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Comics in the Anthropocene: Graphic Narratives of Apocalypse, Regeneration and Warning

ABSTRACT

Narratives of the Anthropocene function in the realm of not only scientific but also popular discourses. Indeed, the most popular narratives of the Anthropocene, namely the story of the apocalypse and the story of progress, with their respective temporalities, are particularly well-represented in comics. The present article looks at the Anthropocene through the lenses of word and image, tracing the response of the medium of comics to the ongoing catastrophe, including Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land* (2020), Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette's modern take on *Swamp Thing* (2019) and Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). *Paying the Land* is a story of the Dene people and their response to the Anthropocene. Drawing on the opposition between nature and progress, it examines whether empathy can stop capitalistic exploitation of Indigenous communities and the land which they cherish. *Swamp Thing*, seemingly a narrative of environmental apocalypse, also functions as a story of ecological reconciliation and regeneration. Finally, *Here* builds on and deconstructs the narrative of progress, demonstrating how a specific location has and will be transformed from 3,000,500,000 BCE to 22,175 CE, offering the reader/viewer a non-chronological look at environmental changes. Apart from the visions of the now and the future that these graphic narratives present, temporality coded in their "grammar" (layout, panels and gutters) is also discussed.

Keywords: comics, graphic novels, Anthropocene, temporality, apocalypse.

INTRODUCTION

52

As demonstrated by its powerful links to various apocalyptic scenarios (Swyngedouw 214; Nixon 64), the discussion of the Anthropocene in the humanities is essentially a discussion of time and temporality, be it in the sense of the inevitable ending, of possible regeneration which deconstructs and subverts stories of the end, transforming them into stories of “the after,” or of “the *longue durée* of the planetary (geological and astrophysical) perspective” (Jones, Rigby and Williams 392). It is these three temporal perspectives, pointing to the (im)possibility and (un)imaginability of the future, that I will focus on in the present article. The temporalities of the Anthropocene, and human responses to it, will be analyzed in three contemporary American comics, Joe Sacco’s *Paying the Land* (2020), Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette’s modern take on *Swamp Thing: Protector of the Green* (2019) and Richard McGuire’s *Here* (2014). As comics, these texts recognize their connection with popular narratives (the “superhero saving the world” scenario or variations thereof), be it in an affirmative (*Swamp Thing*) or critical/distanced fashion (*Paying the Land* and *Here*). As I shall try to demonstrate, all three contemporary graphic narratives,¹ and/as temporal structures, exemplify different human responses to the ongoing crisis, ranging from belief in ecological reconciliation to anti-capitalist critique and a negation of the narrative of progress, thus demonstrating how the popular narrative of “the end” known from the history of comics is critically transformed in (response to) the Anthropocene, defined here not in its limited geological sense but as a time of unprecedented human influence on the Earth with its negative political, ethical, economic and cultural consequences (Zalasiewicz et al.; Clark 1–28). Apart from engaging with the temporality encoded in the “what” of the story, I also comment on the physicality of comics as a medium which represents, breaks, and dissects time in its sequential structure of panels and gutters.

The structure of the article follows and builds on the above premises. First, I briefly discuss the notions of temporality in the study of the Anthropocene. Then, I contextualize all three texts as products of the Western (North American) mindset and comment on the concept of space-as-time in comics. The discussion of the three comics follows.

¹ The term graphic narrative is defined by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven as “narrative work in the medium of comics” (767).

THE ANTHROPOCENE, TEMPORALITY AND COMICS

Suspended between the human notions of the “the end,” “the after” and “the long duration,” Anthropocene graphic narratives should not be read in universal terms but always in connection with the perspective inscribed in them. Despite their ecological intentions, *Swamp Thing*, *Paying the Land* and *Here* are all products of the affluent West, which over the years has marginalized the role and value of nature for the sake of modernity and progress, and this perspective has, in turn, been reflected in the prevailing narrative and temporal structures. As Libby Robin observes:

Time is not equally deep everywhere. Time itself depends on place. Much of the dominant discourse of the era of postwar reconstruction . . . was extrapolated from ideas of the national, particularly European and North American models. . . . A default “global” follows the big economies. It typically focuses on territories and land systems at the expense of atmospheres, oceans and polar ice-caps, which are the truly global spaces. (62)

