

ENVIRONMENTAL COMICS: DRAWING STORIES FOR A CHANGING WORLD

by Aidan Koch



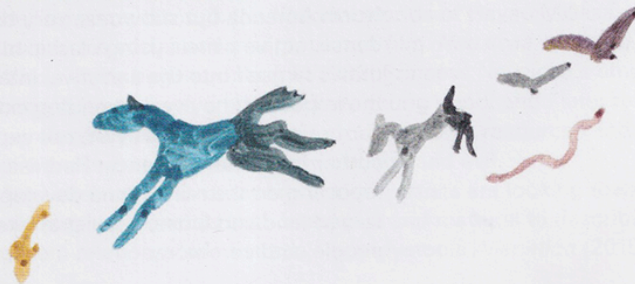
In 2017, I published a twenty-eight-page sci-fi comic titled *Daughter*. It was planned as part one of a longer narrative in which a crashed spaceship “Ark,” holding specimen samples of all of Earth’s biologic inhabitants and led by a renegade artificial intelligence, is found by a young girl whose genetic 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.

THIS IS ONE REASON WHY THE COMIC FORMAT'S ABILITY TO EXPLORE VISUAL PERSPECTIVES OPENS OUR IMAGINATIONS AS TO WHO CAN BE A CHARACTER, AND WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCES CAN BE PERCEIVED WHEN LOOKING TOWARDS THE NON-HUMAN WORLD.



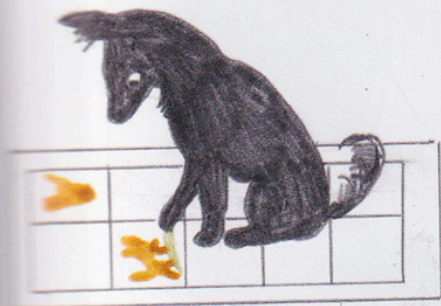
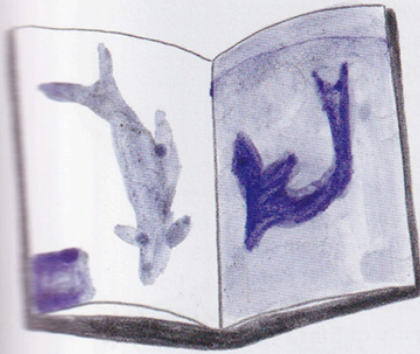
HELLO



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.

