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Growing Stronger Together

Representations of Active Eco-Citizenship within Contemporary Comics

Dona Pursall (Ghent)

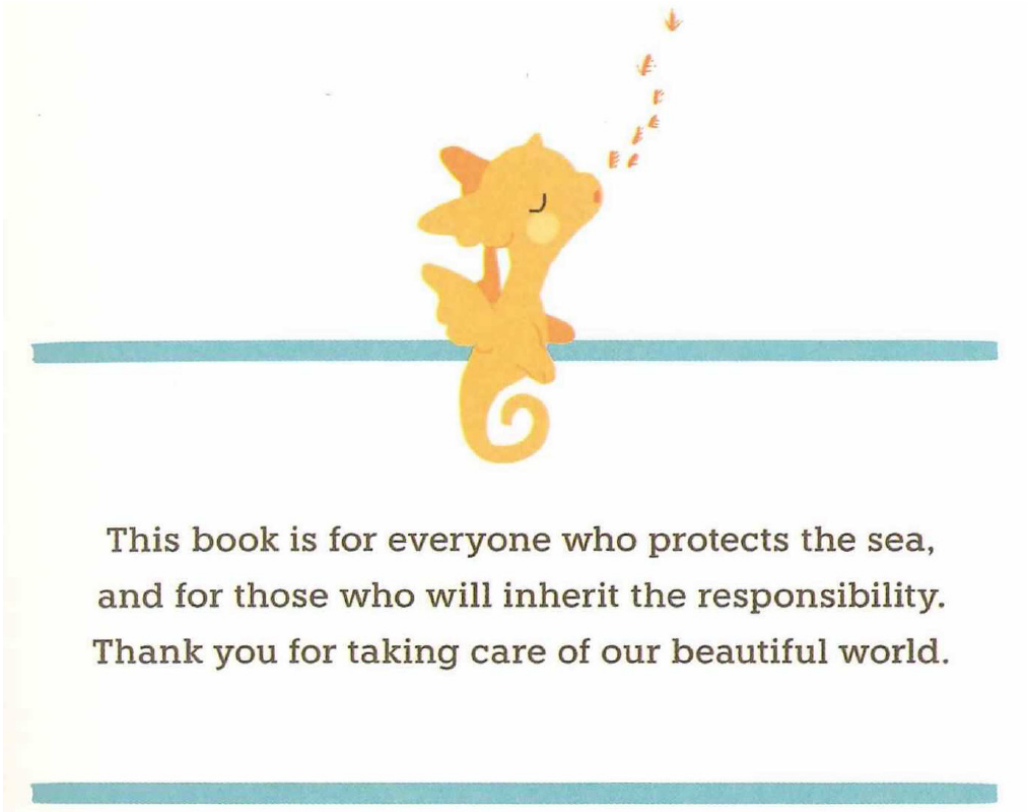

Fig. 1: Dedication To Environmentalism (O'Neill, 1).

The dedication inside Katie O'Neill's *Aquicorn Cove* (Fig. 1) clearly outlines the environmental concerns of the work: »This book is for everyone who protects the sea, and for those who will inherit the responsibility. Thank you for taking care of our beautiful world.« There is an implicit expectation within this statement. By saying ›thank you‹ in advance, it places the onus on the reader, whether child or adult, to accept this posthuman position of respon-

sibility, to adopt what Sherryl Vint terms »a sense of embodied subjectivity, of real material consequences to our actions and choices« (187). Posthumanism philosophically speaks of decentring the human. Lived posthumanism, however, is rather an enmeshed experience, an intertwining through multiple threads with the ecosystem of an entire planet.

This paper will explore the ways in which two specific comics for children, due to their versatile graphic form, are able to embrace this enmeshed complex, problematised, posthuman perspective whilst tackling social and environmental themes. Through a comparative analysis of *Acquicorn Cove* (2018) by Katie O'Neill and *Hilda and the Black Hound* (2014) by Luke Pearson, both targeted at middle childhood age readers (ages 6–12), this study interrogates the ways in which these comics' panels, images and texts wrangle with current themes of environmental concern whilst promoting notions of child agency and lived eco-citizenship. The geographic separation of the works, from New Zealand and Britain respectively, draws attention to the environmental themes as globalised concerns, and offers a comparison of the ways in which children's relationships with nature are both pervasive and culturally constructed.

This paper further seeks to use comics analysis as a foundation for unpacking the ways in which young independent child readers might explore the necessary embodied qualities of eco-citizenship, outlined by the educational research of Marianne Presthus Heggen as behaviours of »care, solidarity, curiosity, and knowledge« (Heggen et al., 397). Drawing from the premise that citizenship is an embodied, interactive practice, I argue that the characters in these comics enact behaviours and make decisions which demonstrate their own awareness of their positions not as humans in an anthropocentric society, but rather as eco-citizens within the whole ecology of the earth. The following analysis will apply an ecocritical, posthuman reading in order to highlight the ways in which the form and style of these comics promote notions of active compassion and complex decision making. It will consider how the works frame multiple perspectives, consequently encouraging a reconsideration of the morals and ethics of the human through the prism of an entangled relationship with non-humans.

Depictions of Connected, Just Children

Luke Pearson's *Hilda* series began as comic books but has since been adapted for novels for young readers and into an animated television series produced for Netflix in 2018 by Silvergate Media and Mercury Filmworks. Unlike O'Neill's work, Pearson's *Hilda* series is not marketed as explicitly advocating environmentally conscientious themes, even though the narrative thread of the human impact on nature, and of the social costs of rejecting rural life, runs through the entire series. The premise is one of displacement and urbanisa-

tion; Hilda and her mother Johanna are forced to leave their rural home and move to the city. Each instalment follows a different aspect of Hilda's adaption to her new life whilst she remains a child with an especially close affinity to nature. Even in the city, Hilda's kinship with the natural world is maintained through a deer-fox called Twig, who is her constant companion. *Hilda and the Black Hound*, the fourth in the series, won the Young People's Comic category at the 2014 British Comic Awards. In 2015 it was also awarded the Max & Moritz Award Bester Comic für Kinder, the Montreuil Book Fair Pépite de la Bande Dessinée, and the Dwayne McDuffie Award for Kids' Comics. The popularity of the whole series suggests that a contemporary readership of both adults and children was touched by this fun fantasy story about a character who faces conflict and change with an attitude of positivity. Such wide acclaim for this particular comic, however, indicates relevant social issues beyond the adventures of the character, raised particularly by the themes of place and displacement as well as tensions between the familiar and safe on the one hand and the strange and frightening on the other.

