

BOOK REVIEW

A Different Kind of Book Review

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Who is Afraid of Degrowth?

Abstract

In Céline Keller's *Who is Afraid of Degrowth?*, the publicly accessible debate on degrowth is curated and restaged in a comic format. Keller's illustrations not only visualize the conversations as they happen across a range of platforms—from snappy, heated retorts on “X,” to long scholarly treatises, memes, and infographics floating around the web—but contextualizes them within the network of references and influences. Moreover, drawing on Victor Fei Lim's framework for multimodal discourse analysis, Keller's own stance within the debate becomes clear through the illustrations and her staging of the *mise en scene* and the *mise en page* (to apply Geraint D’Arcy's terms, 2020). This review examines how Keller not only indexes the argument for and against debate, but inserts her own arguments through the visual plane, showing how *Who is Afraid of Degrowth?* imagines an alternative to the current patterns of public discourse.



A DIFFERENT KIND OF BOOK REVIEW

HOW DOES FORMAT STAGE MEANING?

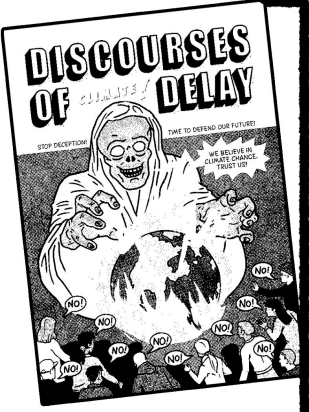
WHO IS AFRAID OF DEGROWTH?, CÉLINE KELLER'S MULTIMODAL CURATION OF THE DEGROWTH DEBATE, FORCES READERS TO SLOW DOWN AND NEGOTIATE THE GAPS, BUCKING THE FAST INFORMATION CULTURE WHICH DOMINATES ONLINE DISCOURSE.

WHO IS AFRAID OF DEGROWTH?

IS NOT THE FIRST OR LAST USE OF POPULAR MEDIA TO DEPICT THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIETY...



... IT IS NOT EVEN KELLER'S FIRST OR LAST OF THESE COMICS.



NOTA BENE:

COMICS HAVE A HISTORY OF GRAPPLING WITH VISUALIZATIONS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE. DANIEL WORDEN'S BOOK PETROCHEMICAL FANTASIES: THE ART AND ENERGY OF AMERICAN COMICS (2024) OFFERS A HISTORY OF THESE COMICS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE BIGGER PICTURE.



Timothée Parrique @timparrique · Mar · 3, 2022

THE 10 MISCONCEPTIONS OF DEGROWTH WHICH STRUCTURE THE BOOK FIRST APPEARED AS TWEETS BY TIMOTHÉE PARRIQUE - SO WHAT IS GAINED BY REINTERPRETING TEXT AS A COMICS NARRATIVE?

50

661

6.1K



I THINK COMICS CAN DO A LOT BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE NOT AFRAID OF THEM, PEOPLE CAN USE THEM AND MAKE THEM THEMSELVES, AND COMICS ARE A GREAT WAY TO SHARE OR INVITE PEOPLE TO READ FURTHER.

COMICS ARE A PARTICULARLY APPROPRIATE FORMAT TO TALK SERIOUSLY ABOUT DEGROWTH, ESPECIALLY SINCE...

THE DOMINANT MODEL OF ACADEMIC PUBLISHING IS ABSURD.

AND SCHOLARS LIKE NEIL COHN (2020) HAVE SHOWN THE POTENTIAL FOR COMICS TO ENGAGE READERSHIPS WHICH ARE OFTEN UNDERSERVED.

