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RETHINKING BITUMEN: FROM “BULLSHIT” TO A “MATTER OF CONCERN”

JONATHAN GORDON

What is the current state of discourse about bitumen and how might it be changed? Philosopher Harry Frankfurt defines “bullshit” as any attempt at persuasion that is “unconnected to a concern with the truth” (Frankfurt). By looking at a variety of recent examples from the debates over bitumen extraction, “Rethinking Bitumen” argues that these debates have many of the characteristics that Frankfurt ascribes to “bullshit.” It is argued further that the debate’s disconnect from a concern with truth is rooted in what Bruno Latour calls “matters of fact” (“Critique” 226). Attempts to persuade are built on “matters of fact”—which can be debunked by both sides as ideological—when they should be founded on the ecological consciousness of what Latour calls “matters of concern” (ibid.) Literature offers one means of effecting this transition from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern.” This article considers Marc Prescott’s play *Fort Mac* as one example of a literary text that creates an opportunity for engaging in ecological thinking about bitumen and for deploying affect and sensation to change the prevailing values about it, to see bitumen as a “matter of concern.”

Quel est le discours actuel sur le bitume et comment pourrait-il être changé? Le philosophe Harry Frankfurt définit comme « connerie » toute tentative de persuader qui « n’a aucun lien à la vérité » [Notre Traduction] (Frankfurt). Dans cet article, je soutiens que les débats récents sur l’extraction du bitume ont beaucoup à voir avec ce que Frankfurt associe aux « conneries ». De plus, j’entends montrer que la rupture de ces débats avec la question de la vérité trouve son origine dans ce que Bruno Latour appelle des « états de fait » [Notre Traduction] (« Critique » 226). Des tentatives de persuader se construisent sur ces « états de fait » —on peut déboulonner celles-ci comme idéologiques sur tous les fronts—, alors que c’est la conscience écologique de ce que Latour appelle des « états d’inquiétude » qui devrait constituer le fondement de l’argument. Cet article examine la pièce de théâtre *Fort Mac* de Marc Prescott comme exemple d’une œuvre littéraire qui crée l’occasion de comprendre le bitume du point de vue écologique afin de partager des inquiétudes liées à cette dimension, puis de changer les valeurs en jeu et parvenir enfin à concevoir le bitume comme un « états d’inquiétude ».



Fig. 1

Introduction: Reframing the Debate

In 2010 a coalition of activist environmental groups working under the banner Rethink Alberta, a group ostensibly concerned with adding ‘facts’ to the debate about the so-called ‘oil sands,’ launched a multimedia ad campaign. The goal was to dissuade international tourists from visiting Alberta by presenting images of the industrial extraction of oil from the bituminous sands around Fort McMurray. Referring to bitumen extraction as the “other oil disaster” (Fig. 1), on par with the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and resulting spill into the Gulf of Mexico, and juxtaposing images of oil-soaked pelicans with oil-soaked ducks, seeks to provoke an emotional response to bitumen and oil in general. Both images are negative and disturbing: they are employed to push the viewer away. The combination

of the images with the title—“Alberta: the Other Oil Disaster”—functions as a metonymy, with the oil-soaked duck standing in for Alberta as a whole. The viewer is not just repelled by the images, but by Alberta itself, or so the campaign intends. As part of this campaign, the group produced the billboard shown below, a Facebook page, and a video, which generated responses in newspapers, on television, and online.

Among the dozens of virulent responses posted on YouTube to the video, asing940 writes, “You don’t think that this US group has a bias too? Let’s see-worst oil disaster EVER just happened in the US. This is an ad campaign, but it isn’t designed to trigger interest, it is designed to point the finger somewhere else.” In direct response to such anti-bitumen campaigns, the website



Fig. 2

ethicaloil.org was launched to highlight the differences between “conflict oil” from Venezuela, Libya, Sudan, the Middle East, etc. and “ethical oil” from Canada. It focuses on the ways in which bitumen extraction creates good jobs and promotes social justice within a Canadian regime of environmental responsibility. While Figure 1 juxtaposes oil soaked birds to equate bitumen extraction with the Gulf oil spill, Figure 2 uses the same visual strategy of side-by-side photos to establish a clear moral hierarchy. While the caption of the left-hand picture—“Sudan’s Oil Fields: Indigenous Peoples Killed”—implies that the bones in the foreground are those of an indigenous person, the right-hand picture offers the smiling, optimistic face of, presumably, an Aboriginal woman. Rather than equating two negatives, as with the Rethink Alberta campaign, Ethical Oil contrasts a negative image with a positive one. Want to stop conflict oil (the red background to the left-hand title says)? Go with ethical (even green) oil from Canada.

The public debate about bitumen occurs within a highly polarized context in which it often seems there is no common ground. This article considers how approaching bitumen as what Bruno Latour calls a “matter of concern” can interrupt the rhetorical warfare being engaged in by all sides, and, in that temporary interruption, provide a shift in perspective.

Latour proposes “an entirely different attitude than the critical one, [...] a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence” (Latour, “Critique” 245). Literature also has a role to play. As Travis Mason has noted in a reading of Don McKay’s poetry, “That Latour neglects to include poetry, or the arts for that matter, in his project of bringing the sciences into democracy, speaks volumes of the continuing need for sharing ecological consciousness in social spheres that are plural: both public and private, both literary and scientific, both

linguistic and kinetic” (Mason). Though literature too, like any other discourse, may be debunked and dismissed as rhetorical, I argue that it is harder to do this for literature than for the Rethink Alberta video or the Ethical Oil campaign because literature, as such, can not so easily be dismissed as “interested.” Of course, propagandist literature exists, but that does not mean literature as such can be reduced to propaganda. Jean-Luc Nancy claims that literature creates a “circulation [that] goes in all directions at once”, and it is in this sense that I want to use the term (3). Literature does not push us towards any of the options in an impossible choice, does not seek to persuade, is something more than rhetoric. It allows us to dwell, temporarily, in a present impossibility, the impossibility of choosing between forms of sacrifice. Dianne Chisholm argues in “The Art of Ecological Thinking” that, “there is an art of ecological thinking which is distinct from ecological science. Science may recognize ecology as a discipline but it does not therefore follow that ecological thinking is properly scientific” (570). There is, she argues, thinking particular to “literary ecology” and, in the example she addresses—Ellen Meloy’s *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*—this thinking “deploys affect and sensation in expressive refrains to enact a transvaluation of values” (572). This article will consider Marc Prescott’s play *Fort Mac* as one example of a literary text that creates an opportunity for recognizing the impossible choice presented by bitumen, an opportunity for engaging in ecological thinking, and for deploying affect and sensation to change the prevailing values about bitumen, to see it as a “matter of concern.”

