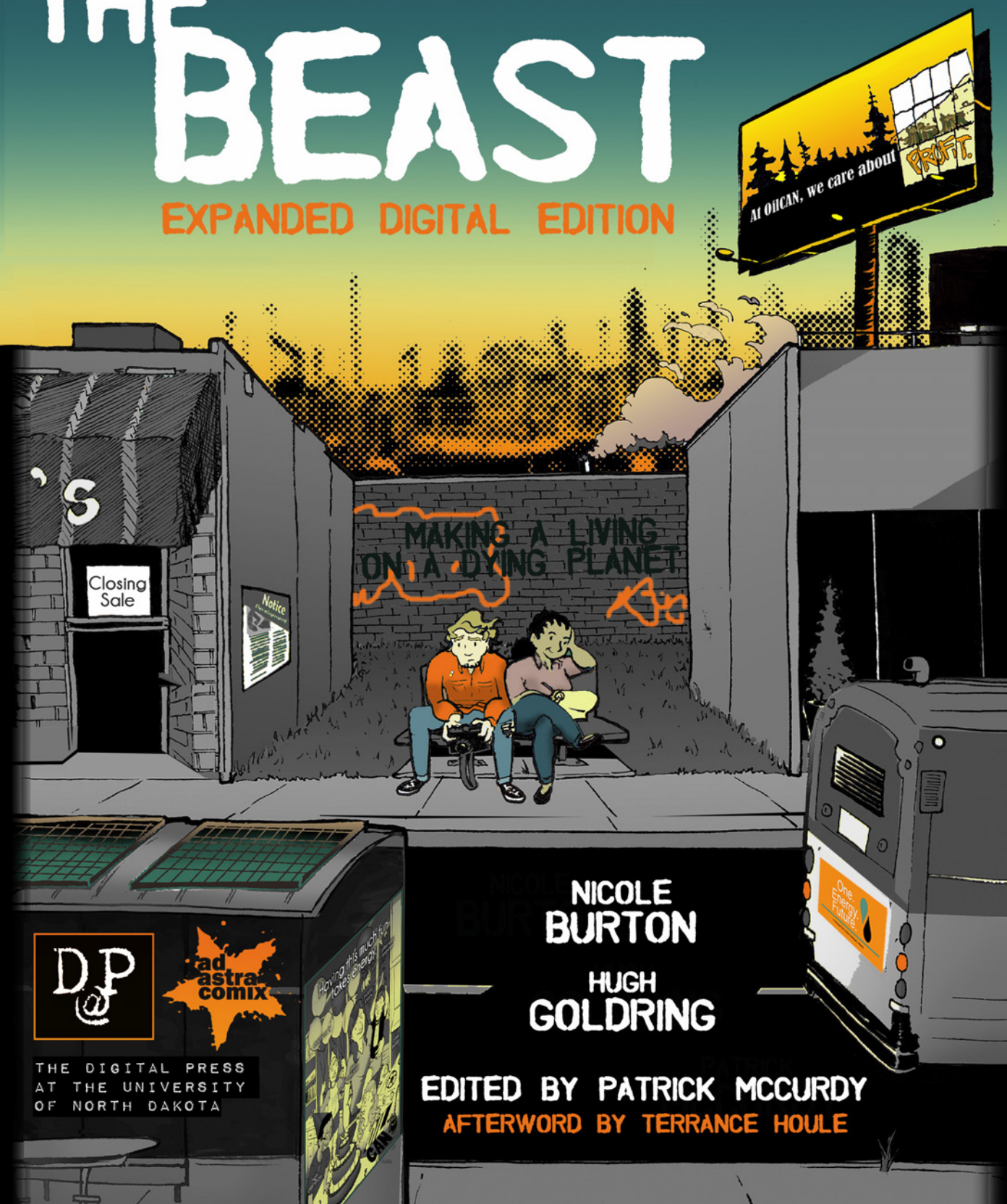


# THE BEAST

EXPANDED DIGITAL EDITION



THE DIGITAL PRESS  
AT THE UNIVERSITY  
OF NORTH DAKOTA

NICOLE  
BURTON

HUGH  
GOLDRING

EDITED BY PATRICK MCCURDY  
AFTERWORD BY TERRANCE HOULE







**Ad Astra Comix**

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**HUGH GOLDRING  
NICOLE BURTON**

**EDITED BY  
PATRICK MCCURDY**



The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota  
Grand Forks, ND

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“Climate Change is an Ornerly Beast: Visual Culter, Denial, and Fort. McMurray in The Beast”  
by Tommy Wall and Chris Russell,  
“Making Comics Beyond the Funnies” by Benjamin Woo  
“Talking The Beast” by David Haeselin

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# PREFACE

PATRICK MCCURDY

We live in a culture born from, steeped in, and heavily reliant upon fossil fuels. While this energy source is now ubiquitous in our lives, very few of us have ever traveled to places where companies extract fossil fuels at scale. The vast bitumen deposits surrounding Fort McMurray, Alberta represent oil extraction on a massive and unprecedented scale. Despite their size and significance, our knowledge of what supporters call ‘oil sands’ and detractors label ‘tar sands’ is limited and mediated. Recognizing this, *The Beast* is based on the premise that struggles over the environment, climate change, and energy transition are also struggles for our imagination.

The contestation over Alberta’s bitumen resources may be traced back to a late-2005 eNGO declaration calling upon the Canadian government to transition away from oil sands development towards sustainable energy. A key discursive accomplishment of eNGO campaigning was to transform the term “tar sands” from a decades-old colloquial term rooted in bitumen’s tar-like viscosity and appearance to a politically loaded signifier used to evoke Mordor-like images of industrial moonscapes and actively opposed the fossil fuel industry. It is worth noting that The Canada Press Stylebook advises journalists against using the term “tar sands” due to its pejorative nature preferring, instead, “oil sands”. While the term oil sands is used by government and industry to refer to Alberta’s bitumen reserves, it is not a neutral signifier; it points to the economic potential and thus value of bitumen. Thus the struggle over energy futures is both material and discursive. Language matters. Images matter. Framing matters.

Messages about the risks of the tar sands and rewards of oil sands development are communicated by multiple parties – from

politicians to protestors – through a variety of media including documentaries, books, articles, advertisements, social media, news stories, and comics. In terms of framing, we’ve seen various tropes rolled out on all sides of the debate with common themes including nationalism, patriotism and the use of Canadian symbols, equating energy extraction with patriotism. This trope is captured in the comic’s full-color “As Canadian as maple syrup” advertisement. As a side note, equating patriotism with energy production is an import from the American Petroleum Institute’s “Energy Citizen” Campaign. Canadians are less apt to wave the flag than our American neighbors to the south however Canadian patriotism and Canadian energy independence have been themes pushed by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), Canada’s upstream oil lobby.

Prior to oil draping itself in the flag, various attempts were made by CAPP as well as individual oil companies to communicate their commitment to the environment attempting to twin fossil fuel extraction with environmental protection. Images ranged from small patches of reclaimed land bathed in golden sunlight to grazing buffalo to pictures of blue skies or lush forest coupled with the promises of oil executives to protect the land, water and air. On the environmentalist side, after 1,600 ducks died on a Syncrude tailings pond in 2008, those animals covered in toxic substances became a powerful image. While unquestionably an environmental catastrophe, the image of the dead duck is an iconic tar sands signifier that is routinely deployed. Its cultural status was further cemented in Kate Beaton’s comic “Ducks.” We use the dead duck trope in our full colour Veldt Club advertisement “What if it happened here?”

Another popular meme which has done the rounds shows a flotilla of activists in kayaks – kayaktivists – protesting the Shell Polar Pioneer Oil rig in Seattle, Washington. While intended as an environmentalist image event framed as “The Paddle in Seattle”, the image has been inverted and memeified into a pro-oil message to read,

“Irony is watching Seattle enviros protest oil... in kayaks made from petroleum”. The meme is biting, funny, and succinct. Multiple variations of this meme have been made and have even followed other social movements such as Occupy activists using iPhones or anti-globalization protestors wearing Nike. The kayak meme, however, has made its way into *The Beast* in a scene where Mary and Callum are slinging images back and forth at each other. This scene is intended to, yet again, draw attention to the state of political discourse where protests are purposefully designed and executed as media events and where memes and quick-witted *ad hominem* snipes on social media pass for political discourse. Using fossil fuels and their by-products is an inevitable feature of contemporary life and while we can, should and are making efforts to find alternatives, the fact we use these products in our daily lives should not be accepted as a legitimate critique of a desire for system change.

Perhaps the most jarring of *The Beast*’s six colour advertisements is the “Oil Sands Proud” ad which shows two women kissing on the tailgate of a pickup truck against the backdrop of an oil derrick. Rainbow colors—synonymous for gay rights—are then superimposed over the image. A superficial reading of advertisement might see it as progressive; an advertisement supportive of same-sex relationships in an environment which may stereotypically be seen as hostile to such a thing. However, it refers to a darker image. The ad was designed in response to a short-lived social media campaign from July 2016 in support of the oil sands. The campaign centered on an advertisement which proclaimed, “In Canada lesbians are considered hot! In Saudi Arabia if you’re a lesbian you die!” While the ad rightly faced much criticism and was eventually withdrawn Canada Oil Sands Community, the grassroots group who produced it, the fact it was initially seen as an acceptable, let alone palatable, reflects the poor quality of public discourse over the tar sands and our energy

culture more broadly. It also reflects the divisive and emotive culture of politics underwritten by an emotive logic of social media.

In putting together *The Beast* my objective is for readers to recognize and reflect on the fact that stakeholders are pouring efforts into emotionally laden communication to mobilize their publics to the point where discourse over the bitumen sands, and now over pipelines has been reduced to throwaway clichés and one liners. Moreover, these stories and images can potentially shape, rightly or wrongly, how we view the tar/oil sands and its relationship with the economy, environment, climate change, and Indigenous rights.

Studying the images used in the ongoing war over the tar/oil sands suggests that there is a lack of genuine public debate over energy and energy transitions because the social imagination is polluted by incessant public relations campaigns. Instead of discussion and reflection, the public is forced to “pick sides”: the environment or the economy; protestors or industry; live with or without oil. These debates were particularly acerbic in the spring of 2016 around the time of the Fort McMurray wildfire, nicknamed “The Beast.” Thus the comic’s title refers to the wildfire but also to the unwieldy tar/oil sands debate which has consumed our attention and sucked the oxygen from public discourse.

The Fort McMurray wildfires were a liminal moment marking our transition into the epoch of the Anthropocene. However, as opposed to using the moment as an opportunity to honestly and sensitively discuss climate change, our energy, and the present and the imminent need to create an alternative energy future, traditional battle lines were drawn between “pro” and “anti” tar/oil sands camps. Moreover, the majority of politicians including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau steered well clear from attempts to attach “political arguments” to the wildfire and specifically connect it with the issue of climate change. The essay “Climate Change is an Ornerly Beast” by Tommy Wall and Chris Russill included in this extended edition tack-



les the beast by its horns offering a scathing and deserved critique of denialism and political inaction in the midst of crisis.

Climate change is not political; it is our reality. Consequently, we must ask ourselves if we can't talk about climate change – the biggest threat humanity has ever faced – in the context of a disaster which was hastened by climate change, when can we talk about it? The objective of *The Beast* is to use the medium of the graphic novel to explore themes present in this debate. Specifically, its aim is to expose and critique the relentless and short-term struggle for hearts and minds, the binaries, and tropes that dominate and cloud public discussion around the tar/oil sands.

The project's genesis dates back to May 2016 when I attended the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at my alma mater, the University of Calgary. I was at the Congress to give a paper titled "The Rise of Petronationalism: A Critical Examination of CAPP's 'Energy Citizens' Campaign," which was based on a research project I was conducting called Mediatoil ([www.mediatoil.ca](http://www.mediatoil.ca)). Funded by an Insight Development Grant (IDG) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Mediatoil sought to map how various stakeholders such as governments, corporations, eNGOs and First Nations represented the risks and rewards of tar/oil sands development in their promotional material. *The Beast* was commissioned with funds from the Mediatoil SSHRC IDG. This expanded digital version was funded from a publication grant from the Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa.

The Congress's setting in Calgary prompted a number of critical discussions about oil and petroculture, including an event I attended on the evening of May 29 whose title took the form of a deceptively simple question: Is Oil a Dirty Word? While the answer may appear to lend itself to a simple yes or no answer, the need for nuance wasn't lost on panelists. The result was a fascinating and engaging discus-

sion about how we can understand our complicated relationship with oil and begin to disentangle ourselves from it.

Two days after “Is Oil a Dirty Word?” I had breakfast with Benjamin Woo, an Assistant Professor at Carleton University with expertise in the cultural industries and comic books in particular. Among the topics we discussed was the reality that our peer-reviewed academic work is often only ever read by a small, specialized audience and frequently hidden behind paywalls, making it difficult for the public to access. Peer-review publications are the gold standard of academic scholarship and the fate of one’s career relies on successfully publishing academic work. Yet when I expressed to Ben my desire to engage the public in a wider conversation about the debate over tar/oil sands, he suggested that I consider doing a comic and that I reach out to Ad Astra Comix. And so, with this suggestion, the idea for *The Beast* was born.

*The Beast* tracks the complicated ethics of media producers working within petroculture and came to fruition through a collaborative process where practically every aspect of the comic’s creation and production is touched by oil. This includes the hydrocarbons burned traveling to meetings about the comic to those involved in the production and delivery of goods such as ink and paper. All of these things rely on oil in some fashion. This is not to mention the role of fossil fuels and the plethora of petrochemicals which allow for and sustain networked communication, let alone our everyday creature comforts. The link between *The Beast* and oil is explored further in Kyle Conway’s essay provided in this extended edition.

*The Beast* began with an initial meeting with Hugh and Nicole of Ad Astra who agreed to take on the project. The story emerged from the convergence of a plot line my wife suggested to me while on holiday on the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia with an Ad Astra pitch. These ideas were then baked into a plot which continued to evolve through conversations with Ad Astra and feedback on script drafts. Along the way, I also received valuable feedback from other family

members, friends and colleagues much of which was fed back into the project, the result of which you are now reading. More about the process, mechanics and inspirations of *The Beast* can be read in an interview between David Haeselin, Nicole Burton, Hugh Goldring and me which is part of this collection.

Just as we pay attention to what is visible, we also must search out and reflect upon what is invisible. Images and texts can be powerful in both what is present and what is absent. In studying the promotional material of tar/oil sands stakeholders for Mediatool, I was struck by the relative absence of First Nations. Of course, some First Nations stakeholders did publish their own material, there were partnerships with eNGO campaigns and large corporations would publish on their relationships with First Nations. However, when analyzing images produced in the contestation over the tar/oil sands there was a noticeable disparity. In some ways, this disparity is understandable. In situations where there are material struggles for environmental, land and health justice we can't assume that media campaigning is a top priority. Meanwhile, with revenues in the billions, oil companies have the financial means to fund slick, expensive and extensive public relations campaigns. For those who seek to challenge oil companies, it's far more efficient (and cutting) to culture jam an advertising campaign than to make one.

*The Beast* replicates the disparity of representation evident across the promotional material wherein there is no addition or reflection on First Nations people and their relationship with the tar/oil sands. However, in seeking to – at least partially – redress this absence, I asked Kainai First Nation artist Terrance Houle to contribute to this project.

I first met Terrance at the “Is Oil a Dirty Word?” event in Calgary. Terrance discussed the potential of a planetary apocalypse caused by climate change, environmental degradation and pollution brought about by our reliance on fossil fuels and linked it to what he saw as the post-apocalyptic reality his people were living in. His image “Oily

Buffalo” (iinniiwahkiimah) was used on the event poster and large hand painted canvas versions were also hung at the venue. Readers can see Terrance Houle’s “Oily Buffalo” at the end of *The Beast* as well as read a brief, poignant essay on the image’s connection with the past and message to the future about the potential of an energy apocalypse caused by a society addicted to fossil fuels.

The complex environmental, economic, social, cultural and Indigenous issues linked to the oil sands extend far beyond what can be feasibly addressed in the pages of a graphic novel. Indeed, the reader is actively encouraged to seek out additional readings about these issues. Some readers – be they activists, government workers or those working in industry – may feel that certain characters in *The Beast* do not relay the nuance of their position. In commissioning and helping produce *The Beast*, my objective has been to create a provocation that prompts a conversation around the seemingly endless, entrenched and divisive media war over the tar/oil sands. As such, the story was deliberately crafted to draw upon and expose the tropes, clichés and throwaway stereotypes that dominate the debate over the tar/oil sands. Readers are encouraged to actively question and challenge these stereotypes and simple dichotomies.

It is my hope that through doing so, and seeking to look beyond reductionist dichotomies, simple media frames, and glossy advertisements, we clear the social imagination and create a space for a more nuanced conversation and meaningful public conversation about our complex relationship with oil, and how we can implement a just energy transition.

Ottawa, August 2018



## Selected Suggested Readings

- Caraher, William and Conway, Kyle (Eds). 2016. *The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of Western North Dakota*. Grand Forks: The Digital Press @ The University of North Dakota.
- Davidson, Debra. J. and Gismondi, Mike. 2011. *Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity*. New York: Springer.
- Johnson, Bob. 2014. *Carbon Nation*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Laxer, Gordon. 2015. *After the Sands: Energy and Ecological Security for Canadians*. Madeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre
- LeMenager, Stephanie. 2014. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Perron, Dominique. 2013. *L'Alberta autophage: Identités, Mythes et Discours du Pétrole dans l'Ouest Canadien*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Szeman, Imre & Boyer, Dominique. (Eds.). 2017. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- Szeman, Imre & Petrocultures Research Group. 2016. *After Oil*. Edmonton.
- Takach, G. 2017. *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.
- Turner, C. 2017. *The Patch: The people, Pipelines, and Politics of the Oil Sands*. Toronto: Simon and Schuster.



# SEEING OIL

KYLE CONWAY

## 0. Zoom

There's a book I like to look at with my kids called *Zoom* (Banyai 1998). I say "look at" rather than "read" because it has no words. Instead, it's a series of pictures, each taking up a page, that work together to create the effect of zooming out. On the first page, you see some red triangles, and then, a page later, you see it's really a chicken, and the triangles are its comb. A page later, it's a chicken seen through a window as you look over some kids' shoulders. Then it's the kids looking at the chicken, seen through a door behind them. You keep zooming out until it's the entire earth, and then, on the final page, the earth disappears into the vastness of space.

What's nifty about *The Beast* is that it can work a bit like *Zoom*. You can look at the picture it paints, literally and figuratively, and then take a step back, then another and another. In the process, you come to see something in our day-to-day experience that is often invisible: oil. Of course, it's not that we *can't* see oil. We see gas stations. We buy gas. Perhaps a bit spills and we carry its acrid smell around with us all day. Rather, it's that we *don't* see oil. We tend not to think about the tanker that brought the gas, nor the refineries that purified it, nor the pipelines that carried oil to the refineries, nor the wells where people took the oil out of the ground. Nor do we think about the plastic that trims our car's interior, nor the tar in the asphalt we drive on, nor any of the other materials we have thanks to oil and the technology we use to process it. When I say oil is invisible, this tendency to overlook it is what I mean.

What makes it invisible? Perhaps it's that oil has caused people to do terrible things they would rather not acknowledge: "the history of oil," writes Amitov Ghosh (1992, 29), "is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic." Perhaps it's that oil is so energy-dense and produces such a high Energy Return on Energy Investment (EROEI), to borrow a term from Antti Salminen and Tere Vadén (2015, 34), that it erases any markers of its presence:

Simply put, the high EROEI of oil and the large amount of oil together intoxicated the human ape so that it started imagining that the effects of oil were due to the ape's own merits. It started to see a combination of virtue and natural determinism as the roots of its prowess.

Or perhaps it's just that oil is so thoroughly imbricated in our lives that we take it utterly for granted. As long as our lives run smoothly, we focus on the tasks that secure our survival from one day to the next, or on the leisure we enjoy when those tasks are done. We lose sight of oil in the same way we lose sight of the ball in the prestidigitator's hand, through misdirection and distraction.

*The Beast* helps bring oil back into focus. It recounts a modern parable about the tensions people in North America experience, some more acutely than others, around issues of energy, sustainability, and the need to make a living. It also provides a collection of art inspired by real-life public relations campaigns in the past few decades. The art provides a comment on (and thematic counterpoint to) the story *The Beast* tells about people working in a public relations firm.

To see the value of this metacommentary—and to see oil—we must now zoom out.



## 1. Impasse

*The Beast* presents its readers with two protagonists: Mary, who works for a company that designs PR campaigns for the oil industry, and Callum, an anti-oil activist who subordinates his freelance PR work to his ideals. Both have to make compromises: Mary shares Callum's idealism, but she knows it won't pay the bills. Callum lives by his ideals but, in many ways, proves Mary right: he can afford his idealism only because Mary spots him rent and buys him dinner. In a very real way, oil money pays for his anti-oil activities.

Throughout *The Beast*, we find ads that Mary's company has produced. One for the fictional company OilCan is interesting for the light it sheds on the compromises Mary and Callum make. It depicts a mother holding a rambunctious kid wearing a birthday hat while a girl with a balloon yells behind her and another blows a noisemaker into the flame of one of the candles on a cake. The mom looks tired. The caption reads:

Polymers. Fertilizer. Neoprene. You're not thinking about all the ways petroleum makes your birthday party possible. And you don't need to. OilCan is there, every step of the way, to make your dream a reality. From cake to balloons, from party hats to plastic chairs, we've got you covered. Just don't ask us to help with the cleanup! (p. 21)

Many readers of *The Beast* are likely familiar with the type of ad this one parodies. Exxon Mobil's "Energy Lives Here" campaign and Enbridge's "Life Takes Energy" campaign, both from the 2010s, used a similar strategy—listing all the things oil allows us to take for granted—but these ads have a long history. In the 1950s, the American Petroleum Institute, for instance, published a series of "educational" pamphlets in the same vein with titles such as "What Makes This

Nation Go: The Story of One Industry, Oil, and How It Fits into Our American Economy” (see Talbot 1958 and Huber 2014). These ads demonstrate the degree to which our lives (and those of the characters in *The Beast*) are saturated in oil, but in a paradoxical way: the ads draw our attention to oil and then relieve us of having to think about it any more. *We’ve got you covered*: it’s a remarkable feat of legerdemain.

Jennifer Wenzel (2016) uses this idea as the starting point for an exercise in her environmental humanities classes. She calls it the “oil inventory,” and she asks students to “trace the presence (or absence) of oil and its history in their own lives” (ibid., 32). The exercise “offers a kind of inoculation against that too-easy depoliticizing gesture of pointing out energy hypocrisy ... as if anyone who drives or flies or eats Kellogg’s cornflakes forfeits the right to wonder and worry about fossil fuels” (ibid., 32). *The Beast* makes this gesture twice. When Callum’s self-righteous activist friends accuse Mary of selling out, she confronts them: “Do you even know what your phone is made of? And your shoes, your clothes, oil is in all of them, you hypocrite!” (p. 75). Later, Mary is idly looking at her computer and sees a meme depicting activists in canoes on a lake with the caption, “Protest oil companies / Coats, lifejackets and kayaks all made of oil” (p. 80). It’s a subtler moment, but the point is still clear: what right do people have to critique the very system that makes their activism possible?

This conundrum is a symptom of what the Petrocultures Research Group (2016, 18) identifies as an “impasse”: “Oil is so deeply and extensively embedded in our social, economic, and political structures and practices that imagining or enacting an alternative feels impossible, blocked at every turn by conditions and forces beyond our understanding or control.” This is the place where Mary and Callum are stuck. Callum’s activism is funded (albeit indirectly) by the very industry he objects to. And to travel to Fort McMurray (where

he takes the video of workers that will cost Mary her job when he publishes it), he still has to take a car. He might protest oil, but he cannot escape it.

But this realization needn't lead to paralysis. Another approach is possible:

Rather than understanding impasse as foreclosure of possibility, we posit that impasse is a situation of radical indeterminacy where existing assumptions and material relations can no longer hold or sustain us and in which we might activate the potential obscured by business-as-usual. In this case, an impasse is not a blockage; it is a condition of possibility for action within a situation that is suddenly open because it is uncertain. (Petrocultures Research Group 2016, 18)

How do we act in this case? We take a step back. We perform an oil inventory. To get a better grip on our situation (in hopes of doing something about it), we zoom out.

## **2. Inventory (part 1)**

Here are some places where oil is present but invisible in *The Beast*:

- Callum walks home from an art gallery opening. Mary walks home from her job. (p. 24)
- The next day, Mary leaves for work. (p. 26)
- Callum rides his bike to a protest, and cars driving the other way honk. (p. 28)
- Mary arrives at a restaurant after work to meet Callum, who is already there. (p. 32)
- Callum is back at home after the restaurant. (p. 36)
- The next day, Mary goes to work again. (p. 37)

This list is nothing more than the first half-dozen times people travel from one place to another. It would be tedious to list every time someone travels (especially when Mary and Callum take buses, trucks, and taxis to get to and around Fort McMurray), although the tedium would reveal the banality and ubiquity of travel.

Even this initial list, however, starts to make oil consumption visible. It's obviously fueling the cars Callum passes as he rides his bike. But it's also in the act of biking itself. Although biking doesn't consume oil or gas directly, it does so indirectly. Plastic or vinyl parts are made with ethylene, which is derived from oil. Parts are transported from one place to another—in trucks, we might assume—as bicycles are assembled, and finished bikes are transported to the stores where people buy them. And to fuel their bikes, people have to eat. The global industrial food system, with its petroleum-derived pesticides, its transport boats and trucks, and its plastic packaging, consumes oil at nearly every stage. Environmental scholar Daniel Thorpe has even calculated the rate of carbon dioxide emissions per kilometer traveled by bike, as a result of the consumption of oil in the production of food. He estimates that an average North American biking one kilometer burns about 25 Calories (or 0.11 megajoules). People who follow a meat-heavy paleo diet are responsible for about 135 grams of CO<sub>2</sub> (or its equivalent) in that distance. (The production of meat requires a lot of oil because of the pesticides in grains grown for feed, not to mention the transport involved in getting animals to slaughterhouses and meat to supermarkets.) People who eat a more conventional diet are responsible for about 65 grams, while vegans are responsible for about 40 grams. In comparison, gas-fueled cars consume about 750 Calories (3.3 megajoules) per kilometer and emit 300 grams of CO<sub>2</sub> (Thorpe and Keith 2016). Biking reduces oil consumption, to be sure, but it does not eliminate it.

Similarly, we can see oil in Mary's walking, too. If she is wearing comfortable shoes, they likely have soles made of polyurethane

foam (derived, again, from oil). The sidewalk she is walking on likely contains asphalt, which is a form of bitumen. And she, too, must eat food. Given her body size, she probably burns about 50 Calories (0.22 megajoules) per kilometer (Bumgardner 2017). If the proportions Thorpe proposed hold true for walking, that's roughly 130 grams of CO<sub>2</sub> per kilometer, depending on what she's eaten.

These examples all demonstrate a phenomenon sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 21) calls disembedding, or “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space.” For Giddens, the abstraction disembedding represents is a defining characteristic of modernity. People in advanced, globally integrated economies maintain relationships with others who are far away—the people who extract oil, those who transform it into pesticides, those who use those pesticides to grow crops, those who deliver food in its raw form to factories for processing, those who deliver processed food to wholesalers and then to retailers, then to restaurants, and then finally to Mary and Callum as they eat their vegan wings and drink their beer—even if they are not conscious of those relationships. This abstraction contributes to oil's invisibility. Disembedding, or “con-distancing” as Salminen and Vadén (2015, 3) describe it, is a “particular way of keeping something close so that it at the same time stays alien, at a distance.”

Here is what we've done so far. First we looked at Mary and Callum's world from their perspective, where they realize the ways their choices are constrained. Then we zoomed out and looked at them from above, from our perspective as readers looking in on a fictional world. Now let's zoom once more, to look over our own shoulders as we read *The Beast*. What does our oil inventory look like?

### 3. Inventory (part 2)

The higher-level perspective that interests me is concerned with one thing: the amount of oil consumed in producing and delivering one copy of *The Beast*. And not just any copy—I'm thinking about the paper copy I hold between my hands as I write this essay. (If you're reading this essay, it means you have the version published by the Digital Press at the University of North Dakota. Perhaps you're reading an electronic version. Perhaps you ordered a print-on-demand copy from Amazon. In either case, the math will be different.)

Determining the amount of oil consumed in the production of a book involves a lot of speculation about variables whose values are largely unknowable. The answer I arrive at is interesting more for the sense of magnitude it provides than for the precision of its figures. My approach derives from the one used by Sougandhica Hoysal (2014), who calculates the energy consumed in the production of one copy of Stephanie LeMenager's *Living Oil* (2014). I reproduce Hoysal's analysis here but change the variables to reflect production of *The Beast*.

Hoysal begins by addressing a vexing problem in this type of analysis, namely where to draw the line with respect to what to include or exclude. She includes the conception, printing, and transportation of a book to warehouses, but excludes the manufacture of component materials such as paper. I have done the same thing.

With respect to conception, Hoysal (2014, 204) estimates that the 90,000 words in LeMenager's book, composed on a Dell desktop computer, took about 1,800 hours to produce. Over the course of those hours, the computer consumed about 500 kilowatt-hours of electricity (or about 1,800 megajoules, or 430,000 Calories). *The Beast*, of course, is a different type of project. Although it grew out of scholarly research, it is not a monograph—it is a collaborative work of fiction. It took shape initially in Patrick McCurdy's research, which

has also resulted in the Mediatoil archive ([www.mediatoil.ca](http://www.mediatoil.ca)), and the work of composition was distributed across a network of servers and personal computers. The calculation of the amount of energy used is thus not as tidy, but it is likely to be on a scale similar to Le-Menager's book. For that reason, I'm using the same estimate, but instead of distributing the total energy use across 600 copies (the initial print-run of *Living Oil*), I am distributing it across 2,000, the initial print-run of *The Beast* by Ad Astra Comix. Each book thus took about 0.9 megajoules (or 215 Calories). (How much of this energy was generated by burning fossil fuels is tough to say. Electricity in Ottawa, where McCurdy works, is generated in part by hydroelectric dams. But what about the servers where versions were stored as he and his collaborators worked together?)

