit coal-mining town where people died the way God and the company intended: hacking up pieces of lung or crushed beneath ten tons of rock. | The men were always sick from the mines; that’s just how it was. [...] But the women got sick, too, in their own way. | They would forget things: wake up in strange places. People joked that you knew a girl had hit puberty when someone found her standing in a stupor in the church parking lot. | Some women had it happen so many times, they forgot their own names. [...] Something in the air, maybe. Or the water.² (no. 1)

The sarcastic opening of this passage explicitly links the town’s health issues with fossil fuel capitalism, where the company plays a nearly divine role by deciding on the fates of the people living in Shudder-to-Think. Indeed, the unnamed company is a spectre, “*never present as such*” (Derrida 1993, 14; our translation; italics in the

² We use vertical bars to indicate movements between panels.

original) but haunting the past, present, and future of the region. The company's god-like role, to draw on Fredric Jameson, "inserts the corporation [...] into the very heart of local and regional culture, about which it becomes difficult to decide whether it is authentic any longer" (1994, 204).

By initially stressing how men got sick or even died because of their jobs in (or close to) the mines, the brief retrospective narration quoted above might at first appear to try to justify the male population's violent behaviour. However, the serial progression from one panel to the next, in fact, accuses patriarchy of inexcusable violence - perpetrated on women and the nonhuman world over several generations. The verbal narration is supported by one of the comic's key visual strategies, as the colour palette changes and images become less detailed and more abstract to indicate past events that connect to the present. A feminine shape in front of a church and a woman sleeping in what seems to be a yard accompany the passage quoted above, culminating in a close-up of a female crotch (covered by a slip), suggesting an interconnection between violent masculine sexuality and female forgetting in Shudder-to-Think. Later in the comic, El reveals that upon returning home from the movie theatre, she discovered that her "underwear was turned inside out" (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 2), drawing the reader's attention to female genitalia as the locus of exerted horror. Instead of a female tool of power that elicits masculine dread in the tradition of the *vagina dentata* (see Creed 1993), her genitalia represent the site where men inflict trauma on the female body. Even though *The Low, Low Woods* locates this particular type of violent male sexuality in Shudder-to-Think, the comic also connects it to a larger history of patriarchal violence by intertextually incorporating Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899). El remarks that the book is "about a woman who is a wife and mother" and who "realizes how much of her life she's missed out on, how much she will continue to miss out on because she's a woman in the world and that's just how things are" (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 1), reflecting El's fears of missing out on so many potential experiences and events in her life due to the perceived impossibility to leave the former coal-mining town.

The page outlining the health issues and hinting at the structural violence in Shudder-to-Think mentioned above illustrates how *The Low, Low Woods* deploys its media specificities to tell a story about different types of trauma. These verbo-visual strategies also come to the fore when El visits a retirement home with her dog to bring some joy to its inhabitants and meets an unnamed African American woman who suffers from black lung disease. As the elderly woman tells El about her past life in Shudder-to-Think, the panel configuration and colouration seemingly tries to separate her past experience from the present moment. However, the traumatic experience of losing her

child to a sinkhole that has opened up in her yard is a borderless panel, suggesting that the past bleeds into the present. This type of verbo-visual storytelling is what Hillary Chute has described as characteristic of the comics medium, as it “offers a unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels” that allows for the creative distribution of distinct timespaces across the comics page and thus “place[s] pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality” (2016, 4). As the horror of past environmental catastrophe and the related human tragedies show their impact on the present moment, a “sense of haunting [...] structures the layout” (Round 2014, 60; see also Burger forthcoming) of these (and many other) pages in *The Low, Low Woods*.