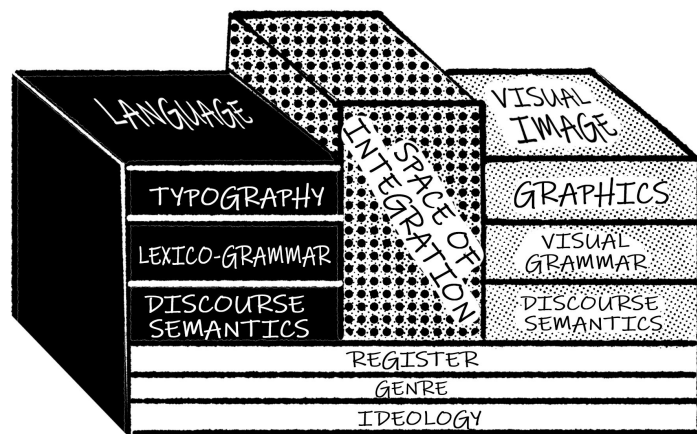
degrowth
JOURNAL
(2023)



IN ADDITION TO THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF TEXT, COMICS OFFER THE RHETORICAL POTENTIAL OF IMAGES. TO STRUCTURE AN ANALYSIS, I LIKE TO USE

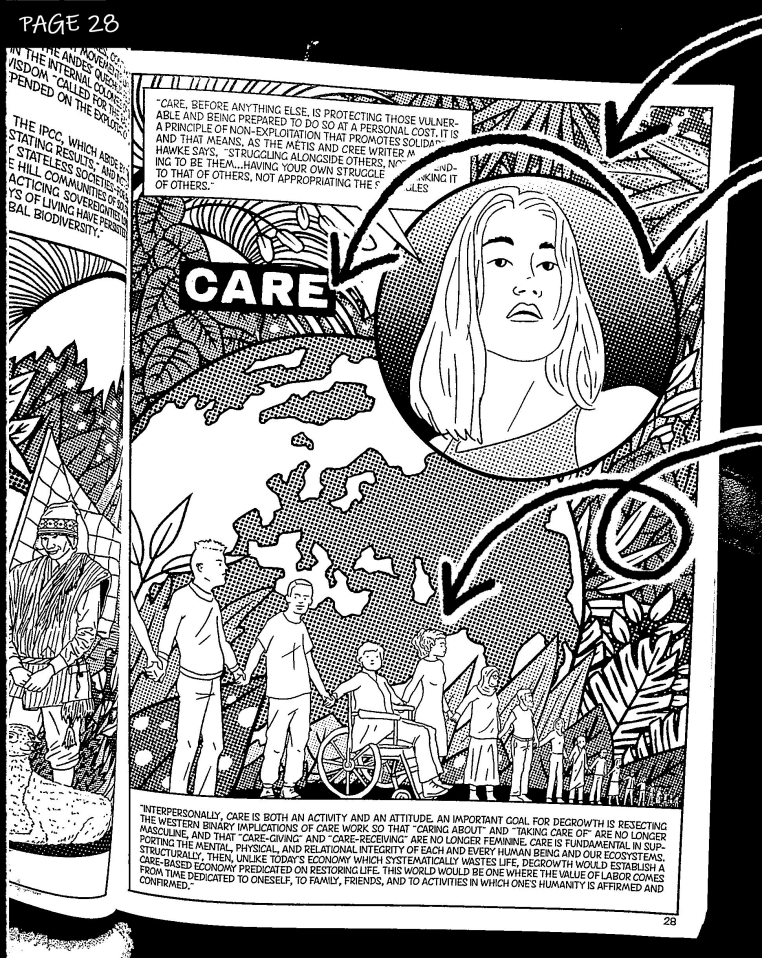
LIM'S INTEGRATIVE MULTI-SEMIOTIC MODEL

NOT ONLY REFERENTIALLY OR SEMIOTICALLY RICH, SEQUENTIAL ART HAS ITS OWN DISCOURSE SEMANTICS. LIM'S MODEL FOR MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ARGUES THAT THE INTEGRATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE ADDS ONE MORE LAYER OF MEANING-MAKING. KELLER'S IMAGES ALIGN WITH THE IDEOLOGY, GENRE, AND REGISTER OF THE QUOTED TEXTS, BUT SHE USES VISUAL RHETORIC TO INSERT HER OWN ARGUMENTS.