Ethicaloil.org, by contrast to the play, claims that we have a clear choice to make between sources of oil: when the choice is framed as one between a place that kills indigenous peoples and a place that employs them, it seems straightforward. However, if it is framed as one between oil-soaked pelicans and oil-soaked ducks, as in the Rethink Alberta billboard, the choice is less obvious. Ezra Levant claims, in his book *Ethical Oil*, which inspired the website, that “The question is not whether we should use oil sands oil instead of some perfect fantasy fuel that hasn’t been invented yet [...] the

question is whether we should use oil from the oil sands or oil from the other places in the world that pump it” (7). Let us put aside for the moment debates about alternative energy sources and accept Levant’s premise that the world needs oil. If the question is about deciding where that oil comes from, that does not mean there is a simple answer (as Levant’s framing of the question implies). Reading bitumen as a matter of concern can help bring the complexity, even the impossibility, of an answer into focus.¹

Latour defines a matter of concern as “what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theater” (“What is the Style?” 39). In attempting to follow Latour’s suggestion, this article shifts between the text of Franco-Manitoban Marc Prescott’s 2007 play *Fort Mac*, statements made by various participants in debates over bitumen, and theories of discourse and rhetoric. While it is impossible in an article such as this to focus one’s attention on all of the factors involved in the discourse surrounding bitumen, just as it would be impossible to focus on the whole machinery of a theatre at one time, this essay presents one attempt at contextualizing the shortcomings of the current debate about bitumen and pointing towards the (im)possibility of an alternative conversation, a conversation that might consider the ecological view that we need, in Meloy’s phrase, to “try to live here [Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, Earth] as if there is no other place and it must last forever” (qtd. in Chisholm 586).

‘Just the Facts, Please’: Objectivity, Control, and “Bullshit”

In Prescott’s play, Jaypee, his girlfriend Mimi, and her sister Kiki head to northern Alberta from Quebec in a dilapidated camper to find the land where it rains jobs. Jaypee is unable to find work because, even though he can fix engines—in his words he “connais ça des moteurs” (24)²—he is not a certified mechanic, and, when he runs afoul of Murdock, a local tough, things quickly become very complicated. Mimi takes a job as an exotic dancer even as she tries to keep her

pregnancy a secret from Jaypee. As their need for money approaches a climax, she is unable to make it to work when the truck breaks down. Jaypee becomes addicted to drugs and decides to set up a meth lab to earn enough money to pay off his own drug debts but is unable to buy all the necessary items as the authorities track large purchases of the ingredients for meth: “parce qu’ils font attention à ce que t’achètes” (65).³ Although Kiki—simple-minded, religious, kind-hearted—tries to help, her best intentions cannot prevent the destructive forces at work. The play presents characters working to change the circumstances they find themselves in, circumstances only partly of their own making and only partly within their control. By contrast, the ongoing rhetorical debate over bitumen suggests, in its emphasis on clear choices, a situation that we do control.

This position of control has been stated recently in an open letter published in *The Globe and Mail* for 9 January 2012, where Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver writes, in the context of the National Energy Board opening hearings into Enbridge’s proposed Northern Gateway pipeline from Fort McMurray to Kitimat, British Columbia, “We know that increasing trade will help ensure the financial security of Canadians and their families.” We can exercise control over our future by building this pipeline. However, Oliver goes to say, despite what “we know,”

there are environmental and other radical groups that would seek to block this opportunity to diversify our trade. Their goal is to stop any major project no matter what the cost to Canadian families in lost jobs and economic growth.

No forestry. No mining. No oil. No gas. No more hydro-electric dams.

These groups threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda. They seek to exploit any loophole they can find, stacking public hearings with bodies to ensure that delays kill good projects. They use funding from foreign special interest groups to undermine Canada’s national economic interest.

The issue, as in the Ethical Oil campaign, is a black and white choice between those who would help build

future prosperity and those who, for their own political reasons, want to prevent this. Oliver concludes, “Our regulatory system must be fair, independent, consider different viewpoints including those of Aboriginal communities, review the evidence dispassionately and then make an objective determination. It must be based on science and the facts.” Nathan Lemphers, Oilsands Technical and Policy Analyst for the Pembina Institute, writes in response to Oliver’s call for a regulatory system that is fair, independent and based on science and facts, “We couldn’t agree more, and can’t help but point out the troubling disconnect between the minister’s call for a ‘dispassionate’ and ‘objective’ approach and his government’s blatant political interference in the process. Remember the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last summer? *The fact is*, such a disastrous spill could easily happen here, too” (“Open for Business” emphasis added). While agreeing with Oliver about the need to base decisions on science, Lemphers then shifts his appeal to the threat of an oil spill, a “fact” that Oliver would surely dispute.

Such exchanges are precisely the problem with the debate currently occurring around bitumen: all sides lay claim to the ‘objective facts’ and defend their positions based on these claims. Change in the debate, let alone government policy or industry actions, will not proceed from more or better facts; we cannot expect some pronouncement from on high that will chart the way forward. Despite what Joe Oliver or Ezra Levant or David Schindler or Andrew Nikiforuk knows, any particular statement of ‘fact’ exists within the context of an ongoing discourse where the various participants are already more or less dogmatic adherents to their positions. Indeed, every attempted truth-claim generates a flurry of opposition activity to debunk it and perpetuate relativist doubt. This doubt serves the status quo. Shifting the debate from facts to concern does not mean abandoning facts or accepting relativism, but putting the facts in a larger context, a context in which the facts appear differently, from which we judge them differently.

