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Picturing Oil: A Tour of the Canadian Petroscape in Words and Images

Claire Omhovère♦

Indian anthropologist and writer Amitav Ghosh was the first to articulate the paradoxes of "oil's literary barrenness" in "Petrofictions," a review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* initially published in *The New Republic* in 1992, but which was to reach a much wider audience as one of the prose pieces collected a decade later in *The Iman and the Indian* (2002). Ghosh's essay queried the negligible attention the oil industry received in Western literature over the same period, a little more than a century, when the extraction of fossil fuels, their exploitation and consumption deeply altered geopolitical forces, the structures of an economy gone global, but also the state of the planet's climate and environment. With the dawning of the "Anthropocene" (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) the expanding domain of the energy humanities has been witnessing the multiplication of neologisms tailored on Ghosh's title. Such compounds as "petromodernity," "petrocultures," and "petroscapes" attest to the lubricity of oil, a material resource whose ubiquitous uses seep into the nature/culture divide, dissolve superficial oppositions, and ease critical frictions. Oil is an operator whose transforming effects need to be made visible, if we are to understand its impact on the societies that have grown dependent upon it, and unleash the imaginaries necessary to inspire an energetic transition (Wilson *et al.,* 2017). Art certainly has a role to play in this matter, as made clear since the turn of the new millennium by unprecedented developments in ecocriticism, in parallel with the production of artistic work that has sought to bring oil and its attendant logics into view (LeMenager, 2011). The present article looks at this epochal change through the lens of the representation of the Canadian oil fields in fiction and in photography, from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. The same period saw petroleum become the staple resource that sheltered Canada's economy from some of the major downturns faced by the rest of the Western world, obliterating, especially in contexts of recession, the environmental cost of its extraction, refining

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and marketing, and the long-term effects those processes have on climate-change (Longfellow in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 28).

As early as in the eighteenth century, fur-traders mentioned the tar seeping from the banks of the Athabasca River, a substance the Indigenous people used to caulk their canoes. In his *Journals* (1801), explorer Alexander Mackenzie also gave a memorable description of the bituminous fountains found in the same region. It was not until the early 1920s, however, that experiments were made to separate bitumen from the water, sand, silt, and clay with which it is mixed in its natural state. The production of conventional oil developed on an industrial scale after Imperial Oil #1 well came in a gusher in Leduc, Alberta in 1947 (Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 80). But the commercial exploitation of the tar sands, the process that comes under the heading of "unconventional" or "extreme oil,"[1] did not begin until another two decades, on account of the sophisticated technology necessary to extract bitumen from its medium. The production then accelerated in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis (Takach, 2017: 4). The country was infamously labelled a "petro-state" during the years when conservative Prime Minister Steven Harper held office (2006-2015), and the interests of the oil-producing sector came to weigh on decisions taken at the federal level.2 Today Canada is a heavyweight in the global oil sector, a position secured thanks to the immense reserves stocked in the tar-sand deposits of Northern Alberta, "the world's third largest recoverable source of oil" (Takach, 2017: 3), behind Saudi Arabia and Venezuela (Wilson *et al.,* 2017: 83).

If it was not for the paradox Ghosh identified, oil should have seeped into countless plots dealing with the history of settlement, the colonial and economic exploitation of some regions of Canada until the present. And indeed, it has very rarely been the case. These exceptions are nevertheless worth considering, should one wish to understand the new relations to space that become visible with the petroscape. The neologism has an alluring conciseness about it, which does not necessarily entail clarity of meaning. If *petro*scape foregrounds the centrality of oil in verbal or iconographic representations otherwise commonly identified as *land*scape, the substitution of one word for another preserves "the intensely visual idea" that became attached to landscape in the course of Western history (Cresswell, 2007: 135). Visuality and the power relations embedded in the gaze place the petroscape within the orbit of W.J.T. Mitchell's definition of landscape as "a medium in the fullest sense

1 "The extremely heavy crude that saturates oil sands is categorized as 'unconventional' because unlike conventional oil deposits, bitumen cannot simply be pumped from the ground and transported to a refinery by pipeline" (Barney in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 82). On "extreme oil" and the technologies of in-situ mining, fracking and deepwater drilling, see Longfellow in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 32-33; Takach, 2016: 24.

2 The term refers to "[a] polity that is subordinated and restructured according to the needs of either the Big Oil multinationals or the global political economy of oil or both. Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Venezuela are among the most common cited examples" (Mookerjea in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 331).

of the word. It is a material 'means' (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values" (2002: 14).

Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky notoriously helped bring oil into public view with his "Oil" series of the 2000s (Pauli, 2003). His use of the industrial sublime drew international attention to what he termed the "manufactured landscapes" (Pauli, 2003: 10) of the Canadian North, at a time of rising ecological anxiety regarding the environmental cost of fossil fuel extraction and its impact on global warming (Wilson *et al.,* 2017: 58, 225). Burtynsky's glossy photographs capture the *fin-de-siècle* environmental disaster with a flamboyance that has eclipsed earlier appearances of oil in less spectacular venues, notably in literary genres viewed as minor according to the conventional hierarchy that ranks parody and short fiction below the novel. In the short forms this article will discuss, oil first registers as an index of the local, a substance that leaves the stain of utility on the sites where it is extracted and on the people involved in the process. In contrast to the natural resources Canada's staple economy came to rely on,[3] most prominently fish, fur, and timber, it has been difficult to reconcile oil with the image of the pristine wilderness the country embraced to the point of "nationalising" it in the course of its post-colonial history (O'Brian & White, 2007). Reverence for the wild acted as a powerful unifying factor across the ethnic diversity of Canada's population, fostering a common sentiment for spaces conveniently viewed as empty of a human presence, untouched, and therefore available for the taking (O'Brian & White, 2007: 4). Industrial landscapes, and petroscapes in particular, make that appropriation visible through the infrastructures that turn the land into a productive asset, the alterations oil operations cause on site, and their impact on all living forms: "Oil," Amanda Boetzkes observes, "now appears in a profusion of media images of pipeline explosions, spills, tailing ponds, and monumental 'landscrapes,' amid headlines of cancers, toxic groundwater, and the ongoing problem of carbon emission" (in Wilson *et al.,* 2017: 223-224). The list enhances the instability that goes hand in hand with the transformative properties of oil. Because hydrocarbons are both viscous and volatile, they flow slowly, imperceptibly, even before their spilling or flaring out hits the headlines. Their molecules seep into organisms, challenging containment, the limits between the outside and the inside, but also between active agent and passive object, two distinctions which also pertain to the mediations of landscape and the control the representation of an external reality seemingly confers upon the gazing subject.

3 Economist Harold Innis coined the phrase "staples trap" to qualify the dependency the exploitation of staple resources induced in colonial economies (Barney in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 90).

To understand the mutations the representation of oil has introduced into the medium of landscape, this article will discuss Ghosh's paradox in a Canadian context, before moving on to analyse the subversive notes the surfacing of oil introduced into the pastoral landscape of settler literature, but also in short fiction representative of the minority literature of the 1980s and more recent Indigenous art. The petroscape foregrounds the material traces left by oil extraction in *situ* and *in visu*, through stains that blur the landscape's composition lines and the clarity of vision they seemingly afford. The hypothesis guiding the investigation is that the petroscape enhances contiguities and continuities between the without and the within that problematize the very nature of the observer's visual pleasure by challenging the securing of an external position.

Questioning the Literary Invisibility of Oil

In "Petrofiction" the question bothering Ghosh is not how to give visibility to a substance "hidden in plain sight," as the editors of *Petrocultures* aptly put it (2017: 5), but rather what blocks the *literary* representation of oil in its most blatant, material forms. "The truth," Ghosh provisionally concludes, "is that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression" (2002, 79), an admission confirming a sentiment Bertold Brecht uttered as early as in 1929: "Petroleum resists the five-act form."[4] In the interval, it is as if almost a century of aesthetic revolutions has led to nothing—at least when it comes to oil in the age of oil.

Because Ghosh is essentially concerned with literary form, his analysis diverges from previous explanations formulated in the 1980s in the emerging field of cultural studies. Raymond Williams memorably wrote that "a working country is hardly ever a landscape" (1973: 120). The unlikeliness in the adverb hinges on the assumption that landscape possesses an aesthetic value which mere setting lacks. What turns landscape into art is a question posed by the art historian as Kenneth Clarke famously did. But what accounts for a portion of space being regarded *as* landscape supposes a different kind of interrogation, one that has social and political underpinnings, as W.J.T. Mitchell subsequently showed. Emotionally attached to the coal mining area in South Wales where he was born, Raymond Williams could not be more aware of the power relations informing the validation of aesthetic tastes, the appreciation or the dismissal of certain sites tainted by the evidence of too much labour. In North America, critical geographers of the same Marxist, materialist persuasion as Williams similarly underscored that "landscape representations are exceptionally effective in erasing the social struggle that defines relations of work […] the thing that landscape tries to hide, in its insistent fetishisation, are the relationships that go into its making"

4 Brecht was reacting to a particularly unfortunate adaptation to the stage of an oil strike in Albania (Mathur, 2019: 48).

(qtd in Wylie, 2007: 107). The industrial landscapes of Northern Europe came to be viewed with various degrees of appreciation as the Industrial Revolution was gathering momentum, actively transforming the countries where it originated. With writers like Disraeli, Gaskell and Dickens, the language of the sublime that expressed the awe and terror felt in front of the grandeur of nature was diverted to translate the turmoil of emotions aroused by the prodigies of the industrial age, the result of human ingenuity and an apparently boundless technological progress (Rancière, 2020).

