



**WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity**  
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## Alberta's Environmental Janus: Andrew Nikiforuk and Chris Turner

*Geo Takach*

If environmentalism is the defining issue of our age, then environmental writing offers fertile insights into the practices, values, and future of a people. As “Canada’s Energy Province” (“Oil and gas”), Alberta has historically been a proud poster-child for the petroleum age. The province offers an insightful case study in two respects: first, as a bellwether in the evolving discursive clash between the insatiable need for economic growth mandated by globalized capitalism and its increasingly unsustainable ecological costs, and second, as an exemplar of how that clash is understood and expressed.

The polarized discourse around the environment and the economy finds an acme in the bituminous (“tar”/“oil”) sands, a resource concentrated in the province’s vast northeast that constitutes the world’s third-largest recoverable source of oil (“Oil Sands”), and what has been called the world’s largest industrial project (Leahy). This polarity echoes the Roman god Janus, depicted as two-headed and facing in opposite directions, and said to govern life’s changes, including transitions between dichotomies such as past and future and, most pertinently here, between competing visions (Ouzounian). This essay takes up the Janus model in focusing on Andrew Nikiforuk and Chris Turner, two leading Albertan environmental writers with distinct approaches to defining and surviving our petroleum age. In highlighting these authors’ environmentally-themed books, this work seeks to situate them in relation to Alberta’s tradition of environmental writing, aspects of its provincial character, and the polarized discourse

around economy and environment both within the province and beyond. Specifically, this chapter argues that Nikiforuk and Turner are motivationally allied but rhetorically opposed exponents of two divergent attitudes characterizing Alberta's provincial history, namely an austere biblical morality and a sunny technological utopianism.

## Environmental Literature

Environmental literature—defined here as writing on themes or issues relating to our physical (and particularly natural) surroundings—has deep roots. From distant accounts such as Ovid's plea for vegetarianism two thousand years ago and Georgius Agricola's defence of mining in 1556 (Wall) to more recent, popular texts such as *Silent Spring* (Carson) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore), writing has depicted, reflected, and even shaped our habitats and our world. After millennia of development culminating in the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic tradition in literature and other forms of art emerged in the eighteenth century in opposition to the dominant, master narrative of progress. The Romantics viewed the earth as worthy of sanctification rather than just human exploitation, and their work is exemplified by writers such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). More recently, the Romantic end of the spectrum has been extended to more ecocentric perspectives by writers such as Arne Naess (1912–2009), Françoise d'Eaubonne (1920–2005), David Suzuki (b. 1936), Vandana Shiva (b. 1952), and Bill McKibben (b. 1960). Aspects of this polarity between anthropocentric and ecocentric views reverberate in Alberta's literature as much as its politics.

In his landmark study of Alberta's literary history, George Melnyk notes the eminence of nature writing in the province, tracing its lineage from Aboriginal etchings on stone and accounts from fur-traders and explorers through to the postwar work of authors such as Andy Russell (1915–2005) and Sid Marty (b. 1944), followed by books on local flora and fauna, and a flurry of tourist guidebooks, many trumpeting the Rocky Mountains. Yet despite the popularity of these works (Hardy's *A Natural History of Alberta* is said to have sold seventy-three thousand copies), Melnyk positions Albertan non-fiction since the Second World War—an

era coincident with the fateful oil strike at Leduc in 1947 that inaugurated Alberta's modern age—as “circumscribed by the singular nature of politics in the province and by the public's devotion to the economic imperative of the energy and natural resource extraction industries” (2: 135). Indeed, income from non-renewable resource royalties accounted for 29% of the provincial government's revenue from 2002–03 to 2013–14 (“Background-er”), while oil has played a significant role in shaping Alberta's identity (Shrivastava and Stefanick; Takach).