For philosopher Harry Frankfurt, “bullshit” is characterized by a whole conversation that is “not

germane to the enterprise of describing reality” (“On Bullshit”). Much of the response to Rethink Alberta has been precisely focused on showing how their facts and statistics do not describe reality. While Rethink Alberta points out “The Tar Sands are the largest contributor to the growth of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada” (Rethink Alberta), Levant, for instance, replies “The oil sands combined emit just 5 percent of Canada’s total greenhouse gases—less than, for example, the emissions from all of Canada’s cattle and pigs” (6). While Nikiforuk argues “Bitumen development [...] will eventually destroy or industrialize a forest the size of Florida” (4), Levant replies, “The oil sands do cover an area the size of Florida. But only 2 per cent of that area will ever be mined” (4). As far as I can tell, all of these claims are true. However, they point in very different directions. Various individuals and groups would chart a course of action for bitumen based on the ‘truth,’ but others dismiss these truths as just so much “bullshit” and chart different courses based on different truths.

Slavoj Žižek argues that in the dominant ideological formation today, “a ‘politics of truth’ [is] dismissed as totalitarian” because, in the postmodern world, truth is unknowable (*Defense* 340). However, believing that truth is unknowable serves the interests of the status quo. As William Corlett writes in interpreting Derrida, “[i]n a world where everything is neutralized, the status quo wins” (197). This, perhaps paradoxically, seems to be the result of increasingly partisan, divisive, and extremist rhetoric: increasing the volume of the debate allows extraction to continue apace while a media battle provides a diverting spectacle. While both extremes in the debate I’m exploring make claims to truth, these claims only have purchase for those who already accept them, and can be dismissed by opponents regardless of whether their positions are more ‘truthful.’ Therefore, despite the fact that certain claims about resource extraction have purchase for me, are persuasive to me, I do not believe that my making an argument based on those claims will necessarily have purchase for others. Here, I am focused on describing the debate as I see it and suggesting how literature might change that debate by adding to an understanding of bitumen as a matter of concern.⁴

In developing the concept of matters of concern, Latour quotes a Republican strategist from a *New York Times* piece regarding the debate over climate change: “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,” the Republican writes, “their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue” (“Critique” 226). This leads Latour to worry:

I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show “the lack of scientific certainty” inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a “primary issue.” [...] Was I foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast? In which case the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! (“Critique” 227) Things are a little more complicated with bitumen as, on the one hand, this strategy of creating distrust of facts is employed for any negative science, but, on the other, scientific certainty is asserted about the potential for continuous improvements in extraction processes. Levant provides examples of both of these strategies: he writes, for the first, “It’s true, there is oil seeping into the rivers north of Fort McMurray and sometimes the air smells like sulphur and the water is bitter. And that’s how it’s been for millennia” (4), and, for the second, “Oil sands technology continues to improve—to produce one barrel of oil sands oil takes 38 percent less [Greenhouse Gas] emissions now than it did in 1990” (6). In this way any doubts about the negatives that remain after the industry spin-machine is finished with them are deferred into a utopian future. With matters of concern, though,

It is the same world, and yet, everything looks different. Matters of fact were indisputable, obstinate, simply there; matters of concern are disputable, and their obstinacy seems to be of an entirely different sort: they move, they carry you away, and, yet, they too *matter*. The amazing thing with matters of fact was that, although they were material, they did not matter a bit, even though they were immediately used to enter into some sort of polemic. (Latour, “What is the Style?” 39)

The NEB hearings into Northern Gateway should, ideally, provide one opportunity for a conversation that moves beyond the polemic of matters of fact, but it is also in danger of being hijacked by paternalistic claims to transparent access to universal Truth by government and industry, and, indeed, by environmentalists as well. If we accept that the starting point for debate is “science and the facts,” as Joe Oliver asserts and Nathan Lemphers accepts, then the terms of that debate are dangerously narrowed (“Open Letter”).

In “Canada and Postcolonialism: Questions, Inventories, Futures,” Diana Brydon argues that postcolonialism depends on recognition of the following:

all truths are complicated and contingent; while there may be many truths rather than a single Truth, that does not absolve an individual or a community from distinguishing among them nor from establishing priorities, nor indeed from seeking consensus through discussion and compromise; and that Eurocentric forms of truth have masqueraded as the universal under a hijacked form of humanism; but that it remains necessary to search for ways to create a renewed definition of the human, beyond the commodification of identity under capitalism. (73)

When Oliver writes that the regulatory process must “consider different viewpoints including those of Aboriginal communities,” but then asserts that, “It must be based on science and the facts,” while clearly implying that the pipeline should be built, he repeats a colonialist disavowal of Indigenous knowledge and concerns. A conversation about the various complicated and contingent truths at play in bitumen development and what the communal priorities should be is the one that we are struggling to have in Alberta, in Canada, and internationally.

If we consider bitumen, and the ecosystem of which it is a part, a “matter of concern,” rather than a substance about which we just need to establish scientific facts, then the process of seeking consensus through discussion and compromise, of establishing priorities, becomes meaningful—more difficult, yes—but also more democratic: a process that does not privilege Eurocentric

models of knowledge over every other includes more truths about bitumen and the boreal forest. In “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” Latour claims

Archimedes spoke for a whole tradition when he exclaimed: ‘Give me one fixed point and I will move the Earth,’ but am I not speaking for another, much less prestigious but maybe as respectable tradition, if I exclaim in turn ‘Give me one matter of concern and I will show you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place?’ For me it makes no sense to reserve the realist vocabulary for the first one only. The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. (“Critique” 246)

A critique of assembly is desperately needed in the debate over bitumen development. While various participants struggle to establish fixed points by which they can move the world’s understanding of bitumen and debunk opponents’ claims, this strategy has not succeeded in changing the status quo. As water ecologist David Schindler, and others, have pointed out, there has been, and continues to be, a tremendous lack of environmental monitoring in the region, and what monitoring does occur is largely done by industry⁵. Further, the critique of debunking is so firmly entrenched that it is very difficult to know which points are truly fixed. Thus, when 99kokanee writes in response to Rethink Alberta, “do you deny *the fact* that the oil is naturally seeping into the river causing the toxins. do [sic] you deny *the fact* that water sampling and testing has shown no increase in toxins in the last 50 years” (emphasis added), it is impossible, at least for most ordinary citizens, to definitively dispute this claim. Despite Schindler’s research, published in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, which shows that “not all toxic metals in the river are from natural sources”, and federal and provincial government promises to increase monitoring, the conflicting narratives about the impacts of bitumen extraction have so far preserved the status quo, which privileges development over conservation (Brooymans B4). Schindler’s facts have not gained more traction than those of industry or government. If it is a fixed point that industry is depositing deleterious

substances into the Athabasca River, in contravention of the Fisheries Act, this has not changed industry practices or reframed the debate.⁶ While Schindler does receive media attention, and his views are taken seriously by some, he remains one voice among many. His warnings about current pollution and future dangers have not punctured industry's balloon, inflated by jobs, taxes, funding for arts and culture, and promises of continued prosperity and improved environmental performance.