But oil operations must be distinguished from the coal, textile, or steel industries whose long shadow extends over the novels written in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, much in the same way as colonial profits and setbacks bear over the development of countless Victorian plots. When Ghosh wonders at the invisibility of oil in Western fiction, he does not stop at the local obliteration of the human labour that finds its counterpart in the fetishisation of its outcome, the pleasurable view (occasionally doubling as a matrimonial prospect) that confirms the status of the gazing subject taken as an individual or as a class. Neither does he dwell on the material conditions of the extraction and transportation that made oil less spectacular than earlier extractive industries, although this is arguably another important factor.[5] Determining what aesthetic form may give visibility to oil, the economies that strive on it and the effects of its extraction and consumption remain unsolved questions to which Ghosh returns in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. In this book-length essay, Ghosh extends his earlier observations to consider "global warming's resistance to the arts" (2016: 73). Although the discussion begins with a plural, the canonical genre of the novel is quickly singled out as the epitome of the great English tradition inherited from the eighteenth-century "Age of Reason," and the very locus of this resistance. Ghosh is writing from within another great tradition, the epics of Vedic India, which have lost none of their formidable ability to evoke larger-than-life forces in their on-going, everyday performances. In his view, the complex entanglements found in the epic have no counterpart in the European novel, an art of selection that rests upon the singling out of an individual destiny envisaged in a specific period and setting. Ghosh argues that "boundedness of 'place'" and a "limited time-horizon" are indeed both necessary to anchor the fictional universe of the novel in an "abstracted yet recognizable reality" (2016: 61, 62). When the consequences of climate change manifest themselves under the guise of tornadoes, tsunamis or unprecedented droughts, those events are so "freakish," Ghosh continues, as to exceed what can be apprehended rationally:

5 The underground pipeline, in particular, has played a decisive role guaranteeing a seemingly clean, safe, smooth transportation of hydrocarbons that leaves no visible trace on the regions it runs through (Simpson in Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 287-318).

> To introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as "the Gothic," "the romance," or "the melodrama," and have now come to be called "fantasy," "horror," and "science fiction". (2016: 24)

His analogy with the estate novel leaves little doubt as to what literary model Ghosh has in mind when distinguishing what can be conceived from what can be imagined. Whereas the conceivable can be accommodated within the scope of the realist novel, manifestations bordering on the irrational have been relegated to sub-genres the novel eclipsed as it rose to the firmament of the national literatures of the nineteenth century.

The fragmentation, selection and distancing necessary to the composition of the realist novel has its analogue, Ghosh proposes, in the mental operations through which European cartographers, surveyors and architects set about to map and actively transform the territories colonized by imperial powers. His argument builds on Panofksy and Cosgrove who both showed that the optical inventions of the Renaissance made it possible to observe the world from afar and develop elaborate techniques of abstraction that evolved into symbolic forms. More than a painter's trick, Alberti's perspectival construction placed the Western subject in the central, dominant position from which the rest of the world could be segmented, measured, comprehended and ruled. Like Michel Serres[6] and Bruno Latour, Ghosh therefore warns against the segmentations that inform Western thought, in which he discerns:

> a habit of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities; […] break[ing] problems into smaller and smaller puzzles until a solution presented itself. This is a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces ("externalities") that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand: it is a perspective that renders the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable. (2016: 56)

The challenge interconnectedness poses to the analytical method is also the main obstacle encountered when trying to apprehend oil, an energy form that permeates all aspects of contemporary life. Although petroleum is a key asset in Canada's

6 Serres, especially, critiqued the epistemological limits of analysis, the breaking of a greater whole into its components, from the Greek verb ἀναλύειν, to unloose, or undo (*OED*). His essays demonstrate that the logic of segmentation and exclusion based on the principle of *tertium non datur* is of little help when studying such objects as time and information. Their fluid, composite, heterogeneous properties require approaches that conceive of opposites as partially porous alterities, thereby taking the impure into the equation.

staple economy, the material conditions of its exploitation have been increasingly removed from public view, with the development of unconventional oil away from urban centres, in remote regions the national imagination has been treasuring as wilderness preserves. After extraction, the transformation of oil and its countless outcomes ("speed, plastic and the luxuries of capitalism," Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 15) make it at once ubiquitous and impossible to separate from the affluent lifestyles that have grown dependent upon it. The complexities of oil are therefore compounded by complicities that resist the processes of fragmentation, selection and distancing which analytical thought and mimesis both share. Oil's interrelation with the living is admittedly the main obstacle its representation faces in the realist novel. But is this equally true of narrative modes that are less dependent on verisimilitude, the metonymies of realism and the selection required to sustain a realistic effect?