Today, environmental issues increasingly populate the discourse around the province. Alberta has long been renowned for its magnificent scenery, depictions of which have beckoned to settlers and tourists since the late nineteenth century. However, in recent years, the province has also become an environmental pariah, with the management of its bituminous sands attracting mounting international wrath, protest, and ridicule (see Pratt; Sands and Brooymans; McFarlane; Takach, *Tar Wars*). Elements of this struggle and efforts to cope with it environmentally, socially, economically, and culturally are reflected in a battery of recent books, mostly written by authors from beyond the province.<sup>1</sup> This is the climate in which the two writers studied here ply their trade.

Andrew Nikiforuk (b. 1955) and Chris Turner (b. 1973) share some key biographical details. Both live in Calgary, Alberta's largest city and the acknowledged centre of Canada's oil industry. Both are serious journalists who have been published in well-established magazines and metropolitan daily newspapers in Canada, and who have authored popular, critically acclaimed books. Both have earned several national magazine awards for their writing. Both have expressed deep concerns about the path pursued by provincial and federal governments in their headlong rush to double down on fossil-fuel extraction despite overwhelming evidence suggesting its non-sustainability. This has pushed both authors well beyond traditional Romantic notions of idealizing and sanctifying nature, and brought them into conflict with deeply entrenched political and economic forces committed to the status quo. In spite of these similarities, the two part ways in classical Janus fashion.

## Andrew Nikiforuk and the Moral Quest

Nikiforuk's first environmental book is *Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Big Oil* (2002). Reading like a political thriller, it chronicles the saga of a socially conservative church leader who came to Alberta's Peace River region with his family and a few followers from Ontario, only to experience oil company drilling, a sour-gas accident causing his wife's miscarriage, diverse acts of resistance and vandalism against the industry, an RCMP investigation, five criminal convictions against Ludwig, and the shooting death of a teenager on a predawn joyride past the family property. In introducing his account, Nikiforuk begins:

For nearly 100 years Canadians have trekked to the Mighty Peace to cut trees, grow wheat or remake a life. When a farm goes broke, a marriage goes sour, or the law comes knocking, the Peace can be counted on to embrace you like an all-forgiving mother. That's what Wiebo Ludwig was looking for in the summer of 1985: a respite from the storms of life. (*Saboteurs* 1–2)

In personifying the land as a maternal shelter, Nikiforuk invites our sympathy with a latter-day settler following a deeply entrenched narrative of westward migration by people seeking a better life, away from the corruption and foul air of cities, repression and poverty of foreign regimes, and all number of evils unleashed by humanity on itself and its habitats. This narrative has played a fundamental role in the settlement of the West. It has resonated particularly profoundly in Alberta, a place with an agrarian and strongly Christian “pioneer” heritage which continues to brand itself as a bastion of individual freedom, with minimal “interference” from government by way of regulations and taxes—or, its critics charge, even by way of adequate public service in essential areas such as social services and environmental protection (Takach, *Real Alberta*). This rejection of state regulation reminds us that beyond the sensationalistic headlines and details of Ludwig's personal struggle looms the larger war that humans continue to wage on the earth's natural systems in the name of progress. While hardly lionizing Ludwig, Nikiforuk's depiction, dedicated as it is “To all downwinders”—citizens directly harmed by the ecological impacts of industrialization—engenders sympathy for Ludwig's cause, if not his

religious convictions or his methods. It also raises unsettling concerns about how our governments, industries, and enforcement systems are running roughshod over public and environmental health in the name of private profit.

A more explicit environmentalism appears in Nikiforuk's next book, *Pandemonium: Bird Flu, Mad Cow Disease, and Other Biological Plagues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2006). Here he follows his earlier homage to pestilence, *The Fourth Horseman: A Short History of Epidemics, Plagues, Famine, and Other Scourges* (1992, rev. 1996), to turn a writerly microscope on how human health and habitat are under siege from avian flu, livestock diseases, SARS, blights, cholera, anthrax, and other biological terrors. These are presented not as natural phenomena, but the result of globalization and its dependence on the monocultural production and movement of agricultural and other goods as quickly, plentifully, and cheaply as possible. He paints a devastating picture of sloppy practices (both individual and institutional) and underfunded public-health systems that both exacerbate the spread of epidemics and leave us at the latter's mercy. Also indicted are the media's tendencies to cover pandemics only during their occurrence—and even then, melodramatically and perfunctorily—rather than to more methodically root out and attempt to neutralize their causes.