Hilda and the Black Hound tells the parallel stories of Hilda's development as a Sparrow Scout and the mystery of the Black Hound, whose appearance threatens the security of the local community. Hilda is an independent, curious child who does not always do what she is told. In both narratives, Hilda's reactions and decisions demonstrate and enact consideration and empathy towards the natural world, positioning her as an eco-citizen, in that she takes action to establish and sustain positive, fair relationships with others, whoever or whatever they may be. As Andrew Dobson asserts in his exploration of the relational qualities of ecological citizenship,

> [t]he obligation to compensate for harm, or to take action to avoid it, is not an obligation of charity to be met through the exercise of compassion, but of justice. […] This obligation to do justice is a political obligation rather than a more general moral obligation, and is therefore more appropriately predicated on ›being a citizen‹ than ›being human‹ (Dobson, 28).

Hilda takes pity on a displaced Nisse called Tontu, a mythical character who lives in the unused spaces in human homes. She chooses to go against her mother's advice by offering empathy to him. She does not, however, offer charity, but rather seeks resolution by trying to understand what has caused the unfortunate situation in which he finds himself. In the process, Hilda gets drawn into a set of more complex, interconnected issues which reveal how Tontu's sympathetic act towards the puppy Jellybean, who later grows up to become the Black Hound, created unforeseen and damaging aftermaths for all of the Nisse years later. The disruption threatens the previously harmonious shared and yet separate use of space in houses between Nisse and humans. The plot highlights how someone's actions can impact upon a much wider, unaware community in unpredictable and extensive ways.

Pearson's comic is open to multiple interpretations, whether connected with displacement and refugees or urban sprawl, overpopulation, and the pressure this places on the natural world. However we choose to read the comic, consideration and concern for the dignity of others, whether human or non-human, are what motivates Hilda to act. Her willing involvement with knotty problems demonstrates how she is unable to accept injustice and unfair judgement. She is prepared to face difficult consequences in order to do the ›right‹ thing, or, as Hilda says when she stands up to her mother, »I know I didn't quite do it right, but I am still a friend – to – animals« (Pearson, [51]). Hilda is solution-oriented, curious, keen to learn and problem-solve, and she faces the uncertain and unsettling world with confidence and optimism. As a child character, it is taken for granted that she might get some things wrong or be mistaken. Significantly, Hilda also assumes that all characters, even adult ones, might have equally flawed or incomplete knowledge, that they too can be wrong and that they can learn. What is shown to matter in the story is how they choose to act when confronted with different opinions or new knowledge. Flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to accept a new world view and endeavour to restore justice are celebrated as positive, joyful qualities.

New Zealand-based illustrator and graphic novelist Katie O'Neill's fantasies for younger readers[1] also embrace themes of self-discovery, loyalty, and environmentalism, fictionalising relational notions of eco-citizenship. Her stories follow characters learning about the experiences and needs of others, which leads them to reconsider their own actions and choices. In 2018, *The Tea Dragon Society*, the story of a young blacksmith apprentice who helps protect the endangered species of Tea Dragons, won O'Neill the Dwayne McDuffie Award for Kids' Comics, the Harvey Award for Best Children's or Young Adult Book, and the Eisner Awards for both Best Webcomic and Best Publication for Kids (ages 9–12). In the following year, *Aquicorn Cove* was similarly nominated for the Eisner for Best Publication for Kids (age 9–12). O'Neill's works often include strong female protagonists learning to rely on personal strength and friendship to overcome environmentally themed challenges. *Aquicorn Cove* follows the child protagonist, Lana, who is visiting her aunt Mae after a long period of separation. After the tragedy of her mother drowning at sea during a storm, Lana's father moved them away from the family home on the coast. The comic portrays Lana's gradual re-acquaintance with the place, the people and the ocean, and how this strengthens the connection with memories of her mother. Lana revives her family's relationship with the coast, and specifically with Aure and the other Aquicorns, magical creatures that are a cross between seahorses and unicorns, living under the sea. When she rescues a baby Aquicorn, Lana develops a personal connection with this underwater community, where she hears first-hand of the consequences of overfishing for both the oceans and the creatures within it. The narrative highlights that even a young child can comprehend how responsibility and choices

create consequences. It does not shy away from the harsh truth that the current damage to the underwater reefs lies with the past actions of her family and her community. This connectivity is framed not as blame but rather as acknowledgement of responsibility, placing the emphasis on the potential for change. Lana develops her own relationship with nature, which becomes the basis for making her own choices about how she wants to behave. The knowledge she develops through this process ultimately leads to her taking the initiative to confront the adults in the community, challenging them to act as eco-citizens by taking responsibility for their own behaviours.

Although the styles of these two books are very different, they share the theme of child agency and activity, and of facing complex situations with thoughtful, considered choices. In both cases, the non-human characters are singular representatives of whole aspects of the natural world. The Aquicorns signify all the life under the sea. Likewise, Hilda's encounters with the Black Hound, and with the Nisse Tontu, encourage her to think about how human activities impact upon all non-human creatures which, perhaps, we do not see but which live alongside us. Especially significant for the analysis of these comics in connection with eco-citizenship is the way in which both engage with the child protagonist as an agent of responsibility and change. Lana and Hilda learn about injustices and imbalances within the non-human natural world and, in gaining this knowledge, are motivated to become active participants in a whole ecosystem, eco-citizens responsible for making changes and questioning themselves and others.

Defining and Developing Child Eco-Citizenship

Relationality is central to the notion of posthuman thinking; it defies borders or boundaries by privileging affective interactions. Following this principle, humans affect, and are affected by, an entire planetary ecosystem in a continual, dynamic process. A powerful illustration of the implications of this kind of intra-relationally aware thought is a shift in the literal sense of self. From this point of view, humans have morphed from a singular I to a collective We, a whole community of elements in continual negotiation: »The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction« (Hayles, 3). Posthuman relationships therefore are unstable and multifarious, in continual flux related to the shifting sands of power, privilege, utility, control, desire and agency. Relationships must negotiate inevitably unequal and complex interactions. Models of interdependent posthumanist theory resist dualism, whether of social ideas such as right/wrong, good/bad or of scientific ideas such as healthy/unhealthy or sustainable/unsustainable. Such thinking, consequently, resists simplistic solutions or conclusions, embracing

instead acceptance of one situation as part of an ongoing dynamic. Posthuman relationality is concerned not so much with the fact that these interactions exist, but rather with appreciating and understanding the qualities and affects of these co-productions and intra-connections as part of a continual process.

