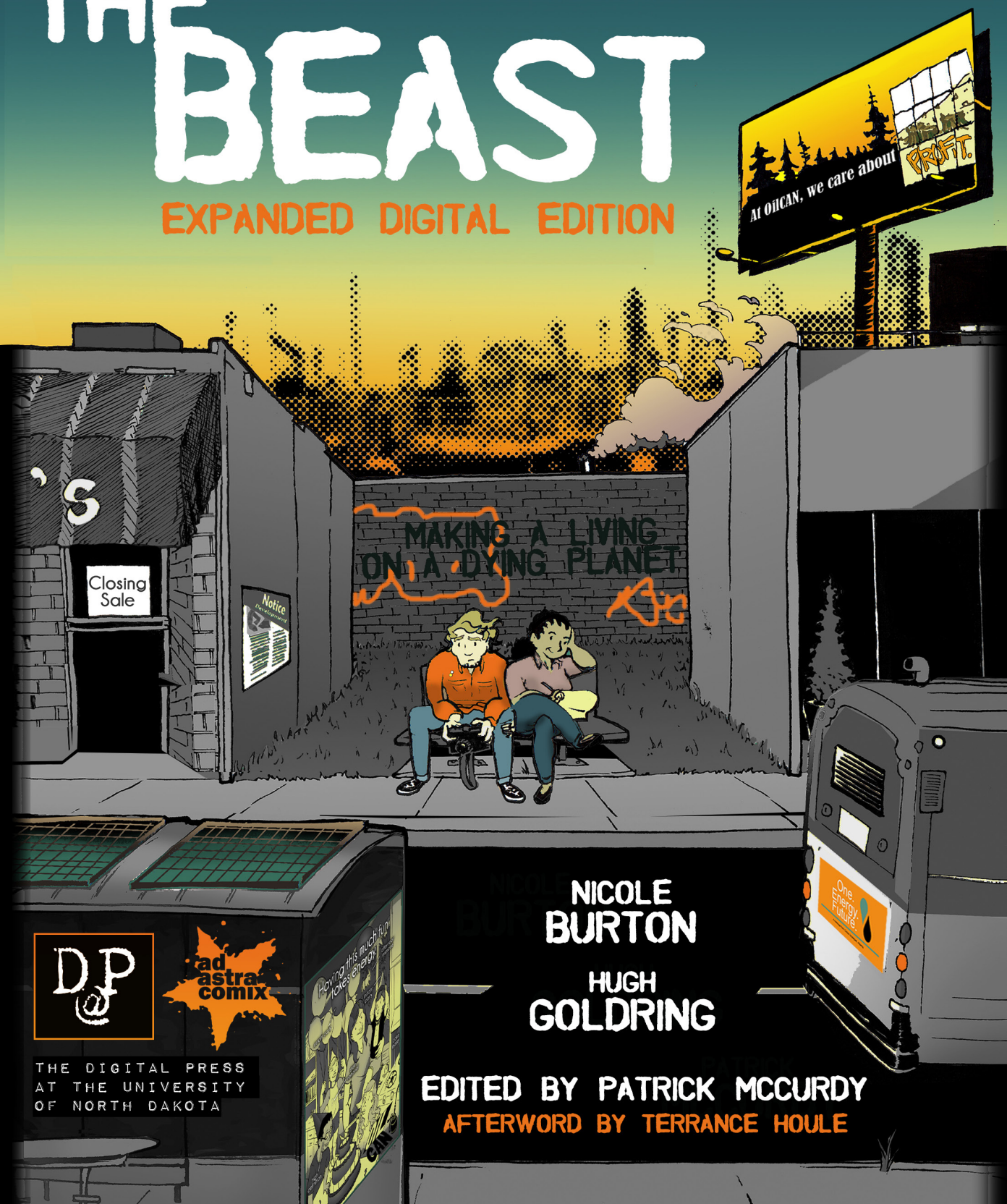


THE BEAST

EXPANDED DIGITAL EDITION



THE DIGITAL PRESS
AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF NORTH DAKOTA

