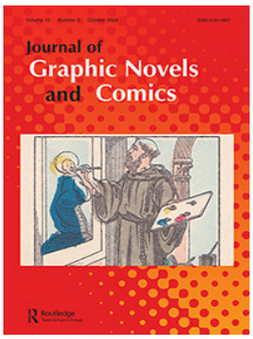

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Gender and terror tangled in the weeds: Poison Ivy between eco-feminism and eco-terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Eco-Terrorist. Femme fatale. Botanist. Environmentalist. Scientist. Villain. DC's Poison Ivy has been challenging ideas about human interactions with the planet since 1966. Exploring alternative portrayals of femininity, power and plant liberation, Ivy sits at a unique intersection between female and plant empowerment – which is complicated by her criminal activities. By examining recently published comic book stories of Poison Ivy in conjunction with academic feminist and terrorism theory, this paper investigates how these two ideas intertwine. Ivy's approach to the environment and her engagement with nature are inextricably linked to violence in the form of eco-terrorism, and this paper unpacks the extent to which this calls into question her portrayal as a plant-empowered female protagonist. In this way, the article explores ideas of identity and autonomy at the crossroads of feminism and botany through alternative representations of eco-feminism, but also reveals a number of provocative tensions at this very intersection.

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Introduction

> . . . when **humans** manipulate **nature**, **nothing** they create **ever** remains under their **control**.
> Poison Ivy in *The Virtuous Cycle* (2023)

One of the 'plant scientists' who embodies environmental themes in the DC universe is Poison Ivy, the alter ego of the botanist Dr Pamela Isley. Created by Robert Kanigher and Carmine Infantino in 1966, she made her first appearance in *Batman* #181. Ivy is best known for being one of Batman's flamboyant female scientist antagonists (for other scientists see Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022; Santos and Jürgens 2023) and flourishes in a myriad of contradictory and complementary storylines. The recent *Batman Secret Files: The Gardner #1* explains her origin as follows: As a successful, passionate scientist – 'beautiful, and idealistic, and naïve' – Dr Isley's research explored 'pheromones plants [use] to speak to each other' (Tynion et al. 2022).[1] During her time at the research lab, Pamela was injected with toxins by her supervisor Jason Woodrue (who

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would later become the Floronic Man, another famous DC villain) which changed her personality and DNA:

> The woman who woke up a few months later was no longer Pamela Isley. Not **really**. She had been changed on a **fundamental** level. – Her blood had been replaced with chlorophyll. Her sweat was poison . . . – And her **pheromones** . . . They could bend any man or woman around her finger. Make them **love** her. (Tynion et al. 2022, emphasis in the original)

The experiment thus turned her into a hybridised human-plant with a variety of powers – including communication with, and control of, plants – and '[s]oon it wasn't just pheromones she could control. She could command plant life to grow at her direction' (Tynion et al. 2022). Additionally, the experiment connected her to The Green,[2] enabling her to fully understand the pain and struggles of plants. She uses these newfound powers to avenge those she believes to be hurting the planet. In sum, Poison Ivy is a DC character with environmental superpowers and 'metahuman ability' (Tynion et al. 2022).

Ivy operates mainly in Gotham City. This places her alongside other popular female villains who pester Batman regularly, such as Harley Quinn and Catwoman (also known as the 'Gotham City Sirens', Manning and Irvine 2016); the former is in a romantic relationship with Ivy in multiple series including *Injustice: Year Zero* #8 (Taylor et al. 2020), *Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy* (2019–2020) and *Poison Ivy* (partly collected in Wilson, Takara, and Prianto 2023). Ivy and Harley (aka Dr Harleen Quinzel) have similar origins: both are gifted female scientists driven to villainy, in part, by men (the Joker and Jason Woodrue, respectively). While Ivy's relationship with Harley – the scientist-clownesse who calls her 'Pam-a-Lamb' (Franklin et al. 2022) – has been associated with feminism (Baney 2019) and eco-feminism in particular (Hopkins 2022; Javaid 2018), Ivy's physical makeup – part human, part plant – is significant in understanding and contextualising her role as a feminist, and her extremism. While Ivy's origin story varies in the multi-faceted DC universe, she typically uses violence to achieve her goals and is characterised as an eco-terrorist (Krul 2008; Krul et al. 2022; see also Knopf 2015). The intersection and juxtaposition of eco-terrorism and eco-feminism within one character is relevant to how we, as an audience, consume her content and messaging. It therefore begs the questions: How is eco-feminism explored in DC's Poison Ivy through her characterisation as an eco-terrorist? And what role does (her) violence play in her portrayal as a plant-empowered female protagonist? To clarify these questions, this paper unpacks Ivy's position between eco-feminism and eco-terrorism.

