

Witnessing Collapse in Miniature: Three Case Studies in Extraction and Environmental History

Mica Jorgenson, McMaster University

Geo Takach, *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2017). 256pp. Paperback. \$34.95.

Jessica Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016). 256pp. Paperback. \$32.95.

Valerie Zink and Emily Eaton, *Fault Lines: Life and Landscape in Saskatchewan's Oil Economy* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016). 128pp. Paperback. \$27.95.

In classic economic and environmental historiography, boom-and-bust resource towns serve as quaint examples of capitalism's hubris. They are microcosms of short-term thinking, the perils of commodification, and the tension between internal and external interests. As the climate crisis has escalated however, old boom-to-bust stories have taken on an even more ominous role. In the hands of a new generation of scholars, mining products present a perfect case study of humanity's unsustainable relationship with nature. Geological time moves too slowly to replenish the vast needs of the twenty-first century world, and the miniature collapses in our resource communities are prophecies of the larger collapse to come. What makes these places tick—not just politically and economically, but socially and culturally, has become a matter of urgent scholarly and public interest. These scholars look to boom-and-bust stories for lessons for coping in a time of environmental crisis.

Three recent books flow out of this new tradition of oil and mining town history. *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community* by Jessica Van Horssen, *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment, and Alberta's Image* by Geo Takach, and *Fault Lines: Life and Landscapes in Saskatchewan's Oil Economy* by Emily Eaton and Valerie Zink follow the history of three extractive geographies in Quebec, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, respectively. They are part of a cohort of emerging environmental humanists looking at Canada's extractive communities for explanations for the Anthropocene.

The power of all three books lies in their ability to parse the logic of extraction. Each author leaves the reader with an understanding of how a seemingly short-sighted and destructive industry looks sensible from the inside. This is

achieved through empathetic treatment of subject actors: the usual suspects of Canadian environmental conflict are all there—insiders versus outsiders, indigenous people versus corporations, Left versus Right, and French versus English—but the authors otherwise reject simplistic binaries. Like looking through a kaleidoscope, a close examination of mining towns reveals infinitely fracturing subcategories of identity, interests, motivation, and opinion. In each community, individuals possess the capacity to simultaneously hold contradictory collections of ideas about the environment: they worry about the impact of extraction while celebrating its positive impact, combine farming with seasonal industrial work, accept massive personal risks yet take pride in their jobs, live in boom towns bought and paid for by mining companies yet assert ownership over the land, and support pipeline projects and national parks in the same breath. Understanding these kaleidoscopic internal worlds offers insight to the functioning of extractive communities over time and helps us come to terms with our own internal contradictions. The reader sees him or herself reflected in all sides of the debate, and thus gains greater insight to the complexity of human relationships with nature under unsustainable economic regimes on multiple scales.

A Town Called Asbestos

A Town Called Asbestos tells the story of Asbestos, Quebec, through its discovery, boom, and eventual bust after the mineral's toxicity came to light in the mid-twentieth century. The history of this community traditionally centres on the strike of 1949, which historians link to the quiet revolution in Quebec.¹ Although the strike plays a crucial role in van Horssen's narrative, *A Town Called Asbestos* is an environmental history and focuses on human relationships to nature as they changed over time. Van Horssen organizes her analysis around what she calls the three physical realities of Asbestos, namely the mineral, the mine, and the land on which the community was built, and refers to three bodies: bodies of land, human bodies, and the body politic.²

A Town Called Asbestos draws on the disciplinary foundations established by Richard White in *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1996). White argues that people build intimate relationships with nature through labour. He rejects the idea that people who manipulate their environments for their own benefit lack sensitive understandings of the way their environments function. Van Horssen extends White's idea by arguing workers *and* communities connect to land through industry: "bodily knowledge of nature is gained not only by those who work directly with it, but also by those who live around it," she argues. In other words, "the people of Asbestos knew the land through work, but men, women, and children, young and old, also knew it intimately simply by living in the community."³ The mine and the community around it became an "organic machine" in which humans and nature worked together to produce raw materials.