NICOLE
BURTON

HUGH
GOLDRING

EDITED BY PATRICK MCCURDY
AFTERWORD BY TERRANCE HOULE



Ad Astra Comix

THE BEAST

EXPANDED DIGITAL EDITION

**HUGH GOLDRING
NICOLE BURTON**

**EDITED BY
PATRICK MCCURDY**



The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

Illustrations and satirical ad art © Nicole Marie Burton, 2018
Script © copyright Hugh D. A. Goldring, 2017
Foreword © Patrick McCurdy, 2017
Afterword and “Oily Buffalo” © Terrance Houle, 2017

Editing & Production Assistance: Patrick McCurdy
Layout Assistance: Crystal Paplinski
Cover Design: Nicole Marie Burton

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Goldring, Hugh, author
The beast : making a living on a dying planet / Hugh
Goldring ; illustrated by Nicole Marie Burton ; foreword by
Patrick McCurdy. -- First edition.

The Beast: Making a Living on a Dying Planet First Edition © copyright 2018
Ad Astra Comix, Ontario, Canada
www.adastracomix.com | adastracomix@gmail.com

All rights reserved.

The Beast: Making a Living on a Dying Plant. Expanded Digital Edition © 2018
The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

The follow are published under a Creative Commons By Attribution 4.0 License:

“Preface” by Patrick McCurdy, “
Seeing Oil” by Kyle Conway,
“Climate Change is an Ornerly Beast: Visual Culter, Denial, and Fort. McMurray in The Beast”
by Tommy Wall and Chris Russell,
“Making Comics Beyond the Funnies” by Benjamin Woo
“Talking The Beast” by David Haeselin

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to
Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

ISBN: 1-7328410-9-8 (ebook)
ISBN13: 987-1-7328410-9-3 (ebook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018963006



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

The research presented in this volume was supported by the
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The Expanded Digital Version was made possible through funding by a Publishing Grant from the University of Ottawa
and support from the Cyprus Research Fund at the University of North Dakota.

THE BEAST: EXPANDED DIGITAL EDITION

Patrick McCurdy
Preface..... i

Kyle Conway
Seeing Oil..... xi

Tommy Wall and Chris Russill
Climate Change is an Ornerly Beast:
Visual Culture, Denial, and Fort McMurray in
The Beast..... xxiii

Benjamin Woo
Making Comics Beyond the Funnies..... xxxviii

David Haeselin
Talking *The Beast*:
An Interview with Hugh Goldring
and Patrick McCurdy..... xlix

Contributors..... lxiii

THE BEAST 1



PREFACE

PATRICK MCCURDY

We live in a culture born from, steeped in, and heavily reliant upon fossil fuels. While this energy source is now ubiquitous in our lives, very few of us have ever traveled to places where companies extract fossil fuels at scale. The vast bitumen deposits surrounding Fort McMurray, Alberta represent oil extraction on a massive and unprecedented scale. Despite their size and significance, our knowledge of what supporters call ‘oil sands’ and detractors label ‘tar sands’ is limited and mediated. Recognizing this, *The Beast* is based on the premise that struggles over the environment, climate change, and energy transition are also struggles for our imagination.

The contestation over Alberta’s bitumen resources may be traced back to a late-2005 eNGO declaration calling upon the Canadian government to transition away from oil sands development towards sustainable energy. A key discursive accomplishment of eNGO campaigning was to transform the term “tar sands” from a decades-old colloquial term rooted in bitumen’s tar-like viscosity and appearance to a politically loaded signifier used to evoke Mordor-like images of industrial moonscapes and actively opposed the fossil fuel industry. It is worth noting that The Canada Press Stylebook advises journalists against using the term “tar sands” due to its pejorative nature preferring, instead, “oil sands”. While the term oil sands is used by government and industry to refer to Alberta’s bitumen reserves, it is not a neutral signifier; it points to the economic potential and thus value of bitumen. Thus the struggle over energy futures is both material and discursive. Language matters. Images matter. Framing matters.

