

ENVIRONMENTAL COMICS:
Sequential Storytelling as Tool and Teacher Amid Ecological Precarity

By

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ABSTRACT

This body of work is a response to the question of how to adapt as an artist amid ecological crisis and failure. Using a multidisciplinary approach, I explore environmental comics as a concept, practice, and teaching method. Following Scott McCloud and Sean Carelton's definitions of comics as a medium based in visual relationality, I examine how its rich history of exploring other than human perspectives, nontraditional storytelling methods and populist readership, provide a unique format for this time. The manifestation of this research has included a published essay surveying contemporary works; place-based comic workshops in the model of ecopedagogy and Lynda Barry's instructional book *Making Comics* (2019); an online resource center outlining artistic strategies for environmental comics, functioning similarly to Lisa Jevbratt's student hub for her former Interspecies Collaboration class; and an autobiographical webcomic. Though not offered as a political solution, by placing myself in the role of facilitator, researcher, and artist, I am trying to deepen my engagement and responsibilities to my human and nonhuman communities.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Art is a way of life I inherited.

My maternal grandparents are artists. My grandfather is a ceramicist and my grandmother is a paper crafts artist and programmer. Her mother was a weaver.

My father has mapped ancestors who worked with their hands in the generations descending back to Fischbach, Germany.

My parents are artists, both of whom deferred their passions to raise children in the small, dark, forested town of Olympia, Washington on the tip of the Salish Sea.

Olympia raised me too; between the shadows of Mount Tahoma (Rainier) and the Olympic Mountain Range, the traditional lands of the Nisqually and Squaxin Island peoples, among the great blue herons, the foxes that would sleep on our porch, and the musical legacies of Kurt Cobain and Riot Grrrl. I learned how to be an artist in relation to my community, both human and nonhuman, as a form of participation, language, and identity. I am eternally grateful for the support and energy I received from this upbringing as it has shaped my being in ways I'm still discovering every day.

Thank you Nich McElroy and Margaret Tolbert for your emotional and creative support.

From Emily Carr University of Art + Design, thank you Jay White and Randy Lee Cutler for your supervision and conversation as well as Allison Hrabluik and Lauren Marsden for sticking with us till the last day.

Thank you to my cohort of 2022 who persevered despite global obstacles and distances.

1 ADAPTING TO FAILURE



Fig. 1. Aidan Koch, Frame 6, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

As I think of the world's problems and what to do about them, I am learning to offer different questions—more generative questions...bubbly, hospitable, and humbling questions: how are we already collectively responding or in response to our specific crisis? How are we mattering...or how are we showing up vis-a-vis the specific challenges we are encountering? How do we account for these emergent realities in terms of what is missing, what we find unintelligible, or what is being excluded?

—Bayo Akomolafe

In 1988, the year I was born, the US senate held a monumental hearing on global warming, addressing it as a scientifically proven, impending, and exponentially threatening condition to all

living beings. During my life, nearly half of all remaining global wildlife has disappeared¹, carbon emissions have only gone up, and catastrophic weather events are increasing². Growing up, a narrative perpetuated in which the worst could still be avoided; blame being simultaneously cast upon individual's consumer habits and the inevitable price of human progress. Despite the work of theoreticians like Donna Haraway³ and TJ Demos⁴ or Kathryn Yusoff⁵ to reimagine the term Anthropocene, which homogenizes and reduces accountability, towards something more suiting the corporate-colonial-neoliberal-extraction machine deserving the majority of the blame, I am not absolved.

As a fourth generation mixed European descendant living on unceded Serrano⁶ lands in the Mojave Desert of Southern California, I have profited from these systems while slowly learning to confront them in myself. An inheritor of whiteness, access, education, ownership, I've struggled in reconciling this position with ecological precarity and my love for the nonhuman world. Throughout the process of this Masters of Fine Art degree at Emily Carr University I have turned again and again to the question of 'Why make art?' when the conditions and consequences of political and social failure are so immense; as flames move through the San Bernardino Mountains, as developers deny their land is anyone's home, and as water lines fall in the Colorado River. During my Independent Research semester I even explored a future that minimized art by proceeding with ecology courses at a local college and connecting with volunteer fieldwork on ecological surveys through University of California Riverside's Center for Conservation Biology.

Despite these inclinations, I was reminded of philosopher, writer, and activist, Bayo Akomolafe's wisdom in *These Wilds Beyond our Fences* in that "we don't observe facts and then decide to do something about it. Ethics is not external to the material doings and undoings of the world, but emerges with it—so that our bodies themselves are ethical responses of the world and its own

¹ The World Wildlife Fund's *2020 Living Planet Report* calculated a general population loss of 68% of vertebrates since 1970.

² Even the Environmental Protection Agency correlates rising carbon emissions to global warming despite their general lack of regulations or reinforcement.

³ Haraway has suggested such alternatives as "Chthulucene" and "Capitalocene."

⁴ See *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* by TJ Demos, 2017.

⁵ Kathryn Yusoff has argued that defining the Anthropocene through geology is inherently imbued with racist and imperialist history that must be reckoned with in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 2018.

⁶Yuhaviatam and Ma'arenga-yam

complexity” (242). This thinking helps me unravel the bonds I’ve placed upon myself in believing there should be a clear and specific way to respond- even if that requires forsaking my own practice. My life has been shaped by the negligent environmental policies of my lifetime and art has been a space for processing and responding. The meditative qualities of drawing as an activity, combined with its connection to imagination and observation have made drawing a lens. Through examining the potentials of this intersection, and trying to understand what kind of niche I can hold, an emergent practice of environmental comics has grown. This practice asks how comics can be a strategy for building awareness and responsibility through a time of ecological crises. My responses and MFA Thesis Project include workshops, webcomics, published writing and a website. It has also developed under a larger pedagogical umbrella in hopes of finding intersections with different communities to both draw together and act in response to the environment. The work is ongoing, as no one response is a conclusion, but an invitation to ask how to adapt as an artist amid the overwhelming ecological failures of our time.

2 GENERALIST SPECIES



Fig. 2. Aidan Koch, spot illustration, *Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World*, 2022.

Comics are a way of thinking. They are a medium I came to over a decade ago and they remain a dominant force in how I visualize and produce work, whether or not the outcome qualifies as comics. Through them, my practice mirrors the behavior of a generalist species⁷ who easily adapts and moves through different habitats, finding my work as easily applied to a wall in a gallery, circulated newspaper, or hanging silk; or in the context of remote schooling working through ephemeral and transitory practices like writing and teaching rather than object based.

⁷ In the Mojave, ravens and coyotes are some of the more abundant generalists. They have varied diets and most can successfully adapt to human altered environments.

Cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9) in his foundational work *Understanding Comics*. Expanding this lengthy description in *Drawn to Change: Comics in Critical Consciousness*, scholar in History and Indigenous Studies Sean Carleton emphasizes how “comics are necessarily partial texts that require readers to bridge the gaps, or gutters, between panels by using their own imaginations and the blended images and visuals as guides” (162). Yet in the practice of actually making comics, constantly producing in relation (to image, panels, and audience) translates into a larger methodology and mental state, much closer to Lynda Barry’s understanding of “comics as a way of seeing and being in the world and transmitting out experience of it” (*Making Comics*, 14). Both Carleton and Barry’s descriptions showcase how comics require participation by both the artist and reader to see and think relationally.

I am often made aware that my comics don’t necessarily follow preconceived ideas of what comics look like or how they function when I share my work with peers or strangers hovering over my table at art book fairs. American cartoons, French bandes dessinées, and Japanese manga rarely stray from their historic drawing tools, much less use abstracted figures and color planes to move their stories along. The tools for making comics are not their defining factor though, as both McCloud and Carleton’s definitions uphold, and one reason I love the medium is the way tools can be adapted into the narrative. One of the most important parts of my work is the visual tension gained through using both representational drawing as well as abstracted or fragmented drawing with a mix of mediums. These stylistic choices are used deliberately to work between seeing and feeling for my characters and my readers.

This exploration within sequential stories grew out of the single image storytelling process I studied as an illustrator for my undergraduate degree, becoming enraptured in the “story-conjuring power” (Barry, *Making Comics* 12) of the medium. My stories have explored the boundaries of perception, focusing on emotional landscapes, dreams, and alternative realities. One of my most recent published works, *Stone Blue Sky* (2021), goes as far as employing talking frogs and friends on a psychedelic-plant-infused walk to consider environmental degradation and species reintroductions. Figures 3 and 4 show a spread from this story in which the frogs lament

the eutrophication⁸ of their pond and disappearance of migratory birds. The looseness of the pastel blurs the boundaries of the characters and environment they've sprung from; the absence of medium in the pond, a disruption in its health or state of being; the cut in framing in fig.4 showing the heron's world and perspective as sky-centric, while the frogs' of the earth and water. In these stories, perspectives are always moving and colors, shapes, textures, and abstracted figures become tools for re-examining reality and encompassing a multitude of ontological orientations⁹.



Fig. 3. Aidan Koch, pp. 25, 26, *Stone Blue Sky*, published by Sporen, 2021.

⁸ Eutrophication is a phenomenon in bodies of water in which increased nutrients lead to an increase in algae and plant growth, who consume more oxygen and block sunlight. This suffocates other living organisms in the water and eventually the algal and plant matter also die resulting in dead zones. Increases in nutrients are usually linked to runoff from industrial farming and agricultural sources.

⁹ Other recent stories of mine include *Man Made Lake* (2020), in which a human tries to describe to their therapist their past life as a fish; and in *La Espiral* (2020), the human story is interrupted by a narrative following two rivers converging and moving towards the ocean.

In their essay “Experiencing the More-than-Human World,” Micheala Fenske and Martha Norkunas specifically look to storytelling to ground the possibilities for more-than-human understanding. They state “narratives as an ancient form of understanding and communication, offer both a record of that connection and a path to creatively establish vital new relationships in the posthuman world” (Fenske and Norkunas 109). Though they are not specifically referring to comics, I can’t help but see comics as an exceptional form of storytelling for just this purpose, specifically the role of narrative as a longstanding form of communication and connection.

At the fringe of storytelling modalities, abstract comics can be seen to push the limits of what a story can be. Artist and art historian Andrei Molotiu describes how in abstract comics “the ‘story’ being told is primarily one of formal transformations and visual energy, not the depiction of a narrative that can be otherwise conveyed verbally.” He notes “words may play a part in abstract comics, but primarily as graphic elements, not to communicate or to further the plot. Some imagery can be there, too, as long as it does not form into a story and as long as it does not cohere into a unified space” (Molotiu). I believe this in turn links to possibilities for non-human storytelling and “the very attempt to imagine how a different kind of intelligent agent might differently negotiate—enact—the world” (Herman, *Storyworld/Umwelt*). In some of my own past work like in *Man Made Lake* (2020), as seen in figure 4, visual abstraction is central to the perceptual understanding of the plot in illustrating the lack of language to describe having transformed from a fish into a human. In this example, the transition from human profile to collage texture, watercolor wash, and pastel shapes, carries the reader from a literal embodiment, to a sensational and metaphorical one.

