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Cabalcor: An Extracted History by **SUN BELT**
Anvil Press, 2015 $24.00

Reviewed by **ALEC FOLLETT**

Cabalcor is not your typical boom and bust town narrative. It is a fragmented, yet immersive, account of life in an imaginary American tar-sands company town generated through fictional archival writing, images, and music. This book, although more of a multimedia experience, explores how resource-rich areas become cursed. In Cabalcor the resource curse is not caused by a supernatural hex or the inevitable "march of progress." Instead, it is a result of exploitation in the name of profit that requires the silencing of Indigenous knowledge and an active disregard for signs of human, environmental, and even economic malady. *Cabalcor* is a topical story, but it resonates with countless moments of environmental injustice and is a worthwhile contribution to the still insufficient artistic representations of oil: one of our most prized, yet destructive, substances.

Cabalcor the book and Cabalcor the town are both shrouded in mystery. The text was created by a group of accomplished visual artists, musicians, and writers who call themselves Sun Belt, thereby emphasizing collective artistic creation and avoiding self-branding and the all-to-common celebration of solitary authorship. The aptly-named collective invented archival material including interviews, memoirs, photographs, and sketches to produce the book, which is accompanied by music available at www.bandcamp.com (the free download code is hidden on the final page of the book). Their fragmented multimedia creation makes for an immersive experience in which the reader, faced with changing perspectives, is in a state of constant reorientation. This formal approach may indeed cultivate an ecological attitude based on curiosity and awe caused by immersion in one's surroundings, fictional or otherwise.

The content of these fragments, however, are what solidifies *Cabalcor*'s environmental sentiments. They allow the book to engage with a number of concerns related to a town that is dependent on resource extraction. Corporate public relations, for example, reminds workers that "the correct term when speaking with outsiders is now 'oil sands' not 'tar sands'" (37), while corrupt government officials and security personnel suppress dissent. The typical worker's complacency is less sinister, but equally destructive. Consider Tomás Otterman's frank description of the destruction caused by tailing-pond construction: "we had to go out into the wetlands just north of the open pit and drain the bogs. Back then you didn't have your supertanker trucks . . . you didn't have your generators and pumps the size of houses. No, you were making it up as you went along" (28). Otterman's complicity surfaces in the fact that he was aware of the damage and knew that the company did not care "what they were doing to the land and water, as long as the money started flowing" (28).

Counter voices are provided by journalists, environmentalists, and the union who, like labourers and company bigwigs, have their own opinions that often result in tentative and troubled relationships with other individuals and groups. The Plains people, who live on the tar sands without causing environmental damage, mount the strongest protest against the destruction: "they fought though, more than anybody . . . pursued legal challenges long before the rest of us even dreamed of such a thing . . . and blockaded Highway No. 3, I don't know how many times" (96). Sun Belt rightfully highlights how Indigenous peoples are often at the forefront of the fight against environmental injustices. The town's heterogeneous perspectives are accompanied by haunting images of unpeopled places and a mix of instrumental music and country songs worthy of more discussion than I have space.

While characters rarely reappear and points of view change, environmental destruction, apathy, and illness are pervasive. A lackadaisical attitude toward environmental injustice is emphasized in the longest archival segment. In "Drip" a man recounts his summer job transporting "liquid waste" to the lagoons (67). He describes this process as "a two-man environmental disaster" (77). Nevertheless, he is indifferent to the work and to the destruction it causes as is the veteran drip-truck driver who shrugs off safety precautions and industrial accidents with the fatalistic phrase "no matter, no matter" (74). This is a captivating story of ecological destruction as business as usual that would work as a standalone piece and is only strengthened by the surrounding archival documents.

Cabalcor is a ghost town; it is a warning. This prophetic work will seep into you if you let it and you should, not only for its creativity, but for its ability to elucidate the mannerisms and beliefs necessary to maintain an ecological disaster for profit's sake. While *Cabalcor*'s message is wide reaching, I wonder what may have been gained had this group of mostly Canadian artists depicted the developed and destructive Canadian tar sands rather than the undeveloped American deposits. Nevertheless, Sun Belt has constructed an intimate portrait of a troubled town. This impressive feat, however, may lend itself to voyeuristic readings where the reader, like a tourist in the now deserted town that will reopen as "a historical theme park" (142), participates in the popular, yet uncritical, obsession with ruins. Fortunately, Sun Belt's careful attention to the causes of disaster should dissuade the uncritical gaze and instead leave the reader with a chilling account of the tar sands where "they moved away with barrels of black and they sold those barrels for next to nothing" (160).

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