Envisioning Oil outside the Novel

Ironically, Ghosh himself could be held at fault for overlooking local variations in the cultural diversity of the English-speaking world. Because of his concern for the hegemony of the European novel and the alternative traditions realism marginalized, there is little reason why Ghosh should have paused in his argument to acknowledge the discreet yet recurrent attention oil has received north of the 49th Parallel, especially from regional writers. Regionalism has been an enduring feature in the formation of Canadian literature on account of the country's immense, contrasted geography, and a colonial history that fostered strong peripheral identities away from central Ontario. Regional expressions have remarkably weathered homogenization in the age of globalization, but their persistence has also encountered contrasted critical responses. Held in suspicion as an enduring form of provincialism—visible cracks in the edifice of the Canadian nation—regionalism has also been valued as evidence that remoteness from centres of cultural and political attraction is an asset when challenging norms, eccentricity stimulating non-conformism and creativity.

Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks* is an early illustration of the above. The book began as an academic spoof, a collection of character sketches interspersed with vignettes of Prairie life loosely strung together into a parody of the Boswellian literary biography. Published in 1947, the year when the Leduc oilfield struck a gusher for the first time, this slim volume is devoted to the fictitious life and works of a poet introduced as "the sweet songstress of Saskatchewan" (1947: 7). The insistent sibilance running through the appellation ties Binks's dissonant name to her home place, a rural province severely hit by the drought during the Depression years. In its evocation of an ungainly *genius loci*, the phrase strikes an off-key note that questions the adequacy between the lyrical and the local, between poetry and place. In the 1940s, Saskatchewan remained associated with the Dust Bowl, the unprecedented ecological disaster that put an end to dreams of settlement in this rural part of Canada: what

poetic idiom may "sing" a place into existence where the pastoral survives as a displaced colonial ideal, the intensive farming that wrought havoc in a vulnerable environment? With *Sarah Binks*, Hiebert provocatively turns the pastoral lyric upside down and taps into the mock-heroic vein to attend to the particulars of life on a Saskatchewan homestead.

The mock epic traditionally depends for its derisive effect on a hiatus between elevated diction and prosaic content. Hiebert's parody deepens the gap by foregrounding the biographer's pompous voice while the poet herself remains largely in the shadow of his commentary. The discrepancy between the voluble, self-proclaimed "Author," his elevated treatment of Binks's life and the mundane facts that caught her whimsy only prepares for another deflation when, after much delay, fragments from her poems are disclosed to illustrate the biographer's claims. This causes a double recoil, the second defla(gra)tion amplifying the first rupture in tone, as on the occasion when the "Author" recalls the great expectations the drilling for oil raised on the farm:

> It is poetic licence also which enables Sarah to describe the well as a "gusher." The actual gush, always excepting that of the Millenium Development and Exploitation Company, subsided after twenty-five minutes to a mere trickle. The oil content, which William Greenglow's field notes classify as "smear" were later corrected by more exact chemical analysis to "trace". […] Those haunting lines
>
> Should maddened pterodactyl chance to meet
> With raging crocodile,
> Then crocodile the pterodactyl eat, *etc., etc*.
>
> express more than an oil well. They speak to us of the Upper Silurian. They speak to us of the Lower Galician. They speak to us of the Plasticine, the Preluvian, the overburden, the underburden, the chert concretion, the Great Ice age. Nay, the whole super epic breathes in and breathes out the geological soul of Saskatchewan. (Hiebert, 1947: 75-76)

Not only is there hardly any oil to write about on Binks's homestead, but neither does the plonking tercet contain any of the poetic gems the reader was led to expect. The consolation for the absence of a find comes *after* the poem, in a Homeric catalogue of grandiloquent, pseudo-geological periods which, however, soon peters out. Who, or rather what is being derided here? The poetic pretensions of colonial yokels? The pedantries of donnish prose? Or the enduring fascination the geological sublime has exerted upon Canadian writers (Mason, 2013: 475)? Far from providing an alternative to the exhausted conventions of the pastoral, geology is just one of the poetic poses the book mercilessly lampoons. As oil drains from the dust in Binks's

fields, leaving a "trickle," a "smear," and then only the merest "trace," the description veers away from what the eye can barely see to what can only be imagined, the parody plummeting down geological depths impossible to fathom. Throughout *Sarah Binks*, excess and absence operate in a dialectical opposition that undercuts representation and the formation of a stable image. For each new episode in the poet's life, there are either too many decorous words but not enough reality to warrant them, or an abundance of realities for which no appropriate words, and certainly not decorous ones, can be found, as evinced in the "Lower Galician" and the fraught labour relations that lurk below the jocular gloss.7