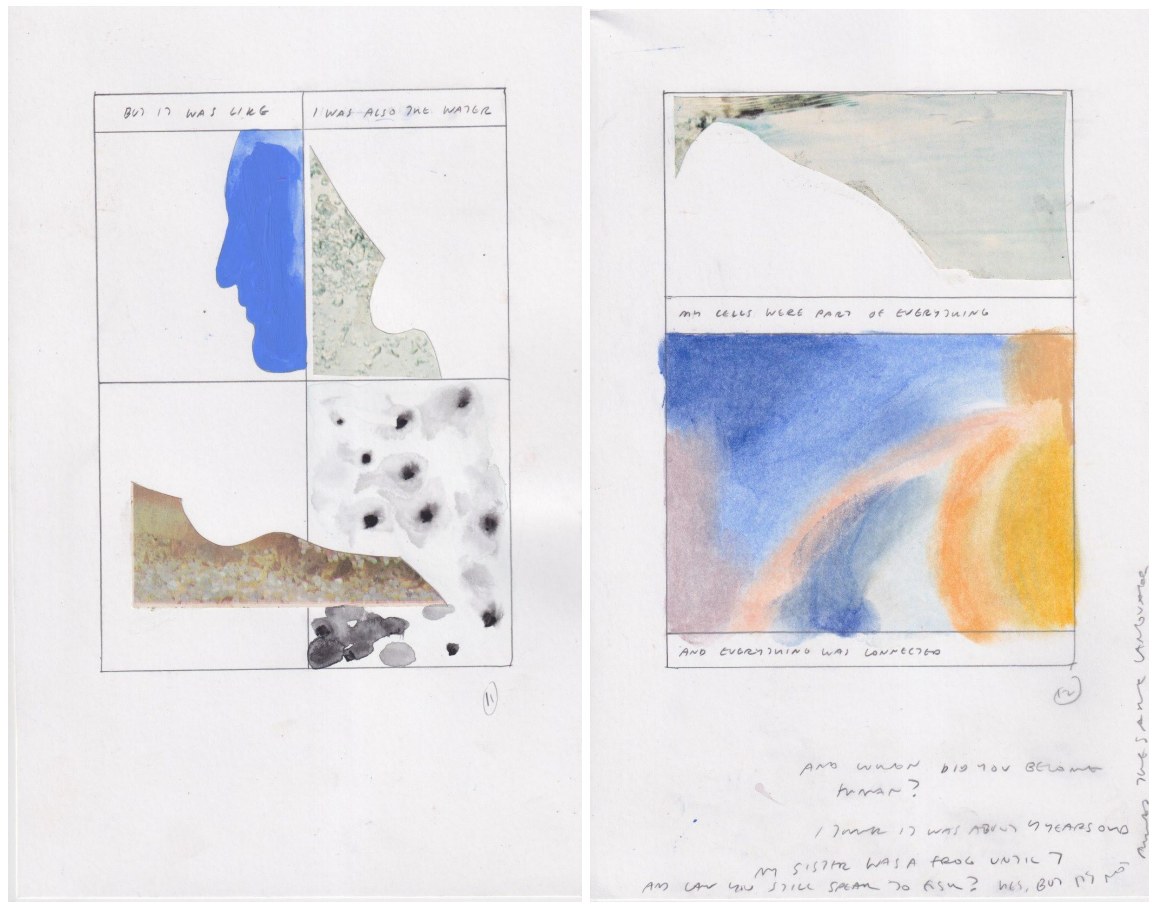


Fig. 4. Aidan Koch, pp. 11, 12, *Man Made Lake*, published by Kuš, 2020.

Moving away from abstraction, comics history also offers a lineage through “funny animals,”¹⁰ to explore animacy and who a character can be. From George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944) to Walt Kelly’s *Pogo* (1948-1975) and Tove Jansson’s *Moomin* (1948-1975), comics history is laden with examples of animal and animal-ish beings whose agency reframes reality and its laws. Although often their worlds reflect aspects of ours or are instrumentalized to discuss human politics,¹¹ their status as non-human is also essential to their existence. All of these characters live in diverse multispecies worlds and maintain non-human characteristics due to their physiology, perception, or environments.

¹⁰ The term “funny animals” applies to a genre within comics using anthropomorphized non-human animals (Gardner).

¹¹ *Pogo* regularly produced commentary on 1950’s America, tackling “McCarthyism, communism, segregation, and, eventually, the Vietnam War” (Wills) as well as early environmentalism.

More contemporary work like Alan Moore's revisioning of *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987) as a plant based humanoid, Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014), in which time and place become a narrator, to Clément Vuillier's *L'année de la comète* (2019), which disposes of human and animal characters to follow a comet strike on earth and its geologic consequences, represent a different era of nonhuman character, broadening agency outside the animal kingdom. In my most recent graphic novel, *La Espiral* (2020), the human narrative is interrupted by chapters following the convergence of two rivers and their movement towards the ocean. As seen in figure 5. These pages are all painted with watercolor using a wet on wet technique. By employing this artistic method, the medium and water itself expresses something akin to agency in how it spreads across the page and bleeds over the panels. I felt my lack of control over this process only enhanced the narrative in allowing a connection between the river or water as a character and a means of visual production. And while I still own up to my wholly human perspective, my own experimentation as well as these examples express ways to push interpretations and thereby experiences of our world.

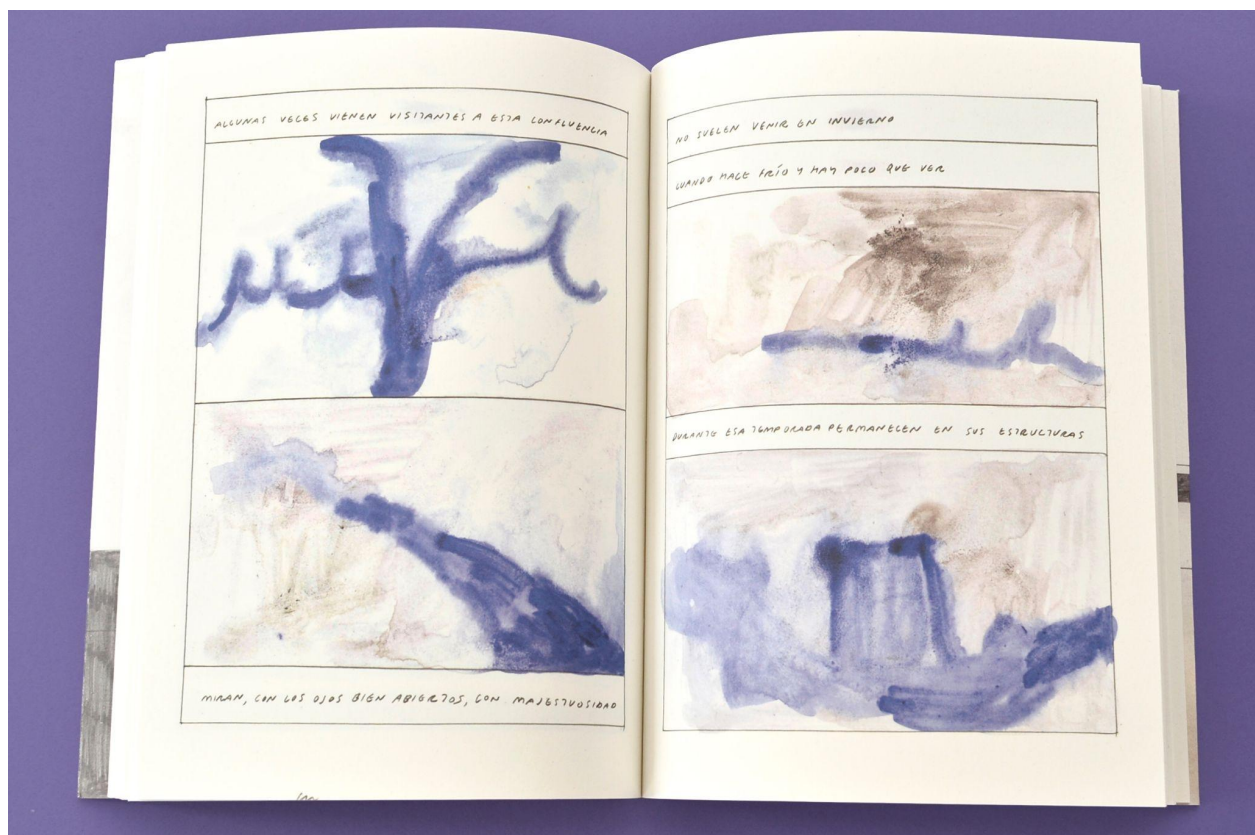


Fig. 5. Aidan Koch, pp. 55, 56, *La Espiral*, co-published by AIA Editorial and Ediciones Valientes, 2020.

This opportunity to further perspective within comics is assisted through comics' versatility and inherent adaptability to various platforms and audiences. In *The BEAT* interview with Kwakwaka'wakw comic artist Gord Hill, he describes comics as “effective in communicating to people who may have difficulty reading long historical texts, such as children or even adults with poor literacy skills or who simply lack the time and energy to commit to researching history” (Hill). In *EcoComix*, editor Sidney Dobrin details their extensive intersections with “ecomposition, animal studies, posthumanism, ecofeminism, queer ecology, semiotics, visual rhetoric and communication, ecoseeing, image-text studies, space and spatial theories, writing studies, media ecology, ecomedia, and other methodological approaches”¹²(5). These reflections show a growing interest and investment in comics from both a populist standpoint as well as academic. While Dobrin categorizes the work in his publication as “Eco” short for ecological and “Comix,” relating to subversive and experimental American comics from the 1970's, my choice of “environmental comics” flips emphasis to relate to the activist history of “environmentalism” within a general framework of comics.

Environmental comics are an artistic practice of thinking through ecological relationality using the expansive form of comics as its outcome. As described above in discussing comics as a medium based in visual relationality with a rich history of exploring other than human perspectives, nontraditional storytelling methods and populist readership, comics provide a unique format with which to approach the difficult ecological crisis of our time in providing a new tools for discussion when so many others have failed. In expanding my position as a creator within this niche, I outlined some of these connections and arguments in *Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World*, published in Bomb Magazine's Spring 2022 issue (See Fig. 5).