The central tension in *A Town Called Asbestos* is between the community

and Jeffrey Mines (JM). At first, the community's dependence on the mine leads to an allegiance between town council and mine interests. In these early years, there was a sense of security and longevity in the community stemming from the size of the ore deposit—although asbestos is, like all minerals, finite, the nature of JM's deposit promised a long future. By the end of the nineteenth century, people built a permanent community around the mine.⁴ Their faith in its permanence and beneficence meant that no one questioned JM's authority to determine the shape of the landscape. Thus, when the mine needed to expand to remove the downtown core in the 1920s, there was little resistance from the community.⁵ The mine was central, and "all other possible land uses were secondary."⁶ In these early years, Van Horssen asserts, residents had little attachment to the past and instead turned their attention to the promise of the future.

The 1949 strike dismantled the alliance between mine and community, and Asbestos' residents began questioning whether JM's interests allied with their own. When the mine wanted to expand further in 1967, this time over the area occupied by the community's church, JM faced stiff resistance and was eventually forced to pay 1.2 million dollars in compensation. Van Horssen argues that perceptions had changed: the community had developed identities and attachments to the land based on the past. Residents shouted "L'amiante notre patrimoine (Asbestos: Our Heritage)" at that year's St. Jean Baptiste parade.⁷ These attachments did not necessarily contradict the work of extraction—Van Horssen argues that they were compatible and even rooted in the industrial nature of the mined landscape. Miners had learned to take pride in their role in producing a product that contributed to a global building industry.

Parallel to these historic developments was the slow revelation of asbestos' toxicity. Van Horssen chronicles a long and shocking legacy of JM's corporate deception as the details of asbestos' danger emerged. Isolated by geography, language, and class, the town of Asbestos ironically became one of the last to understand the danger posed by its primary product. As Van Horssen argues, "mining communities learn to live with risk and danger."⁸ She notes, too, that miners accepted the fact that their bodies would be at risk as part of the nature of their work, and that it was not until middle-class urban women and children started getting sick that the issue was addressed in Canadian society.⁹ JM's intentional cover-up of the health risks of asbestos finally eroded the last shreds of trust in the company in the 1980s.¹⁰ Van Horssen's narrative tells the story of a community holding a complicated and shifting collection of beliefs and relationships with the mined environment in Quebec.

Tar Wars

Several thousand kilometres to the west, a different debate about safety, environment, and labour emerged over northern Alberta's contentious tar sands. *Tar Wars* picks up approximately where *A Town Called Asbestos* leaves off in the late 1970s

and early 1980s. *Tar Wars* is an analysis of the ways filmmakers have portrayed Alberta since the early days of the environmental movement in the 1970s. Geo Takach, a scholar of communications studies, argues that a constructed binary between economy and environment “has depicted the province as either an almost mythical, pastoral paradise, or a scene of spectacular ecological apocalypse.” These reductionist tropes hide “a complex, nuanced network of interests and cultural political, and economic forces.”¹¹ Working on a provincial scale rather than a community one, Takach reaches similar conclusions as Van Horssen: peoples’ ideas about mined environments are, in short, complicated. Each person carries unique collections of beliefs informed by historic and personal experience, interests, and relationships with extraction which shift over time.