> Children with an active identity as eco-citizens may feel an initial sense of belonging to our common planet, including the more-than-human world. Knowing the value of participation, they may exercise and further develop a desire of care, solidarity, curiosity, and knowledge. This can promote children as active and informed members of a sustainable society. We argue that an identity as eco-citizen may provide an emerging understanding that humans, including each individual child, are active parts of the environment. In this perspective, our actions have consequences for the future. (Heggen et al., 397)

The article from which the above quotation is taken outlines the theoretical foundations of current research into nursery and early-years educational environments as spaces for exploration and construction of an individual identity as an eco-citizen. Marianne Presthus Heggen leads the research group Education for Sustainability and Being and Becoming Eco-Citizens at KINDknow – Kindergarten Knowledge Centre for Systemic Research on Diversity and Sustainable Futures. Their research, undertaken by ecological and outdoors educational practitioners, asserts that for children, action and identity are fundamentally united. Consequently, advocating eco-citizenship in young people need not only be theoretical, but also practical, literally promoting activity and participation as a means of exemplifying behaviours and promoting relationships between children and their environments. Heggen et al. propose the idea that children, just like adults, are able to embrace the notion of the self as part of a greater ecological system, and should therefore be offered opportunities to enact eco-citizenship. Through consideration of children as »*being*« rather than »*becoming*«, (389), their paper advocates for children not just learning theoretically, but rather being offered spaces in which to act upon their environmental concerns within the wider community. This approach is embedded within wider discourses of childhood studies which wrangle with the notion of child citizenship, and agency more broadly, as continuous, culturally constructed and delineated notions. From a philosophical conceptualization defined by Hall and Williamson as »lived citizenship«, Lister further frames »citizenship as an active, participatory practice and as a set of rights, which are the object of struggle« (Lister, 695). This argument on the contribution of comics draws on this definition of childhood eco-citizenship as an active, on-going, developmental negotiation.

The practice of enacting ecological citizenship is arguably bound up with the early definitions of the term. Andrew Dobson's (2003) chapter on the term ›ecological citizenship‹ foregrounds inevitable tensions between large-system models of ecological thinking and existing political and economic definitions of citizenship. »A key feature of this is to see that the ›space‹ of ecological citizenship cannot be understood in terms of contiguous territory.« (Dobson, 105)

> The ›space‹ of ecological citizenship is therefore not something given by the boundaries of nation-states or of supranational organizations such as the European Union, or even by the imagined territory of the cosmopolis. It is, rather, produced by the metabolistic and material relationship of individual people with their environment. (ibid. 106)

Dobson positions all citizens in an interactional relationship within the space of the entire ecosystem around them. Consequently, any actions we take are enmeshed within all ecology. The relationship between a sense of place and a feeling of belonging is a foundational connection associated with citizenship. To be a citizen of somewhere requires a physical space, but it is also intrinsically bound to the social construction of place, to a society. The interaction of these two elements of social place and physical space is a dominant debate within literary ecocriticism. Nancy Easterlin draws attention to the poetic connection, often demonstrated in literature, between social relationships and perceived environment: »To be without places is to lose one's bearings, to be an inherently orienting organism bereft of orientation« (137).

> Isolated and vulnerable characters typically suffer placelessness – perceived or real threats from a potentially inimical environment that are the counterpart to psychic vulnerability. While strong social relations can result in attachment to places with rather harsh climates or limited resources, extreme threats emanating from the environment always put pressure on human relationships and on self-coherence. (ibid.)

It is especially interesting to engage with the notion of place and self-coherence in connection with middle childhood age readers because children in this age group are actively changing their sense of place. Whilst young children have their most predominant relationships with significant adults, by the age of six, peer relationships are becoming increasingly important and influential. This alters both their expectations of others and their relationship with themselves and their own capabilities and power. In this context, the qualities and negotiations of interactions portrayed within narratives are important. Stories and the social interactions they present need to be believable for the readers and thus also reflect the child readers' constant tussle between authority and agency, between others and individuality (Collins).

Both comics depict protagonists struggling with literal displacement. In Hilda's move to the city, she loses her connection with the forested, rural place in which she grew up. Lana's separation from the coastal environment distances her both from the memories of her mother and the connection she has with the sea and the life within it. As Easterlin has argued, the specific interplay between social relationships and embodied experience of an environment affords an interrogation of the ways in which a sense of place or placelessness is evoked. In the case of these particular comics, both child characters negotiate the difficult notions of belonging versus isolation, and safety versus vulnerability as associated with the relationships between humans and the natural environment. In making choices which

contest the status quo, both Hilda and Lana further displace themselves, acting as isolated and vulnerable eco-citizens standing up for what they see as justice. Lana defends the creatures of the sea and Hilda the creatures who live unseen by humans. Despite their own displacement, both of these young girl characters contest the behaviours and choices of the human characters on behalf of the nonhuman ones. Their actions as »lived« citizens (Lister, 695) are inspired by a sense of self-incoherence, a discrepancy between their moral sense of justice and the unjust consequences of the actions of those they identify with, their fellow humans. That they take the more difficult, non-conforming, questioning stance demonstrates their acceptance of not only the posthuman position of relationality, but also of taking responsibility to consciously act from this position, to act as an eco-citizen.

Reading Posthuman Comics

Freestone and O'Toole's educational research from 2016 investigates reading and reminiscences, connecting the influence of early reading experiences with pro-environmental attitudes later in life. Despite sampling quite a limited study group, consisting only of people who chose careers in environmentalism, it found that »the recall of the large number of books from middle childhood age […] implies that this age, as well as adolescence, was an important and influential time« (9). This finding ratifies the influential power of formative reading already during middle childhood, and not, as was previously thought, only during teenage and young adult reading. Their qualitative memory studies research concludes that the subject matter of early reading can significantly influence and establish environmental consciousness for later life. Such findings acknowledge the potential persuasive power of books and their themes over children in this age group, thereby insisting that further study of reading material for middle childhood is necessary, particularly in connection with the influential capacities for social and emotional learning such works inspire in their readers.

In offering space to play, to experiment, to break boundaries and test consequences, comics joyfully enable explorative curiosity The interactions of words and images, the visual versatility of perspective and point of view, the temporal freedom and flexibility of the comics form are all elements particular to the medium. Although we are able to describe them, precisely how they work and how we learn to read them often eludes explanation. A recent study used eye tracking to explore comprehension and reading of incoherence in short strips, comparing university-age students with 10 to 12 year-old child readers (Martín-Arnal et al.). It found, surprisingly, that although the younger readers spent a longer time reading the texts, the patterns of how they constructed coherence in visual texts was exactly the same as for the adults. The implication is that younger readers make sense

of what they read in just the same way and with equal retention as adults (134). These insights emphasise the importance of trying to understand what children read and how they interpret or learn from what they read, especially with regard to comics. In a similar vein, Michael Joseph's 2012 article »Seeing the Visible Book: How Graphic Novels Resist Reading« explores the liminal nature of comics as a medium which, through the very nature of its form, inherently resists socially constructed expectations about reading:

> [C]omics in particular remain self-consciously expectation-free; they have constellated around, and knowingly celebrated, scholastic inutility. Alternative comics do not transmit a set of reading operations, or relate actual and notional objects to linguistic signs to regulate the development of abstract thinking skills. They undermine ostension and reobjectify signs; they rematerialize abstraction. (Joseph, 454)

In light of research which establishes that young readers glean just as much from what they read as adults do, it seems essential that we begin to interrogate comics for children to become more aware of the multiple, contradictory and unregulated interpretation a child reader might experience when reading.

