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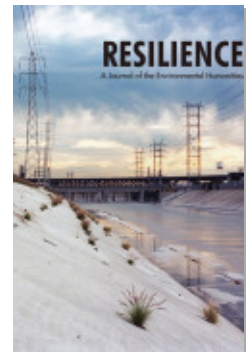
Canadian Editor's Introduction: Political Ecologies,  
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# Canadian Editor's Introduction: Political Ecologies, Public Humanities— a Report from Canada

CHERYL LOUSLEY

It didn't change everything. But when Canadian writer, journalist, and activist Naomi Klein published *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* in September 2014, coinciding with the People's Climate March and the United Nations' Climate Summit, it marked a political shift that resonates with new directions in environmental humanities research and activism in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Klein provocatively takes both "Big Green" environmental groups and left-wing activists to task for ignoring the connection between climate change and capitalism. She suggests that the international failure to achieve significant progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions over the past twenty-five years is due to the strident antiregulatory economic rhetoric of neoliberalism that assumed a stranglehold on political options at the same time that scientists began raising the alarm about climate change. For Klein, struggles for social justice will be undermined by the exacerbating effects of climate change; in turn, climate change will not be slowed to any liveable level without a resurgence of public oversight for the public interest.

Klein's sentiments are echoed in a manifesto-like editorial opening a special issue of the bilingual literary journal *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* on "Canadian Literary Ecologies" published in late 2014. "Canada is being forcibly recolonized from with-

in and without through the combined forces of capitalism, globalization, and the oil and gas industries,” writes University of Calgary eco-critic Pamela Banting.<sup>2</sup> “The nation whose literature most Canadianists here and beyond have taught for many years as a postcolonial literature is rapidly becoming a neo-colonial state. What happens now to our critical and theoretical approaches?”

The politics of extraction have hurtled to the fore of environmental humanities discussions in Canada for several reasons: the explosive pace of bitumen extraction from the Alberta tar sands; the forty-seven people who died in the Bakken-crude freight train explosion that destroyed the picturesque downtown of Lac Mégantic, Quebec, in July 2013; the nationwide, Indigenous, grassroots movement Idle No More, actively opposing unjust resource extraction from Indigenous lands through blockades, round dances, and teach-ins; and the decimation of environmental protection legislation, scientific oversight, and public consultation by the Conservative government. These events figure prominently in two new interdisciplinary book collections: *Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes in the Anthropocene* and *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments*, both of which are published in the Environmental Humanities book series I have edited with Wilfrid Laurier University Press since 2007.<sup>3</sup>

What could and should be the humanities contributions to these events? How might greater attention to rampant privatized resource extraction and climate change reshape humanities research and writing?

The documentary photography of Canadian artist Edward Burtnysky, whose large-format landscape images offer sublime views of industrial processes and waste, receives repeated attention in the above collections for their insertion of extraction politics into the space of the art gallery.<sup>4</sup> His 2009–2012 solo exhibition, *Oil*, also published as a book and an app, tracks oil production across its varied spaces: dusty California and Azerbaijan oil fields; gleaming modernist geometries in Canadian pipelines and refineries; sprawling, mirrorlike Alberta tailing ponds; symmetrical highway cloverleaves; suburban developments and car lots; abandoned auto factories; scrap yards; and ship breaking in Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> Métis writer, filmmaker, and scholar Warren Cariou suggests, in his contribution to *Sustaining the West*, that Burtnysky’s photography provides “a view into the unconscious of modernity.”<sup>6</sup> “The hellish landscapes of his recent *Alberta Oil Sands* series,” Cariou writes,

“reveal something that may not seem entirely ‘real’ because we have trouble conceiving of the nightmarish reality depicted there.”<sup>7</sup>

Cariou makes his own creative contribution to exploring what might awaken political dissent in Canada in “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto,” published in 2012 in *Imaginations*, a digital journal of image studies.<sup>8</sup> “TarhandsTM” is Cariou’s trademarked term for our nationally subsidized extraction extravaganza. Tarhands is a mythical figure whose hands tarnish everything he touches and whose insatiable hunger eats everything the nation shovels at him: “trucks, roads, steam, pipes, trains, muskeg, lives, methamphetamines, rivers, *pastahowin*, laws, futures.”<sup>9</sup> There’s a need for a larger-than-life, mythic figure to name this phenomenon because, Cariou notes, Canadians seem remarkably adept at not noticing, at humming along day-by-day pretending our hands are clean. Cariou’s TarhandsTM manifesto is a poetic effort in ecological pedagogy—a way to mire us all in the putrid stink of an effluent pond that makes Cariou retch and migraine and rage against our democratic complacency.