With "Meneseteung," a short story from the collection *Friend of My Youth* (1990), Alice Munro pens another parodic, diminutive epic in which the prospect of oil serves to interrogate the nature of the gaze that views the colonial land as landscape and the challenges its artialisation represents. Like the geologist in *Sarah Binks*, Jarvis Poulter is a character moved by the hope that has kept generations of immigrants on the lookout for the next economic boom, from the eastern seaboard to Canada's most western provinces. The narrator, one of the many local historians that people Munro's fiction, provides the necessary context: "The first oil well in the world was sunk in Lambton County, south of here, in the 1850s" (Munro, 1990: 322). The indication points to Oil Springs, the village where James Miller Williams discovered the first commercial oil well in North America in 1858, 158 kilometres from Munro's hometown, Wingham, and the implicit place of enunciation to which the deictic refers.[8] The prospect of oil drew the entrepreneur to a province then known as "Canada West," later to be renamed Ontario, but it was salt extraction that made his fortune. Although the two mineral deposits make for a colourful contrast, they elicit similar reactions from Poulter who views the land from a utilitarian perspective that rules out its artialisation as landscape. This is quite different with Almeda Roth, the amateur poet with whom he begins a hesitant courtship. The pair embodies the uneasy marriage between two perceptions of the resources of the land and those of language. When they go out for walks, Poulter's dull conversation has contradictory effects on Almeda, either cutting her off from the countryside she cherishes, or stimulating the acuity of her own perception (Munro, 1990: 325). As the entrepreneur drones on about his salt wells, his companion's attention wanders off to the Sermon on the Mount and the praising of "the salt of the earth," her imagination reeling at the idea of the immense inland sea that covered the whole area eons ago (Munro, 1990: 323). Almeda develops an imaginative vision that goes beyond the

7 The term alludes to the economic exploitation of Ukrainian immigrants, derogatively called "Galicians" in reference to their origins in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia.

8 ("Village of Oil Spring" n.p.). The fact is little known, as the modern discovery of oil is usually recorded as having taken place a year later, in 1859, in Titusville (Pennsylvania). Both foundational events should be further relativized, bearing in mind that the exploitation of oil started much earlier in Burma, though not on the same industrial scale.

ordinariness of her surroundings to infuse the useful with the beautiful. Arguably a similar convergence is less likely to occur with oil. But the inscription of salt in the biblical repertoire facilitates the crosspollination of the geologic and the poetic, an aspect of Munro's writing (Dutoit, 2015) which is rooted in settler interrogations regarding the adequacy of colonial aesthetic prisms, and the "sliding" that results when the land is viewed through them (New, 1997: 74-75). The quirky, little poems Almeda penned in the manner of the picturesque illustrate this tension between land and language. Their offbeat tonality is a characteristic Sarah Binks wrought to perfection in her own geological epic, *Up from the Magma and Back Again*.

Although Munro's narrator presents her amateur poet in a kinder light than Hiebert does with Sarah Binks, the humiliation that seals Almeda's fate rules out the appeal to pure, unadulterated pathos on the reader's part. The two women's attempts at anchoring poetry in a land defined first and foremost in practical terms of production and value are met with discomfitures that elicit mixed responses from the reader, mirth mingling in varying degrees with sympathy and unease.[9] This unstable combination suggests that the response to the land was far from having solidified into a stable structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams' phrase, neither in the periods when the stories are set nor at the time of their writing. But assuming that Almeda Roth's small frontier town and Binks's Prairies were respectively awaiting their William Wordsworth or their Wallace Stevens amounts to a colonial fantasy of progress that gauges local potential in terms of another country's literary history. Instead, the short story and the parodic biography both hesitate on the place occupied by the gaze that grants consideration to certain aspects of the land or dismisses them as trivial and therefore unworthy. Such is the conversion at stake in Rudy Wiebe's "The Angel of the Tar Sands" (1982).

From the Visible to the Edible Landscape

Wiebe's short story contains an early description of the oil operations that developed in the 1980s around Fort McMurray, an area that has since then become synonymous with the large-scale exploitation of unconventional oil (Wilson *et al.*, 2017: 33, 82). The oxymoronic title embraces aspects of the Canadian North that are rarely shown to coincide in a site which is now "the world's largest industrial project" (Takach, 2017: 3), nestled in an environment prized for its pristineness. The story opens on a composite landscape that pastes the dirt and the unsullied together. Dazzling light, expansive vistas, and vibrant, colourful contrasts are signature traits of the Group of Seven whose striking paintings have made an important contribution to the construction of the North as a symbolic counterweight to the urban growth

9 Almeda loses her head to laudanum, and becomes the butt of cruel pranks from local youths; Sarah dies of poisoning after swallowing a horse thermometer.

