Comic-Strip Mining: Neo-Extractivism and Land Conflicts in Joe Sacco’s *Paying the Land* (2020) and Nelly Luna and Jesús Cossio’s *La guerra por el agua* (2016)

*L’exploitation minière au prisme de la bande dessinée : néo-extractivisme et conflits fonciers dans Paying the Land (2020) de Joe Sacco et La guerra por el agua (2016) de Nelly Luna et Jesús Cossio*

*Minería en Viñetas: Neoextractivismo y conflictos territoriales en Paying the Land (2020), de Joe Sacco, y La guerra por el agua (2016), de Nelly Luna y Jesús Cossio*

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Introduction

Eduardo Galeano’s extractivist history of Latin America, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (2003), first published in 1971, is a Marxist reading of Latin American dependency in which he argues that the region has constantly been sucked dry of resources and labour power. Despite the book’s fame, ratified in 2009 when Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez delighted in presenting US President Barack Obama with a copy of Galeano’s book at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, Galeano later disavowed his book. But *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* continues to resonate, at least to some degree, with the contemporary wave of neoeactivism that now dominates Latin America’s economic landscape. As Linda Farthing and Nicole Fabricant suggest, the “overall pattern [Galeano described] remains unchanged” (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018, p. 4). There are, of course, differences between earlier patterns of extractivism
and current neoextractivism in Latin America, whether in terms of scale or scope (Ibid., p. 5). Neo-extractivist practices are increasingly diverse, with new forms of mining (such as shale fracking), more agricultural crops, notably soy, and large-scale deforestation and hydroelectric projects. In fact, the discourse of extractivism is now applied to all manner of ways of life and exchanges, not just economic. As Laura Junka-Aikio and Catalina Cortes-Severino argue, neoextractivism has become “an analytical and also political concept that enables the examination and articulation of deeper underlying logics of exploitation and subjectification that are central to the present conjuncture of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism” (Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino, 2017, p. 177).

The new era of extractivism in Latin America, which intensified particularly around the turn of the new millennium, has been associated with the so-called “Pink Tide” or “Left Turn” in Latin American politics, the term given to describe the rise of left-wing, often populist, governments that took power in the 2000s as part of a perceived refutation of the neoliberal project that had dominated the region since the 1970s. But the administrations of the Pink Tide tended to refashion rather than reject outright the state’s relationship to mining and agribusiness. Far from restricting the negative impacts of, say, soy production, which has had a devastating impact on the environment due to deforestation and the widespread use of herbicides and pesticides, the governments renegotiated – or tried to renegotiate – an increase in revenue through taxation that could be used to undertake social welfare and new infrastructural projects. Maristella Svampa has described this shift from traditional neoliberalism to neo-extractivism as a move from the Washington consensus, the tacit agreement between major economic organizations in the US and Latin American governments to usher in neoliberal structural reform during the late twentieth century, to the “commodities consensus,” the agreements between contemporary Latin American governments and multinational corporations. Often deploying direct state repression or turning a blind eye to the way large businesses deploy their own forms of violent action against protestors, trade unions and “recalcitrant” private landowners, these governments have embarked on a Mephistophelian pact of opportunity and abandonment. As Gastón Gordillo writes, “the expansion of social services and domestic markets is being funded by the creation of sacrifice zones in the Chaco, the Amazon, and mineral-rich areas of the Andes” (Gordillo, 2014, p. 127). The benefits of extractivism, therefore, are wildly uneven and those living in such sacrifice zones are often adversely affected by the negative impacts of those processes.

The notion of the sacrifice zone highlights one of the recurring tropes of neoextractivism: invisibility. For large sectors of the population, often those who benefit most from its economics, extractivism occurs far from the metropolis, out of sight, out of mind. Imre Szeman adds that “in an increasingly urbanized world, we are doubly distanced from the spaces and material processes of extraction, sheltered from them first by physical distance and second by techno-utopian fantasies of a quotidian reality shaped by immaterial forces” (Szeman, 2017, p. 443). In turn, extractivism tends to have the greatest negative impact “on the indigenous, campesino, and Afro-descendant populations of the Americas” (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018, p. 10). And, as Gordillo writes about the Argentine Chaco, extractivism is “disregarded by urban elites” because it is to be found “in the nonwhite margins of the nation” (Gordillo, 2014, p. 216). Such environmental racism coupled with state abandonment, María Moreno
Parra argues, results in processes of “slow death” for indigenous and Afro-descendent populations whose ways of life are gradually destroyed. For that reason, resource extractivism is also tied up with cultural extractivism, the removal of ways of life, belief systems and worldviews either directly exploited via forms of cultural appropriation or ripped out together with other resources. Cultural extractivism is not merely a byproduct but is embedded in the overarching agenda: it both disconnects people from the historical material environment in which extraction takes place and promotes ways of life funded by extractivist economics. The invisibilities that surround such racialised forms of extractivism, therefore, make it imperative to address the imaginaries that underpin the “materialities of extraction”.

