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TARHANDS: A MESSY MANIFESTO

WARREN CARIOU

This essay attempts to make visible the physical reality of the Athabasca oil sands mining developments in Canada, a reality that has been occluded by corporate and governmental disinformation as well as by citizens' unwillingness to face the consequences of their actions and their inaction. By presenting photographs of oil sands mining operations interspersed with brief ironic narratives, aphorisms and poems, the essay creates a collage of disjunctive responses to the contemporary situation in the Canadian petro-state. Given that this situation is one of national self-deception, denial and fundamentally irrational behavior, the paper sets aside any attempt to make reasoned arguments about conservation or regulation, and instead embraces irrationality as the last possible mode of engagement with a contemporary public that will no longer listen to reason. In tone and structure the essay echoes F. T. Marinetti's 1909 "Futurist Manifesto," but it is very different in its intent, mapping a way toward a different kind of future than the technologized and hyper-individualistic one that Marinetti espoused. By moving into the realm of the irrational and engaging with Canadian petroculture as an expression of a kind of national unconscious, the essay attempts to reveal some of the psychological structures that prevent Canadians from seeing the dirt that is on their hands.

Cet article veut rendre visible la réalité physique des complexes miniers des sables bitumineux de l'Athabasca, au Canada. Les désinformations des entreprises et du gouvernement ont occulté cette réalité, mais les citoyens ont aussi contribué à cette occultation en évitant de faire face soit aux conséquences de leurs actions, soit à l'absence de celles-ci. On offre ici un collage des réactions variées face à la situation contemporaine de l'état pétrolier canadien à travers des photos des travaux d'exploitation minière des sables bitumineux entrecoupées de petits segments écrits, d'aphorismes et de poèmes. Étant donné que cette situation est le produit d'un aveuglement et d'une négation à l'échelle nationale qui stimule un comportement irrationnel, cet article met de côté les *arguments traditionnels* raisonnés sur la conservation ou la régulation et adopte le ton irrationnel comme dernier recours afin d'en appeler à l'engagement d'un public qui se détourne de la raison. Le ton et la structure de cet article font écho au « Manifeste du futurisme » publié en 1909 par F. T. Marinetti, mais l'intention est d'indiquer la direction d'un autre avenir que celui technologique et hyper-individualiste que Marinetti proposait. En adoptant l'irrationnel afin d'envisager la culture pétrolière canadienne comme une manifestation de l'inconscient national, j'essaie de dévoiler quelques structures psychologiques qui empêchent les Canadiens de se rendre compte qu'ils ont les mains sales.

Look at us! We are not out of breath, our hearts are not in the least tired. For they are nourished by fire, hatred and speed! (Marinetti)

Have you noticed anything about your hands? I mean, I didn't want to say anything at first, but I couldn't help seeing it, and... what are friends for, right? If you had guacamole in your teeth, I'd say something. If your fly was down... not that it is! Nothing like that. But still, I just thought I should ask: have you noticed?



Fig 1.

Tarhands rose up out of the swamp wearing a nation on his back. He was hungry.

The people fed him whatever they could. They had wakened him, after all, and they knew he was going to go far, so they shoveled all kinds of everything at him: trucks, roads, steam, pipes, trains, muskeg, lives, methamphetamines, rivers, *pastahowin*, laws, futures. He ate as fast as they could shovel, and sometimes he was almost satisfied. But everything he touched turned the opposite of gold. He wanted more than anything to have that gleaming metal for himself, to fold it in his sticky embrace, but every time he tried, the tarnish spread in seconds. It wasn't fair, he thought. Someone else got all the gold and he couldn't touch a bit of it.

