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Whose Sands?

Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands written and drawn by **KATE BEATON**

Drawn & Quarterly, 2022. \$39.95

Reviewed by **JORDAN B. KINDER**

In our collective imagination, Alberta's oil sands conjure up an array of contradictory images. From reputations of the drug-fuelled nightlife in Fort McMurray enjoyed by shadow populations to the roving green fields of landscapes undergoing reclamation, it is difficult to precisely pin down the oil sands as a phenomenon today. No doubt, the oil sands have always been a different thing to different people: a place to work with those rare opportunities to cobble together a good living without advanced education; a place to raise a family; a place to live fast and die young.

But, as Indigenous and environmental activists have made clear, regardless of how economically prosperous for some the oil sands may be, the sands are also a site of intensifying and ongoing dispossession and ecological destruction. Academic discussion and popular commentary often points to these tensions in the broader oil sands imaginary—as a site of prosperity for some and dispossession for others. Sometimes it's both for the same people. With the launch of Alberta Premier Jason Kenney's "energy war room" in 2019, innocuously named the Canadian Energy Centre, the stakes of representation are perhaps higher than ever.

Enter Kate Beaton's graphic memoir, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*. Beaton is best known for the characteristic style first developed in her early webcomic series *Hark! A Vagrant*, which was later honed for *The New Yorker*. *Ducks* documents Beaton's life working in the oil sands from 2005 to 2008. Following that journey so familiar to Atlantic Canadians, the graphic memoir follows Beaton's travels from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia to Fort McMurray as an economic migrant hoping to pay down her student loans. Her travels trace the path in this moment from a 'have not' province to a 'have' one. As Beaton puts it in the opening pages of *Ducks*, in the *longue durée* of Canada's extractive economies, Atlantic Canada was once known for its exports of resources—fish, coal, and steel. Now, the province is known for its export of people (12). This is fundamentally disruptive to entrenched ways of life, since, for Beaton, Nova Scotians are conditioned by "a deep love for home and the knowledge of how frequently [they] have to leave it to find work somewhere else" (13).

At the Patch, Beaton experiences firsthand the lofty promises and stark realities of Canada's fossil fuel economy. And so, in *Ducks*, the oil sands appear at-once as better than the stories and stereotypes of the region might suggest *and* worse. Readers of *Ducks* ultimately follow a story seen through the eyes of a young Beaton. Upon first entering Fort Mac, for instance, readers are offered an orientation through what we might call an oil sands 'starterpack' that illustrates the varied versions of Fort Mac on offer. Over two pages, images of bars, a raised pickup truck, a casino, a church, a mosque, and more appear, which conclude with a frame in which Beaton confirms over telephone: "Yeah—I made it" (37).

Divided into several parts based on place and people, *Ducks* guides readers from Cape Breton to the oil sands where place is demarcated by the projects on which Beaton labours, including Syncrude's Mildred Lake mine, its Aurora mine, and Long Lake's Opti-Nexen. With a brief, almost idyllic year-long interruption working for the Maritime Museum of BC in Victoria, Beaton then returns to work at Shell's Albian Sands project. It is no accident that 'place' in Fort McMurray is synonymous with specific industrial sites rather than with regions or municipalities like in Cape Breton or Victoria. To chase the Albertan dream, Beaton does her time at camps, transitory spaces conditioned by isolation and hyper-masculinity. Yet, in each section, a rich cast of characters is identified by name, position and home location, revealing how despite such isolation and loneliness, strong communities form regardless of where one's home is outside the camp.

Around Fort McMurray at these camps, where much of the story takes place, Beaton's narrative highlights tensions so characteristic of working environments in resource economies, with massive gender imbalances—where a kind of unchecked sexism permeates everyday life as well as a tangible, seductive promise in the payoff of hard work which makes the tolerance of such experiences worth it. One way in which this sexism emerges is through persistent advances by coworkers who are men toward women. Beaton airs her frustration in one episode, confiding in another woman co-worker that "All you need here is to be a woman. You stick out, and that's all it takes . . . And someone thinks they like you" (72). Beaton continues, detailing the awkward atmosphere this condition produces, concluding with a resigned stare: "I just don't know, I don't know how to handle these guys" (72.) Her co-worker responds: "I think that's pretty cynical. What's the harm in giving him a chance" (72)? Part of what makes *Ducks* so powerful is in instances such as these. In these instances, Beaton conveys an intimacy and sincerity of expression that can be hard to find in oil sands discourse, which, like the finance capital that underwrites oil sands extractivism, tends to privilege abstractions on the one hand and the reification of 'boom' narratives over harsher 'bust; ones on the other. And when oil sands discourse doesn't privilege these modes, it often privileges spectacles of ecological degradation, a kind of abstraction in itself.

Artistically and narratively speaking, Beaton's *Ducks* demonstrates a maturity of style that underscores the often unsettling ways in which resource extraction pervades everyday life for newcomers. Extraction, in other words, exists at a social level in the ways that, for instance, women are objectified as a kind of resource both during work and outside of it. Thematically, relations between and among labour and gender permeate *Ducks*, mediated as these relations are by mental health put under pressure by isolation. Like the fellow Atlantic Canadian poet Lindsay Bird (in her collection of poetry based on her time in the sands, *Boom Time*), who Beaton lists as a confidante, *Ducks* offers an artistic rendering of the harsh realities of working at the Patch, limited of course to her own experiences, but with a strong carrying capacity to identify and, in turn, critique the toxic relations that emerge alongside and through extractive enterprise. The colour palette of shades of gray and blue only furthers this muted tone of experience.

In a concluding note to the graphic memoir, Beaton outlines her motivations for finally putting together *Ducks*—to complicate the easy representations of the oil sands, for better and worse. Some speculative questions that seem to animate *Ducks* are: whose oil sands, and for what ends? The answers to these questions are found on uneven terrain. And such unevenness of experience inflects the microscopic and macroscopic forces and relations of the fossil fuel economy in Alberta and other oil-producing regions. Empirical research confirms that the experiences Beaton visually narrates to readers are not uncommon ones. And as Beaton details in her closing remarks, gendered and sexual violence are more pronounced for Indigenous women and girls in Canada, exacerbated as they are in the setting of camps, often called “man camps,” in which Beaton resided. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, *Reclaiming Power and Place*, doesn’t mince words in its findings when it points out that “[t]here is substantial evidence of a serious problem demonstrated in the correlation between resource extraction and violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people” (593).

It is one thing to read about these catastrophic failures to deliver on the promises of resource extraction in news coverage or academic scholarship, facing the spectacle or navigating the abstractions of academic discourse with conceptual apparatuses often lacking in clarity and translatability beyond the academy. It is wholly another to confront these failures through a graphic memoir so sincere as *Ducks*. Given its stark representation of working life in the oil sands—from a lack of mental health resources to ongoing harassment of women in particular—the agents, architects, and allies of Canada’s fossil fuel economy will likely not endorse Beaton’s story. But *Ducks* isn’t for them. It’s for those of us hoping to build a better, more socially and ecologically equitable future who take seriously the human *and* more-than-human toll of the kinds of unrestrained resource extraction and exploitation of lands and bodies that occur in extractive centres like the oil sands.

Works Cited

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JORDAN B. KINDER is a settler-British and Métis scholar of environmental humanities and media studies from a resource town in what is now called northern British Columbia. Over 2022-23, he is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University and in Fall 2023, he will begin as Assistant Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Department of Communication Studies.