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Encountering Oil in Saskatchewan

Fault Lines: Life and Landscape in Saskatchewan's Oil Economy by VALERIE ZINK and EMILY EATON

University of Manitoba Press, 2016 \$27.95

Reviewed by **MATTHEW ZANTINGH**

Alberta's tar sands have attracted much critical and popular attention in the last 15 years, perhaps rightly so given its size and scope, yet as Emily Eaton argues in the first line of *Fault Lines*: "the boom-bust cycle of the oil economy is not new to Saskatchewan" (1). Eaton, a geographer at the University of Regina, sets out to make visible the past, present, and future of the land of living skies' oil industry, presenting the results of multi-year investigation and drawing on more than 70 interviews with those involved in and affected by the industry. The book is a collaboration, with Eaton's text complemented by Valerie Zink's gorgeous black and white photographs of the diverse landscapes, sites, and people of this lesser-known oil economy. The book itself is beautifully crafted and reasonably priced, suggesting that the University of Manitoba Press has high hopes of attracting a broad readership. I hope it will as this is a fascinating and vital book.

Saskatchewan's oil industry is lesser-known because its oil pools are too deep for pit mining and too shallow for Steam-Assisted Gravity Drainage techniques. As Eaton makes clear, this has meant that the industry is more diffuse, located primarily in rural areas, while perceived fears over leftist government controls in the mid-twentieth century has meant that the industry has evolved differently than Alberta's. These differences make Eaton

and Zink's book a fascinating, if equally depressing alternative discourse of an oil economy's workings and power.

Zink describes her artistic vision for the photos, writing:

More than a lament for a pastoral plains, these images testify to a moment of transition and urge viewers to consider the complex consequences of rural communities' engagement with the oil economy. (xv)

Her images, along with Eaton's text, expose the fault lines of Saskatchewan's now faltering oil economy. The photographs and many of the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2014, at the peak of the latest oil boom in the province. However, as Eaton points out, "the collapse of world oil prices in the fall of 2014 called into question the future of Saskatchewan's oil boom" (19), before ominously concluding her first chapter:

it is yet too soon to understand the depth and breadth of the impacts of the bust. But since oil prices are not expected to rebound any time soon, rural areas are bracing for a long downturn. (19)

Fault Lines offers a timely look into the oil industry, the rural areas that play host to it, and the many peoples whose lives are deeply affected by the boom-bust cycles of Canada's petrocultures.

Given the emergence of the energy humanities, *Fault Lines* comes at an ideal moment in terms of laying out a complex portrait of Saskatchewan's oil industry. Eaton provides a brief history of oil extraction in the province, before turning to

look at the places and people that host the industry, those who work in it, those who service it, and, finally, the few sites of resistance to oil extraction. Each chapter presents a concise summation of Eaton's fieldwork, sprinkling in comments from interviews to exemplify the complex and contradictory feelings towards the oil industry. As Eaton makes clear, oil is often seen as the only way forward for many rural communities long hurt by rural depopulation and farm consolidation. Such a one-sided context makes it exceedingly difficult to push back or even express concern over the short and long-term impacts of oil extraction. Eaton writes:

In many communities where oil has been a long-standing fixture of life, criticisms of fossil fuels and the industry are understood as threats to the present and future of life and livelihood. (9)

Juxtaposed with this statement is Zink's photograph entitled "Cultivating," which shows an oil company's white GMC Sierra parked in front of a painted mural of the prairie being plowed, wheat planted and harvested. The juxtaposition of the arrival of settler-invaders and their first extraction with the latest form of resource extraction is stark and provides a telling visual commentary on the oil industry. Indeed, the richness of Zink's photographs offers a fascinating counterpoint to Eaton's measured tone throughout. Where Eaton maintains a social scientist's reserved tone, Zink's photos shine an intimate and even uncomfortable light into the landscapes of rural Saskatchewan and some of the roughnecks, service workers, and farmers who call it home.

While Eaton's text is informative and compelling, Zink's photos provide the affective punch that will drive readers towards action. Several photos in particular stood out to me days after reading the book. Tanya, a waitress/baker in Estevan, looking straight at the camera with a look of guarded resignation; Anna, a desk clerk at the Derrick Motor Hotel in Estevan, looking tired, happy, and apathetic from behind her desk; and a roughneck in the RM of Arlington, coveralls half unbuttoned and covered in the oil and grime of his job. These photos are some of the only ones of people, as most of the photos are instead of the towns, farms, oil sites, and housing units for workers. These photos take on an eerie resonance precisely because of their lack of humans while also suggesting the emptying out that occurs in the bust phase of the oil extraction cycle.

I suspect that *Fault Lines* will take its place alongside Jon Gordon's *Unsustainable Oil*, the edited volumes *Petrocultures* and *After Oil*, and Geo Takach's *Tar Wars*, among others, as key resources for thinking about, engaging with, and imagining beyond Canada's oil industry. In the book's conclusion, Eaton writes that the recent bust

opens up opportunities to articulate a different future. The burden is on us all to bring to life alternatives that can break the cycle of boom and bust and that are more environmentally and socially just. In so doing, we ought to defend people's rights to livelihood, and their choices to stay in the communities that they call home and on the lands that they have stewarded for generations. (105)

This conclusion makes clear that critique alone is not enough, and calls on readers to imagine different relationships to Saskatchewan's lands and people.

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