Though Ivy has featured in a variety of TV series and film – including *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992), Batman and Robin (1997) and Harley Quinn (2019) – her storyline and character development originate from comics, and comics are the primary focus of this study. Although older appearances are referenced, Ivy's motivations and depiction are mainly examined from 2011 onwards, when DC introduced 'The New 52', an in-universe reboot that streamlined stories and origins of DC characters (Hyde 2011). Specifically, this paper concentrates on the recent story *The Gardener* (Tynion et al. 2022) and the series *Poison Ivy*, written by G. Willow Wilson and illustrated by Marcio Takara, published since June 2022 and (partly) collected in *Poison Ivy: The Virtuous Cycle* (Willow et al. 2023). This material was chosen for its contemporary portrayal of the character and her environmentalist actions and motives.[3] Comics, and pop cultural media more broadly, are vehicles for environmental concerns, messaging and advocacy

(Bilandzic, Kinnebrock, and Klingler 2020; Morris et al. 2019). It is relevant to explore both *affirmative* portrayals of environmental messaging (such as those in eco-feminism) and *detrimental* portrayals (such as eco-terrorism) as they have the ability to affect not only our cultural imaginaries about the environment but also audiences' – our – perceptions of these issues (Smith 2008; Sturgeon 2008).

Environmental themes outlined in Poison Ivy

Issues of the environment and sustainability are increasingly being discussed in comics (Comer 2012; Krinsky 2013; Vasileva and Golubev 2019; Wilhelm 2021). Comics' depictions of environmental devastation – sometimes referred to as *cli-fi* (Mossner 2017) – often explore near-apocalyptic dystopias set in worlds of total environmental degradation through nuclear warfare, climate change or over-exploitation of resources. These stories help to consider the radical extension of current environmental problems (Mossner 2017) and form the backdrop of the media landscape in which Poison Ivy sits. The DC universe parallels modern North America, with Gotham City standing as an allegory for New York (Debona 1997). In the same way, many of the environmental issues outlined in the DC universe reflect those found in the Global North.

Throughout her various storylines, Ivy protects plants from a variety of harms, including environmental degradation, pollution and otherwise-unspecified human impacts on nature. 'Pamela's goal as Poison Ivy [is] to punish the people she [thinks are] hurting the world' (Tynion et al. 2022). Her motivations are usually explained, be it by others – 'She said that if what she and Woodrue were planning worked, it would be the seed of a whole new program. A new kind of science that could save the world' (Tynion et al. 2022) – or by herself: 'I can only hope that [. . .] I can inspire **others** to **rise** up and do the **same**' (Wilson, Takara, and Prianto 2023, Chapter 6). The very explicit main environmental themes of the 2022 comics series revolve around capitalist agricultural systems (monocultures), tokenistic environmentalism, understandings of veganism, greenwashing within environmentally damaging industries, such as fossil fuel and gas companies, and broader societal environmental complacency. Aptly, Poison Ivy informs us:

> Humankind has **warped** the natural landscape so **completely** that even our food has become an **ecological cancer**. – These cattle were never meant to be here. The **native species** that evolved in **harmony** with this land **starve** beneath their **hooves**. [. . .] **Collectively**, we are an **invasive species**. (Wilson, Takara, and Prianto 2023, Chapter 1)

Overall – within *Poison Ivy: The Virtuous Cycle*/the 2022 *Poison Ivy* series and beyond – environmental issues are treated as serious problems, mirroring our society. However, when analysing Poison Ivy, an intersectional perspective is important. Women play a central role in historical environmental movements and – part plant, part woman – Ivy is a unique lens to explore the intersection of these two ideas: women and plants.

Mother Woman, Mother Advocate, Mother Earth: eco-feminism through Poison Ivy

Although Poison Ivy is little discussed in academic research in comparison to characters such as Batman or Joker (see, e.g., Peaslee and Weiner 2015; Redmond 2022), she is mentioned as a point of interest in intersectional feminist research, especially when it

comes to the representation of women in comics. These publications generally criticise the over-sexualisation of her and other DC women, especially in screen adaptations (e.g. Baney 2019; Hopkins 2022; Javaid 2018). Others see such portrayals as consistent with the ideals of third-wave feminism, which focuses on empowerment and reclaiming sexual identity (Curtis and Cardo 2017; cf.; Knopf 2015, 202). Another important area of publishing concerns eco-feminism and its use as a framework for analysing Ivy. Authors, including Checkett (2001), explore the history of eco-feminism and the connection of women to nature in Ivy's stories, whereas Tedeschi (2018) (see also Gaspers 2020) focuses on how the tensions between Batman and Ivy mirror those of the battle between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism. According to Knopf (2015, 202), who is interested in concepts of motherhood, Poison Ivy is not only associated with the 'tradition of poison damsel tales' but also a (monstrous) 'militant mother' of sporelings and plants 'in the eco-feminist movement'.