¹² While reflecting many of these intersections, *EcoComix* felt neglectful towards the visual artistry of the works it analyzed. This emphasized for me the necessity of an artist's voice on the subject in addition to academics and critics.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMICS: DRAWING STORIES FOR A CHANGING WORLD by Aidan Koch



In 2017, I published a twenty-eight-page sci-fi comic titled *Daughter*. It was planned as part one of a longer narrative in which a crashed spaceship “Ark,” holding specimen samples of all of Earth’s biologic inhabitants and led by a renegade artificial intelligence, is found by a young girl whose genetic memory triggers visions of plants and animals long lost on an abandoned and dying planet. The genre narrative was a stretch for me, and I never continued the story, but it opened a question I was desperate to investigate: How do I respond as an artist to escalating global ecological devastation?

I didn’t know, and I still don’t know. That same year I started a project called the Institute for Interspecies Art and Relations, a publishing, event, and resource platform, as a response to the same question. While IFIAAR has instigated conversations and collaborations between artists grappling with similar concerns, it hasn’t resolved my own conflicting feelings about my position as an illustrator, cartoonist, and fine artist. I have an ongoing impulse to give up my life as an artist for a more direct approach to environmental work, and yet it feels negligent to the career and community I’ve invested in for so long, as well as the part of me that truly believes in the activist potential and cultural power of art.

While *Daughter* didn’t become the epic saga I’d mapped in my notebook, it helped push me to see my practice in comics as a vessel for exploring the ecologically minded research, conversations, and experiences I was accumulating.



I wasn’t the only one beginning to dig into how comics intersect with environmental justice issues and political inaction on climate change. A recent wave in comics studies produced two important books—*Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives* (2017), edited by David Herman, and *EcoComix: Essays on the Environment in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2020), edited by Sidney I. Dobrin. Together these volumes present more than twenty scholarly essays on comics using the frameworks of ecocriticism and animal studies. This is new for comics, a medium historically sidelined in academia as lowbrow entertainment. Herman and Dobrin’s volumes help establish comics as, in Dobrin’s words, “dynamic representations of and constructors of cultural moments,” integrating “posthumanism, ecofeminism, queer ecology, semiotics, visual rhetoric and communication,” and “ecomedia” in their readings.

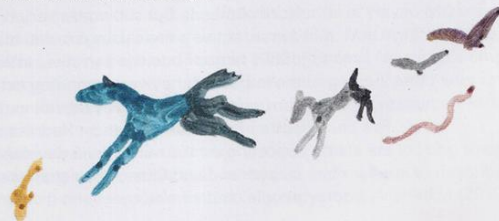


Fig. 6: Aidan Koch. “Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World.” *Bomb Magazine*, Issue #159, pp 85, 2022.

2.1 Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World

Having my pitch accepted to *Bomb Magazine* by editor Chantal McStay¹³ in Fall 2021, I spent much of winter crafting this work as a call within the greater arts community to consider the possibilities and influence of a comics lens in creating or reading ecologically oriented works. The final piece, published in the Spring 2022 issue, covers five pages and includes my illustrations throughout as visual guides and references for how image lends to greater comprehension of text. My writing was inspired by Elvia Wilk's *All Systems Go* published by ArtForum in the beginning of 2021. In Wilk's essay she surveys ecosystemic fiction from Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach* (2014) trilogy to Richard Power's *Overstory* (2018), popular books that have advanced in the vein of Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin, focusing on relationships with unknowable yet intertwined others. Wilk, a fiction writer herself, builds a supporting case noting "that weirdness is partially why fiction works even in times when revolution is repressed; it is also why you might not realize that the revolution is already upon you until you read about it in a story" (Wilk). This reflects TJ Demo's closing argument in *Decolonizing Nature* in that within art there's possibilities for "constructing a different form of life, decolonizing nature within and beyond the human, even while we recognize that art as such offers no automatic or guaranteed redemption" (271-272); a reflexive admission of ambiguity that rings true to my own questions of artistic reconciliation with ecological disaster.

¹³ I first met Chantal in 2016 on comics at the Sequential Artists Workshop on comic that I taught in Gainesville, FL and have enjoyed an ongoing dialogue on comics, art, and writing since.



Fig. 7: Aidan Koch. "Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World." *Bomb Magazine*, Issue #159, pp 86, 87, 2022.

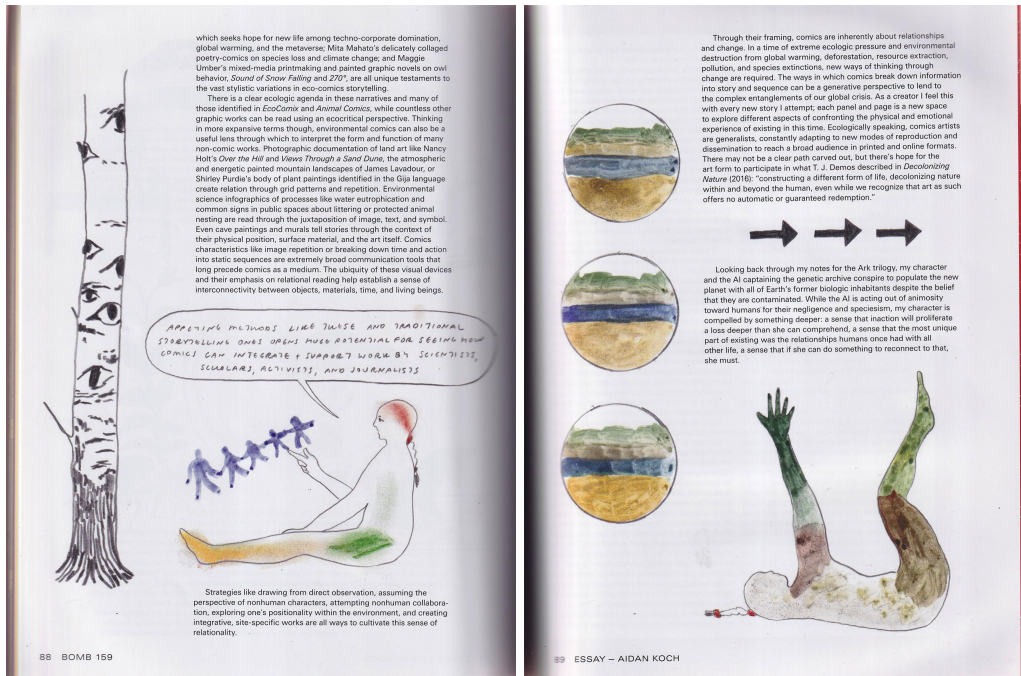


Fig. 8: Aidan Koch. "Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World." *Bomb Magazine*, Issue #159, pp 88, 89, 2022.

My essay expresses this creative quandary and representations of environmental comic works. Filling in the gaps of academic books like *Animal Comics*, edited by David Herman, and aforementioned *EcoComix*, I discuss the work of Lauren Redniss, Ines Estrada, Mita Mahato, Gord Hill, Joe Sacco, Hayao Miyazaki, and Maggie Umber. I found presenting the work as a graphic-essay rather than comic strip best suited the density and cerebral nature of the content.

Drawings of myself act as a guide throughout and spot illustrations demonstrate references and connections as they come up in the text. These include my avatar drawing, reading, and soliloquizing as well as aspects of my personal surroundings like my book pile or my cohabitators Tulip, Smiley, and Chippy. These personalize the larger inquiry by putting it in context of my daily life and nonhuman interlocutors, who so often emphasize for me the importance of grounding theory with being present and active in my relationships.



Fig. 9: Aidan Koch, spot illustration, “Environmental Comics: Drawing Stories for a Changing World”, 2022.

By pursuing this writing and its outlet in *Bomb Magazine*, my goal was to extend the web of relationality between comics, contemporary art, and ecology. It also acted as a call to encourage cross-disciplinary collaborations, visualizing new possibilities within the form for exploring pressing issues facing our planet.

3 MAPPING ECOSYSTEMS



Fig. 10: Workshop participants at Giant Rock, Landers, CA, permissions not granted

I was drawn to the idea of environmental comics not simply as a genre or personal approach to making work but for its pedagogical potential. Through pedagogy and group participation, the “feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us” (hooks 40). bell hooks describes her struggles and successes in forming this type of

learning community in *Teaching to Transgress*, a text I turned to while trying to understand the role of teaching. Building and facilitating this sense of community feels important as a way to tackle the emotional isolation of caring about animals, ecosystems, and biodiversity in a wealthy, capitalist, neoliberal country that has done little more than lip service to climate change. By positioning myself as a facilitator, I'm responding to the "catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning" (hooks 11). If nothing else, assuming this role is a device to keep myself motivated through responsibility to my human and nonhuman communities.

Though I have limited professional teaching experience, I drew upon the confidence others have extended to me for coordinating past workshops. Alternative educational bodies like cartoonist Tom Hart's Sequential Artist Workshop in Gainesville, Florida, and experimental educator Frank Traynor's NoSchool for youth in Rockaway, New York both invited me to teach for them with little to no experience. Their models emphasize the value in sharing a diversity of art practices and taking risks¹⁴ in the learning environment. These programs connect to the legacy of artists as teachers and alternative arts education in America stemming from Black Mountain College (1933-1957) in Asheville, North Carolina. Today various other artists and groups have taken up this agenda including Stephanie Springgay's The Pedagogical Impulse, Fritz Haeg's Salmon Creek Farm, and 2727 California in Berkeley.

Participating in programs based on these models, I've been inspired by their ability to support relationships. By operating outside the hegemonic educational system, value exists in more than outcomes. Community building and personal creative practice find space to flourish. Since working with Tom and Frank, I've facilitated many more workshops, and continued to find inspiration in using teaching as a creative process to learn about my own practice and that of others.

My current work involves hosting independently organized environmental comics workshops in various geographic locations, allowing these places to "become 'pedagogical' through cultural

¹⁴ Frank let me lead a workshop where kids in Rockaway made comics as "ancient scrolls" that we rubbed in mud and lit on fire.

practices that enable or encourage us to attend closely to their multifarious qualities” (Gough 71). In, “Ecology, ecocriticism and learning: how do places *become* ‘pedagogical’?” Noel Gough specifies “becoming” to avoid an essentialist argument as well as demonstrate the relational quality of pedagogy. This nuance felt accurate to the type of encounters I wanted to work with. I wanted to find a way to not just make work *about* the environment, but to ground the making in actual experiences with people in places. This approach places the work in the category of ecopedagogy, a term rising from Paulo Freire’s *critical pedagogy*, yet incorporates ecoliteracy as an integrated and substantial aim (Lang). In the US, most ecological education occurs only within the sciences and with an emphasis on being objective or nonpolitical. Yet, ecopedagogy adheres to the necessity for ecological education to be paired with social justice, understanding that these are intrinsically linked in the modern world. In creating a learning branch of this conceptual project, I’m emphasizing the need for holistic ecological education outside the discipline of natural sciences, that encourages new forms for critical thinking.