This capacity for unruly reconsideration of themes and ideas is at the centre of current posthuman comics discourse. Menga and Davies argue that the »infrastructural forms and rhizomatic[2] assemblages of comics«, by which they mean the capacity for comics to simultaneously sustain polyphonic, »plurivectoral« narratives, compliments the telling of posthuman, »elastic, anti-linear temporalities« (9). The freedom and playfulness with which comics are able to tell stories construct a destabilised and yet comprehensible position for readers, one from which expectations and conventions tolerate contradiction and multidimensionality. In drawing together strands from comics ecocriticism and posthuman theory with notions of lived childhood eco-citizenship, the comics considered here can be seen to present environmentally conscious posthuman behaviours. The actions and relationships in *Hilda and the Black Hound* and *Aquicorn Cove* illuminate the ways in which the comics medium is able to emphasise and interweave the notions of eco-citizenship and posthuman experience through its rhizomatic form.

Characterising »care, solidarity, curiosity«

Comics theorist Thierry Smolderen poetically asserts that comics reading is a personal, bodily, experience, »a much more intimate physiological phenomenon: the subjective, kaleidoscopic editing of sensations« (158). Precisely this potential for constructing an experiential moment during closure is a device that comics can utilise to establish feelings and relationships, without necessarily needing to be narrative-driven. In both O'Neill's and Pearson's work, panels, often silent ones, illustrate moments in which the child character is with a

nonhuman character and the focus is simply on their togetherness, on the mood of the moment. This strategy slows down the narrative and draws attention to qualities of companionship rather than interaction or function.

Aquicorn Cove deals with images of wondrous, fantastical ocean life. Small panels exaggerate details from the wider landscapes, paying equal attention to the sensory effect of nature as to the social interaction and the narrative events. Throughout the narrative-led story, where action and reaction, relationships and benevolence lie at the centre of the experience, O'Neill uses detailed panels to magnify the minutiae of certain moments as a plethora of intricate, marvellous facets.[3] Lana's relationship with the natural environment is constructed as entwined memories of sharing experiences with friends and family in particularly important natural spaces. Alone on the beach, for example, she is not isolated, because the natural environment evokes the memory of a happier time of togetherness. The illustrations in Fig. 2 focalise the connection between the remembered emotions and the emotions of the current moment through the character's textural experience of nature; her toes in the water, a detail of the waves, her footprints in the sand – each panel enhances the strength of her memories because it is sensually evocative (O'Neill, 16–17).

Through these sequences, which demonstrate Lana building her own relationship with the place, the repeated use of flashbacks illustrates how emotional memory is influential in the construction of present experience. Emotionally charged memories are portrayed through details and collages of multiple panels, constructing a layering effect of feelings and reproducing the experience of multiple associations being evoked simultaneously through a singular memory. This strategy creates depth and complexity, reconstructing the kind of sentimentality places and feelings can create. This particular sequence, for example, uses a single background image, overlaid with intercutting panels, emphasising how one moment is evoked not just by one singular image (as constructed in the sequential reading of panels), but rather by a whole, sensory, concurrent experience through a combination of many small details and from several overlapping perspectives. O'Neill's collage style of depicting the moment through many complementary, interacting panels creates a multi-sensory experience of the moment. The plethora of panels slows down the narrative for the benefit of feeling the moment. Rather than focusing on narrative through action-to-action momentum, it focuses on the physicality of an embodied instance, experienced through many, simultaneous specificities, thus recreating visually the range of senses through which humans feel one particular moment. The interplay between panels, in which the close-ups are related to the wider perspectives, echoes the simultaneous experience of being present within a wider physical space and also being captured in the moment by the feelings and associations of particular details. This sequence serves to evoke in a non-linear way the process of Lana rebuilding her own relationship with the coastal place, establishing the emotional depth of that relationship through the visual, non-chronological intertwining of feelings, senses and materiality from the past and the present.