Understanding Poison Ivy as a feminist figure helps to decipher her external perception (audience reception), but also her internal motives for violence as a form of environmental advocacy. Eco-feminism is the intersectional feminist movement that ties together ideas of women's (imagined) role and perception in society[4] to the biological world of plants and animals (Shiva and Mies 2014). There are two primary approaches to eco-feminism. The first is a practical approach – that of women's groups engaging in collective action to make change for an environmental cause. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, women's groups were essential in advocating for environmental issues such as nuclear non-proliferation (Mann 2011). The second approach is more theoretical, exploring how the oppression women face under patriarchy parallels the oppression of plants (Lennon 2019). It encompasses ideas like coding meat as male but plants and greens as female (Adams 1991; Gaard 2016) and identifies how patriarchal masculine traits have led to business models that focus on the domination, control and destruction of the environment (Oksala 2018). This understanding of eco-feminism considers how women are disproportionately affected by the effects of pollution and climate change. It scrutinises the role and connection of women to the earth and nature through stewardship and depictions such as 'mother nature' (Canipari, Santis, and Cecconi 2020; Desai and Zhang 2021; Eppinger 2011). Although there is no *explicit* reference to Ivy as a feminist within recent comics, feminist theory – specifically eco-feminism – can be examined through parallels of actions and imagery in the text, and also on a macro level: in relation to our reception of Ivy's character.

In the *Poison Ivy* comics of 2022, there are some important direct representations of eco-feminist ideas that are worth highlighting because of the way they reflect an eco-feminist ideology. For example, in issue #7 we see a manifestation of the agricultural-industrial complex being imposed on women. In this story, Ivy seeks revenge against the fracking company FutureGas, which is greenwashing its product: 'They're trying to **greenwash** petroleum-based fuels with a new **extraction technology**. And give it a gloss of **girl power** with a **CEO** who's also a **mother of three**. – I thought I could **dismantle** the **whole thing** in a **week**.' That female CEO herself speaks of needing to 'break into the **boys' club**' and how her empire is built on exploitation and greed. This is a key area of criticism in eco-feminism – company structures and the capitalist market economy are built by men in ways that prioritise money at the expense of the environment, and even though women may be able to fulfil these CEO roles today, they need to

act like men to be respected and successful. Eco-feminism would assert that 'acting like men' in such a context would also include environmental harms (as seen in the story) (Oksala 2018). This critical reading of the text affirms the eco-feminist criticism of the industrial complex.

Another nod to eco-feminism can be found in issue #11, which parallels the women in the text and the female-organising element of eco-feminism. In this story, Ivy enlists a group of women – reminiscent of groups such as the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, who aided in blockading a number of nuclear facilities in the 1980s (Mann 2011) – to block an oil truck. However, this seemingly positive portrayal is undermined by the fact that Ivy uses toxic spores and her pheromone powers to make women advocate against their will. Thus, in issue #11 we see how Ivy identifies herself as a mother (nature) but exploits this for her ecological goals. Though the series seems to be aware of the positive promotion of eco-feminism through women's connection to Earth, it simultaneously undermines this awareness through Ivy's subversive, manipulative and violent representations of environmental activism, eco-feminism and advocacy. Whilst *Poison Ivy* (2022) addresses explicit themes of eco-feminism, the series does so through violent female villains, polluting female CEOs and brainwashed protesters. Even if representation is important, the text can hardly be praised as pro-eco-feminist.

