

Grounded Normativity and Living with Meaning: A Comparison of *Ducks* and *Moon of the Crusted Snow*

Anna Krieger

As the Western world has developed, there have been many changes to the way people live. Many First Nations communities have been disrupted and uprooted from their homes, and even some settlers have been forced to move away due to the depletion of natural resources in their area that used to provide their incomes. These types of changes, as well as the human greed for wealth and domination, have caused a decline in grounded normative practices that are traditional among First Nation Peoples, and an increase in the exploitation of the natural environment, other people, and even ourselves. The graphic novel *Ducks*, by Kate Beaton, details the reality of a Nova Scotian woman living and working in the Alberta oil sands for two years in order to pay off her student debt, due to a lack of opportunity back home. While she is there, Kate faces the reality of what it is like to live with those who, like her, have come from afar and are disconnected from their homes and families to work in a rich, but highly exploitative industry. Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* explores the effects that the loss of power has on a (previously relocated) isolated northern Anishinaabe community that has already been struggling with the damage to their culture and way of life caused by colonialism. Tensions between members of the First Nation rise as outsiders are welcomed into the community, but traditional practices allow the reserve to stay afloat. In *Ducks*, the lack of grounded normativity creates a disconnect between a person's sense of self and the way that they live. Meanwhile, in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, living in a grounded normative way allows people to feel connected to their true selves. Through analyzing these two texts, it can be concluded that a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with one's own self can be developed through the practices of grounded normativity.

Grounded normativity is described as the process of living in an accountable and non-damaging way among "a web of human and other-than-human relations" (Daigle). This concept develops a sense of connection with a person's self and community. In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Evan displays grounded normative living. For example Rice describes an occasion in which Evan offered tobacco and prayer for a moose that he hunted, and the narrator says that it "made him feel good to believe that he was giving back in some way" (4). It is also mentioned that Evan will give much of the moose meat to others in his community (Rice 6). Both of these acts of grounded

normativity help Evan feel at peace with himself and his life, and lift up his community. On the other hand, in *Ducks*, Katie does not have this same connection to the land or community. In one instance, she steps outside to find a three legged fox, and ends up yelling and throwing snow at it until it leaves (Beaton 82-3). Upon first notice of the fox, her expression changes from surprise to anger (Beaton 82) and in the gutter we can see Katie projecting herself onto the fox, as the damage done to it represents the damage that is being done to Katie as she works, isolated from her support system and home, in the oil field. By taking out these frustrations on the fox in the form of aggression, Katie moves further from grounded normativity and distances herself from her own mind in order to allow her to continue on in the hostile environment. It is clear that the way Katie is living versus the way Evan is living are very different, and only in the case where grounded normativity is practiced can a person find fulfillment.

Clinton N. Westman's article, "Cautionary Tales: Making and Breaking Community in the Oil Sands Region", explores Indigenous ideologies and mythologies and relates them to the northern Albertan oil sand industry and surrounding communities. One such mythological figure discussed is that of the wendigo, which is "typically conceived as a former human being who has turned into an anthropophagous monster through greed" (Westman 221). Westman suggests that "the logic of petro-capitalist extraction resembles the predatory logic of the wendigo, a dangerous (and rapidly growing) entity that has lost its humanity and sense of relatedness to others" (221). It follows from Westman's article that a lack of grounded normativity, such as that present in the oil sands industry, can cause the people involved to change and become disconnected from themselves and others. Katie experiences this loss of "humanity and sense of relatedness" in *Ducks* when a worker's death is announced and the men in the meeting seem to take no notice, just continuing on with their conversations (Beaton 330). In another instance, a man tells Katie that "like three hundred of them [ducks] got stuck in a tailings pond down by syncrude or somewhere" (Beaton 328). The man then immediately returns to the topic of work. Both of these examples show how the workers' disconnect from their surroundings, and damage they are causing to the environment in the pursuit of money, have forced them to embrace the qualities of a wendigo and separate themselves from their inner nature. In *Moon of the Crusted Snow* however, life is of great meaning to those who practice grounded normativity. While Justin Scott displays wendigo-like traits, demonstrated by his ease in shooting and killing a newcomer (Rice 140), Evan depicts the opposite. For example, in regards to the bodies that have been accumulating throughout the winter, it states

that Evan “remembered exactly which person laid where, the circumstances around their death, and the day they brought them to this unfair and uncertain tomb” (Rice 194). This act of humanity is a direct result of Evan’s close ties to the community, and returning the bodies to the earth in the spring is a gesture of grounded normativity that allows people to find meaning, even in horrifying circumstances.

The article “A Place to Call Home: Identification With Dwelling, Community, and Region” by Lee Cuba and David M. Hummon explains the factors that contribute to a person’s place identity, which can be considered as “an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity” (112). Significantly, the article concludes that “dwelling-based ties” contribute significantly to creating a “sense of home” (Cuba and Hummon 126). Coupled with community and social connection, location comprises much of a person’s identity. A lack of these ties then, representing a lack of grounded normativity, can change the way that individuals view themselves, and how they treat others and the environment. Most of the characters in *Ducks* are living in a place that they do not consider home. Their relocation causes them to lack connection to their physical location, as well as the people there. This is what allows them to damage the environment, but it damages the people in the process. As a result, most people feel disconnected from themselves, as if their current job and location are not who they truly are. For example, when Katie is driving to a site with Ambrose, a coworker from Newfoundland, she asks him whether he used to be a fisherman (Beaton 113). He responds, “I’m still a fisherman. [...] I’m just here” (Beaton 113). The pause during Ambrose’s answer demonstrates the inner conflict that takes place when he, and others, are disconnected due to their lack of grounded normativity. In contrast, Evan lives in the same place he was born in in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. He feels a deep connection to his culture and self there. Rice writes: “Evan had never really wanted to leave this place. The comfort and familiarity of his community and the pull of the land made him a proud rez lifer” (20). Evan finds fulfillment in living in traditional grounded normative ways, as expressed when it says, “Evan ate southern meats when he had to, but he felt detached from that food” (Rice 6). This sense of detachment relates to the sense of detachment experienced by the workers in the oil sands. When people are lacking in grounded normative practices, and they are away from their personal places of value, they become disconnected and feel unfulfilled.

By living in a grounded normative way, people are able to connect more deeply with themselves and find greater meaning in their lives. In *Ducks*, Katie displays outbursts of emotion,

the camp has become desensitized to destruction, and everyone's identity is in conflict with their lives. These things are a result of a lack of grounded normativity. Meanwhile, in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Evan displays grounded normativity in his respect for the dead, traditional ways of living off the land, and desire to help his community wherever he can. While the characters in *Ducks* are disconnected from themselves, Evan feels fulfilled in his way of life. This argument can be extended to everyone in the world today, as it is clear that maintaining positive reciprocal relationships with the land and our communities would create greater harmony among people and less damage to the natural world.

Works Cited

- Daigle, Michelle. "Indigeneity." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Audrey Kobayashi, 2nd ed., Elsevier Science & Technology, 2020. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGljbGU6NTg4MTE=?aid=103278>
- Westman, Clinton N. "Cautionary Tales: Making and Breaking Community in the Oil Sands Region." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 211–31. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/canajsocicahican.38.2.211>
- Cuba, Lee, and David M. Hummon. "A Place to Call Home: Identification with Dwelling, Community, and Region." *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1993, pp. 111–31. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121561>