It takes El and Vee (and readers) a while - and requires the help of a witch and what might be described as magical mushrooms - to come to understand that Shudder-to-Think’s male population drugs the women in order to rape them. This type of sexual violence has been defining the female experience in (and of) Shutter-To-Think for generations. *The Low, Low Woods* repeatedly highlights this multi-generational dimension of patriarchal violence in the town. For example, El asks Vee early in the comic, “Do you remember that story your grandmother told us? About how women around town used to forget things?” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 1). That the town’s women forget about their horrifying experiences draws on the idea of a traumatic event not being “available to consciousness until it imposes itself” (Caruth 1996, 19). A general assumption underpinning traditional trauma research is that the victim’s mind protects itself (and the victim) from confronting the traumatic event, which compulsively finds expression in “nightmares and repetitive actions” (19) and “overwhelms the individual” (Whitehead 2004, 3) through “vivid sensations and images” (Brett, Ostroff 1985, 417). However, while “trauma precludes its registration” because “the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out” (Felman, Laub 1991, 72), the women of Shudder-to-Think are kept from accessing their horrifying memories. Some townsfolk discovered that the water sourced from up in the mountains, nearby a former sanatorium, “was special in that it ran away memory” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 5). Whereas traditional trauma theory “removes agency from the survivor” (Balaev 2014, 6), *The Low, Low Woods* acknowledges that the women have little to no agency in the moment of violence, but trauma becomes a vehicle that allows women to assert agency, as they have to fight to recover and reclaim their memories and traumatic experiences.

3 Labour, Health, and Community

While *The Low, Low Woods* never makes the link explicit, the nearly magical powers of the water surrounding what once was the sanatorium Sunblind Ridge – and later became a mountain resort called Heaven on Earth before turning into a (not-so-)secret place where teenagers meet to party – are implicitly connected to the environmental impact of mining. What becomes more explicit in the course of the comics series is how Sunblind Ridge and Heaven on Earth epitomise the social issues and exclusionary practices that characterise the region. The sanatorium was “a place for people of fragile nerves and constitutions. Women, mostly. Homosexuals, sometimes. Transsexuals”, the witch explains (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 5). Heaven on Earth, on the other hand, was where you would spend the summer “if you had money” and “[i]f you were the right kind of person” (no. 2). “[M]ost of those folks”, Vee disapprovingly notes, “would shit a brick if they saw me or El [t]here” (no. 2). While this remark highlights the racial tensions that have defined the region, her emphasis on the fact that the only role in which they might have been tolerated in Heaven on Earth would have been as waitresses not only foregrounds racialised stereotyping but also classism.

If one accepts that “race matters, gender matters, class matters, and that all of us have complicated identities” (Engelhardt 2003, 4), the subplot centring on El’s dire future showcases how these dimensions intertwine. El’s teacher impresses upon her to submit her college applications because she fears that El fails to “understand [her] options” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 2). El, however, is convinced that she knows what her options are: “[M]y mom is a waitress and my dad is on disability. I wish you got how few options I actually have” (no. 2). “I just – I can’t fucking afford it”, she tells Vee later, “Do you not understand how shitty it’ll be to get accepted somewhere and then realize you just can’t afford to go? [...] What’s the point? All of that work, all of that hope” (no. 2).

El’s story does not simply question the idealisation of education as a means to escaping one’s social milieu, though; rather, it exposes the classist assumptions underpinning this very idea – that one can afford to leverage the liberating powers of education – and the intersectional forces of oppression at work in her particular case. *The Low, Low Woods* highlights that El’s is not a singular, exceptional story for (and of) someone coming from a working-class background and living in a (former) coal-mining town, either. “Why did anyone stay?” El wonders at one point, before stressing that outsiders “don’t understand how bad things are. They don’t have the means to leave. They can’t bring themselves to abandon everything they know” (no. 2). Indeed, the ones who leave – such as the investors behind Heaven on Earth – can afford to do so, while the working-class community of

Shudder-to-Think remains immobile. Visually, El's melancholic ponderings about why people do not leave the town are supported by vacated, derelict, and barricaded buildings that commemorate not so much their past inhabitants as Shudder-to-Think's more prosperous times, when coal was more important. In one of the most telling panels in this context, a poster suggests that "THE SUN SETS" and "THE WIND DIES DOWN" but "COAL NEVER STOPS" (no. 1). Since Shudder-to-Think's mines shut down years prior to the (main) events unfolding in *The Low, Low Woods*, the comics series confronts its readers with the limits of aspects of the natural world that were once considered cyclical or even inexhaustible: fossil fuels, air, water, possibly even life itself.