Production is a bit simpler. Hoysal (2014, 204–205) writes that the amount of energy used to print a book varies considerably by “the types of printing processes and machinery used”; she uses 0.11 kilowatt-hours (0.4 megajoules or 95 Calories) as her per-book figure. I do the same.

Distribution is a bit more complicated. Ad Astra's printer is based in Louiseville, Quebec, and after printing, the books were delivered to a warehouse in Ottawa, Ontario, about 300 kilometers away. The amount of energy used depends on the type of vehicle, as Table 1 describes:

**Table 1. Energy use for transporting books from Louiseville, Quebec, to Ottawa, Ontario**

Mode of transit	Distance	Rate of energy use	Total energy use (2,000 books)	Energy use per book
Transit truck, diesel (about 8 mpg or 30 l/100 km)	300 km	10.3 MJ (or 2,450 Cal) / km	3,100 MJ (or 740,000 Cal)	1.6 MJ (or 370 Cal)
Car, gasoline (about 25 mpg or 9.4 l/100 km)	300 km	3.3 MJ (or 750 Cal) / km	990 MJ (or 225,000 Cal)	0.50 MJ (or 110 Cal)

If we add these figures together, we see that between 1.8 and 2.9 megajoules (420 and 680 Calories) of energy went into producing and delivering my book to me. There are of course other factors we could consider that would change these results. Some would raise our estimate, such as if we considered the energy that went into producing the book's component parts, especially paper. (The manufacture of paper is energy-intensive.) Others would lower our estimate, such as if we took into account the other cargo the transport car or truck likely had, or if we found a way to reflect the fact that electricity can be generated without burning gas or oil. The number of factors grows as we look beyond conception, production, and distribution, a fact that explains Hoysal's choice to limit her analysis to those three aspects.

Are these caveats enough to jeopardize the validity of my conclusions? I don't think so. The real value of this analysis is that it allows us to make comparisons. For instance, the amount of energy used to produce and distribute one copy of LeMenager's book was more than ten times the amount used for my copy of *The Beast* because of the distance traveled and the number of copies in the print-run: a copy of *Living Oil* traveled almost four times as far as my copy of *The Beast*, and that energy consumption was distributed over 600 copies rather than 2,000. In addition, this accounting exercise lets us make other types of comparisons, too. Hoysal provides a fascinating benchmark, that of a hamburger on a North American plate. The manufacture and transport of the ingredients for one hamburger take an average of 13.6 megajoules (or 3,200 Calories). (The person eating the hamburger might get only one tenth of those Calories in his or her meal!) Compared to a hamburger, my copy of *The Beast* took about one fourth the energy to produce and deliver.



## 4. What we see

The calculations that are part of the oil inventories presented here, first of Mary and Callum within the storyworld of *The Beast*, then of my copy of *The Beast* itself, are indices of oil use, but they do not provide a map or a flowchart. They make oil use visible, but not in a step-by-step way. Their real value lies in the tools they provide to make sense of the different, interrelated dimensions of our current state of impasse. They reveal the dialectical relationships between structural factors that shape how objects move from one place to another and individual trajectories that specific objects take.

These relationships help explain the ambivalence Mary and Callum (not to mention readers of *The Beast*) feel about the need to balance long- and short-term goals. Mary and Callum need to eat and keep a roof over their heads, but the choices they make to be able to buy food and pay rent contribute to an economic and industrial system that is not sustainable. And in any case, their individual choices can have only a limited impact, in so far as they leave the structural organization of an oil-based economy intact. The Petrocultures Research Group (2016, 18) reframes this impasse as a point of “radical indeterminacy” to address that constraint: rather than paralysis, we should opt to write new rules altogether. Somewhere between paralysis and radical newness, people will need to find the collective will to act.

The strategy of the taking an oil inventory or of zooming out has the benefit of helping us situate ourselves and our choices within the broader set of forces that structure our lives. It helps us weigh different options (do I eat a hamburger or buy a comic?) by gaining a broader sense of their impacts. Ultimately, this strategy, by causing us to look for oil in our lives, can help us organize a collective response to the challenges of sustainability.

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# CLIMATE CHANGE IS AN ORNERY BEAST: VISUAL CULTURE, DENIAL, AND FORT MCMURRAY IN THE BEAST

TOMMY WALL  
CHRIS RUSSILL

## Introduction

In 2016, a massive wildfire turned Fort McMurray residents into refugees, destroyed their dwellings, and transformed the surrounding landscape into a hell-scape; firefighters were flown in from South Africa, insurance companies failed miserably, and one year later, the fire still burned in places. The disaster is routinely described as among the costliest in Canadian history and unequivocally affected the health of first responders, residents, and the surrounding eco-system.<sup>1</sup> It is burned deeply into Canadian memory, and will remain so for a long while.

One thing we remember well is the parade of politicians, journalists and pundits censoring questions on the relationship of the flames to climate change. Climate change denial never burned so bright! Sure, the question of climate change is uncomfortable, raised difficult feelings, and forced us to ask what is 'natural' about natural disasters. Yet, in this case, most Canadian leaders refused the conversation. When it was raised, Prime Minister Trudeau himself argued that it was inappropriate to discuss, and has yet to put the disaster in a larger context for the Canadian people.<sup>2</sup>

Why was climate change denial most intense during the wildfire? Canada is a resource-extraction state and its approach to indigenous peoples, work, economics, and democracy is irrevocably

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<sup>1</sup> See Wallis Snowdon, "Fort McMurray Wildfire Costliest Insured Disaster," CBC News, <https://perma.cc/ER5T-WHJA> (July 7, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> See Mike de Souza, "Justin Trudeau Criticizes Elizabeth May's Fort McMurray Climate Connection," <https://perma.cc/LV3X-Y5CL> (May 4, 2016)

shaped by this fact. Government and media outlets, in this context, often have difficulty saying anything sensible about climate change. This is understandable, as no one has figured out how to address climate change. Yet, the inability to permit discussion of the relationship of climate change and resource-extraction in Canada is deeply troubling.

The question of how the Fort McMurray fire fits into larger patterns of wildfire and global warming affords no single answer, especially in a country as committed to resource-extraction as Canada is. The key is to ‘stay with the trouble,’ not to deny it.<sup>3</sup> In ‘staying with the trouble,’ we let a variety of perspectives, feelings, and approaches come together, and the tensions and difficulties this diverse experience generates is understood as productive by participants. In ‘staying with the trouble,’ we overcome the insecurity and denial that threatening situations can produce; it is not about instant answers or quick fixes, but about exploring the contours, risks, and possibilities of the present, while refusing the divisions and exclusions that often structure our lives. In ‘staying with the trouble,’ we generate mutual trust and use collective commitment to overcome the insecurity, fear and denial of troubling times. The answers and solutions only come afterwards, later, maybe. Alas, the opportunity to ‘stay with the trouble’ by asking how the Fort McMurray fire fits into larger patterns of wildfire and global warming was abandoned, as politicians, pundits and journalists tripped over themselves to claim that discussion was inappropriate.<sup>4</sup>

This is climate change denial in Canada. By denial, we don’t mean disinformation circulated by the fossil fuel industry.<sup>5</sup> While real, that

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<sup>3</sup> See D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016),.

<sup>4</sup> Editorial, “Why Pinning the Fort McMurray Wildfires on Climate Change is a Bad Idea,” iPolitics, <https://perma.cc/PVR3-8KH6> (May 5, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see N. Oreskes and E. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global*

denial is not the worst kind; it is often emphasized because it feels good to morally condemn liars, and because it distracts us from looking more deeply at ourselves. By denial, we mean the realization that climate change is altering Canadian geography, ecology, agriculture and climate, and doing nothing about it. This kind of denial doesn't involve a lack of information, moral integrity or apathy, but a desire to avoid feeling bad about our inability to address a pressing societal need. As Kari Norgaard insightfully argues, climate change denial is socially organized and widely distributed through culture as a means of coping with unsettling situations. The good news is that this denial and its enforcement springs from a place of decency, as it is "testament to our human capacity for empathy, compassion, and an underlying sense of moral imperative to respond, even as we fail to do so."<sup>6</sup> The bad news is that our leaders and news industry are ill-equipped to overcome it. An entire town burned down in real time on our screens, while authorities reprimanded people for asking why.

The situation was almost comical...

And, of course, now it is....

*The Beast*, the graphic novel published this summer (2018), is worth celebrating because it refuses such denial. Its title, *The Beast*, is taken from the colloquial name given to the Fort McMurray inferno; yet, ironically, "beast" is also the nickname given to dangerous climate change. In the mid-1990s, Wally Broecker, an internationally respected earth scientist, warned politicians that they were wrong about how the climate system worked. It was not something you could tame, control, or govern through a carbon market. It was an "ornery beast," and the consequences of meddling with planetary dynamics would emerge in surprising and unmanageable ways.<sup>7</sup> His

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*Warming*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010)..

<sup>6</sup> K. Norgaard, 2011. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 61.

<sup>7</sup> W. Broecker, "Will Our Ride into the Greenhouse Future be a Smooth One?"

warning, like this comic, tried to cut through the chatter and denial of public discourse, permeated as it is by advertising, public relations, and the promotional goals of politicians and industry.

Is it surprising that a graphic novel takes up this task? Not really. Visual depictions of environmental change, realistic and imaginative, have long worked to restore emotional and affective responses to abstract issues. Greenpeace, at its inception, popularized spectacular photographs, and *Whale Wars*, the TV show, staged images to provoke wider ethical engagements with issues we cannot experience firsthand.<sup>8</sup> Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* was a dull lecture with compelling visuals.<sup>9</sup> Eco-horror films, as discussed below, now give compelling visual expression to something we sometimes forget: the world "kicks back," as Karen Barad has put it.<sup>10</sup>

*The Beast* is a story of the world 'kicking back,' and explores the consequences of tethering our lives to resource extraction. Importantly, it grounds the abstraction of global issues in a more familiar and localized Canadian context than most of popular culture. It illustrates how denial is lived by depicting how an economy built to intensify resource extraction is experienced interpersonally by those forced to organize their lives around its imperatives. Canada, in this respect, is a test case for addressing climate denial more widely, as its democratic values have always been circumscribed by the logistics of maintaining resource extraction. The collapse of bison on the plains, cod populations in the sea, and subterranean coal mines structure the question of why the oil sands figures so prominently in our lives today – and their historical ruin prefigures the damage

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GSA Today 7.5 (May 1997), 1-7.

<sup>8</sup> See C. Russill, "Whale Wars: A Deeper Shade of Green on the Public Screen," *Flow*. <https://perma.cc/2FQN-NHKM> (April 6, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> *An Inconvenient Truth: A Global Warning*. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Perf. Al Gore. (Paramount, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> K. Barad, "Getting real: Technoscientific practices and the materialization of reality." *Differences*, 10.2 (1998), 87–128.



to come from tying Canada's future so intensely to fossil fuels. "Oily Buffalo," the image shared by Terrance Houle, brings this history together in an essential fashion. In what follows, we discuss our visual approaches to the environment in popular culture before turning to *The Beast* itself.



XXIX

## Visual Media and Denial

Visual media is especially important in provoking the public imaginary to work through and cope with contemporary environmental crises. While often melodramatic, spectacle-laden and consumerist in orientation, such media have raised questions of denial, trauma, and fear in especially compelling ways.

Let's begin by addressing the obvious criticisms. Melodrama tends to reduce social conflict to individualized contests involving stylized heroes and villains, whether it is an environmentalist group versus an oil company, a mother against the chemical industry, or a scientist challenging the corruption of politicians. In addition, melodrama simplifies the complexity of environmental problems, and emphasizes narrative closure, where a satisfying or quick resolution is achieved regardless of the odds against the hero.<sup>11</sup> No one knows what the hell happened in *Interstellar*;<sup>12</sup> yet, the love between father and daughter transcends time, space, and planetary death. Increasingly, melodrama is tied to visual spectacle, and to the escalation of special effects that produce shocking depictions of climate change disaster; *The Day After Tomorrow* is the standard bearer in this respect, as abrupt climate change visited an ice-age on the Northern United States over the course of a week! In some cases, melodrama and spectacle depict crisis without closure, as the allegorical tale of *Mother!* emphasizes the catastrophic consequences of exploiting nature without end.

If melodrama and visual spectacle are understood from an informational-perspective, then these examples appear as misrepresentations designed to trivialize complex problems for entertainment or commercial purposes. Yet, visual media does more than produce

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<sup>11</sup> D. Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Nolan, et al. *Interstellar*. 2014.

dramatic spectacle to gain attention at the cost of truth. As communication scholar Steve Schwarze argues, melodrama often re-establishes an affective and ethical relationship to abstract issues, and reminds us that crises involve ethics as much as emergency management protocols.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, visual spectacles can display symptomatic silences in representations of environmental problems and gain wider circulation. These silences can be exposed visually in unique ways that complement, ignore or contradict dialogue or the written word. *Mother!* is emblematic of this visual approach, overtly showing how environmental problems are made worse when not addressed, and suggesting how solutions to problems are not always available, all the while permitting a diversity of interpretations. It is a genuinely puzzling film, with horror often overwhelming our ability to think in a detached manner about what we are seeing, and challenging us with cyclical and religious conceptions of time; in this respect, it is not unlike the cycles of denial characterizing our responses to the consequences of resource extraction.

Environmental problems are terrifying, and visual culture can re-work our feelings and approaches to these problems by using different genres of visual presentation. For instance, eco-thrillers and eco-horror increasingly depict the environment as an agent, as a primary protagonist, and even as a villain.<sup>14</sup> This genre of environmental film is often situated in the post-9/11 American context and is understood as reflecting societal anxieties; according to Kaplan, these films can encourage “pretrauma,” an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the ecological harm that will produce traumatic events has happened, even as the consequences

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<sup>13</sup> S. Schwarze, “Environmental Melodrama.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92.3 (2006), 239-261.

<sup>14</sup> E.E. Moore, *Landscape and Environment in Hollywood Film*. (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 23.

<sup>15</sup> E. A. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 10.

have yet to occur. It is our anticipation and foreknowledge of things that cannot be avoided that produces a traumatic response, not a past outcome. Whether this idea has medical or scientific merit is not the point; the engagement of visual media with new kinds of environmental crises are producing different ideas, feelings, and ways of responding that puncture the pervasiveness of denial.

We (the authors of this chapter) experimented recently by watching films without sound, avoiding the sonic cues and dialogue to observe closely what was depicted. Surprisingly, in the most spectacular and melodramatic films involving climate change, the speedy and surprising depiction of ruin is followed by the slower and more silent pacing of migration in search of refuge. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, Americans flee to Mexico in a cheeky inversion of North American immigration politics, although the entire film is about migration from a newly threatening environment. In *Snowpiercer*, the cyclical looping of the train's ecosystem is finally broken by the exhaustion of its political system, and its inhabitants abandon technological fixes to migrate into the unknown. In *Interstellar*, migration to a different planet is sought, as a refuge from climate change. Collectively, the noise, drama, and spectacle of these films creates fictional projections of the anxieties and concerns of our culture; yet, at the same time, they link climate change to unspoken questions of migration and refuge in compelling ways. Cinematically, they display what no one talks about, using the tropes of catastrophe and ruin to introduce us to problems of migration and refuge.

## **The Beast: Easy and Hard Answers**

While comics routinely become films, we recognize that *The Beast* is very different from mainstream filmmaking, and these differences help us amplify some of the oversights and omissions of the films discussed above. In the films, the spectacular disasters are fictional,

and their causes are often explored through the dynamics of interpersonal melodrama. The complex relationships of time, crisis and human agency are conceptualized in different ways, yet invariably the central figures dwell in ruin before seeking refuge outside the dominant system. The environment, in these tales, is no longer a stable background upon which humans play out their lives; it becomes an actor, an active agent, and occasionally even a villain, as the assumption that the environment is something inert and awaiting exploitation is overturned in spectacular fashion.

In the comic, Fort McMurray is depicted in this process of becoming-ruin; it is caught in historical circumstances that the characters have difficulty perceiving, cannot change, and the broader question of whether ruin is followed by refuge is left open-ended and undressed.

What happened in Fort McMurray? What is its significance?

The comic affords both an easy and hard answer.

The easy answer reverts to the idea of denial as industry disinformation. In many of the films, and at moments in the comic, it appears as if catastrophe results because truth goes unheard and unheeded. Indeed, at one level, *The Beast* is an exploration of the communicative dynamics shaping how 'truth' does and does not circulate. In fact, among the most provocative scenes in the graphic novel is the idea that all of us are implicated in the logic of promotion. Advertising and public relations, on this account, permeate industry, activism and art alike; disaster results from the lies that dominate public discourse.

It is this belief that encourages one of the protagonists, Callum, to publish his lazy exposé of worker exploitation in the tar sands. Callum, recruited by his friend and roommate, Mary, participates in creation of promotional materials that depict oil workers as happy and fulfilled; soon afterwards, Callum is contacted by one of the workers, who is now disgruntled and unhappy because he was recently fired.

Callum records the subsequent interview but agrees not to release it. After the Fort McMurray fires begin, Callum posts it online, leaves a letter for Mary, and flees town.

Callum's actions are both familiar and odd. As with those who feel that the climate change crisis is entirely a result of corporate disinformation, his solution is easy, and satisfying: speak truth, condemn others, and exit when things are not working out as you expect. In our terms, he is unable to 'stay with the trouble'; worse, his actions not only get Mary fired, but his letter 'mansplains' her public relations job to her. Oddly, in condemning her work, Callum distinguishes between masculine oil workers (as *needing* to work in dangerous conditions) and PR workers (as simply lying when they could presumably do other things); in doing so, Callum reduces the commonalities of their exploitation in resource-extraction economies to a question of whether one tells truth or lives through lies (again, this is odd, because it is the oil worker who lies to Callum about liking his job when they first met; and it is familiar because work associated with women is often critiqued in unhinged ways).

In our view, this way of 'exiting the trouble' is morally smug, self-serving, and representative of an uncaring brand of identity-politics. More importantly, has it ever once worked to address climate change in Canada?! We prefer Mary's response: ball up Callum's self-aggrandizing letter, silently trash it (or recycle it!), and return to helping the city recover from ruin. Still, we recognize there are many Callum-sorts in the climate-change game, and are thankful the comic crystalizes their usual tendencies in such a clarifying way.

The **hard answer** is embodied in Mary's lived experience, where we witness her silently working to restore the city to a livable condition, deprived of her previous job by men who either lied about her (an oil executive in an earlier scene) or subject her to their blinkered view of the truth (Callum). The hard answer recognizes that the broader issue isn't about advertising or public relations specifically. It

is about the nature of work in Canada. From start to finish, the comic links climate change to questions of work in a country whose economic model is bound to the intensification of resource extraction. Its main and peripheral characters are most realistic when discussing environmental concerns with respect to ‘making a living,’ as opposed to pretending that Canadians spend time debating science, truth, opinion, or policy. In fact, the comic’s willingness to circle back repeatedly to this question, by involving a variety of characters, experiences, and situations in the question of work is its most important contribution. The substantive dialogue isn’t particularly novel or insightful, but it is realistic and reflects where a conversation that seeks to transcend denial must start; in this respect, the tension, conflict and problems experienced by the characters in the comic are symptomatic of the difficulties many Canadians face today.

If the relationship of climate change and ruin were discussed in the context of work, it would represent a major step forward for Canadian conversations around resource-extraction, and pulling on this thread in the comic helps us understand why Callum’s ‘exit’ is untenable as political strategy or lifestyle choice in this country.<sup>16</sup> Consider, for example, how work and migration are connected in the story. It is notable that in Autumn of 2015, when Callum and Mary first depart from Cape Breton for Alberta, that the real-life cod fishery in the region had just collapsed... or, rather, the anticipated recovery from the previous collapse had itself collapsed. In addition, as this comic was written, the coal industry of the region collapsed again, as the promotional PR of newly hired coal miners was swiftly met with layoffs. In this respect, the inability of resource extraction to sustain opportunities for work in the region shape the context in which people migrate west to seek employment. Dependence on an archaic form

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<sup>16</sup> On why the desire for exit is strong but politically untenable, see Sarah Sharma, “Exit and the Extensions of Man,” *Transmediale*. <https://perma.cc/VDS2-AJBF> (August 5, 2017)

of fuel (coal) and the brutal treatment of a species (cod) is partially responsible for what the comic calls the “long term structural unemployment” (9) of the environment, which forces the region’s youth to migrate elsewhere. The brutality of the situation is perhaps best captured in a classic film, *Margaret’s Museum*, as it depicts a Nova Scotian town struggling for survival in the face of an extraction-economy that forces unwilling participants into especially dangerous work conditions (the mine) to care for their loved ones.<sup>17</sup>

In this respect, the comic offers numerous hints to migration and work once you are attuned to them, just as prominent films use spectacular ruin to embed difficult ideas about refuge and migration. And who can forget the global spectacle of 300 South African firefighters flying to Canada to combat the Fort McMurray fire, promptly going on strike for insufficient pay, and returning quietly to their country after the Albertan government was embarrassed.<sup>18</sup>

Consider, as a thought experiment, how different the debate about climate change would sound if there were a ‘basic income’ program in place for Cape Breton, or Nova Scotia, or even throughout Canada. Would Callum, Mary and other east coast Canadians rush westward to tether themselves to a resource-extraction industry? Would so-called ‘energy citizens’ swear fealty to fossil fuel companies, or would people pursue other ambitions through their work? This kind of debate – even if it went nowhere – would at least be more interesting than the endless proposals for carbon taxes, energy efficiency, and TESLA charging stations, and it would raise fundamental questions about the role of government in our lives.

In this respect, the connection of migration and work in the context of climate change is a compelling one, and the comic is notable

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<sup>17</sup> M. Ransen. *Margaret’s Museum*. 2015.

<sup>18</sup> G. Hampshire, “South African employer of firefighters apologizes for ‘international incident’ after pay dispute.” *CBC News* <https://perma.cc/U3T2-TVA3> (June 10, 2016)



for making this thought experiment a plausible one. It is not that citizen opinion or activist struggle is unimportant, but that the circulation of bodies that is necessary to the extraction of resources is crucial to the history of Canada. Activism and social movements, in the popular imagination at least, are tied to abstract expressions of citizenship and to a desire for self-realization through ideals and ethical commitments. Yet, for the entirety of Canadian history, these abstract ideals have proven unable to raise fundamental questions about the country's relationship to resource-extraction. In addition, there is no reason that autonomy and self-expression should not be pursued through work, and in systems that share wealth more equitably.

## Conclusion

In reading the comic, we were grateful that Terrance Houle shared his story of how film shaped his life, and of how movies and visual culture are often drawn upon imaginatively, tactically, and artistically to understand our contemporary situation. His "Oily Buffalo" exemplifies visual culture at its most provocative, bringing the entangled histories of species, energy and colonialism together in an image that silently rebukes histories of Canada that work to separate these things. It is what Brady and Kelly call a media intervention, a creative and tactical deployment of cultural history that articulates present concerns.<sup>19</sup>

In our way of thinking, *The Beast* is a handbook for living in ruins, and a search for the refuge that lies beyond it. The artwork and story shared by Terrance Houle brought this idea into focus for us, and helps illuminate the historical and colonial arc of Canada's dominant economic model. In the Canadian imaginary, Houle's warning

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<sup>19</sup> M. Brady and J. M. H. Kelly, *We Interrupt This Program: Indigenous Media Tactics in Canadian Culture*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

intersects well with the immigrant story of *Margaret's Museum*, and these indigenous and settler examples bring compelling questions of work and migration to the fore as we struggle to figure out our relationship to climate change.

The main characters of this story, it bears repeating, are migrants, and it is their migrant experiences that shape their lives and words, not abstract ideals about citizenship and truth. This story rings true to us. We suspect this dynamic will only expand, as *The Beast* sharpens our awareness that migrants proliferate as lived environments become unstable, threatening, or uninhabitable. A society tying its viability to the capitalist exploitation of fossil fuels dedicates itself only to ruin; the comic's brilliance is to let this lesson emerge organically from the interpersonal experiences of the main characters, as they navigate a variety of relationships and contexts. While all perspectives and experiences of this land are not represented here, and while the longer colonial history of the region is ignored, the story nicely captures the ambient anxieties of the moment. Work and environment, always entwined, seem precarious and unable to support the lives to which we aspire. The story of *The Beast*, in this respect, is unfinished. And, like all stories, it exists only in retelling. Can we transcend denial? Is Canada to become ruin or refuge? The next chapter belongs to you.



# MAKING COMICS BEYOND THE FUNNIES

BENJAMIN WOO

Let's start by playing a little word association: What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say "comics"? Is it a superhero like Batman or Spider-Man, or a newspaper strip like *Peanuts* or *Garfield*? Maybe you think of a book like Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* or Kazu Kibuishi's *Amulet*, or perhaps a webcomic like *Check, Please!* by Ngozi Ukazu. But, whatever your answer, I suspect that *The Beast: Making a Living on a Dying Planet* didn't come to mind first. A tale of two friends working on opposite "sides" of the debates over the future of our carbon-based economy, *The Beast* is an entertaining read but also engages with one of the most pressing social and political issues of our time. It's a fictional story based in academic research in the environmental humanities and social sciences, published by both a scrappy collective of Canadian cartoonists with a social justice mission (in print) and an imprint of an American university press (digitally). Suffice it to say you are reading a somewhat unusual comic book – but not an unprecedented one. While characters derived from comic books and comic strips have taken over our cinemas, TV screens, and children's birthday parties, other cartoonists have been quietly excavating space to tell all kinds of stories of significance in the comics form.

I say "form" very deliberately here. For a long time, comics were not only identified with their most visibly successful products but also viewed as merely a *genre*, a sub-type – and a not particularly worthwhile one at that! – of literature. Where "genre" refers to content (i.e., the *what*: a superhero story, a comedy, a mystery, or a romance), terms like "form" and "medium" refer to specific modes of communication (i.e., the *how*: a novel, a poem, a play, or a film).

Comic books and graphic novels have been made in practically every genre in existence. They rely on rich and subtle devices that are distinct from the craft of the novelist or poet. Rather, comics are a unique and distinctive art form that selectively and transformatively uses the tools of writing and visual art, arranged on the space of the page or, increasingly, the screen to communicate. By combining words and images together – sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes subverting each other’s meaning – comics offer artists a broad palette of expressive tools and call for sophisticated forms of visual literacy from their readers.

Although this mode of expression has ancient roots, historians credit the invention of comics in more or less the form we know them now to the Swiss educator Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846), who drew on a tradition of satirical cartooning and caricature to create humorous picture stories. But comics truly came into their own as part of the print mass media later in the nineteenth century. Newspapers and magazines were their first home, as conventions for telling jokes and stories with words, pictures and symbols developed through debate and experimentation: Should dialogue and exposition be placed as captions below the image or be included in the panel itself in boxes and balloons? Do readers need the panels to be numbered in order to know what order to read them in? How should a purely visual medium represent sound? Artists tried out solutions to these “problems,” and audiences let them know what was working and what wasn’t.

Cartoons and comics served a number of functions in newspapers of the time. They illustrated the news in much the way photographs and video do today. But as photography began to take over that illustrative role, comics were increasingly associated with editorials and with entertainment – that is, with spaces in the newspaper that were not *news*. In contrast to the handful of tiny comic strips on a comics page today, the comic features of the late-nineteenth

and early-twentieth centuries were lavish affairs, and the full-page Sunday strips drawn by Winsor McCay (*Little Nemo in Slumberland*), George Harriman (*Krazy Kat*), and Frank King (*Gasoline Alley*) are still pointed to as a high-watermark of the cartoonist's craft. They were given much more space because they drew readers to the paper, much as exclusive albums on Tidal and Netflix original series drive subscriptions today, and newspaper cartoonists were well-compensated – sometimes becoming celebrities in their own right.

Comics made the jump from newspapers to the comic books in the 1930s. Publishers began by reformatting and reprinting popular newspaper strips in magazine form. While publishers continued reprinting strips for many years to come, other publishers realized that they could produce their own original content much more cheaply than licensing already successful strips from the newspaper. The success of Superman, introduced in their pages of *Action Comics* in 1938 and quickly turned into a radio show, film serials, and oodles of merchandise, demonstrated the potential of this strategy (Gordon 2017). The comic books became immensely popular very quickly. Surveys from the 1940s show that virtually all American children read them regularly, and scholars of children's media have observed that, costing a mere 10¢, comic books were the first cultural commodity that children could afford to purchase and, therefore, choose for themselves (Kline 1993). Children's tastes soon proved problematic, however, as some adults reacted to this new medium with suspicion and alarm. The anti-comic book crusade was launched by the writer and editor Sterling North (1940). Although he described comic books' lurid content as "a violent stimulant," North's concerns were primarily *cultural*. He feared the easy, trashy pleasures of comic books would "make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories" and that the books' poor printing quality would ruin their readers' eyesight. Soon, however, parents, teachers, church groups, and politicians took up the cause, convinced that comics

were not merely bad but *bad for* children, contributing to a perceived epidemic of juvenile delinquency. The anti-comic book crusade of the 1950s culminated in U.S. Senate committee hearings and the adoption of a self-regulatory code by many American comic book publishers.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, many have blamed the industry's popular decline on the hidebound, moralizing rules contained in the Comics Code, though the real nail in the coffin was the advent of television, which made entertainment available to children for even less than comic books. Comic book sales peaked in 1952, and the rest of the history of the American comic book could be seen as a long, tactical withdrawal from mainstream culture to the parallel institutions of comic book fandom, the subculture of comic book collectors and aficionados. While artists have pushed at the boundaries imposed by convention and expectations throughout their history, comic books gained a reputation as disposable entertainment for children – or for child-like men.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, however, the category of the “graphic novel” has been a way to recover some space for comics beyond comic shops, comic conventions, and fandom forums. Distinguished from comic books principally by their publishing format – the cartoonist Art Spiegelman defines a graphic novel as a comic book that needs a bookmark – graphic novels nonetheless move in spaces and institutions differently than comic books traditionally have, making their way into trade bookstores, schools and libraries, and the review columns of serious newspapers and magazines that would never admit a floppy comic book. It is indeed true that most comic books today

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the Criminal Code was revised to include the making, selling, or possessing of a “crime comic” as an “offence tending to corrupt morals.” Due to a broad definition of crime comics, this law effectively criminalizes the majority of mainstream comic books sold on the market. Although still on the books, it is rarely enforced.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this history, see Kunzle (2010), Smolderen (2000), Gordon (1998), Gardner (2012), Lent (1999), and Gabilliet (2010).

are produced as simple entertainment commodities by large media companies like Marvel (Disney), DC (Warner Bros.), or Scholastic Books. But the fact that comics are a *form* and not a *genre* means that they are by no means limited to chronicling the adventures of corporate brands. Like the humble comic book, a graphic novel can be about literally anything. The new horizon and opportunities presented by the rise of the graphic novel as a way of thinking and talking about comics – and the fact that there are lower barriers to entry for a single artist or small team of collaborators than in, say, film or video games – has inspired a wave of new authors and new kinds of comic books.