(GRAPHIC ADAPTED FROM LIM 2002: 37)

AN EXAMPLE OF READING THE ARGUMENT OF THE IMAGE:



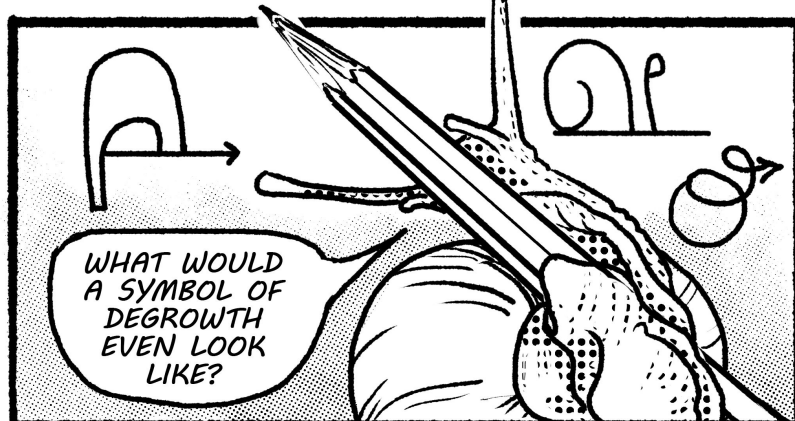
THE ORGANIC BACKGROUND IS NOT 'MERELY DECORATIVE,' BUT A 'PRODUCTIVE' LAYOUT CHOICE (PEETERS 2007), EQUATING THE KEY TERM 'CARE' WITH LUSHNESS AND LIFE. THE CHOICE OF MORE TROPICAL PLANTS CONTEXTUALIZES THE SPEAKER, JAMIE TYBERG, OUTSIDE OF A EURO-CENTRIC DISCOURSE.

THE VARIETY OF PLANTS IS THEN REPEATED IN THE DIVERSITY OF FIGURES ENGAGED IN A HUMAN CHAIN, ANOTHER SYMBOLIC EMBODIMENT OF THE KEY TERM.

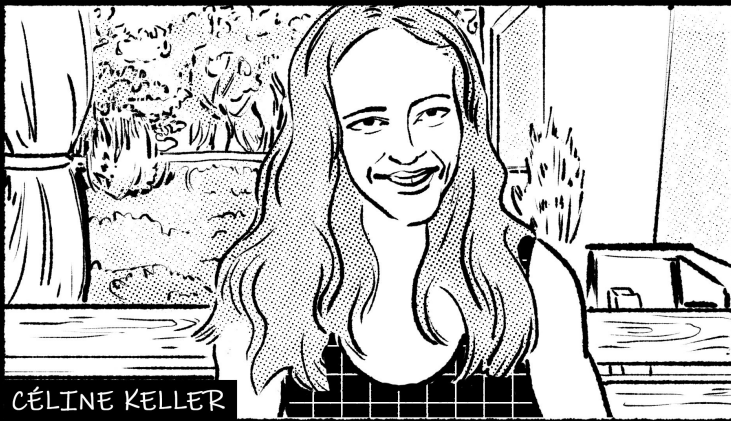
THE IMAGE OFFERS VISUAL METAPHORS WHICH CONTRIBUTE AESTHETICALLY AND HIGHLIGHT THE FACTORS WHICH MOST INTEREST KELLER, ARGUING THAT BOUNTY AND CONNECTION WILL RESULT FROM CARE. (FOR MORE IDEAS ABOUT ANALYZING THE VISUAL PLANE OF RESEARCH COMICS SEE: WOOCK 2023.)

ALL IMAGES FROM THE BOOK ARE REPRODUCED WITH THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

WHO IS AFRAID OF DEGROWTH? IS A LOGOCENTRIC BOOK, AS THIS REVIEW WILL BE, BECAUSE OF THE TEXT DOMINANCE OF THE DISCOURSE. WITHOUT A GRAPHIC SHORTHAND FOR BIG IDEAS LIKE "DEGROWTH," TEXT CAN BE EXPEDIANT.