to the South and a compelling source of identification for the Canadian imagination (Grace, 2001; O'Brian & White, 2007: 4).[10] The industrial plant is delineated against that treasured backdrop, thanks to a couple of synecdoches that index largely invisible processes of extraction and refining:

> Spring had most certainly, finally, come. The morning drive to the plant from Fort McMurray was so dazzling with fresh green against the heavy spruce, the air so unearthly bright that it swallowed the smoke from the candy-striped chimneys as if it did not exist. Which is just lovely, the superintendent thought, cut out all the visible crud, shut up the environmentalists, and he went into his neat office (with the river view with islands) humming, "Alberta blue, Alberta blue, the taste keeps—" but did not get his tan golfing jacket off before he was interrupted. (Wiebe, 1982: 188)

Adverbs and modalities foreground the viewer's involvement in what is described. Through the internal monologue, landscape comes across as an active way of seeing, much more than as the reception of an external view (Cresswell, 2007: 135). Narrative focalization also sets off the limit between what the superintendent perceives and what remains indiscernible, between what is visually pleasing and what is so unsightly it must be left out. Such discrepancies create irony, as with the parentheses that frame a picturesque river but crop out the plant and its toxic fumes. The visual arrangement foregrounds the selective process at work—the separating and filtering necessary to "cut out all the visible crud"—not unlike the refining of heavy crude into colourless, odourless chemicals. The parallel therefore enhances the complicity between the extractive and the romantic gaze that has received some critical scrutiny in recent years (Hodgins & Thompson, 2011). But sight is not the only perception on which the description comes to rely for its effect. "The candy-striped chimneys" contains an enigmatic reference to taste that anticipates on the short story's turning point and ending after a mechanical spade excavates an angel encased in the black-oozing sand. Against all realistic expectations, the angel comes to life and utters a couple of incomprehensible sentences before unfolding its wings and flying away under the crew's bemused eyes.

In this Anabaptist parody of the Annunciation, the Hutterite woman operating the excavator realizes that the angel addressed her in Low German, the ancient

10 Along with the wilderness landscapes in which they asserted their distinctive style, the Group of Seven also painted Canada's coal mining areas and industrial sites during the 1920s and 1930s, when the development of new technologies inspired large sections of the Modernist movement. But by the late 1960s and the celebration of the Centennial, this aspect of the Group's output had largely fallen into oblivion. Posterity chose to remember their celebration of the wild because it reflected values that distinguished Canada's "peaceful kingdom" from the rowdy industrial giant south of the 49th Parallel (Pauli, 2003: 20).

language of her people. In this respect, "The Angel in the Tar Sands" is quite typical of the minority literature of the 1980s and its questioning of the affective ties through which newcomers find a place in the new land. Such are the implications of the story's ending when the Hutterite tells her Japanese co-worker: "Next time you'll recognize it […] And then it'll talk Japanese" (Wiebe, 1982: 191). In Wiebe's optimistic version of Canadian multiculturalism, belonging finds its expression in the landscape viewed as a potent affective factor, one that creates a common ground where a plurality of origins, religious beliefs and languages may meet.[11] This is the reason why the plant's superintendent, still struggling to understand what happened, is overwhelmed by a vision harking back to a rather different cultural tradition:

> [A]ll the surface of the earth was gone, the Tertiary and the Lower Cretaceous layers of strata had been ripped away and the thousands of square miles of black bituminous sand were exposed, laid open, slanting down into the molten centre of the earth, *O miserere, miserere*, the words sang in his head and he felt their meaning though he could not have explained them, much less remembered Psalm 51, and after a time he could open his eyes and lift his head. The huge plant, he knew every bolt and pipe, still sprawled between him and the river; the brilliant air still swallowed the smoke from all the red-striped chimneys as if it did not exist; and he knew that through a thousand secret openings the oil ran there, gurgling in each precisely numbered pipe and jointure, sweet and clear like golden brown honey. (Wiebe, 1982: 191)

As with the previous instances in which geology afforded an approach to the land where the pastoral failed, the mention of oil causes the perspective to shift from horizontal prospect to vertical fathoming. The point of view soars with the angel's flight above the geological map, taking in eons of time piled up into sedimentary strata. The same towering viewpoint, the point of view of the surveyor and map-maker is also characteristic of Edward Burtynsky's "Oil" series, as if the petroscape could not be apprehended otherwise, except from high above, in an all-encompassing bird's eye view. Burtynsky has thus drawn upon the pictorial legacy of the nineteenth-century sublime and ruin painting in photographs of the Albertan oil patch that explore the blurry zone where consumption meets destruction, and the

11 Meet but not necessarily converse, a point forcefully made by artists from racialized minorities like Korean-born-Canadian Jin-me Yoon. Yoon's photomontage, *A Group of 67* (1996), also draws upon the ambivalence of parody as homage and dissonance. The series confronts the invisibility of Asian-Canadians in the national space by placing the face portraits of sixty-seven Asian people (their number alludes to 1867, the year when the British North America Act established Confederation) in the foreground of two of Emily Carr's iconic landscapes.

guilty pleasure both afford. Unsurprisingly, his photographs have been criticised for artistic choices that erase signs of a human or animal presence, and let the beholder experience the thrill of ruination vicariously without any of its brutal consequences on local life (Wilson *et al.,* 2017: 225).