The global flows of extractivism are always embedded in local environments, cultures and political contexts. But it is also important to look at the transnational links between specific local cases. Latin America is a site par excellence of the extractivist agenda, but neoextractivism also takes place in North America and Europe. Moreover, though the extractivist dynamic in the Americas still tends to be based on the one-way removal of resources from Latin America to the US, as described by Galeano, the flows of capital embedded in such practices are increasingly complex. “The extractive frontier,” Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino write, “is flowing, flooding and drilling increasingly close to urban areas and the centres of knowledge production, complicating earlier geographical and class divisions between those who extract and those who are extracted, or who live with the consequences,” a shift that is simultaneously creating opportunities for “a new sense of commonality and translatability of causes across the Global South and North” (Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino, 2017, p. 176). There are, perhaps more than ever before, a shared set of experiences and (visual) narratives of exploitative extraction circulating across the Americas.

To highlight how extractivism in the Americas is both highly embedded in local environments and also creating wider narratives of displacement, I focus in this article on two recent graphic works: Joe Sacco’s *Paying the Land* (2020), an exploration of the upheaval caused to the Dene communities living in the Mackenzie River Valley by both the Canadian state and mining enterprises; and *La guerra por el agua*, drawn by Peruvian Jesús Cossio and written by Nelly Luna, a work initially released as a webcomic in 2016 with the participation of Jason Martínez, and subsequently as a newspaper-sized pamphlet in 2018, both studies of the Tía María mining project in southern Peru, an operation owned by the Mexican company Southern Copper. Though both works are cut through by social protest and political wrangling, they simultaneously demonstrate the power of graphic narratives to put forward counter-imaginaries of exploitation that transgress the narratives of big capital. Like other visual forms, graphic narratives, especially those with testimonial qualities such as the ones I analyse here, have considerable potential in terms of making visible practices that are sometimes pushed beyond the mind’s eye. Comics are also a potent cultural form for exploring resource extraction, with their dynamics of possession and dispossession, the visual territorialisation of their frames embedded as occupations of the page.

More specifically, I explore the (in)visibilities of extractivism and the visual narratives of the entropic comics page with reference to what Rob Nixon has called “slow violence”. One of the challenges posed by slow violence, which “occurs gradually and out of sight,” is “incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2) and is “open ended,
eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat” (ibid., p. 6), lies in terms of culture: “how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (ibid., p. 3). In a very insightful analysis of *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, written by Chris Hedges and illustrated with images and comics by Joe Sacco, Georgiana Banita uses Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” to highlight how comics can capture the impact of extractivism on local communities. Banita reads Sacco’s comics in *Days of Destruction* “through the lens of graphic entropy” suggesting that his images present “the loss of power” brought about by extractivism (Banita, 2015, p. 104). Here I draw on Banita’s point about how the energetic temporalities and visualities of graphic narratives can engage with slow violence and the entropic transformations of extraction. Nevertheless, the works I analyse here present visual decelerations that combat the fervent energies of extractivism. They are also productive, shaping alternative engagements with the land and community formation, gesturing towards the potential for networks of energetic resistance that can confront development narratives promoted by national governments and major corporations. If the latter increasingly operate at a transnational level, manoeuvring not just capital and goods across borders but also imaginaries of futures dependent on energetic extraction, then it is even more important to construct transnational crossroads of positive imaginaries of energy.

**Comics Journalism**

7 The diverse field of comics journalism is well established within graphic narratives. Works by authors like Guy Delisle, Sarah Glidden and Joe Sacco, among many other practitioners of non-fiction comics, have created a respected and widely popular genre. Sacco himself has offered some thoughts about comics journalism, speaking of the opposition between “the essential truth” and “literal truth,” the unapologetically subjective nature of his craft, and the way that he is mainly interested in “those who seldom get a hearing” (Sacco, 2012, p. x-xii). Many of these tenets and beliefs have been the subject of analyses of comics journalism. Nina Mickwitz argues that documentary comics share both a concern with addressing “the challenges, conditions, and strategies (and their implications) involved with visually representing and narrating the actual historical world” (Mickwitz, 2016, p. 3) and “an investment and engagement in negotiating and exploring the relationship between reality and representation as a social, visual, and narrative practice” (ibid., p. 6). That is, documentary comics are often self-aware of the challenges of addressing social issues, often ones that are traumatic and contentious, in comics. Fewer people are now concerned with whether comics are apt to address matters of consequence – though that concern does persist, as Sacco indicates in *Paying the Land* when an interviewee tells him that fracking “is not a cartoon. It’s not a joke. It’s something really fucking serious” (Sacco, 2020, p. 39); instead they reflect more on how the limits and potentialities of the form engage with shifting forms of reality.

8 In a recent article on Sacco’s work, Jörn Ahrens argues that the drawn nature of comics and its lack of indexicality makes “documentation impossible in comics” (Ahrens, 2019). He describes “the tension between the comics reportage’s aspirations to documenting reality, inscribed to it as a claim for truthfulness, and the coercive fictitious content of comics reportage”. That, he suggests, makes comics’ use of the
imagination to combat social and political invisibilities irreconcilable with the idea that they embody “iconic evidence”. Ahrens is keen to demarcate the specific boundaries and qualities of comics in comparison to film and photography in terms of mimesis. He argues that it is not comics’ ability to capture the invisible or to develop a relationship between “information and affect”, but rather their anti-mimetic qualities and “satur[ion] by fiction” that make them so powerful when addressing non-fiction. Thus, he argues that the comic form is at its most convincing “when it does not hide its graphic artificiality and when it does not allow its presumed disadvantage of lacking indexicality, with regard the seemingly indexed media of film and photography, to be turned against it, but rather/instead acknowledges this fact as an advantage”. Ahrens’ argument rests on the belief that indexicality rather than truth is the measure of the documentary cultural productions. Rather than seeing the “fictional” or imaginative qualities of documentary comics as anti-mimetic impediments, therefore, I see them simply as part of a process of truth-telling. In that sense, I prefer to follow Johannes Schmid’s positive take on documentary comics artists who deploy a “strategy of conscientious authentication” precisely to persuade readers that “comics is a valid documentary medium” (Schmid, 2021, p. 2). It is the mediated and subjective nature of the comics image and the process of framing, Schmid argues, that provides it documentary authenticity.