The participants for my workshops have ranged from internet followers, friends, and friends of friends to university students specifically studying sequential arts.¹⁵ By using a comics framework, the exercises I design mirror and expose some aspect of the relational quality of their environment, and encourage new ways of seeing.

3.1 Exercises in Seeing

¹⁵ Definitions of sequential arts vary, but the term usually refers to comics-related art practice. I tend to think of it generally as art displayed in sequence to imply a connection. Sequences could be linear or spatial and at the discretion of the artist as to how they’re read.



Fig. 11: Workshop participants' drawings at Mission Creek Preserve, Desert Hot Springs, CA.

In designing exercises, I found setting up a foundation of strategies helped in planning. These strategies are observation¹⁶, position¹⁷, perspective¹⁸, collaboration¹⁹, and integration²⁰. While I have not employed all of them yet in practice, they offer a roadmap for myself or others hoping to share an environmental comics curriculum. For place based workshops, I have tried to be sensitive to the conditions and circumstances by employing the concept imparted in Anna Tsing et al's *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* and "[begin] with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us" (M7). For the online workshop, participants were directed to use their position and different perspectives through digital references and memory.

¹⁶ Using direct sensorial observation.

¹⁷ Using oneself and one's family or cultural history.

¹⁸ Attempting the perspective of another by considering physiological constraints. The idea that different organisms have unique experiences based on their biology is commonly referred to as *umwelt*.

¹⁹ Attempting to consensually or passively collaborate with a nonhuman entity like wind or sun.

²⁰ Creating site specific work.

Below are some descriptions and exercises from the various workshops. I've included a few corresponding images from participants, fig. 11-13, to help illustrate the variety of outcomes.

NOVEMBER 14 2021

Mission Creek Preserve

Desert Hot Springs, California

Traditional Serrano and Cahuilla land

This was the first workshop and incredibly intimate. I picked up my friends Andrew and Vanessa in Yucca Valley and drove them down to Mission Creek Preserve where Kwonyin met us. The preserve is tucked in a valley surrounded by the foothills of the San Bernardinos. It is a vital habitat for liminal species like black bears and mule deer, providing an active water source between the mountains and the desert. We used the old stone houses and a decommissioned cattle trough, our drawing surface as seen in Fig. 10, as work stations over the two and a half hours we were there drawing.

Illustrating Presence (30min)

- Divide a single piece of paper in two sections either by folding or a line.
- Spend 15 minutes wandering the landscape. Write notes about observations and experiences- smells, sounds, colors, feelings- on one half of the paper.
- Return and trade papers.
- After reading the written observations, on the other half of the paper, in either a single or multi-panel drawings, illustrate the writing.
- Share.

GOALS: In this exercise I hoped to both offer a unique moment of quiet, concentrated observation in an outdoor setting, and through changing hands, the challenge of interpreting text into image. The sharing of observations built a wider interpretation of the landscape and exposed the limits of individual attention. The practice of interpreting another's writing also flexed the valuable skill of communication and translation, as well as bonding through trying to understand

one another's perspectives. I repeated this exercise in some variation with every workshop because of how positively participants reacted to both halves of the work.

DECEMBER 5 2021

Payne's Prairie Preserve

Gainesville, Florida

Traditional Timuca and Seminole lands

On December 5, 2021 I hosted a workshop at Payne's Prairie Preserve, a biodiverse swamp and grassland, in Gainesville, Florida. My friend Margaret Tolbert helped organize and reserve a shelter to gather and work under. Collectively there were about a dozen participants from a landscape architect and a botanist, to a couple of cartoonists, only a few of whom I'd met before. The workshop lasted approximately three hours including coffee and conversations.

Exquisite Tree (15min)

- Oriented vertically, fold a single piece of paper into three parts.
- Keeping it folded, draw the base of a nearby tree on the bottom third, extending the trunk lines just over the fold.
- Trade papers without looking at the bottom third.
- Using the extended lines to start from, draw the trunk of a nearby tree, extending any extra lines just over the top fold.
- Trade papers without looking at the bottom two thirds.
- Using the extended lines to start from, draw the canopy of a nearby tree.
- Unfold and share.

GOALS: This exercise was designed as a group warm up to feel a sense of cohesion together and to cast off insecurities about presenting solitary/individual drawings. In creating a hybrid tree, I also hoped it might open curiosity onto the relationship between different species of trees located in proximity and their histories/relationships. While in this instance, it quickly loosened nerves, prompted observation/tree-appreciation and brought people together in admiring their shared

work, I think an extension to the exercise would need to be added to build deeper ecological implications.



Fig. 12: Multiple artists, “Exquisite Tree” Exercise.

FEBRUARY 21 2022

Falmouth University

Falmouth, UK

(ZOOM)

Having connected with Hugh Frost, a friend from the comics community, in 2021, I reached out to him about experimenting with his MA in Authorial Illustration class at Falmouth University in the UK for a digital environmental comics workshop. We arranged it as a Microsoft Teams session and I tried to plan out ideas that could be less reliant on physical locality.

Zoom Out (40min)

-Divide a piece of paper into four panels.

-In the first panel, use a web based live-cam of an animal sanctuary, nature preserve, or zoo and draw from the screen what's there.

-Type in the name of the animal sanctuary, nature preserve, or zoo into google image search. Fill in the second and third panels by drawing two images found in the image search.

-Type the name of the animal sanctuary, nature preserve, or zoo into Google Earth. Zooming in or out, choose a perspective and fill in the final panel with a drawing of this view.

GOAL: While working together online I wanted to utilize a technological frame- a view we can't directly achieve but is something that has influenced and shaped environmental conversations since the famous 1972 "Blue Marble" photo.²¹ I hoped using these platforms would help connect the participants thinking about real places and their own geographic connections. The final search through Google Earth led to the most conversation as it surprised people in seeing the scale of these places in comparison to other types of land use leading to critique and speculation about proper wildlife habitat and welfare.

²¹ This image has become ubiquitous in the cultural perception of Earth. The photograph was taken in 1972 from space in the precise position to show the Earth fully in line with the sun, therefore fully illuminated and glowing like a marble. This view was interpreted to show how small and contained our planet is highlighting the consequences of our actions to potentially have global effects.

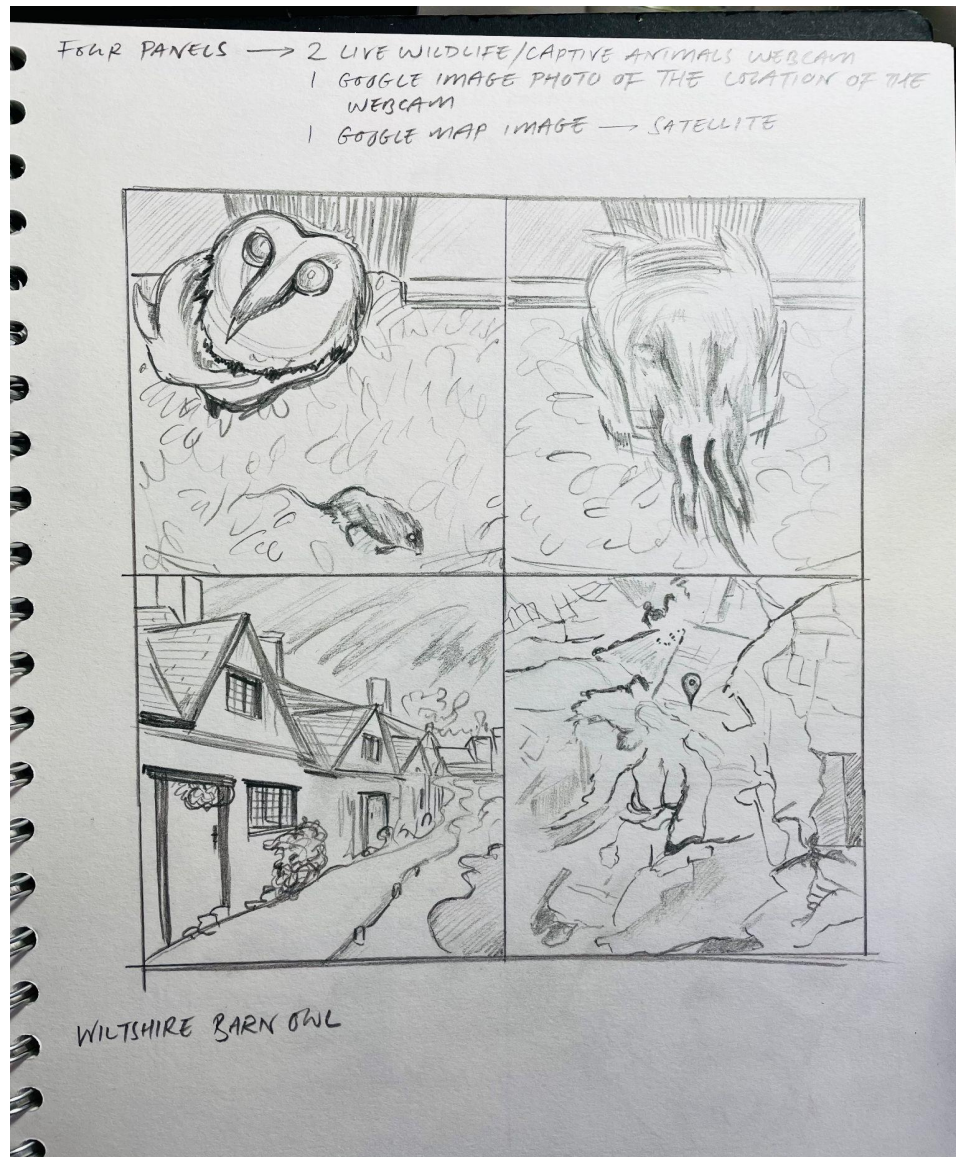


Fig. 13: Carys Boughton, “Zoom Out” exercise, 2022.