Writing about the Cumberland (a region in the south-eastern part of Appalachia), Allen Batteau notes that "[a]fter years of boom and bust, of decaying coal camps juxtaposed with the ostentation of hillbilly millionaires, of environmental destruction amidst the scenic beauty of the Cumberland, many of the mountain people began to realize that coal was as much the curse of their land as its blessing" (1990, 4). As a gothic narrative, *The Low, Low Woods* focuses on coal's destructive side, as mining has scarred the people of Shudder-to-Think. In the scene at the retirement home mentioned earlier, the elderly African American woman begins to cough when she throws a treat in the direction of El's dog. The terrified expression on El's face in combination with the sound produced by the elderly woman – which seems to elude representation – and her nearly monstrous look indicate that the disease has effectively de-humanised her. Her monstrous appearance, to riff on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, asks the coal industry why it has created her (1996, 20). Any monster, Cohen suggests, is "a double narrative [...] that describes how the monster came to be and [...] what cultural use the monster serves" (13). As a body expressing fears and anxieties, the elderly woman does not become the epitome of how capitalist societies tend to treat their senior citizens (in particular those from ethnic minorities) but rather symbolises a seemingly omnipresent ecoprecarity (Nayar 2019) that has resulted from fossil fuel-based capitalism. "Black wracking", the woman calls the disease and sardonically adds, "The Shudder-to-Think specialty" (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 2). She tells El, "I shouldn't even be alive. [...] The mines took my husband and my child. [...] Some days, I think I survived | – just to show that coal that I could" (no. 2). The implied notion of survival as an act of resistance against the coal industry's will evokes Gerald Vizenor's concept of indigenous people's survivance as "renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry" (1999, VII).

However, based on her brief appearance, the elderly black woman does not oppose the notion that her life is tragically expendable and dehumanised. As such, the monstrous female figure manages to

“keep patriarchal society functional” (Cohen 1996, 13) – despite embodying the horrifying results of the entangled powers of patriarchy and fossil fuel capitalism and their violent practices. Indeed, part of Shudder-to-Think’s identity seems to be based on turning a blind eye. Toward the end of the story, the witch reveals that the water’s power to make people forget was and is an open secret among the male population: “Men had their ways” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 5). When she curses some of the perpetrators and turns them into skinless creatures that largely live underground, “[t]here was talk about the missing boys” and “[h]ow they’d been careless. The lesson was not, ‘*Don’t do what they did*’. It was, ‘*Don’t get caught*’” (no. 6; italics in the original). As for the abused women, the witch was concerned that “giving them back their memories [...] would destroy them” (no. 5). Reflecting on her surroundings in Appalachia, the witch muses,

It’s beautiful here, isn’t it? This town? This patch of wilderness? The trees, the wildlife? The way the light catches against the mountains? [...] I wanted that for them. What I made were monsters. Half-things. Women who were also rabbits. Trees that were also women. Women who collapsed into sinkholes. (No. 5)