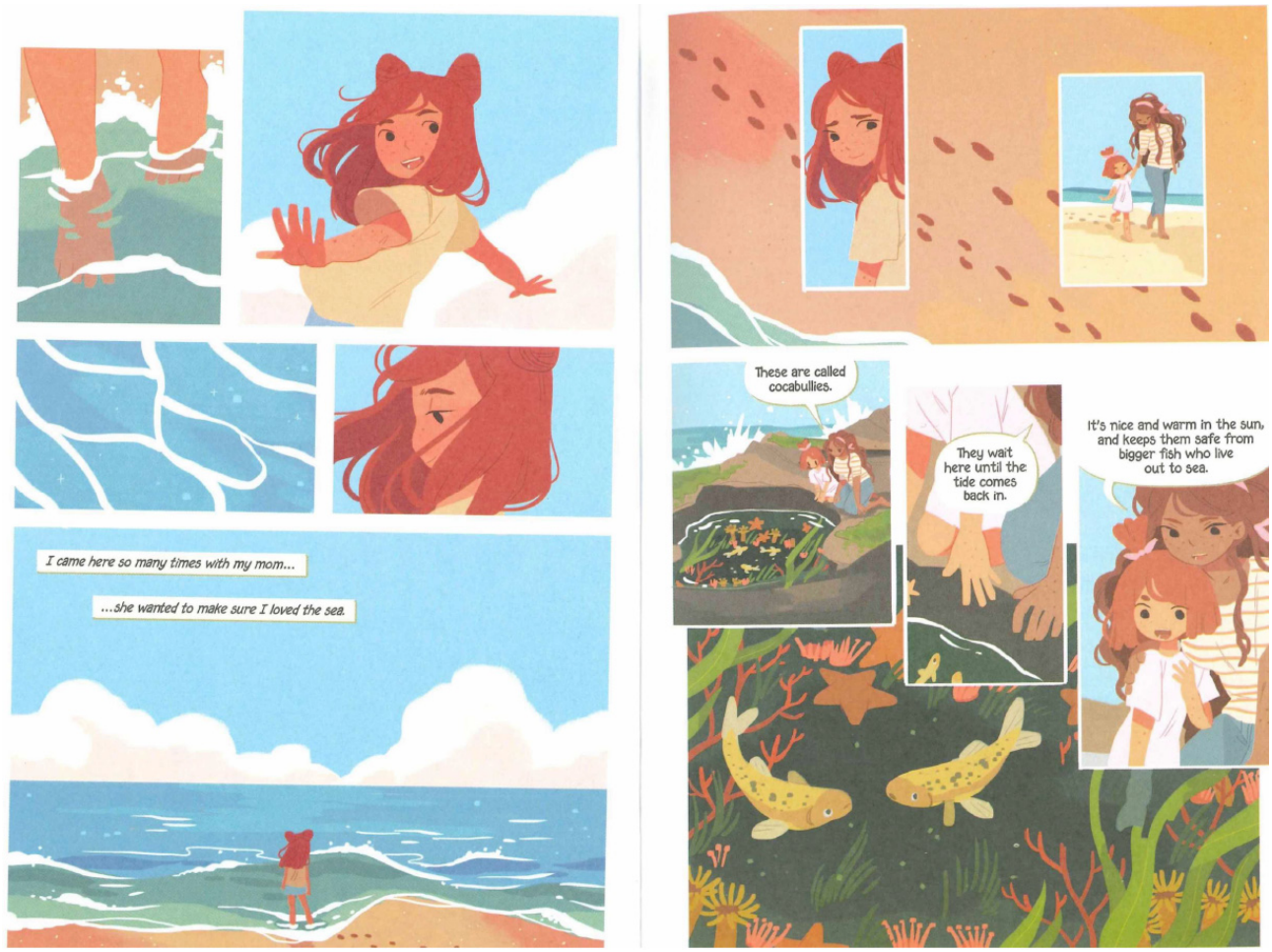

Fig. 2: Footprints and Flashback (O'Neill 16–17).

The coastal village from which Lana's family comes has recently been damaged by terrible storms. As the story develops, it is revealed that environmental change caused by human overfishing and subsequent reef and coastal damage are to blame. The character of Lana's aunt Mae must therefore negotiate the complex situation and make an intractable decision, balancing the necessity of reduced fishing in such a way as to protect the reef against the background of real and immediate negative economic and social consequences this creates for herself and her community. Conciliating these complex interactions is not an individualistic activity, though, and is shown to be importantly influenced by Mae's friendship with the Aquicorns and specifically with their leader Aure. Due to this long-standing, fantastical friendship, Mae is able to see first-hand the real impact her actions have on the life under the ocean, and she also learns about the diversity and richness it holds. Aure introduces her to other resources that the sea provides which humans can eat and use, thereby offering alternative ways, a network rather than just binary options, by which to maintain the livelihood of the community whilst protecting the ocean

(O'Neill, 47). The comic demonstrates that enmeshed, posthuman consequences are rarely either/or decisions. Further engagement and knowledge gleaned from curiosity and openness results in multiple, alternative possibilities, in many answers. The book reinforces the idea that being willing to open up to new ways of acting, to make radical life changes, is importantly linked with the considerations and kindness provoked through friendship. In the sequence following the death of Mae's sister, Aure's dress changes from ocean blue to mourning black, demonstrating without words the depth of her empathy towards her friend. To return to the theories of Heggen et al., care and solidarity between these two characters invite a broadening of ideas, an acceptance of the unfamiliar and the unknown, and a willingness to adopt new behaviours.

An open exchange of knowledge and the readiness to make compromises in light of social and moral concerns is posited as a premise for collaboration between all actants within an ecosystem, as practiced behaviours of active eco-citizens. This is modelled within *Aquicorn Cove* through the human characters' appreciation of the ocean and all the life within it. Decisions are made by humans who consider the ›other‹ of nature as valued and significant and lead to sustainable and long-sighted resolutions in the narrative. Mae's decision to fish less illustrates the complexities involved in decision-making, especially in relation to natural resources. In recognising the interdependence between the village community and the reef, the characters find a reason to act compassionately towards nature in order to protect themselves and the future of the community. Despite their differences of opinion about what they need to take from the sea, the depth of friendship guides the choices the characters make. In an interview, the creator has spoken about her personal connection to this story, assigning inspiration for *Aquicorn Cove* to the catastrophic earthquakes in her hometown in 2011. O'Neill defines the story as »not a natural disaster narrative, but it's kind of a community survival narrative, an emotional survival narrative« (Alverson). In the comic, Aunt Mae evocatively acknowledges »there's no home without a future« (O'Neill, 77). To return to Easterlin, in taking responsibility for – caring for – instead of exploiting the vulnerability of the environment, the characters embrace their attachment to the place, ensuring a future for the community's entire ecosystem.

Rather than drawing from real experiences of the sea, Luke Pearson's *Hilda* series finds inspiration in Scandinavian folklore. The British cartoonist has acknowledged that the style of the series was inspired by his own reading of Nordic mythological stories. He describes as particularly influential the tone of *Scandinavian Folk-Lore: Illustrations of the Traditional Beliefs of the Northern Peoples* (William A Craigie, published in 1896). »[T]hey have this matter-of-fact tone to them and they're almost boring, like a document that just tells you that a thing happened« (Mautner). Each instalment in the Hilda series includes different types of mythological beings. Hilda's capacity to greet them, to welcome them and engage with them is fundamental to Pearson's storytelling: »I wanted

a character who was very positive and who would get caught up in adventures as a result of her own curiosity, empathy, or sense of responsibility« (ibid). The openness and sincerity with which Hilda connects with others, her fundamental belief in the worthiness and equality of others, is often used as a device to drive the narratives. Pearson has not spoken overtly about the comics in relation to the environmental concerns they raise. In reasoning why his main character is displaced from a rural to an urban setting, he rather matter-of-factly recognises that this is a reflection of the majority of people's lives. Pearson concludes, »I felt that the move would normalize that part of her life and give greater weight to the fantasy elements« (ibid).