FEBRUARY 25 2022

Giant Rock

Landers, California

Traditional Serrano lands

For the last workshop concluded under my MFA, I hosted four local mixed discipline artists²² near my home at Giant Rock, a significant landmark of the high desert for its massive scale, as

²² Kiko the dog was also there but did not participate beyond holding down supplies from the wind.

seen in Fig. 9. The site is operated by the Bureau of Land Management (BML) and associated with off-highway vehicle recreation, though also used for graffiti, free-camping, illegal-dumping and gun shooting. It also sits adjacent to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms. Though not abundant in plant life, the boulder mountains and vast sandy acres are home to a variety of reptiles, insects, and mammals.

Following Tracks (24min)

- Divide a piece of paper into four panels.
- Find a set of tracks in the sand and in the first panel, draw them from above.
- Based on the size of the tracks, try to lower your eye level to the height of their maker.
- Follow the tracks.
- In the second and third panels, draw two scenes from the imagined perspective of the track maker.
- In the fourth panel, make an educated guess about who made the tracks based on print size and shape and draw the culprit.

GOAL: In this exercise, I wanted to encourage a shift in perspective out of the human. My hope was that this could enhance the participants' own awareness to different planes of life and see how variations in landscape less perceptible from a human eyeline may have great effects on different beings. By asking for three views over the four panels, it also sets up a sequence in which a reader could infer the transfer of perspective without outside context based on the linearity of the discovery at the end. This exercise felt successful in both activating a sense of excitement and curiosity as well as critical thinking about physiology.

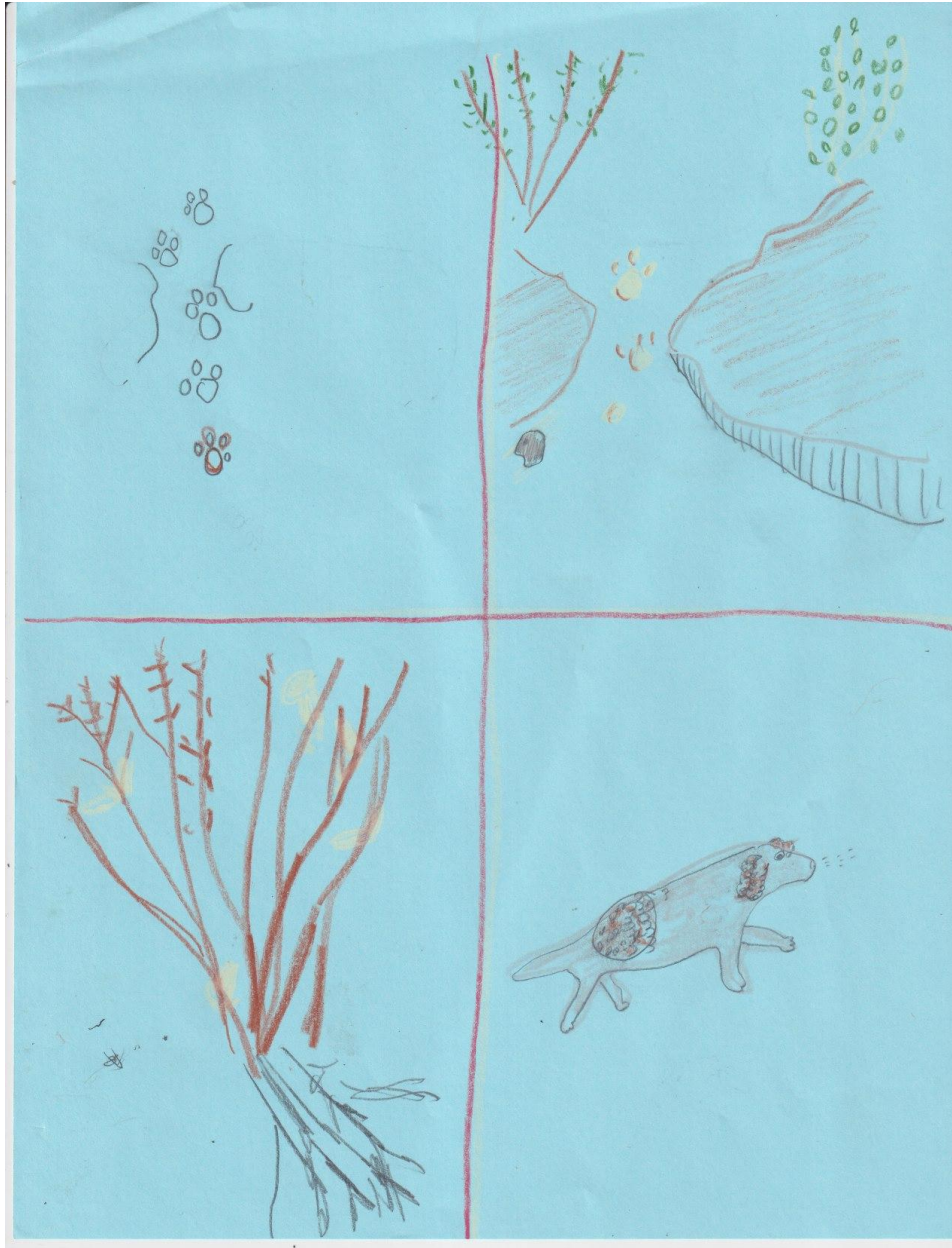


Fig. 14: Nich McElroy, "Following Tracks" exercise, 2022.

These workshops were essential in understanding the possibilities for environmental comics. They were both part of the art and part of my own research. Talking with participants after drawing together in the physical workshops, an important comment was how rare it was to just spend hours outdoors in one place with other people. During the pandemic especially, this felt like a valuable offering in itself, one that I also gained a lot from. Each time I also learned from how participants engaged with the exercises- which processes really stimulated creativity, which

observations offered surprises and excitement, and how to evolve certain areas to engage more deeply in the future. While I see the goal of these particular events as being the experience itself- observing, drawing, collaborating- I can imagine a more concentrated body of work at another time that collects outcomes for publication or distribution, memorializing the time, place, people, and creation.

3.2 Making Comics, *Making Comics*

As I realized my work was turning towards comics pedagogy, one book I immediately pulled from my library was Lynda Barry's *Making Comics* (2019). Her work and presence have been with me since childhood starting in 1999 at a reading for her forthcoming book *Cruddy* (2000) at Orca Books in downtown Olympia. Despite being a former Evergreen State College classmate of Matt Groening and Charles Burns, Barry's work has always existed more on the periphery of the comics world. Her experimental mediums, busy style, and cartoonish characters often mask tough stories about coming of age and familial relationships. Starting with 2008's *What it is*, her work started shifting towards workbooks and harnessing creativity.

Making Comics is an invitation to draw and learn through Barry's methods. It's outlined like a class, with a supply list, grading description, and expectations, followed by 150 pages of exercises that take from five to ninety minutes. Each page is elaborately illustrated and includes her reproductions of student work as well as various animated characters to lead through the handwritten text instructions. She is a generous teacher and maintains that anyone and everyone can draw comics.

What makes this book compelling is how it frames comics as a way of processing experiences rather than simply a means to creating a product. She notes "the hand is experiencing the same world in a different way. It's you but not you" (Barry, *Making Comics* 37) and that "different methods of seeing the world will make your comics more alive" (37). Translating realities from imagination or eye to hand and image is part of what I find most stimulating about working in the comics medium. Specifically practicing observational drawing can help train away

reductionist and simplistic ways of seeing. Following lines and shapes with your hand can open up understanding to the vast differences and specific natures around us. Stepping out of single image and into sequence opens even more space for subtle variation and changes to unfold.

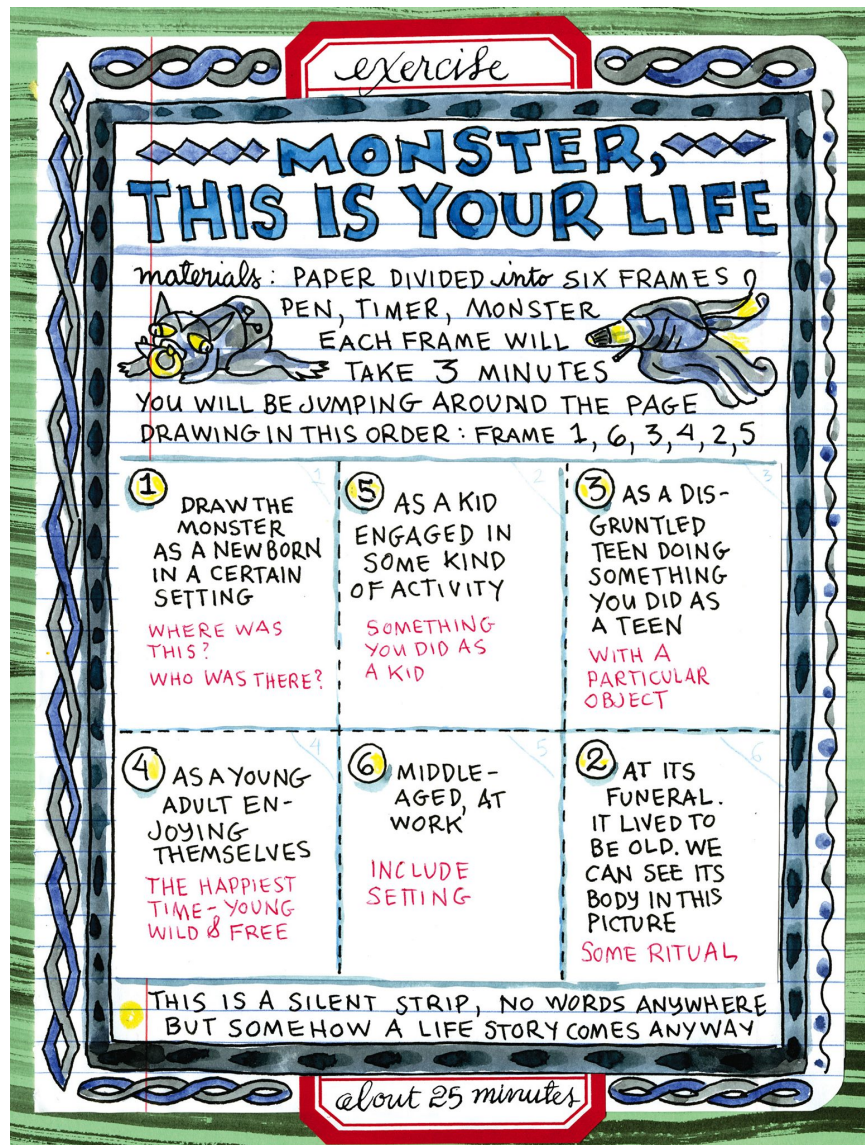


Fig. 15: Lynda Barry, page 10, *Making Comics*, 2019. Copyright Lynda Barry. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

Barry's exercises in the book run from drawing characters with both left and right hands to *Monster, this is your life*, a snapshot lifecycle of a monster character from newborn to funeral in six panels (Fig. 14.). The brevity and experimental quality of the exercises in *Making Comics* are

similar to what I've developed for environmental comics workshops, especially in being designed to accommodate any level of artistic skill or familiarity with comics. A notable difference is that while Barry is focused on accessing imagination as a tool for storytelling, my work is based around identifying stories within pre-existing ecological relationships, and one's perspective in relation to them. In my Zoom Out exercise, which I directed both in person and online, the goal was to connect the micro and macro. Whether starting from abstracted details of rotting wood/nest-cam to treeline horizon/aerial geo-mapping, putting these images in sequence made apparent their relationality and embeddedness- the micro existing in the macro. Even in the exercises I've developed for remote teaching, I ground prompts in memory or online tools that can offer new perspectives on actual places. Though we cannot separate ourselves from a human lens, playing with perspective in this way can deepen awareness of our surroundings. This step is essential to the environmental comics concept in aspiring to build stronger relations with places and nonhumans. Barry's work sets a strong example though for keeping comics pedagogy unpretentious and welcoming, no matter the conceptual aim.