As mentioned earlier, one stream of eco-feminism studies is interested in the ways in which depictions of plants perpetuate representations of women defined by patriarchy (Kachel, Steffens, and Niedlich 2016). The visual portrayal of the plants themselves within the *Position Ivy* (2022) series demonstrates different manifestations of plant power, linked to varied representations of gender. Spores and fungi, a prevalent motif throughout the series, for example, are visualised in a highly grotesque and violent manner. This is in stark contrast to depictions of 'classically feminine plants' such as flowers, which are drawn with bright colours in cheerful contexts. Ivy's primarily brown and green plants tend to have tentacle-like outgrowths, are dripping with unappetising, swampy elements more reminiscent of compost and regurgitated food than of daisies (for images see 'Poison Ivy/Cover'). This depiction of plants extends to the depiction of Ivy herself (see 'Poison Ivy/Cover'). For example, on the cover of *Poison Ivy* issue #2, fungi are seen oozing pus and are intercut with human limbs, eyes and teeth. Within this cover, Ivy looks muscular and harsh, with strong features, red eyes and unkempt hair. This is a contrast to the more 'feminine' covers of issue #3 and #4. In these, Ivy has a soft complexion and expression, styled hair and makeup. She is surrounded by flowering plants such as daisies, roses and chrysanthemums; delicate and soft plants that form a strong counterpoint to the 'fungi covers' of other issues (including #2 and #6). This dichotomy in the representation of plants and fungi-like kingdoms of life runs throughout the series and is achieved through a variety of aesthetic choices.

These aesthetic choices echo criticisms within the eco-feminist literature of certain plants being coded as either masculine or feminine (Kachel, Steffens, and Niedlich 2016). The varied aesthetic portrayals of Ivy demonstrate mirror-encoded gender depictions of strength and masculinity, compared to softness and femininity within plants. In other words, many of the inherently gendered plant images that eco-feminism advocates for recognition of are perpetuated in the literature itself. This is an affirmation of the patriarchy and, by extension, the oppression of women (Shiva and Mies 2014). Poison Ivy is both a symbol of her liberation as a woman and her oppression as an aesthetically

gendered plant. When Ivy's violence and crime add an additional layer of complexity, we then need to consider the role her character plays in the broader social perception of eco-feminism and its symbolism.

For Ivy, there is no escape from her situation: she is subject to both the effects of patriarchy – as all women are, according to feminist theory (Shiva and Mies 2014) – and humanity's impact on the biotic world. She is a victim of her circumstance on both fronts. Unlike many of her other female counterparts in the DC universe, breaking free of the impacts of one limitation is not enough. This conflict directly plays out in the crossover story *Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy* (Houser et al. 2021). In this story, Harley begs Ivy for a life together where they can be the 'good guys' – 'Harley and Ivy . . . we were together through it all.' – and turn away from their villainous past. For Harley, escaping the male abuse (from the Joker) has given her the freedom and opportunity to pursue a new direction in life, one of her own choosing. Although Ivy wants a free-spirited life with Harley, she has to be aware of the factors that limit her freedom and that of others because of her connection to The Green: Since she is an advocate not only for herself but also for the plants around her (which cannot advocate for themselves), she cannot experience true freedom without the liberation of both women and plants. This is the uniquely eco-feminist reality she exists within.

Those within minority communities are often passively pushed into advocacy out of a need to stand up for their group within majority communities (where they may have little or no other representation, see Danquah et al. 2021). Their forced advocacy stems from the fact that they are not represented or accommodated if they do not take on this role (Bowes and Sim 2006; Minta 2019). Where majority groups can have autonomy over their ability to choose activism, minority groups are not afforded the same ability to choose. For Ivy, she is one of the only half-plant, half-human lifeforms in her universe. Because of the inability of plants to advocate for themselves in the human world, Ivy is obligated to be the advocate for the entire community, regardless of her personal drive to do so. Ivy thus reminds us that 'if the plants could talk to us, and explain the pain we were inflicting on them [. . .] people around the world **might** listen to them' – and that she definitely does (Tynion et al. 2022). The uniqueness of her position means Ivy is required to be a sole actor. With this additional layer of consideration, it becomes easier to understand her motivations as an eco-feminist that manifests as malice or resentment towards a society that puts humans at the centre (at the expense of plant life). This is to say, eco-feminism is *not an autonomous choice* a character like Poison Ivy is able to make. It is a *requisite reality* of her position.

These reflections have a three-pronged relevance to Ivy as a character and the role she plays within feminist and environmental discourse. Firstly, she is a woman (although the sexualisation of women within comics is an important discussion, it falls outside of the scope of this paper, see Cocca 2014; Dunne 2006 for more insights). Secondly, she is a plant. Ivy is not only innately affected but forcibly compelled to advocate as an eco-feminist in response to the impacts on plants, who are unable to advocate for themselves. Thirdly, Ivy is both a woman AND a plant. *She is a victim as a woman and a plant. She is an advocate as both a woman and a plant*. This unique representation means that her actions in her stories reflect both the representation of women in comics and the representation of eco-feminism and the environment. This is why the portrayal of this woman – the most iconic

representative for eco-feminism and plant society within DC comics – as a violent terrorist is problematic and deserves a closer examination.

