

“Out here you’re just in the wind”: The Liminal World of The Oil Sands in Kate Beaton’s *Ducks*

Kalea Furmanek-Raposo

Abstract: This paper examines how Kate Beaton represents the Alberta oil sands in her graphic memoir *Ducks* (2022). Taking an interdisciplinary approach that draws on comics studies and contemporary ethnographies, I argue that Beaton’s visual and textual details make the oil sands a liminal space. I explore how Beaton draws on shades of grey to visually establish this space between the boundaries of life and work, even as she conveys the harsh realities of such a transitory existence within the narrative. However, her solid black panels speak to the emotional consequences (such as disassociation, drug use, and infidelity) of such a life on the workers. Ultimately, Beaton’s memoir demonstrates how the liminal world of the oil sands ignores the humanity of its workers.

Kate Beaton’s graphic memoir *Ducks* (2022) digs into the world of the Alberta oil sands. During her time in the oil sands, the protagonist, Katie, witnesses how sexism, environmental degradation, and capitalist greed can exist in the same space as empathy, bravery, and familial care. For example, Katie encounters sexism in the lack of respect shown to female workers; she sees environmental damage in the titular incident wherein hundreds of ducks die at one of the mines, and she perceives the bravery and care of the employees who push themselves to provide for their families despite their dangerous and lonely work environment. However, the oil sands are certainly not a neutral space in her narrative. Beaton highlights the fact that the oil sands foster a lack of moral responsibility. That is, it is difficult to discern good and bad in this space. I argue that Beaton’s

carefully chosen visual and textual details make her world a liminal space.

I refer to “liminal space” in terms of a world “on a boundary or threshold, especially by being transitional or intermediate” (“Liminal,” def. A.2). This understanding of liminality stems from cultural anthropology: Arnold Van Gennep coined the term “liminality” in 1903 in the context of coming-of-age rituals, and anthropologist Victor Turner expanded it to broadly refer to the state “between” states of being (Buchanan n.p.). Recent criticism (such as that of Matthew Bamber et al. and Sara Dorow and Sandrine Jean) explores the anthropological understanding of liminality in workplaces with temporary employees.

Beaton demonstrates the consequences of life in a liminal world through her use of shades of black and white rather than colour. She thus makes the oil sands an actual grey zone that views what goes on within it as beyond normal moral categories (such as good, bad, or neutral). Furthermore, her panel arrangement and cartoonish style does not soften the distressing aspects of life in the camps—instead, the familiarity of her visuals emphasises how abusive events and behaviours (such as causal misogyny) are commonplace in such a space. However, she does turn to solid black panels to draw the reader’s attention to the long-term emotional impact of this world on Katie. Beaton’s text thus explores what happens when corporations blend life and work into a single space without a sense of permanence. By treating their employees as expendable resources, the oil companies in *Ducks* not only devalue the humanity of their workers but also prioritise the belief that people live temporarily and in sole service of profit.

Ducks episodically tells the story of Katie Beaton’s two years working in the Alberta oil sands between 2005 and 2008. She works for Syncrude (at the Mildred Lake and Aurora mines), Shell (at Albion Sands), and Opti Nexen (at Long Lake). After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts and suffocating student loans, Katie leaves her home of Cape Bretton, Nova Scotia and travels to Fort McMurray, Alberta

to find employment in the oil fields.¹⁰ Katie feels the physical toll of working long hours surrounded by pollution. For example, she develops a cough and a rash. She acclimates to causal misogyny and sexual harassment as a woman in a workplace dominated by men. Katie witnesses workers sustain injuries or die operating heavy equipment or driving to and from base. Yet, the environmental impact of their work—rather than the human cost—garners media attention when *The New York Times* reports on the five hundred ducks that die in a Syncrude tailings pond.¹¹ As Katie moves from one site to another, she forms connections with other workers who left their homes and families.¹² When she leaves the oil sands for good, Katie realises that she will continue to carry this world with her.