In *Hilda and The Black Hound* it is the development of the relationship between the »Nisse« Tontu[4], a house spirit equivalent to a goblin or gnome, and Hilda that drives the narrative. *Nisse* are a familiar tradition in Scandinavian folklore. Often associated with family ancestors, they are benevolent sprites thought to be attached to the physical place of the family home. Visually they are mostly depicted as small, old, rosy-cheeked men with white beards. Hilda's Tontu however looks very different from this traditional image: only his nose is visible from the ball of hair which forms and covers his head. He is strangely featureless and yet expressive, exaggerating his non-humanness but also gaining Hilda and the readers' empathy. Tontu explains how all Nisse live in the »wasted«[5] unused spaces in people's homes, and although this effectively makes them squatters in occupied households, they are protective of their territory. Like humans, the Nisse feel safe within homes, while they consider the outside world as threatening and unknown. The security of their magical hidden space, and the isolation it affords them, seems to denote the way many people live today, each in the refuge of their own homes and distanced from the concerns of the wider community or world, maintaining the illusion of security. *Hilda and the Black Hound* could consequently be read as an allegory for contemporary tensions around displaced social groups and migration, showing how greater forces beyond their control can impact upon those who live without possessing the right to the places they inhabit, whether land or homes of their own. As increasing numbers of Nisse are banished by their homeowners, Hilda becomes aware that there is something fundamentally wrong. Despite their normal behaviour being one of isolation and anonymity, once they become homeless and placeless, the Nisse become visible to Hilda, to the wider community, and to each other. The usually isolated Nisse distrust others and they quickly lay the blame upon each other whilst each professes their own innocence. Lack of compassion and camaraderie aggravates the conflict in the comic, and further disempowers the Nisse during their displacement. It is Hilda's choice to act on her own feelings of care and solidarity, to move beyond the bond of maternal security and go against her mother's advice by involving herself in the plight of the Nisse, that is central to the progression and energy of the plot.

Fig. 3. Facing Fear Head-on (Pearson [47]).

Constructing Posthuman Experience through Panels and Pace

The characters' qualities of eco-citizenship embody a posthuman consciousness of relationality, an interconnectedness present in the comics both through story and created through the respective artists' use of the medium. Conscious framing of panels is used in Pearson's work to construct polyphonic emotional experiences in particular sequences, enabling the reader to appreciate the contradictory concerns of intra-connected characters. The regular, dense panel style of the *Hilda* comics are frequently action-driven, with many small panels creating strong narrative momentum. Leading up to the moment in which Hilda comes face to face with the Black Hound, very regular panelling creates high momentum in the action and therefore encourages a fast-flowing, anticipatory perception/viewing speed. This energy is interrupted by the single, large, frameless image occupying the entire width of the page

and forcing the reader to stop, an effect which powerfully mimics Hilda's frozen, shocked, and fearful response in that moment. The imposing size of the dog and the solid black colour of his fur make him almost eerily shadow-like. This lack of distinct features further amplifies his ›mythic‹ status, strengthening the stories the adults had previously been telling about how dangerous and primal the Black Hound is. In Fig. 3 (Pearson, [47]), the line of his back merges with the shadowy silhouette of the surrounding mountains, positioning him within, as a part of, nature. The physical space taken up by this one panel echoes the momentousness of Hilda's fear, freezing both the action – visually there is more to take in – and also time, as both Hilda and the reader must pause. The absence of a frame around the panel suggests this moment is somehow outside of or beyond the rest of the narrative, a suspension encouraging the reader to take the time in this instant to imagine themselves there, to consider what action they might take. As well as offering space to think, by extending and relishing this moment of uncertain collision between the two characters, the reader is able to experience enjoyment of the unknown as potentiality. They are encouraged to look beyond the tension of fear constructed by the adults running away in the previous panels, to notice that the stillness of this image is steeped also in inquisitiveness and wonder, associating feelings of unpredictability and uncertainty with the possibility of finding out something entirely new and of achieving positive growth. Through the literal size of the image and the composition, the emphasis placed on this one moment highlights a burgeoning relationship between the two characters, further prioritising the aesthetic, emotional experience of the moment over being drawn forward by the energy of the narrative, privileging posthuman relationality over linear narrative.

A central social crisis lies at the heart of the events in both plots. In *Hilda*, the crisis is caused by the unsettling sightings of the mysterious, wolf-like Black Beast of Trolberg who creates a threatening and uncontrolled presence within the human, adult community. The response of fear amongst the community is strong: people stay inside and the children return home early from camp. Hilda, however, remains fearless, a character of genuine curiosity and openness. When meeting both Tontu and, later, the Black Beast, she is open, calm and willing to listen to these strangers and to try to understand them. The crises driving events in *Aquicorn Cove* are recent coastal storms which caused damage to the town. O'Neill similarly exploits creative use of framing to encourage an appreciation of the characters' multitude and complexity of feelings in these moments of high tension. Fig. 4 (O'Neill, 22–23) is a silent sequence visualising Lana's memory of one night spent at sea with her mother. The collage of interspersed panoramic views, layered against details and textures, focuses on the tactile experience of the shared moment, mimicking the interplay between present moment and memory; the movement of the water, the sensations of the rain, and the wonder of witnessing the luminescence of jellyfish in the water. Close-up panels focusing on Lana's facial expression are interspersed with images of animals and nature, implying a kind of mirroring,

a back-and-forth, between them. The minimalistic use of language is suitable for a younger reader, but also foregrounds the validity of the experience of nature as an alternative, yet equal perspective in the same moment. Lana's enjoyment of their wonder is not dependent on their awareness of her; she is appreciative that she can share this unique moment unnoticed. In this instance, doing nothing, watching the drama and display of the jellyfish and simply not interfering is appropriate, a dynamic echoed by the brightness of the bioluminescence in contrast with Lana's face in shadow and the darkness of the night sky. Through the building of a rhizomatic relationship between the character and the jellyfish, admiration is evoked towards nature in both the human characters and the readers.

The reader witnesses both the action of the creatures, and Lana marvelling at them, positioning nature as the most important actor in the sequence. Perspective and proportion further promote the significance of the jellyfish through the bird's-eye-view panel in which the boat and the humans are surrounded, diminished in importance in contrast to the vividness and drama of the gelatinous animals. The collage composition strengthens the rhizomatic qualities of interaction which serve to create solidarity in that moment. It connects emotions associated with experiencing a natural wonder to emotions associated with memories of times Lana spent with her mother and the feeling of being close to the ocean in the present. Pervasive positive associations create strong, compassionate feelings towards natural creatures, yet, importantly, this sequence neither anthropomorphises nor narrativises the jellyfish. This matters, as narratives for children often anthropomorphise in order to animate, to make the inanimate relatable, and in recent times this has reinforced a »romantic reverence for nature« (Lassén-Seger, 33). The unanimated jellyfish, by which I mean that they are not personified, anthropomorphised, nor romanticised, then, remain entirely jellyfish. They are unconcerned with the activities and interests of the human characters, and they do not represent a metaphor for something else. Arguably, the kind-heartedness with which Lana sees them, despite their obliviousness towards her, encourages the reader to see the wonder in nature without needing to be seen by it in return. Nature is to be relished as alive and changing, existing now within the contemporary world, not idealised in opposition to modern, industrial life but alongside it.