Violence, terror, murder: eco-terrorism through Poison Ivy

Without going into the academically divisive definitional history of terrorism (for more details see della Porta and Haupt 2012; Schmid 2004), eco-terrorism can be broadly understood as a branch of left-wing terrorism characterised by violence for environmental ends (Carson 2016). Rising to prominence in the 1960s, radical environmentalism (the underlying philosophy for eco-terrorism) was founded on the idea that humanity (and the structure of society), is responsible for significant environmental degradation. The radical extension of this philosophy is that of bio-radicalism or bio-centrism. Contrary to anthropocentrism – the belief that humans alone possess intrinsic value and are the most important entity on the planet – biocentrism conceptualises humans simply as member of a broader biological community (Boxley 2019). Bio-centrism takes up this idea and expands it into visions, such as humanity should only be granted the same protection and liberties as other organisms within that community (Brown 2007; Rottman 2014). Eco-terrorism takes these philosophies and translates them into actions such as murders, bombings or vandalism directed against those causing environmental harms (including individuals, organisations and company assets). The line between eco-terrorism and environmental activism (including violent environmental activism) is ill-defined but can be considered the proclivity towards illegal, violent action, compared to legal non-violent action (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). Illegal or violent political or environmental action can emerge from radicalised activism, and analysis of the 'activists' perceptions of their identity' and environmental conditions has been the main tool for determining the link between individual motivations and environmental conditions (della Porta and Haupt 2012, 314).

Poison Ivy – whose self-definition and ambitions go beyond environmental activism (e.g. of the School Strike 4 Climate-type, see Hee et al. 2022) and clearly celebrate radical forms of violent action – is often called a bioterrorist both within her texts and in external analysis (e.g. Baney 2019; Tedeschi 2018). However, the term 'eco-terrorist' is simply used as an adjective and without further development of motivation or methods paralleling eco-terror theory, and there is little to no scholarly writing that unravels and clarifies Poison Ivy's portrayal as an eco-terrorist. Is she engaging in violence for bio-centric reasons or is she using plants to engage in terrorism? Or is it some combination of both?

Ivy's motivations for violence are inconsistent throughout her cannon. For example, in one of her earlier iterations, in *Batman #181* (Kanigher et al. 1966), her motivations for violence are simply focused on being the 'most evil female villain' with no mention of environmental objectives. 'You men are such fools!' she begins her performance review and charade, explaining:

> If you weren't so blind you would see that I'm not only more beautiful – but more successful than those amateurs! Why – you don't even know of my crimes – they're so perfect! That's the only mistake I make – committing such perfect crimes that I haven't gotten any publicity about them! (Kanigher et al. 1966)

DC's recent reboots of Ivy feature a more complex and consistent characterisation, focusing less on the sex appeal of Ivy as a seductress and more on her character motivations. Throughout different series, we begin to see not only the early use of 'eco-terrorist' terminology but also specific examples of crimes that earned her this characterisation. In *Birds of Prey #3*, for example, she states: 'I'm no killer. – I merely prevent greedy individuals from despoiling the planet.' Below her image, newspaper clippings inform us that: 'Refinery Explosions Linked to Terrorist "Ivy"; 13 Dead', 'Entire ToxClean U.S.A. Exec Board Found Dead at Treatment Plant – Scott Phillips, 47, GlobalChem Founder, Takes Own Life – Reportedly Despondent Over Mistress – a Mystery "Lady in Green"' (Swierczynski et al. 2012). Here, we see a version of eco-terrorism that relies primarily on classical eco-terrorist motivations, specifically targeting organisations or individuals believed to be involved in terror actions.

More recently, the eco-terror narrative is centrally highlighted in the 2022 *Poison Ivy* series. Issue #2 of that series not only explains Ivy's eco-terror motivation but also introduces radical bio-centric ideology. On a page depicting catastrophic fires, Ivy reflects while sipping a cup: 'We have **less** than twenty years left to **save** this **planet**. – Half measures aren't **enough** anymore. – The only way to spare the **Green** from total **destruction** is to **eliminate** the **problem**.' Ivy's violence is not only targeted at individuals or organisations but society at large; she uses broad societal apathy to environmental causes as justification for total elimination of the world population. Directly paralleling biocentrist ideology, in issue #1, Ivy expresses her contempt for society and need for a radical system overhaul in order to see environmental change: 'The **only** way to **save** this beautiful blue marble is to get rid of all of us. **Every** one of us. – Even **me**.' Ivy's solution: eco-terrorism for the benefit of a planet free from human environmental dominance. This form of extremist environmental thinking mirrors that of classical terror ideology, notably the need for radical action to overhaul a system (Boxley 2019). In many ideologically motivated terror actions (such as radical religious terror acts), individuals have been so disillusioned by reality and, as a result, see no way to enact change outside of radical action (Borum 2004). This justification risks undermining Ivy's legitimate environmental concerns as it aligns with radical ideas (see Brown 2007 on the impact of the violent method on messages).