If the goal is to change the debate, then a strategy to explore is not only to search out more or better facts but to assemble the various voices that enable the status quo as a way of trying to see how they operate together. TheMountainDude8, who writes in the same vein as 99kokanee, states, "The oil companies in Alberta are smart enough to do something about it. They are investing millions in research and working with local research[r]s at the Universities to find better ways of extracting the oil, minimizing the footprint, and sequestering CO2 in old depleted wells." An opponent may well respond that the open pit mining by which the vast majority of bitumen is currently being extracted does not use wells, that in situ extraction still requires huge amounts of water and fragments habitats, that carbon capture and sequestration is not being done on a commercial scale anywhere, that serious doubts about its feasibility remain, and that the technology is unsuitable for use in the bitumen region.⁷ My main interest in 99kokanee's statement is the rhetorical effect of the ambiguous pronoun "it." He or she does not say explicitly what the oil companies are smart enough to do something about. The sentence that follows suggests that "it" is the environmental damage wrought by bitumen extraction, but we might also read "it" as the *perception* that bitumen extraction is environmentally destructive: the oil companies are smart enough to do something about the negative perceptions associated with their industry. A cynic might suggest that all of the efforts 99kokanee lists are targeted toward this perception as much as, or more than, the destruction. As Schindler himself put it, "I guess what really rankles me is we have this foolish propaganda going on to make people think everything is OK and therefore support

the tarsands," but "If people know what's really going on and they still support the tarsands, well, I can grit my teeth, but that's democracy. What's going on now is not democracy" (McLean and Brooymans A2). The challenge for a position like Schindler's, though, is dealing with the counter-rhetorical pincer move of dismissing such a claim to know "what's really going on" as totalitarian on the one hand and falling back on industry's 'objective claims' to improvement on the other. We need to supplement efforts to describe what's "really going on."

Propaganda and an Attentive, Affective Alternative

We can see the type of propaganda Schindler criticizes at work in a piece Dave Collyer, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), wrote for the *Edmonton Journal* on 11 August 2011 titled "Oil, gas industry is making environmental progress." He writes that, "The Canadian oil and gas industry [...] is focused on the three 'E's'—energy security and reliability, economic growth and environmental performance". This would seem to indicate that these can all be focused on at the same time, that a balance can be achieved. Collyer articulates precisely a "need" for "balanced solutions—responsibly developing Alberta's valuable resources within a reasonable regulatory framework that recognizes economic benefits and the need for practical environmental protection." Further, "In addition to focusing on environmental performance improvement, we must continue to improve our engagement and communication with customers and the Canadian public," but "Unfortunately, we also understand responsible environmental performance and objective communications won't satisfy the activists who oppose oilsands development."

This type of ad hominem attack has been extended in the federal government intervention in the debate over the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline. Joe Oliver's attack on "radical" environmentalists and "jet-setting celebrities" who seek to "undermine Canada's national economic interest" attempts to marginalize anyone with doubts over the project. Oliver has also stated in an interview that, "There have been very few

pipelines indeed that have ever been rejected by the National Energy Board. I think there have only been two out of tens of thousands” (O’Neil A5). While Collyer and Oliver are targeting groups like Greenpeace and Corporate Ethics International, the coalition of organizations behind the Rethink Alberta campaign encouraging tourists not to visit Alberta, one can assume that they would also take issue with Prescott’s *Fort Mac*, which suggests, according to one review, that the boomtown lifestyle “will steal your soul” (The National Arts Centre). However, Prescott’s play presents a series of events that cannot simply be refuted with a set of statistics. We might think of these events within what Chisholm calls “the art of ecological thinking” or what Adam Dickenson has theorized as “lyric ethics,” which is understood as “a kind of attention that is not reducible to linguistic code or description, a form of listening, perhaps, that might serve to hear the imperative of the other, human and nonhuman” (Dickenson 48). In short, literature pays attention to ecology, recognizes it as a “matter of concern,” in ways that science and politics do not.

In *Fort Mac*, Jaypee, Kiki, and Mimi arrive in Alberta to make their pile and get out; they have come to, as Jaypee says, “faire du *cash* [...] faire le gros motton” (20).⁸ Commissioned by Daniel Cournoyer for Edmonton’s French-language L’Unithéâtre at the height of the last boom, the play went on to run at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Alexandre Gauthier wrote, in reviewing the play, that the interest of the piece is in the characters, as they are thrown into a world governed by money:

Et c’est là l’intérêt de la pièce. *Fort Mac* n’est pas qu’une fable écologique qui s’emploie à dénoncer l’exploitation des sables bitumineux. Ce n’est pas non plus qu’une pièce politique, revendicatrice d’une position anticapitaliste claire et précise. Il s’agit tout simplement d’une pièce sur l’humain—l’homme, la femme—qui, vouant un culte à l’argent et à la prospérité, entrent dans un tourbillon sans jamais pouvoir en ressortir. Les personnages dévoilent peu à peu, directement au public, des fragments de leur humanité, humanité qui s’effrite tout au long de la pièce.⁹ (Gauthier)

It is the humanity of the characters that makes it impossible to discount the play as a piece of rhetorical propaganda. As Cournoyer describes them, “to forget the past and reinvent themselves. [...] Crawling out of your old self: That’s a story everyone understands” (Nicholls). The way that the play catalogues the failure of the characters to achieve this re-creation in Fort McMurray, the failure of Fort McMurray to enable this re-creation, casts doubts on Joe Oliver’s certainty in bitumen development and pipeline building to generate a better future.