Beaton textually explores liminality in her narrative through her characters' conversations. Bamber et al. describe occupational liminality as a "revolving doorway" where workers separate themselves from their normal identities when they enter the workplace and reclaim their identity when they leave (686). However, *Ducks* demonstrates that the prolonged nature of work in the oil sands complicates the idea that workers can simply reclaim the identity that they leave behind. Beaton explores such a liminal dilemma in a conversation between Katie and Ambrose. Ambrose says, "you know, we're all in two places here. And we can get caught up in that in our own way." Katie replies, "well I'm not staying." "That may be. But people kid themselves if they think the only life they're living is somewhere

10 Beaton notes that the fish, steel, and coal industries that once supported the people of Cape Breton dried up, forcing the residents to find work away from home (10–13). She adds that her leaving to find work in Western Canada is part of a long and sad tradition in Atlantic Canada (Beaton 10).

11 A tailings pond is a large pool that collects the leftover water, sediment, and bitumen that mining and drilling creates (Barber).

12 Such workers—who appear in this essay—include Ambrose (a foreman from Newfoundland who drives Katie to base), Leon (a tool crib lead hand from Alberta who adores his wife), Mike (the mechanic from B.C. who Katie dates), Ryan (a foreman from B.C. providing for his two young daughters), and Norman (a mechanic from Alberta learning photography).

else,” Ambrose retorts. Katie jokes, “I don’t have a life here or anywhere else at this point!” (133). Katie gives up her home, family, friends, and aspirations to make quick money in a few years. As a result, she exists in a temporary space between her old self and future freedom from debt. Ambrose’s insistence that “we’re all in two places” and Katie’s interactions with other workers throughout the novel indicates that she is not alone in this experience (133). Fittingly, Beaton delivers Katie and Ambrose’s exchange about living in an in-between world in shades of grey—a shade in-between black and white—to visually complement the liminality of the world that her characters inhabit.

The prominence of grey in *Ducks* suggests a deliberate and thematic choice given its stylistic departure from Beaton’s previous works. Beaton’s use of grey in *Ducks* contrasts the black and white of her previous work, *Hark! A Vagrant* (2011). *Ducks* maintains the same crisp black outlines and cartoonish style as her earlier comics in *Hark! A Vagrant*—but some of the comics in this collection do not include any grey at all. For example, “Dude Watchin’ With the Brontës” preserves a simple division between black and white (Beaton, *Hark!* 9). In contrast, *Ducks* bleeds these binaries into each other, inviting the reader to look for complexities. Beaton’s use of grey extends from the panels within her memoir to the full-page illustrations, the endpapers, and even the cover; notably, *Hark! A Vagrant* includes a full colour cover. For example, on the cover of *Ducks*, Beaton not only opts for grey rather than colour but also chooses a decidedly liminal image that does not appear within the novel at all. *Ducks*’s cover shows Katie on a heavy hauler (a machine that she never operates) looking out from the Alberta oil sands to the shores of Nova Scotia (a geographically impossible scenario). The grey cover epitomises Katie’s experience of liminality during her time in the oil sands: she does not think that that she is truly living in Alberta, nor living the life that she wants to in Nova Scotia. Beaton’s move to grey thus proposes a purposeful visual choice that complements her textual construction of a liminal world. Her panel arrangement similarly functions thematically.