One further dimension of Schmid’s argument is important to my analysis of Sacco’s and Cossio’s work: their subjective qualities are also part of a wider critique of media culture and reporting. Instead of the dichotomies of anti/mimesis referred to by Ahrens, Schmid instead sees documentary comics as offering an alternative “to the claims to objectivity based on naturalized facts in other media” (Ibid., p. 20). Part of that media landscape, which otherwise purports to cover everything and be everywhere, are new forms of digital media “premised on the constant immersive flow of information” (Ibid., p. 275). Instead, and in a reflection that brings us back to the tropes of energy and speed that characterise extractivism, Schmid suggests that in a present “increasingly characterized by the boundlessness and fluidity” (Ibid., p. 276), documentary comics deploy a kind of “slowness”, a necessarily reflective analysis of the present produced by the inherently measured nature of comics image production that “provides a metajournalistic corrective, challenging the reader to reflect upon the practices and ethics of mainstream news media” (Ibid., p. 277).

Sacco illustrates many of the traits exemplified by Schmid, not least the qualities of slowness, and his approach has been hugely influential in the world of comics non-fiction. The Peruvian Jesús Cossio, the other artist I focus on in this article, has frequently commented on Sacco’s influence on his work. In a recent interview he noted that “in graphic terms, my work is derivative of [Sacco’s] style” (Tullis, 2019, p. 266). In fact, La guerra por el agua was partly inspired by Sacco’s webcomic Srebrenica (Amancio, 2021, p. 208) and Sacco was present at the launch event for the Peruvian work. Cossio is one of Latin America’s leading graphic artists and perhaps the most well-known of its proponents of non-fiction, especially following his comics that addressed the height of the civil conflict between the Peruvian state and Shining Path [Sendero Luminoso], notably Rupay: Historias gráficas de la violencia en el Perú, 1980-1984 (Rossell et al., 2008). Though he generally prefers the term “documentary comics” to describe his work, working with Nelly Luna at Ojo Público, an online platform for investigative journalism in Peru, was an opportunity for him to undertake journalism (Tullis, 2019, p. 264). Taken together, then, La guerra por el agua and Paying the Land share an interest in the
relationship between comics journalism, land, culture, and exploitation. It is to the latter book that I now turn.

From Mineral to Cultural Extraction: *Paying the Land*

Extractivism in Canada has had a long history, dating back to the arrival of Western settlers. Modern extractivism in Canada is embedded in the long history of colonialism, racial inequalities and injustices, cultural decimation, and land appropriation. As Jen Preston argues, “colonial histories and reiterations of race-based epistemologies inform the discursive practices used by the oil and gas industry” (Preston, 2017, p. 356). Such racialised forms of extraction are part of a wider discourse that links “frontier” mining to national identity and the very notion of “Canadianness” (Ibid., p. 370). In *Paying the Land*, Sacco locates extractivism within this longer history by referencing pelt collection as one of the first destructive extractivist trades (Sacco, 2020, p. 35) and exploring the devastating impact of early treaties between white settlers and indigenous communities, particularly following the discovery of oil in the late nineteenth century. To highlight how treaties parcelled up land, a map showing the scope of these land grabs is inserted just below the frame depicting oil discovery (Ibid., p. 61). The treaties themselves symbolise a clash in the understanding of the relationship between humans and land. For white settlers they determined land ownership in exchange for payment; for the local Dene communities, who do not see land in terms of ownership but use, the treaties were seen as “a friendship pact guaranteeing their livelihood […] that in no way prejudiced their relationship to the land” (Ibid., p. 62).

*Paying the Land* gives voice to a wide range of different people, most of whom have no equivalent outlet to express their views. Listening to these people is not just about addressing those who have fallen outside wider imaginaries of development and national development, even if that is crucial, but also about engaging with the long tradition of oral storytelling, something seen as more important than written legal documents (Ibid.) and as an ongoing process of constantly rewriting history and culture. Sacco uses graphic narrative as a cultural patchwork that dismantles both Western forms of spatial organisation and, in their presence of multiple temporalities on the page, also rational concepts of time and progress.