Canadian conservative philosopher and critic of technological society, George Grant states that “the retirement of many from the public realm [...] raises questions about the heart of liberalism: whether the omnipresence of contract in the public realm produces a world so arid that most human beings are unable to inhabit it, except for dashes in followed by dashes out” (12). Fort McMurray is often seen as a place people dash in to, profit from, and dash out of again. In the play this seems, indeed, to be a necessary survival strategy. As Gauthier notes, Kiki is the only character to believe in something other than money—“Kiki, en vierge Marie des temps modernes, prie, en vain. Elle est bien la seule à croire en autre chose qu’en l’argent”¹⁰—and, because no one else shares this belief, she dies in the end.

Kiki begins the play “sur un pont” (9)¹¹ contemplating suicide, but decides not to kill herself because she feels her death will not have any meaning: “Si je meurs maintenant ma mort aurait pas de sens”¹² (14). Instead she attempts to build a life of mutual benefit for herself and those around her, trying to help in any way, however ineffectual, whenever she can. She says, after finding work at Tim Hortons, that making people happy is her reason for being: “J’ai trouvé ma raison d’être. Je vas rendre les gens heureux”¹³ (35). Ultimately, even though she offers herself as a sacrifice to pay the debts of those she cares for, it seems unlikely that she has made anyone happy. Gauthier describes how Kiki represents the dangers of human greed: “Kiki est la seule à reconnaître les dangers de l’exploitation des sables bitumineux, invoquant souvent Dame Nature. Mais elle

représente surtout les dangers humains liés à l'appât du gain."¹⁴ While one might dismiss the invocation of Mother Nature as an appeal to a sentimental construct, it is important, in my view, if we are to establish bitumen as a matter of concern, that we not categorically dismiss such appeals: sentiment may provide access to a truth, one that is marginalized within Eurocentric rationalist discourse, but one that may usefully be redeployed.¹⁵ The selfishness of others leads to Kiki's tragic death, and if her death is more meaningful at the end of the play than it would have been at the beginning it will be because of the audience's recognition of the dangers to human and non-human nature that come with greed, that come with all people acting only in their own self-interest. This ending is meant to evoke an emotional response from the audience, certainly, and that response enables a change in perspective, a change to a perspective that recognizes relations that exceed the contractual. Daniel Coleman has argued that "reading a thing that is truly admirable [...] reminds us what it is like to be open and undefended." And "We need this reminder, [...] because it opens us to the Other" (37). Being open to otherness, I would suggest, is a requisite step in moving from matters of fact, and the polemical rhetoric and "bullshit" that they generate, to matters of concern, where the beauty of otherness is recognized as good for its own sake. Admirable texts may come from many realms but there is something about how we read fiction that can facilitate this openness. Recognition of beautiful otherness does not absolve us of the hard work of establishing priorities that Brydon outlines, indeed it shows us how important that work is when we recognize the other as beautiful and at risk.

If, as Ian Angus, argues, "the concept of community refers," on one hand, "to the human community within which the individual lives and works" but also, on the other, to "the natural environment that surrounds and sustains human life" (84), ecological and communal consequences arise when it becomes impossible to imagine both living and working in a single location, impossible to imagine living with the consequences of your work. Kiki dies as a result of prostituting herself in a work camp in an attempt to earn enough

money to pay off Jaypee's debts. Her death illustrates a breakdown of the sustaining human and non-human community in Fort McMurray. In the first "Intermède," a series of soliloquies that separate the "Scènes," Kiki asserts an etymological connection between "nature" and "naissance" before arguing, "Si Dame Nature voyait ce qui se passait ici à *Fort McMurray*, elle pleurerait son océan de larmes. Mais là que j'y pense... Elle n'a pas besoin de le voir—elle le sent, elle le sait. Mon Dieu... Elle doit le sentir" (16).¹⁶ The breakdown of that sustaining surround leads to her death. Despite the help of the well-intentioned Maurice, the franco-Albertan from Plamondon who has come to Fort McMurray to escape the small town pity and gossip that followed his wife leaving him, Kiki is not able to create community in Fort McMurray.

The Rhetoric of Bitumen Extraction and its Limits

The representation of Kiki's sacrifice pushes beyond the rhetorical battle, the "war of words" (A15), as CAPP president Dave Collyer has characterized it, in which, while there may be some fixed point somewhere that the committed citizen can uncover if given the resources, for the average observer it all comes to resemble so much "bullshit." That is, all participants seem to be concerned with is persuasion "unconnected to a concern with the truth"; the whole conversation is "not germane to the enterprise of describing reality" (Frankfurt). Regardless of the intentions of the sender of the message, which are more or less unknowable, this is how it appears to the receiver. Revealingly, numerous posters declare that the Rethink Alberta video is "bullshit." Indeed, many posters then instruct others to "get educated" about bitumen development and turn to "facts," such as KakeC13, who writes, "Do some research and you will find out that the Province counter acts [sic] everything, they take down trees, we plant them." The ambiguous pronouns *they* and *we* create an interesting opposition, since the oil companies are responsible both for taking down the trees and planting new ones. KakeC13's us vs. them dichotomy makes industry both us and them, appropriately both self and other since all Albertans, Canadians, North Americans are implicated in the environmental degradation required to extract bitumen

and the costs of its regeneration. Frankfurt argues that, “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.” I don’t mean to demonize the YouTube posters, or simply expose their ignorance. Talking about bitumen, perhaps talking about the environment in any capacity, requires talking without knowing what we are talking about (we are not omniscient and this is one reason perpetuating doubt proves such an effective strategy). There is, certainly, good reason to take issue with the manipulative way that “facts” are used in both the Rethink Alberta video and the Ethical Oil campaign, as I have tried to suggest above. My point, rather, is that despite the proliferation of statistics marshaled by all sides in the debate, there is a lack of fixed points about the consequences of bitumen development, and this is the situation that we need to come to terms with, the circumstance we need to learn to live within. We do not and cannot know what the results will be. In such a situation, rather than trying to exclude everything that does not provide an indisputable matter of fact from the conversation, as Oliver claims we must, we can “follow the poets in their quest for reality” (Latour, “What is the Style?” 23), which I take to mean that poetic (or literary) descriptions of reality get beyond matters of fact.¹⁷

While environmentalists target counter-discursive rhetoric at government and industry propaganda, bitumen continues to be extracted because the public is deceiving itself about the impossible choices involved in that extraction. Bitumen production occurs because a majority of citizens want to believe it can satisfy our appetites without any permanent sacrifices, that reclamation can return the land to its pre-development state, and that pollution is compensated for by jobs, taxes, and increasing prosperity. Underlying these beliefs is a dominant cultural enthymeme—a syllogism in which some premises remain unspoken and that the audience must supply. Aristotle saw the enthymeme as the most important rhetorical form (78).