The book culminates in predicting a pandemic that will rock the global economy with sweeping force and cost countless lives. Nikiforuk brings our survival down “to family and community, the only first responders that have ever mattered in history,” rather than to public preparedness plans, noting further that “Rural communities that still value self-reliance and neighborliness will pass through the ordeal with greater dignity than urban monocultures of wealth or poverty” (*Pandemonium* 263). Nikiforuk tries to end his apocalyptic vision on an optimistic note:

Long after the monotony of deprivation and separation, the survivors of the Great Mortality will kiss their loved ones each night and hold on tight. Then they will light candles, true plague of light, and pray for deliverance from more invaders. The humbled will be thankful, as Albert Camus once was, for what pandemics have always taught those receptive to biological instruction: “There are more things to admire in men than to despise.” (265)

Nikiforuk closes with an ecologically oriented “canticle for local living” that encourages humility in the tradition of St. Francis (268). Here he cites the state motto of Hawaii (“The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness”) and calls for us to consume less than we can imagine. He includes as an appendix a British list of fourteen steps to reduce the risk of a hospital infection. This approach seems archetypically biblical, foretelling catastrophe and promoting its alleviation through prayer and good behaviour. As in *Saboteurs*, the book invokes a Christian approach (albeit in narration rather than in a protagonist) and raises larger questions around how industrialization and neoliberalism are destroying the simpler life that humanity has led for all but a miniscule and relatively recent fraction of our history.

More down to earth (at least literally) is *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of the Continent* (2010). Nikiforuk asserts himself as arguably Alberta’s pre-eminent critic of our societal petroleum addiction in general and its largest manifestation in particular. The book opens with a “declaration of a political emergency” (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 1), cataloguing with caustic succinctness the madness of accelerating the liquidation of the sands without either a plan or a regard for the massive ecological, economic, social, political, and democratic costs. Besides consuming gargantuan quantities of non-renewable natural gas and irreplaceable fresh water (which is drained into toxic tailings “ponds” as large as lakes), destroying vast amounts of virgin boreal forest, flora, and fauna habitats, endangering various species, tarring Canada’s international reputation as an obstacle to action on climate change, sentencing us to servitude to the US (our largest energy market, by far), and other apparently unsavoury consequences, the resource’s mismanagement by the provincial and federal governments is seen as compromising both governments’ responsiveness to their citizens. Here Nikiforuk cites Friedman’s First Law of Petropolitics, linking rising oil prices to reduced democracy, as governments more dependent on revenue from petroleum rather than from taxation are less prone to listening and accounting to their citizens. He concludes with an Alcoholics-Anonymous style twelve-step program “for energy sanity” (200), which includes a cap of two million barrels per day that has since been surpassed.

Three important contributions of *Tar Sands* to environmental writing in Alberta (and beyond) relate to our agency, both individually and collectively, in addressing the diverse and complex challenges of our addiction to

oil. The first is showing that the multitude and the depth of damaging impacts of the bituminous-sands project are not separate from the rest of the province (and country), even if the site is geographically remote from all of Canada's larger population centres, with the exception of Edmonton. From the health of Aboriginal communities to the freedom of their community doctor to raise it as a concern, among many other examples, the book illustrates the risks of maintaining a business-as-usual attitude in starkly concrete terms. Second, the book exposes the ruinously false division and the forced polarity between economic development and environmental protection. Clearly, the latter is a prerequisite for the former, as there can be no long-term growth if its foundation destroys what we need to live: clean air and water, and a balance of the planet's natural ecosystems and among its non-human inhabitants. A third, important contribution of the book frames these environmental concerns as *moral* issues, embracing our duties to the casualties of the status quo: the earth's ecosystems, future generations, and all forms of life.