Knowledge: Raising Questions not Conclusions

Both texts foreground a relationship between a child and nature, empowering them through independence and advocating for direct interaction and understanding between humans and their natural environment. Pearson and O'Neill offer a strategy of positive interest, openness, and inquisitiveness as a tool for surviving and even succeeding as a

Fig. 4: Loving Luminescence (O'Neill 22–23).

posthuman citizen, qualities very close to the care, solidarity and curiosity advocated by the research of Heggen et al. Both of these comics depict children taking time to listen to nonhuman creatures, appreciating a perspective which is different from their existing one, and acknowledging the ways in which this new information alters the status quo. This process of negotiation and re-negotiation relates directly to the construction of citizenship as a continual, relational, dynamic state. In furthering this project, both texts seem to critique or undermine the expectations, behaviours and judgements of the adult characters. Hilda's mother and Lana's father, the grown-ups closest to each of the main characters, are particularly impacted by this dynamic, which works to cast doubt on the adults' assumed authority. Their ideas and opinions are to be heard but not necessarily followed, believed nor accepted. Whilst this suggests that both child characters have agency, it also situates these children in a space of uncertainty, plurality, and change, demanding that they cope with the contradictions and discomfort of multiple perspectives in tension, the disquiet of posthuman experience.

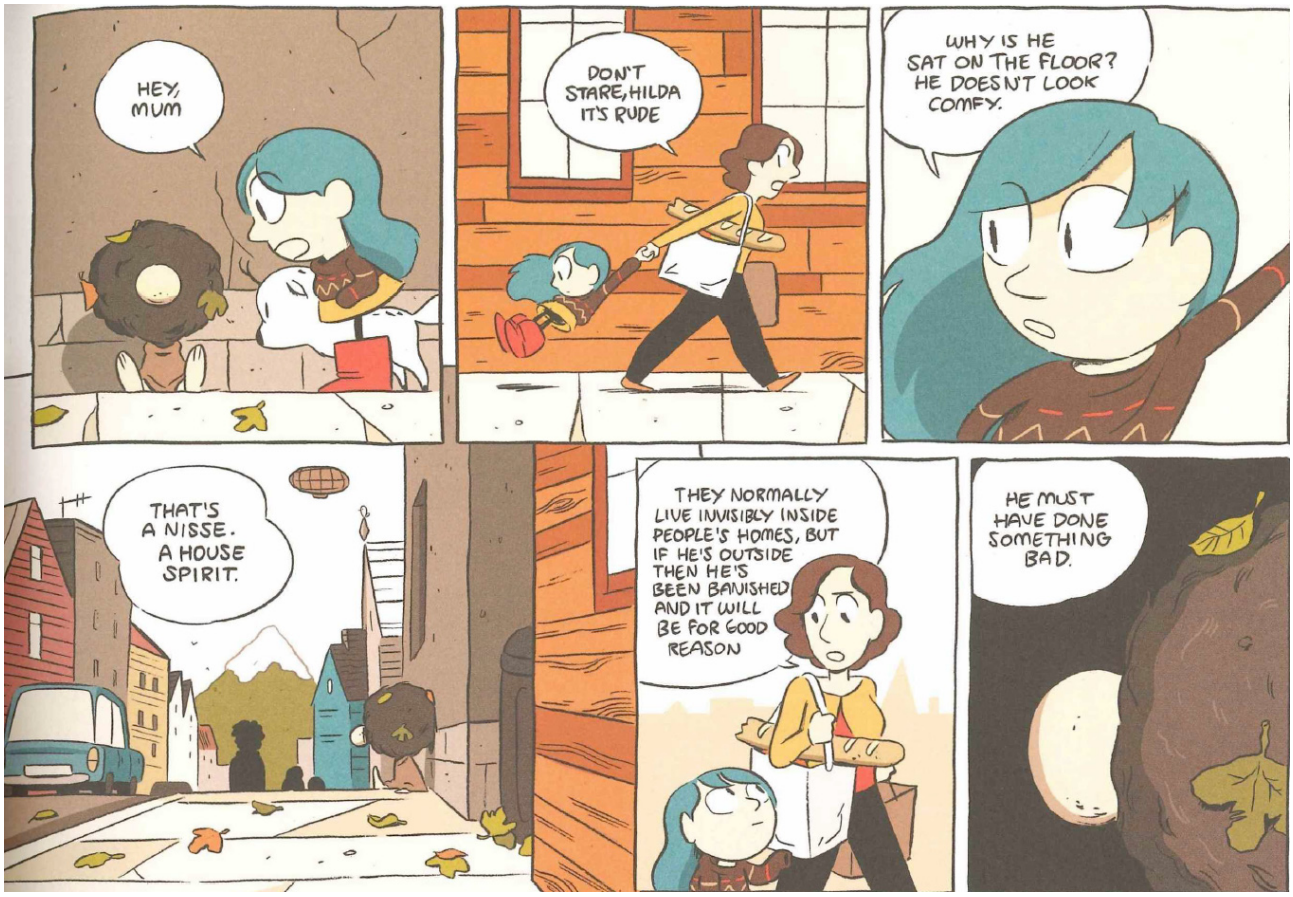

Fig. 5: Showing Impolite Concern (Pearson [7]).

Several details within *Hilda and the Black Hound* work to specifically critique adult opinions about a child's questioning and the ways in which adult knowingness, assumptions, presumed norms, or expectations may actually limit the child's inquisitiveness and, consequently, their motivation to engage with the world around them. When Hilda first notices the evicted Tontu sitting on the pavement, she is concerned and curious about this unfamiliar creature. Despite its otherness and her clear lack of knowledge about the creature, she is not afraid, and she responds with benevolence. »He must have done something bad« is her mother Johanna's judgement on the matter (Pearson, [7]). The harshness of her words contrasts with the framing of the panel. We do not see her, only hear her words, while the panel is rather focused on Tontu's passiveness, through a close-up image of his head dappled with fallen autumn leaves, exaggerating both the sadness of his downfall and his non-threatening stillness. Hilda is sympathetic, acknowledging his physical discomfort and suggesting they should bring him food. »No, Hilda. You mustn't talk to them and you mustn't feel bad for them, okay?« Johanna's refusal to engage or acknowledge Tontu is ardent, and her dismissal of him is definitive, a judgement not about him as a singular but as a plural, as a representative of a group or kind.

