

In the Shadows of Exploitation:
A Reading of Extractive Capitalism's Migrant Workforce in Kate Beaton's
Ducks

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Kate Beaton's autobiographical graphic novel, *Ducks*, recounts her experience working at the Northern Alberta oil sands. Rife with experiences of misogyny, depictions of mental health crises, health problems, substance abuse, and striking images of environmental damage, Beaton's memoir makes evident the difficult social and physical conditions of the oil sands. However, a critical reading applying the concept of extractivism reveals how the issues that plague those working at the oil sands are interrelated, symptomatic manifestations of the non-reciprocal and extractive relationships paradigmatic of long-standing colonial systems. Extractivism exploits, subjugates, and depletes nature (including humankind), ideologically naturalizing destructive modes of being and ways of relating to the world. According to Imre Szeman in his article, "On the Politics of Extraction," when the concept of extraction is expanded to include contemporary social and economic landscapes, alongside environmental ones, extraction "becomes the name for any process through which value is generated for capitalism" (444). In this essay, I argue that Beaton's *Ducks* demonstrates how sites of natural resource extraction are epicenters of extractive capitalism's systemic pathology; as the oil sands lure, commoditize, and extract from the mobile workforce, individuals become ensnared as participants and victims in the cycle of exploitation.

Under capitalism's guise of equal opportunity for socioeconomic growth, resource extraction sites like the oil sands lure the mobile workforce, reflecting the cyclical nature of resource depletion and labour migration that fuels extractive capitalism. The lure of the oil sands is intensified by the social and economic conditions of places like Cape Breton, which is also a casualty of extractivism. As rapid resource extraction depleted coal mines through World War 1, "the central Canadian capitalists" that had come to profit from the industrial sector "abandoned the area" (Muisse). Left to navigate the repercussions of resource depletion with "inadequate" government subsidies, the population's history of mass migration ensued (Muisse). In *Ducks*, the protagonist, Katie, recalls how Cape Breton "used to export fish, coal, and steel, but . . . [now] main[ly] export[s] people" (Beaton 10). She describes a century of "empty chairs around the table" left by "fathers, siblings, [and] cousins" who have "gone to be cheap labour where booming industries demand [it]" (Beaton 10). Often compelled to choose between having the opportunity for economic success and staying home, the people in Cape Breton become an example of how extractive capitalism feeds on mobile labour; the process of resource extraction and depletion leads to displacement, forcing individuals to leave their homes and migrate, and thus continuing to supply the labour needs of the next extraction site.

The capitalist fantasy that resources are infinite and economic growth is accessible to everyone attracts a displaced work force, which is necessary to support the resource extraction cycle. Near the beginning of the memoir, a newspaper reading "the smell of money" is pictured underneath Katie's dialogue,

which expresses her need to rid herself of her “debilitating student debt” as quickly as she can (Beaton 12). The newspaper is advertising the Alberta oil sands for migrant workers. The oil sands hold a captivating lure, energized by the “smell,” or promise, of quick and stable economic growth. However, the idea of endless profit and opportunity is ultimately illusory; natural resources, like bitumen, are finite. At Syncrude, the mechanic foreman, Ambrose, scolds the younger men who brag about their success and purchases, warning them against “spending their money like fools” and “digging [themselves] a hole” (Beaton 110). One of the men retorts in defense of his spending, stating that the “hole [is] full of oil for a hundred more years” (Beaton 110). Rather than saving money, he risks debt and loss, confident that the oil will not run out. Ambrose’s reminder that “the Grand Banks were full too,” alongside the history of Cape Breton that Katie explains earlier in the memoir, contradicts this notion and demonstrates how the younger man’s consumer mindset supports capitalism’s dependence upon mobile labour; without savings or security, he will have to migrate if the oil runs out. Although the promise of secure work and money follows migration, the loss of nature, family, and connection does, too.

As extractivism reduces and assimilates individual value into an interchangeable and mobile workforce, people are exploited as tools serving the capitalist machine. Before Katie goes to Long Lake, Ambrose warns her that at the camps, when people “[do not] come home to regular life every night, . . . [it] changes [them]” (Beaton 132). The difference between Syncrude – where Katie lived in town, removed from the oil sands during her hours off – and Long Lake is immediate and striking. The sustained duration of time spent at the camps seems to intensify the

series of interrelated issues that imprison the workers, who are known as “the shadow population” (Beaton 132). The title of “shadow population” is indicative of the looming and oppressive atmosphere at the oil sands; the workers are burdened by isolation and the loss of dignity and identity that accompanies the process of exploitation. The conversion of value into wealth that extractive capitalism promotes correlates with an absence of meaning; far from families, living in subjugation, and often displaced from their homes, those who work at the oil sands are vulnerable to mental health problems and substance use issues.

The extractivist approach ignores individual health and wellbeing for the sake of profit; in a system that renders the worker an interchangeable and dispensable tool, their condition is of no concern. As one character puts it, the reason there is so much drug and alcohol use at camp is because “things are shady in the shadow population,” showing the wide awareness of the issue (Beaton 392). However, as Katie expresses it, out of all the safety meetings she has attended, she “[has] never been to one about drugs or alcohol” (Beaton 392). Katie’s friend, Mike, tells her that someone “coked out of [their] mind” had an accident with a crane (Beaton 153). When a mortified Katie questions Mike about the cocaine, he laughs and tells her that “everyone is on that shit” because it leaves the body’s system after one day and employees can pass the urine test (Beaton 153). Mike’s knowledge of drug use at the oil sands, as well as his nonchalant attitude, suggests that repeated, long-term exposure to the issue has desensitized him, reflecting the way that extractivism naturalizes destructive modes of being and ways of relating to the world. In this way, the men are victims of exploitation – in how they are used and

discarded for their labour – and perpetrators, as they exploit the environment and people they perceive as inferior to them. Extractivist views structure the way men at camp relate to women, producing a culture that normalizes and encourages misogyny. As a result, although they are subject to the same loss of identity and individual value as men, women endure the added layer of gender-based exploitation.