KELLER EXPLAINED THAT SHE FOUND THE HUMBLE SNAIL TO BE QUITE SYMBOLIC OF DEGROWTH WHEN I INTERVIEWED HER ABOUT THE BOOK ON JULY 18TH, 2024. SHE DRAWS A CUTE SNAIL CHARACTER TO REPRESENT DEGROWTH, WHICH APPEARS ON THE COVER OF THE BOOK ITSELF.



CÉLINE KELLER

CLIMATE ACTIVIST, COMICS ARTIST, PUBLIC THINKER



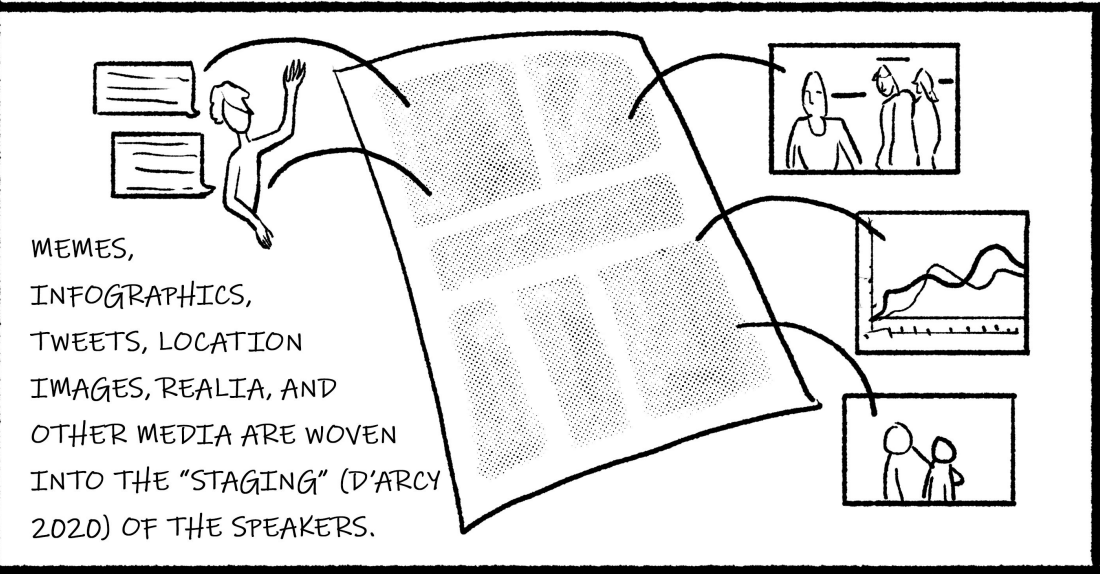
ELIZABETH WOOCK

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT PALACKY UNIVERSITY

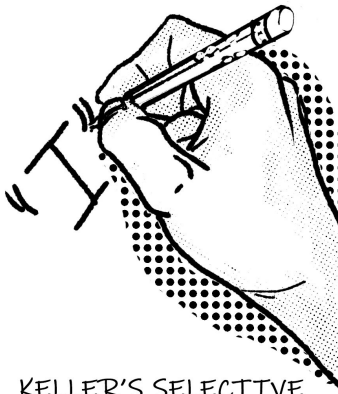
RATHER THAN USING IDEOGRAMS OR SYMBOLS TO CONTEXTUALIZE THE IDEAS OF MANY VOICES, KELLER EMPLOYS PORTRAITURE. THIS REFERENCES THE USE OF PROFILE PICTURES IN SOCIAL MEDIA BUT GOES BEYOND THE AVATAR TO INCORPORATE MORE NATURALISTIC PORTRAITS WHICH GIVE THE READER A SENSE OF THE POSITIONALITY OF THE SPEAKER.



THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF EACH SPEAKER IS LABELLED WITH A JOB TITLE, BUT SOME NOTES CAN ALSO INCLUDE EXTENSIVE INFORMATIONAL ASIDES, ALTERING THE CONTEXT OF A GIVEN QUOTE.



MEMES, INFOGRAPHICS, TWEETS, LOCATION IMAGES, REALIA, AND OTHER MEDIA ARE WOVEN INTO THE "STAGING" (D'ARCY 2020) OF THE SPEAKERS.

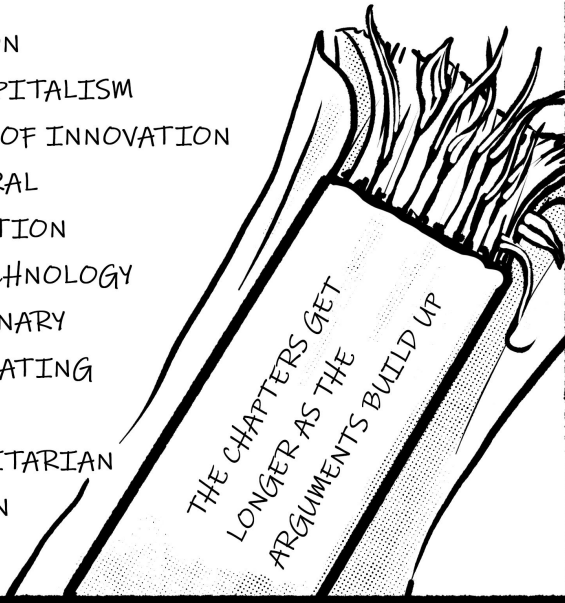


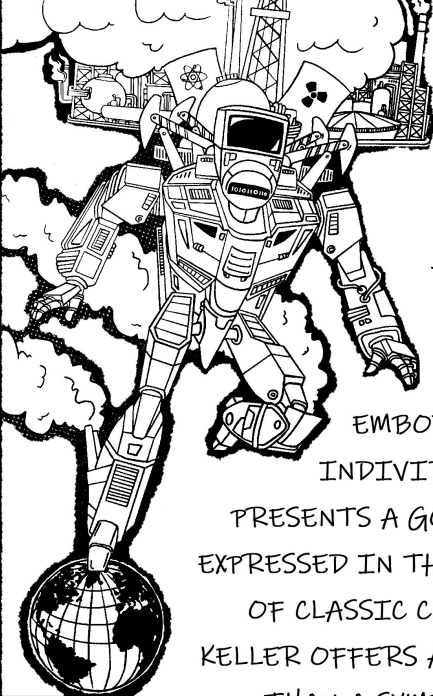
KELLER'S SELECTIVE STAGING STANDS IN FOR THE FIRST PERSON NARRATOR.



THE BOOK TACKLES 10 REPRESENTATIONS OF DEGROWTH.

- 1) DEGROWTH AS RECESSION
- 2) DEGROWTH AS MINI-CAPITALISM
- 3) DEGROWTH AS THE END OF INNOVATION
- 4) DEGROWTH AS UNNATURAL
- 5) DEGROWTH AS DEPRIVATION
- 6) DEGROWTH AS ANTI-TECHNOLOGY
- 7) DEGROWTH AS REACTIONARY
- 8) DEGROWTH AS PERPETUATING CAPITALISM
- 9) DEGROWTH AS AUTHORITARIAN
- 10) DEGROWTH AS UTOPIAN