The short Part 1 exemplifies this characteristic of comics. Narrated by Paul Andrew, seen first as a baby whose umbilical cord is in tune with the land, Part 1 is his rendition of the Dene way of life. The twenty pages that follow depict scenes of hunting, skinning, cooking, fishing, boat building, striking camp, and exchanges of cultural knowledge and history. Barring the few delimited frames in which Andrew appears against a stark black background, the images are otherwise not framed but blend into one another in less rigid ways, the almost invisible spaces between them swirling across the pages like the rivers that are so embedded in the culture of the Dene. The lack of straight lines mirrors Andrew’s comments about the cycles of work and being in “the circle of that community” (Ibid., p. 17). Other sequences that depict the memories of the people that Sacco interviews are similar in terms of energy cycles. The account given by a Catholic missionary, for example, is set over a series of images showing Dene activities. One image, which occupies almost an entire page, shows a range of activities happening simultaneously – fishing, preparing boats, teaching youngsters, pouring tea, drying and
baling fish (Ibid., p. 55). The text boxes circle the image, drawing the reader across the page and back again in a cyclical manifestation of the processes taking place. The Dene are constantly involved in cycles of energy conversion, turning one form of life force into another but without ever depleting those forces, as if this cycle of existence could last forever.

14 The cycles of the Dene’s way of life, however, are inevitably pierced by the arrival of extractive forces. Extraction too is energy flow; except that its forces leave behind a wake of destruction, of negative energies manifest as deforestation, toxicity and cultural contamination. Fracking, for example, is seen as a set of straight lines that cut through circles, threatening the balance of limits that exist in these areas of Canada. Dene engagement with the land is based on complex and interweaving networks of hunting trails and migratory patterns: Jim Antoine, who earlier tells Sacco that white people are “putting cut lines on our land looking for oil and gas” (Ibid., p. 65), asks him if he has “seen maps showing the enormous area Dene trappers and hunters traversed even in the time of the dogsleds. It’s like a spider web” (Ibid., p. 78). To exaggerate the point, the flowing lines of dogs pulling a sled through the snow and across the page are located above a frame showing businessmen with mathematical instruments and calculators imposing lines over the circular swirls on their map. The page exemplifies Nixon’s point about what happens when “an official landscape”, which “writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental” is forced onto “a vernacular landscape”, one that “is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations” (Nixon, 2011, p. 17).

15 Sacco does not idealise the landscape or the place where the Dene live, which is often brutally cold and difficult to traverse. The land bogs straight lines down, as Sacco finds out when travelling the winter road with his guide Shauna. The panels depicting them driving the road in their pickup are angled, fragmented like shards of ice (Sacco, 2020, p. 28-29). And the scale is vast: to highlight the vast expanses Sacco includes maps on the same page that show them embarking on the winter road, their truck a small moving entity in the intransigent landscape of snow, ice, mountains and trees (Ibid., p. 27). But such inaccessibility is not limitless, as Shauna tells Sacco, “it’s easy to say this is a vast land with lots of habitat, that there are lots of places for the caribou and moose to go… And in a sense that’s true. But it’s a slippery slope... Where are some of those tipping points and thresholds?” (Ibid., p. 35). It is not just the land that is vast, as Preston points out: “The scale of the Athabasca, Cold Lake and Peace River bitumen extraction projects is difficult to adequately convey – the area is massive. […] The extraction sites are vast industrial wastelands visible from space” (Preston, 2017, p. 366). And yet, Sacco seems at pains to stress, the answer to Shauna’s question is tricky since “resource extraction drives the economy” (Sacco, 2020, p. 35). Though the promised benefits of extractivism have not materialised Sacco’s stresses that many local people do not reject extractivism outright but rather their exclusion from the management of such resources and the development of alternative sources of income like tourism. As with his other works, Sacco presents what Juliet Fall calls “a plurivocality of daily experiences of violence” that “highlight the often contradictory narratives of particular situations, serving to destabilize hegemonic or simplistic narratives” (Fall, 2014, p. 98-99). Yet the balance that he presents – “I rarely hear indigenous people reject mining out of hand no matter how differently they weigh its benefits and costs” (Sacco, 2020, p. 42) – cannot hide the way that energy extraction has
dramatically changed the weave of Dene communities, splintering them, in fact, into tribal factions (Ibid., p. 77).

Just as fracking is the violent insertion of toxic chemicals into the land (Ibid., p. 33; p. 37), extractivism brings with it other poisons, including drugs and prostitution, but above all alcohol. Alcohol saps the energies of workers on their days off, of the unemployed, and of the young, draining them of life force. Many people Sacco interviews have histories of alcoholism, rife in Dene communities. Intoxicated bodies saturated with drugs and alcohol recur, lying huddled on freezing pavements (Ibid., p. 39) or frozen to death after passing out in the snow (Ibid., p. 86; p. 110; p. 155), manifestations of how their cells are chemically overloaded much like the fracked landscape itself. Drinking is depicted as a swirl of open mouths, open cans and glugged bottles (Ibid., p. 115), a force that takes on a vortical life of its own, but which is only transformed into domestic violence, abuse, and suicide. “It’s a cycle that goes around and around”, one interviewee says (Ibid., p. 115).

Fundamental to the extractivist energies that bulldoze their way through the book are other processes of cultural extractivism. As Sacco has said in interview: “How do you control land? You control the people on it. You have to sort of break their bond to the land, send them off the land or in some other way just separate them from the land”2. The wider history of settlement has included encouraging indigenous populations to engage in home ownership via mortgages (Sacco, 2020, p. 179), the use of the system of reserves, which “continues to structure and spatially manage racialized Indigeneity in Canada” (Preston, 2017, p. 357), and the “‘resourcification’ of Indigenous territories' that “informed the racialization of Indigenous peoples as wasteful, lazy and unable to be productive in the economy” (Ibid., p. 358). That dynamic is part of what Nixon calls a “displacement without moving […] a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (Nixon, 2011, p. 19).