Respectively, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, “the epoch [should] be more properly called ‘the Capitalocene’ or ‘econocene’ so that a vague and undifferentiated humanity—‘anthropos’—is not held responsible for bringing about this time and that the blame is laid squarely at the door of a system: capitalism or the global economic system” (6). Acknowledging their Western and capitalist affiliations, many American comics, both mainstream and alternative, which engage with the question of the Anthropocene focus on different forms of anti-capitalist critique. They actively perceive Western Capitalism as threatening, and thus, quite literally, visible. The conceptualization of the Anthropocene as an epoch that is very much conditioned by the economic, the historical and the social and, most importantly perhaps, by the spatiotemporal (i.e. the West), helps explain why the narratives of “the end” and “the after” prevail. They rely on culturally inscribed teleological narratives found in the Bible and privilege stories of the apocalypse, seen as both “the end” and the lessons that it brings (De Cristofaro 3), at the expense of the more complex perspective of the *longue durée*. In aligning “the monumentalism of national modernity” with “the monumentalism of the apocalypse” (Nixon 157), they either relegate the “deep time perspective” to the periphery or make it function in terms of the temporal “other.” This is not to say that the disastrous impact of humans on the environment should be downplayed but rather points to the fact that looking at the Anthropocene through the human(istic) notions of

narrative and temporality reveals structures that are framed by older narrative concepts, such as, for example, the “artistic chronotope” (Bakhtin 84–85). It is through these “tamed” forms of conceptualizing time that contemporary American comics venture into, explore, and engage with deep time, attempting to represent the “complex, paradoxical temporality” (Farrier 6) of the human epoch.

Crucially, the ability of comics to tell and structure stories depends on the intersections between space and time. Scott McCloud has famously defined comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). In comics, time is coded in space (McCloud 100–07), as the reader/viewer actively moves from one panel to another, and the shape and the size of the panel, as well as the width of the gutter (the empty space between the panels) all play a role in how the reader/viewer perceives time in the story. Moving from panel to panel, from one temporal moment to the next, the reader/viewer is (self-)consciously made aware of how the physicality of the medium codes time. In classic comics theory, the process of “closure,” which McCloud defines as the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63), allows the reader/viewer to bridge the gaps between the panels, thus co-creating the story. More often than not, however, the artist chooses to challenge the reader/viewer’s need for “closure.” Nick Sousanis talks about how the “spatial interplay of the sequential and the simultaneous imbues comics with a dual nature—both tree-like, hierarchical and rhizomatic” (62). Respectively, Hillary Chute observes that

comics can retrack narrative, confuse the eye, offer multiple directions of reading. . . . While a visual rhythm is sometimes established (through panelization, through colour), as regular in these texts, it is just often as not. . . . There are two broad senses of rhythm at work here: the rhythm of the reader’s acquisition of the text, and the material, visual rhythm of the created page, in which a trace of the imaginary, projected regularity of the grid is always present. (36–37)

Time, both “readerly” and “narrative,” and space lie at the heart of comics’ storytelling. All three analyzed comics, in their own respective ways, point to and critically engage with this phenomenon, exploring the links between temporality and the narrative (form). To paraphrase David Farrier’s claim in *Anthropocene Poetics*, I suggest that “the environmental crisis is also a crisis of” (6) form, with contemporary comics artists seeking new ways of representing time on the page, often by experimenting with the classic grid structure.

“YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THE CIRCLE”

In his most recent work, *Paying the Land*, Joe Sacco, an acclaimed comics journalist, tells the story of the Dene, an Indigenous people who have lived in the Mackenzie River Valley in the Northwest Territories of Canada for centuries, and their response to the agents of the Anthropocene: the Canadian government, with its drive towards “modernity,” and corporations mining for oil, gas and diamonds. Drawing on the opposition between ecology and “progress,” *Paying the Land* examines whether empathy can stop capitalistic exploitation of Indigenous communities and the land which they cherish.