4 Slow Apocalypse and Rhizomatic Networks

The Low, Low Woods thus symbolically entangles the natural world with women’s bodies, acknowledging that “[h]umans are not [...] separate from and superior to the world around them [...]. Rather, humans and nonhumans together are part of the total ecology” (Engelhardt 2003, 3). This “recognition that one’s bodily substance is vitally connected to the broader environment” (Alaimo 2010, 63) allows us to “think across previously segregated species, categories and domains” (Braidotti 2019, 42). Women’s bodies and the natural world have long been connected in the Western imagination; as Carol J. Adams observed, there is “an overlap of cultural images of sexual violence against women and the fragmentation and dismemberment of nature and the body in Western culture” ([1990] 2010, 65-6). Indeed, what women and the nonhuman world have in common in *The Low, Low Woods* is, first and foremost, a shared vulnerability. This aspect becomes most explicit in the sinkholes that not only open up all across town due to the underground mines but also appear on (and in, as well as from) women’s bodies. The deformations of female bodies are horrifying, with Jessica’s mother figuring as the symbol of years of abuse and exploitation.

The comic establishes a symmetry between her and her daughter: whereas the first issue concludes with a splash page showing how a

sinkhole opens (in) Jessica's body, her mother appears toward the end of the third issue, also on a splash page. The different points of view as well as the panels' aesthetics affect the comic reader's perception of the deformed figures. Seen from a disembodied, third-person perspective, the former illustration includes Vee, who looks at Jessica simultaneously in shock and with sympathy. In combination with the colouring, Vee's response makes Jessica's body appear not so much horrifying as nearly magical and dreamlike. She is still young and beautiful, and the deformation of her body seems contained, highlighted by the circular emanata surrounding her hole. Her mother, seen from Jessica and Vee's point of view as they enter her room, is terrifyingly disfigured and seems to decay while she continues living, highlighted by the bugs and her seemingly necrotising flesh. The sinkhole has effectively overtaken her body; she is, as Jessica puts it, "a wound in the earth" (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 3).

This becoming-wound evokes how mines have "scarred the planet", to draw on the subtitle of Timothy LeCain's book (2009). This mass destruction has prompted John Gray (2003) to refer to our species as *Homo rapiens*, but this generalisation risks equating the rape of the natural world (a problematic phrase that we nevertheless use on purpose here) with the rape of women. Greta Gaard has rightfully warned that

[c]omparable with metaphors of 'mother nature' and 'virgin forests', rape is a poor metaphor for what it represents - the lived experiences of individual women, children, genderqueers, and entire cultures. The shame and self-loathing, the acute sense of violation that accompanies rape is experienced by humans, not mountains, much as we know. (2018, XV)

In other words, *The Low, Low Woods* addresses men raping women and men exploiting and destroying the natural world, but the comics series does not suggest a hierarchy of suffering nor does it hastily equate the violence inflicted upon women and the nonhuman world in an overly simplistic manner. Nevertheless, they are interconnected; violence is a key ingredient of a white male-dominated, capitalist society.

While "[w]e [traditionally] defend ourselves from [the] fearsome side of inter-connectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religious fanaticism, racism, and sexism)" (Amorok 2007, 29), *The Low, Low Woods* identifies a potential for resistance in these entanglements. "There's a metaphor in there somewhere. How we're all connected, maybe manifestations of the same organism", notes Vee (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 3). The interconnected processes of forgetting and remembering play a key role in this context. "Forgetting is easy", muses El, "We do it as automatically as breathing. Remembering - well, that's another matter entirely. It's as difficult as

drowning yourself. Maybe even more so” (no. 1). This early reflection encapsulates the difficulty of remembering but also the potential power that resides in remembering. Whereas Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier ends up committing suicide by drowning herself in the Gulf of Mexico, the witch reveals that mushrooms growing in and around what used to be Heaven on Earth can counter the effects of the water. Vee describes the mushrooms as “weird because they’re basically dicks” (no. 3), associating them with the symbolic force of the phallus, which the female characters leverage to allow the women of Shudder-to-Think to reclaim their pasts – if they want to – and to take their stories into their own hands: “Sometimes, you’ve got to write your own fucking endings”, the final panel of the fifth issue announces (no. 5).