Beaton's panel arrangement reinforces the normality of alarming events in the oil sands. In graphic novels, the number of panels, the size of the panels, and the size of the gutters (the empty space surrounding panels [McCloud 66]) can serve both visual and narrative purposes (Brunetti 49). Beaton varies the size and amount of her panels throughout the story,¹³ but she largely uses democratic panel arrangement during distressing scenes. Comics scholar Ivan Brunetti refers to "democratic panels" as "panels that are all exactly the same size, from which we can infer their equal weight and value in the 'grand scheme' of the page" (45). Democratic panels deliver the following conversation between Mike and Katie about Leon: "He is sleeping with one of the cleaning ladies. And they could hear it through the wall but no one knew who it was till today so they thought it was you!" Mike exclaims (Beaton 185). "Wait Leon is married," says Katie. "Yeah so?" asks Mike. Katie says, "No, he has a wife, he—his baby, the picture..." (186). Although the dialogue conveys Katie's shock at Leon's infidelity, the democratic panel arrangement—along with her tired expression and the punctuation that draws out her protests—contradict her surprise. Beaton does not make a visual statement about infidelity or the misogyny of the men around Katie by varying the size or position of her panels. Rather, she conveys Katie's growing desensitisation to the world around her. Scholars Dorow and Jean study liminal time and its consequences in the Albertan oil sands. They discuss dissociative strategies similar to those that the characters in *Ducks* employ: "a number of workers told us they strive to be busy (...) so as not to dwell on the depressing distance from family and social life" (Dorow and Jean 694). Beaton's democratic panels leave space for empathy for those characters coping with the extreme loneliness of the camps through damaging means (e.g., Leon's infidelity and Ryan's drug use). However, Beaton unambiguously establishes the immorality of sexual assault through her visual and verbal details.

13 For example, she also includes full page panels and hierarchal panels (wherein some or all panels on the page vary in size).

Beaton does not exclusively use grey; indeed, solid black emphasises the long-term emotional consequences of living in the oil sands. For example, the scene of Katie's first sexual assault features black panels. Beaton intersperses this scene with black—rather than grey—to visually convey the negative consequences of living in a liminal world that obstructs employees' sense of moral responsibility. When the man grabs Katie's shoulder, four black panels appear on the following page (Beaton 192–93). Although the panels in this scene remain democratic, their vertical arrangement, large gutters, and the lack of page numbers constitute an abrupt change in form that matches their alarming contents (191–196). Furthermore, the black panels deny the reader straightforward closure.¹⁴ Comics scholar Scott McCloud writes, "comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous unified reality" (67). Beaton's page of black panels leaves the reader in a state of anxious anticipation "between" the moments before and after Katie's assault. Notably, the first man who assaults Katie does so the day his contract ends: "contract's up. Finally leaving this dump" (Beaton 189). When reflecting on her assault, Katie says, "I could have yelled. But he was leaving" (380). Existing in a liminal world thus not only creates a sense of impermanence that encourages instant gratification (as Katie's experiences with sexual assault and drug use demonstrate¹⁵) and exploitative behaviour but also discourages a sense of moral responsibility and resistance.¹⁶

While I argue that Beaton's grey visuals depict the oil sands as a space that evades moral categorisation, the solid black pages suggest that this liminal world has a nega-

14 McCloud defines closure as the "phenomenon of observing the part but perceiving the whole" (63).

15 Specifically, Katie's boss Ryan develops a drug addiction that impacts his work performance and family life (Beaton 387).

16 For example, when Katie informs her boss that the behaviour of her male co-workers makes her uncomfortable, he tells her to "get a thicker skin" (Beaton 165). Katie accepts his response (and even apologises for complaining) since her work is temporary.

tive effect on Katie. Beaton includes solid grey pages and full-page illustrations to separate episodes. The only solid black pages occur after Katie experiences sexual assaults (197–98, 215–16).¹⁷ Beaton follows the first black page with a conversation between Katie and Leon—who Katie now knows cheats on the wife who he praises earlier in the narrative (173). Katie asks, “Leon, do you think you’re different since you came here. Do you think people are different at home than they are here?” Leon responds, “course they are. This is a rat cage.” “But, are they different forever? People do things here they wouldn’t do at home,” Katie says. “People are bored and crazy,” retorts Leon. “But is that who they really are? Or are they who they are at home?” asks Katie (201). Beaton’s solid black pages not only speak to the unspeakable damage left by sexual assault, but also create the impression that any answers to Katie’s questions will not fill the void created by splitting a person between two worlds. Dorow and Jean remark that prolonged exposure to the liminal world of the oil sands has “psychological and physical costs, from mental exhaustion to anxiety and disorientation” (698). Through the simple black page, Beaton conveys the enormity of the anxiety and disorientation that Katie feels. In another conversation with Leon, after her second sexual assault,¹⁸ Katie asks, “why would anyone come here knowing it could tear their life apart.” She continues, “out here you’re just, in the wind” (Beaton 232). Despite her questions about other workers’ life choices, Katie herself continues to work in this world that is tearing her apart. Katie’s anxiety, dissociation, and disregard for her own mental and physical wellbeing typify the negative impacts of the liminal world of the oil sands—where morality is indistinct, so people are morally irresponsible.