The story opens with a chapter entitled “You Find Yourself in the Circle” (3–22), in which Paul Andrew, one of the Dene people, explains to Sacco (who both acknowledges and accepts his role as a Westerner and therefore acknowledges and accepts his own limitations) how his tribe has “always” lived. The people were close to the land and the animals and rarely had “contact with the outside world” (4). The question of time is addressed early in the conversation. Sacco asks about “keeping track of time” (11), which is in itself a very Western concept, and Andrew responds that “the environment dictates” (11) and governs time. The concept of Western linear time, of progress, is thus conceptualized in relation to cycles and “circles.” “You find yourself in the circle,” Andrew explains, “you work yourself in[to] the circle of that community” (17), which is as much human as more-than-human. A special bond with place, a “unique and complex ensemble—rooted in the past and growing into a future” (Iuan 388), as opposed to space, is emphasized. And while the tensions between the need to tackle unemployment and poverty among the Dene and “the responsibilities of environmental stewardship” (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 42) are also acknowledged,² it is nevertheless apparent that the Dene have responsibility towards nature. “Progress” and “modernity” are brought by the West, Catholic missionaries, the residential school system, foresting companies, and mining consortiums, and the tribe struggles to come to terms with the fact that they cannot protect what they consider to be their land (“their” in terms of a connection to the place; Sacco dedicates his book to “the people of the land”), because they do not own it (in the Western legal sense of the word). “Progress to us means becoming a wiser person,” Richard Nerysoo, one of the Dene interviewed by Sacco asserts, “it means living with the land and nature as close as possible”

² The Dene, as a people, want a future, also an economic one. Darrell Beaulieu, “president and CEO of Denendeh Investments, which promotes the economic growth of the Dene first nations” (42) interviewed by Sacco, observes that people “‘are not going to stop’ taking what they need. . . . ‘It’s just a matter of how we do that’” (43).

(69). “Ownership is not how we look at the land” (200), another person asserts. Sacco thus sets up the same kind of temporal conflict that Nixon has described as a conflict between “the short-termers who arrive (with their official landscape maps) to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath” (17). The dividing line between the Western and the Indigenous understanding of existence and time is thus clearly marked and, in the complex network of demarcation lines that this narrative presents and operates within, will only deepen. And while the story seems to operate with(in) binary oppositions, it does so self-consciously and therefore, paradoxically, critically. Sacco realizes how limiting binary oppositions are and yet, as a Westerner, cannot help but refer to them.

56

This point of divergence is marked at the end of the opening chapter. Sacco interrupts and intervenes in Andrew’s tale, saying: “Okay. This is very fascinating, but I guess we should get to the point where a plane [which took young Andrew to a residential school] shows up” (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 22). He is bored. He wants action and cannot conceive of (narrative) time in terms of duration. Or perhaps he is testing the contemporary reader/viewer who might be on “an insatiable—and often insensate—quest for quicker sensation” (Nixon 8). Henceforth, the narrative will operate as if on two temporal levels.³ One is linear and Sacco, as a Western journalist is critical of it and yet finds it difficult to ignore it. While he criticizes the narrative of capitalist progress, he still thinks about (hi)story in terms of the impending end. Linear time must come to an end. The environmental apocalypse is upon us. This is probably why, despite the claim made by Andrew in the opening chapter, Sacco structures the history of the Dene in a linear fashion, albeit with some hints of modernist disruption, fragmentation, and achronological order (e.g., the plane he asks about in the opening chapter only appears on page 120), as these are the formal tools that he has at his disposal as a Western writer. He visualizes the struggle of the people over the last 600 years as a “line” of key events, including the Doctrine of Discovery, first contact with the colonizers, claiming of the land, the introduction of the residential school system, urbanization and the exploitation of natural resources, highlighting the fact that, as Nixon observes, “[n]arratives of national development are partial narratives” in which Indigenous communities function as objects but not subjects (150).

³ It should be noted that Sacco has experimented with the representation of time in his previous works. In *The Great War: July 1, 1916: The First Day of the Battle of the Somme* (2013), he explored the format of the panorama in/as comics. It both combines and juxtaposes sequentiality and continuity.

The other, circular, temporal plane is developed concurrently by Andrew. He speaks in the opening and the final chapters, entitled respectively “You Find Yourself in the Circle” and “The Circle is Closed,” opposing the linear perspective of the Western narrative with its drive towards the end. In “bending” time, the story does not negate the possibility of the apocalypse but rather points to what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” namely

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. . . . [W]e also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (2)

57

The poor and the vulnerable, such as the Dene, fall victim to “slow violence” and, importantly, recognize that fact. Their perspective extends beyond “instant sensational visibility,” which is probably what made Sacco interrupt Andrew in the opening chapter, and also embraces the timespan over which “slow violence” extends, as some of the changes may only be observed on such a plane. The Dene People acknowledge and oppose both “reckless corporate short-termism” (Nixon 22) and long-term “unnoticeable” environmental degradation, e.g., the fact that the local mine has “produced 237,000 tons” of the highly toxic arsenic trioxide dust which is literally hidden deep inside the mine (Sacco, *Paying the Land* 247–48). The “circular” plane also implies a constant, unending, sense of responsibility for the land, which is something that may not be found in the linear perspective, as the latter tends to (dis)place that burden onto future generations.