In the remainder of this brief essay, I want to place the *The Beast* in context by sketching out a map of some alternative models, traditions, and schools of comic art. Duncan, Taylor, and Stoddard's (2016) book *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir and Nonfiction* not only provides some helpful advice to the aspiring creator of nonfiction comics but its title also helpfully outlines some possibilities for comics' engagement with the real. I think this is crucial because, although *The Beast* is neither memoir, journalism nor nonfiction, it nonetheless has something of consequence to say about the cultural politics of climate change and the world in which these debates take place.

First, some of the most celebrated graphic novels of all time have been memoirs and autobiographies. In the 1960s, a group of artists associated with the counterculture and underground newspapers created the underground comix movement. They used the styles and formats of commercial cartooning but twisted them into means for unfettered self-expression. While many of their attempts to push the boundaries of acceptable expression now seem merely provocative and, in some cases, traded in sexist and racist tropes, their experiments also laid the groundwork for later cartoonists to tell personal stories about their lives in comics. Justin Greene's semi-fic-



tionalized account of his experiences with obsessive compulsive disorder and a repressive, religious upbringing, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), showed many of his peers the possibilities of comics working in a more personal, confessional mode. In the 1980s, Spiegelman began serializing “Maus” as booklets inserted in the pages of *Raw*, an alternative comics magazine he edited with Françoise Mouly. Re-published in two collected volumes by Pantheon Books in 1986 and 1991 respectively, *Maus* is both an autobiographical story of Spiegelman’s relationship with his aging father, Vladek, and a biographical story (based on taped interviews) of Vladek’s experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust. The book’s title is the German word for “mouse,” and Spiegelman cannily redirects the potential cognitive dissonance that a comic book about the Holocaust might produce by appropriating the tradition of “funny animal” cartooning and rendering Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Americans as dogs. Even unfinished, *Maus* received a review in *The New York Times*, which in many ways launched the graphic novel discourse by proclaiming that what Spiegelman was creating couldn’t be called mere “comics,” and Spiegelman was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for the book in 1992. *Maus* created a template for the literary graphic novel as memoir that other creators, notably Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis* [2 vols., 2003 and 2004]) and Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home* [2006]), could follow (see Beaty and Woo 2016, chap. 2).

Second, other creators have taken the same tools developed by the memoirists and used them to tell stories about other people and their experiences. The most prominent practitioner has been Joe Sacco. Trained as a journalist, Sacco has produced a number of graphic novel-length comics based on reporting trips to the occupied Palestinian territories (*Palestine* [2001] and *Footnotes in Gaza* [2009]) and the former Yugoslavia (*Safe Area Goražde* [2000], *The Fixer* [2003], *War’s End* [2005]), and, in the recent *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life* (with Matt Hern and Am Johal) on the Alberta

tar sands). Typically working from his own interviews for the narrative and from photo references for the visuals, Sacco's work is meticulously reported, leading to the label "comics journalism" being applied to this and similar work, but it also shows clear influences from underground and autobiographical cartoonists. Sacco is always present in these narratives, guiding the reader through the stories he encounters. It is not journalism by the numbers; rather, the drawn image seems to be almost inescapably subjective, a tool for communicating experiences and understanding, rather than merely imparting information (Williams 2005; Woo 2010). However, these works are also labor-intensive and slow to produce. As books, they can't respond to current events at the speeds we are used to news unfolding, meaning that they occupy a space somewhere between the journalism and history. But as more news production and consumption moves online, both traditional journalistic outlets and comic-specific digital platforms such as *The Nib* ([thenib.com](http://thenib.com)) are creating venues for cartoonists like Susie Cagle to report and comment on the news of the day in shorter works that reach broad audiences.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the visual culture of the web and social media means that comics may be an ideal medium for sharing issues of public concern.

Third and finally, some nonfiction comics take advantage not only of comics' multimodal communicative repertoire but also their reputation as an "easy" form of reading to teach ideas. For example, the Mexican cartoonist Ruis' *Marx for Beginners* launched a series of graphic guides to topics in philosophy and social theory now known as the Introducing series. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) is an essay about the history and future of comics in the comics form. By tying his subject matter to his mode of address, McCloud has been responsible for convincing many of comics' potential and power. There has been a recent renaissance in longform, essayistic

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<sup>3</sup> See the CoJo List newsletter for an ongoing roundup of examples at [www.tinyletter.com/cojo](http://www.tinyletter.com/cojo).

comics. Nick Sousanis, now a professor of humanities and liberal studies at San Francisco State University, made national headlines when he successfully defended a graphic dissertation at Columbia University's Teacher's College. Published by Harvard University Press as *Unflattening* (2015), Sousanis's comic argues that drawing (and, specifically, drawing comics) enables different modes of cognition that can enrich teaching and learning – a topic he has continued to address in his teaching, public lectures, and arts workshops. Meghan Parker, an art educator, recently garnered similar attention for her comic-book *Master's thesis* from Simon Fraser University. Both works are examples of (and to some extent about) practice-based research, a category of scholarly production that recognizes that making things is a way of developing knowledge about them. But comics can also be used to circulate and publicize ideas generated elsewhere, as in the “Cartoon Abstracts” that the multinational scholarly publisher Taylor & Francis commissioned for a handful of articles published in their journals, including one that investigated whether comics are a good medium for science communication (Lin et al. 2014; unfortunately, Taylor & Francis does not credit the cartoonists involved).<sup>4</sup> A growing number of works are blurring the lines between arts-based research and scholarly communication. Graphic Medicine ([graphicmedicine.org](http://graphicmedicine.org)), Graphic Justice ([graphicjustice.blogspot.com](http://graphicjustice.blogspot.com)), and Graphic Social Science ([medium.com/@GraphicSocSci](https://medium.com/@GraphicSocSci)) are movements that aim to promote the use of comics in health, the law, and social science, respectively.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, existing comics are mined for insights into how people think about and represent important concepts like pain and illness. In others, artist-scholars make comics to explore their experiences with their own

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<sup>4</sup> The complete run of Cartoon Abstracts can be accessed at [explore.tandfonline.com/page/est/cartoon-abstracts](http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/est/cartoon-abstracts).

<sup>5</sup> See Graphic Social Science's interview with the creators of *The Beast* at [medium.com/@GraphicSocSci/the-beast-an-interview-e786d4b613bc](https://medium.com/@GraphicSocSci/the-beast-an-interview-e786d4b613bc).

illness or that of others. And in still others, scholars investigate how comics can make a difference in people's understanding of health information. As Ian Williams, a medical doctor who coined the term "graphic medicine," suggests, health professionals (and the people who train them) can make use of comics and graphic novels to build understanding and empathy.

I have tried to draw together some examples of different ways of dealing with the real in comics and graphic novels – as memoir, journalism, and nonfiction – in order to show how *The Beast* can be seen as similar to and different from these other approaches. It does not, of course, fit into any of these three categories but shows some influence from all of them. Nicole Burton and Hugh Goldring give us an entirely fictional story (featuring an entirely fictional oil company) that dramatizes the themes and forces explored in Patrick McCurdy's Mediatoil research project. Like memoir and journalism, it draws on resources external to the authors' imaginations, but it feeds them into Mary and Callum's story. Burton and Goldring (and their colleagues at the book's original publisher, Ad Astra Comix) self-consciously draw on a tradition of radical political cartooning that dates back to the labour press (Huck and Konopacki 2001) through politically engaged cartoonists like Spain Rodriguez, Seth Tobocman, and Peter Kuper. Like comics themselves, which are neither "art" nor "literature" but a hybrid of the two, Burton and Goldring have drawn on and transformed these traditions of nonfiction comics to create something different.

*The Beast* is a story about how systems – notably, the economy and the media – impose constant compromises, challenging us all to find the line we're not willing to cross. But Callum and Mary are also professional communicators, skilled at using both words and pictures to create persuasive frames. In this, they are like cartoonists and comics creators. Harvey Pekar, known for the nonfiction comics he wrote in his series *American Splendor*, once said, "Comics are just

words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures.” The question, then, is what you want to do with them. Ultimately, *The Beast’s* lesson is that the truth is our most precious resource of all and we have a powerful responsibility to be its steward, as well.

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# TALKING THE BEAST

WITH PATRICK MCCURDY  
HUGH GOLDRING  
DAVID HAESELIN

**DAVID HAESELIN:** My students and friends think that I'm a bummer. They lament my interest in the problem of climate change and works of culture that explore it. Do you worry that *The Beast* may be depressing?

**PATRICK MCCURDY:** In developing *The Beast*, my goal was to have a text which reflected the bifurcated nature of the oil/tar sands debate and the crossroads at which we find ourselves. From my perspective, the existing 'debate' was already depressing not just because of the accelerating pace of climate change but, also, the fact that the discourse around this planetary emergency was often reduced to meme wars and *ad hominem* attacks. This type of discourse hasn't moved the debate forward but caused both sides to double down and entrench their positions while far too many people stand on the sidelines. It was my hope that *The Beast* would, through the use of fiction, hold a mirror up to the current state of affairs and perhaps cause those who read it to think critically about how we talk about and envision our energy futures, seek out further information, and, ultimately, take action so our future is not so depressing!

**HUGH GOLDRING:** I have an anecdote I like to tell about tabling the books put out by Ad Astra at book fairs. People will sometimes asked with a pained expression if we have anything that isn't, y'know, sad? And when telling them about our story, I'll say "NO" with great relish. It's important to be sad! We are living in heart-breaking times. But hopefully the point of that feeling is to be stirred to passionate rebellion—to decisive action. I'd like to think that as



sad as *The Beast* is, it is ultimately a hopeful book. I don't want to say too much about the ending here, of course, but I think it's only sad in proportion to the sadness of our situation.

**DH:** As a literary scholar, I'd argue that it's important to think of *The Beast* as metafiction, a work of fiction that dramatizes the act of writing fiction or creating art. How does the choice to make the book's main characters both creative media producers (albeit with very different styles) help represent the ethical complexities you explore in the book?

**PMC:** The struggle over oil/tar sands, as well as the struggle over our energy and climate future, is both a material struggle and a mediated one. Put simply, the war of the oil/tar sands is a media war. Consequently, advertisements, memes, tweets, and activist photo-bombs are all resources which can be deployed in this struggle. Of course, some actors such as multinational oil companies have more financial and thus symbolic resources to draw on than their more nimble environmental counterparts who may deploy culture jamming and other guerrilla tactics. Having the book's main characters both be creative media producers allowed us to put the framing of the oil/tar sands by various stakeholders front and center and, subsequently, delve into the complexities, contradictions and ethical challenges that come along with this.

**HG:** One of the most persistent tropes about tar sands discourse is that we're all implicated in the carbon economy. So I wanted to show the lived experience of that trope. I read a student review of *The Beast* recently where the writer said she felt like you would have had to live in Alberta during the fire to relate to it. She herself talked about working at a call centre, calling people at Fort McMurray to tell them not to fall behind in their debt payments. Yikes!

But I think it's actually fairly universal, this experience of being implicated in this awful system. So I wanted to keep that relatable trope at the centre of the storytelling so that anyone with even a glimmer of conscience could relate. Beyond that, I also think that making them media creatives meant that the reader would have to think consistently about how the sausage is made. My own limited experience in ad writing and activism, as well as the legendary AMC show *Mad Men*, got me thinking about how very different things look from behind the camera. Attending a protest as a person off the street is very different from being an organizer. A random attendee would be unlikely to think, for example, to crop photos of the protest to make them look as big as possible, which would, I'd argue, be essential from the organizer's point of view.

So making our characters ad people means giving the reader a chance to see who pays for ads, what ads are intended to accomplish and just how much cynicism is involved in the whole process.

**DH:** Ad Astra Comix proudly describes itself as a publishing collective. Graphic novels, unlike their traditional textual counterparts, are often written by (at least) one person, drawn by (at least) one person and then often colored/inked by (at least) one person. In that vein, *The Beast* combines the labor of many, including Patrick as a "producer." How does your chosen format enable Ad Astra's stated commitment to the social production of knowledge and social justice?

**HG:** As we are frequently reminded in *The Beast*, nothing in life is free. This goes for comics production too. So Patrick - and his grant - paid for this work. His support of the text influenced its production as surely as a commercial publisher might have. But he has much better values! So we were able to tell a story and explore ideas that we think are important.

As for comics as a medium, I'm in danger of repeating what I've said elsewhere. Comics are a popular medium. They reach people who would never pick up an academic text. Publishing is a lousy way to make a living but a great way to learn interesting things, meet exciting people and change a few minds along the way.

Some of our work ends up published elsewhere. It doesn't all come out through the publisher. Our experience with this project was a good one but at the same time our basement is filling up with books. We're too busy making new comics to sell them!

**PMC:** It was hard to know what title to push for on this project, producer, editor or what have you. As I note in the Introduction, the idea to write a comic was suggested to me via a colleague and then I approached Ad Astra about the project with the kernel of an idea my wife suggested to me. I was lucky enough to have funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council which allowed me to pay Ad Astra for the project. That said, the project took more time and more hours than anticipated coming in at just under two years from when I first approached them to when the book first launched on Earth Day, 2017. From the project's inception, I sought to develop a collaborative partnership with Ad Astra where we would meet in person or email to discuss the direction of the story or various plot points and then Hugh and Nicole would go off and work their magic on the comic. From my perspective, we had a productive partnership which resulted in a work we are all proud of.

**DH:** In recent years, ecological criticism has become, arguably, the most important topic in academic conversations in literary studies, communication studies, media studies, history, sociology, and many other humanities/social science disciplines. Of course, many of the hard sciences monitor the natural world and thus must directly consider the impact of anthropogenic forces. How do you see environ-

mental concerns building bridges between multiple forms of inquiry and artistic expression?

**HG:** Scientists have been doing their very best to convince people that if we don't radically alter our consumption patterns we will devastate the climate. So far, they have succeeded in convincing most people to recycle and increasing the popularity of the color green. This is probably in part because scientists are not trained communicators. Perhaps that's a little glib. There are scientists doing important public relations work. But the scale and urgency of the problem is obviously not registering in the minds of the general public. There are a lot of explanations for that but part of it is definitely a failure to produce thoughtful, accessible art about the future of the planet. I'm hopeful that *The Beast* is one modest example of this. Plainly, much remains to be done.

**PMC:** In developing *The Beast*, we were keen to move beyond academic publishing and find another means to engage the public. I realize that not everyone wants to read academic papers, book chapters or policy pieces; a comic allows me to reach a different audience who may not otherwise engage with this debate but engage with readers using a fictional narrative that has been purposefully constructed based on themes from academic work. Moreover, unlike most academic writing, comics require a graphic and narrative style that is pithy and direct. In making the comic, we were forced to review and distill the various narratives around the oil/tar sands, pipelines, and energy transition and develop them into a storyline appropriate to the medium. I found this a very liberating exercise as it allowed me to take broad themes evident in my academic analysis of the tar sands and work with Ad Astra to communicate those in a different way. Moreover, whether it is protestors covered in "oil" or corporate executives standing in lush boreal forests, the debate over

the future of the tar sands is one that is soaked in imagery. As such, the visual nature of comics lent itself perfectly to explore the tropes tossed back and forth between polarized publics. As Benjamin Woo's essay in this expanded collection highlights, *The Beast's* format as a fictional comic grounded in themes of academic work is somewhat unconventional. It is perhaps more common to take a literal or journalistic approach to research to convert research or events into comic form. However, the comic's use of fictional characters and situations to represent the real world of petroculture allowed us to tell a short story that engages the cultural narratives surrounding energy production as well as the oil/tar sands debate that I examine elsewhere in my peer-reviewed academic work.

**DH:** One of the most pressing difficulties about understanding and, for that matter, addressing global warming is the problem of scale. For instance, Kyle Conway's new introduction to this digital edition of *The Beast* gives us one way to think about the problem in terms of publication and distribution of books. How does scale impact your personal understandings of ecological politics? Can scale help explain the book's title?

**PMC:** Credit for the title goes fully to Ad Astra. I was stuck on the Tar Wars cliché which, I knew we wouldn't use, but capturing a pithy title had me stumped. When Hugh and Nicole suggested "*The Beast*" not only as a direct reference to the Fort McMurray wildfire but to the 'the beast' that is the debate over the oil/tar sands as well as 'the beast' which is our struggle with our reliance on cheap fossil fuels, I was sold.

**HG:** The book's title is, I suppose, an allusion to the horrific dissonance between the monstrous scope of the problem we face and our own trifling individual capacity. This comic is not going to save the

world. Only human beings can do that. There is a stanza in the old labor anthem “Solidarity Forever” that sums up my thoughts about scale beautifully:

When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run  
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun  
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?  
But the union makes us strong.

As individuals, we’re helpless in the face of the scale of the problem. But there’s nothing that we can’t do together. I’ll leave it up to the reader to interpret my use of the Ralph Chaplin lyrics above, and whether or not I think that a general strike aimed at grinding the carbon economy to a halt is a viable strategy.

**DH:** Americans from different regions feel differently about environmental issues. Many of us at the Digital Press originally come from the Eastern US and now live in North Dakota. Our state government and many energy companies are (as William Caraher, Bret Weber, and many others have argued) actively attempting to change the ecological and social character of the state in order to fully embrace its new identity as an “energy producer.” I suspect that Canadians must experience similar regional conflicts concerning fossil fuels and energy production. Can you briefly explain your sense of these tensions to our American readers?

**PMC:** There is a 40+ year history of tension between the province of Alberta where the oil/tar sands are produced and the rest of Canada. At a national level, there have been skirmishes between the federal government and the province of Alberta since the 1970s rooted in the perceived federal encroachment upon resource ownership rights which belong to the province. This has manifest itself in

various political skirmishes as well as proposed and failed policies throughout the decades which have been the focus of many political and academic books.

Perhaps a key takeaway for American readers is to recognize that Albertan identity is closely associated with, and indeed, underpinned by a pride in its oil industry. Thus perceived threats to the industry can often get the backs up of many Albertans. Moreover, this pride – which is both understandable and deserved – is used by stakeholders such as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) – the Canadian equivalent of the American Petroleum Institute (API) – to stoke divisions under an affect-laden banner of pride and unquestioning love of the oil/tar sands. There are, of course, skirmishes between the provinces too and Alberta met resistance in its efforts to build bitumen export pipelines east with Ontario and Quebec via the failed Energy East pipeline and west with British Columbia and the Kinder Morgan TransMountain pipeline. The inter-provincial and federal politics around TransMountain have become so contentious and garbled that in late May 2018 the federal Liberal government purchased TransMountain from Kinder Morgan for over \$3.4 billion US dollars (\$4.5 billion Canadian) as a means to steady the project and push past resistance from the province of British Columbia, indigenous groups, as well as environmental activists. So, while US readers may view Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a refreshing and liberal force on the international political stage, he's also the architect of the fossil fuel pipeline nationalization project while we stand on the edge of a climate precipice. Though President Donald Trump has seemed to say “damn the environment, the economy is what is important,” Prime Minister Trudeau's Liberal government seems convinced that furthering fossil fuel extraction is a suitable means to combating climate change and encouraging energy transition. I'm less convinced.

**HG:** Nearly every region of Canada is an energy producing region other than the Arctic. In some places that energy comes from oil and gas - this is the case in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland. In other provinces - notably Manitoba, British Columbia, and Quebec - it's hydroelectricity. Ontario, where most Canadians live, is a mix of hydroelectric and nuclear.

Energy production in Canada always comes at the expense of indigenous people, though they have wrested more concessions in some jurisdictions than others. It is usually a thing that benefits a handful of wealthy corporations rather than the people who live in the province. Hydroelectricity is different here as it is generally publicly owned.

This conversation is a great example of what a meaningless metric GDP is. Oil sands production in Alberta is a major contributing factor to Canadian GDP and a significant chunk of Canadian export revenue. But that translates into very few jobs and little tax revenue. This is characteristic of the Canadian economy which has always been dominated by the extraction of raw resources for export to imperial centres (these days, that means the USA). Canada would be fine without the oil sands. The fantastically wealthy energy companies, on the other hand, would not. So their interest is conflated with the national interest under the guise of GDP.

Right now, the province of British Columbia is at war with the province of Alberta over the future of a pipeline that will cross the Rocky Mountains to bring Alberta oil to the Pacific Coast. BC is concerned about spills. Both provinces are ruled by the same political party - the NDP - and the internecine bloodletting is spectacular. And that spectacle has distracted British Columbians from the disgraceful decision their government made to flood indigenous territory as part of a dam construction project. They had opposed the project in opposition then changed their mind in government. This reversal



dominated the headlines until the conflict with Alberta over pipelines began. Now? Nary a whisper!

So Canadian energy politics are highly regional but they are always fraternal conflicts about how best to exploit indigenous lands and resources at the expense of indigenous people.

**DH:** Mass media saturates contemporary life. Many powerful and wealthy interests work extremely hard and pay vast sums of money to try to shape our perspectives and attitudes in ways that the average citizen may not even realize. *The Beast* is an interesting document within this larger media landscape, especially in the ways that its characters' position advertising against art. What do you think comics/graphics novels and independent publishing offer that these coordinated and strategic campaigns cannot or will not?

**HG:** Hopefully, quite unlike advertising, *The Beast* is authentically enjoyable! Advertising is so smarmy. I don't think I'm unusual in this regard. Most millennials I know regard advertising with sneering suspicion and have reasonably high media literacy. Ads are this kind of obnoxious background static that makes life under late capitalism intolerable. There's also a sentimentalism about 'indie' everything for us as a generation whether that's music, comics, or news. So I think that *The Beast* has a credibility that a billboard doesn't.

Yet, the book hasn't been the overnight success an author might wish for which is ok. I like the idea that it will continue making its way into libraries, bookstores, course listings, and people's minds. I'd be happy to see some of the fake ads we did resurface on the internet. This is a very conspicuously Canadian book which anyone in the Canadian arts will tell you is the kiss of death on international markets; but I'm not so sure. If there's one thing that international readers will know about Canada it's about the crime against humanity that is the Athabasca tar sands.

**DH:** Publishers have a lot in common with avid fans. Simply put, both make it their job to discover, consume, and promote the stuff they are passionate about. Ad Astra clearly believes in certain types of comics just as The Digital Press tries to deliver cool projects and ideas to new audiences. What are you big fans of currently?

**HG:** Apart from our own work? Gosh, that's a good question. I saw there was a new comics biography of Louise Michele out that I haven't got to read yet. She was involved in the Paris Commune then deported to New Caledonia. It's not a comic, but I'm currently reading through Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* about the colonization of the red planet. We'd highly recommend Ben Passmore's work, particularly *Your Black Friend*. I also recently got into Larry Gonick's *Cartoon History of the Universe* which is decades old but still a classic. He has a new book out called *Hypercapitalism* that I can't wait to read!



# CONTRIBUTORS

**Nicole Marie Burton** is an illustrator, comics creator, and educator based in Ontario, Canada. In 2013, she founded the Ad Astra Comix publishing collective in an effort to build a community base for comics with social justice themes. Today, Nicole works with a variety of collaborators around this goal, including activists, scholars, and community elders. Her published comic art includes *DOGS*, a brief history of RCMP violence in Inuit communities in the Eastern Arctic, *The Boy Who Walked Backwards*, and *Coal Mountain*, a history of the Corbin Miners Strike of 1935, which appears as a chapter in *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working Class Struggle*. She is currently working on comics about ecological sustainability, prison divestment, and Indigenous homelessness, as well as Canada's history of wartime internment.

**Kyle Conway** teaches communication at the University of Ottawa. He has edited two books about oil in North Dakota, his home state: *The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of Western North Dakota* (with William Caraher, The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, 2016), and *Sixty Years of Boom and Bust: The Impact of Oil in North Dakota, 1958–2018* (The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, forthcoming). He occasionally updates his blog about western North Dakota at <https://bakkenbook.org/>.

**Hugh Goldring** is a writer, editor and collective member at the comics publishing collective Ad Astra Comix. With Ad Astra he has published six books, including *The Beast*, with more to come. His next book will be about the devastating impact of hydroelectric devel-

opment on the Cree in northern Manitoba. He lives with his wife Nicole in a beat up 2006 Toyota Corolla that takes them from one end of the continent to the other, visiting artists, activists and academics along the way. He holds a B.A. in History from Trent University.

**David Haeselin** teaches in the Writing, Editing, and Publishing program in the English department at the University of North Dakota. He currently serves as the Director of Editorial Content and Strategy for The Digital Press @ The University of North Dakota. For the Digital Press, he has edited a volume - *Haunted by Waters* - and contributed an essay to Micah Bloom's *Codex*. His writing has appeared in *Tin House Online* and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and he has published interviews at *Public Books* and *Post-45*.

**Terrance Houle** is an internationally recognized interdisciplinary media artist and a member of the Blood Tribe. Involved with Aboriginal communities all his life, he has traveled to reservations throughout North America participating in Powwow dancing along with his native ceremonies. Houle utilizes at his discretion performance, photography, video/film, music and painting. Likewise Houle's practice includes tools of mass dissemination such as billboards and vinyl bus signage. A graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design, Terrance Houle received his B.F.A. in 2003. In 2004 he received the award for Best Experimental Film at the Toronto ImagineNATIVE Film Festival and in 2006 he received the Enbridge Emerging Artist Award. Houle's work has been exhibited across Canada, the United States, Australia, the UK and Europe. Most recently, Houle has been touring his multimedia project GHOST DAYS across Canada. His work is also featured in the Alberta Art Gallery 2018 exhibition LandMark and is part of the gallery's permanent collection. Houle maintains his practice and lives in Calgary, Alberta.

**Patrick McCurdy** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa. His research draws from media and communication, journalism, social movement studies, environmental communication to examine media as a site and source of social struggle. Since 2014 his research has critically analysed the mediated debate over Canada's oil/tar sands with his current book and documentary film project focuses on a banned 1977 CBC docudrama called *Tar Sands*. He is the co-author of *Protest Camps* (Zed, 2013) and the co-editor of three books including *Protest Camps in International Context* (Policy Press, 2017).

**Chris Russell** is an Associate Professor and the Supervisor of Graduate Programs in Communication and Media Studies, School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. He studies how environmental crisis, climate change, and the anthropocene are visualized, and teaches classes on the subject. He has edited, *Earth Observing Media*, and is currently co-editing another volume titled, *Critical Approaches to Climate Change and Civic Action*, with Anabela Carvalho and Julie Doyle. He has also written on 350, Whale Wars, Climate Central, and climate denial in Canada.

**Tommy Wall** is a graduate student with the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. He recently completed his undergraduate degree in Communication and Media Studies and Environmental Studies at Carleton. He is interested in many topics of environment and climate change research, including climate change denial; public understanding of science, environment and climate change information; and visual representations of environmental crisis and imagined environmental and planetary futures in film and popular culture. Tommy has conducted and produced interview audio to contribute additional content related to existing research by FLEdGE (Food Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged) research group

on agriculture and food systems transformation. In addition to his academic research, Tommy works as a communication advisor and web writer with Environment and Climate Change Canada, helping to improve content readability and website navigation on Canada.ca.

**Benjamin Woo** is Assistant Professor of communication and media studies at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). His research examines contemporary “geek media cultures” and the production, circulation and reception of comic books and graphic novels. He is the director of the Comic Cons Research Project, the author of *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture*, co-author (with Bart Beaty) of *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*, and co-editor (with Stuart R. Poyntz and Jamie Rennie) of *Scene Thinking: Cultural Studies from the Scenes Perspective*.







# THE BEAST

EXPANDED DIGITAL EDITION



NICOLE  
BURTON

HUGH  
GOLDRING

EDITED BY PATRICK MCCURDY  
AFTERWORD BY TERRANCE HOULE



THE DIGITAL PRESS  
AT THE UNIVERSITY  
OF NORTH DAKOTA

*"The consequences of resource extraction is one of the most pressing (and divisive) issues that we face. 'The Beast' maps the fault lines of the debates in a nuanced and dramatic fashion. It is a story about the way we live now, and the ways that we will live in the future."*

*- Bart Beaty, Department of English, University of Calgary*

What does  
it mean to lie  
for a living?

Set in Alberta, 'The Beast' sinks its fangs into one of the toughest questions of our time: Would you rather starve next week when the economy crashes, or in 50 years when the ecosystem collapses? Environmentalists and energy companies engulf each other in a firestorm of dramatic imagery and emotionally manipulative rhetoric in this tale of existential uncertainty. Join art school graduates Callum and Mary as they drift through bars, strip clubs and vegan wing joints not so much struggling to answer life's difficult questions as doing their best to avoid having to ask those questions in the first place.