Takach divides *Tar Wars* into two parts. The first part identifies and describes the main body of documentary films produced about Alberta since 1977 through the “watershed” era of the 2005–2014. The second part of the book connects these films to the broader global context of environmental anxiety. Takach ultimately identifies seventeen frames used by filmmakers to portray and understand Alberta.¹² These frames exist on a spectrum from utilitarian to eco-centric. At the utilitarian end of the spectrum, filmmakers (usually Albertans) rely on instrumentalist frames like “money,” “progress,” “status quo” to explain the oil’s place in provincial identity and society.¹³ Documentary film makers on the ecocentric side, conversely, use frames like “eco-justice,” “bully,” “health,” “greed,” “rogue,” and “present-minded.”¹⁴

Takach believes that understanding and communicating nuance is important because “identity is produced through communication.”¹⁵ The ways in which outsiders choose to represent the culture of the province has become embedded in the ways which Albertans see themselves. By obscuring complexity, false binaries impede democratic discussion about the oil industry: “the traditional discourse of identity in the province, typified by that finite binary, seems to leave little room for dialogue, let alone compromise.”¹⁶ For Takach, overly simplistic depictions of Alberta as either economic promise-land or ecological wasteland are so harmful that they threaten to undermine the central pillars of Albertan society by stifling its natural nuances.

Takach traces the origins of binarism in Tar Sands discourse to a 1977 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) one-hour movie called *The Tar Sands*.¹⁷ The film portrays then-Premier Peter Lougheed as defying “the cautions of dedicated public servants to compromise the province both environmentally and financially by acceding to the demands of shady, profiteering oil executives.” Lougheed is not the only one under critique: Albertans as a whole in the film are seen to “ultimately privilege economic development and job creation over ecological and human (specifically labour) concerns, and perhaps even fairness in general.”¹⁸ The film suggested that Alberta as a whole had struck a Faustian bargain, trading long-term health and well-being for short-term profits.

A few more films followed in the footsteps of *The Tar Sands*, until the “watershed” years between 2005–2014 broke the film industry open. Takach argues that, during these years, Alberta became the “bellwether in the ongoing debates around extractive fossil-fuel burning resources, manifested in Alberta’s place-branding in a globalized and highly visual society.” The period witnessed an explosion of film and video produced by professional filmmakers and communicators as a wider audience took up the tar sands discourse.¹⁹ In this new era, filmmakers made Alberta a metaphor for broader anxieties about the state of the earth under the fossil fuel economy.

Historians are unlikely to take much from Takach’s discursive categories, which might be more relevant for communications scholars. However, the central insight that neither end of the spectrum accurately describes Albertans’ engagement with the tar sands informs an understanding of modern Canadian environmentalism. Takach touches on a long-standing debate among Canadian scholars about the nature of the environmental movement. Takach describes an external context in which utilitarianism and environmentalism are diametrically opposed. This fits with what environmental historians know about the American context and the rivalry between conservation and preservation. Takach points out that the filmmakers in his study, many of them American, are almost all elites.²⁰ Thus, external politicians, managers, and educated artists drive the dialogue at a level inaccessible and irrelevant to most Albertans. Indeed, Canadian historians have painted a less binary picture of environmental politics north of the border, arguing that Canadians blended the two perspectives, or that different perspectives dominated at different times and contexts.²¹ Takach’s work does not provide any new answers, but provokes additional questions about the relationship between Canadian and American environmental movements and the autonomy of Canadian perspectives from the powerful ideologies south of the border.

Fault Lines

Emily Eaton and Valerie Zink’s *Fault Lines* addresses an even more recent history (2011–2015) of the Saskatchewan oil industry. Eaton, a geographer, travelled Saskatchewan with photographer Zink to interview and photograph the people and landscapes of the industry. Her analysis is based on interviews and images collected at the height of the province’s oil boom. Her work blends the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders including “oil workers, regulators, environmental consultants, landowning farmers and ranchers, community pasture staff from the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, Indigenous land defenders, municipal politicians, temporary foreign workers, and social service providers.”²²