In the closing chapter, Andrew once again addresses Sacco, and through him, the reader/viewer. He asserts that “Indigenous people should not await validation from the non-aboriginal world” and baffles the comics journalist with the claim that the Dene “have something to go back to” (254). “Go back?,” Sacco (255) asks in disbelief, as this statement challenges his forward-looking narrative of the impending end. For the Dene People, “going back” means both literally going back to the old ways of living, with one young member of the tribe, Eugene Boulanger, describing how spending time in his ancestral hunting grounds made him see himself “in the continuum of [his] ancestry” (258), and asserting that the “circle” is complete by “being responsible enough to provide this experience for those ones who aren’t here yet” (258).

Paying the Land operates on both temporal planes, the linear and the circular, pointing to what Farrier calls “the Anthropocenic moment” (128)—a moment in which one realizes the “rift” between the actual and the imagined outcome—in this case, the “rift” between the “end” and the possibility and the dream of the “after.” The function of “the Anthropocenic moment,” Farrier further observes, is to force one into the position of responsibility: “[I]n focusing attention back on us, it asks the question, what will you do?” (128). Sacco seems to direct this question at both the reader/viewer and himself. It is as if he is working against himself as the narrator and the character; indeed, the comics journalist regularly positions himself in his graphic narratives in a self-reflective and contradictory place (Dong 39–53). He seems to recognize the fact that “[c]omics grammar exhibits the legibility of double narration—and stages disjunctions between presence and absence and between word and image—in order to pressure linearity, causality, and sequence” (Chute 206). Torn between his roles as Sacco-the-narrator and Sacco-the-character, Sacco-the-Westerner and Sacco-the-critic of Western modernity and progress, he builds a story that combines contradictory linear and circular planes. The pages are not organized in a grid-like sequential manner: Sacco employs sequences of panels, of different sizes and shapes, drawings without frames and full-page images interchangeably, saturating his work with visual details. The reader/viewer cannot decide on or fall into a steady rhythm of reading (as is the case with consistent grid-based layouts made of panels of the same size) and has to navigate their way through the graphic narrative, looking for closure and at the same time accepting the gaps, inconsistencies and conflicting temporalities. In and of itself, the medium of comics self-consciously draws the reader/viewer’s attention to time, i.e. the time that is required to read a single page and the time coded in the spatial arrangement of panels and gutters. Indeed, “Sacco’s investment in slowing readers down and asking them to grapple with producing meaning is a deliberate technique,” Chute writes, “positioned both against the global news media’s propensity to offer quickly consumed visual spectacles and against the restless acceleration of information” (202). Forced to position themselves in-between the linear and the circular plane, the reader/viewer is also constantly reminded of complex approaches to temporality in the Anthropocene in and through the process of reading.

APOCALYPSE NOW?

Scott Snyder and Paquette’s contemporary rendition of *Swamp Thing: Protector of the Green*, arguably the most commercial text of the three analyzed graphic narratives, may be read in terms of extending and

commenting on the questions raised in *Paying the Land*. While the perspective of the Indigenous people gives way to a medley of science-fiction and superhero fiction, *Swamp Thing*—the history of which dates back to the 1970s—is not only a narrative of the environmental apocalypse but also a story of ecological reconciliation and regeneration extending beyond the human/nature divide.

