Extraction

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IN his introduction to *Mineral Statistics for 1853 and 1854*, Robert Hunt, keeper of the mining record office for the British Geological Survey, explains his methods for compiling data on Britain's coal. He consulted export lists to determine "the quantity of coals shipped from the different ports," and railway companies to get accurate numbers on "inland distribution." He visited "every coal-producing county in England and Wales" to make "personal inquiries," and received crucial information from "the owners and lessees of the collieries."[1] Hunt tracked British coal as it was vended and carried across the country and the world, but missing from his survey are the pits from which the coal was extracted, including abandoned pits that were mined out. Though mining is an exhaustive industry, such sites were not included in these volumes until far into the twentieth century. The introduction to the British Geological Survey's 2014 *Directory of Mines and Quarries* discusses the Victorian beginnings of the series and notes that while "some of the information being collected is still the same," the older volumes did not track defunct sites of resource extraction, "with the result that the information on any site where extraction had ceased was lost." It was not until "the late 1990s" that BGS began "to keep details" on "inactive mineral workings."[2]

A century and a half of inattention to inactive workings illustrates one of the key ideas captured by the term *extraction* in the Victorian era and beyond. Samuel Johnson defined the verb "to extract" in his 1755 dictionary as "to take from something of which the thing taken was a part."[3] But if mined materials are "a part" of Earth before their extraction, they are something else after their removal—something countable, valuable. What counts in extraction are the bits of Earth/earth that are removed, sold, and transported; the extractive zone in which they were embedded does not. A critique of this dynamic has emerged in recent postcolonial writing about extraction, typically

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centering on carbon-based fuels but theorizing from that primary example broader relations within colonialism and capitalism that produce the resource imbalance between the Global South and North. Latin American studies has been a key site for such work; Thea Riofrancos, for example, discusses *extractivismo* as a concept that places ongoing "struggles over natural resources, territory, and indigenous sovereignty" in the context of a longer history of imperial conquest.[4]

In Victorian studies, the term *extraction* helps us express the nineteenth-century emergence of a society fully reliant on finite underground materials and helps us describe the material and value relations at the heart of imperialism and at the heart of the provincial–metropole dynamic. I have also argued in my book, *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion*, that there is a pronounced tension between the nineteenth-century rise of industrialized mining and the concurrent emergence of ecological science, one that the term *extraction* helps us see.[5] For while *extraction* presumes the ability to withdraw—neatly, completely—one piece from the receptacle of nature, *ecology* suggests a complex of interdependences from which no single part can be removed in isolation.

Much of the recent attention to extraction in Victorian studies and beyond returns us to the sites of removal, to the extraction zones or sacrifice zones left behind when commodities of value are withdrawn, tallied, and sold.[6] While *extraction* is most commonly used in regard to underground mineral resources, the term can also refer to other natural resources; Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, for example, define extraction as "the forced removal of raw materials and life forms from the [E]arth's surface, depths, and biosphere."[7] Recent critics such as Macarena Gómez-Barris employ an even more expansive use of the term, identifying hydroelectricity and even spiritual tourism as extractive practices. Critics such as Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel have cautioned, however, against "the risk of conceptual creep and adjectival ubiquity," advocating that "we hold on to extraction" in its "specifically material and ecological sense" as a term that names a disjuncture between extracted resources and "the lifeworlds in which they are embedded."[8]

In Victorian literature, England's coal mines, copper mines, quarries, and other sites of extraction have a hefty footprint, but so does the British extractive industry that was increasingly moving to the colonial frontier. Overseas extraction provides an influx of cash in many a Victorian novel set in Britain, as in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady*

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Audley's Secret (1862) or Anthony Trollope's *John Caldigate* (1879), while exhausted sites of resource extraction became crucial settings in other novels set in Britain, such as Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) or George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). As the century wore on, more novels imagined buried treasure in the colonial periphery, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) or H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), while other novels depicted active mining sites, colonial and provincial, as in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1908) or D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913).[9]

As these examples suggest, literature, language, and discourse actively participated in the creation of an extraction-based society and of ideas of an extractable Earth; they helped develop extractivism, the set of ideas and beliefs that underlay extraction-based society. Sometimes literature challenged aspects of it too: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" (1843) stoked public outrage about child labor in the mines; John Ruskin's "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884) raged against industrial smoke; and Dinabandhu Mitra's drama *Neel Darpan* (1860), as Sukanya Banerjee has shown, depicted English planters in India "whose sole interest [is] in extracting maximum profit" from indigo plantations.[10] Written in the immediate aftermath of the emergence of the first fossil-fuel-based society, Victorian literature is a crucial archive for understanding extractivism and how it was both normalized and challenged across the British imperial world.[11]

Notes

1. Robert Hunt, *Mineral Statistics for 1853 and 1854*, in *Memoirs of the Geological Survey of Great Britain* (London: Longman, 1855). On Hunt, see Alan Pearson, "Hunt, Robert," *Dictionary of National Biography* (September 23, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/14203.
2. Cameron, D. G., T. Bide, S. F. Parry, A. S. Parker, and J. M. Mankelow, *Directory of Mines and Quarries, 2014*, 10th ed. (Keyworth, Nottingham: British Geological Survey, 2014): i.
3. "extract, n.s.," *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson (1755; accessed January 31, 2023), https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/extract_ns.

4. Thea Riofrancos, "Extractivismo Unearthed: A Genealogy of a Radical Discourse," *Cultural Studies* 31, nos. 2–3 (2017): 278.
5. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
6. On extraction zones, see Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). On sacrifice zones, see my "Expandability and Expendability: Reading the Sacrifice Zone," forthcoming in *Textual Practice* (2024).
7. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "Operations of Capital," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (2015): 2.
8. Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, "What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?" *Textual Practice* 35, no. 3 (2021): 510.
9. For more on these textual examples, see my *Extraction Ecologies* as well as "Extraction, Exhaustion, and the Sensation Novel of the 1860s," in *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1860s*, edited by Pamela Gilbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).
10. Sukanya Banerjee, "Drama, Ecology, and the Ground of Empire: The Play of Indigo," in *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, edited by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 27.
11. For other Victorian literary criticism about extraction, see, for example, Philip Steer, *Settler Colonialism in Victorian Literature: Economics and Political Identity in the Networks of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and Michael Tondre, "Conrad's Carbon Imaginary: Oil, Imperialism, and the Victorian Petro-Archive," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 48, no. 1 (2020): 57–90.