When some premises are suppressed or assumed by both sides in a debate, appeals to *logos* reach a limit. As Aristotle notes, in situations “where precision is impossible and two views can be maintained,” the logical appeal must give way to the ethical—the perceived character of the speaker—as we “sooner believe reasonable men [sic]” (75). This helps explain why responses to criticism about bitumen development have focused so heavily on public relations, and perhaps suggests the opportunity that the current debate over Northern Gateway offers.

The Alberta Government, for example, famously took out an advertisement in New York’s Times Square, which stated that, “a good neighbour lends you a cup of sugar. A great neighbour provides you with 1.4 million barrels of oil per day.” The tagline for the campaign was “Tell it like it is.” This line asks the reader to fill in the premises and, thereby, cooperate in creating its persuasive effect. Reading this line with one set of premises would give, ‘Tell bitumen’s story accurately (not as environmentalists tell it): it is being done properly by a neighbour of strong moral character and is beneficial for all.’ The ambiguity of the pronoun referent—the “it” of the tagline—creates space for counter-discursive responses as well, but the effectiveness of such responses depends on recognition of what Slavoj Žižek (following Donald Rumsfeld) has called “unknown knowns,” the “disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not aware of adhering to ourselves [... which] in the case of ecology [...] prevent us from really believing in the possibility of a disaster” (*Defense* 457). The ambiguity of the pronoun referent—the “it” of the tagline—creates space for counter-discursive responses, such as Chris Turner’s “Paradigm Shift,” a letter to the next Premier of Alberta, which claims that the reality is that “The tarsands will be a curse if not managed properly. It can also be a great gift to Canada and Alberta” (32). The government’s approach tends to be effective nonetheless, because, in asking readers to fill in the blanks, it appeals to the cultural dominant and reestablishes the status quo. Literature, by contrast, though it calls on readers to create the meaning of texts in similar ways, can interrupt the operation of that status quo, at least temporarily.

Kenneth Burke describes the “characteristic invitation to rhetoric” this way: when partners “collaborate in an enterprise [...] who is to say [...] just where ‘cooperation’ ends and one partner’s ‘exploitation’ of the other begins?” (25). Alternatives to the status quo emerge when we recognize the beliefs whose disavowal allows us to represent our exploitation of nature as cooperation. The heavy-handed intervention of the federal government in the Northern Gateway debate may enable this recognition through its failure to appeal to the ethos of those who do not consider themselves ‘radical environmentalists’ and yet have doubts about running a pipeline through one of the world’s largest intact temperate rainforests or about tanker traffic off the treacherous B.C. coast. Campaigns such as Rethink Alberta and Ethical Oil are so polarizing though, that they only reinforce the positions of those who already hold them. They fill in the premises of the syllogism with a predetermined script: bitumen development is either a disaster or an ethical good. There is no middle ground. I would not suggest that literature seeks such a middle ground, but it can present an alternative view of reality, one that people with various views might recognize as having a place in the conversation.

This recognition can help to counter the general lack of fixed points. Indeed, among the specifications Latour offers for a project based in matters of concern is that they “have to be *liked*” (“Style” 47). This suggests that, for one, in making decisions about bitumen development or pipeline building we should listen carefully to the people who live in, and like, the places affected. This may be difficult for Joe Oliver who seems to think the land holding the bitumen deposits, “is uninhabitable... uh... by human beings. So, you know, no community is being disrupted” (Paris). It is shocking that the colonialist view of *terra nullius* could be maintained by anyone, let alone a government minister, today, and not even to describe the past but to describe the present situation in Northern Alberta. This may offer an example where critical debunking still has a role to play. Nevertheless, by considering *Fort Mac* we can see how moving out of the realm of facts temporarily, and into that of the values that language can only intimate, might

help us change our minds about what our relationship to bitumen should be.

Kiki explains her difficulty in understanding how men can dominate nature when recognition of the beautiful otherness of nature makes us human:

J’ai jamais compris le besoin qu’ont les hommes de vouloir détruire ce qui est beau. Je comprends juste pas. Peut-être ils voient pas la beauté qui les entoure—mais je refuse de croire que ces hommes peuvent pas voir la beauté parce que c’est ça ce qui nous rend humain. Pis je crois pas que ces hommes sont pas humains. Ils se sentent peut-être à part—détachés ou supérieurs à la nature. La nature est seulement une force à dompter—à dominer—à exploiter.¹⁸ (67)

Jaypee shows himself to be precisely such an exploiter as he encourages Mimi to take a job as an exotic dancer, convinces her to prostitute herself to Murdock, and, as soon as Mimi has left to try to save Jaypee from Murdock, he tries to force himself on Kiki. When she asks him what he wants from her—“Qu’est-ce que tu veux de moi?”¹⁹—he states, “Je veux ton innocence. Ta lumière. Ta beauté. Ta bonté”²⁰ (98). However, when she does not resist, saying, “Si tu me veux, prends-moi,”²¹ he is unable to rape her, saying under his breath, “(Fuck... Je peux pas fourrer la Sainte Vierge, estie!)”²² (98). Those like Jaypee—and the more malevolent, and successful, Murdock (who never appears on stage)—who see all forms of otherness as potential to dominate and profit from—are certain in their own knowledge regardless of any evidence to the contrary. Throughout the play, whenever Jaypee requires support for some claim he is making he will say, “J’ai raison, j’ai pas raison?”²³ and then he will wait for Mimi or Kiki to reply “T’as raison”²⁴ before concluding with “J’ai raison, çàrtain”²⁵ (22). As the play moves on, however, and he gets further in debt and more drug-addled, the support from others is no longer forthcoming, but this does not cause him to question his certainty in his own reason. He simply waits a moment before declaring, as usual, “J’ai raison, çàrtain” (97). Jaypee’s certainty in his own reason is easy to dismiss as flawed. There is very little appeal in his *ethos* to come to his defense when the limits of his reason are reached.