Sacco highlights one other way in which the Dene could be “weaned off life in the bush” (Sacco, 2020, p. 105): residential schools and the enforced system of educating young indigenous children far from their parents and their land. On one of the least “busy” pages of the entire book, which depicts the arrival of a plane in the white expanse of river and sky, Sacco writes: “Unmooring the indigenous people – in fact, erasing the essence of their indigeneity – was long Canada’s official policy” (Ibid., p. 122). These boat planes, which shepherded children off to Church boarding schools, were the first step in a process of dismantling the Dene’s ties to the land and their culture. As one journalist states, “Schools were used essentially as a weapon for assimilation and acculturation and Christianization” (Ibid., p. 127). In a sequence of pages depicting school life as remembered by former pupils, the children are subject to various forms of physical abuse but also to the extraction of their language, belief systems and family relationships, making them, in the words of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, victims of “cultural genocide” (Ibid., p. 149).

Paying the Land does not present the Dene as passive victims of the bulldozer of history. There is plenty of political agency throughout the book, whether engaging with discourses and practices of decolonialisation, involvement (albeit as a significant minority) in representational politics, or participation in militant organisations that mobilised themselves around indigenous identity from the 1960s on. Sacco’s decision not to close the book with the sequence (Ibid., p. 247-249) in which he visits an underground deposal facility for the arsenic that is a by-product of gold mining but
with two other short, interspersed sequences, is part of that cultural politics. One depicts a young Eugene Boulanger taking part in a reality TV show about the Dene, during which he kills a caribou in the Mackenzie Mountains. It is a moment that reawakens something in him. As the panels open up, finishing with one of the sparser images in the book, a full-page depiction of Boulanger standing alone next to the dead caribou looking out over the Mackenzie River, he becomes aware of the invisible traces of those who passed there before him. As he looks up, he says: “There was this big mountain right there. And I was like, Grandpa! It had this energy” (Ibid., p. 257). The reference to the mountains’ energy is a reminder of the forces embedded in the land and which need not be converted to dirty energy via resource extraction but offer alternative energies. The other, which bookends the sequence with Boulanger, is the hand-game tournament. The simplicity of the game, in which teams try to guess in which fist opponents are holding a token, belies a subtle web of sleights-of-hand, second-guessing, and misdirection all to the backdrop of “a barrage of sound” (Ibid., p. 251). Here is another kind of energy, Sacco’s images depicting the flows of mind and body, the gaze intimate with the physical gestures and movements of the competitors. The ongoing presence and energy of the Dene is encapsulated in the final two pages, in which one player constantly outwits his opponent, who guesses wrong and wrong again. In the last image of the book the player looks directly at us, challenging us to figure out which hand the token is in as the narrative voice cries: “And that guy? He’s not out yet! He could still be there today!” (Ibid., p. 260).

These concluding sequences present a temporal alternative to the ecological crisis that Mark Anderson describes as “a temporal disjunction in which modernity’s hyperbolic velocity has opened an irreparable breach with the body’s biorhythms and planetary geochemical cycles” and “a metabolic rift, in which entropy is accelerated as energy sources become depleted without the possibility of regenerating through natural carbon cycles” (Anderson, 2016, p. xiv). Sacco presents an alternative set of energies, energies of production and work that are more in tune with the energies of the land. His own images reflect such energy, pressing against each other in a productive kind of leeching across boundaries, becoming a kind of life force, bound up between pen and word, story and image. It is a manifestation of the force and energy that continues to emanate from the Dene, and which have not yet been extracted but rather transformed into new forms of politics and cultural expression, ones that exist in a precarious but productive balance between older cycles, practices and imaginaries, and new ones.

They are, moreover, energies that are “slow” because they are out of synch with the energies of extractive capitalism. As Jared Gardner points out, the comic form for Sacco “opens up opportunities for representing experiences of time outside the dominant ‘proper’ time of global capitalism and its networks” (Gardner, 2015, p. 36). The slow nature of the creative process fits his subjects, those “who by the standards of modernity have no story to tell, precisely because they have no future towards which to move” (Ibid., p. 23-24). Such temporal engagements, exacerbated as Gardner points out because he dates every page, means that “Sacco’s journalism is always ‘late,’ the processes of travel, interviews, photographs and recordings, transcriptions, and, of course, the meticulously crosshatched drawings with often highly detailed architectural and environmental backgrounds staggering and fracturing the ‘news cycle’ in manifold ways” (Ibid., p. 27). Rather than presenting the Dene as having no future, however, Paying the Land depicts a community on its own threshold, the future of which might but does not have to be the landscapes of Days of Destruction, Days of
Revolt. If the fractured panels in this earlier work, Banita argues, depict “the disintegrating social fabric of mining communities” by presenting “no sense of rhythm, expectation, or advance” amidst a landscape “of drainage and fatigue” (Banita, 2015, p. 106-107), then Paying the Land presents an alternative entropy, one still embedded in the land.