The spatially disparate places Burtynsky gathers together in his photographic documentation of an industrial oil economy push against the national frame in which artistic, literary, and historical studies have long been organized in Canada; on the other hand, Cariou, like Pamela Banting, presents a nationalist manifesto, refusing to let globalization act as an alibi for citizen disengagement. Clearly, contested forms of collective organization and identity will take on new significance in humanities research and writing, in light of this increased attention to climate change and resource extraction.

A final consideration comes from these artists’ use of a wide, layered range of media and distribution platforms for connecting with audiences. Among environmental humanities scholars, it is the environmental historians who have been most adept at reconfiguring scholarly research and communication in light of emerging digital possibilities. The Network in Canadian History & Environment, known by the ecological acronym NICHE, was founded in 2004 as a scholarly hub for environmental history as a form of public history, developing its membership through a combination of annual field schools and a digital network. A decade later, their website ([niche-canada.org](http://niche-canada.org)) is an extraordinary collection of constantly updating photo essays, podcasts, research projects, study groups, and more. Building these digital tools and publics has enabled these historians to act as *fast responders* to contemporary events.

Days after an oil spill in the harbor of the city of Vancouver on April 8, 2015, York University environmental historian Sean Kheraj published “Burrard Inlet, Beaches, and Oil Spills: A Historical Perspective” on the NiCHE site, featuring archival photographs of young volunteers cleaning the Vancouver beaches of oil in 1973 and unveiling a longer history of pipeline, tanker, and refinery politics that has shaped regional politics, infrastructure, and laws.<sup>10</sup>

A specifically Canadian—though not parochial—voice and perspective is what I will be bringing to *Resilience* as Canadian editor of reviews and comments. My own research is in the areas of contemporary Canadian literature, environmental literary and cultural studies, feminist studies, and social and cultural theory. I am interested in the relationship between rhetorical and narrative forms and environmental politics and justice, particularly the representation and distribution of environmental risk at imagined scales of the local, national, and global. I am also very committed to bringing humanities scholarship to bear on broader public and environmental debates. As mentioned above, I created the Environmental Humanities book series with Wilfrid Laurier University Press in 2007, with the goals of making visible the contributions of humanities research to environmental studies and fostering discussion that challenges and reconceptualizes the humanities from environmental perspectives. From 2002–2004, I was executive editor of *Alternatives Journal*, a Canadian environmental magazine that brings together academic, activist, and professional audiences.

My academic home is a small, interdisciplinary campus in Central Ontario of a larger research university primarily based in Northern Ontario, with a particular mandate to serve the educational needs of northern and Aboriginal people. The resource economies of forestry and mining dominate in Northern Ontario, and I am pleased to be collaborating with colleagues in Thunder Bay, across disciplines, on how we might use our varied environmental knowledge and analysis in this context. In August 2014 we hosted the biennial conference of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada / L'Association pour la littérature, l'environnement et la culture au Canada, at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. I am also fortunate to be involved in a number of international networks, most notably as an alumni Carson Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cheryl Lousley** is an associate professor in English and interdisciplinary studies at Lakehead University Orillia, Canada. Recent essays can be found in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan (New York: Routledge, 2015); *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); *Emotion, Space & Society*; *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*; *Critical Collaborations: Indigeneity, Diaspora, and Ecology in Canadian Literary Studies*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Christl Verduyn (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014); and *Popular Representations of Development: Insights from Novels, Films, Television and Social Media*, ed. David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock (New York: Routledge, 2014). She is the editor of the *Environmental Humanities* book series with Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

#### NOTES

1. See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

2. See Pamela Banting, "Colony Collapse Disorder: Settler Dreams, the Climate Crisis, and Canadian Literary Ecologies." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 39, no. 1 (2014): 5–20, 5.

3. See Robert Boschman and Mario Trono, eds., *Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes in the Anthropocene* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014); Lisa Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones, eds., *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).

4. For more on Edward Burtynsky's work, including samples of his photographs, see his website at <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>.

5. For more on the book of this exhibition (*Burtynsky: Oil* [Göttingen, Ger.: Steidl, 2009]), see <https://steidl.de/Buecher/Burtynsky-Oil-0210375152.html>. For more on the available app, see Edward Burtynsky, "Burtynsky: Oil," version 1.2, iTunes, last updated October 17, 2013, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/burtynsky-oil/id524467450?ls=1&mt=8>.

6. Warren Cariou, "Wastewest: A State of Mind," in Piper and Szabo-Jones, *Sustaining the West*, 23–32, 26.

7. Cariou, "Wastewest," 26.

8. Warren Cariou, "Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto," *Imaginations* 3, no. 2 (2012): 18.

9. Cariou, "Tarhands," 18.

10. Sean Kheraj, "Burrard Inlet, Beaches, and Oil Spills: A Historical Perspective," *NICHE*, April 16, 2015, <http://niche-canada.org/2015/04/16/burrard-inlet-beaches-and-oil-spills-a-historical-perspective/>.