4 HOLOBIONT RELATIONS



Fig. 16. Aidan Koch, *Environmental Comics*, website, 2021.

<http://aidankoch.com/environmentalcomics.html>.

Over the summer 2021, I constructed a website as a guide to the concept of environmental comics. Using my web 2.0 skills in dreamweaver, I tried to make it playful and informative, incorporating a variety of images and links. While this was mainly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and not having a physical exhibition option at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, I also liked it as an active archive available worldwide. I have always been drawn to

the archival and collection aspect of the internet, having built my first personal artist website in 2007 at the age of 19 and maintaining online relationships through sharing experimental comics on flickr and tumblr for the decade after.

The resulting website is a research project and hub. The introduction states:

The intention of environmental comics is to position and support the environment as a significant character in our lives and stories rather than backdrop within sequential visual narratives.

Environmental comics considers eco-criticism, land-based art practices, folk memory, fairy tales, post-humanism, and intersectional environmentalism.

Five foundational facets of environmental comics are: observation, position, perspective, collaboration, and integration. These strategies ground dialogue around how sequential visual narratives examine their environments. These are simply points to build from and explore.

[BACK](#)

Position: using oneself and one's family or cultural history. How has one's family and society shaped their relationship to nature and environment? What are the historical events or narratives that shaped this point of view?



EXPLORING: POSITION

In Caroline Merchant's *Radical Ecology*, she begins by addressing the need to access how relations with the environment are built through society and personal histories "going back at least to your grandparents' generation." She asks

Were your ancestors native to this country? Are you or your parents first-, second-, or perhaps eighth-generation immigrants? What large events-wars, depressions, revolutions, social movements- shaped their lives? How did your families use the land and relate to nature? Which of their values have you absorbed? Which have you rejected? (1)

By starting with this set of questions for the reader, she opens a necessary and vital dialogue that directs attention towards subjectivity and positionality in regards to ecologic conversations. Answering these questions is imperative to better understanding accountability towards the environment as well as destabilize the hegemonic hold "objective" science has on environmental movements, governmental policy, popular philosophy, and societal values.

Bibliography

Merchant, Carolyn. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

More Resources:

[UC Berkeley: The Graduate Council Lectures: Carolyn Merchant lecture on Environmental History in the United States](#)

[Duke University: The Kenan Institute for Ethics: Trace: Marks of History, Memory and Race in the Anthropocene with Dr. Lauret Savoy](#)

[The New School: Tishman Environment and Design Center: Ecology and Sovereignty: Native and Indigenous Perspectives Transcending Boundaries](#)

Fig. 17. Aidan Koch, "Position," *Environmental Comics*, website, 2021.

The site exists like a holobiont²³, an assemblage of disparate elements grouped around their domain forming an ecological unit. Though elements can be seen and accessed as discrete pages or images, I would have never conceived to create or connect them without the larger site to guide me. Under the strategy sections of observation, position, perspective, collaboration, and integration, exist descriptions, image examples, bibliographic references, and links to relevant articles and youtube lectures. The research mixes explicitly art material with more abstract theoretic and political content. Under the page “Integration” I cite Miwon Kwon’s *One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity* (1997) connecting the possibility of site specific comics to contemporary art discourse as well as links to relevant projects by artists Steven Gill, Nicholas Galanin, and Naziha Mestaoui. These illustrate the breadth of influences that can be drawn upon from a comics lens. A link to *Mojave Walk and Other Stories* leads to a webcomic I drew while *Environmental Comics Blog* links to a tumblr page with loosely related works of art pieced together from the internet.

Creating this site was as much an archive for myself to reference as for others. In thinking through the broad scope of connections to environmental comics, maintaining an active, growing, space to form ideas and literally link resources is valuable to my continuing research. For others, it should offer some unique perspectives as to what this intersection of theory and practice can be. Referencing Lisa Jevbratt’s *interspeciescollaborations.net*, I can also see potential for it to become a participatory space.

²³ A holobiont recognizes both host and organisms maintained within the host as intertwined, inseparable, and necessary for life. The way in which the internet links and connects material suits this kind of structure. One could say social media especially mirrors holobiont relations in that the framework has no value without the users to activate it.

4.1 Internet Archiving and Participation

I first came to *interspeciescollaborations.net*²⁴ as I was filling in resources for another web-platform of mine, the Institute for Interspecies Art and Relations,²⁵ *ifiaar.org*²⁶. This site immediately felt like a kindred spirit or virtual predecessor without my having been aware of it. The heading for this site declares it as “a collaborative research space for documenting the progress of art projects made together with non-human animals and for posting resources relevant to such endeavors” (Jevbratt, *interspeciescollaborations.net*). Although it was “originally developed for the class “Interspecies Collaboration” (Art 185LJ/ART130) at UCSB” (Jevbratt, *interspeciescollaborations.net*) which was conducted on and off from 2006 to 2014, the site allows access for non-student contributors.

The site is divided into several categories including reference information for the site, and sections *By Collaborators*, *Resources*, and *For Collaborators*. Visitors can explore postings by past students documenting their collaborative proposals and projects along with personal journaling about their progressions. The *Field Guide* pdf offers an abbreviated version of the general principles in a form that is printable and mobile including ethical guidelines and quick start project ideas like *Sing together with a Coyote or a Cat*. The *Interspecies Collaboration* pdf link on the other hand is a longer academic document. This writing is a key reference for my work and generates a framework that can be applied and adapted to a variety of mediums and methods. Her division of approaches into collaborative forms: protocol, interface pattern, communication, limbic resonance, also inspired my thought process on breaking down categorical strategies within environmental comics. The ability to break down the larger concept into cohesive concepts creates repeatable and relatable ways of working²⁷.

While the framework for Jevbratt’s class site lays out an aspirational model for online pedagogy, the specific topic of interspecies collaboration is less relevant to the environmental comics work

²⁴ <http://128.111.69.4/~interspecies/>

²⁵ 2017-present. IFIAAR is a publishing, event, and resource platform focusing on collaborating with artists on human-non-human animal topics. Projects have included submission based cell phone animal video compilations to a week long symposium at a gallery in New York.

²⁶ <http://ifiaar.org/>

²⁷ See 3.1 *Exercises in Seeing*.

I propose. Though listed as one potential strategy to begin a comics work, I mainly suggest working with entities like wind and sun, where potential harms and issues of consent are less at the forefront, and there is a clear path towards a visual art product. It's possible that the term "collaboration" becomes less suitable to the nature of the experiment, but assuming some degree of agency by those entities, I don't think it's wholly inappropriate. A deeper investment into the possibilities for non-human animal collaboration leading to a comic piece as its outcome is interesting, but not the distinct goal or focus of this work, and would come with a deeper interrogation of the approach.




Figure 18 has been removed due to copyright restrictions




Figure 18 has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 18. Lisa Jevbratt, *Interspecies Collaboration Field Guide*, 2009.

Jevbratt's personal work and practice looks at digital interfaces, specifically in relation to translation and communication with non-humans. One of her best known projects, *Zoomorph* (2013), offers "software filters for video and imaging software and smartphones simulating how animals see" (Jevbratt, *zoomorph.net*) combining biologic/physiologic inquiry with technology, art and animal studies.

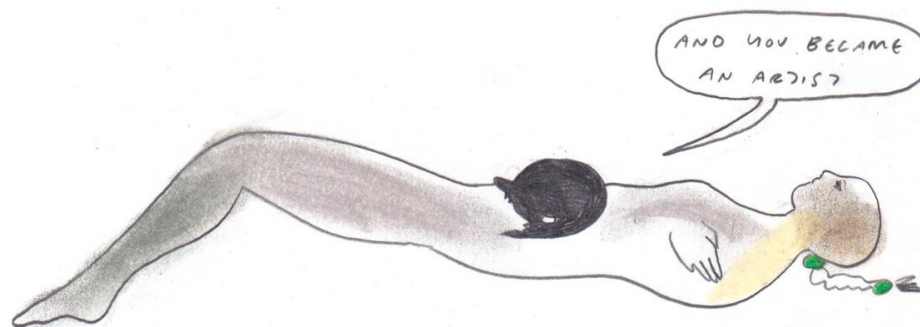
The way her work thinks about perception and communication feels critical to the dialogue I'm building on comics and the aspirations I hold for continuing my website and pedagogical practice. The continued existence of *interspeciescollaboration.net* as a domain allows the project to influence beyond its use within the classroom and is a generous resource and tool.

4.2 Mojave Walk & Other Stories



Fig. 19. Aidan Koch, Frame 15, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

In developing the five conceptual categories for my pedagogy of environmental comics, position stood out as a place I personally needed to ground the creative research with. I saw it as an opportunity to think through the various conflicts I've been feeling about making art at all. Though historically I've avoided using myself as a character²⁸ the merits of drawing one's life story are not lost on me, especially given two of the most critically acclaimed comics²⁹ Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy* (2006), are autobiographical.



²⁸ This is probably some mix of privacy concerns, cowardice, and deep curiosity towards the world outside myself.

²⁹ More commonly regarded as "graphic novels."