In his next eco-book, *Empire of the Beetle: How Human Folly and a Tiny Bug Are Killing North America's Great Forests* (2011), Nikiforuk blends themes from *Pandemonium* and *Tar Sands* by tying the meteoric proliferation of an apparently natural pestilence—the voracious pine beetle—to anthropogenic global warming and human mismanagement and arrogance. He explains how since the 1980s, the insect, smaller than a grain of rice but travelling in swarms physically larger than schools of killer whales, has devoured thirty billion conifers from Alaska to New Mexico, a swath of devastation said to be unmatched since the deforestations by European peasants from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Among the environmental lessons that this history-changing event teaches us, he suggests, are that the human love of stability can be trumped by nature's volatility; that big things, the root of our social and political miseries, always fail, while smaller things adapt and survive; and that aging forests, which he likens to what he sees as our corrupt and failing banking systems and resource industries, actually require razing (by fire in the case of forests) and reconstituting to survive (the fire helps germinate seeds from the old trees). Again, the primary lesson is that the archetypically biblical moral that our human failings—in this case, selfishness, avarice, and systemic violation of the Golden Rule of doing unto others as we would have others do unto us (Matthew 7:12)—all lead to our destruction.

In *The Energy of Slaves: Oil and the New Servitude* (2012), Nikiforuk approaches the economic and environmental costs of our petroleum-based lifestyles from a historical perspective, following the critical path of the great Canadian economic historian, Harold Innis (1894–1952). Starting with the observation that the abolition of slavery in North America occurred around the dawn of the age of fossil-fuel production, Nikiforuk suggests that this abolition may have resulted from economics as well as morality since both were about harnessing energy to do our work for us. He likens our profligate use of energy in all aspects of our lives to the exploitation of slaves by nineteenth-century plantation owners. In measuring the physical work required to meet our needs, he suggests that each resident of the developed world today consumes the energy equivalent available to a Roman patrician with almost one hundred slaves. This, he argues, has shackled people to machines and mechanical thinking, which has increased our material well-being, but not our happiness.

Citing the depletion of half of the world’s oil and the illusion of endless economic growth based on fossil-fuel consumption, Nikiforuk builds on his Christian-influenced moral undertones in *Saboteurs, Pandemonium*, and *Tar Sands* to call for a substantial reduction in our use of oil. He finds our energy servitude “debilitating,” concludes that “our health, our freedom, and our humanity depend on a moral reassessment of mastery and slavery in all energy relationships” and calls for “a radical decentralization and delocalizing of energy spending combined with a systematic reduction of the number of inanimate slaves in our household and places of work” (*Energy of Slaves* 227). A notable departure in this work is his focus on the US; Alberta is scarcely mentioned, and even then mostly derisively as anti-democratic in its subservience to a petro-economy.

Finally, Nikiforuk’s latest book at this writing, *Slick Water: Fracking and One Insider’s Stand Against the World’s Most Powerful Industry* (2015), chronicles the epic personal and legal struggle of a solitary Albertan, Jessica Ernst, against an energy colossus, Encana, the provincial government, and its industry-funded energy “regulator” after her groundwater was contaminated by the environmentally devastating practice of hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”). In portraying Ernst as courageous and complicated, and government and industry as fraudulent and corrupt, Nikiforuk depicts a quintessential clash of good versus evil—David versus Goliath—positioning Ernst’s “ordeal” as “a troubling and important window

on a brutal North American drama” (*Slick Water* 312). Adopting an overtly political stance, he declares, first, his motivation for writing the book (as opposed to merely a magazine article) as potentially offering “some measure of real justice” (312), and second, his donation of 15% of his royalties from the book towards Ernst’s legal fees in her suit against Encana, the Alberta government, and the Energy Resources Conservation Board.