This is an aspect which Warren Cariou, a Métis writer and artist now living in Manitoba, chose to address in a recent experimental project for which he used bitumen collected from the banks of the Athabasca River to photograph the oil fields. His repurposing of oil—Cariou ironically refers to it as a "re-mediation" (personal website, n.p.)—was inspired by the technique of photoengraving perfected by Nicéphore Niépce in the years 1819-1824. While experimenting with different types of sensitive plates, Niépce discovered that surfaces thinly coated in bitumen reacted to the light and would reveal astounding images after the exposed plates were rinsed in lavender oil diluted in white kerosen.[12] Relying on the same technique, Cariou produced a series of "petrographs" in which bitumen fulfils a triple function as material, object and active principle. The golden, mirror-like surface of the petrograph reflects the light, but also the face of whoever is drawn to it. On the shimmering plate, the landscape and the reflection of the viewer's face blend in such a way that it impossible for beholders to deny their involvement in the consumption of the image and the aesthetic pleasure it procures. But because the petrograph was made using bitumen, it also gives off a strong, heady smell. Long-term exposure to these pictures is therefore likely to cause discomfort, such as headaches and nausea. Cariou's petrography thus makes palpable the invisible cost of the enjoyment of oil, not only its impact on distant regions and invisible populations, but on all living organisms, including our closest and most intimate companion, our own body. In this respect, Cariou's artwork is all the more disturbing as it appeals to the senses in a way that causes them to disagree, forbidding any harmonious merging comparable to synaesthesia, one of poetry's highest achievements. The petrograph makes such a sensorial convergence impossible by sending simultaneous, discordant information to the body. The golden, oily surface of the picture looks so smooth the eye could almost touch it. And yet, it gives off such a powerful smell that one can feel, even while briefly looking at it, that long exposure to the picture would be toxic. The demonstration rests on the visual instantaneity of the image and the tactile and olfactory impact of the material used to produce it. The indexical and sensorial qualities of the petrograph impress the senses in a way that the temporal development of narrative, perhaps, cannot match. This, however, remains to be seen.

If we go back to the ending of Wiebe's short story, the familiar notes of the geological sublime are not sustained for long, but quickly shade into a reminiscence of the psalmist's plea for divine mercy which, in turn, evokes a deeper-seated memory of transgression and punishment. Although the comparison of oil with

12 See "Niépce and the Invention of Photography" (n.p.).

"golden brown honey" partly recalls biblical descriptions of the Promised Land, the image owes a lot more to the "edible landscape" found in traditional and modern fairy tales, themselves harking back to the mythical land of Cockaigne.[13] A *topos* of consumer culture with venerable antecedents, edible landscapes "were meant partly to assure children that the world was a perfectly good and kind place, with abundant things for everybody" (Leach, 1993: 247). But abundance, in the present case, also contains its own threat—the punishment incurred for over-indulging, that is being consumed after having consumed in excess. Such is the peril looming on the horizon of Mark Anthony Jarman's "My White Planet" (2008), a cunning parody of "Snow White" that weighs the possibilities of survival in the Arctic after the last drop of petroleum has been burnt. The poetic justice of the fairy tale is invoked to warn against the pleasures of acquisitiveness, greed and gluttony, both in Jarman's and in Wiebe's stories, when the narrative veers away from the conventions of realism on account of its inability to represent the complexities of oil, its complicities and their far-reaching, global effects (Omhovère 2019).

These complexities and complicities come centre stage in Warren Cariou's "An Athabasca Story" (2012), another cautionary tale, but one that draws upon the Indigenous tradition of the Trickster. On the verge of exhaustion Elder brother is desperately looking for a place to get warm in the Athabascan forest when he picks up a strange burning smell:

> So he quickened his frail pace and followed the scent, over one hill and then another and yet another. And eventually he came to the top of one more hill and he looked down across an empty valley and saw the source of the smoke. A huge plume billowed from a gigantic house far in the distance, and between himself and the house there was a vast expanse of empty land. Empty of trees, of muskeg, of birds and animals. He had never seen anything like it. The only things moving on that vacant landscape were enormous yellow contraptions that clawed and bored and bit the dark earth and then hauled it away toward the big house. And the smell! It was worse than his most sulphurous farts, the ones he got when he ate moose guts and antlers. (Cariou, 2012: 70)