*"Compelling! Every activist should read this book."*

*- Joan Kuyek, community organizer and author*

*"[The Beast] opens up new ways of understanding our present circumstances and of imagining a new future together."*

*- Imre Szeman, University Research Chair and  
Professor of Communication Arts, University of  
Waterloo*



THE DIGITAL PRESS  
AT THE UNIVERSITY  
OF NORTH DAKOTA



AS  
CANADIAN.

AS  
MAPLE SYRUP...

OIL  
CAN







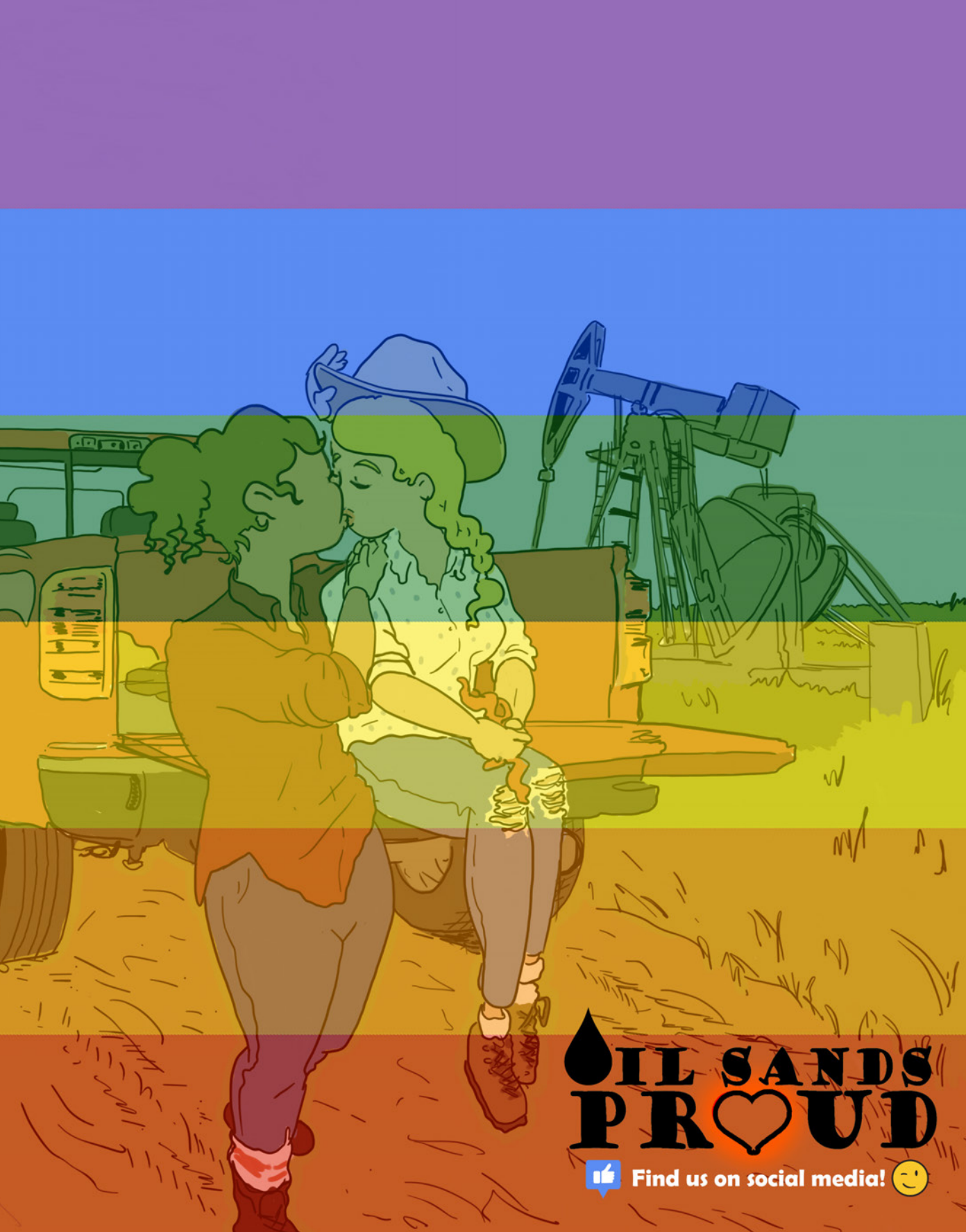
# What if it happened here?

We need to stop the Tar Sands,  
before it's too late.

*The Veldt Club*  
because nature (it matters).







**OIL SANDS  
PROUD**



Find us on social media!



Illustrations and satirical ad art © Nicole Marie Burton, 2018

Script © copyright Hugh D. A. Goldring, 2017

Foreword © Patrick McCurdy, 2017

Afterword and "Oily Buffalo" © Terrance Houle, 2017

Editing & Production Assistance: Patrick McCurdy

Layout Assistance: Crystal Paplinski

Cover Design: Nicole Marie Burton

Expanded digital edition of 'The Beast' is © The Digital Press  
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# THE BEAST







SHARE THE  
MOMENT  
WITH US.

SPECIAL LIMITED  
EDITION OILCAN  
COMMEMORATIVE  
LAPEL PINS



# Winter Games



COLLECT ALL 10!  
WHILE SUPPLIES LAST.



PROUD  
SPONSOR





We live in a culture born from, steeped in, and heavily reliant upon fossil fuels. While this energy source is now ubiquitous in our lives, very few of us have ever travelled to Fort McMurray, Alberta and visited its vast bitumen deposits in person. Instead, our knowledge about the tar/oil sands is mediated.

Recognizing this, *The Beast* is based on the premise that struggles over the environment, climate change and energy transition are equally struggles for our imagination.

Messages about the risks and rewards of tar/oil sands development are communicated by multiple parties – from politicians to protestors – through a variety of media including documentaries, books, articles, advertisements, social media, news stories and comics. These stories can potentially shape, rightly or wrongly, how we view the tar/oil sands and its relationship with the economy, environment, climate change, and Indigenous rights.

Furthermore, there is a lack of genuine public debate over the tar/oil sands because the social imagination is polluted by incessant public relations campaigns. Instead of discussion and reflection, the public is forced to “pick sides”: the environment or the economy; protestors or industry; live with or without oil. These debates were particularly acerbic in the spring of 2016 around the time of the Fort McMurray wildfire, nicknamed “The Beast”. Thus the comic’s title references the wildfire, but also refers to the unwieldy tar/oil sands debate which has consumed our attention and sucked the oxygen from public discourse.

The Fort McMurray wildfires were a liminal moment marking our transition into the epoch of the Anthropocene. However as opposed to using the moment as an opportunity to honestly and sensitively discuss climate change, our energy present and the imminent need to create an alternative energy future, traditional battle lines were drawn between “pro” and “anti” tar/oil sands camps.

Moreover the majority of politicians including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau steered well clear from attempts to attach “political arguments” to the wildfire and specifically connect it with the issue of climate change.

Yet climate change is not political, it is our reality. Consequently we must ask ourselves if we can’t talk about climate change – the biggest threat humanity has ever faced – in the context of a disaster which was hastened by climate change, when can we talk about it? The objective of *The Beast* is to use the medium of the graphic novel to explore themes present within this debate. Specifically, its aim is to

call into focus the relentless and short term struggle for hearts and minds, the clichés, the binaries, and tropes that dominate and cloud public discussion around the tar/oil sands.

The project's genesis dates back to May 2016 when I attended the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at my alma mater, the University of Calgary. I was at Congress to give a paper titled "The Rise of Petronationalism: A Critical Examination of CAPP's 'Energy Citizens' Campaign," which was based on a research project I was conducting called Mediatoil ([www.mediatoil.ca](http://www.mediatoil.ca)). Funded by an Insight Development Grant (IDG) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Mediatoil sought to map how various stakeholders such as governments, corporations, eNGOs and First Nations represented the risks and rewards of oil/tar sands development in their promotional material. The Beast was commissioned with funds from the Mediatoil SSHRC IDG.

Congress' setting in Calgary prompted a number of critical discussions about oil and petroculture, including an event I attended on the evening of May 29 whose title took the form of a deceptively simple question: Is Oil a Dirty Word? While the answer may appear to lend itself to a simple yes or no answer, the need for nuance wasn't lost on panelists. The result was a fascinating and engaging discussion about how we can understand our complicated relationship with oil and begin to disentangle ourselves from it.

Two days after "Is Oil a Dirty Word?" I had breakfast with Benjamin Woo, an Assistant Professor at Carleton University with expertise in the cultural industries and comic books in particular. Among the topics we discussed was the reality that our peer-reviewed academic work is often only ever read by a small, specialized audience and frequently hidden behind paywalls, making it difficult for the public to access. Peer-review publications are the gold standard of academic scholarship and the fate of one's career relies on successfully publishing academic work. Yet when I expressed to Ben my desire to engage the public in a wider conversation about the debate over tar/oil sands, he suggested that I consider doing a comic, and that I reach out to Ad Astra Comics. And so, with this suggestion, the idea for The Beast was born.

The Beast came to fruition through a collaborative process. It began with an initial meeting with Hugh and Nicole of Ad Astra who agreed to take on the project. Over the course of many meetings, emails and draft scripts sent to me from Hugh, the story began to take shape. Along the way I also received valuable feedback from my wife Katrina as well as other family members, friends and colleagues, much of which was fed back into the project, the result of which you are now reading.

Just as we pay attention to what is visible, we also must search out and reflect upon what is invisible. Images and texts can be powerful in both what is present and what is absent. In studying the promotional material of tar/oil sands stakeholders for Mediatoil, I was struck by the relative absence of First Nations. Of course some First Nations stakeholders did publish their own material, there were partnerships with eNGO campaigns and large corporations would publish on their relationships with First

Nations. However, when analysing images produced in the contestation over the tar/oil sands there was a noticeable disparity. In some ways, this disparity is understandable. In situations where there are material struggles for environmental, land and health justice we can't assume that media campaigning is a top priority. Meanwhile, with revenues in the billions, oil companies have the financial means to fund slick, expensive and extensive public relations campaigns. For those who seek to challenge oil companies, it's far more efficient (and cutting) to culture jam an advertising campaign than to make one.

The Beast replicates the disparity of representation evident across the promotional material wherein there is no addition or reflection on First Nations people and their relationship with the tar/oil sands. However, in seeking to – at least partially – redress this absence, I asked Kainai First Nation artist Terrance Houle to contribute to this project.

I first met Terrance at the “Is Oil a Dirty Word?” event in Calgary. Terrance discussed the potential of a planetary apocalypse caused by climate change, environmental degradation and pollution brought about by our reliance on fossil fuels, and linked it to what he saw as the post-apocalyptic reality his people were living in. His image “Oily Buffalo” (iinniiwahkiimah) was used on the event poster and large hand painted canvas versions were also hung at the venue. Readers can see Terrance Houle’s “Oily Buffalo” at the end of The Beast as well as read a brief, poignant essay on the image’s connection with the past and message to the future about the potential of an energy apocalypse caused by a society addicted to fossil fuels.

The complex environmental, economic, social, cultural and Indigenous issues linked to the oil sands extend far beyond what can be feasibly addressed in the pages of a graphic novel. Indeed, the reader is actively encouraged to seek out additional readings about these issues. Some readers – be they activists, government workers or those working in industry – may feel that certain characters in The Beast do not relay the nuance of their position. In commissioning and helping produce The Beast, my objective has been to create a provocation that prompts a conversation around the seemingly endless, entrenched and divisive media war over the tar/oil sands. As such, the story was been deliberately crafted to draw upon and expose the tropes, clichés and throwaway stereotypes that dominate the debate over the tar/oil sands. Readers are encouraged to actively question and challenge these stereotypes and simple dichotomies.

It is my hope that through doing so, and seeking to look beyond reductionist dichotomies, simple media frames and glossy advertisements, we clear the social imagination and create a space for a more nuanced conversation and meaningful public conversation about our complex relationship with oil, and how we can implement a just energy transition.

Patrick McCurdy  
Ottawa, November 2017.

## Selected Suggested Readings

Davidson, Debra. J. and Gismondi, Mike. (2011). Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity. New York: Springer.

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

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LeMenager, Stephanie. (2014) Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century. Oxford University Press.



### A Note To International Readers

'The Beast' is a distinctly Canadian comic. This is not out of any special patriotic pride. But Canadians aspiring to succeed internationally often write stories that could be taking place anywhere in North America. Conspicuous Canadianness is sometimes regarded as a kiss of death.

It was impossible to avoid with a story like this one. So instead, here are a few notes of clarification for readers who may not be familiar with places and events in the comic.


Geographically, this comic takes place almost entirely in the Canadian province of Alberta. Alberta is located in western Canada, and is widely considered to be the most conservative part of Canada. It is bordered by the Rocky Mountains in the west and is a part of the great plains of the North American continent. Think of it as a chilly Texas.

The tar sands in northern Alberta are the source of the province's wealth and indeed a major contributor to Canada's wealth as a state. As such they are the focus of intense national feeling. They are also a magnet for Canadians from parts of the country suffering from long term, structural unemployment - especially the Atlantic provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. Callum and Mary, the protagonists of 'The Beast' are from Nova Scotia.

'The Beast' was a wildfire that raged across northern Alberta and destroyed a significant chunk of Fort McMurray, the urban center for the part of Alberta where the tar sands are located. There was some comment at the time that climate change had likely contributed to the conditions that caused the fire to become so destructive.

There's no hard scientific evidence for this. But events like the fire are definitely linked to the changing climate. So when the Prime Minister of Canada said that it was not the time for discussions of climate change and energy policy, he was making a statement. Fort McMurray and the tar sands are a dangerous subject for 'progressive' politicians in Canada. The few politicians brave enough to say 'keep it in the ground' will probably not last the next election.

This intractable, destructive debate is the backdrop for our story. Alberta depends on the tar sands for economic prosperity, and in one way or another, much of Canada depends on Alberta. That's just the nature of the beast.



Wow. Here we are. It seems like a hundred years ago that we had a conversation about a graphic novel that would explore the nature of advertising around the tar sands in Alberta. I'll try to avoid cliches about blood, sweat and script drafts.

It has been hard to explain what this comic is about. Advertising? Environmentalism? Precarious work? Privilege and oppression? I don't know that there's one good answer. At one point I described it as a story about two alcoholics chain smoking. That may not be totally true, but at least it's succinct.


This story is messy because life is messy. It has a profusion of themes because life is seldom simple and we find that our politics and our practices collide in difficult ways. I don't think that there are any 'good guys' in this story, although there are definitely some bad guys.

I never read authors' notes, so I don't know what to say in one. Thank you, I guess, for reading this. Thank you for buying the book, if you did. I hope that it reveals some small truth about the human experience. That's what I think good art does. Hopefully it makes you laugh at the absurdity of the human condition, too.

We need laughter, in times like these.

So I hope you read this and go out in the world with no more answers than you came in with. All I can offer is a renewed sense that you are not the only one struggling to do good, find meaning and make a living in a confusing and often hostile world. And that there is a hope and a dignity that comes from that struggle with all its messy imperfections. We're all in this together, after all. I hope that can be enough.

Hugh Goldring,  
October 2017, Ottawa.



“The Beast” is my first graphic novel. Like all projects, I began this one with great enthusiasm, looking forward to examining the high-octane house-of-mirrors world that is extraction and environmental advertising. Against this backdrop is a pair of millennial experiences that I only found myself relating to more as the pages were laid out. At times I feel like Mary: just desperate for a steady paycheck and someone to say ‘Well done!’ to me at the end of the day. Oh! To be resigned to social issues, but paying the rent on-time! Other days I feel like Callum, sensitive and jittery, constantly reminded of various environmental, economic and social doomsday scenarios while scratching for a freelance contract here and there.

I’ve been making comics since I was a kid, but opted out on going to art school when I was 17. My older friends, who had gone off to various institutions of art and design in the year prior, were returning to my hometown with stories of dismay. I became convinced that art school was a privileged bubble devoid of “real-world” issues. What was more, it seemed to be as much a training ground for advertisers and product designers as it was for artistic expression. I didn’t want to end up branding coffee sleeves for Starbucks. To me, understanding (and designing) content was as important as form.

Content matters, as any ad can teach us. Ads convey powerful symbols and ideas, communicate the politics of representation, and are historic markers for societal norms and compulsions. It only seems fitting that we talk about ads using comics: a medium of equal versatility.

“The Beast” has been a fun and compelling contribution to an important discussion. I look forward to working with a growing number of academics who see the value of comic art in disseminating complex ideas and narratives.

Nicole Marie Burton  
October 2017, Ottawa





# THE BEAST

MAKING A LIVING  
ON A DYING PLANET











NO, NO. YOUR WORK  
SPEAKS FOR ITSELF. THE  
JUXTAPOSITION OF THOSE  
TINY PEOPLE AGAINST  
THE HUGE SWATHS OF  
POISONED  
LAND...

...OH,  
AND  
YOUR  
DUCKS!  
I ALMOST  
CRIED.

I'LL LEAVE THE THREE  
OF YOU ALONE. GOING TO  
CHECK ON THE AUCTION.

IT WAS SO  
GENEROUS  
OF YOU TO  
DONATE  
YOUR WORK  
FOR THIS  
FUNDRAISER.

ACTUALLY,  
GREENSLEEVES  
OWNS THE RIGHTS  
TO ALL MY WORK,  
SO THEY CAN DO  
WHAT THEY WANT  
WITH IT.

ANYWAY, WE WERE  
HOPING YOU COULD DO SOME  
WORK FOR US, TOO.

OH?

YES, WE'RE  
ON THE BOARD  
OF A LITTLE  
N.G.O. CALLED  
MARMOT  
RESCUE.

YOU MIGHT THINK, MARMOTS LIVE IN THE  
MOUNTAINS! HOW COULD THE TAR SANDS  
HURT THEM?

BUT AIR AND  
WATER POLLUTION  
FROM THE OIL  
INDUSTRY IS  
CONTAMINATING  
THEIR HABITAT!

CHK!



EVERYONE PAYS  
ATTENTION TO  
OTHER MEMBERS  
OF THE WEASEL  
FAMILY-

BADGERS,  
OTTERS,  
WOLVERINES...

BUT THEY  
FORGET  
ABOUT  
THE POOR  
MARMOT.

WE WERE HOPING YOU COULD  
PUT SOMETHING TOGETHER,  
HELP US SHED SOME LIGHT ON  
THE PLIGHT OF THE YELLOW-  
BELLED MARMOT. IF YOU  
HAVE TIME.

I'D LOVE TO.  
MAY I ASK  
HOW MUCH  
YOU WERE  
LOOKING TO  
SPEND?

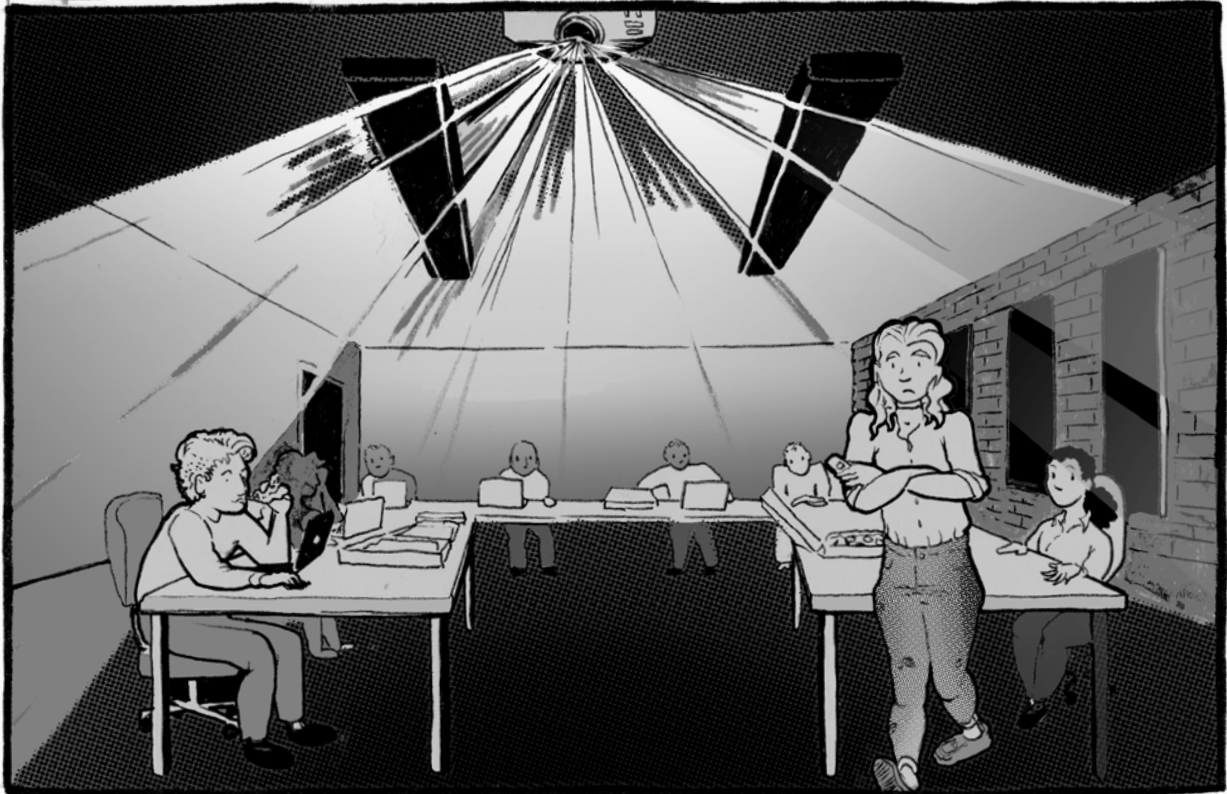
OH! OH.  
WE WERE HOPING  
YOU COULD DO  
IT, *PRO BONO*.

WE'RE A VERY SMALL  
GROUP, YOU KNOW.

OF  
COURSE!



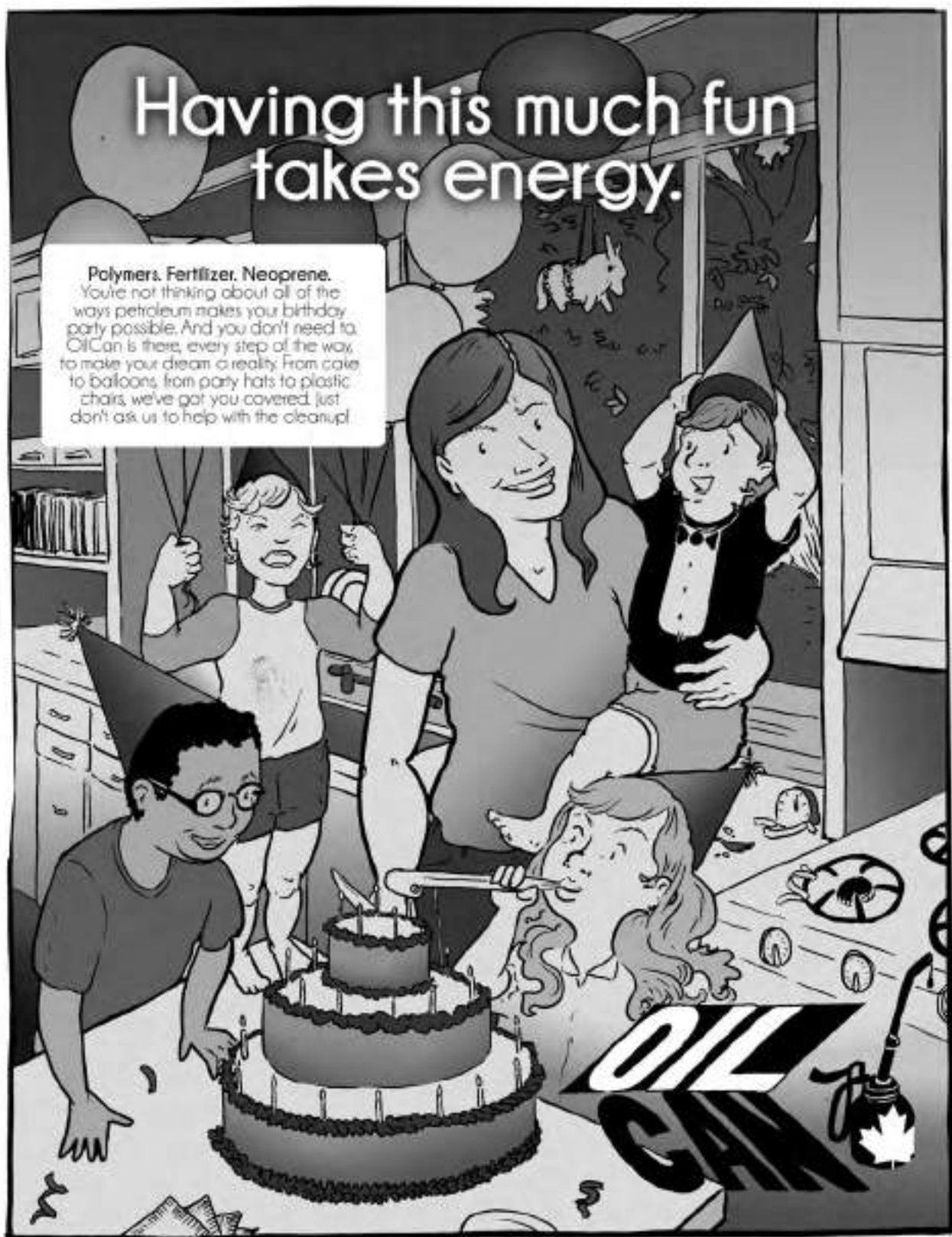
EARLIER THAT DAY



# Having this much fun takes energy.

## Polymers. Fertilizer. Neoprene.

You're not thinking about all of the ways petroleum makes your birthday party possible. And you don't need to. OilCan is there, every step of the way, to make your dream a reality. From cake to balloons, from party hats to plastic chairs, we've got you covered. Just don't ask us to help with the cleanup!





YOU REALLY HIT A HOME RUN WITH THIS ONE, MARY.

DID YOU KNOW THAT ONE OF THE GUYS FROM OILCAN ACTUALLY TEARED UP WHEN WE PRESENTED THIS?

THIS IS WHY MARY GETS THE MARCH BONUS. EVERYONE GIVE MARY A ROUND OF APPLAUSE.

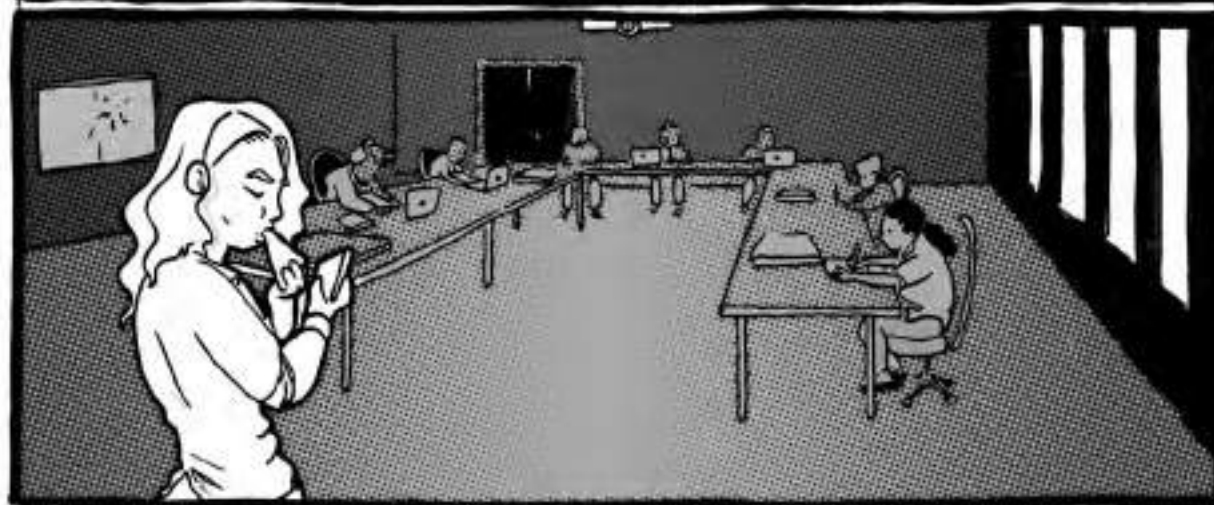


THIS IS WHAT'S IMPORTANT, PEOPLE. DOING GOOD WORK.

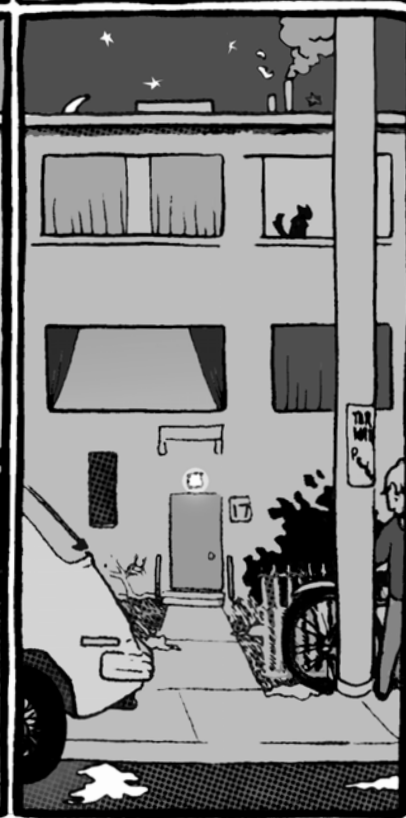
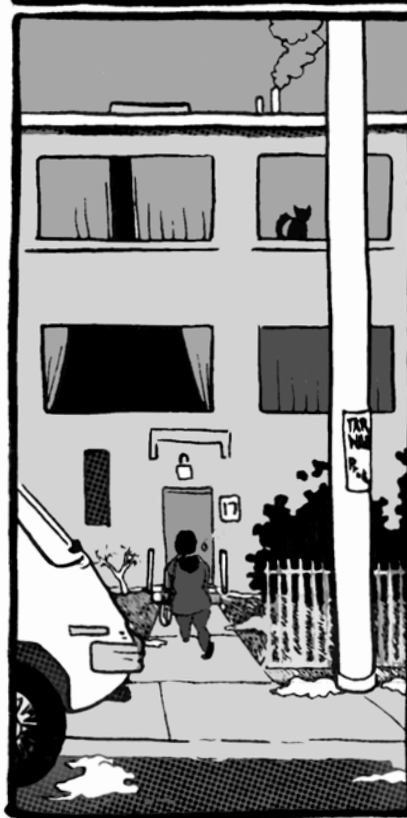
RIGHT.