In the same way visual depictions of plants are relevant to their gender parallels, they are also relevant to the depiction of the aesthetics of violence. Within *Poison Ivy* (2022), plants act as a tool for terrorism: Throughout the 2022 series, plants are used to attack, trap and even kill. Plants with toxic fumes, whipping vines, sentient trees and rose thorns are all examples of the vegetation in Ivy's deadly arsenal (see 'Poison Ivy/Cover'). In issues #1 and #2 (and many other Ivy stories), the fungal spores (called 'Lamia') spread via person-to-person contact – a depiction of plants that mirrors that of biological weapons used in traditional warfare or crime, such as anthrax or ricin (Frischknecht 2003). This is interesting because it adds another layer of terror depiction: bio-weapons intertwine with the ideologies of bio-centrism and eco-feminism, engaging in eco-terrorism. Plants are not only the motivation but the tool. This ties into how bio-feminist ideas manifest within Ivy's motivations and actions. These ideas directly challenge one another and our understanding of environmental messaging in visual narratives more broadly. More recent stories, notably *Poison Ivy* #16 (2023), expand on this complicated relationship between frictional concepts, with Ivy realising the error of her

radicalism and attempting to find a cure for her lamia spores – becoming a mere activist in the process (see above; Moskalenko and McCauley 2009). There are more tensions at play.

Plant matters, entanglements and tensions: Poison Ivy at the intersection between eco-feminism and eco-terrorism

The 2023 *Poison Ivy Uncovered* special issue (Berbey, Roe, and Lopez 2023) breaks the fourth wall by using meta-commentary to talk about the comics process and walk the reader through some significant main and alternative cover artwork for each issue of the series. This issue encapsulated the varied depictions of a feminine vs. masculine Pamela, but also the inherent interconnectedness of ideas between Ivy as an eco-feminist and as a violent eco-terrorist. This idea is perhaps best witnessed on the page in the centre of the issue. Ivy stands alone within the centre of the page, the illustrator capturing her from an upward angle, elongating her figure and emphasising an aura of power and dominance. She stands with her right hand across her chest as if making a proclamation. It is unclear where plant ends and Ivy begins, with spores extended over the length of her body, her feet literally rooted to the ground, her red hair like flames, furling above her with extruding twigs. In this state, she proclaims herself an eco-terrorist with an advocating call to the reader '… but I don't see **you** trying to save the planet from yourselves' (Berbey, Roe, and Lopez 2023). In the very next speech bubble, Ivy conjures up images of eco-feminism in the idea of beautiful nature and the sisterhood of environmental activism that eco-feminism embodies: 'Whatever the case, I think there's something profoundly **beautiful** about the natural world, and while some of you may find lamia spores **unappealing** I consider them my gorgeous little earth sisters' (Berbey, Roe, and Lopez 2023). Here, we are able to witness the inherent interconnectedness of the eco-feminist and terrorist ideals within Ivy's narrative.

However, there is tension between Ivy being an advocate and a terrorist (as explored through definitions of terrorism mentioned above). A significant part of Ivy's perils is that she cannot break out of her position and that she is the only representative of the plants. Like other DC eco-terrorists, Ivy targets those she believes to be harming the planet, but unlike the eco-terrorist in 'real life', she *is* the plant she is trying to protect.[5] Unlike other DC characters, like Woodrue[6] or The Gardener, at her core, Ivy's intentions are those of altruism and liberation – the foundations of eco-feminism. Here lies Ivy's unique positioning: Because the line between human and plant is indivisible, she is *simultaneously* fighting for herself *and* the voiceless (other plants). Plants cannot advocate. Plants cannot separate themselves from their oppression. Ivy, as a woman, cannot separate herself from the oppression of her gender nor the oppression of her DNA (plant). It is therefore in a position of desperation that she turns to radical action. This desperation is not uncommon in real-world terrorism, with studies showing that many terror acts are committed by those with little prospects (Borum 2004). What Ivy's depiction demonstrates is the meeting of harm with the powers to enact change.