Still, he tried to keep himself happy. He wore that colourful nation like a cape, and it waved out behind him almost cheerily, fluttering in the breeze of his motion. But when he wasn't moving (which was, let's face it, most of the time) it hung straight down and dragged in the muck. If he wasn't careful, he stepped on it with his heels. Sometimes it annoyed him, that nation dangling there from his neck, always rustling, getting caught in his hands when he tried to scratch his back. Once in a while he stepped backward on purpose, pinned that nation under his heels, and leaned forward as far as he could. The fabric stretched, but no matter how hard he pulled, it wouldn't break. Worst of all, it tightened around his neck like a slipknot. Sometimes he leaned there for ages, pressing against his own weight, until he passed out. He always woke up with a mouth full of dirt and a tighter collar.

"Guess I'm stuck with you for good," he said finally, rubbing his neck.

The nation said nothing, as always.



Fig. 2

Okay, I've lost it.

I was going to write my manifesto and be done with it, nail my 95 theses to the parliament door and all that, stand back and listen to the silence, all reasonable like. But then my nation embarrassed me (again) by reneging on an international climate treaty, and as I cringed, I recognized the problem with my plan: nobody listens to reason anymore. In the court of national opinion, reason is treason. That's the only explanation for Canada's current climate change and energy policy. And even when people do recognize the rational validity of something as unpleasant and intractable as climate change, they simply don't want to accept it. They find ways to think about something else. Anything else.

A manifesto needs to make things manifest: to open eyes, unclog ears. And if reason doesn't work anymore, then I'll have to try something else. Anything else.



Fig. 3

What I remember most about the tar sands is the stink. We stood there with our cameras, trying to capture a record of that obliterated landscape, but I could hardly even see. The fumes were like hammers: sulfur and benzene and diesel and something else—a dead smell, a charnel residue on the back of my tongue. I had a migraine in half a dozen breaths. I breathed into my shirtsleeve, trying not to retch. How could people work in this, day after day? How could the Cree, Metis and Dene people of Fort Mackay live in it?

“Oh I used to smell it, too” one security guard laughed, after warning us to stay off Company property. “But after a week or two you don’t notice a thing.”



Fig. 4

The Tarhands Institute is a stink-tank based in beautiful downtown Waterways, Alberta, but we have chapters, sties and tarpits all across this great nation. We reside online at tarhands.org, just next door to the national unconscious, and some day soon we'll move in next to you.

What do we do? We make a stink. We disturb the proverbial shit. Because something is already rotten in the petro-state, and **NOBODY SEEMS TO NOTICE**.

How do you point out that the air smells, when everyone's already used to it? By making more stink.

How do you point out that everyone's hands are dirty? By making more mess.

That is our credo. Mess as manifest. Stinking as thinking.

And this is our membership drive.



Fig. 5

My country pulled out of Kyoto, and now I want to pull out of my country. Make a mess on the sheets, on the ground, wherever. Why not? Everyone else does.

Pull out! It's the Canadian way. We're always pulling something out, of the ground that is. Pulling and pulling.

Everyone else does. That's the problem, isn't it? Everyone else.



Fig. 6

Generations ago, the Cree and Dene used the tar on the banks of the Athabasca River to seal their canoes. Today, it's used to plug the holes in a sinking ship called modernity.

How long will it keep us afloat? How much will we burn in the effort?



Fig. 7

The futurists on speed.

They got off on it: hard, fast, gleaming, efficient. The iron and the motorcoach, the rocket and the train.

They were hateful, like velocity.

But they never forgot the muck, the grime, the smoke. They knew where their god came from, and where it would go back. And they were damn sure they'd all be dead by then. No need to care about that future.



Fig. 8

Have you ever gone to shake someone's hand and noticed, too late, that yours was dirty? At the last moment you saw that patch of grime on your palm, that sticky residue on your fingers, but you couldn't abort the handshake because—well, because a handshake is never stopped once initiated. That would be rude. Unthinkable, really. So you went through with it, shook that hand as briefly as you could, maybe trying to cup your palm a little bit, gazing straight into the face of your new acquaintance without even flinching. Hoping it would be over soon.