Messages about the risks of the tar sands and rewards of oil sands development are communicated by multiple parties – from

politicians to protestors – through a variety of media including documentaries, books, articles, advertisements, social media, news stories, and comics. In terms of framing, we’ve seen various tropes rolled out on all sides of the debate with common themes including nationalism, patriotism and the use of Canadian symbols, equating energy extraction with patriotism. This trope is captured in the comic’s full-color “As Canadian as maple syrup” advertisement. As a side note, equating patriotism with energy production is an import from the American Petroleum Institute’s “Energy Citizen” Campaign. Canadians are less apt to wave the flag than our American neighbors to the south however Canadian patriotism and Canadian energy independence have been themes pushed by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), Canada’s upstream oil lobby.

Prior to oil draping itself in the flag, various attempts were made by CAPP as well as individual oil companies to communicate their commitment to the environment attempting to twin fossil fuel extraction with environmental protection. Images ranged from small patches of reclaimed land bathed in golden sunlight to grazing buffalo to pictures of blue skies or lush forest coupled with the promises of oil executives to protect the land, water and air. On the environmentalist side, after 1,600 ducks died on a Syncrude tailings pond in 2008, those animals covered in toxic substances became a powerful image. While unquestionably an environmental catastrophe, the image of the dead duck is an iconic tar sands signifier that is routinely deployed. Its cultural status was further cemented in Kate Beaton’s comic “Ducks.” We use the dead duck trope in our full colour Veldt Club advertisement “What if it happened here?”

Another popular meme which has done the rounds shows a flotilla of activists in kayaks – kayaktivists – protesting the Shell Polar Pioneer Oil rig in Seattle, Washington. While intended as an environmentalist image event framed as “The Paddle in Seattle”, the image has been inverted and memeified into a pro-oil message to read,

“Irony is watching Seattle enviros protest oil... in kayaks made from petroleum”. The meme is biting, funny, and succinct. Multiple variations of this meme have been made and have even followed other social movements such as Occupy activists using iPhones or anti-globalization protestors wearing Nike. The kayak meme, however, has made its way into *The Beast* in a scene where Mary and Callum are slinging images back and forth at each other. This scene is intended to, yet again, draw attention to the state of political discourse where protests are purposefully designed and executed as media events and where memes and quick-witted *ad hominem* snipes on social media pass for political discourse. Using fossil fuels and their by-products is an inevitable feature of contemporary life and while we can, should and are making efforts to find alternatives, the fact we use these products in our daily lives should not be accepted as a legitimate critique of a desire for system change.

Perhaps the most jarring of *The Beast*’s six colour advertisements is the “Oil Sands Proud” ad which shows two women kissing on the tailgate of a pickup truck against the backdrop of an oil derrick. Rainbow colors—synonymous for gay rights—are then superimposed over the image. A superficial reading of advertisement might see it as progressive; an advertisement supportive of same-sex relationships in an environment which may stereotypically be seen as hostile to such a thing. However, it refers to a darker image. The ad was designed in response to a short-lived social media campaign from July 2016 in support of the oil sands. The campaign centered on an advertisement which proclaimed, “In Canada lesbians are considered hot! In Saudi Arabia if you’re a lesbian you die!” While the ad rightly faced much criticism and was eventually withdrawn Canada Oil Sands Community, the grassroots group who produced it, the fact it was initially seen as an acceptable, let alone palatable, reflects the poor quality of public discourse over the tar sands and our energy

culture more broadly. It also reflects the divisive and emotive culture of politics underwritten by an emotive logic of social media.

In putting together *The Beast* my objective is for readers to recognize and reflect on the fact that stakeholders are pouring efforts into emotionally laden communication to mobilize their publics to the point where discourse over the bitumen sands, and now over pipelines has been reduced to throwaway clichés and one liners. Moreover, these stories and images can potentially shape, rightly or wrongly, how we view the tar/oil sands and its relationship with the economy, environment, climate change, and Indigenous rights.