...AND THAT TAKES ENERGY. RIGHT, MARY?









THE NEXT DAY



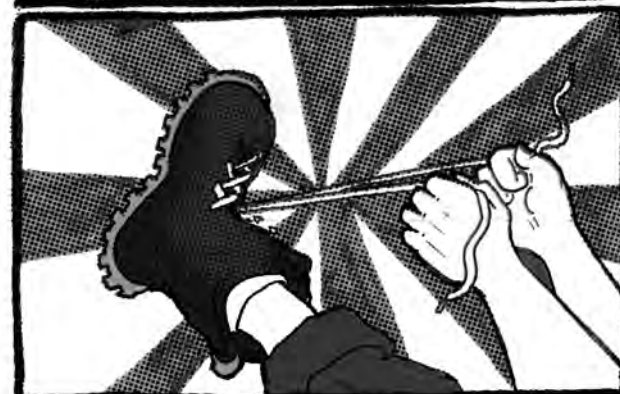
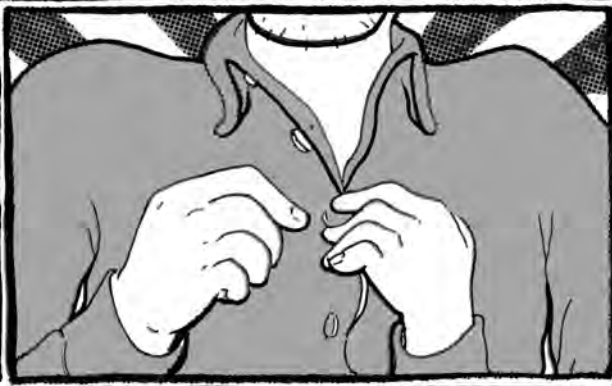




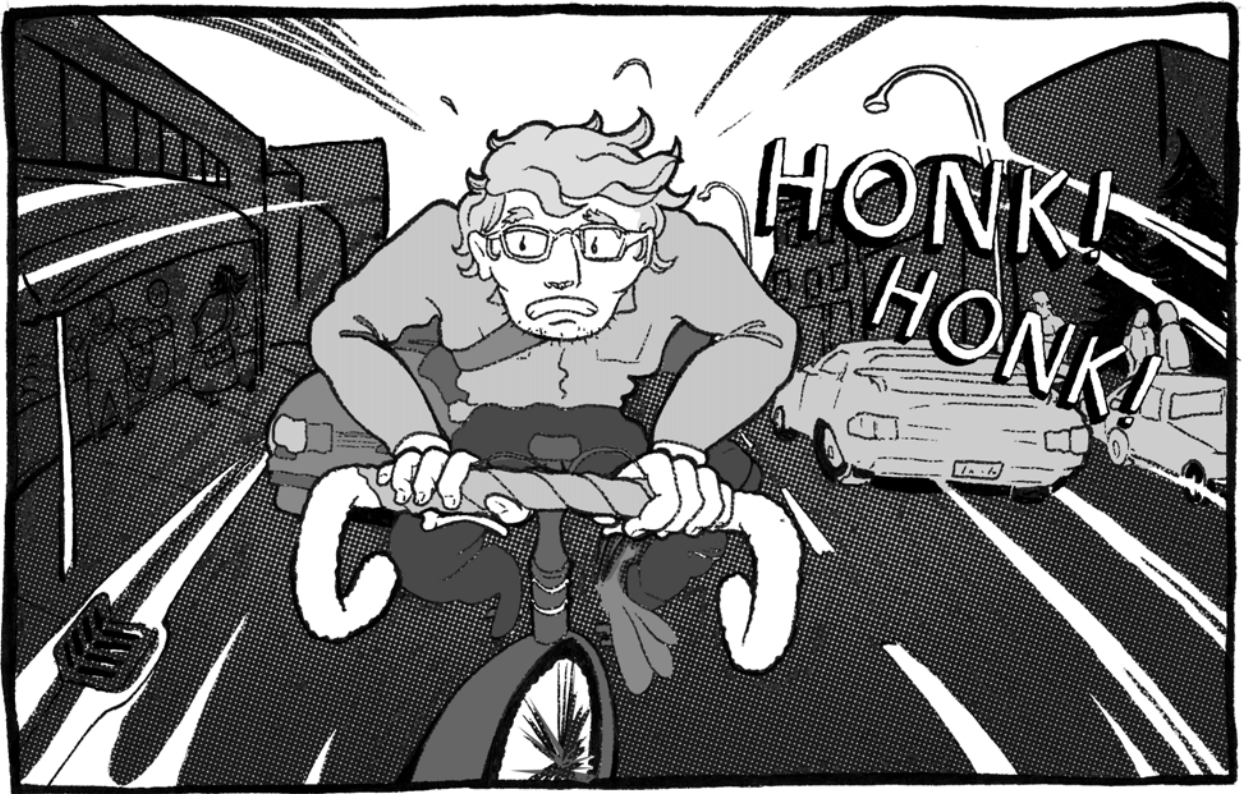








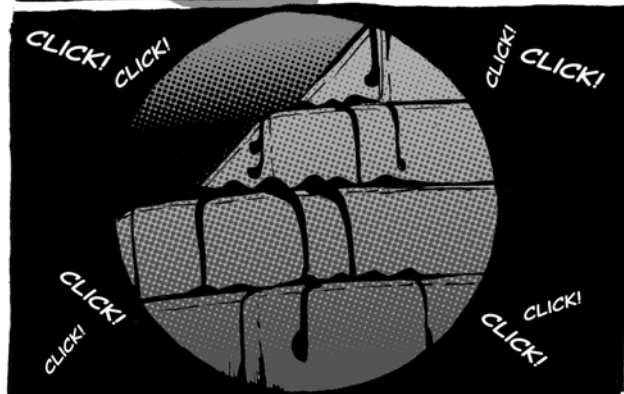




**OIL SPILLS ARE ALWAYS A DISASTER!**



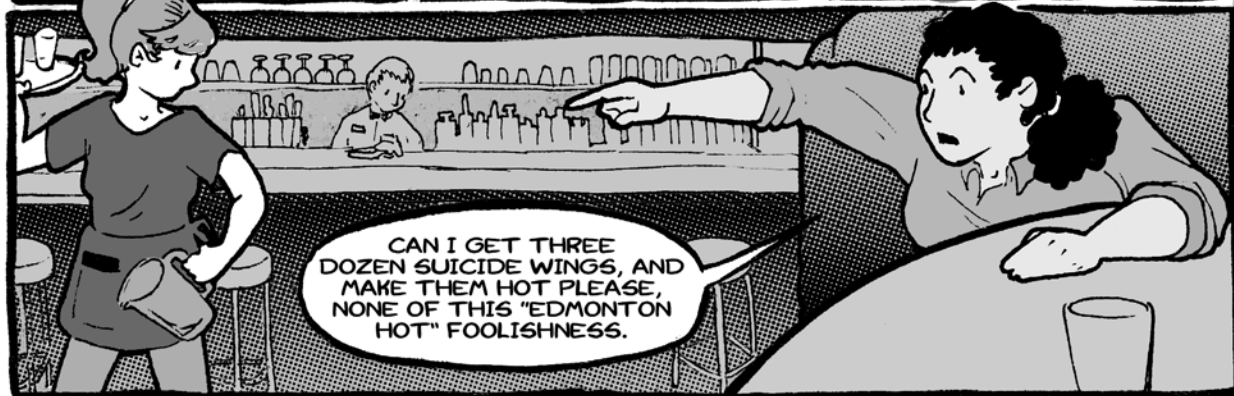
















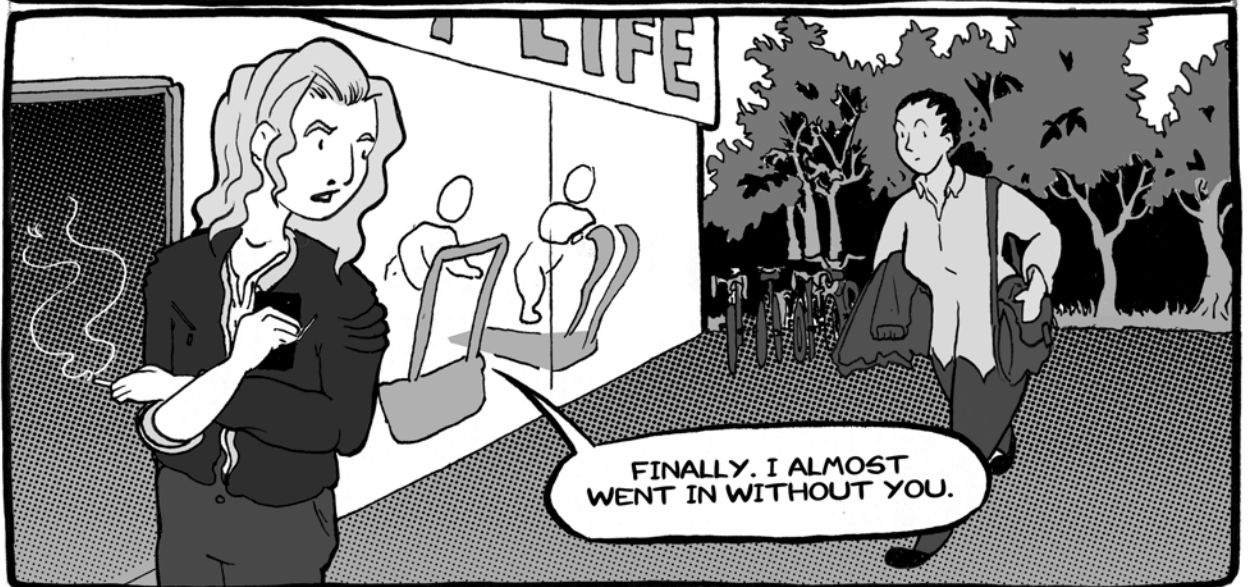
















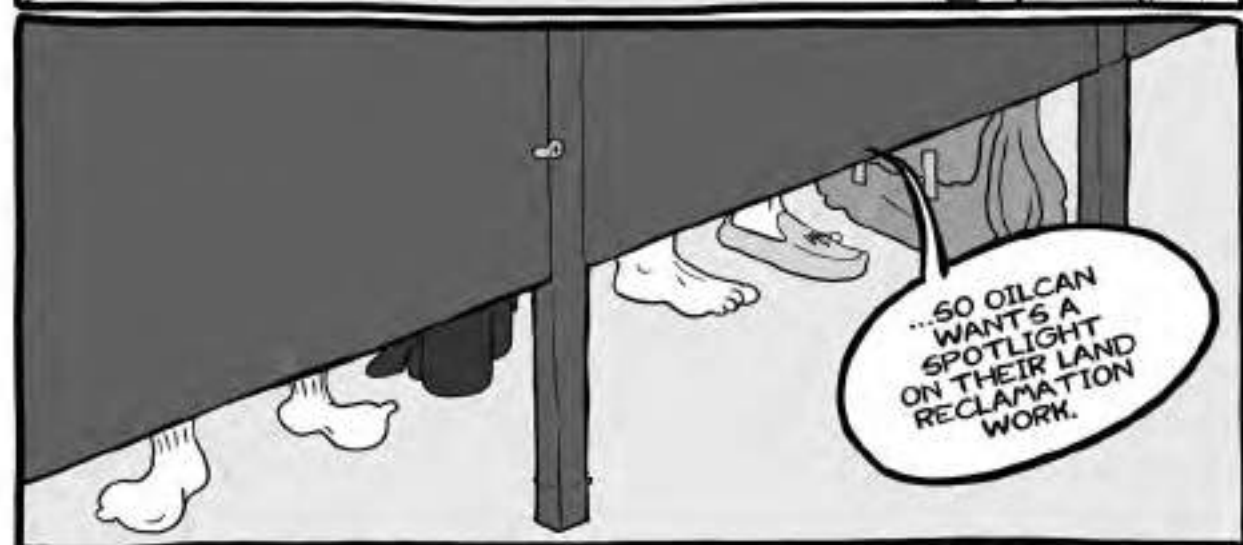
JUST GOT  
THIS BACK  
FROM THE ART  
DEPARTMENT.



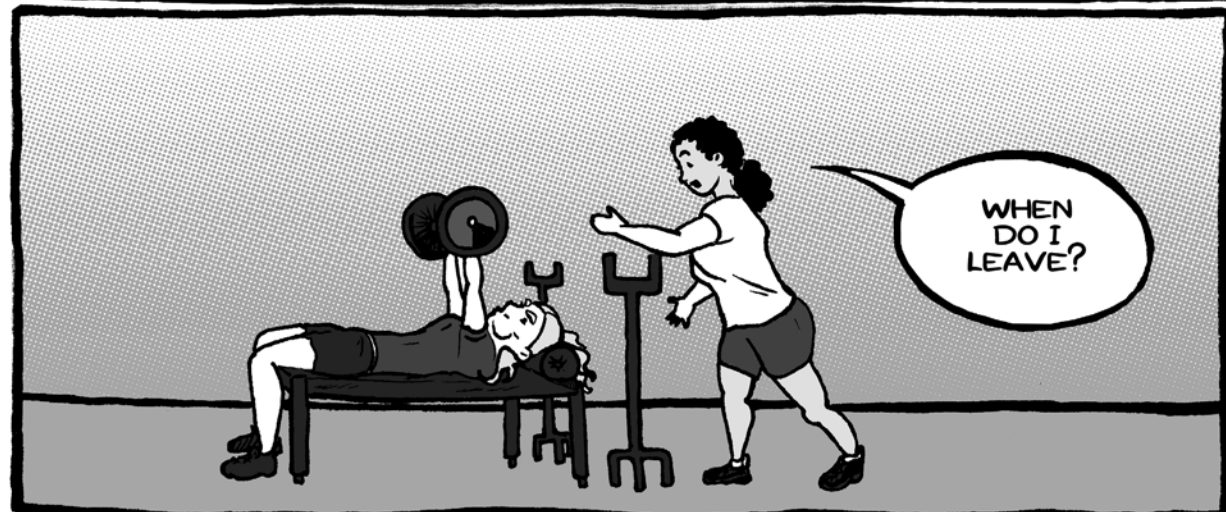
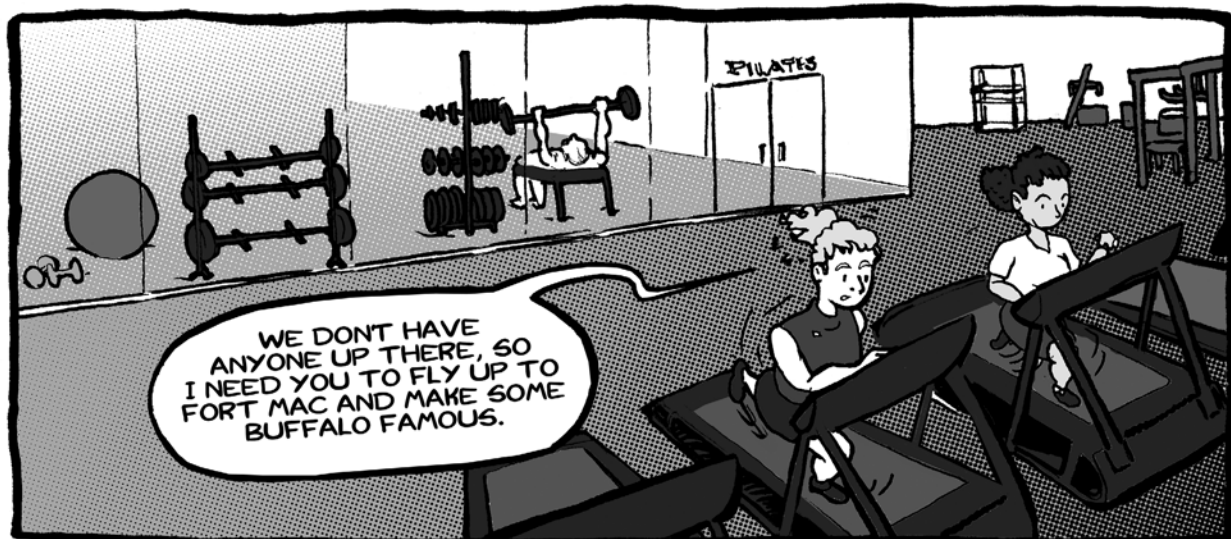
WHAT DO  
YOU THINK?

IT'S... WHAT  
THE CLIENT  
ASKED FOR.

EXACTLY.  
GOOD  
WORK.











ALFREDO DIRIENZO...  
FROM THE MOVIES?  
HE WAS IN  
LUSITANIA?



CANADA'S GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO  
LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE...

AND TAKE IMMEDIATE, DECISIVE  
ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE,

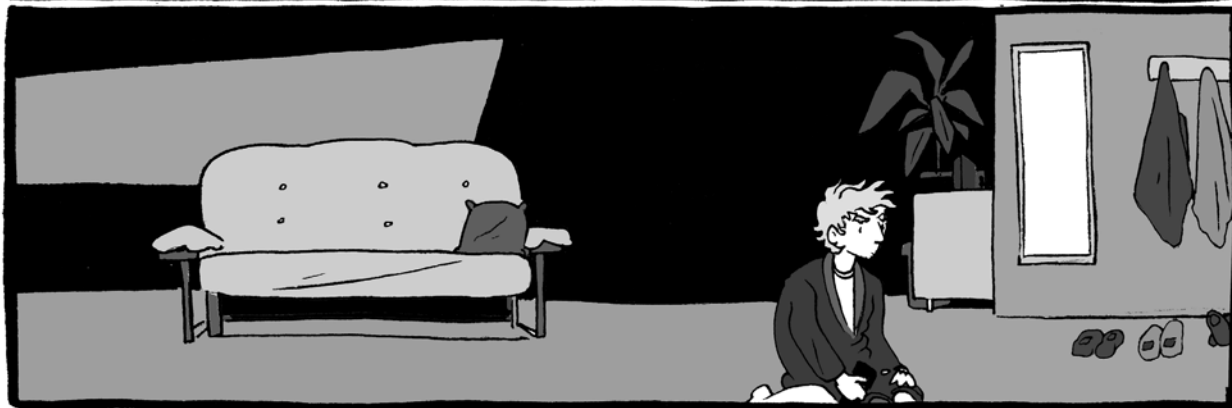
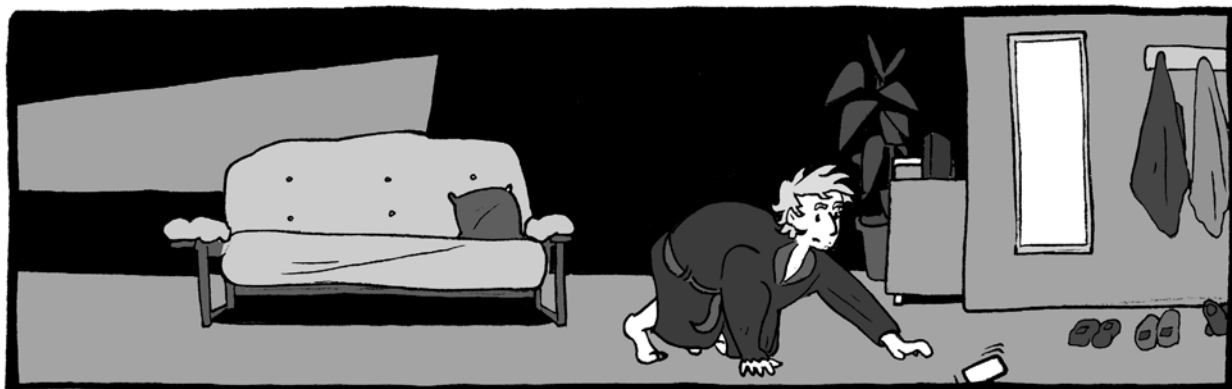


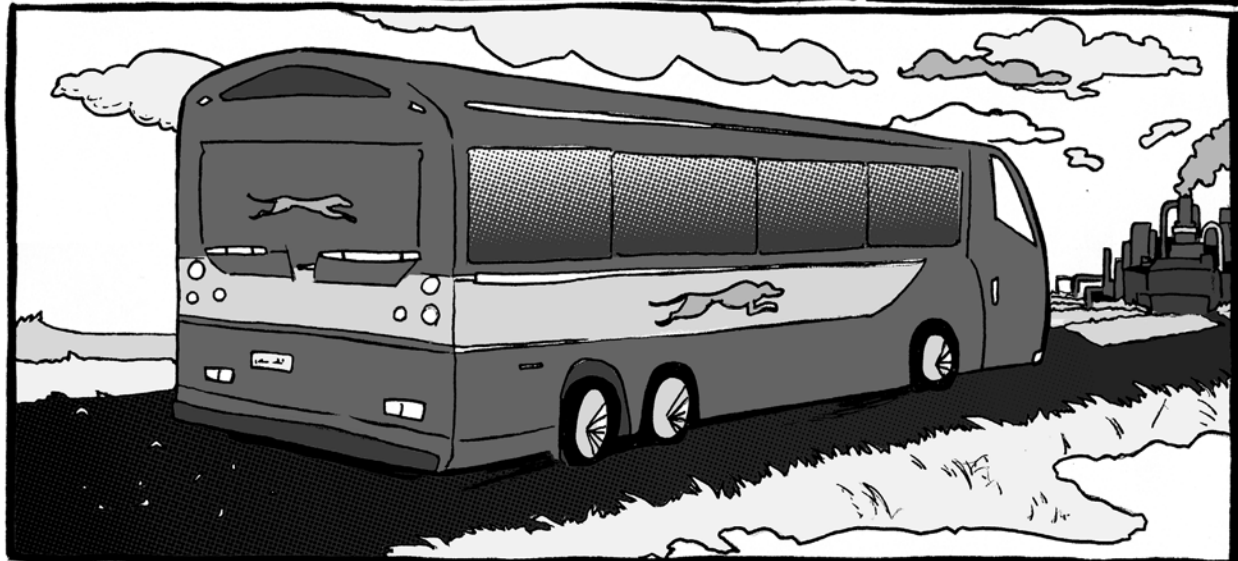
...BEFORE IT'S  
TOO LATE!







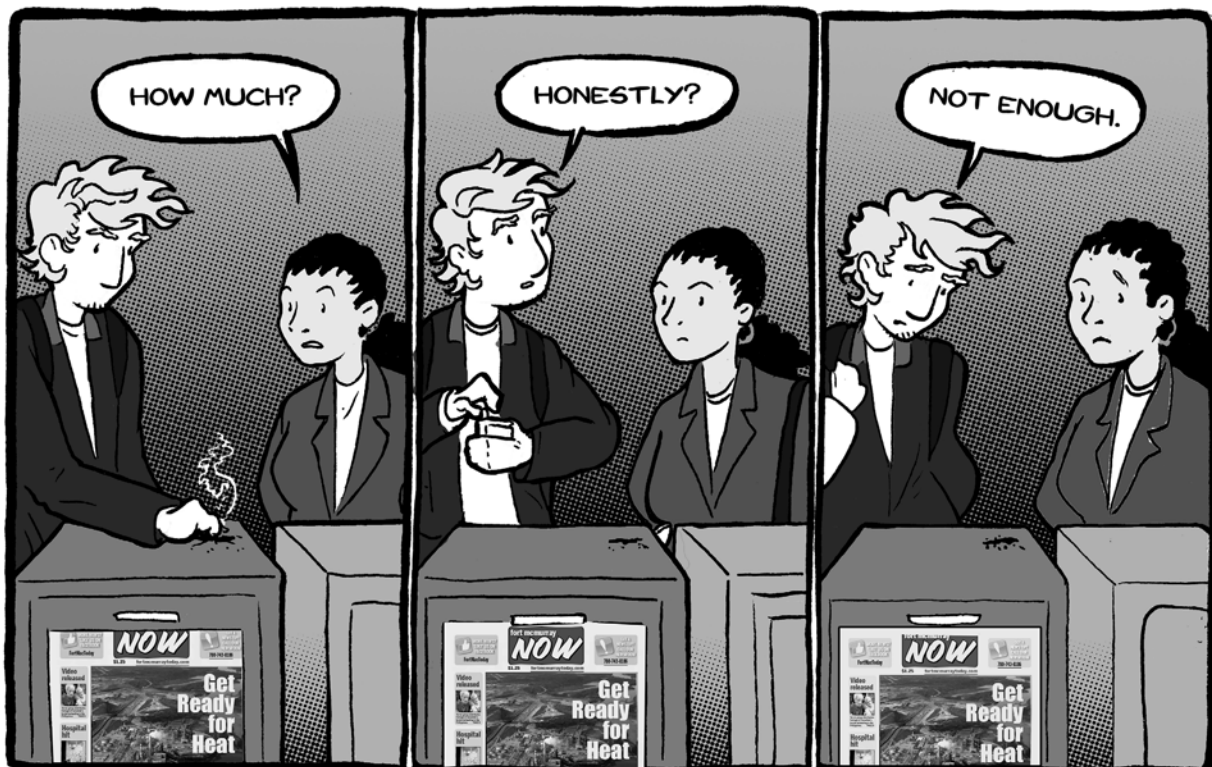


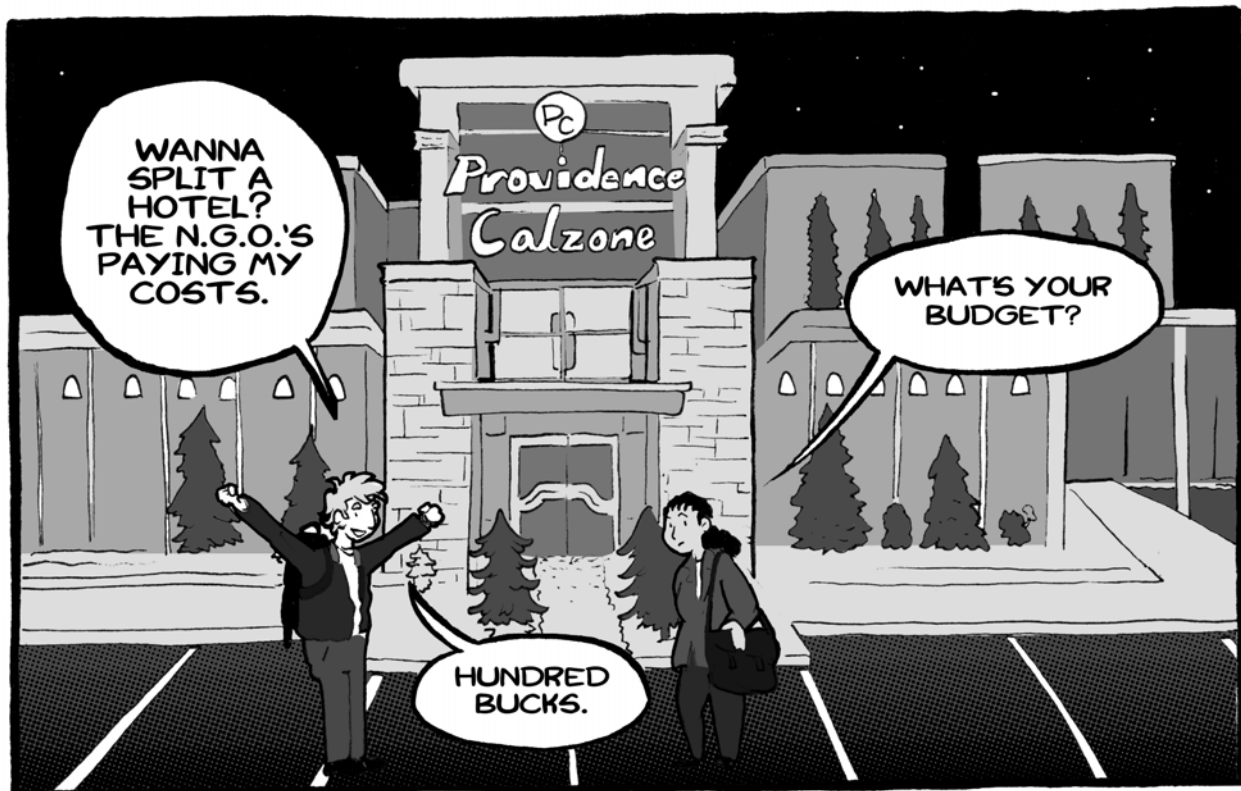








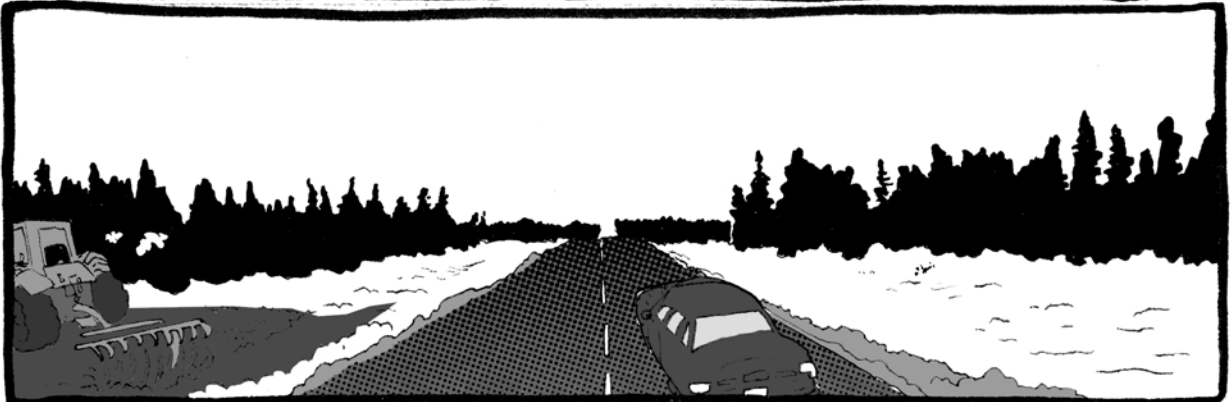
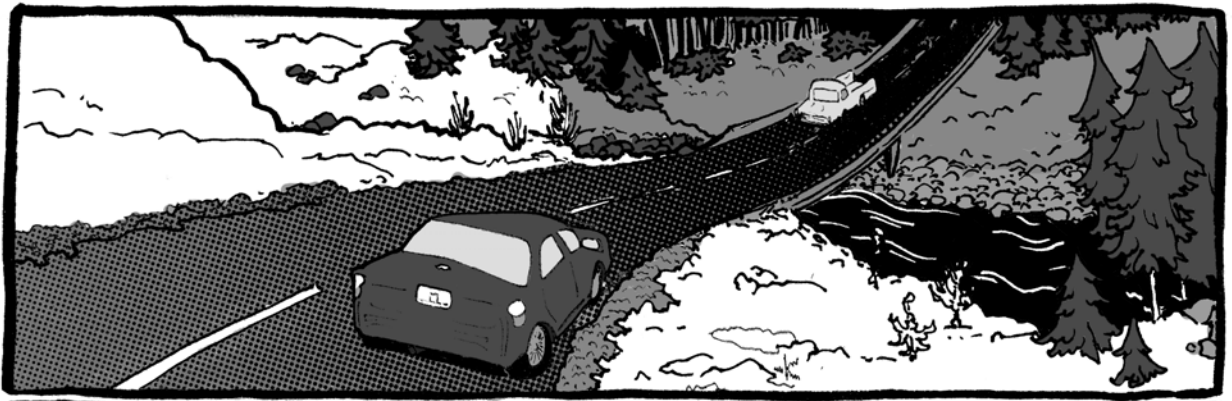








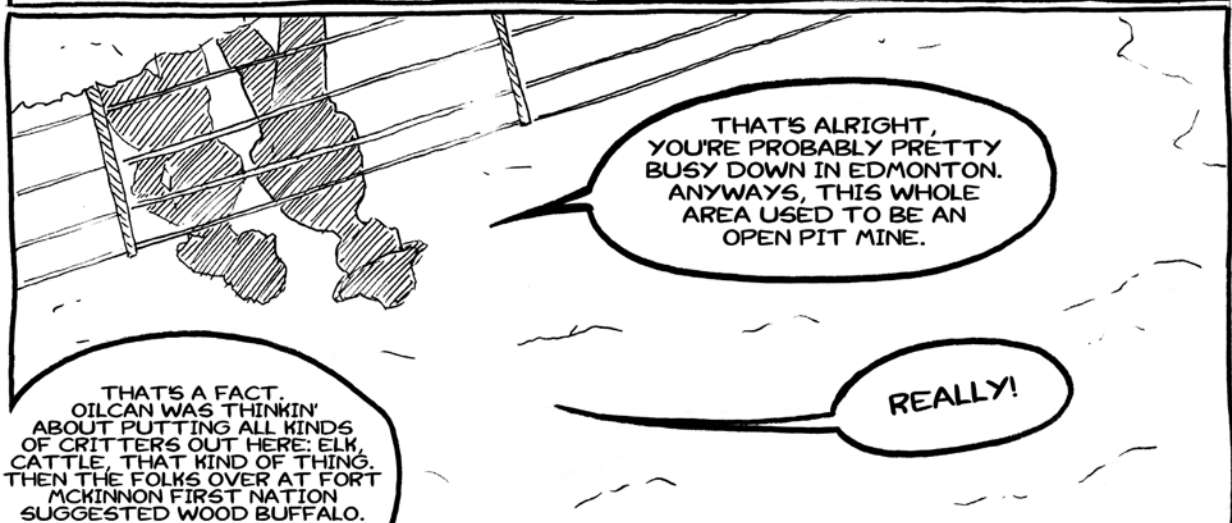






SO WE OPENED  
MOOSE BROOK ABOUT  
FIVE YEARS AGO. HAVE  
YOU LOOKED AT OUR  
WEBSITE, YET?