The parallel aesthetic portrayal of plants as a means of depicting femininity and as a means of representing violence illustrates precisely the dichotomy that *Poison Ivy* (2022) perpetuates. The series spreads environmental messages and builds a strong female character while simultaneously showing harm, death and destruction. This

juxtaposition demonstrates the impasse that the aforementioned theories themselves (external to the text) do. Both eco-feminism and eco-terrorism have similar motivations and goals – primarily the protection of, and justice for, the natural world. Both advocacy and violence can stem from desperation of one's position (Borum 2004). However, one is built on empowerment and liberation, the other on violence and harm. The two, though similar, address and represent intrinsically different issues. This means that the association of the two within the text (whether it is within the text itself or through our interpretation as an audience) threatens to damage the underlying messaging (particularly of eco-feminism).

In the context of both terror and radicalisation, it is important (legally and academically) to separate ideology from action (Schmid 2004). Eco-feminism is not terrorism. Biocentrism is not eco-terrorism. However, these two concepts are inseparable within Ivy's portrayal; her very nature seems to be predisposed to violence. Though this is a perfectly valid writing decision (after all, Poison Ivy's role within the DC universe is that of a villain), it can be dangerous when the character is *uncritically* consumed as a feminist figure or one to be representing women. The ability of comics to be accessible and to engage audiences' interest in themes such as science and environmentalism (Jürgens and Buchenberger et al. 2024; Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022; Santos and Jürgens 2023; see also Farinella 2018) also exposes readers to portrayals that may dissuade them from the cause. This is why it is critical to consider what framing is used when exploring complex characters like Poison Ivy: Ivy's violence undermines her portrayal as an eco-feminist, but she does not enjoy violence for violence's sake; it is the feminist spiel that casts her portrayal in a more sympathetic light.[7] Overall, if comics present a 'form of amplification through simplification' (McCloud 1993, 30), we may conclude that it is *tensions* that are amplified in the character of Poison Ivy.

In a moment of planetary environmental crisis, depictions of Poison Ivy as a 'plant-based' terrorist *and* feminist present a complex narrative network that provocatively challenges the notion of autonomous and human-centred environmental agency and exposes it as bound to other entities.[8] Ivy stands for a radical intimacy with the non-human, personifying 'a sense of being close, even too close, to other lifeforms, of having them under one's skin' (Morton 2013, 139), and thus a version of what has been called 'entanglement': a 'relational understanding of the world that recognizes and engages with more-than-human agencies' (Giraud 2019, 6), going beyond human exceptionalism. By violent and feminist means, Ivy calls for greater recognition of nature, but does she really go beyond 'the entirely faulty supposition that nature exists only in its relation to humans' (Gomes 2022, 84)? And what about the undesirable nature of certain forms of relation and the need to preserve distance, alterity and separateness? Drawing upon Eva Haifa Giraud's critique of the concept of entanglement between activism and anthropocentrism, Poison Ivy actually embodies *a paradox of relationality*: the struggle 'to accommodate things that are resistant to being in relation, including forms of politics that actively oppose particular relations' (Giraud 2019, 7). The fact that Ivy is a botanist – a *scientist* – at the interface between eco-terrorism and eco-feminism, and not just 'a walking plague' (Moench et al. 1993, 11), reveals further tensions in this context.

Comics are an essential part of pop culture, blending character-driven content and messaging with visual explanations and representations – strategies that can stimulate interest in science-related themes (and even scientific education, see Pauwell 2006).

Within Poison Ivy's fictional world, visual understanding of plant form and biotic interactions with the built environment are key to the narrative and environmental messaging, and in the words of Harley: 'This is kinda sciencey!' (Conner et al. 2019). In the comics moments discussed above – for example, when she appears as a mushroom goddess and calls lamia spores her 'gorgeous little earth sisters' – Ivy embodies a 'pop culture ecology' (Pike 2012, 16) that promotes the symbiotic relationship between humans, plants and other kingdoms of life. Her intermingling of humans and non-humans and her convergence with metaphysical speculation and spiritual realms (centred around The Green), if not animism (the belief that the world is full of inter-connected and interdependent living beings, Harvey 2005), seen as sources of truth, echo non-Western 'ways of knowing', ways of being human and modes of environmental thinking (Richards and Jürgens 2023) that challenge positivist or materialist notions traditionally associated with Western science. Trained as a scientist in more or less 'classical' fictional Western science labs, does Ivy thus embody the intertwining of different forms of environmentally oriented knowledge, or rather an *uneasy* alliance of such knowledges? It seems that there is a rather blatant silence about the convergence of knowledge systems in Ivy stories (if read *symptomatically*, see Moore 2016).