The sweeping narrative opens with a detailed account of a natural-gas explosion that caused “raining fire” over a quarter-mile retail area in Los Angeles. In keeping with his characteristically rigorous research, Nikiforuk provides a statistical account of the volume and the actual and potential devastation of fracking, and its ability to upset the earth’s natural rhythms and equilibrium. His conclusion includes an invocation of the Christian philosopher, Jacques Ellul, in citing the ongoing threat to democracy and the social order by technology unleashed by powerful forces in furtherance of their own financial self-interest, as opposed to the greater good of the commonwealth. These apocalyptic visions are in keeping with the biblical moralism underlying his environmental volumes.

## Chris Turner and the Technology of Hope

While not as numerous as Nikiforuk’s book-length output, Chris Turner’s environmental tomes have also distinguished themselves for their breadth of perspective, depth of investigative research, and iconoclasm. Like Nikiforuk, Turner brings a critical eye to the petroleum age, although he acts on it quite differently. He emphasizes not the cataclysmic retribution attendant on humanity’s long-term destruction of the earth’s natural systems, but the exciting potential for saving it, relying on the very innovation and ingenuity that fuelled the Industrial Revolution and the dizzying technological advances marking society today. In this, he echoes Alberta’s self-proclaimed can-do entrepreneurialism, said to be a legacy of the same pioneering spirit from which Nikiforuk draws his biblical inspiration (Sharpe; Takach, *Real Alberta*).

Turner’s first environmental book, *The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need* (2007), begins with the premise that environmentalism has failed to live up to its initial, hopeful promise, and collapsed under the weight of a mammoth mission to solve anthropogenic climate change,

becoming not a “We-shall-overcome” rallying cry, but a corporate buzzword. He recounts his own summer job as a student canvassing for Greenpeace, when he came to despair at his own doom-saying rhetoric, and subsequently, the myopic, respective foci of governments and businesses on election cycles and bottom lines, which he felt would never solve anything. Taking his lead from a 2004-speech by Adam Werbach, an American advocate for sustainability who declared environmentalism dead and rechanneled his outlook from apocalyptic to constructive, Turner drops the gauntlet for his readers thusly:

To look back, perhaps half a century from now, to say to our children—to our grandchildren—that we took all this on, thought and thought, worked our asses off, tried and failed and tried again, and finally got this wonderful new contraption moving down a clear path toward the sustainable city on a hill—what could be better, more worthwhile, more flat-out balls-to-the-wall exhilarating than to be part of that?

What else are you working on right now? What great project that would rest upon your soul like the many bars of ribbon on a war hero’s chest? What’s that you would point to, and look your grandkids in the eye and say, “Now that was worth the fight”? I know how I’d answer this one: There’s nothing else.

Only this:

To be part of the generation that beat climate change.  
(Turner, *Geography of Hope* 9)

Turner asserts that we already have the knowledge and the technology to solve the problem of carbon and climate change, and that our paralysis comes down to a tragic lack of will. From there, he embarks on an intercontinental investigation titularly billed as “a tour of the world we need.” He introduces us to functioning models of sustainable power (the Danish island of Samsø; Gut Ankelohe, Germany), transport (Singapore, Portland), housing (Freiburg, Bangkok), design (St. Louis; Hyderabad, India), and metropoli (Malmö; Aurora, Colorado). Samsø exemplifies finding solutions not through sweeping global movements, international treaties, or government policies, but simply by thinking and acting locally: one local explains how the island switched to nearly completely renewable sources

of electricity through a grassroots movement of neighbours meeting at inns, one local champion, one house, one village at a time. Here Turner wryly notes that the total cost of that transformation, \$125 million, was about half of the production budget of a Hollywood climate-change disaster flick, *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich). He positions sustainability as a paradigm shift in the way in which we run our societies, but one that is both economically feasible and non-ideological. He also foresees a sustainability revolution happening much as the Internet plowed aside older, more cumbersome, slower, and inferior telecommunications infrastructure. He closes with a repeated allusion to the biblical notion of a “shining city on the hill” from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14), where hope for the future becomes reality and ultimately takes comfort in the knowledge that his infant daughter has already glimpsed the dawn of a world far brighter than the darkening failures of the petroleum age.