In contrast to the more reflective perspective presented in Sacco's work, *Swamp Thing* is a popular narrative guided by superhero conventions which by definition relies on the "instant sensational visibility" criticized by Nixon (2). The narrative of the environmental apocalypse is thus perceived as integral to the genre, imbuing it with action and suspense. As Erik Swyngedouw points out, in the context of the ongoing environment crisis, such narratives are considered even more entertaining, because "sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imaginaries is an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism. . . . At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms" (219). In other words, environmental apocalyptic narratives are so appealing because they replace actual politics (responsibility held by national governments, international organizations and individuals in the affluent West) with a call to action that functions at the basic archetypal level of a battle between good and evil, superheroes and villains. Furthermore, as Swyngedouw explains, this "environmentally apocalyptic future" tends to be "forever postponed," looming over the world as constant threat which "neither promises redemption nor does it possess a name; it is pure negativity" (219). In *Swamp Thing's* universe, the apocalypse is indeed "forever postponed," insofar as social and political mechanism described by Swyngedouw is combined with the formal limitations of comics as a serial (not to be confused with sequential) product: new narratives must be constantly produced and consumed.

Specifically, in *Swamp Thing*, the reader/viewer enters into a world where three forces—the green (the force of plant life), the red (the force of animal life), and the rot (the force of death)—are managed and kept in check by their respective avatars. In Snyder and Paquette's story, the balance among the three forces is disrupted, as Dr. Alec Holland, the person chosen to take on the role of "the protector of the green," the titular *Swamp Thing*, abandons his mission. The apocalypse narrative, envisioned as the ultimate fight between the forces of good and evil, begins when the powerful avatar of the rot, a flesh-eating monster, is awakened and unleashed from the depths of the Earth. The force that is threatening the environment is, in keeping with Swyngedouw's remarks, depoliticized, not to say apolitical, and functions only as "pure negativity" (219). It is not a man-made threat, and neither is it conceived

in terms of the consequences of man's actions. Instead, as Swamp Thing explains, the rot "makes his home in the world's most barren places, places where the green is weak" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.) and functions as a conceptual antithesis of the green. Swyngedouw explains that such populist, or in the context of this graphic narrative, popular visions emphasize the threat and downplay the responsibility for it, insofar as "[w]e are all potential victims. 'THE' Environment and 'THE' People, Humanity as a whole in a material and philosophical manner, are invoked and called into being. . . . However, the 'people' here are not constituted as heterogeneous political subjects, but as universal victims, suffering from processes beyond their control" (221).

Human, though still depoliticized, agency is only invoked in the figure of the saviour, when Dr. Alec Holland eventually accepts his mission, morphing into a human-plant hybrid. In a process of environmental transformation, the human ("the flesh," "the red") bonds with the green; eventually "the body beneath dies" but the consciousness is "given over to the green in full, never to uproot or walk again" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). It is as much a physical (material) as mental experience, with Alec feeling "the carbon dioxide from [his] lungs being taken in, like a second breathing in [his] own body" (n.pag.). Reluctant at first, "[t]he Swamp Thing comes to realize that he incorporates both the human and the green within a sacred whole; he embodies the trans-corporeal intra-action of all life" (Klassen 173). While the rot is only death, Swamp Thing seems to embody the cycle of matter: the human flesh will eventually die and nurture the green, giving rise to new life. "It's like living in a haunted body," the creature observes, "I'm still me, still Alec, but I feel what it feels too" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). Apart from posthumanist interpretations, according to which the creature "dissolves the very categories of 'normal,' 'natural,' and 'human'" (Klassen 173), Swamp Thing embodies a world that does not end in apocalypse, but in ecological reconciliation and regeneration, as the human and the natural become one. Human temporal perspective shifts as a result. Instead of thinking in terms of one or two generations, Dr. Alec Holland opens himself up to the possibility of "deep time." "Even my thoughts are divided," Swamp Thing explains, "I have my life, my memories, and I have the memories and history of the green" (Snyder and Paquette n.pag.). While such a realization is not in itself a solution to the environmental crisis, it is a vital alternative, insofar as the negative "end" is replaced with a hopeful sense of "the after." And, especially considering the sensationalist aspects of the apocalyptic temporality to which I return below, the latter presents itself as a more responsible response.