The summit view follows a visual composition now recognized as conventional, from Petrarch's inaugural vision on top of Mount Ventoux to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1817), a painting that thematises the landscape imperative to "look at the view!" (Mitchell, 2002: vii) through the inclusion of a figure contemplating an endless recession of mountain lines draped in mist. The pleasure of recognition is nevertheless mitigated by defamiliarising periphrases,

13 As pictured, for instance, in Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Land of Cockaigne* (1567).

such as "gigantic house" or "enormous yellow contraptions," for which the reader is required to silently supply equivalents, the refinery and mechanical shovels that are not part of Trickster traditional lore. The trick has several effects. Not only does it stimulate reader-participation, the equivalent in a written piece of call-and-response patterns in oral performances, but it also entices the implied audience to rescue the Trickster from the Indigenous mythical past, translating what he sees into contemporary terms, and filling the wilderness with elements that belie its assumed pristineness. The same is true of the recurring references to the "empty" valley. The meaning of the qualifier evolves through the description. Initially an attribute of landscape understood in its narrow sense as the "representation of a natural scenery in and for itself" (Mitchell, 2002: 11), it subsequently morphs into an active emptying indexing the activities that have cleared the space now invested by the gaze. Whereas in Wiebe's story refinery smoke was "swallowed" by the bright air (1982: 188), consumption leaves visible, loud and smelly traces in "An Athabasca Story." When Elder brother likens the excavators' exhaust fumes to "his most sulphurous farts," the crude comparison supposes a chemical intimacy between the living body and the machine that calls into question the naturalist duality between subject and object, and further narrows the distance between the spectator and the scene.14 Elder brother wants to get warm so badly that he comes down to beg the machine operators for their help. Although he cannot grasp why the company men reject him, the Trickster deduces from their threats that burning "magic dirt" will "make so much heat that the winter never comes back" (Cariou, 2012: 72-73). Consumption comes with a vengeance for the blundering Trickster. Elder brother digs into the oily soil with both hands and grabs so much of it that he sinks and disappears into the sand, before one of the excavating buckets scrapes him up: "Soon the thing began to move, and it hauled him across the wasteland, encased there in the tar as if he was a fossil" (Cariou, 2012: 75). Although the storyteller's earlier allusion to global heating is likely to speak to all readers across the board, the fossil (fuel) reference cannot fall lightly on the ear of an Indigenous audience that the nineteenth century "wrapped into the literary shroud of the vanishing Indian" and dismissed as the fossilized remains of a "noble race" unfit to survive the onslaught of modernity.15 With the advent of the Anthropocene, however, the fossil trope has become a persuasive metaphor to configure the impact of human activities on the earth and the future of humankind, should the man-made, sixth extinction proceed unnoticed and unchecked.

Both "An Athabasca Story" and Cariou's petrography project certainly resist indifference by appealing to the senses in ways that foreground continuities and discordances, stimulating a "sentience" (Cariou, personal website, n.p.) to the environment from which modernity has allegedly become cut off (Zhong Mengual

14 Carbon represents approximately 18% of the human body weight in which it is the second most abundant element after oxygen ("Carbon is…" n.p.).
15 I am indebted for this remark to Moritz Ingwersen.

& Morizot, 2018). Whereas the indexical image appeals to the beholder's senses in a most tangible way, the short story exploits the full potential of the indirectness and suggestiveness that result from its brevity, the principle undergirding a genre in which "small is plentiful" (Tibi, 1988). It is therefore another paradox that the petroscape, the making visible of a small portion of human beings' interactions with oil, should have made its entry on the Canadian literary scene through the narrow door of the short story and other lesser genres such as the literary parody. In the texts under study, parody recurred as a favourite strategy to explore blind spots in conventional landscape aesthetics, not only the dirt the pastoral could not accommodate, but also what made the artialisation process derail. One will have to wait for the turning point of 2007—"the year of the Great Melt" (Gillmor 2015, 319)—and the end of the Harper decade to witness the publication of novels—most prominently Will Ferguson's *419* (2012), Fred Stenson's *Who by Fire* (2014), and Don Gillmor's *Long Change* (2015)—in which the perspective of the end of oil calls for new arrangements in the visual regime of landscape. Bearing in mind the successive separations through which landscape emerged and evolved, first as a result of the secularisation of the Western gaze during the Renaissance, then as a consequence of the reinvention of nature in reaction to the technological, social and political upheavals of the "age of revolutions" (Rancière, 2020: 97), the slow rise of the petroscape would tend to confirm that landscape thrives in cultures of loss and melancholy (Wylie, 2007: 34, LeMenager 2011). With oil, however, loss is a double-edged question that obliges one to consider the consequences of the end of fossil fuels, but also what imperceptible losses their massive extraction and consumption brought about over time. These are questions for which writers and artists still have answers to proffer.

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