SORRY NO,  
NOT YET.



THAT'S ALRIGHT,  
YOU'RE PROBABLY PRETTY  
BUSY DOWN IN EDMONTON.  
ANYWAYS, THIS WHOLE  
AREA USED TO BE AN  
OPEN PIT MINE.

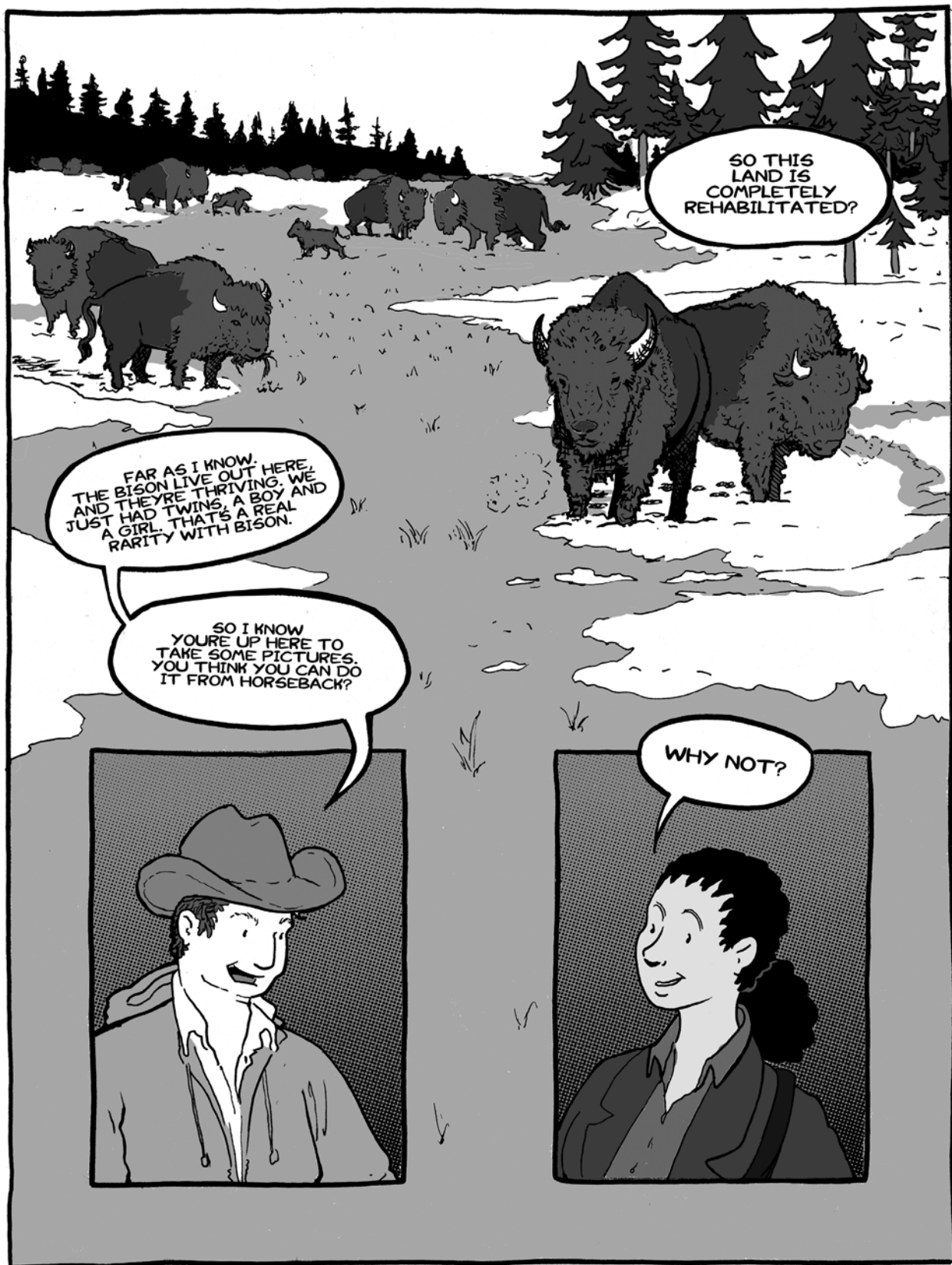
REALLY!

THAT'S A FACT.  
OILCAN WAS THINKIN'  
ABOUT PUTTING ALL KINDS  
OF CRITTERS OUT HERE: ELK,  
CATTLE, THAT KIND OF THING.  
THEN THE FOLKS OVER AT FORT  
MCKINNON FIRST NATION  
SUGGESTED WOOD BUFFALO.  
THEY'RE CULTURALLY  
SIGNIFICANT TO EM, OR  
THAT'S WHAT THEY  
TELL ME.



FACT IS, THEY'RE  
CULTURALLY  
SIGNIFICANT TO  
EVERYBODY UP HERE.  
SHOWS WE CAN TURN  
THE LAND BACK TO  
NATURE WHEN WERE  
DONE MINING IT.





SO THIS  
LAND IS  
COMPLETELY  
REHABILITATED?

FAR AS I KNOW.  
THE BISON LIVE OUT HERE.  
AND THEY'RE THRIVING. WE  
JUST HAD TWINS, A BOY AND  
A GIRL. THAT'S A REAL  
RARITY WITH BISON.

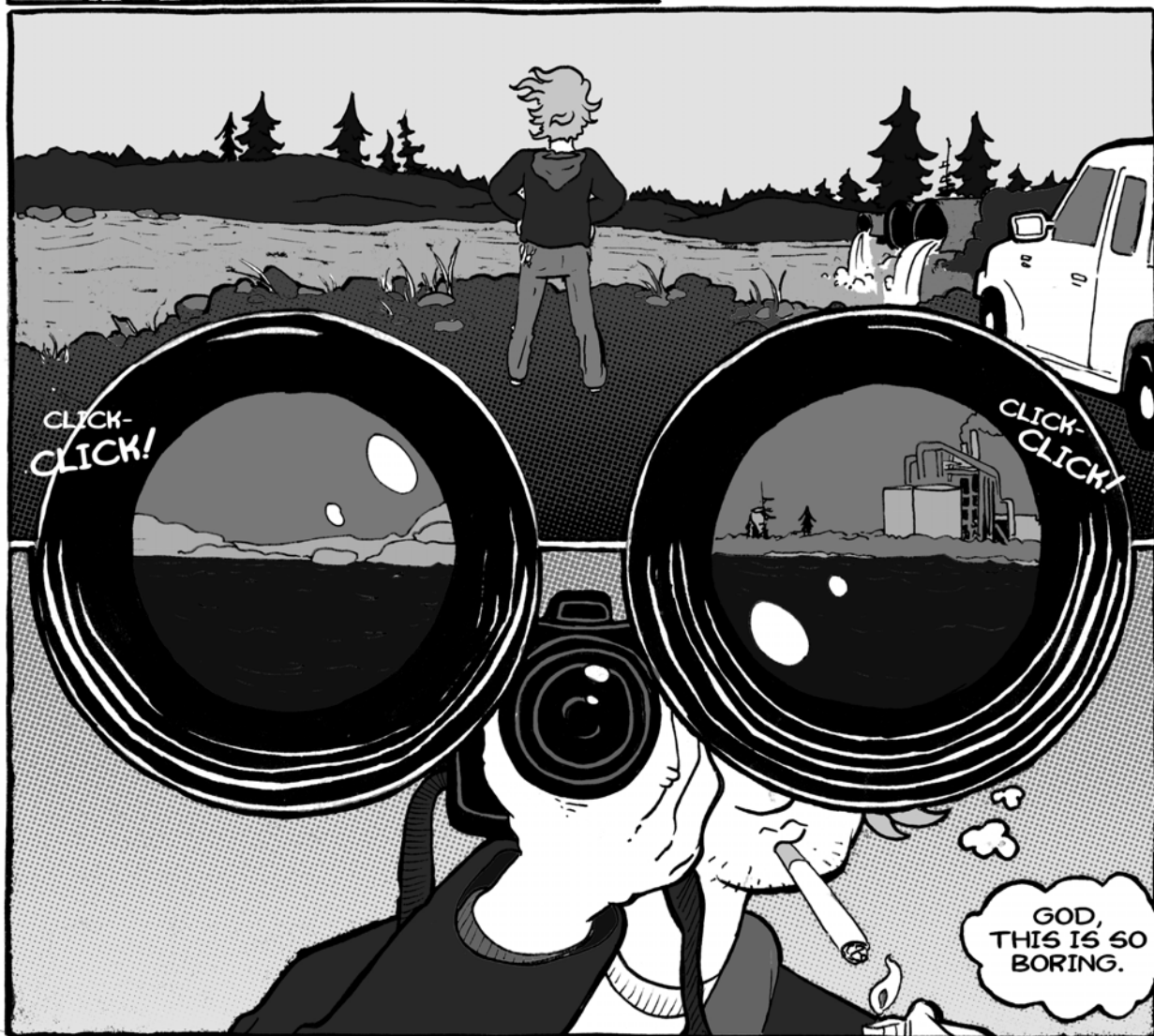
SO I KNOW  
YOU'RE UP HERE TO  
TAKE SOME PICTURES.  
YOU THINK YOU CAN DO  
IT FROM HORSEBACK?

WHY NOT?





















WE CAME TO ALBERTA  
TO WORK, YOU KNOW...

I KNOW.



HAVE YOU  
EVER THOUGHT  
ABOUT GOING BACK  
TO SYDNEY?

TO DO WHAT?  
BUSK FOR TOURISTS  
AT THE BIG FIDDLE?



TO MAKE  
A LIVING,  
CALLUM.

I MEAN MAYBE,  
AT LEAST I WOULDN'T BE  
WORKING FOR ANYONE EVIL.



EVERYONE IS EVIL, BUDDY.  
YOU STILL NEED TO EAT.

WE HAVE TO  
DO BETTER.



THERE IS NO BETTER,  
CALLUM. JUST GOOD  
ENOUGH.

YOU GOT SOMEWHERE  
TO LIVE? THAT'S GOOD  
ENOUGH. YOU EATING  
REGULAR? THAT'S  
GOOD ENOUGH.

SOMEBODY TO CARE  
IF YOU COME HOME LATE,  
OR DONT COME HOME AT  
ALL? THAT'S AS GOOD  
AS IT GETS.



CAN I  
TELL YOU  
SOMETHING?



ANYTHING.  
ALWAYS.



I APPLIED TO WORK  
FOR SOME N.G.O.'S  
WHEN WE GOT  
HERE.

YEAH,  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
ONES.

REALLY?

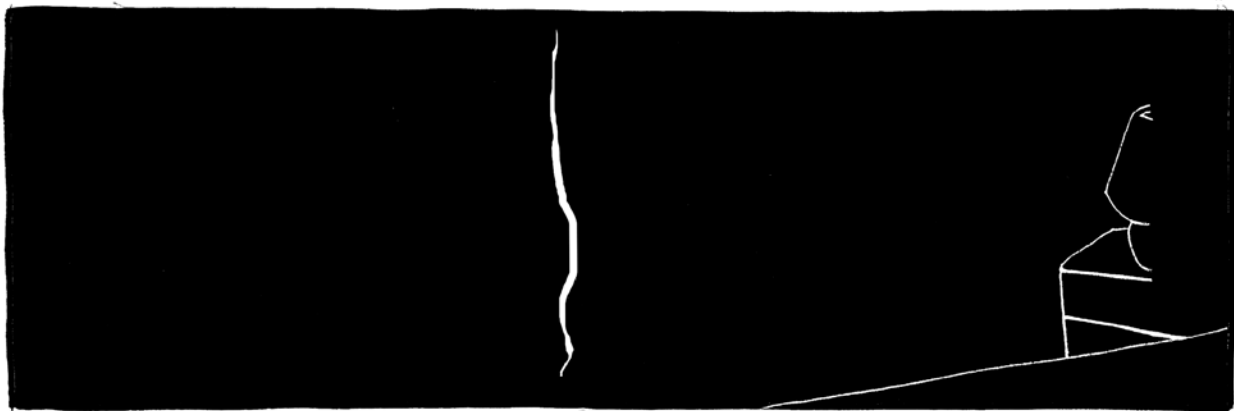
WHAT  
HAPPENED?

NOTHING  
HAPPENED

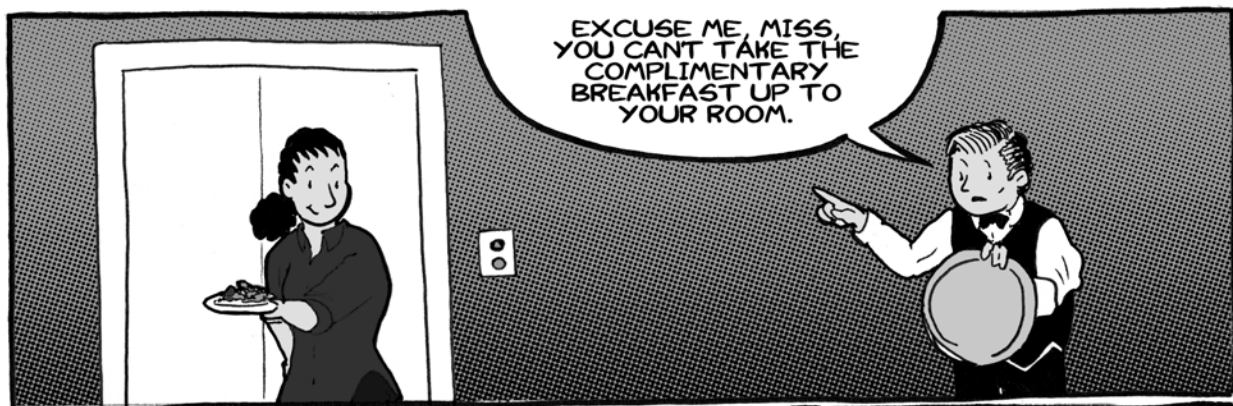
NO CALLBACKS.  
NO E-MAILS. NO  
THANK YOU FOR  
YOUR INTEREST,  
BUT--

I WANTED  
TO KEEP WAITING.  
BUT WE HAD  
ALREADY SIGNED  
THE LEASE...

...SO I KNEW  
I HAD TO HAVE  
SOMETHING.







PATHWAY HOLLOW RECLAMATION AREA



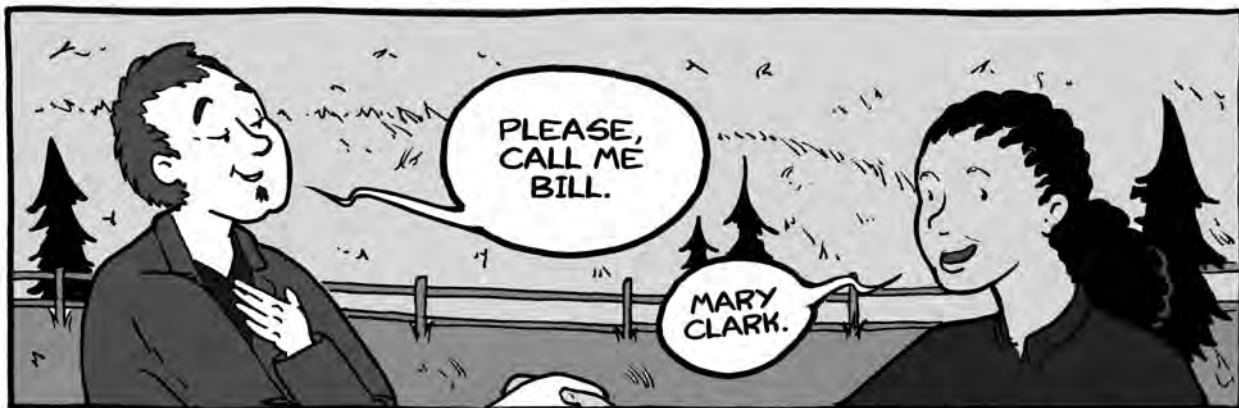
EARLY APRIL, 2016



MR. STRATHROY, I PRESUME?







SO WHAT DO YOU THINK OF OUR LITTLE RECLAMATION PROJECT, MARY?

BEAUTIFUL. SO ALL THIS WAS A SURFACE MINE?

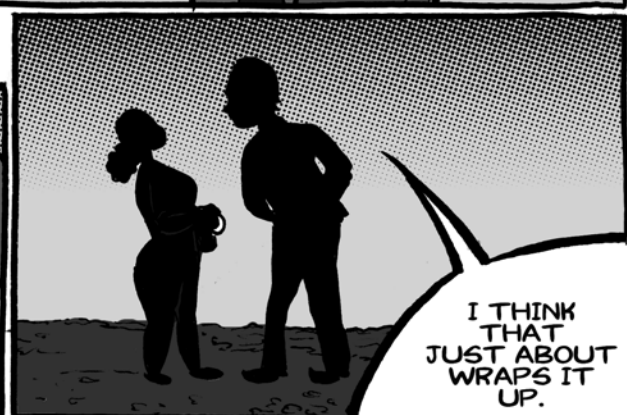


NEVER WOULD HAVE GUESSED. LET'S GET A FEW OF YOU AGAINST THE LANDSCAPE.



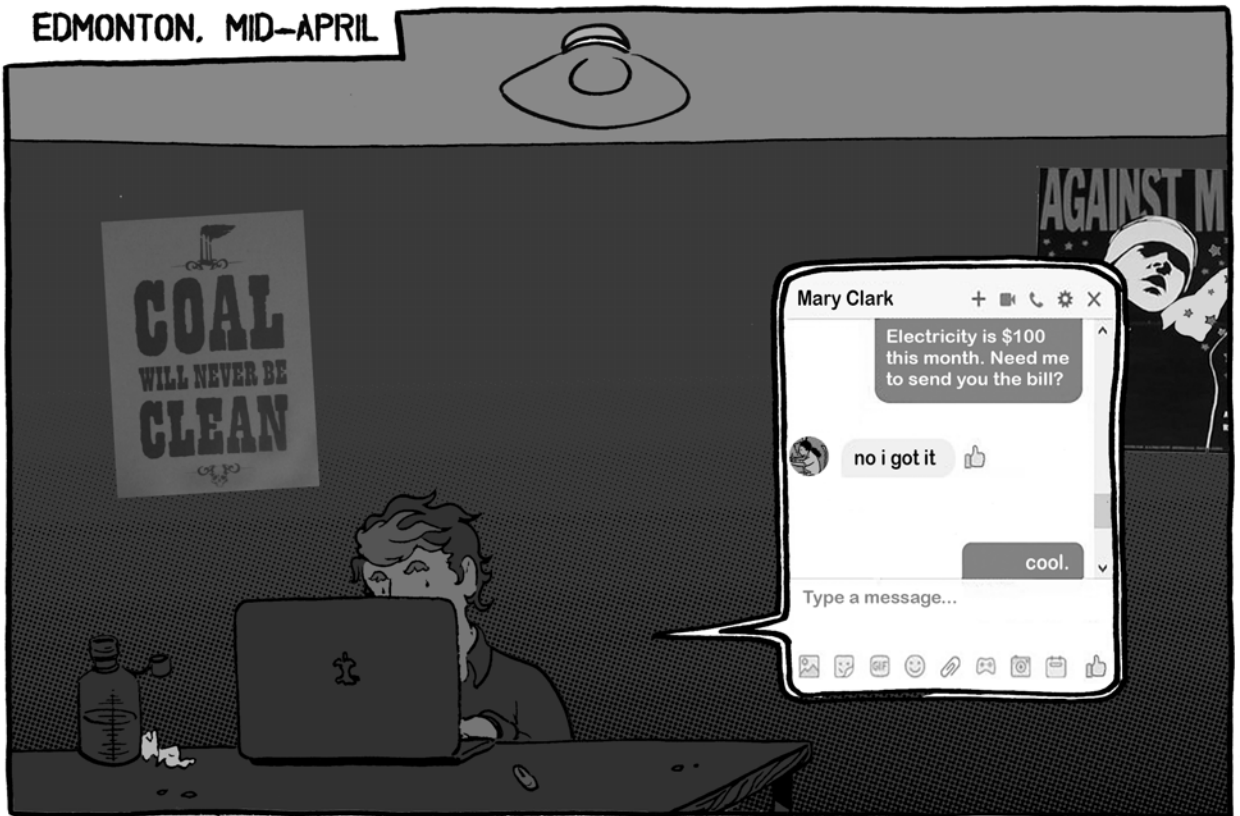
THIS WAS A MINE, AND NOW, A MEADOW!  
IF THAT ISN'T A PRETTY PICTURE,  
I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS.



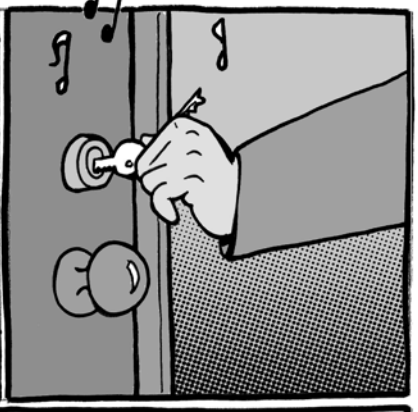
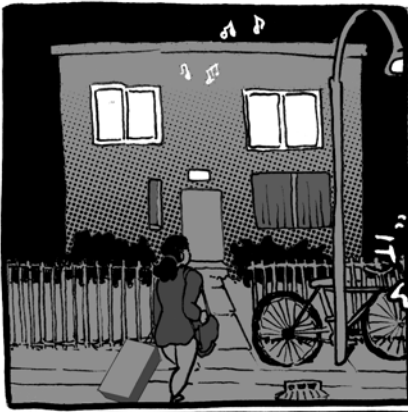














I THOUGHT YOU  
WERENT GETTING BACK  
TIL WEDNESDAY.





OH, OF COURSE!





SO HOW WAS THE REST OF YOUR TRIP?









YEAH, I READ THIS BOOK, IMPAIRED WETLANDS IN A DAMAGED LANDSCAPE. SURE, IT LOOKS GREAT, BUT IT'S NEVER GOING TO BE THE SAME. YOU CANT REPLACE NATURE. ITS STILL BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, IT JUST LOOKS GOOD IN PHOTO OPS.



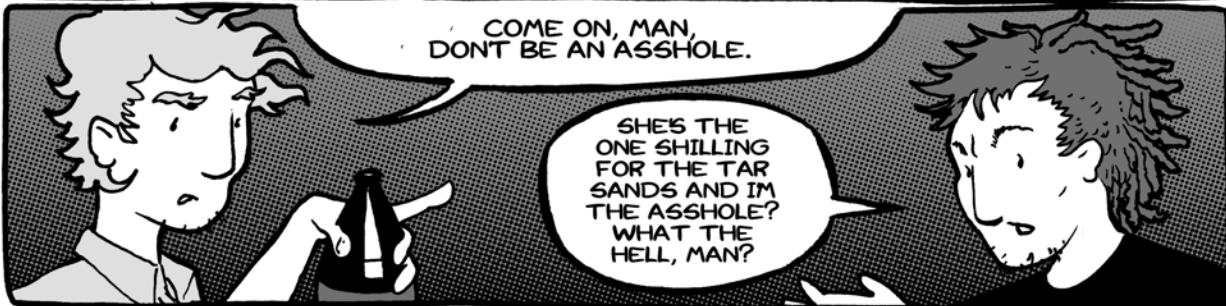
I DUNNO.

MORE LIKE YOU DONT WANT TO KNOW.



EXCUSE ME?

IT'S TOTALLY TYPICAL. SOMEONE OFFERS YOU A JOB WHERE YOU LIE FOR A LIVING? SURE THING. YOU'RE ASKED TO DEFEND CLIMATE CRIMINALS FOR A PAYCHECK? RIGHT ON. BUT SOMEONE CALLS THE ECOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR LIFESTYLE INTO QUESTION? SUDDENLY YOU'RE LOST IN A FOG OF UNCERTAINTY.