Future research can unpack these tensions and why, in view of the climate crisis, Ivy is actually (still) portrayed as a villainess and not a heroine and metaphor for the human need to overcome the limitations of our biological form. Would not a 'million heroes' – or comics villainesses – like her, who represent 'the human enmeshment within the biosphere' (Westling 2006, 45), be more (in)appropriate to save the planet (Machata 2022; Singh and Adams 2015, 290)? How does a character as complex – but also as popular – as Poison Ivy relate to what has been called *spectacular environmentalism*: a commodified 'large-scale mediated spectacle[] about environmental problems' (Goodman et al. 2016, 678)? The implications and influences of Ivy on DC fandom are waiting to be unpacked in this context (see Lundgren et al. 2024), such as the role of comics production, genre expectations and the politics of a corporation like DC – of positionalities, material realities and social practices – in juggling consumer choices, corporate ambitions and culture production (e.g. comics featuring a sympathetic view of Ivy and her actions vs. endorsing radical, if not violent, climate activism). Finally, female oppression, (spectacular?) environmental liberation and depictions of eco-violence are all inherently connected – in Poison Ivy, comics and beyond – and they offer us a glimpse into our personal relationship with ourselves and the environment through the lens of the biotic world. We are all connected to The Green if we listen, and like Ivy, we rely on sustaining environments.

Notes

1. All emphasis in this and the following quotes is taken from the original texts which often do not have page numbers. The author is fully aware that it is insufficient to reference the authorship of comics with only one or two names, as is common in academic writing, as each comic is the result of the talent and hard work of many people. Space does not allow us to include all writers and artists – colourists, letterers, cover-artists, co-authors and many more. Further information about the comic book artists referred to in this paper can be found at www.comics.org.

2. The Green is an abstract force that not only connects but animates all organic life within the universe. More so: 'Whoever controls the green controls this world' (*Birds of Prey: Harley Quinn*, see Conner et al. 2019). The Green is also a physical dimension where the collective consciousness of plant life – known as the Parliament of Trees – exists. Other DC characters connected to The Green include Swamp Thing and Black Orchid, both human/plant hybrids similar to Ivy (Manning and Irvine 2016). There are also other plant scientists – including the female biologist-turned-villain The Gardener – who are associated with this context (and the botany lab of Dr Jason Woodrue, see Tynion et al. 2022).
3. Images (covers) and further information on the individual issues of the series can be accessed online via the 'Poison Ivy (2022—Present)' DC data base: https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Poison_Ivy_Vol_1. We discuss our example through the lens of textual analysis. Textual analysis is a common procedure of analysing and interpreting fictional texts and their 'processes of sense-making' (Rauscher 2014, 68). It is used to examine how structures of thoughts and patterns of ideas are staged or framed, how specific characteristics create meaning or contrast each other (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Learmonth and Griffin 2018). Approaching comics through textual analysis implies paying "close attention to textual details with respect to elements such as setting, characterisation, point of view, figuration, diction, rhetorical style, tone, rhythm plot, and allusion' (Rapaport 2011, 4). For a more detailed discussion of textual analysis as a method for examining environmental and scientific topics in pop cultural media – including comics – see Jürgens and Darragh et al. (2024).
4. We explore cultural ideas of women's roles in society through intersectional perspectives, focusing specifically on women scientists, in our forthcoming book *Women Scientists in American Television Comedy: Beakers, Big Bangs and Broken Hearts* (Judd, Gaul, and Jürgens 2024).
5. This relationship between fictional protest (in comics) and 'real world' protest (embodied, for example, by Greta Thunberg), and how these affect an audience's perception on environmental advocacy, are worth a closer look in future research.
6. Biocentric ideas are mirrored in Jason Woodrue, for example (see introduction), but he is less focused on plant liberation than his own personal domination (*Batman Secret Files: The Gardener #1*, see Tynion et al. 2022).
7. Feminist reading methodologies, enacting feminist theorisation, can deliver a more nuanced understanding of the structural inequality (see e.g. Cox 2022) in Ivy's visual rhetoric, and unpack the extent to which Ivy embodies nature's refusal to be exploited.
8. For an analysis and contextualisation of agency and intra-action in environmental fiction, see Machata (2022).

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