Turner’s second environmental book, *The Leap: How to Survive and Thrive in the Sustainable Economy* (2011), picks up from his first work to envision a new Industrial Revolution or operating system for the world, a cognitive leap through which civilization can advance to an economy powered by renewable energy sources rather than continue the decline that inevitably follows a dependency on fossil fuels. He points to three colossal failures under the status quo: the collapse of market fundamentalism, exemplified in the economic crash of 2008; the illogic of a system premised on unlimited growth on a planet with finite natural resources; and the breakdown in the infrastructure on which everything depends—the earth—indicated by anthropogenic climate change. He observes that grandiose schemes and technologies (for instance, geo-engineering attempts to mitigate some of that change through large-scale intervention in the climate, such as sequestering carbon) prove that it is not lack of imagination that holds us back, but our disproportionate preoccupation with ways to keep following a failed path. He challenges the myth of the rational actor, the premise of both our economic system and the Enlightenment philosophy, that we know what is best for ourselves and therefore make the best choices. Citing a few recent, catastrophic ecological statistics, Turner responds, “Like hell we do” (*The Leap* 82).

Turner fixes the primary barrier to a successful “leap” as our natural bias to the status quo, born of a fear of loss which makes us “much more deeply invested in where we are than in where we might be able to go” (87).

Such a leap requires considering the *actual* costs of our energy economy, such as its effects on our air, water, wildlife, and landscape, and making decisions based on what we value. Today, he says, the vast bulk of the cost (the value) of electricity production lies in extracting, refining, and distributing coal without accounting for the real costs, while factoring in government subsidies and other biases included to keep coal-fired electricity cheap in many places. Turner sees more value in renewable sources of power, where the fuel is free, limitless, and non-polluting, and our electricity costs, after installing wind turbines or solar panels, are limited to maintaining and repairing them. Thus, the system's focus moves from extraction and refining to manufacturing and installation, bringing tremendous economic opportunities in addition to energy autonomy and sustainability. Turner views the leaders of this leap as entrepreneurs, inventors, and municipal politicians, much as purveyors of petroleum pushed that innovation a century ago. As in his first book, the move to sustainability is accompanied by examples of advances in urban design and transportation, which he illustrates here with Copenhagen's pedestrian-friendly downtown, widespread solar panels in rural India, and rapid public transit in Bogotá. Again, his core message boils down to our choosing between "a leap of blind faith in a twisted model of business as usual and a reasoned Great Leap Sideways" (343).

Turner's third related book, *The War on Science: Muzzled Scientists and Wilful Blindness in Stephen Harper's Canada* (2013), documents what he argues, with ample supporting evidence: the former federal government was not only suspending its public duty to protect the environment in favour of facilitating further private profit by energy corporations, but also the ability of its own scientists to discuss their work. He views this as part of a larger subordination of scientific research to political imperatives, subverting not only Canada's foundational ethics of exploration, scientific achievement, and environmental contributions, but also a centuries-old tradition privileging reason which dates back to the Enlightenment. This is the same tradition he asserts in *The Leap* that we have violated with our swath of environmental destruction. While far from a jeremiad, it is an angrier work than its predecessors. The book's dedication to the campaign team behind the author's failed bid for a seat in a federal by-election in the year preceding its publication suggests a possible correlation to that unhappy result.<sup>2</sup>