Studying the images used in the ongoing war over the tar/oil sands suggests that there is a lack of genuine public debate over energy and energy transitions because the social imagination is polluted by incessant public relations campaigns. Instead of discussion and reflection, the public is forced to “pick sides”: the environment or the economy; protestors or industry; live with or without oil. These debates were particularly acerbic in the spring of 2016 around the time of the Fort McMurray wildfire, nicknamed “The Beast.” Thus the comic’s title refers to the wildfire but also to the unwieldy tar/oil sands debate which has consumed our attention and sucked the oxygen from public discourse.

The Fort McMurray wildfires were a liminal moment marking our transition into the epoch of the Anthropocene. However, as opposed to using the moment as an opportunity to honestly and sensitively discuss climate change, our energy, and the present and the imminent need to create an alternative energy future, traditional battle lines were drawn between “pro” and “anti” tar/oil sands camps. Moreover, the majority of politicians including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau steered well clear from attempts to attach “political arguments” to the wildfire and specifically connect it with the issue of climate change. The essay “Climate Change is an Ornerly Beast” by Tommy Wall and Chris Russill included in this extended edition tack-

les the beast by its horns offering a scathing and deserved critique of denialism and political inaction in the midst of crisis.

Climate change is not political; it is our reality. Consequently, we must ask ourselves if we can't talk about climate change – the biggest threat humanity has ever faced – in the context of a disaster which was hastened by climate change, when can we talk about it? The objective of *The Beast* is to use the medium of the graphic novel to explore themes present in this debate. Specifically, its aim is to expose and critique the relentless and short-term struggle for hearts and minds, the binaries, and tropes that dominate and cloud public discussion around the tar/oil sands.

The project's genesis dates back to May 2016 when I attended the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at my alma mater, the University of Calgary. I was at the Congress to give a paper titled "The Rise of Petronationalism: A Critical Examination of CAPP's 'Energy Citizens' Campaign," which was based on a research project I was conducting called Mediatoil (www.mediatoil.ca). Funded by an Insight Development Grant (IDG) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Mediatoil sought to map how various stakeholders such as governments, corporations, eNGOs and First Nations represented the risks and rewards of tar/oil sands development in their promotional material. *The Beast* was commissioned with funds from the Mediatoil SSHRC IDG. This expanded digital version was funded from a publication grant from the Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa.

The Congress's setting in Calgary prompted a number of critical discussions about oil and petroculture, including an event I attended on the evening of May 29 whose title took the form of a deceptively simple question: Is Oil a Dirty Word? While the answer may appear to lend itself to a simple yes or no answer, the need for nuance wasn't lost on panelists. The result was a fascinating and engaging discus-

sion about how we can understand our complicated relationship with oil and begin to disentangle ourselves from it.

Two days after “Is Oil a Dirty Word?” I had breakfast with Benjamin Woo, an Assistant Professor at Carleton University with expertise in the cultural industries and comic books in particular. Among the topics we discussed was the reality that our peer-reviewed academic work is often only ever read by a small, specialized audience and frequently hidden behind paywalls, making it difficult for the public to access. Peer-review publications are the gold standard of academic scholarship and the fate of one’s career relies on successfully publishing academic work. Yet when I expressed to Ben my desire to engage the public in a wider conversation about the debate over tar/oil sands, he suggested that I consider doing a comic and that I reach out to Ad Astra Comix. And so, with this suggestion, the idea for *The Beast* was born.

The Beast tracks the complicated ethics of media producers working within petroculture and came to fruition through a collaborative process where practically every aspect of the comic’s creation and production is touched by oil. This includes the hydrocarbons burned traveling to meetings about the comic to those involved in the production and delivery of goods such as ink and paper. All of these things rely on oil in some fashion. This is not to mention the role of fossil fuels and the plethora of petrochemicals which allow for and sustain networked communication, let alone our everyday creature comforts. The link between *The Beast* and oil is explored further in Kyle Conway’s essay provided in this extended edition.