Fig. 20. Aidan Koch, Frame 16, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

I started trying to sketch myself in my journal on a regular basis to find an authentic portrayal, one that was both recognizable and artistically interesting to reproduce. I looked to Amelie von Wulffen³⁰ and Trenton Doyle Hancock³¹ who, besides being established contemporary artists, have deeply revealing comics practices in which they act as characters though not in strictly autobiographical narratives. Trial and error brought me to an androgenous nude with a braid held by two scrunchies- my most common hairstyle of the past six years- smudged with tonal multicolor pastel. As I allowed this character to take shape, they began sharing the depths of my ecological insecurities, mostly in conversation with a little black dog, Tulip, my 8lb chihuahua-mix cohabitor.



Fig. 21. Aidan Koch, Frame 17, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

Using dialogue actually made describing my own feelings more direct and clear, allowing the wavering nature of my beliefs to come out between characters and over time. Drawing and script coevolved. Insecurities about being an artist when something more utilitarian like a biologist or lobbyist could have more direct political impact were enhanced by showing myself becoming physically immobilized lying down. Tulip acts as relief and a counterpoint to these insecurities by emphasizing the present and a more generous view. This is both another part of myself

³⁰ In *At the Cool Table*, deceased Spanish painter Francisco Goya tags along with Wulffen to art openings offering snide commentary and addressing her insecurities as an aging female artist.

³¹ Doyle Hancock recently entered his ongoing sci-fi story-world, the Moundverse, as a character.

speaking, and a genuine feeling she offers me through the grounding of her needs and her unwavering emotional support.



Fig. 22. Aidan Koch, Frame 18, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

The drawings shift the tone, beginning with voice bubbles floating next to solitary landscape panels, oscillating the source of the voice between land and figure. Pauses are marked by full bleed plein air watercolors I painted throughout Spring 2020, a quiet and desperate time in which my greatest solace was watching the desert bloom. The second half of the piece starts with a walk cycle sequence³² where the repetitive imagery slows time and allows a lingering on the conversation. My body is represented as simply a body shape with gestural color pastel smearing over the lines. This mix of nudity and ambiguity reflects my own confusion over my defining physical characteristics and wondering what might I look like to Tulip whose relationship to my

³² This sequence refers to the work of Eadward Muybridge, whose photographic documentation of human and animal walk cycles were both a lesson in biologic locomotion and essential in development of moving image arts. I use it as both a gesture towards my own cyclical anxious thought patterns and my daily dog walks.

body includes jumping, climbing, and sleeping on me daily.



Fig. 23. Aidan Koch, Frame 20, *Mojave Walk*, webcomic, 2021.

The finished comic is presented on the aidankoch.com/environmentalcomics.html website under the title *Mojave Walk*. It reads vertically through scrolling downward and without boundaries demarcated between panels. I thought this suited the online nature, conforming to how most people read web-based content. The piece is supplementary to the mission and primary content of the site but is valuable in giving a backstory and an example of how comics can be a strategy for coping with ecological crises. By framing the link as *Mojave Walk & Other Stories*, I'm also leaving an opening for myself to continue sharing and processing through this method.

5 Staging Materials



Fig. 24. Aidan Koch, installation at Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons, July 2022. Photo: Aidan Koch.

In designing the final thesis exhibition, I was challenged by materializing works that had largely existed in nonmaterial space. Given the final opportunity to work on site at Emily Carr in July 2022 though, it felt meaningful to try and translate the projects shared in this document as an installation. I tried to consider each area of my project and describe it through new materials.

In order to allow access to the website, I had the landing page and strategy links printed on fabric and sewn together, leaving the ends unfinished to represent the ability to grow and extend the site like a quilt. The essay, present in print in Bomb Magazine issue 159, was displayed along with a poster of scanned comic book references relating to environmental comics from Phillippe Squarzoni's *Climate Changed* (2014) to Melanie Gillman's *As the Crow Flies* (2017) offering a guide to those curious to read more.

I converted the panels from the webcomic into a projected slideshow adding a brief animation of hand drawn wind in pastel to mark the beginning/end of the loop. This was back-projected onto a

two sided wooden frame with screens of printed fabric showing a pink landscape and abstracted landscape. The screens make a kind of dimensional comic in themselves while the projection activates more direct storytelling and an environment for my characters.

In order to encourage engagement and represent the workshops, I made sixty risograph print editions of two worksheets for gallery attendees. One, for drawing in the space, prompted the use of rocks collected on my travels from California to BC, while the other, asks for a slower, reflective moment outside the gallery space to begin. Immediately after installing this work on the plinth, myself and others in my cohort noted people standing around the worksheet table. By the end of opening night, a small stack of worksheets sat to the side, filled in. I enjoyed looking through the anonymous pile and the diversity of visual responses. It worked in breaking the norms of the gallery show in asking the audience to make work, not just consume it. It was also validating in proving how even a passive display can get a real level of participation when the invitation is clear.



Fig. 25. Aidan Koch. *Environmental Comics Worksheets: Rock Thoughts* and *ZOOM OUT*, risograph on paper, 2022. Photo: Aidan Koch.

The process of converting the works into the gallery space emphasized the adaptability I mentioned at the beginning of my writing. While not produced for this specific context, the work lent itself to becoming. In this sparse physical space where people would be moving through- my choices were not survival strategy, but a strategy of relationality and finding modes and methods that best suited the environment.

4 CONCLUSION



Fig. 26: Shifting sand dune ecosystem, Palm Springs, CA

Through the spring, I spent most weeks heading down to Palm Desert, driving by the massive wind farm at the base of Mt San Jacinto, Coachella Festival billboards, and a newly under-construction hockey arena.³³ An evaporative haze hung over the valley from hundreds of acres of sprinkler-fed golf courses with a brown tint lent by exhaust drifting from Los Angeles. Here I joined biologists in counting annual wildflowers, arthropods, and vertebrates among the shifting sand dune ecosystems. In these segmented parcels of land, endemic lizards like the flat-tailed horned lizard and Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard can be found tucked under dormant saltbush; ribbon-like tracks of shovel-nosed snakes and paced prints of a trotting coyote

³³ Palm Desert has an average of 99°F for almost four months of the year with summer highs reaching the 110°s. From an ecological standpoint, the choice to place a hockey arena here is beyond ration.

make patterns in the rippled sand. In this ever-worsening drought year, flowers were few and far between but we spotted some milkvetch pushing up the sand.

It's hard to know if my artistic pursuits would be different if the dunes and fringe-toed lizard and life in the desert weren't on the precarious edge of existence. Global warming and over development³⁴ are violent realities of this time. My mind is often dominated by the fear and urgency of losing what's left and having to witness that loss. In Dr. Lynn Sweet's 2019 report on the future of the iconic Western Joshua Trees within Joshua Tree National Park, she warns of a near extinction in this historic range by the end of the century, primarily due to climate change (Sweet et. al.). I live 18 miles from the park where rapid development of illegal marijuana grows, short term rentals, and lack of reinforced protection on top of climate change are having visible consequences now. When the ones by my house fall, there may not be others to take their place.

The difficulty in concluding this description and research of an emergent practice is that like the complex systems and problems around me, there may not be a clear resolution, but there is change and growth. As the pressures of my life before COVID-19 and school return, my mind is again dominated by the simple insecurities of making a living as a working artist, something difficult to reconcile with ephemeral practice. While this is a familiar pattern in my life, I also know the conversations I've begun through this work- with participants and readers- will continue to resonate beyond myself. As of this August, I have scheduled a speaking engagement with the New York Comics Symposium to discuss environmental comics, a workshop being planned in the desert for late Fall in collaboration with a local field biologist, and have corresponded with a student who participated in my class at Falmouth University about how to imagine interviewing a compost pile. Activating these connections, I'd like to continue to work towards interventions and collaborations that have real impacts and outcomes that reach beyond or expand upon conventional art making.

³⁴ These are the largest threats to the desert ecosystem. Habitat alteration and loss as well as changing weather patterns to hotter and drier create potentially catastrophic circumstances for many endemic species.

The process of this degree helped me recognize the importance of holding the joy of slow, curious, caring, and reciprocal relationships to places and creatures along with the fear of witnessing their loss. These relationships are helping to teach me gratitude towards being an artist in this time; an excuse to watch, learn and listen. They offer me glimpses of different worlds. I'm hoping to simply help others see them too.

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APPENDIX

Koch, Aidan. "Environmental Comics: Drawings Stories for a Changing World." *Bomb Magazine*, issue #159, Spring 2022.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMICS: DRAWING STORIES FOR A CHANGING WORLD by Aidan Koch



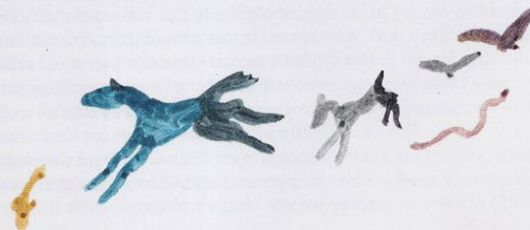
In 2017, I published a twenty-eight-page sci-fi comic titled *Daughter*. It was planned as part one of a longer narrative in which a crashed spaceship “Ark,” holding specimen samples of all of Earth’s biologic inhabitants and led by a renegade artificial intelligence, is found by a young girl whose genetic memory triggers visions of plants and animals long lost on an abandoned and dying planet. The genre narrative was a stretch for me, and I never continued the story, but it opened a question I was desperate to investigate: How do I respond as an artist to escalating global ecological devastation?

I didn’t know, and I still don’t know. That same year I started a project called the Institute for Interspecies Art and Relations, a publishing, event, and resource platform, as a response to the same question. While IFIAAR has instigated conversations and collaborations between artists grappling with similar concerns, it hasn’t resolved my own conflicting feelings about my position as an illustrator, cartoonist, and fine artist. I have an ongoing impulse to give up my life as an artist for a more direct approach to environmental work, and yet it feels negligent to the career and community I’ve invested in for so long, as well as the part of me that truly believes in the activist potential and cultural power of art.

While *Daughter* didn’t become the epic saga I’d mapped in my notebook, it helped push me to see my practice in comics as a vessel for exploring the ecologically minded research, conversations, and experiences I was accumulating.



I wasn’t the only one beginning to dig into how comics intersect with environmental justice issues and political inaction on climate change. A recent wave in comics studies produced two important books—*Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives* (2017), edited by David Herman, and *EcoComix: Essays on the Environment in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2020), edited by Sidney I. Dobrin. Together these volumes present more than twenty scholarly essays on comics using the frameworks of ecocriticism and animal studies. This is new for comics, a medium historically sidelined in academia as lowbrow entertainment. Herman and Dobrin’s volumes help establish comics as, in Dobrin’s words, “dynamic representations of and constructors of cultural moments,” integrating “posthumanism, ecofeminism, queer ecology, semiotics, visual rhetoric and communication,” and “ecomedia” in their readings.