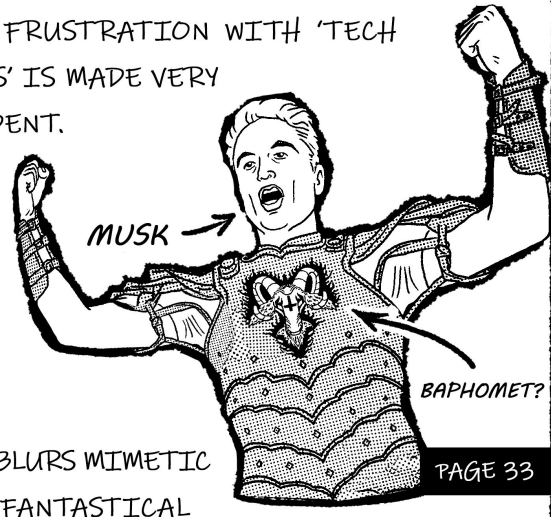


KELLER'S STANCE
TOWARDS THE
DEGROWTH DEBATE
IS STATED NOT
IN THE TEXT, BUT IN
THE ILLUSTRATIONS.

THE IMAGINATIVE
EMBODIMENT OF CERTAIN
INDIVIDUALS AND CONCEPTS
PRESENTS A GOOD/BAD DICHOTOMY
EXPRESSED IN THE VISUAL LANGUAGE
OF CLASSIC COMICS. FOR EXAMPLE,
KELLER OFFERS A PORTRAIT, RATHER
THAN A SYMBOL, OF CAPITALISM.

PAGE 09

HER FRUSTRATION WITH 'TECH
BROS' IS MADE VERY
EVIDENT.



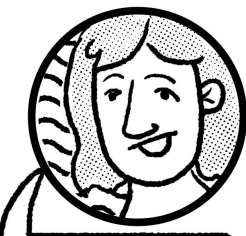
PAGE 33

SHE BLURS MIMETIC
AND FANTASTICAL
IMAGES TO CONSTRUCT THE PORTRAITS.
THIS ECHOES THE BLENDING OF FORMAL
ACADEMIC TEXTS WITH SHORT, WITTY
SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DISENTANGLE
WHO IS AFRAID OF DEGROWTH?
FROM SOCIAL MEDIA. KELLER IS
ENGAGED ONLINE AND SHARES HER
WORK ON PLATFORMS LIKE "X".
PUBLIC THINKING, SCIENCE
COMMUNICATION, AND ACTIVISM
BECOME A SINGLE ACTIVITY.

SHORT TWEETS DO TRANSLATE
WELL TO SPEECH BUBBLES!

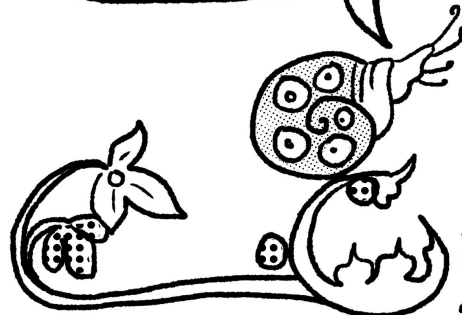
675,019 Retweets 1,253,910 Likes
47K 675K 1.3M



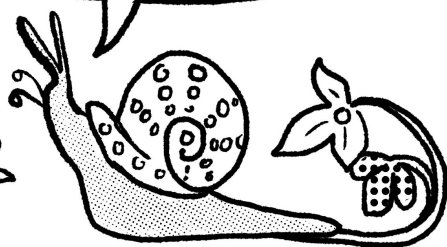
IT'S OUTSIDE THE NORMS OF ACADEMIC
WRITING, BUT FINE FOR A COMIC.

417 Retweets 1,182 Likes
5 417 1.2K

WHILE THE BOOK
INCORPORATES ACADEMIC
TEXTS, IT IS DETAILED WITHOUT
BEING CONDESCENDING.



IT DOESN'T PRETEND TO
BE ACADEMIC, AND HONESTLY, IT
DOESN'T NEED TO BE. THIS BOOK
IS FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST
THOSE IN THE IVORY TOWER.



HOWEVER, THE BOOK IS FRAMED AROUND "MISCONCEPTIONS," AND WILL PRIMARILY PREACH TO THE
CHOIR OF READERS WHO ACCEPT A PRIORI THAT THESE ARE INCORRECT ARGUMENTS. THE
COMBATIVE STANCE TOWARDS DETRACTORS WILL LIKELY TURN OFF POTENTIAL OUT-GROUP READERS.