**Obdurate Energies: *La guerra por el agua***

Peru continues to be one of the world’s leading exporters of mined goods and since mining forms such a significant part of the country’s economy it is, as in Canada, tied up with discourses of national development and identity, whereby to be against extractivism is to be “anti-Peruvian” (Boudewign, 2020, p. 190). But with an increase in mining activities and the concurrent impact on local, principally indigenous, rural-based communities, Peru has also seen significant growth in protests against mining activities in recent decades, a number of which, such as the 2009 Bagua massacre during the second presidency of Alan García, have resulted in the violent deaths of activists and protesters. Alexander Dunlap has indicated how, in the wake of the conflict with Sendero Luminoso, it has been indigenous groups and environmental protesters who have been treated as “subversives,” the discourse of presenting anti-mining protests as a kind of post-Sendero terrorism, which is tied up with racism towards indigenous people, has resulted in the justification for repressive state or state-sanctioned violence (Dunlap, 2019, p. 14-16). Elected president in 2021, Pedro Castillo has spoken of the need to increase taxation on the multi-national conglomerate companies that dominate the mining industry, and he has managed to negotiate a truce with those protesting the Chinese-owned Las Bambas mine. But large-scale mining is embedded in the Peruvian landscape and economy and it is difficult to see an easy resolution to tensions over extraction.

In this section, I look at how two comics have addressed protests related to one of these mining operations: Southern Mining Corporation’s Tía María copper mine near Cocachacra in the province of Ayacucho, an agricultural area dominated by an agrarian economy. I will focus on the 2016 webcomic *La guerra por el agua* alongside the subsequent paper copy version released in 2018, both written by Nelly Luna and drawn by Jesús Cossio. The title of the work highlights the way mining operations have created a conflict over water, part of the natural resource commons that exist around mining extraction. Water in the Tambo valley is vital to the agricultural activities of the region. It is, as the webcomic demonstrates, flow, movement and energy, the nourishing life force of the plants and people that inhabit the area. As Part 3 of the webcomic makes clear, Cocachacra is an agricultural town and locals decry the lack of state support for that sector of the economy, protesting that “they forget that agriculture also combats rural poverty”.

*La guerra por el agua* makes the transnational reach of Southern’s mining operations clear. At the start of Part 2 of the webcomic, a series of maps highlights how the company is owned by a Mexican, registered in Delaware and active in the US, Mexico, Chile and different parts of Peru. Yet the comic also highlights how such multi-national corporations are embedded in local communities and economies. Mining companies frequently justify their operations based on increases in local employment and reinvestment via taxation. But as *La guerra por el agua* flags up, taxation is often
contested, with the precise nature and scope of tax breaks and figures relating to public works undertaken by the companies often hidden. The paper comic also includes a graph to demonstrate the fall in infrastructural investment and tax contributions by mining companies in Peru (Luna and Cossio, 2018, p. 6).

But despite the scale of such operations, if both the webcomic and paper comic include imposing images of a nearby open cast mine at Cerro Verde, trucks passing the huge hole in the ground as if it were a vortex sucking in empty vehicles only to spit them out laden with extracted materials, a whirl of energetic contamination presented as Tía María’s possible future, the operations at the latter are largely invisible. After setting out its vision of the conflict, the webcomic concludes with a final image of Cocachacra accompanied by the reflection that “recent news focuses on increases in the price of copper and the drought in the south. The Tambo Valley conflict is almost entirely absent from the news”. Moreover, when one of the researchers tries to visit the site he is stopped at a barrier, and the operation remains hidden behind an outcrop of rock. And on the map which spreads over the two central pages of the paper comic, a page-territory that depicts the narrative spatiality of the conflict and the way that it affects different communities around the area, the mining operations are barely visible. Instead, the agricultural land is the focus, stretching away on both sides of the river, the statue of the rural labourer found in one of the squares in Cocachacra flagged up in a circular frame in the centre of the page.

Image 1: Map of Cocachacra and surrounding area


Near the middle of the map are the figures of Melchora and Mauro, the aging couple who are a recurring presence in La guerra por el agua and who are at the heart of the comics’ take on resource extraction. That does not always appear to be the case, since both web and paper comics include many images of the protests against the mining
operations: the web comic plays the sounds of protest, the chanting and shouting, the pop of firearms and teargas shells, over the images of the protestors; it shows how the protestors use slings to fight back against the riot police, as if they were David fighting Goliath (Southern is described as “a mining giant”); Part 4 depicts a makeshift tribunal taking place on the back of two open-bed trucks. All these bodies comprise a wave of protest, the energetic transformation of anger into embodied presence. They are, in turn, confronted with the violent energies of the state: Part 2 of the webcomic concludes with an image of a riot policeman pointing his firearm at the reader, the same figure that dominates the front page of the paper comic; and on the second page of the latter two frames show the riot police firing on the protestors, the tear gas canister traversing the two panels like a violent flow of energy.