Johanna drags Hilda away (Fig. 5), an aggressive act emphasised by the angle of Hilda's body and the fact that her feet are off the ground. The spoken chastising of her daughter, »Don't stare, Hilda it's rude«, serves to further highlight the irony that ›good‹ behaviour in this context is judgemental, uncompassionate and »to do as you're told«, contrasting Johanna's decision to ignore the suffering of another with Hilda's disquiet and consequent prying. The alignment of the panels, where Hilda's concern is interspersed with her mother's dismissal of Tontu, encourages the reader to see how the adult judgement is defensive and closed, lacking kindness, while Hilda remains open-hearted. She is aware that all creatures have basic needs and concerns herself with Tontu's comfort, firstly seeing that he has to sit on the floor, and then later in the narrative that he might be cold or hungry.

Another way in which tensions concerning knowledge and learning are emphasised in *Hilda* is through the Sparrow Scouts' system of earning badges. Hilda's mother, Johanna, recounts her own memories of being a member and reminisces about how many badges she earned, as though this measure of success is related to the pleasure of taking part. Hilda becomes distracted and despite her good intentions, her work to earn badges is hampered by her involvement with Tontu. When she realises time is running out, she wants to succeed to please her mother. An extended montage from page 36 to 39 elaborates on Hilda's work on several projects with the purpose of achieving specific badges. The sequence evidences her labour and shows a commitment to and understanding of the Sparrow Scouts' measure of progress. Her independent work is terminated by the caveat in the Scout handbook which requires some adult supervision of the projects for a badge to be awarded. The protracted degree to which the comic illustrates Hilda's work on the project, her engagement and her efforts focalises the narrative from her point of view, exacerbating the feeling of disappointment when she realises it has all been for nothing. Through the frame of adult rules for success, Hilda has failed. Nevertheless, the reader has witnessed her work and her self-motivation inspired by genuine interest, creating a sense of achievement, of satisfaction, and of personal success. This serves to make the injustice of her failure, that she does not receive any badges at the award ceremony, seem even stronger and yet, simultaneously, less important; we all know she did the work and succeeded and therefore does not need a badge to prove it. The energy and the act of doing are, through this sequence, emphasised as a reward in and of itself.

In opposition to childrens' curiosity, adults' erroneous ideas and judgements are equally evident in the narrative of *Aquicorn Cove*. The tragic loss of his wife to the water drives Lana's father to move him and his daughter away from their home by the sea. Whilst relocating to a more controlled, safe, human place appeases his fears, it consequently takes them away from their family connections and the traditions of fishing and working in connection with the ocean, and it also distances Lana from her aunt and community.

Her father wants to restrict her relationship with the sea to keep Lana safe. Aunt Mae and her sister, Lana's mother, are rather depicted as having a relationship with the sea which is more experiential and therefore open; they do not show fear in the storm, but rather affinity, solidarity: it is part of the life they live. In the flashback sequences, we also see the mother's curiosity and openness towards the natural world (Figures 2 and 4). Lana's behaviour towards the baby Aquicorn is further paralleled by the actions, shown in flashback, of Lana's Aunt Mae when she also meets the Aquicorns for the first time. It is openness, rather than prejudice, which is able to lead to change and solutions.

Both comics promote curiosity and the notion of knowing enough so that you see how much you don't know. Thus, they advocate bravery in trusting oneself to tackle the unknown, even to the extent of challenging and confronting adult authority. Hilda, despite seeing everyone else turning away, is confident enough in her abilities to confront the mystery of the evicted Nisse, and when she comes face to face with the Black Hound, she looks it in the eye and does not run. In contrast, Lana's object of fear is emotional rather than literal, since she has to face the dramatic storm on the ocean while remembering that it was in just such a storm that her mother lost her life. In order to rescue Aunt Mae from the same fate as her mother, she must trust her own knowledge of, and solidarity with, the sea and all the creatures it contains. Lana and Hilda are characters inspired by their emotional relationships with nonhuman characters to the extent that they make choices to act in ecologically conscientious ways, upon their own initiative, and to take an empowered, antagonistic stance as concerned eco-citizens. Comics which model such proactive behaviour, and which engage with complex, reflective consideration of interactions, offer an important and inspiring reading experience. As Massey and Bradford argue, books which contain interwoven, confrontational, or multiple perspectives offer the potential for enriching reading and furthering discourse. Differences of ideology or expectation are inevitable, but offering children the experience of reading and enjoying works that demonstrate the »rifts and tensions in the broader domain of environmentalism« (124) is a means for safely practicing and developing open negotiation skills which are inevitably going to be important capabilities of the eco-citizens of the future.

The very concrete connections between O'Neill's *Aquicorn Cove* and issues effecting New Zealand bind the story within a literal framework of environmentalist concerns despite the fantastical creatures in the narrative. Human interactions with nature and the impact of our choices are at the very heart of the comic. Pearson's *Hilda and the Black Hound* equally encourages action and conscious decision making in young people, even at the cost of going against adult advice. Both Pearson and O'Neill have confidence in their young readers, trusting that they are able to face the difficult, complex, confrontational aspects in their narratives with »care, solidarity, curiosity, and knowledge« (Heggen et al., 397). Through main characters who model this same openness and willingness to

negotiate, difference need not be feared but rather invited, and children can bravely make their own decisions, take their own actions and embody lived eco-citizenship as a continual process of learning and change, as an endless potential for growth.

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Fig. 2: Footprints And Flashback (O'Neill 16–17).

Fig. 3: Facing Fear Head-on (Pearson [47] (excerpt).

Fig. 4: Loving Luminescence (O'Neill 22–23).

Fig. 5: Showing Impolite Concern (Pearson [7] excerpt).

1] This term is taken from the author's biography within the book. Although a broad term, in publishing it frequently covers the middle childhood age range.

2] Furthering Deleuze and Guttari's philosophical interpretation of the biological rhizome, the term encompasses culturally structured heterogeneous connections which might be multiple, simultaneous, non-binary, non-hierarchical, and non-chronological (Adkins, 22–33).

3] Importantly, use of panel size and focus seems to be related to genre. Barbara Postema's analysis of David Wiesner's picture book *Flotsam* (2006) finds that in his work, in which the focus is on the wonder of nature rather than the construction of narrative, an opposite use of panels and rhythms can be noticed; where smaller panels drive momentum, having »the more prosaic role of creating narrative«, larger images and landscapes cause the reader to pause, »to pore over and spend time« (Postema, 319–20).

4] These creatures are called *nisse* in Danish and Norwegian or *tomte* in Swedish (*tomtenisse* in Finish). For clarity in this paper, I will use Nisse to refer to the collective (the species) and Tontu to refer specifically to the character.

5] Tontu, sitting by the campfire, states: »We're not invisible/In every home there's a lot of wasted space« (Pearson [14]).