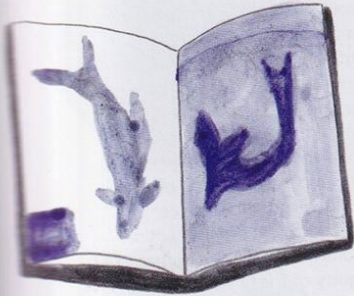
Today, comics and graphic novels range from abstract, poetic experiments with form to intimate narratives on gender, sexuality, race, mental health, war, and more. And the spectrum is widening to encompass new generations inspired by the medium. I love the expansion comics allow in navigating image and language. The best comic works don't simply illustrate a text; rather, text and image integrate and complement each another, creating a dynamic tension in how we read simultaneous elements. This unique construction opens space beyond language, creating room to feel through the intricacies of relationships via sequence and rhythm. Comics rely on change and the perceived relations between panels and pages to tell their stories, driving readers to seek connections and interpret.



Around the timely publication of *EcoComix* and *Animal Comics*, I was inspired by three recent works of environmental graphic journalism. Lauren Redniss's *Oak Flat* (2020) and Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land* (2020) both explore resource extraction and Indigenous land battles in North America but showcase very different artistic styles. Sacco builds dense, active panels using classic black-and-white crosshatching. He draws himself into the narrative, interviewing First Nations members on the impact of the ever-expanding extraction industry in the Northwest Territories. While in *Oak Flat*, not explicitly presented as a comic, the author is a softer presence. Redniss shifts between observational reporting on the mining and development encroachment on Apache sacred land and loose, color graphite drawings of landscape, sky, people, and ceremony.



Jumping back in time and taking an Indigenous perspective, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* by Gord Hill (first published in 2010 and revised and expanded in 2021) offers an expansive look at colonial violence and Indigenous resistance movements through short historical vignettes. The consistent graphic approach with bold hand-drawn titles, maps, action sequences, and third-person narration allows momentum to carry the reader between different time periods, reinforcing recurring patterns of injustice. These stories outline the framework for Indigenous peoples of the Americas' leadership in environmental protection, land reclamation, and policy today, in which Hill actively participates.



While nonfiction comics cut a relatively clear path toward the current political-ecologic crisis, my own introduction to environmentalist storytelling came through the fictional worlds of Hayao Miyazaki, particularly his acclaimed manga-turned-film, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, which began printing in 1982. Princess Nausicaä's empathy and compassion deeply impressed my young mind, and I later reflected on the relevancy of Miyazaki's story to fights over resources, industry, global warming, and the ambiguity of good and evil.

Many alternative contemporary comic artists are looking toward experimental approaches both in subject and material to describe ecosystem relations. Inés Estrada's eco-dystopia *Alienation* (2019),



which seeks hope for new life among techno-corporate domination, global warming, and the metaverse; Mita Mahato's delicately collaged poetry-comics on species loss and climate change; and Maggie Umber's mixed-media printmaking and painted graphic novels on owl behavior, *Sound of Snow Falling* and *270°*, are all unique testaments to the vast stylistic variations in eco-comics storytelling.

There is a clear ecologic agenda in these narratives and many of those identified in *EcoComix* and *Animal Comics*, while countless other graphic works can be read using an ecocritical perspective. Thinking in more expansive terms though, environmental comics can also be a useful lens through which to interpret the form and function of many non-comic works. Photographic documentation of land art like Nancy Holt's *Over the Hill* and *Views Through a Sand Dune*, the atmospheric and energetic painted mountain landscapes of James Lavadour, or Shirley Purdie's body of plant paintings identified in the Gija language create relation through grid patterns and repetition. Environmental science infographics of processes like water eutrophication and common signs in public spaces about littering or protected animal nesting are read through the juxtaposition of image, text, and symbol. Even cave paintings and murals tell stories through the context of their physical position, surface material, and the art itself. Comics characteristics like image repetition or breaking down time and action into static sequences are extremely broad communication tools that long precede comics as a medium. The ubiquity of these visual devices and their emphasis on relational reading help establish a sense of interconnectivity between objects, materials, time, and living beings.

APPLYING METHODS LIKE THESE AND TRADITIONAL
STORYTELLING ONES OPENS HUGE POTENTIAL FOR SEEING HOW
COMICS CAN INTEGRATE + SUPPORT WORK BY SCIENTISTS,
SCHOLARS, ACTIVISTS, AND JOURNALISTS



Strategies like drawing from direct observation, assuming the perspective of nonhuman characters, attempting nonhuman collaboration, exploring one's positionality within the environment, and creating integrative, site-specific works are all ways to cultivate this sense of relationality.

Through their framing, comics are inherently about relationships and change. In a time of extreme ecologic pressure and environmental destruction from global warming, deforestation, resource extraction, pollution, and species extinctions, new ways of thinking through change are required. The ways in which comics break down information into story and sequence can be a generative perspective to lend to the complex entanglements of our global crisis. As a creator I feel this with every new story I attempt; each panel and page is a new space to explore different aspects of confronting the physical and emotional experience of existing in this time. Ecologically speaking, comics artists are generalists, constantly adapting to new modes of reproduction and dissemination to reach a broad audience in printed and online formats. There may not be a clear path carved out, but there's hope for the art form to participate in what T. J. Demos described in *Decolonizing Nature* (2016): "constructing a different form of life, decolonizing nature within and beyond the human, even while we recognize that art as such offers no automatic or guaranteed redemption."

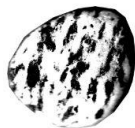


Looking back through my notes for the Ark trilogy, my character and the AI capturing the genetic archive conspire to populate the new planet with all of Earth's former biologic inhabitants despite the belief that they are contaminated. While the AI is acting out of animosity toward humans for their negligence and speciesism, my character is compelled by something deeper: a sense that inaction will proliferate a loss deeper than she can comprehend, a sense that the most unique part of existing was the relationships humans once had with all other life, a sense that if she can do something to reconnect to that, she must.



PANEL 1

PANEL 2



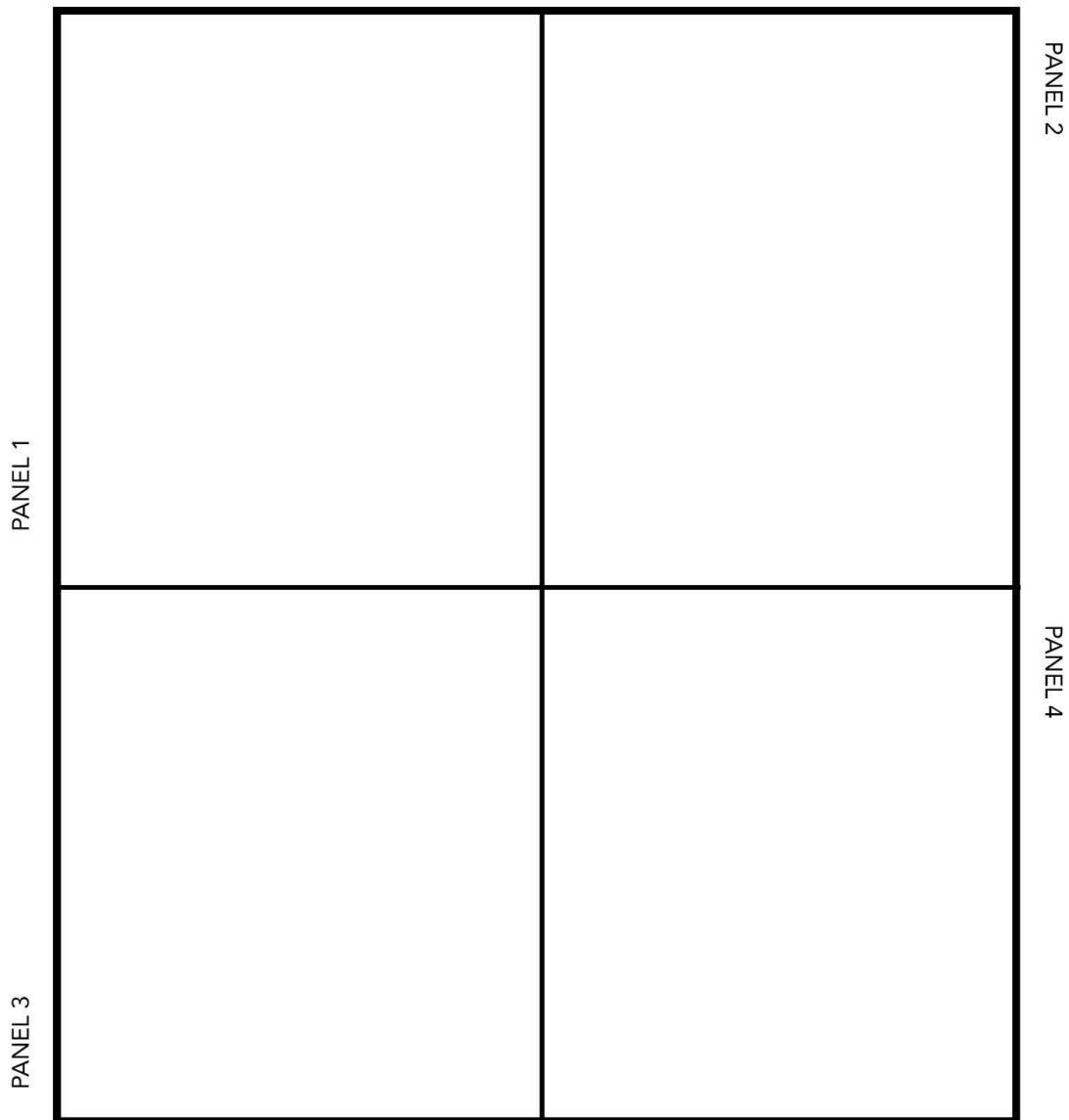
Rock Thoughts

Place a rock in panel 1 and trace it's outline.

In panel two take several rocks and place them in a curved line with a larger rock at the end. Trace their outlines.

In panel 1, working only outside the rock outline, use your imagination or geologic knowledge to draw a picture of the environment where you think the rock may have originated from. A mountain? A driveway? A beach?

In panel 2, write inside the the outline of the largest rock some thoughts on what this rock's journey must have been to get here now.



ZOOM OUT

Find a location outdoors or at a window.

Identify a texture or pattern in your view and draw this in panel 1, filling the entire panel.

Identify a motion in your view and in panels 2 and 3 draw this motion as a sequence, depicting the movement over time (location, proximity, and state changes are all examples).

In panel 4, draw your entire scope of vision including details from your foreground and view that includes the subjects of panels 1-3.