Image 2: Demonstrators protesting the Tía María mine

Those protesting against Tía María, who were aware of the Southern’s impact in other areas of Peru (Dunlap, 2019, p. 15), as if such mining activities were themselves leeching across the country, echo Moreno Parra’s analysis of environmental racism in Ecuador, speaking of the mine as a “slow death” and the company “slowly killing us” (cited in Dunlap, 2019, p. 15). Dunlap describes Southern’s operations in Tambo valley, which includes “erecting enclosures, hiring mine security personnel, conducting drill tests and attempting to legally grab water resources to begin mineral exploration” as a kind of “counterinsurgency” that tries “to slowly and continuously socially engineer the political acceptance of the Tía María mine” (ibid., p. 23).

Melchora and Mauro represent those made invisible by the actions of Southern. In that sense, there is a testimonial quality to the comic’s treatment of the aging couple, the speech bubbles of the couple spatialising their voices on the page. The couple illustrates what Nixon calls the “imaginative displacement” of the “unimagined communities internal to the space of the nation-state, communities whose vigorously
unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development” (Nixon, 2011, p. 150). La guerra por el agua here contests the “indirect bureaucratic and media violence that creates and sustains the conditions for administered invisibility” through which “communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory” (ibid., p. 151).

29 But Melchora and Mauro also represent something else since they do not participate in the protests, a point the print copy makes twice in two pages (Luna and Cossio, 2018, p. 2-3). Though they (nor the comics themselves) are opposed to the strikes and marches, Melchora and Mauro rather present an alternative politics of obdurateness. They are embedded in the land, a kind of temporal longevity that has its own force. The comic certainly does not romanticise their existence – “sometimes you don’t earn anything’ they observe – but their existence is resolute. The images depict Melchora’s wrinkled fingers, highlighting her physical connection to the land that has inscribed itself on her over the course of years working the soil: ‘Melchora Tacure tries to remove the earth embedded under her fingernails’.

Image 3: Melchora working the land

© Jesús Cossio, Nelly Luna Amancio and Ojo Público, 2016.

30 In the face of the accelerated time of extraction, theirs is an extended time: “Far from the events of that afternoon’s gathering, Melchora and Mauro carry on working their parcel of land. They’ve spent over eight hours removing weeds”. On one page in the paper comic they stand in the bottom frame looking at their terrain but also towards the insert maps above them that depict the reach of the mining company. They stand on the right of the frame looking left with their backs to us, arresting us as we have to stop and look back against the flow of the reading gaze. They recur as eternal figures, working the land to the backdrop of the social protests, the smoke from their two small
bonfires rising constantly into the air. Here too the webcomic plays its part, constantly involving the reader in a process of movement and stasis, progress and repetition. Melchora and Mauro’s movements when they till the land are on a loop: their repeated motions intensify the intransigent habits of the couple, the repeated energies that are constantly transforming one kind of energy into another.

**Conclusion**

31 The comics of *La guerra por el agua*, which are much shorter in length and available for free, not insignificantly for a graphic work that has an explicit social function, evidently have significant differences with *Paying the Land*, a hardback book-length work produced over the course of more than three years. But despite these and other differences, both works have a great deal in common with the engagement with communities affected by mining and by the emphasis that they put on the (in)visibilities of extractivism and about forms of energy, not least in terms of slowness. The figures of Melchora and Mauro in *La guerra por el agua* and the Dene with whom Sacco chooses to conclude *Paying the Land* are all figures of persistence who present alternative ways of thinking about energy and engaging with the land.

32 That Sacco chose to end *Paying the Land* with sequences of Dene cultural practices and habits serves as a repose to an earlier page in his book that queries his very presence researching communities of extraction. Cultural knowledge, he points out, is often preserved by elders who are sometimes reluctant to share it “with outsiders that come poking around with their anthropology sticks” (Sacco, 2020, p. 107). Sacco’s presence in his graphic novels is a reminder of the subjective nature of journalism, embedding his choices and perspectives in the gathering of material. Nevertheless, Sacco’s presence in *Paying the Land* is unintrusive, confined to occasional frames, the sequence depicting the journey along the winter road, and the passage in which he is taken ice fishing, where he describes himself in typical self-deprecating, tongue-in-cheek fashion as “Joe of the North” who “has engaged with the fauna and redeemed himself in the eyes of his readers” (*Ibid.*, p. 196). These moments are light-hearted reminders, in the context of a community with such close ties to nature, the humorous disjuncture between author and land. But on the page where Sacco questions his own presence, his feelings are more complex: “why am I surprised – and indignant – when a man pulls out of an interview upon learning I won’t be compensating him?”, before he asks himself: “what’s the difference between me and an oil company? We’ve both come here to extract something” (*Ibid.*, p. 107).

33 Drawing is inherently a form of extraction, an extrapolative process by which much of what we are looking at is removed to exacerbate what we see, a kind of distillation of the visual. As both Cossio, who does not include himself in *La guerra por el agua*, and Sacco demonstrate, the difference is to what use such extraction is put, the energy into which it is transformed. Both the final images of Dene communities and the older generations of the Tambo Valley encourage us to accept the limits of (knowledge) extraction and to embrace a certain implacability, gesturing towards ways of energetic co-habitation and encounters that might be converted into new forces.
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Dunlap, Alexander, “‘Agro sí, mina NO!’ The Tía Maria copper mine, state terrorism and social war by every means in the Tambo Valley, Peru”, *Political Geography*, vol. 71, 2019, p. 1-25.