Fault Lines provides an important glimpse into the changing face of Canada’s breadbasket, which most readers associate with agriculture, not oil. The central tension in *Fault Lines* is between the older agricultural industry and the

emerging oil economy in Saskatchewan. Outside of Saskatchewan, this is an old and well-known conflict: mining historians from the United States to South Africa to Australia have observed the relationship between the two industries since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Within these narratives, mining is seen as a necessary precursor to agriculture: prospectors open up the frontier for more sedentary, permanent agricultural industries. Under this ideological framing, farmers transform a rough and ready frontier into a moral, efficient, and well-organized hinterland. Problems occur when miners fail to make way for their farmer successors, or leave eroded, toxic, and otherwise denuded landscapes in their wake and disrupt the ideological expectations for the land.²³

Saskatchewan reverses the natural historical order of these economies. On the twenty-first century prairie, agriculture is giving way to the oil economy. Stable, sedentary lives are becoming less common than frontierism, transience, and boom and bust cycles. The irony of the situation appears to be lost on Saskatchewan residents. Eaton's subjects see "a future without oil" as "'turning back the clock' – regressing to a period without leisure time, travel, or mechanized farm production."²⁴ The reversal of the economy and accompanying reversal of peoples' notions of progress complicates older stories of state-building. Here is a turn of events which Frederick Jackson Turner, Harold Innis, and Donald Creighton failed to predict in their models of Canadian development.

Eaton argues that the precariousness of work and livelihoods in Saskatchewan has made people unwilling to speak out against the industry. Like the community of Asbestos' relationship with JM, Saskatchewan residents depend on the industry for all or part of their economic well-being. Almost everyone is tied in some way to the industry: "If a landowner is not actively working for an oil company, it is sure that their child, grandchild, sibling, or other family member is."²⁵ In this context, no one wants to be seen as anti-oil, "for the hosts of oil infrastructure, complaints that call into question the legitimacy and desirability of the industry can lead to blowback from community members and leadership."²⁶

The oil industry permeates Saskatchewan society and yet remains largely overlooked by observers. Eaton describes a community on the edge of change: issues of compensation, interference with traditional life, and the oil company's instability—especially during spring break up—has led to fissures, or, as Eaton would have it, "fault lines," between Saskatchewan residents and the industry. At the end of *Fault Lines*, Eaton wonders if the recent downturn in the price of oil will finally break the cycle of dependence and lead to more open dialogue about the relationship between Saskatchewan and its oil economy.²⁷ History suggests the answer is no: in both Quebec and Alberta, it takes much more than a temporary slump to detangle citizens invested economically, socially, and politically with extractive industry.

Witnessing Collapse in Miniature

Since environmental history emerged in the 1980s, its practitioners proved fond of case studies and unafraid of presentism. Inspired by the environmental ethic of thinkers like Aldo Leopold, who saw the land-as-text, the field's founders engaged microcosmic analysis from the beginning: think of Bill Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* and *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1983, 1991), Carolyn Merchant's *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (1989), and Richard White's *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995). The power of the case study lies in the author's ability to fully grasp a single local history while extrapolating outwards to offer larger insights into human relationships with nature. In the Anthropocene, mining scholars do not have to reach very far to find useful environmental lessons for the present.

Although the three books under discussion do not all fall neatly under the umbrella of environmental history, they share many of its characteristics. Geographically and chronologically dispersed, *A Town Called Asbestos*, *Tar Wars*, and *Fault Lines* offer a collection of insights about our relationships with nature across time and space. What lessons do they offer? Acceptance and negotiation of risk run through all three of these books. People in Asbestos, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are not victims duped by evil industries. They are skilled negotiators who hold nuanced understandings of their roles and their rights within extractive societies. This is precisely the position readers navigating the Anthropocene in their own ways might see themselves as occupying. As a result, the message in all three becomes approachable and useful without ever explicitly stating that Asbestos, Alberta, or Saskatchewan are microcosms of bigger issues.