The sensationalist drive towards the apocalypse that lies at the heart of what is essentially an action-driven graphic narrative means that the story

must end with a battle between good and evil, between environmental degradation and reconciliation. In a dramatic twist, Alec-turned-Swamp Thing appears to lose to the rot, while the green mourns. The story teeters on the brink of an apocalyptic ending, the triumph of death and destruction, only to be continued when the Swamp Thing is reborn after five years. Both his human flesh and his green exterior are regenerated by trees endowed with a form of consciousness, who help him realize that environmental regeneration takes time. In contrast to Nixon's discourse of "slow violence" developed in Sacco's *Paying the Land*, the sensationalist, fast-paced, narrative of *Swamp Thing* engages with what Chakrabarty refers to as the (political) paradox of inhabiting "two presents":

Anthropocene time puts pressure on another question: What does it mean to dwell, to be political, to pursue justice when we live out the everyday with the awareness that what seems "slow" in human and world-historical terms may indeed be "instantaneous" on the scale of Earth history, that living in the Anthropocene means inhabiting these two presents at the same time? (30)

Swamp Thing, as a narrative, seems to "inhabit two presents at the same time." On the one hand, the reader/viewer is presented with an exciting, colourful, suspense-driven story of the impending environmental apocalypse. A classic grid-like structure of frames and gutters gives way to more organic and irregular panel division and numerous splashes (full-page images) and bleeds (images which extend over two or more pages), which grab the reader/viewer's attention (Petersen 150–55) and at the same time propel the story. Bleeds, in particular, "are, by their nature, violent. The image's domination of the page is striking and demands the reader's complete attention" (Earle 49). *Swamp Thing* thus capitalizes on the fast pace with which the environmental apocalypse approaches, exploiting this theme for the sake of "action," but it also points to the "instantaneous" aspect of the ongoing changes, even if they might appear to be "slow" for humans. Coded in the very character of the human/nature hybrid is a perspective of "deep time," not only as regards the lifespan of greenery but also as regards environmental regeneration.

FROM NOTHING TO NOTHING

The contradictory temporal perspectives explored in Sacco's *Paying the Land* and Snyder and Paquette's *Swamp Thing* are further investigated and challenged by Robert McGuire in *Here*. *Here* builds on and deconstructs

the narrative of progress, or the concept of narrative as such, demonstrating how a specific location has and will be transformed from 3,000,500,000 BCE to 22,175 CE, offering the reader/viewer a non-chronological “deep-time” perspective on environmental changes. *Here* demonstrates how limited human temporality is, much in keeping with Jan Zalasiewicz’s⁴ distinction between human-centred and planet-centred thinking (29–30), on which Chakrabarty also comments, explaining that we are, naturally, predisposed to think in terms of “human time” rather than “geological time” (9–11). Still, Chakrabarty continues, considering how unimaginable the latter is in the context of the horizon within which most humans operate, “geological time” is also tinged with human bias, because “[b]oth geological time and historical time are expressive of human categories, but they are tinged with different kinds of affect. It is, of course, only within the sense of time that informs world history that we can speak of hope or despair” (12).

Respectively, the concept of “an” (as in one in many in geological history), as opposed to “the” (as in the one and final), apocalypse, an end, or “loss,” are rendered both central and peripheral in *Here*. On the one hand, even in the act of challenging it, *Here* does present the reader/viewer with a narrative, a comics sequence, with a beginning and an end,⁵ out of which “time,” associated with either “hope or despair,” may arise. On the other hand, in its temporal scope, it actively engages with a “deep-time” perspective (in an ironic gesture, McGuire draws a scene in which a person living in 1986 is wearing a T-shirt which reads “Future transitional fossil”), demonstrating that the trajectory of geological time involves a movement from “nothing” to “nothing”:

Yet if we pan out from such spatiotemporally specific instances of extinction to assume the “deep-time” perspective often invoked in discussions of the so-called Anthropocene, it could appear that loss is the name of the game. To go back to very deepest notions of time, if current cosmological models are accepted as roughly accurate, what we know of, what we see as, this particular universe appears to start from nothing and could quite possibly end as nothing. (Jones, Rigby and Williams 391)

⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz is Professor of Palaeobiology and chair of the Anthropocene Working Group. He has published widely on the concept of the Anthropocene in geology and commented on how “the Anthropocene,” as a concept, functions in the humanities.

⁵ It should be emphasized that it is true for the book format of *Here*, which is the dominant format in the English-speaking countries. In Poland, *Here* was published in the form of 154 unbound cards which the reader/viewer may arrange freely, be it in a chronological or non-chronological order, which further challenges the notions of narrativity and causality.