READERS WHO CAN GET PAST THIS BARRIER ARE TREATED TO AN INCREDIBLY ACCESSIBLE RESOURCE.

FREE

SHARED MATERIALS

Who Is Afraid of Degrowth? graphic novel

Please share and download the free graphic novel

ACCESS

PRINT

POSTED

Colleen Keller
Bill Gates collaborating with Bjorn Lomborg is probably a good time for another preview of my comic. This time on cartoon debate removal

DIGITAL

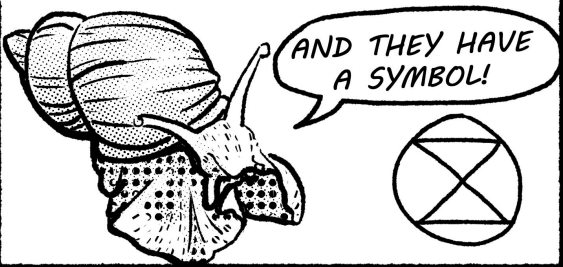
Files

WHO IS AFRAID ...

PDF

THIS LEVEL OF ACCESSIBILITY IS RARELY MATCHED BY TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC TEXTS.

THIS COMIC IS IN THE TRADITION OF POLEMIC TREATISES, ORGANIZING AND PREPARING PROPONENTS OF A CAUSE FOR DEBATE. EXTINCTION REBELLION AND OTHER MOVEMENTS HAVE SIMILAR DOCUMENTS PREPARED IN TEXT FORM TO GUIDE ADVOCATES.



USING COMICS TO ARTIFICIALLY STAGE CONVERSATIONS CAN BRING POWERFUL VOICES TOGETHER ACROSS BOTH THE GUTTER BETWEEN FRAMES AND REAL-WORLD DIVIDES.

PAGE 112

HEIDI BEIRICH
EXPERT ON THE AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN FAR RIGHT

"IT'S ONLY NOW THAT THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IS LESS RACIST THAN IT'S EVER BEEN,"

"ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS FORCED AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALISTS, MOST OF WHOM WERE WHITE AND MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASS, TO REALLY CONFRONT THIS LOGIC."

"THERE'S BEEN AN IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT AMONG MAINSTREAM AND PROGRESSIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO REALLY REFLECT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION."

JOHN HULTGREN
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

THERE'S POTENTIAL TO USE THIS AND OTHER AFFORDANCES OF MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION EVEN MORE.



AS THE COMICS FORMAT OPENS UP POSSIBILITIES OF COMMUNICATION, IT PUTS INTO STARK CONTRAST THE COMMUNICATION THAT TAKES PLACE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.



THE FACT THAT MANY OF THE COLLOCUTORS WHO SHARE A PAGE HAVE NEVER SHARED A ROOM HIGHLIGHTS THE LACK OF DIRECT, LONG-FORM, FACE-TO-FACE DISCUSSIONS ACROSS IDEOLOGICAL LINES. THE COMICS STAGING CREATES ADDITIONAL LAYERS OF MEANING, REMINDING US THAT THE CURRENT DISCONNECT IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE IS ALSO A MATTER OF FORMAT-DRIVEN STAGING TO SOME DEGREE, AND PERHAPS WE SHOULD BE MORE SENSITIVE TO THE MEANING LAYERED INTO IT. THANKS TO THE COMICS FORMAT, WHO IS AFRAID OF DEGROWTH? SHOWS READERS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE STATUS QUO, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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The authors

Elizabeth Allyn Woock (she/her) is an Assistant Professor at Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. As a researcher, illustrator, and public science communicator, she combines her training in the arts with the fields of cultural analysis, narratology, and history to explore new directions in the study of popular media. In addition to teaching and experimenting with arts-based research methodologies, she organizes interdisciplinary and international opportunities for collaboration and seeks to build bridges across specializations.