When Patrick Moore, co-founder of Greenpeace, however, campaigns for CAPP on behalf of Northern Gateway, describing post-mining restoration as “the best reclamation I’ve seen,” his *ethos* provides more support. In a recent op-ed, Moore wrote, “the world needs oil now and we’ll need it for the foreseeable future—so it matters greatly where that oil comes from. If any oil is to be labeled ‘dirty,’ shouldn’t it be the oil coming from dictatorial regimes [...]?” (A19). However, despite such efforts to show the superiority of bitumen, both *logos* and *ethos* reach their limits in moments when particular horrors cannot be repressed, dismissed, or marginalized. It does matter greatly where oil comes from; we may even decide that bitumen is the best source of oil; but the extraction of bitumen does require moments of sacrifice that cannot be compensated for.²⁶ The conclusion to Prescott’s play offers one such moment, as does the death of the ducks that Rethink Alberta attempted to capitalize on. Such moments do not prescribe a course of action or attempt to chart a way forward, their value is in the way they raise the question of what should be done, of whether anything will be done in response to such tragedy. Continuing with the status quo is a possibility, probably the most likely possibility, but Kiki’s death makes us either choose the status quo again or choose something else.

Conclusion: Choosing to Pay Attention to Ambiguity

In the final Intermède, Maurice describes the abuse of nature by humans: “Dame nature est fatiguée, aussi. Elle s’est offerte a nous avec toutes ses bontés pis on la remercie en profitant d’elle. On prend avantage d’elle, on l’abuse... On la viole”²⁷ (114). We can read Kiki as a representative of nature. Maurice stands on the stage waiting for recognition of her sacrifice—“pour marquer son départ, sa souffrance, son sacrifice”²⁸ (114)—but a sign is not forthcoming from nature and he must mark her departure himself: before the stage goes dark, “Il lance des pétales de roses en bas du pont”²⁹ (115). It may be a literary-critical commonplace to point out that the ambiguity of this conclusion leaves the possible truths of the play open to the interpretations of the audience members. Nevertheless, that openness is important and the type of response it requires—debate, discussion,

and compromise—to make whatever sense it will make needs to be extended to the conversation about bitumen in general. Such a debate, one that considers all of the competing truths before establishing a set of priorities through a process of discussion and compromise, would characterize an understanding of bitumen as a matter of concern.

Today, however, instead of engaging in the type of collaborative debate required for textual analysis, battle lines are being drawn. As mentioned, the federal government has taken an aggressive line against foreign influence in the anti-pipeline movement and has taken steps in its budget implementation bill to restrict the opportunities for charities to undertake political activities. The editorial in *The Edmonton Journal* of 10 January 2012 questions this tactic:

by using assaults on the legitimacy and credibility of opponents instead of engaging with adult politeness, the government has given a clear signal which way it is leaning before the independent panel gives the first formal testimony a respectful hearing. Even worse, it has undermined its credibility by being inconsistent, if not outright hypocritical, on the subject of foreign participation in the debate. After all, the foreign money being poured into the anti-pipeline fight is pocket change compared to the billions that French, American, Norwegian, and Chinese business people have invested in the oilsands. (“Foreign Influence” A12)

The editorial concludes by declaring that “name-calling isn’t how you win this argument; on the contrary it’s a surefire way of getting your opponents even more committed to doing battle” (A12). Indeed, rather than helping to win, name-calling might help to create the conditions for losing the argument if it helps to undermine the pro-bitumen side’s *ethos*. If we “sooner believe reasonable men,” continued evidence that defenders of the status quo are not more reasonable than their interlocutors might create the conditions for change. As Žižek argues, “Words are never ‘only words’; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do” (*First as Tragedy* 109). Literature is one place where the definitions of words can be changed, where

the contours of what we can do can be changed. In *Fort Mac*, Prescott's attention to the multiple sacrifices required by bitumen extraction, and the connection between human and non-human sacrifice in the character of Kiki, provide one opportunity to change the debate from one that currently starts and ends with scientific facts into something broader. It is easier in a play to argue at a remove from immediate factuality and necessity, and that remove enables a type of assessment that is not valid in other realms, that might simply be dismissed as sentimentalism or utopianism or parochialism. And, of course, these charges can be leveled at literature too. However, after recognition of the supplement literature provides to social discourse (Angenot 219), our view of that social discourse may change; we may read the social discourse differently. When a country's federal government engages in schoolyard name-calling regarding a review process that approves over 99% of applications, their purported focus on scientific facts begins to seem like an attempt at persuasion unconnected from a concern with the truth; it suggests that what we have heard up to now has been mostly "bullshit" and it is time to talk about matters of concern.

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Image Notes:

Fig. 1 Allan, Jord. "The Rethink Alberta Billboard." *cultural dysphoric*. N.p. September 9, 2010. Web. July 15, 2011.

Fig. 2 "Ethical Oil Poster." EthicalOil.org.; rpt. in "Ethical Oil: Framing a Debate on an Issue." *Flares into Darkness*. Web. July 15, 2011.

Endnotes

1. It means, among other things, asking, first, *if* we should extract oil from bitumen, and then, if we feel we should, asking *how* we should go about that, what we are willing to sacrifice for the oil (rather than assuming that these questions have already been answered). I explore these questions more fully in another article, "What Should We Sacrifice for Bitumen?", not yet published.

2. "knows engines"

3. "because they pay attention to what you buy."

4. Any readers eager to know more of what I think might see "Displacing Oil: Toward 'Lyric' Re-presentations of the Alberta Oil Sands" in *Countering Displacements: The Creativity and Resilience of Indigenous and Refugee-ed Peoples*.

5. Most recently, Bill Van Heyst, associate professor of environmental engineering at the University of Guelph, has warned that cuts included in the federal Conserva-

tive government's 2012 omnibus budget bill C-38 will degrade the quality of environmental monitoring even further (De Souza A13).

6. Indeed, since the time of writing, the federal Conservative government has included as part of Bill C-38 changes to the Fisheries Act, which seem to weaken protection for fish habitat.