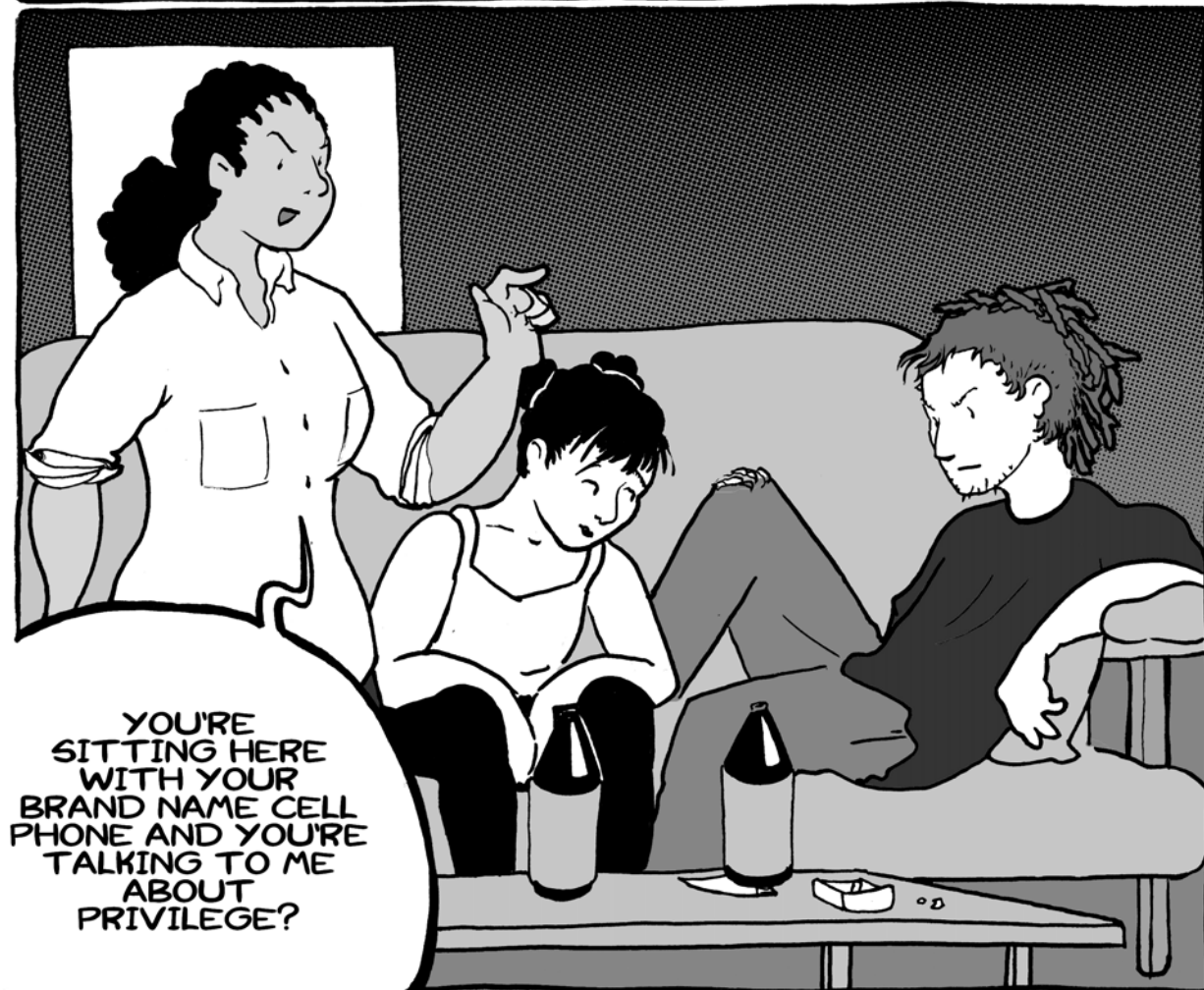
COME ON, MAN, DONT BE AN ASSHOLE.

SHE'S THE ONE SHILLING FOR THE TAR SANDS AND IM THE ASSHOLE? WHAT THE HELL, MAN?



I WISH  
YOU'D  
JUST  
CHILL.

PEOPLE GET  
THREATENED  
WHEN YOU  
CHALLENGE  
THEIR  
PRIVILEGE,  
MAN!

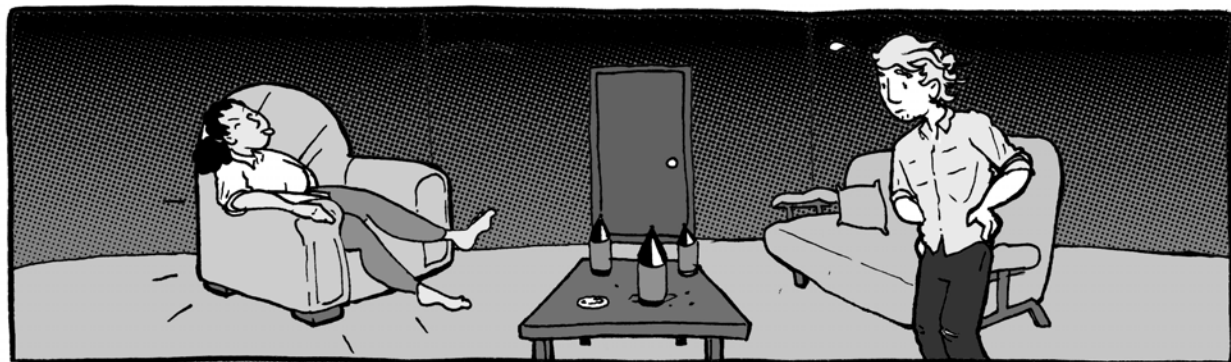


DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT PHONE IS MADE OF? AND YOUR SHOES, YOUR CLOTHES, OIL IS IN ALL OF THEM, YOU HYPOCRITE!

WE ALL HAVE TO LIVE IN THE SYSTEM. DOESN'T MEAN WE NEED TO WHORE OURSELVES OUT TO IT.







I DONT WANT THEM COMING BACK.



DEFINITELY. ILL FIND THEM SOMEWHERE ELSE TO CRASH.



DOES THAT GUY EVEN HAVE A JOB?

HE DOESNT BELIEVE IN CAPITALISM.

CONVENIENT!



HE WAS JUST DRUNK.

SO HE HAS A JOB WHEN HE'S SOBER?

PEOPLE DONT HAVE TO WORK, MARY.



MOST PEOPLE DO, CALLUM. HE'S JUST LAZY.

I THINK IT'S PRINCIPLED.



WHAT, THE  
PRINCIPLE OF LETTING  
OTHER PEOPLE WORK  
SO YOU CAN LIVE  
FOR FREE?



NO, THE PRINCIPLE OF  
REFUSING TO GET RICH BY  
POISONING THE PLANET.



WHAT ARE YOU  
TRYING TO SAY?



IT'S PRETTY  
FUCKED UP THAT  
YOU'RE DEFENDING THE  
PEOPLE WHO ARE KILLING THE  
EARTH IN EXCHANGE  
FOR SUSHI AND  
HOTEL STAYS.



IT'S PRETTY  
FUCKED UP THAT  
YOU'RE THROWING THAT  
IN MY FACE WHEN YOU  
OWE ME THREE  
MONTHS' RENT.





YOU AND YOUR  
BUDDIES TALK ABOUT  
NOT WORKING FOR THE  
SYSTEM...

BUT WHO'S PAYING  
YOUR RENT, HUH? WHO  
TAKES YOU OUT TO  
THE BAR?

WHERE'D YOUR  
CELL PHONES  
COME FROM?

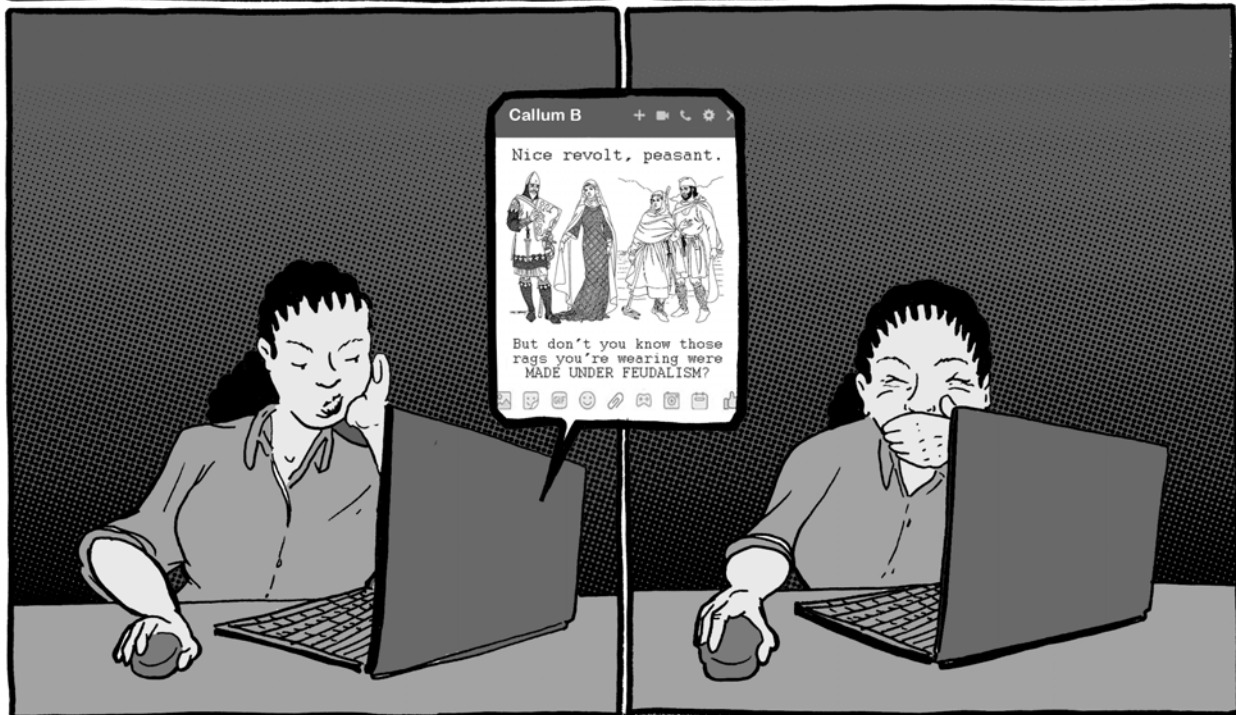
YOU HAVEN'T PAID FOR ANYTHING IN THREE MONTHS, CALLUM!

YOU'RE NOT OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM.

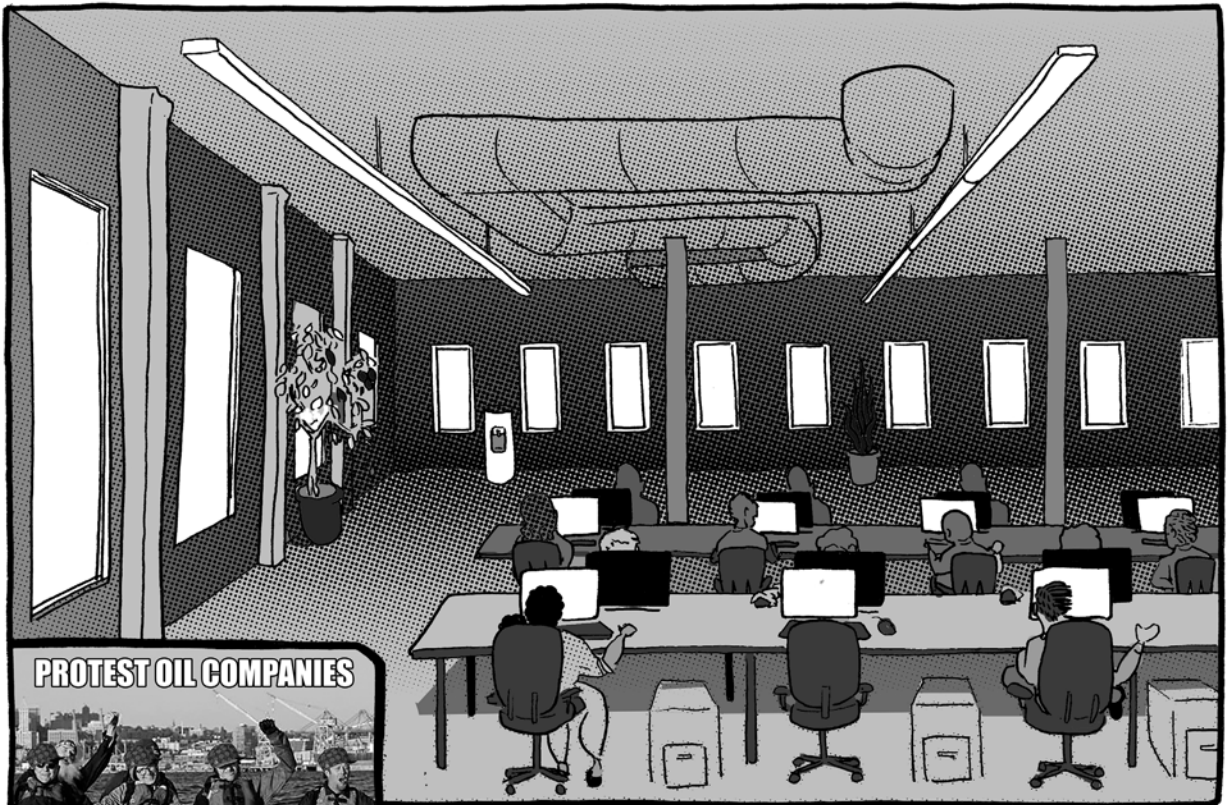
YOU'RE FEEDING OFF ITS SCRAPS.

SLAM!

plastic.  
(it's what's for dinner)







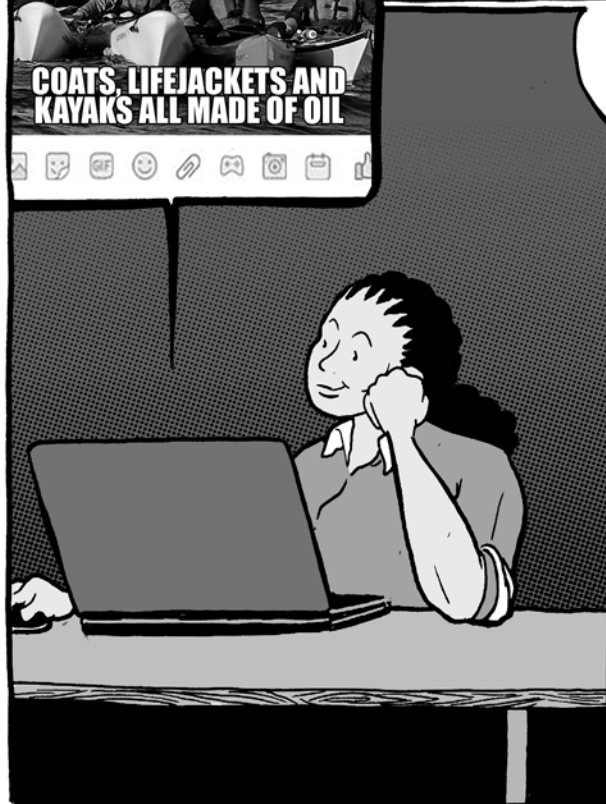
**PROTEST OIL COMPANIES**

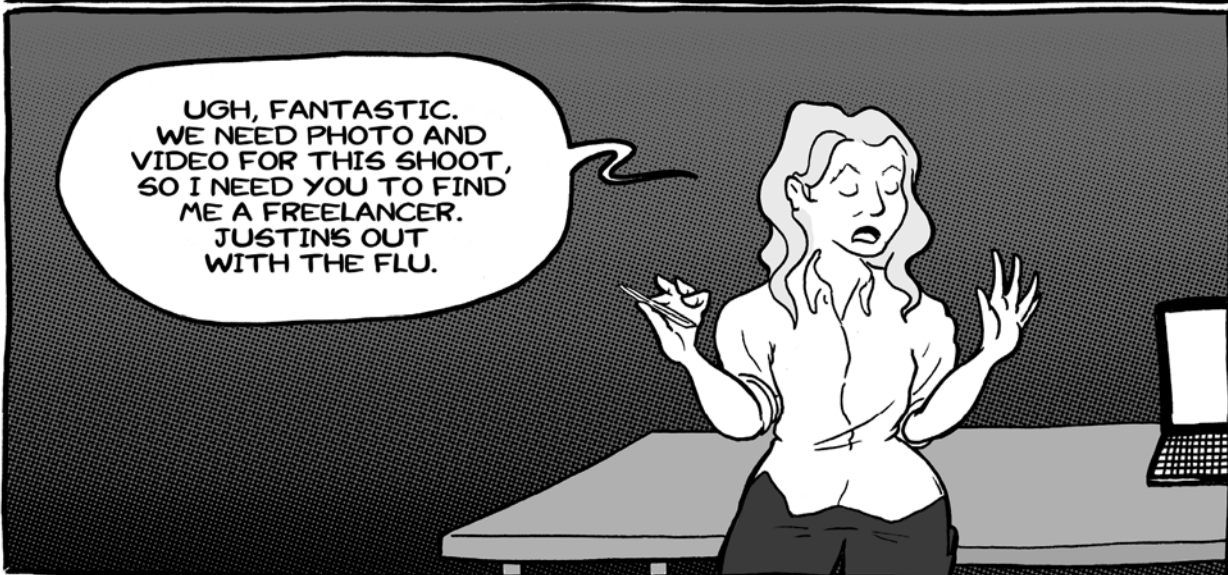


**COATS, LIFEJACKETS AND  
KAYAKS ALL MADE OF OIL**



I NEED YOU TO TAKE  
CARE OF SOMETHING.









HEY.

HEY.



IM SORRY.



ME  
TOO.



NO, FOR  
EVERYTHING.

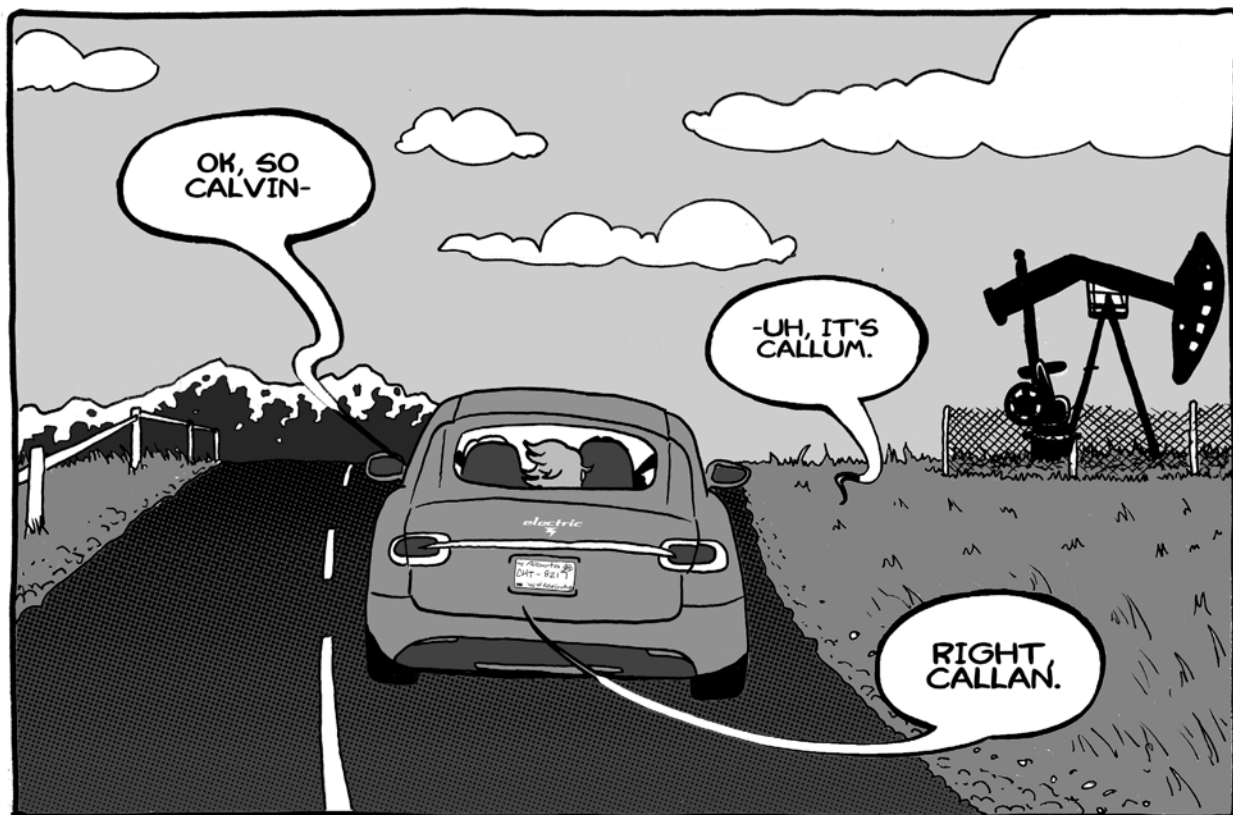


I  
WORKED  
IT OUT, I  
THINK I OWE  
YOU ABOUT  
\$3500. I KEEP  
TELLING  
MYSELF IT'S  
TEMPORARY,  
BUT EVERY  
DAY IT GETS  
A LITTLE MORE  
PERMANENT.







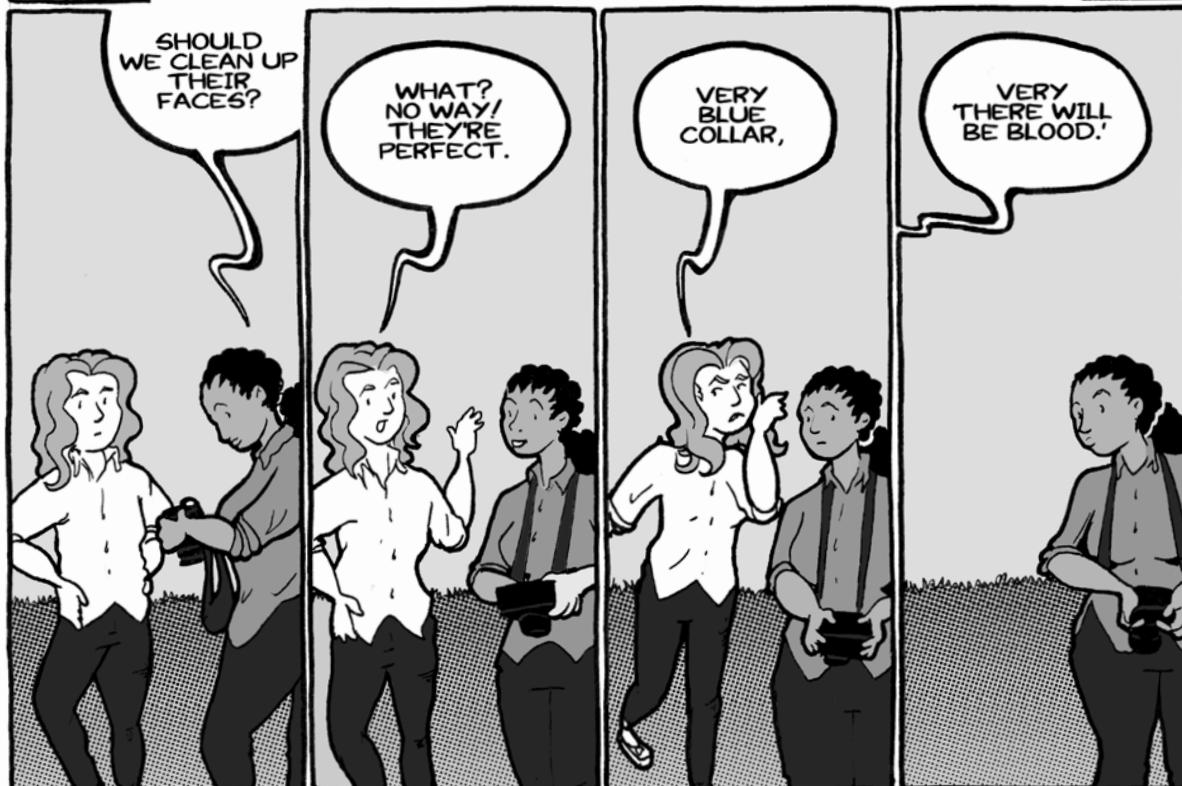
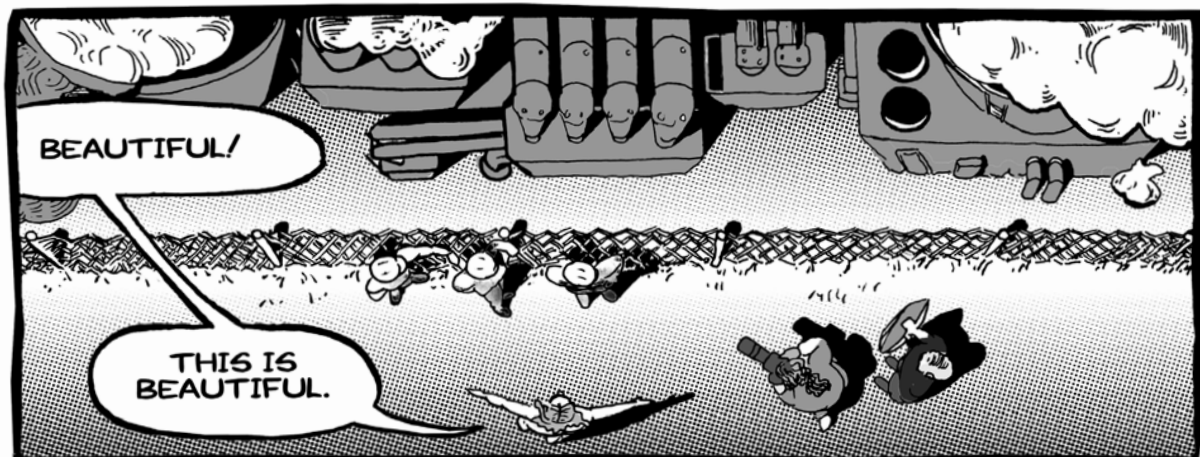


WHEN PEOPLE OUT EAST THINK OF THE OIL SANDS, THEY THINK OF GIANT MACHINES, HUGE OPEN PIT MINES. BAD. OPTICS.



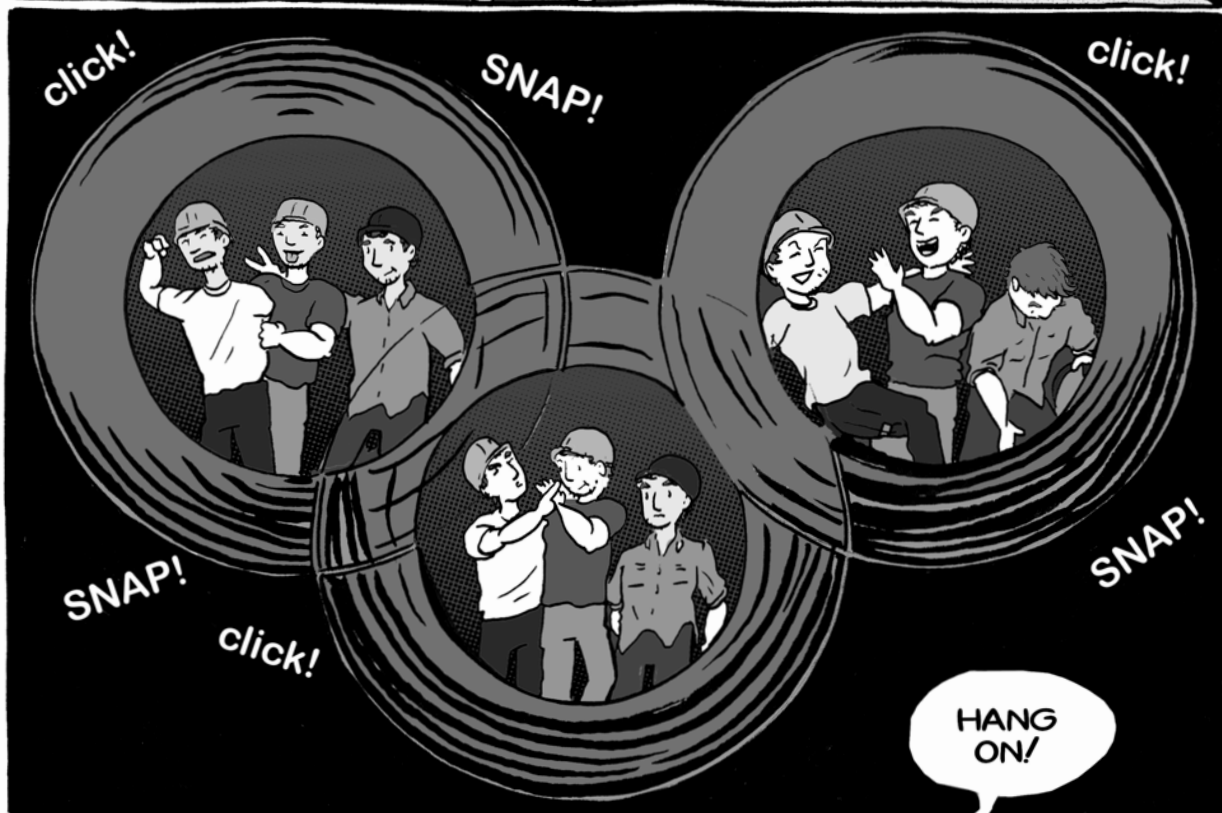
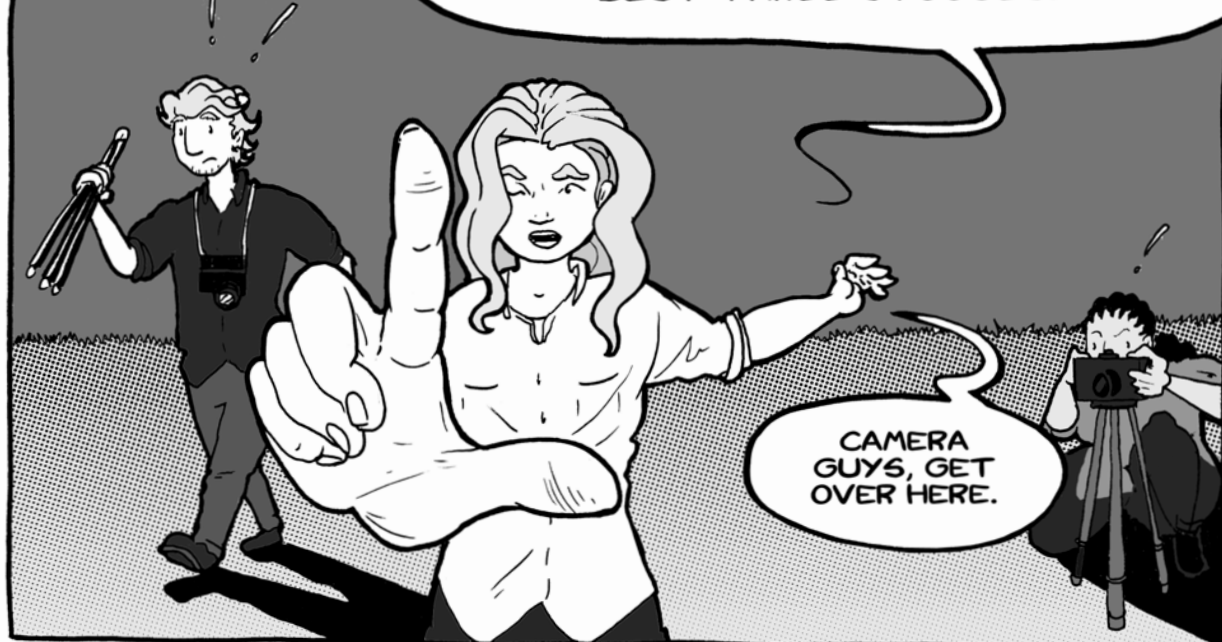