Many of the men at camp view women as a resource from which they can extract sex; by commodifying the female body, men feel free to disregard women's autonomy and take what they want without permission and, if necessary, with violence. Although Katie has faced misogyny since arriving in Northern Alberta, the standard for the behavior of men towards women in Long Lake is derogatory, explicit, and shameless. Some examples include classifying women into categories such as "hot" and "camp hot," throwing coins at a stripper's genitals, and blatant verbal sexual harassment (Beaton 169). Likewise, Katie is mortified to learn of her boss's infidelity, remembering his wife and "the picture" of "his baby," but Mike replies with a light-hearted chuckle, stating "they all have fuckin' wives" (Beaton 183). After this conversation, a frame shows Katie's written financial comparison of living in Syncrude and Long Lake; as she stares down at the paper sadly, it is implied that she cannot afford to keep up with her student loan payments unless she stays in Long Lake (Beaton 183). Under the systems of inequality produced by extractive capitalism, Katie's gender and socioeconomic status are intersecting disadvantages that exacerbate her vulnerability. While staying in Long Lake allows for greater income, it also requires a sacrifice: managing pervasive misogyny. In the succeeding

scene, Katie attends a party where she is raped. Shortly after, she is raped again. Katie's decision to stay at Long Lake reinforces how extractive capitalism imprisons workers in dismal conditions, as they are bound to economic need or promise. Her sexual assaults, which are subsequent to this decision, parallel how extractivism depletes and discards resources, exploiting them for their capital value.

As a woman at camp, Katie is a victim of exploitation across multiple domains, but she also participates in the exploitation of the environment. She admits that upon arrival at the oil sands, she "did [not] think anything of [coming to Alberta]," but now she "can [not] extract [herself] from having come," highlighting the way that extractive capitalism traps and exploits individuals in a way from which they cannot recover (Beaton 354). In this manner, the ducks who "[get] stuck in a tailings pond" and drown due to oil deposits become a metaphor for the migrant workers (Beaton 320). Like ducks migrating to safety, workers follow the promise of economic stability. However, as the ducks become trapped and weighed down by oil, individuals become ensnared by the heavy and oppressive conditions of the oil sands. The workers are sitting ducks, trapped and with little protection from exploitation. Ambrose's affectionate and infantilizing nickname for Katie, "ducky," highlights how women are even more vulnerable (Beaton 132). However, while proximity to the oil sands scathes Katie, it also brings her awareness. When Katie sees a video of an Indigenous woman speaking about the devastating health and environmental effects of the oil sands on Indigenous lands and peoples, she takes an appropriate degree of personal responsibility based on her position within the hierarchy of power; she states that her and the workers "[are] not the president of

shell but [they are at the oil sands]" (Beaton 352). Katie's reflection and emerging awareness indicates that the visibility of physical sites of extraction and their proximal effects is integral to understanding the multifaceted systemic destruction brought on by extractive capitalism.

The harm done to Indigenous Peoples living near to and downstream from the oil sands demonstrates how the practice of extractive capitalism is indivisible from colonial violence. In the video Katie watches, Celina Harpe, "an elder from the Cree community in Fort McKay," declares that the cost of Canada's profitable oil industry is "First Nation People's lives;" as their land is spoiled, Fort McKay First Nation suffers the effects of toxic pollutants, which poison their waters and cause cancer (Beaton 424, 350). Celina Harpe asks what the next generation "will live on," as their "lives around the lands," their water, and their air are all "ruined" (Beaton 352). While the mobile workforce can manage resource depletion through migration, Indigenous Peoples are immobilized by the destruction of their livelihoods, which are sacrificed for the government's "almighty dollar" (Beaton 352). Furthermore, Katie reveals that shortly after arriving in Northern Alberta, when she worked at a restaurant, she "served a table . . . of Archaeology students" sent to "survey prospective areas" for "expanding oil companies," who are required to make sure there is nothing "important" where they want to build (Beaton 354). A frame with a map of the oil sands shows that Fort McKay First Nation is surrounded by mine areas, with the highway that the industry depends upon for transportation running directly through their unceded land. The construction of plants around First Nation's People, which happens despite the surveying process Katie explains,

demonstrates how the worldviews established through colonialism and extractive capitalism work in tandem to naturalize the displacement, harm, and exploitation of Indigenous Peoples for capital gain.

Beaton's *Ducks* illustrates extractive capitalism's systemic pathology; as they spend time engaging with the oil sands, individuals are actively trapped as participants in and victims of exploitation. The migrant workers' proximity to the oil sands, a physical site of extraction, seems to concentrate the subjugating and exploitative characteristics of extractivism and reproduce them in a toxic culture built upon destructive ways of relating to the environment and other humans. The toxicity of epicenters of extractivism is not contained by physical boundaries; the effects extend to the Indigenous people, whose unceded and sacred land is destroyed and mutated into a toxic and health-harming environment, and to the wives, families, and children of migrant workers who are also displaced by their loved one's attempts or failure to manage the conditions of the oil sands. However, while *Ducks* demonstrates how extractivist ways of relating to the world extend to culture, subjugating and exploiting individuals alongside the environment, Beaton does not leave us without hope, as she actively employs a strategy for shifting views: visibility and awareness. This hope is strengthened by the fact that *Ducks* is an autobiography; not only did Beaton survive and extract herself from the cycle of exploitation, but she also created an accessible, engaging, and visually informative work that unveils the systemic destruction produced by extractivist worldviews.

Works Cited

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