Furthermore, a central tension in all three is the balance between environmental relativism and environmental criticism. The former rejects value judgments around extraction and argues that anthropogenic change is just change, regardless of how damaging to human health. The latter argues that anthropogenic change is bad and disagree only on which part does the most damage—industrialization or commodification. Environmental criticism proves popular among mining and extractive historians, for whom the negative effects of their subject on human and environmental health can be difficult to ignore. Under this framing, mined landscapes too often become sacrifice zones, and their human residents become passive victims. Van Horssen, Takach, and Eaton all describe active human agents negotiating difficult relationships with extraction. All three studies must walk a fine line between writing their human characters as active agents and as helpless subjects. In reality, they were both at different times, and the line between development and destruction is blurry and uneven.

If all three authors chronicle landscapes of fractured interests and kaleidoscopic identities, their interpretations of the meaning of all this nuance diverge. Each approaches insider versus outsider tension differently. In Asbestos,

Van Horssen describes a population which alternately rejects outsider perspectives and remains unaware of it, thanks to the town's linguistic and geographic isolation. She roughly divides Asbestos' historical characters into three groups: Jeffrey Mine Workers, middle-class community workers, and upper-class company officials.²⁸ Within these groups, there are more divisions: men versus women, doctors versus managers, French versus English. Alliances shift over time (a nuance that the more present-focused stories from Alberta and Saskatchewan do not meaningfully explore). For example, after fifty years, the strike turned the alliance between town council and the mine to distrust and animosity.²⁹ By the 1960s, Asbestos' residents were aware of the risks inherent in their work and the growing global perceptions around asbestos. Even after questions about the safety of asbestos mining began to emerge, residents continued to negotiate a unique relationship with the land and the mine. They accepted risk, felt pride in the mine's contributions to the global industry, and passed on both knowledge and pride to successive generations of miners in spite of the negative perceptions of outsiders.³⁰

In comparison, in Takach's Alberta outsider narratives of wilderness preservation and economic exploitation powerfully divide communities into false eco-centric or utilitarian binaries. These categories are the work of elites and outsiders anxious about the future of a fossil-fuel dependent global economy. Despite themselves, Albertans find themselves identifying with these overly simplified external constructions. Alberta is either a wilderness threatened by unrestrained economic exploitation or a place of economic prosperity driven by workers. Diversity and complexity are under threat in this increasingly binary dialogue. Alberta's size, the penetration of modern media since the "watershed" days of the early aughts, and growing divisions between urban and rural populations possibly lend these outsider binaries outsized influence on the province.

Unlike *Tar Wars* and *A Town Called Asbestos*, outsider perspectives play almost no role in *Fault Lines*. Outside of the province, sparsely populated Saskatchewan is better known for its agricultural prowess than its oil and gas industry. Even if the world knew about the growing extractive economy, the province plays second fiddle to Alberta's comparatively much larger industry. There is not much reason to pay attention to Saskatchewan's little boom as an outsider—it is neither the biggest nor the most interesting oil economy in Canada. This very invisibility is part of Eaton's argument. Part of the impetus for writing this book comes from the desire to portray Saskatchewan as a dynamic, changing place and to shed light on an event that is changing peoples' lives in the breadbasket of the nation.

The lack of attention from the outside is mirrored by a lack of dialogue within: Eaton describes an alarming silence from the front lines of Saskatchewan's oil industry. Without the ability to talk openly about its effects or to engage in broader debate addressing the complexity of the industry, Saskatchewan must continue to navigate the difficult new territory in relative iso-

lation. Eaton wants to start the conversation at the local level—her narrative looks inward to the mundane problems experienced day-to-day rather than outwards to the larger historical trajectories in which Saskatchewan is enmeshed. Although there is an undercurrent of tension between local farmers and multinational extractive companies, the “fault lines” Eaton describes (and seeks to heal) are mostly internal divisions between community members.