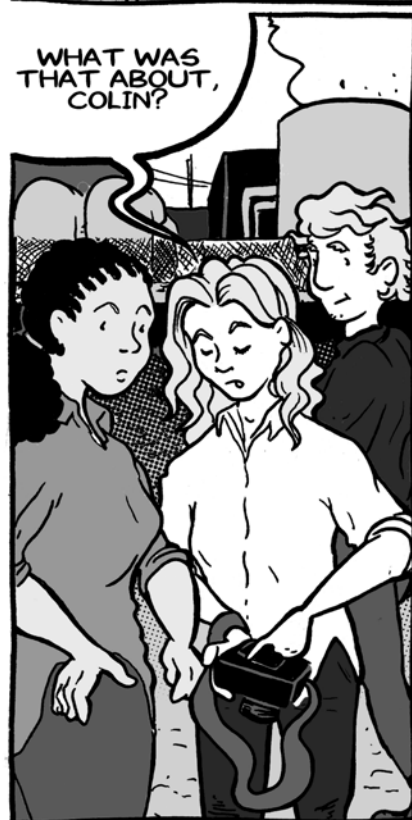
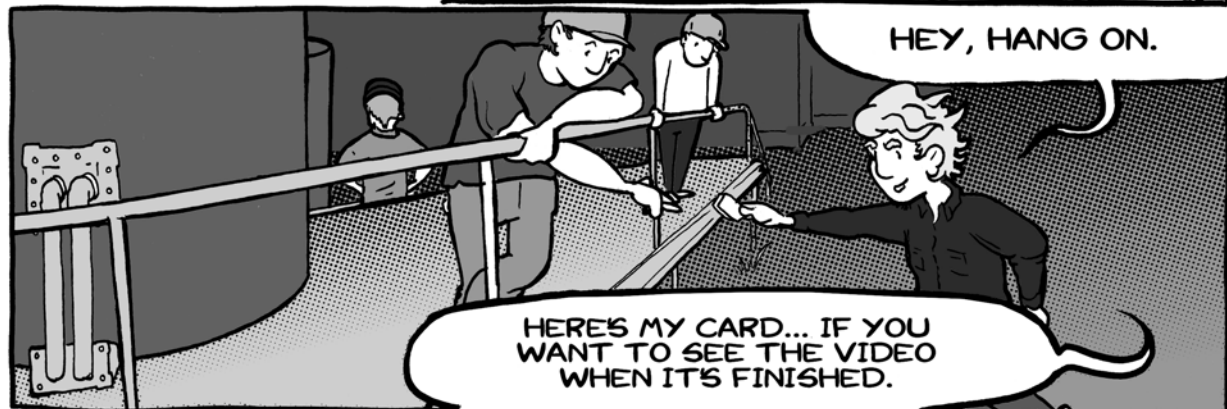




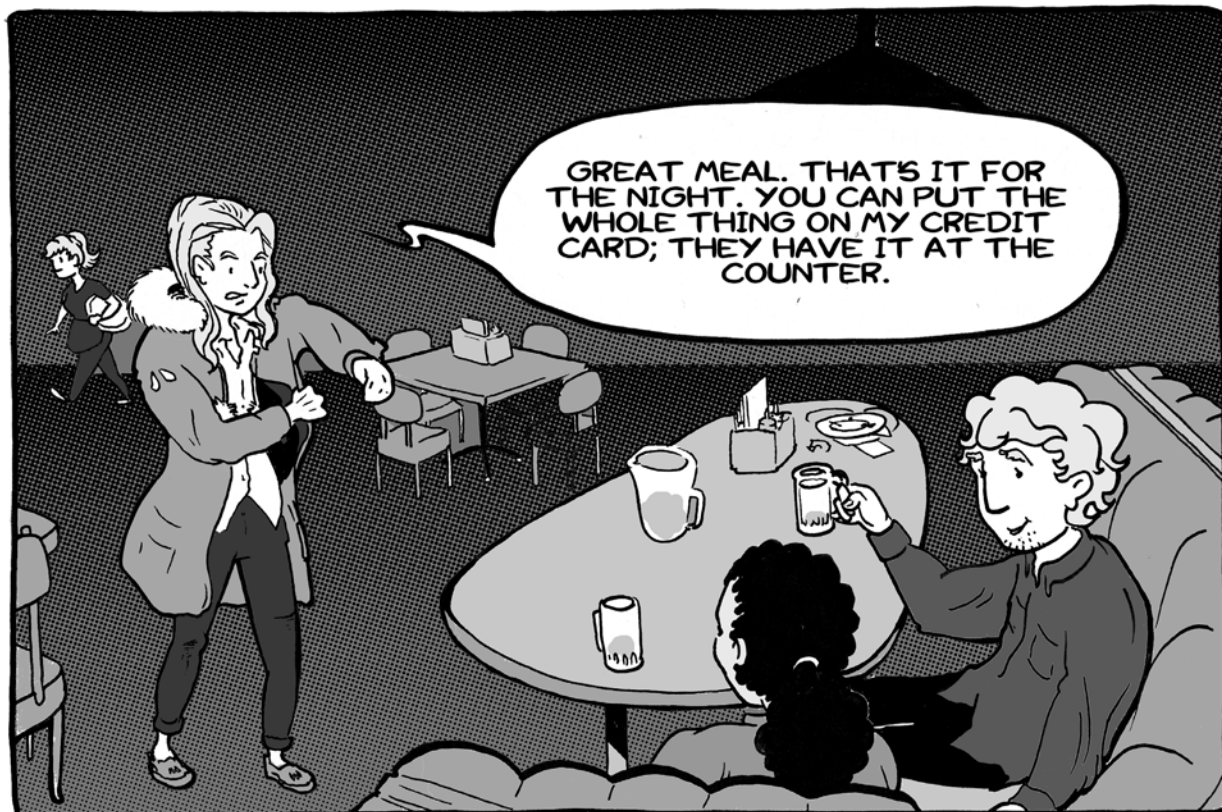


ALRIGHT, I WANT YOU THREE TO  
STAND AGAINST THIS TRUCK THING. HAVE  
SOME FUN. CLOWN AROUND. GIMME YOUR  
BEST 'THREE STOOGES'!







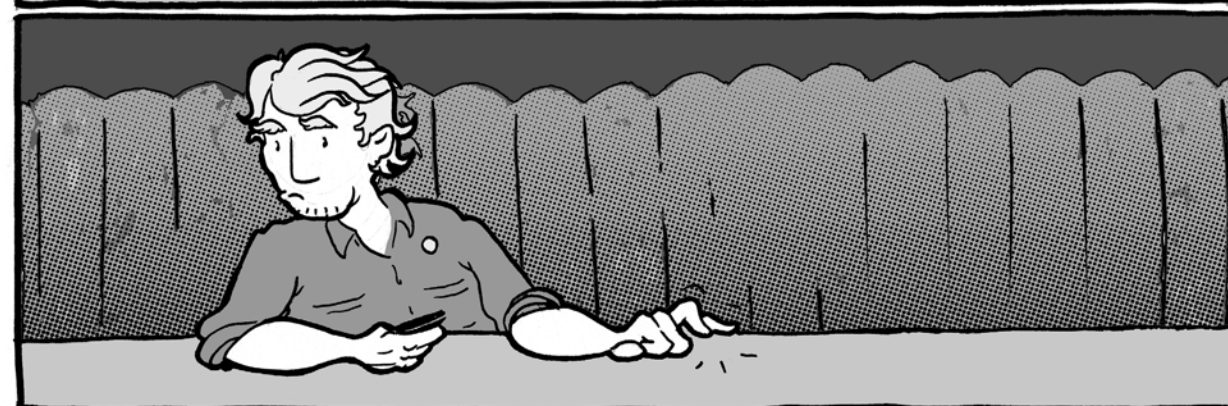






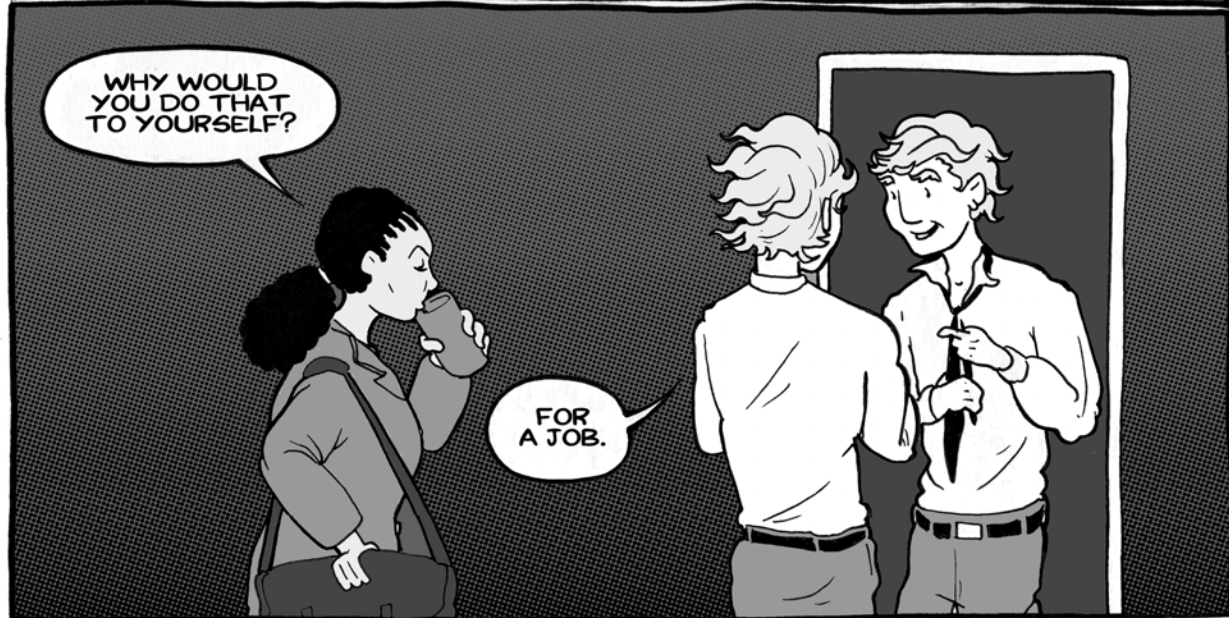
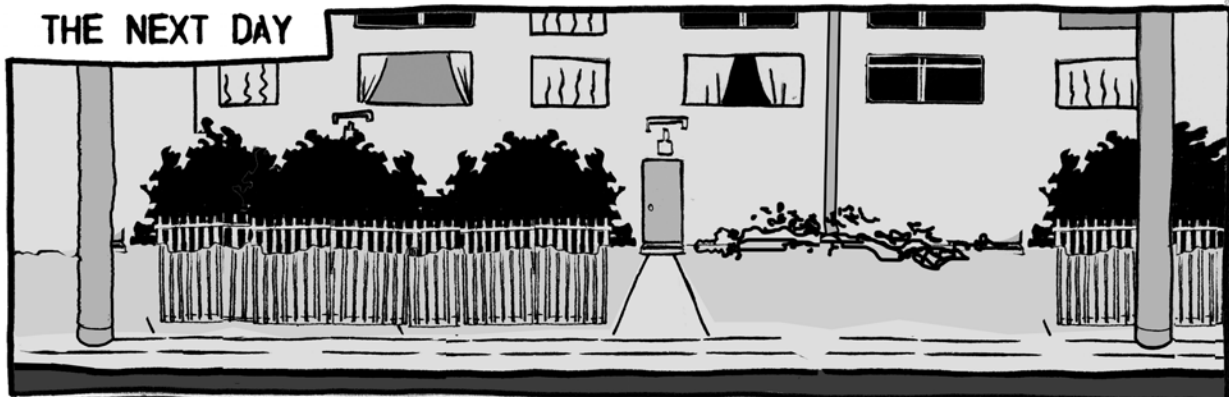








THE NEXT DAY









BUT MAKING US PRETEND TO BE HAVING  
A TIME FOR THE CAMERA RIGHT BEFORE  
KICKING OUR ARSES TO THE CURB,  
IT'S TOO MUCH.



SO THE WHOLE  
THING WAS PUT  
TOGETHER FOR  
THE AD COMPANY?



YA THINK WE ALL FROLIC AMIDST  
THE FUCKIN' RELEASE VALVES ON  
A NORMAL WORKDAY?



DO YOU  
THINK PEOPLE  
LIKE WORKING  
FOR OILCAN?



IM THREE THOUSAND MILES  
FROM HOME, BREATHING POISONOUS  
SHIT EVERY DAMN DAY.



YOU THINK ANYONE LIKES  
WORKING AT A PLACE LIKE  
THAT? YOU WORK BECAUSE  
YOU GOT TO...



...LEAST TIL THEY  
DECIDE THEY DONT NEED  
YOU NO MORE.





CALLUM,

HAVE YOU  
SHOWN THIS  
VIDEO TO  
ANYONE?



NOT YET/  
BUT I WAS GOING  
TO SEND IT TO  
GRIME, THAT NEW  
JOURNALISM  
WEBSITE.



CALLUM, THIS IS  
SERIOUS. IF THIS  
GETS OUT, I COULD  
LOSE MY JOB.

IT HAS  
NOTHING TO  
DO WITH  
YOU.



JENNI IS SCARY, NOT STUPID.  
IF YOU PUBLISH THIS, SHE'LL FIRE ME,  
AND NO ONE WILL EVER HIRE ME,  
EVER. AGAIN.

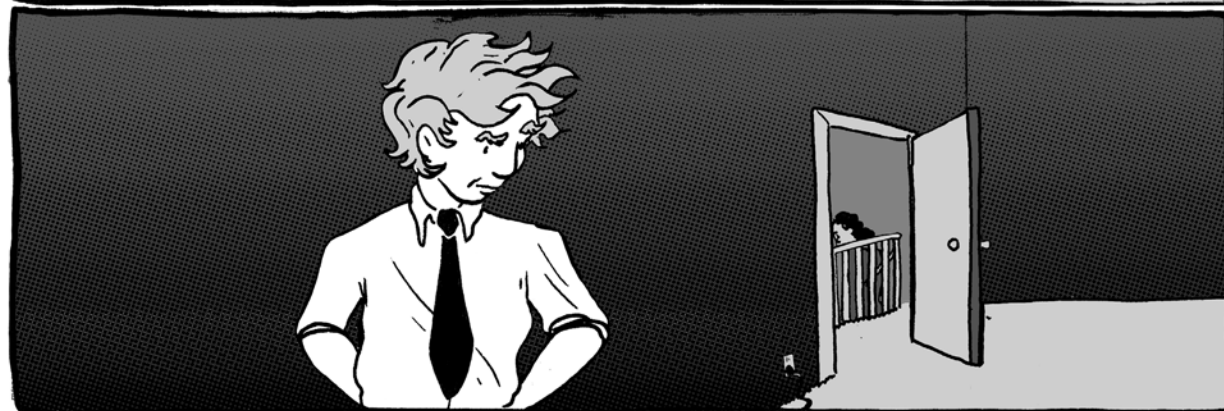
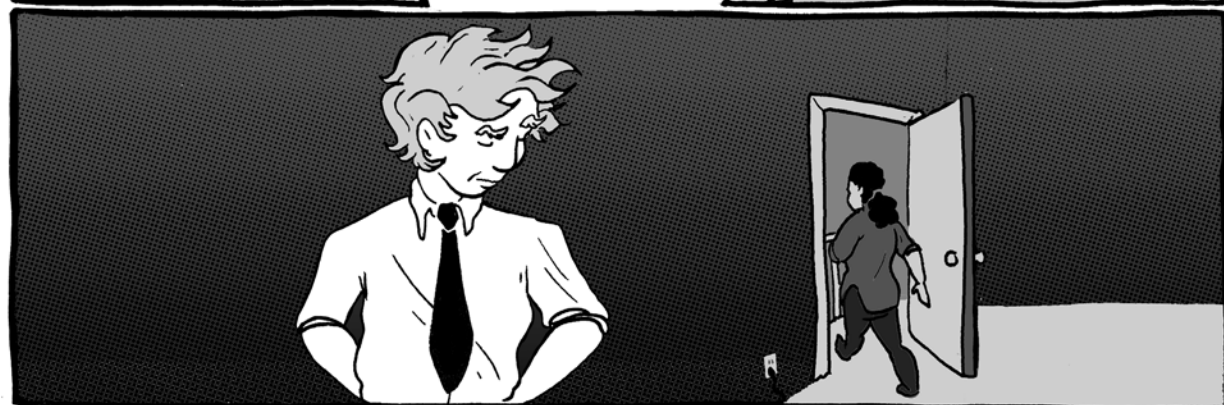
BUT...



I WANT YOU TO PROMISE ME YOU  
WON'T SHARE THIS WITH ANYONE.

...OK.

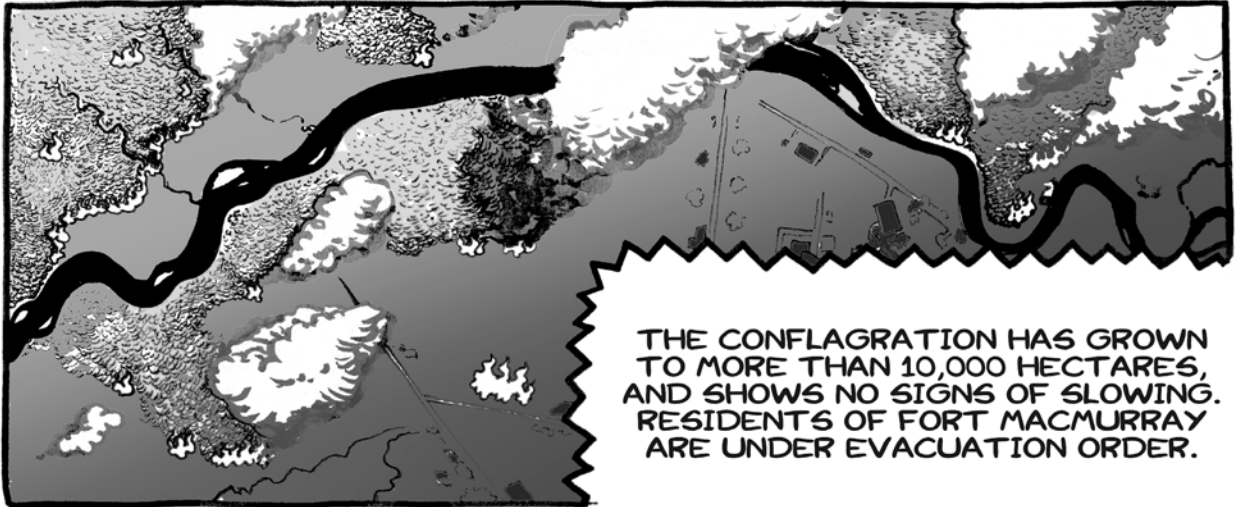




MAY, 2016

## LOCAL BREAKING NEWS ALERT

THE FIRE,  
WHICH LOCAL OFFICIALS  
ARE DESCRIBING AS THE  
'BEAST', HAS MOVED INTO  
THE CITY, CONSUMING  
WHOLE NEIGHBORHOODS.



THE CONFLAGRATION HAS GROWN  
TO MORE THAN 10,000 HECTARES,  
AND SHOWS NO SIGNS OF SLOWING.  
RESIDENTS OF FORT MACMURRAY  
ARE UNDER EVACUATION ORDER.



INSURANCE AGENCIES ESTIMATE THAT LOSSES MAY BE  
IN THE BILLIONS...











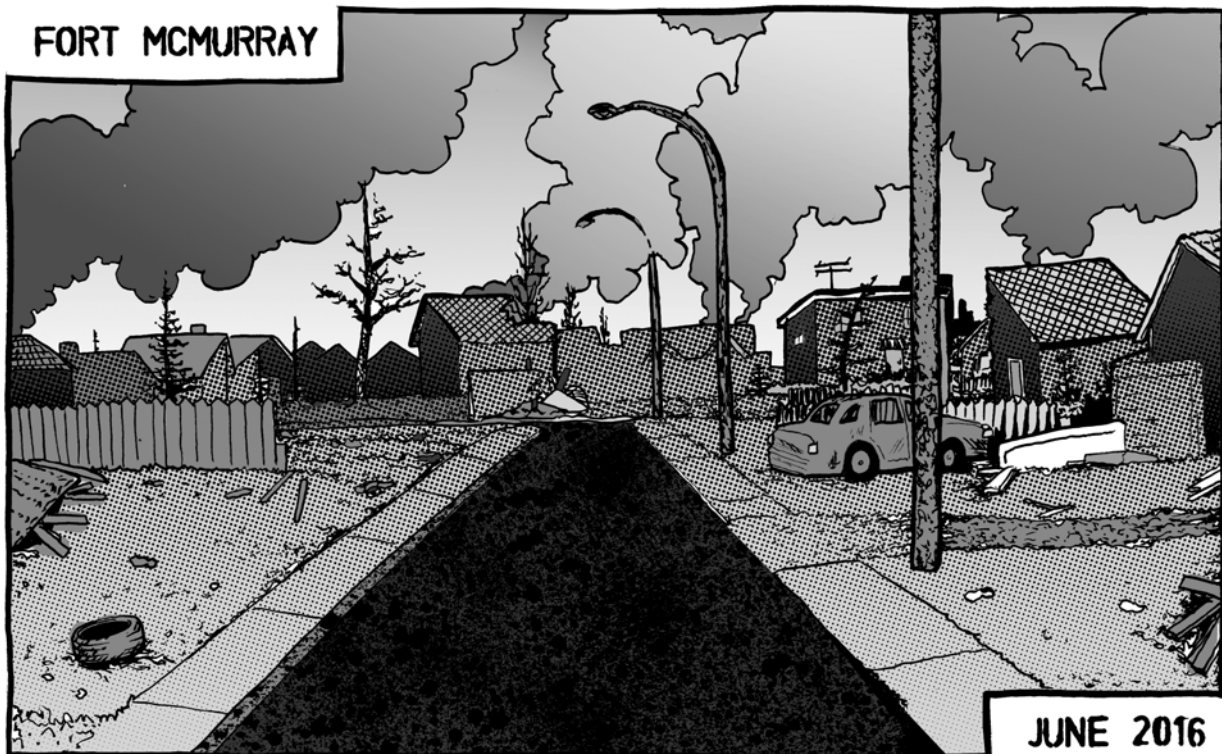








FORT MCMURRAY



JUNE 2016

MARY, BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS LETTER, I WILL BE ON A GREYHOUND HEADED FOR TORONTO. FIRST OFF, I AM SORRY I DIDNT SAY THIS IN PERSON.





YOU ARE RIGHT ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS, BUT WRONG ABOUT WORK. IT'S ONE THING FOR GUYS LIKE FRANK TO WORK IN THE OIL SANDS. THEY HAVE TO MAKE A LIVING.

BUT WHEN YOU LIE FOR A LIVING, IT CHANGES YOU. YOU START TO BELIEVE THE LIES YOU'RE SELLING. IT'S INESCAPABLE. YOU TELL THE SAME STORY OVER AND OVER...



...UNTIL YOU DON'T KNOW YOU'RE LYING ANY MORE. ME, I'M DONE LYING.

I'M SORRY IF THE 'GRIME' PIECE GETS YOU FIRED. I'VE ENCLOSED THE REST OF THE MONEY I OWE YOU.

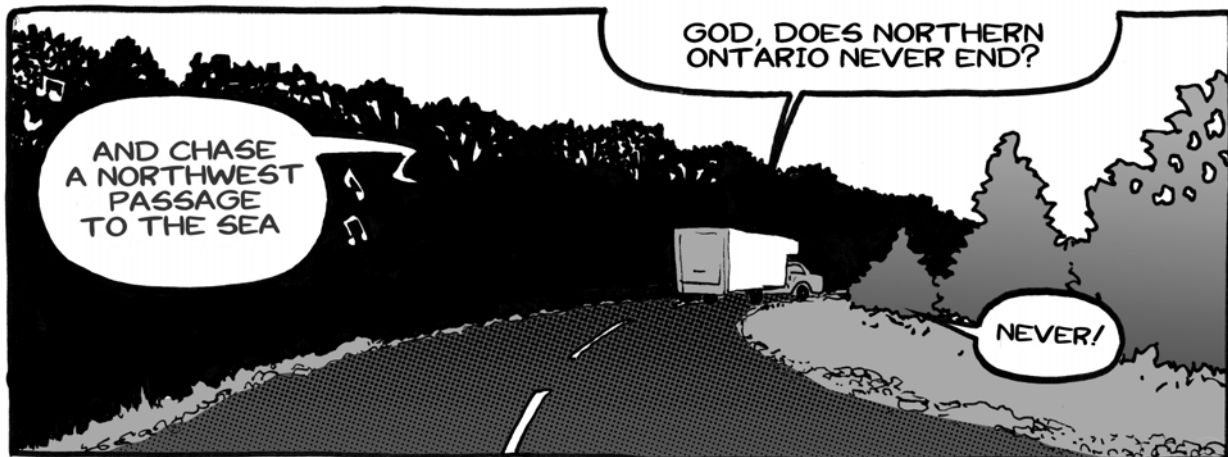
THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING. YOU LIT A PATH TO THE TRUTH.



LOVE, CALLUM.



**AUTUMN, 2015**







## Publisher's Note

The indigenous people whose traditional territories are in present day Alberta, among them the Blackfoot, Sioux, Cree, Dene, Tsuut'ina (formerly Sarcee) and Chipewyan, belong at the center of any discussion about the exploitation of the Tar sands.

They are not at the centre of this narrative because they are not at the centre of the public relations discourse. This does not mean that indigenous voices are not important, only that we did not feel it was our place to present them here.

Instead, we've held space in the book for Terrance Houle, a Kanai artist whose work also touches on these themes, to share his thoughts. His words are below.

Iinniiwahkiimah or 'Buffalo Herder/Slaughterer' is my Blackfoot name, and what I am called within my people, the Kainai.

It is a spiritual name based on the riders who would herd buffalo off jumps or pens to be slaughtered. I received this name years ago in a ceremony my aunty was hosting called a "Big Smoke". In the ceremony I was asked to be a helper, but did not have a name, so the elders sang song and found it. To this day, I hold this story very dearly.

I have used this name on several projects involving the buffalo spirit and the duty I have to help feed my people and culture.

I created the "Oily Buffalo" (2012) that is iinniiwahkiimah for the exhibition Oh, Canada at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts in 2012.

When asked to be in exhibit I was already working towards bringing the spirit of my buffalo namesake to life. For my contribution I used a stencil technique to create a large scale buffalo and, using flat/matte black spray paint, created the look of graffiti with paint dripping down; dripping like oil.

I have painted subsequent versions of "Oily Buffalo" on pieces of vinyl canvas cut from the wrestling mat of another of my projects, the National Indian Leg Wrestling League of North America. The medium of vinyl is made from oil (ethylene). I was using this medium to create a symbolic image of a buffalo, representing the idea of dependency, dependency my people the Kainai had on one source – The Buffalo.

The key idea I wanted to convey with this image is that the Plains Indigenous people are living in a post-apocalypse. An apocalypse wrought from the Plains peoples' dependency on one source of energy: The Buffalo.

Buffalo were everything to us. They sheltered us, fed us, clothed us, and so much more. The buffalo dictated so much for us spiritually, but also dictated the migratory manner of our camps in winter or summer. We followed the buffalo to survive and live. They were our food and energy source.

Once taken away, there was collapse.  
Our civilisation forever changed.

I do not blame Indigenous people for this collapse.

With “Oily Buffalo” I set out to create work that spoke to questions about the past and present of my people.

How did we get here? What does the current era mean for Plains people of North America?

Post-Apocalypse.

Around the same time as I was working on “Oily Buffalo” energy issues and their polarizing politics were constantly in the news. From debates over the future and impact of the oil sands to the Keystone XL Pipeline; from China’s \$15.1 billion takeover of Calgary’s Nexen Energy to the devastating legacy of BP’s Deepwater Horizon explosion and spill, you couldn’t go to the pub without some political, and potentially antagonistic, talk about these subjects.

As an artist and Indigenous person, I was conflicted by my own ideas and views surrounding the debates over energy politics. I have friends who depend deeply on the oil and gas industry for their livelihood. I support work for my friends and family who struggle to put food on the table; but on the other hand I am a Kainai/Anishinaabeg who doesn’t want to see the land his people live on exploited.

The message of Innniiwahkiimah, the artwork, can be extended to modern society which depends on oil.

Growing up I loved watching sci-fi movies especially apocalyptic films such as Escape From New York, Def Con 4 and The Day After, which portrayed the impending or total collapse of humanity. In the opening of Mad Max: The Road Warrior (1981) we hear a narration of the oil and gas wars that lead to nuclear war. The narrator speaks to the decimation of society and the rise of scavengers; road warriors. I can’t help but think this is how my people had survived when the onslaught of colonialism hit us after the demise of the great buffalo herd, the abundance of a source slaughtered and leading to weakness and exploitation.

The idea of indigenous people living in a post-apocalyptic world and trying to rebuild is strange at first, but when I put the pieces together through movies and culture, I realised that we as a society are not too far off from the sci-fi realm.

Innniiwahkiimah, “Oily Buffalo”, has become a warning sign for myself that as a society we can’t just blame oil companies, governments and colonialism for the crisis of energy.

Change starts with all of us as individuals. We need to change and stop being dependant on oil and gas.

If we as a people – and I speak as a person – do not change our ways then we will be doomed to live through these collapses and, inevitably, apocalypse.

Terrance Houle,  
Alberta, 2017



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