The Beast began with an initial meeting with Hugh and Nicole of Ad Astra who agreed to take on the project. The story emerged from the convergence of a plot line my wife suggested to me while on holiday on the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia with an Ad Astra pitch. These ideas were then baked into a plot which continued to evolve through conversations with Ad Astra and feedback on script drafts. Along the way, I also received valuable feedback from other family

members, friends and colleagues much of which was fed back into the project, the result of which you are now reading. More about the process, mechanics and inspirations of *The Beast* can be read in an interview between David Haeselin, Nicole Burton, Hugh Goldring and me which is part of this collection.

Just as we pay attention to what is visible, we also must search out and reflect upon what is invisible. Images and texts can be powerful in both what is present and what is absent. In studying the promotional material of tar/oil sands stakeholders for Mediatool, I was struck by the relative absence of First Nations. Of course, some First Nations stakeholders did publish their own material, there were partnerships with eNGO campaigns and large corporations would publish on their relationships with First Nations. However, when analyzing images produced in the contestation over the tar/oil sands there was a noticeable disparity. In some ways, this disparity is understandable. In situations where there are material struggles for environmental, land and health justice we can't assume that media campaigning is a top priority. Meanwhile, with revenues in the billions, oil companies have the financial means to fund slick, expensive and extensive public relations campaigns. For those who seek to challenge oil companies, it's far more efficient (and cutting) to culture jam an advertising campaign than to make one.

The Beast replicates the disparity of representation evident across the promotional material wherein there is no addition or reflection on First Nations people and their relationship with the tar/oil sands. However, in seeking to – at least partially – redress this absence, I asked Kainai First Nation artist Terrance Houle to contribute to this project.

I first met Terrance at the “Is Oil a Dirty Word?” event in Calgary. Terrance discussed the potential of a planetary apocalypse caused by climate change, environmental degradation and pollution brought about by our reliance on fossil fuels and linked it to what he saw as the post-apocalyptic reality his people were living in. His image “Oily

Buffalo” (iinniiwahkiimah) was used on the event poster and large hand painted canvas versions were also hung at the venue. Readers can see Terrance Houle’s “Oily Buffalo” at the end of *The Beast* as well as read a brief, poignant essay on the image’s connection with the past and message to the future about the potential of an energy apocalypse caused by a society addicted to fossil fuels.

The complex environmental, economic, social, cultural and Indigenous issues linked to the oil sands extend far beyond what can be feasibly addressed in the pages of a graphic novel. Indeed, the reader is actively encouraged to seek out additional readings about these issues. Some readers – be they activists, government workers or those working in industry – may feel that certain characters in *The Beast* do not relay the nuance of their position. In commissioning and helping produce *The Beast*, my objective has been to create a provocation that prompts a conversation around the seemingly endless, entrenched and divisive media war over the tar/oil sands. As such, the story was deliberately crafted to draw upon and expose the tropes, clichés and throwaway stereotypes that dominate the debate over the tar/oil sands. Readers are encouraged to actively question and challenge these stereotypes and simple dichotomies.

It is my hope that through doing so, and seeking to look beyond reductionist dichotomies, simple media frames, and glossy advertisements, we clear the social imagination and create a space for a more nuanced conversation and meaningful public conversation about our complex relationship with oil, and how we can implement a just energy transition.

Ottawa, August 2018

Selected Suggested Readings

- Caraher, William and Conway, Kyle (Eds). 2016. *The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of Western North Dakota*. Grand Forks: The Digital Press @ The University of North Dakota.
- Davidson, Debra. J. and Gismondi, Mike. 2011. *Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity*. New York: Springer.
- Johnson, Bob. 2014. *Carbon Nation*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Laxer, Gordon. 2015. *After the Sands: Energy and Ecological Security for Canadians*. Madeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre
- LeMenager, Stephanie. 2014. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Perron, Dominique. 2013. *L'Alberta autophage: Identités, Mythes et Discours du Pétrole dans l'Ouest Canadien*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Szeman, Imre & Boyer, Dominique. (Eds.). 2017. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- Szeman, Imre & Petrocultures Research Group. 2016. *After Oil*. Edmonton.
- Takach, G. 2017. *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.
- Turner, C. 2017. *The Patch: The people, Pipelines, and Politics of the Oil Sands*. Toronto: Simon and Schuster.