## Alberta's Environmental Janus

In considering these eight works by Turner and Nikiforuk, one finds a striking contrast. Nikiforuk seems to want to scare, anger, and shame us into curing our addiction to fossil fuels, which he believes can only beget deeper folly, servitude, pandemonium, filth, pestilence, and extinction. He sees the way out as making sweeping changes to government policies and consuming less as individuals, as outlined in his twelve-point plan closing *Tar Sands*. While occasionally resorting deftly to irony and sarcasm to make his point, the overarching sense projected is of earnest, biblical moralizing. On the other hand, Turner wants to inspire us to leap into a brave new world of environmental sustainability, one local solution at a time, and shows us how change is already underway around the globe. These approaches constitute a divergence that would do Janus proud. Yet, fundamentally, the two authors do not disagree, and their approaches can be seen as complementary, the yin and the yang of environmental writing in Alberta. Nikiforuk praised Turner's *The Leap* in a national newspaper review ("One Giant Cognitive Leap" R18), an extract of which appears on that book's front cover. In writing on the Anthropocene era—a term recently popularized in recognition of humanity's profoundly harming the earth's air, water, flora, fauna, and more (Stromberg)—both authors provide an essential service: Nikiforuk underlines the gravitas and horrific consequences of our addiction to fossil fuels, while Turner offers hope and points the way to recovering from it. In doing so, they echo two divergent attributes etched deeply into Albertans' collective psyche: on the one hand, a fundamentalist, moralistic linking of one's life's work to one's heavenly reward (and its converse, divine retribution for falling short), and on the other hand, an unshakable faith in the human capacity to dream up and realize solutions to the problems of the world, whether of our own making or not.

Alberta's oil-based economy and specifically what has been called the world's largest industrial project have pushed the province into the maelstrom of environmental debate. The eight books by Andrew Nikiforuk and Chris Turner highlighted here place Albertan writing at the forefront of that discourse. Their work is important not only because it addresses what may well be the greatest challenge to our survival that we have ever visited on ourselves, other life on earth, and the planet itself. Nor is their

work important solely because it addresses the petroleum age with expansive vision, extensive research, and insightful analysis. Perhaps even more compelling is how their writing defies powerful forces both within and beyond a province that boasts a fierce political and economic monoculture in which its citizens seem to have been largely muted by affluence. With decades of nation-leading economic activity (“Backgrounder”), rare changes in government (despite the stunning election of the NDP in 2015),<sup>3</sup> record-low electoral turnouts, and a tradition of marginalizing, if not squashing, political dissent, Alberta has become fecund ground for a neoliberal, colonialist, uber-Darwinist ethic. This ethic is born of the longstanding and deeply entrenched master narrative of progress, enriching the privileged at the expense of the earth’s natural systems and residents. Perhaps most importantly, their writing re-exposes the polarity between economic development and ecological sustainability as fundamentally false. In fact, even framing those values as polarities may be seen as an ideological tactic, because we should treat our planetary and collective survival as being in everyone’s best interest, not as some kind of political compromise. Both authors illustrate the true costs of continuing our present course and different ways to survive it, although Turner’s work focuses more on how to move towards sustainability in tandem with economic growth. In this way, their work transcends much of the body of nature writing that preceded them in Alberta in its scope, dissension, and intended impact.

The aforementioned works have been well received as a whole. *Tar Sands* and *The Geography of Hope* are billed as national bestsellers and have generated significant critical acclaim. For example, *The Literary Review of Canada* called *Tar Sands* even-handed, novel in showing the project’s effects on real people, and emotionally powerful on both the local and global levels (Heintzman), while *Canadian Geographic* concluded of *The Leap* that “[i]ts wide dissemination would do us all a favour” (de Villiers 77). Nikiforuk won a Governor General’s Award for Non-Fiction in 2002 for *Saboteurs* and the Rachel Carson Environment Book Award from the US-based Society of Environmental Journalists in 2009 for *Tar Sands*. *The Geography of Hope* was a finalist for the Governor General’s Award for Non-Fiction, among other nods. Turner’s *War on Science* drew minor criticism that it could have been more deeply researched, which the otherwise approving reviewer attributed to a need to publish the book in time to affect critical debates around controversial proposed pipeline projects

(Warner). Both authors' work can be found in libraries across Canada and in the US, and both men travel the speaker's circuit with their environmental tomes. For better or worse, their arguments have helped to turn the spotlight on Alberta in the greater context of rising global concern around anthropocentric climate change. This could fuel further grassroots concerns expressed in avenues ranging from individual posts to the New York Library's website (Walker) to advocacy campaigns against BP's involvement in the sands ("Dirty Diplomacy")—concerns that one day may culminate in global pressure sufficient to help curb the virtually unchecked development of the resource and its devastating results, economic downturns notwithstanding.