The supernatural power of the mushrooms indicates that “[a]gency is distributed among multifarious relations and not necessarily knowable in advance” (Cohen 2013, XXIV). While “the evacuation of agency from nature underwrites the transformation of the world into a passive repository of resources for human use” (Alaimo 2010, 143), acknowledging the presence and force of nonhuman agencies “matter[s] for political, ethical and emotional action” (Haraway 2003, 27). Edna Pontellier – whom *The Low, Low Woods* repeatedly evokes – is not heroic; she is a victim of patriarchal society; likewise, survivors such as the elderly black woman in the retirement home are “pathologised as victims without political agency” (Craps 2010, 56). However, El, Vee, and Jessica overcome their victimisations through their entanglements with the nonhuman world. El and Vee deploy the mushrooms to recover women’s pasts, which acknowledges that “‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (Alaimo 2010, 4). The crucial dimension here is that El and Vee do not force these horrifying memories on the women of Shudder-to-Think, but rather allow every single woman – and the ‘half-things’ roaming the forests – to decide for herself whether she wants to know.

A three-page sequence in the final issue illustrates how El and Vee, with the help of the witch, collect mushrooms and water and prepare two vials for each woman of Shudder-to-Think – one vial to remember and one to forget. Remembering, of course, comes with the horrifying recognition of what happened in the past, even returning some of the witch’s ‘half-things’ to their human form. Jessica arguably comes to epitomise this process earlier in the final issue, after El and Vee have found her – apparently unaware of where she is and what has happened – and a group of men at the former site of Heaven on Earth. El offers Jessica one of the mushrooms, which she eats. Vee’s retrospective narration remarks, “I’d never heard anyone scream like that. And I haven’t, since that night. | It was grief and rage and something bigger. Older. Primordial. | Like the earth itself had been waiting to cry out” (Machado, Dani, Bonvillain 2020, no. 6). Jessica’s body becomes

a wound as her pain fractures the earth, swallowing nearby men and skinless monsters. The pain the women of Shudder-to-Think have experienced for decades assumes a planetary scale in this scene, as the traumatic experiences of Shudder-to-Think's women become interconnected with centuries of patriarchal oppression of various human groups around the world and with the scars inflicted upon the planet through extractive practices, which have been accumulating over human generations and which also have implications for the deep future. Forgetting, on the other hand, may allow the women to simply not know, but it may also be accompanied by sadness, sorrow, and desolation because of having decided to ignore one's past while simultaneously being aware of what had been a defining feature of Shudder-to-Think over generations.

Although the comics series might at first seem to end on an empowering note, one should remember the witch's words of warning: "[H]umanity has always had witches and witches have always had potions, and yet the fucked-up bullshit never ceases" (no. 6). Indeed, the comic's final two pages highlight the bodies that are hidden beneath the surface and the monsters that are still lurking underground, waiting to break free. *The Low, Low Woods* thus suggests that there is still a long road ahead until society will have liberated itself from the shackles of the entwined oppressions imposed – and various types of violence perpetrated – by white patriarchy and capitalism. The concluding splash page taps into a long tradition of associating sites of industrial production with infernal images, thereby returning us more explicitly to the question of anthroturbation. In this context, the witch's cautionary warning suggests that

[t]he challenge that we face is [...] of conceptualising the earth and our place within it in ways that do not continue to repeat and reproduce the very same anthropocentric values and assumptions that have created the crises we seek to overcome. (Grech 2022, 3)

Here, the anthropocentrism espoused by *The Low, Low Woods* – which focuses on Shudder-to-Think's female human population rather than 'the environment', despite their interconnections – might become a cautionary warning itself: while the women may assert their individual agencies as well as their collective agency by deciding to remember or forget their traumatic experiences, the unleashing of the planet's geopower (in the form of the sinkholes) is little more than a side-effect of the witch wanting to punish the men and providing respite to the women. In other words, the planet's agency emerges from the unwanted effects of anthropogenic activities, which could be said to be the story of the Anthropocene.

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