Eaton’s interpretation of the problem as an internal one is incompatible with Takach’s vision of a people divided by externally imposed ideologies. In defense of grassroots debate, Takach argues that “any redefinition of Alberta must be more representative, not only in the content but also in the process of representation.”³¹ There are no false binaries undermining dialogue and democracy in Saskatchewan—people experience the extractive industry in its full complexity. In other words, Saskatchewan already has the democratic representation Takach calls for at the end of his book, and yet communication fails to flourish. Eaton finds that fault lines still exist, and open dialogue remains difficult, even where false binaries are not a feature of the socio-political landscape. Depolarization does not solve these essential tensions. In short, representation does not equal democratic debate. Eaton’s work suggests diversity alone is insufficient for starting conversations or solving the complicated problems associated with the oil industry.

Van Horssen’s work adds additional layers. For Asbestos, the health and environmental risks associated with mining were an acceptable trade-off for steady employment. This acceptance occurred at the local level, even as international and national communities rejected the idea that the benefits of asbestos as a building material outweighed its risk. As a result, the risk asbestos posed to miners’ bodies was insufficient to turn the tides. It was not until middle-class urban bodies were threatened that the wider world decided asbestos was unacceptable as a construction material. It was this outsider rejection of asbestos that killed the town, more so than residents’ concerns about their own health. Locals had already weighed the risks, negotiated its fallout, and made their choices. Van Horssen adds the question of agency and power to the insider/outsider dynamic. As in Alberta, the ability of Asbestos’ residents to define and assert their own relationships with nature is curtailed by the power of elite outsiders whose values have significant power over the fate of the community.

If mining landscapes like those found in these books are stand-ins for our broader anxieties about the fate of humanity, the fractured nature of human societies built around extractive sites might seem to preclude the possibility of easy solutions. The complexity of issues and their embeddedness in the very fabric of human society makes them overwhelming. There are no easy targets, no bad guys, and the lines between interests are unhelpfully blurry. Van Horssen, Takach, and Eaton offer few answers and no prescriptions for dealing with the situation. If extractive booms in Asbestos, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are microcosms of the world’s larger relationship with non-renewables, there are no clear

paths away from bust and hence disaster.

However, all three books manage to avoid leaving the reader with a feeling of hopelessness. The people in these books are not dupes or pushovers. They are self-conscious participants in ambiguous processes acting logically in their own interests. Their presence and their voices regularly challenge overly simplistic thinking from the outside. These stories make sense. Placed next to each other, they chronicle the stories of rational people working with the resources at their disposal to determine their own fates, for better or for worse.

As readers caught up in a modern environmental crisis, we can see ourselves reflected in the struggles and victories described by Van Horssen, Takach, and Zink and Eaton. These books show that solutions to our modern environmental and human justice problems lie in complicated, multi-layered understandings of economy and environment. Such understandings must be based in the experiences of real people and their communities. Sweeping generalizations about the nature of history and abstract theoretical ideals about wilderness will only get us so far. Place based research, and an acknowledgement that people know the land through work as well as appreciation, are keys to sensitive social and environmental change.

NOTES

Jessica Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resistance in a Resource Community* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2016), 11.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 8–10.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 8–10.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 27.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 40.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 37.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 124.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 135.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 182.

Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 176.

Geo Takach, *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment, and Alberta's Image* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2017), 10.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 117.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 153.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 154.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 11.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 128.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 154.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 31.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 116.

Takach, *Tar Wars*, 129.

See, for example, Alan MacEachern's work on national parks: *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935–1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 18.

Emily Eaton and Valerie Zink, *Fault Lines: Life and Landscape in Saskatchewan's Oil Economy* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 1.

²³ See, for example, Robert Kelley's classic *Gold Versus Grain: The Hydraulic Mining Controversy in California's Sacramento Valley* (California: Arthur Clarke, 1959).

²⁴ Zink and Eaton, *Fault Lines*, 9.

²⁵ Zink and Eaton, *Fault Lines*, 45.

²⁶ Zink and Eaton, *Fault Lines*, 103.

²⁷ Zink and Eaton, *Fault Lines*, 105.

²⁸ Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 10.

²⁹ Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 118.

³⁰ Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos*, 169.

³¹ Takach, *Tar Wars*, 130.