Here essentially depicts a movement from “nothing” to “nothing,” albeit in a manner that tames it for the reader/viewer. Comprising approximately 150 double-page images (the pages are not numbered) which interconnect and overlap, it begins and ends with the same image of a room in 2014. Space and time are thus domesticated and sympathetic to the human scale, and *Anthropos* appears to frame the story, insofar as “to acknowledge the word *home* is to turn to spatial, temporal, and material scales that are distinguished from deep-time or primordial sources” (Jones, Rigby and Williams 392). This domestic human perspective, however, is quickly challenged as the reader/viewer enters deeper into the story.

With every turn of the page, new temporal shifts take place. At first, they are relatively small, insofar as they embrace the human lifespan: the reader/viewer moves from 2014 to 1957, then 1942, 2007, and then back to 1957. Nothing much changes except the decor in the room. Then, over three consecutive pages, the temporal shifts extend, as one travels from 1757 to 1623, back to the 1950s, and then to 8,000 BC, and to 1,009 BC. Concurrently, apart from the dominant temporal frame, minor “time portals” open in the form of smaller frames dispersed over the double-page. Such a structure, one which involves major temporal shifts and minor cross-temporal insights, is in itself a commentary on the differences in the perception of time.⁶ “Time portals” also further complicate a non-chronological narrative by opening passages to other moments in time, demonstrating how brief human presence appears to be against the background of “deep time.”

That is not to say, however, that it is inconsequential. The dominant image of a living room, which is originally read in terms of the safe and the domestic, transforms to signify “human presence,” which is, as “human time” progresses, more and more threatening and damaging. Over the course of three double-page images, the reader/viewer witnesses the changes which have taken place in the natural landscape over 300 years. Vast virgin forests fill the pages which show the world in 1573 and 1637; yet, this vision is interrupted by, respectively, two smaller “time portals” placed next to one another on the facing pages. The panel on the right-hand side shows the beginnings of deforestation in 1763 (and the displacement of the Indigenous people) and the panel on the left-hand side shows the living room in 1989, with the forest completely gone (fig. 1).

⁶ Paradoxically, double pages in general suggest a slower pace of reading than the classic grid structure. Instead of moving from one scene to the next quickly, one lingers on the page.



Fig. 1. Double-page from Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). The beginnings of deforestation. *HERE*. Copyright © 2014, Richard McGuire, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

The reader/viewer actually learns (more than 50 pages) later that the forest had been wiped away by 1906, as the double-page image shows a row of houses in its place, with the “time-transgressive human-altered” archaeosphere (Zalasiewicz 35) extending everywhere. The layering of different temporal perspectives on the same and across multiple pages, yet always in the same place, creates “a cross-temporal intimacy,” which is crucial because “through space, we can elucidate the binds of capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism so central to progressive time” (Sobelle 212). Over the next pages, the reader/viewer once again jumps in time, from the 1770s to the 1980s, back to the original “nothing” (an undefined space filled with clouds) in 3,000,500,000 BCE, and then to two future apocalypses, one around 2111, when humanity disappears from the picture and a vast ocean covers the Earth, and one in 2313, when humans reappear only to be faced with a (man-made?) bio- and radioactive catastrophe which forces them to walk in protective suits on what has now turned into a barren desert (fig. 2).