This question of impact is central, as both writers' work pleads for decisive and immediate action. In his literary history of the province, Melnyk concludes that writing which dissents from economic imperatives around oil extraction "has had little tangible effect" (2: 136). While presenting divergent outlooks on our potential future—environmental Armageddon and a "geography of hope," respectively—Nikiforuk and Turner concur emphatically that business-as-usual is not only unacceptable, but ecological suicide on a massive scale. In inviting us to make a Great Leap to sustainability, Turner echoes Pascal's Wager, articulated in the seventeenth century when skepticism challenged traditional religious views of natural law: Pascal held that rational people should live as if there *is* a supreme being, even if we can never know it, as we lose nothing if we are wrong and the world improves by the goodness of our actions. Transposed to the Anthropocene, this advice augurs for a clear, fail-safe, and moral alternative to perpetuating even the chance of the horrors depicted so powerfully by Nikiforuk.

Critiquing present practices of extraction, denial, and deceit while presenting progressive alternatives from *within* the province even more courageously plants small but powerful seeds of perspective, conscience, and hope for those who believe that the planet, all of its current occupants, and those who survive our stewardship deserve infinitely better. At its absolute core, this is what good writing must do: offer ideas that can inspire ameliorating action. Channeling Janus, Nikiforuk and Turner's work engenders both a deep, dark shame and a precious ray of hope.

## NOTES

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- 1 Sample titles include *Stupid To the Last Drop: How Alberta is Bringing Environmental Armageddon to Canada (And Doesn't Seem to Care)* (Marsden); *Tar Sands Showdown: Canada and the Politics of Oil in an Age of Climate Change* (Clarke); *Journey to the Tar Sands* (Murphy et al.); *The Canadian Oil Sands: Energy Security vs. Climate Change* (Levi); *Black Bonanza: Canada's Oil Sands and the Race to Secure North America's Energy Future* (Sweeny); *The Heart of the Monster: Why the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies Must Not Become An ExxonMobil Conduit to the Alberta Tar Sands* (Bass and Duncan); *Ethical Oil: The Case for Alberta's Oil Sands* (Levant); *Little Black Lies: Corporate and Political Spin in the Global War for Oil* (Gailus); *The Pipeline and the Paradigm: Keystone XL, Tar Sands, and the Battle to Defuse the Carbon Bomb* (Avery); *After the Sands: Energy and Ecological Security for Canadians* (Laxer); *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Identity* (Takach); and *Scripting Environmental Communication: Oil, Democracy and the Sands of Time and Space* (Takach).
- 2 In 2012, Turner literally put his money where his pen was by running as a Green Party candidate in a federal by-election. Alas, residents of Calgary Centre were unwilling to express sufficient support for his ideas: he finished third with 25% of the vote, splitting opposition support with a Liberal candidate (who got 32%) and losing to a Conservative who strategically avoided several campaign debates, but still netted 36% of the vote. Even worse for proponents of change (if not democracy), just 29% of registered voters in the riding made what seems to be, at least in Canada's oil province, a "Great Leap" to the polls ("History of Ridings").
- 3 From an environmentalist perspective, Alberta's 2015 provincial election, while exterminating the national record, forty-four-year dynasty of the Conservatives, is hardly a panacea. Despite the new NDP government's stunningly prompt completion of a climate strategy long promised, but never delivered by its predecessors, greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions from the bituminous ("tar"/"oil") sands are still expected to double to about one hundred and fifteen megatons from 2010 to 2030, during which time the megaproject's share of Canada's GHG emissions is also expected to double, from 7% to 14% ("Oilsands' Share").

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