But even worse, before it was over, you realized that the other person had noticed the dirt too. You could tell by the look in their face, that squeamish little half-smile, and by the way they held their right hand away from themselves afterward, waiting to wipe it on their pants as soon as you'd turned your back. Which you did—turn your back—as soon as you possibly could. And you walked away quickly, without looking back to see what that poor unfortunate was doing.

And the strangest thing was that neither of you ever said anything to anyone about what had passed between you. Both of you pretended it was never there.



Fig. 9

If you look at something for too long, it becomes invisible. Your eyes need a little shake, *saccade*, to wake them up, so you can see what's right in front of you. A bit of blur, some judder, to make it all come into focus.

When I say give your head a shake, that's what I mean.

There. See it now?



Fig. 10

That apple you're eating. The milk you drank at lunch. Every little thing you touch, even just to lift it into your mouth. It's there. It rubs off. Think about that.



Fig. 11

Denken ist Danken, Heidegger was fond of saying: thinking is thanking. But I think he was misquoted. What I believe he really said was *Denken ist Stinken*.

Who can deny that some forms of thought create a noxious atmosphere, a stink, sometimes subtle and other times overwhelming? We all believe this about the people we disagree with, the ideologies we hate. But maybe it's even true that most thinking creates a kind of exhaust, a residue that lingers in our air. And maybe the other kinds of stink that humanity creates—the hydrocarbon pollution, the sewer gas, the industrial waste—can be seen as a kind of thinking. Thought bubbles. Olfactory philosophy. Smell is irrational, of course. That's what makes it so appropriate to the modern human condition.

But I believe we need to learn a new kind of stinking. We need to think outside the nox. It will be like inventing a new language, a new medium of being.

Let's go. Follow your nose to somewhere, someone, you've never been.



Fig. 12

Satan Rouses his Legions on the Shores of Syncrude Tailings Pond #4

Inhale, my friends: breathe deep
the bitumen air. I give you
a waveless lake,

stacks blowing brimstone,
the slick earth itself
turned out, spilled like troubled guts

into the pipeline of need.
The stink that lingers on the back
of your tongues

is the scent of our conjuration.
We are wanted here.
The heavy-haulers drone our names,

the pit-sumps wail to us, desperate
as sirens, and mile-long flags
drape from the mouths of smokestacks

waving us in. I for one will enter
and plant my ensign here.
Which among you hordes will follow?

Come then, hurry!—
wings unfurled, torches on high,
past evaporators and bright

ziggurats of sulfur, past even
the unstanchable pits themselves
to the waiting world.

This time, the ground is laid for us
wide open. Sniff and you know:
all of it was made to burn.



Fig. 13

Could there be a different futurist movement, one that actually cares about the future, not as a technological apotheosis of the now but as the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the generations of creatures, the species, the biomes? The future as life, as what will live on after we're all gone, back to muck and tar, to the mess we were made from.

The future we are making, whether we admit it or not.



Fig. 14

Letter for a time capsule to be opened in 2112

This is just to say
we've burned up all the oil
and poisoned the air
you were probably hoping to breathe.
Forgive us.
It was delicious
the way it burned
so bright and
so fast.



Fig. 15

Join us. Together we can make visions that shudder a billion eyes, make a stink to awaken the nostrils of the world! There is still some time, maybe enough, but we need numbers, we need creativity, we need community. We can refuse to be everyone else. We can look around ourselves and see what's happening, we can say to the future that we saw, and we acted. We did whatever had to be done.



Fig. 16

Tarhands.™ How clean are yours?

Cariou, Warren: Warren Cariou was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan into a family of Métis and European heritage. He has published numerous articles on Canadian Aboriginal Literature and he has published a collection of novellas, *The Exalted Company of Roadside Martyrs* (1999) and an award-winning memoir/cultural history entitled *Lake of the Prairies* (2002). He has also co-directed and co-produced two films about Aboriginal people in western Canada's oil sands region: *Overburden* and *Land of Oil and Water*. His latest book is *Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water* (2012), co-edited with Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair. He is a Canada Research Chair and Director of the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture at the University of Manitoba.

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