Beaton includes instances of kindness that highlight

17 I consider the other black pages illustrations because they include a full-page image of Syncrude, the stars, the moon, or the northern lights (Beaton 43, 99, 299, 398). Furthermore, many of these black pages are not double-sided while the solid black pages are double-sided.

18 Katie’s conversation with Mike about Leon’s infidelity and Katie and Leon’s conversations about camp life bracket and separate her sexual assaults.

the goodness that Katie encounters during her time in the oil sands. In fact, most men that Katie interacts with daily do not bother her. She even exclaims, “I mean, how many men here are also just fine and say nothing to us? There’s hundreds of those ... They are still my people, even at their worst” (377). For example, a man brings Katie cookies during her night shift on Christmas because he knew that she was alone, Norman gives her large prints of photos he took of Long Lake and the northern lights because he knew that she liked them, and the other workers enjoy the comics that she makes in her spare time (95, 401, 313). Beaton thus empathetically communicates the fact that the other characters are also just people suffering from the loneliness and isolation brought on by living in a liminal world. However, Syncrude, Shell, and Opti Nexen approach their workers the same way they approach the environment: both are expendable resources.

Beaton establishes parallels between the oil sands workers and the environment throughout her memoir. The highly public death of the ducks in the tailing pond follows two scenes where the oil sands puts employees’ lives at risk (that is, they are figuratively ‘sitting ducks’) (329, 324, 326).¹⁹ Syncrude has buffalo that they show off to prove their environmental dedication much like Shell whose executive singles out Katie (the only woman in the room) to document their workplace equality (67, 309). Finally, the three-legged fox that Katie discourages from coming back to the mines mirrors the workers (like herself) who come back to the oil sands despite suffering physical and or emotional trauma (like Katie’s sexual assaults) at its hands (63). The liminal world created by these companies forces workers to become someone between the person they left home as and who they will become after experiencing hard environmentally and bodily damaging labour, extreme loneliness, and casual brutality.

19 Specifically, their plane out of the camp catches fire and the employees must sit through a redundant safety briefing about how ice is dangerous because it is slippery.

Ducks represents the Alberta oil sands as a world where people put their lives and their values on hold in the name of profit. Beaton includes both humanity's light and dark sides in her visual and textual details; indeed, what leaves a mark on her characters is the liminal world that capitalism creates. Although Beaton complicates normal moral categories within the oil sands, this liminal world's sense of impermanence fosters an environment rife with opportunities for unchecked abuse, which has negative long-term consequences. In the oil sands, the lives of employees like environmental resources are consumable and economically replaceable. Nothing in this world persists except, perhaps, emotional damage.

Works Cited

- Bamber, Matthew, et al. "Occupational Limbo, Transitional Liminality and Permanent Liminality: New Conceptual Distinctions." *Human Relations*, vol. 70, no. 12, 2017, pp. 1514–37.
- Barber, Katherine. "Tailings Pond." *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2004.
- Beaton, Kate. *Ducks*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2022.
- . *Hark! A Vagrant*. Drawn and Quarterly, 2017.
- Brunetti, Ivan. "Comics as Poetry." *The Paris Review*, 30 Jan. 2020.
- . *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*, Yale University Press, 2011.
- Buchanan, Ian. "liminality." *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford University Press.
- Dorow, Sara, and Sandrine Jean. "Managing Liminal Time in the Fly-in Fly-Out Work Camp." *Human Relations*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2022, pp. 681–704.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.
- "Liminal, A. (2)" *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 2022.