7. See, for instance, Grant, Dyer, and Woynilowicz "Fact or Fiction: Oil Sands Reclamation."

8. "to make cash [...] to make the big piece"

9. And that's interest of the piece. *Fort Mac* is not an ecological fable that works to expose the oilsands. This is not a political play, claiming a clear and precise anticapitalist position. This is simply a human piece—the man, the woman—who, through sincere devotion to a cult of money and prosperity, get caught in a whirlwind without the power to get out. The characters reveal, directly to the audience, fragments of their humanity bit by bit, humanity crumbling throughout the play.

10. "Kiki, a modern day Virgin Mary, prays, in vain. She is the only one to believe in something other than money"

11. "on a bridge"

12. "if I die now my death will not have any meaning"

13. "I have found my reason for being. I am going to make people happy."

14. "Kiki is alone in recognizing the dangers of the oil sands, often invoking Mother Nature. But she especially represents the dangers associated with human greed."

15. See Chisholm's reading of Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz* in "The Art of Ecological Thinking," where she argues that Meloy "treats ecological upheaval as inexplicably affective, not as positive, measurable, factual, and fixable. Affect is key to Meloy's art of

composing a vision of what is otherwise imperceptible and unthinkable” (572). In my reading of *Fort Mac* the use of “Dame Nature” works to generate affect, despite the problematic associations of that phrase.

16. “If Mother Nature saw what was happening here in Fort McMurray, she would cry an ocean of tears. But now that I think of it ... She does not need to see it—she feels it, she knows it. My God ... She must feel it.”

17. Given more time I would like to connect Chisholm’s reading of Meloy’s vision of the desert—“Such a vision deterritorializes the State’s deterritorialization of the desert as void or as so ‘empty’ of natural and human resources as to be ideal for atomic bombing without consequence (29)” (583)—with a history of viewing the North American prairie as empty and deficient and, therefore, ripe for industrialization (see Frances W. Kaye’s *Good Lands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* for an elaboration of this view), which, following settlement and the development of an industrial agricultural economy is pushed northward onto the bituminous sands and boreal forest, which are similarly constructed as deficient, empty and available for industrial development. Meloy’s vision of the desert connects with the history of bitumen extraction via Project Plowshare and plans, never enacted, to detonate nuclear bombs in order to extract oil from sand (see Marsden, *Stupid to the Last Drop* and Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* for versions of this story).

18. I never understood the need of men to want to destroy what is beautiful. I just do not understand. Maybe they do not see the beauty that surrounds them—but I refuse to believe that these men can not see beauty because that’s what makes us human. Worse I don’t believe that these men are not human. They feel perhaps set-apart—detached or superior to nature. Nature is only a force to subdue, to dominate, to exploit.

19. “what is it that you want from me?”

20. “I want your innocence. Your light. Your beauty. Your benevolence.”

21. “If you want me, take me”

22. “Fuck... I cannot fuck the Holy Virgin, estie!”

23. “I have reason. Do I not have reason?”

24. “You have reason”

25. “I certainly have reason”

26. See Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable.”

27. Mother Nature is tired, too. She has provided us with all her bounty, and we thank her by profiting from her. We take advantage of her, abuse her ... We violate her.” Some ecofeminists criticize the anthropomorphism involved in the construction “Mother Nature.” I do not have space to outline this debate here, but will simply suggest that despite flaws and limitations it still has capacity to help recontextualize an objectivist approach to environmental issues. Catriona Sandilands has described a goal for ecofeminism as being to “understand the ways in which nature and gender are wielded as discursive constructs, to investigate the ways in which the oppression of women and the domination of nature are imbricated in a whole host of destructive relations and practices, and to create an oppositional framework capable of addressing their interrelations” (xvi). Deployment of “Mother Nature” as a discursive construct could serve the ends of domination in some contexts or operate as part of the oppositional framework in others. My contention is that in *Fort Mac* it operates to address the interrelations between the oppression of women and the domination of nature through the character of Kiki.

28. “to mark her departure, her suffering, her sacrifice”

29. “He throws the rose petals below the bridge”

Gordon, Jonathan: Jonathan Gordon has taught in English and Film Studies and at the University of Alberta and Writing Studies at Maskwachees Cultural College. He currently teaches Writing Studies in the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Alberta. His dissertation, *Belonging and Homelessness in 'Post-Modern' Alberta Literature: Community at the Limits of Discourse*, examines the cultural signifying practices that constitute community in Alberta and critiques their various complicities with the homogenizing narrative of capitalism. He has published on hog production—“Bent to the Shape of Wordlessness’: Home, Hogs, and Community at the Limits of Discourse”—mountaineering literature—“Means and Motives: The Mystification of Mountaineering Discourse”—and bitumen—“Displacing Oil: Towards ‘Lyric’ Representations of the Alberta Oil Sands.” His current project, *Unsustainable Rhetoric: Liberalism, Ecology, and Industrial Mega-projects*, of which the article in this journal is a part, goes beyond purely literary analysis to study advertising and media representations of various mega-projects: industrialized agriculture, hydroelectric dams, and oil extraction.

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Gordon, Jonathan : Jonathan Gordon (B.A. Alberta, M.A. Western, Ph.D. Alberta) a enseigné l’anglais et les études cinématographiques à l’Université de l’Alberta, ainsi que les techniques de rédaction au Collège culturel de Maskwachees. Il est aujourd’hui de retour à l’Université de l’Alberta, où il enseigne les techniques de rédaction pour le compte du Bureau des études interdisciplinaires. Sa thèse, *Belonging and Homelessness in 'Post-Modern' Alberta Literature: Community at the Limits of Discourse*, est une analyse des pratiques culturelles constituantes de la communauté de l’Alberta, et une critique de leurs diverses accointances avec le récit homogénéisateur du capitalisme. Il a publié au sujet de l’élevage des porcs : « ‘Bent to the Shape of Wordlessness’: Home, Hogs, and Community at the Limits of Discourse », de l’alpinisme : « Means and Motives: The Mystification of Mountaineering Discourse », et du bitume : « Displacing Oil: Towards ‘Lyric’ Re-presentations of the Alberta Oil Sands ». Son projet actuel, *Unsustainable Rhetoric: Liberalism, Ecology, and Industrial Mega-projects*, dont fait partie cet article, dépasse les frontières de l’analyse littéraire pour s’étendre au domaine de l’étude de la publicité et des représentations médiatiques de divers mégaprojets : l’agriculture industrialisée, les barrages hydroélectriques, et l’extraction du pétrole.