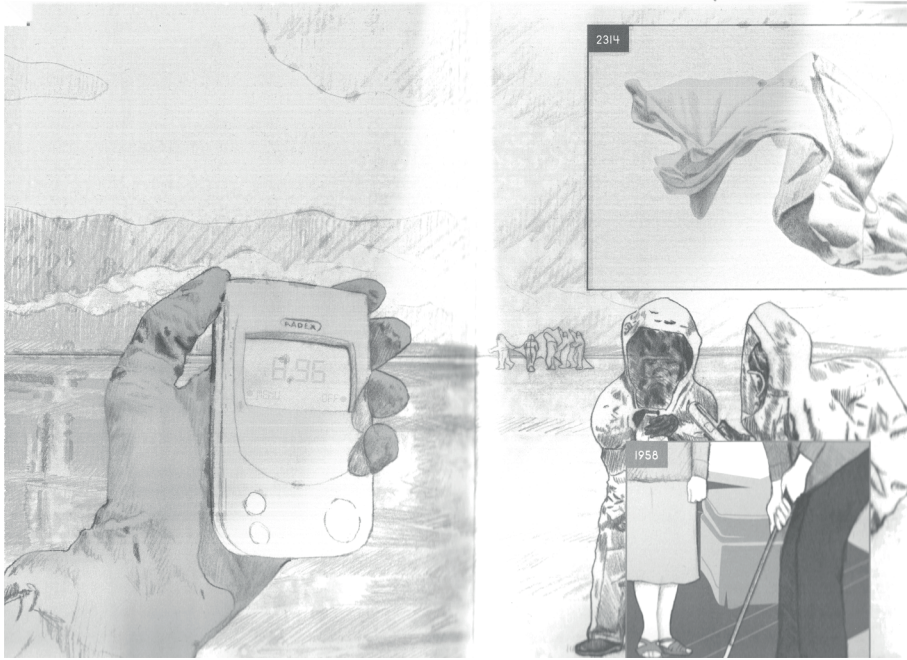


Fig. 2. Double-page from Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014). Bio- and radioactive catastrophe. HERE. Copyright © 2014, Richard McGuire, used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited.

While it is at this point that the narrative ends for humans, which is an apocalyptic narrative and temporal development that *Paying the Land* and *Swamp Thing* envisioned but never realized, “the after” is still viable for the Earth. In 22,175, *Here*'s chronological end point, nature is reborn and new more-than-human lifeforms appear. Is this a warning for humans and/or a “happy ending” for the environment which is finally liberated? It is for the reader/viewer, the co-creator of the story, to decide. Still, while the final geological “nothing” is not shown, the pressure of “deep time” coded in *Here*, combined with a human yearning for (comics) closure, point to it.

CONCLUSION

In navigating their ways through the stories and temporalities of “the end,” “the after” and “the *longue durée*,” Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*, Scott Snyder and Yanick Paquette's *Swamp Thing* and Richard McGuire's *Here* acknowledge the apocalypse but also present scenarios in which human and more-than-human life continues. As such, they engage with both the more contemporary understanding of the apocalypse as “a catastrophe

of overwhelming proportions and dystopian consequences that leads to the end of the world as we know it” and the more traditional definition according to which “‘apocalypse’ is essentially about a ‘revelation’ of a sense-making utopian teleology” (De Cristofaro 3). The environmental apocalypse envisioned in the three analyzed comics is thus transformed into a story of regeneration and/or warning.

Still, as products of Western, American culture, in equal measure responding to, and resulting from, the Anthropocene, these texts make the reader/viewer reflect on time, temporality, and the future as narratives. Looking at the three texts reversedly, *Here*, one of the most thoughtful representations and meditations on time, makes us realize that, as Timothy Clark observes, “[v]iewed on very long time scales, human history and culture can take on unfamiliar shapes, as work in environmental history repeatedly demonstrates” (54). Addressing the “deep time” perspective, or the movement from “nothing to nothing,” *Here* self-consciously points to its own futility as a narrative. Nature, not narrative, will ultimately survive, the comic seems to suggest. This, in turn, makes one approach the highly commercial *Swamp Thing* with ironic distance. While all of us want to see good triumph over evil and witness the victory of the more-than-human hybrid of the human and the natural over death, the repercussions of falling for such an apocalyptic scenario, as explained by Swyngedouw, are potentially catastrophic. Still, the possibility of human and environmental reconciliation and regeneration coded in *Swamp Thing*, which opens up the “deep time” perspective, may be instrumental in realizing the difference between the pace of the ongoing environmental degradation for humans and for the planet, insofar as what is slow in human terms becomes instantaneous for ecosystems. These competing perspective of “slow” and “fast” are also explored in *Paying the Land*. In stark contrast to *Swamp Thing*, Sacco explores how the Dene fall victim to “slow violence” (Nixon 2), actively structuring his comic in such a way as to make the reader/viewer realize the conflicting temporalities in/of the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, while all three texts differ in their visions of time and degree of complexity (after all, they are also conditioned by genre, insofar as comics journalism and superhero comics work with different comics traditions), what unites them is that they make the reader/viewer reflect on their role in the narrative and, by extension, in real life, asking whether environmentally destructive culture can change. To quote Clark, these texts ask whether “human capacity for engagement” may extend “beyond certain scales in time and space” (182). As much as the reader/viewer looks for closure, a moral, an unequivocal and optimistic “yes,” the answer may be a form of an Anthropocenic cul-de-sac because the discussed narratives and their temporalities are only human.

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