NOTES

1. All translations in the article are mine unless otherwise stated.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPIcjakI1PU, accessed 15 September 2021
3. Prior to La guerra por el agua, Cossio published another, shorter comic on neoextractivism. Conga (2019), first released in 2013, addressed those protesting the Conga mining project in Cajamarca. One of the protestors, Máxima Acuña, won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2016 for her role in the struggle against the mining corporations.

ABSTRACTS

From the oil pipelines that scar the Northwest Territories transforming the lives of First Nation communities to the forest fires that rampage across the Gran Chaco due to soy deforestation, the devastating impact of neoextractivism is writ large in the Americas. To the backdrop of ecological devastation and the struggle for natural resources, local peoples across the region are faced with the impact of cultural upheaval and displacement brought about by faceless multinational corporations. In this article, I address the way two comics artists have used the graphic form to address neoextractivism, highlighting how investigative comics can create counterimaginaries of exploitation by relating image-stories told by local inhabitants. In 2016, working in collaboration with Nelly Luna Amancio and Ojo Público, the Peruvian Jesús Cossio published the webcomic La guerra por el agua, a study of the impact of the Tía María mine in Ayacucho, southern Peru, an operation owned by the Mexican company Southern Copper, later also released as a newspaper-sized pamphlet version in 2018. And in 2020 the US-Maltese Joe Sacco – who spoke at the launch of La guerra por el agua – released his graphic work Paying the Land, an exploration of the upheaval caused to the Dene in the Mackenzie River Valley by both the Canadian state and mining enterprises. Though both journalistic works are cut through by social protest and political wranglings, they simultaneously demonstrate the power of the
micropolitical – in which we might include the comic form itself – to transgress the narratives and imaginaries of big capital.

Des pipelines pétroliers qui défigurent les Territoires du Nord-Ouest et modifient les modes de vie des communautés indigènes aux catastrophes qui dévastent le Grand Chaco, notamment la déforestation liée à la culture de soja, l’impact destructeur du néoextractivisme se ressent de manière extrême dans les Amériques. Sur un arrière-plan de dévastation écologique et de conflit autour des ressources naturelles, ces régions subissent de plein fouet l’impact des bouleversements culturels et des déplacements de populations provoqués par des sociétés multinationales anonymes. Cet article analyse la façon dont deux auteurs de bande dessinée ont utilisé ce moyen d’expression pour aborder la question du néoextractivisme et montré comment la bande dessinée de reportage peut créer des contre-imaginaires de l’exploitation, en mettant en scène des récits en images racontés par les populations locales. En 2016, avec Nelly Luna Amancio et Ojo Público, l’auteur péruvien Jesús Cossio a publié un webcomic intitulé *La guerra por el agua*, qui étudie l’impact de la mine Tía María à Ayacucho, dans le sud du Pérou, détenue par la société mexicaine Southern Copper. En 2020, l’auteur américain-maltais Joe Sacco a publié *Paying the Land*, qui retrace les bouleversements subis par les Indiens dénés de la vallée de la Mackenzie (Colombie-Britannique) du fait du gouvernement canadien et des sociétés minières. Ces deux œuvres construites autour de protestations collectives et de querelles politiques démontrent en même temps la capacité du micropolitique (au sein duquel on peut intégrer le médium de la bande dessinée) à remettre en question les récits et les imaginaires du grand capital.

Desde los oleoductos que desfiguran los Territorios del Noroeste transformando las vidas de las comunidades de las primeras naciones, hasta los incendios forestales que arrasan el Gran Chaco debido a la deforestación de la soja, el impacto del neoextractivismo en las Américas es devastador. Con el telón de fondo de la catástrofe ecológica y la lucha por los recursos naturales, los pueblos locales de la región se enfrentan al impacto de los trastornos culturales y al desplazamiento provocado por las corporaciones multinacionales sin rostro. Este artículo examina imágenes-historias de habitantes locales afectados por el neoextractivismo y recopiladas por dos artistas de cómics que han utilizado el “cómic de investigación” para crear contra-imaginares a los de la explotación. En 2016, en colaboración con Nelly Luna Amancio y Ojo Público, el peruano Jesús Cossio publicó el webcómic *La guerra por el agua*, un estudio sobre el impacto de la mina Tía María en Ayacucho, al sur de Perú, propiedad de la empresa mexicana Cobre del Sur. Y en 2020, el estadounidense-maltés Joe Sacco, que fue uno de los presentadores de *La guerra por el agua* durante su lanzamiento, publicó su obra gráfica *Paying the Land*, una exploración sobre los daños causados a los indígenas del Dene, en el valle del río Mackenzie, tanto por el estado canadiense como por empresas mineras. Ambos trabajos están atravesados por temas como la protesta social y las disputas políticas. Pero más que eso, ambos demuestran cómo el poder de lo micropolítico, una de cuyas expresiones es el comic, es efectivo para cuestionar narrativas e imaginarios del gran capital.

**INDEX**

**Palabras claves:** cómics periodísticos, neoextractivismo, violencia lenta, Joe Sacco, Jesús Cossio, Perú, Canadá

**Keywords:** comics journalism, neoextractivism, slow violence, Joe Sacco, Jesús Cossio, Peru, Canada

**Mots-clés:** BD-journalisme, néo-extractivisme, “violence lente”, Joe Sacco, Jesús Cossio, Pérou, Canada
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