

8-27-2016

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Recommended Citation

van der Marel, L. Camille (2016) "Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes for the Anthropocene edited by Robert Boschman and Mario Trono," *The Goose*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/20>

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What we talk about when we talk about Alberta

***Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes for the Anthropocene* edited by ROBERT BOSCHMAN and MARIO TRONO**

Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2014
\$42.99

Reviewed by **L. CAMILLE VAN DER MAREL**

In the summer of 2013, unprecedented rains and mountain runoff flooded Calgary, my hometown, to devastating effect. I was not there for the floods or their cleanup, though. Instead, I had traveled some 4,000 circuitous kilometers from my current home in Edmonton, Alberta, to Ithaca, New York. Like colleagues from across Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America, I made this a trip to participate in the School of Criticism and Theory's "Postcolonial Studies in the Era of the Anthropocene" seminar, hosted by Cornell University. During the days, our international cohort met in the university's numbingly air-conditioned rooms (an irony not lost on us) to debate the diffused responsibilities of resource extraction and imagined time-scales of human agency, issues we tried to refract through anti-colonial theory; at night, I trawled online for news about Calgary.

The floods displaced roughly 100,000 people across western Canada and caused an estimated \$6 billion in damages to the white-collared heart of Alberta's petroleum industry, but did not register in upstate New York. Instead, I spent my nights on Canadian news sites, ignoring our generation's prevailing folk wisdom: don't read the comments. These online comment sections' content in response to the floods ran the gamut from wishing safety and a

swift recovery to those affected, to heated and occasionally inflammatory disputes over climate change, government policy, and questions of responsibility: "it represents a kind of divine justice that some of those who are the most responsible for climate change denial are now experiencing its effects, rather than a poor slumdweller [sic.] of Mumbai who has a carbon footprint of almost zero;" "looks like good old karma hard at work again;" "harper's [sic.] climate change ideology is coming home to roost." This spring's Fort McMurray wildfires resulted in a similar range of responses. *Schadenfreude*-tinged retorts like these are easy to dismiss: they largely avoid discussing climate change's multiple motors, the diversity of opinion concerning oil and gas development within Alberta, or the First Nations and low-income communities that were devastated by the floods and fires. What such comments demonstrate, however, is that for many, "Alberta" signifies a homogenous whole, a geographic metaphor for an at-best naïve, at-worst, reckless petro-logic predicated on climate change denial with little concern for its local or global environmental consequences. And, as a metaphor, Alberta is perceived as being divinely, ironically, and rightfully punished for the wealth it has gained suborning climate change.

Not-quite-natural disasters, those whose frequency and force grow as our world warms—or rather, as we warm our world—highlight the scholarly, affective, and economic distances between sites of resource extraction and the sites of their consumption. Scholars across the humanities and social sciences are now working to understand the ideological distances between "local" and "global," the incommensurable and the everyday, cause and effect with regard to anthropogenic

climate change. To these scholars, Robert Boschman and Mario Trono offer *Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes for the Anthropocene*, an edited collection of sixteen interdisciplinary essays that effectively expands scholarly horizons through their restrained geographical focus: by routing environmental debates through Western Canada, Alberta emerges as a particular but complex and interconnected site from which to examine the historical depth and conceptual breath of global climate change.

Organized into five topical sections (“Found in Alberta,” “Bituminous Sands,” “Policy and Legal Perspectives,” “Wilderness,” and “Shared Horizons”), *Found in Alberta’s* essays enter a productive—not always consilient—dialogue with one another. Interdisciplinary collections at times stiffen disciplinary boundaries through inelegant transitions or bewilderingly specialized essays; the majority of Boschman and Trono selected pieces, though, introduce readers to unfamiliar schools of thought with focused introductions to discipline-specific methodologies and proceed to offer nuanced readings of their diverse topics. (I am thinking in particular of Lorelei Hanson’s piece on the diversity within Alberta land trusts as well as T.R. Kover’s study of sublime aesthetics in Edward Burtynsky’s industrial landscape photography here.) Wilfrid Laurier University Press further establishes itself as a home for Environmental Humanities work in Canada with this collection, whose relevant pieces are supported with handsomely reproduced graphics, images, and maps.

Beginning with a forward by Maude Barlow, co-founder of the Blue Planet Project and National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, and framed by an

introductory chapter by Boschman and Trono, *Found in Alberta* orients the collection around the humanities’ and social sciences’ role in establishing an operationally safe concept of time with regard to anthropogenic climate change. Additionally, both pieces offer sharp critiques of the provincial and federal Conservatives’ environmental shortsightedness, which they attribute to each party’s dangerous faith that infinite capital and social growth are possible through resource extraction. For readers with little love of Alberta’s bituminous sands or their lackluster regulation, these critiques are deeply gratifying, but these arguments find themselves unexpectedly unsteadied by the 2015 elections of a New Democratic government to the Alberta provincial legislature and Liberal government to the Canadian national parliament. The question now is whether such surprising—particularly at the provincial level—changes in political power will have an accordingly radical impact on the global environment, though this hope is lessening given the provincial NDP’s forceful rejection of the Leap Manifesto and thirst for tide water. Regardless, this unanticipated political shift reminds *Found in Alberta’s* readers that disjunctions between capitalist societies’ chronotopes and the natural world’s capacity to support them are not the purview of any singular political ideology, let alone a singular political party. Within Alberta, these elections certainly felt like a significant manifestation of democratic renewal, but the Anthropocene demonstrates this newness’s limited force and discredits our powerful desire to reduce humanity’s ecological impact to simplified political motors.

To this end, one of the collection's most valuable elements—the simplification it exposed in my own thinking—is that it refuses to reduce Alberta's relationship with the Anthropocene to oil and gas extraction. Instead, its essays emphasize the interconnecting industrial, cultural, and legal frameworks that are often peripheralized by Alberta's bituminous sands and their intellectual suck. This distinguishes the "Under Western Skies" conference, from which this collection resulted, and its research focus from Imre Szeman's "Energy Humanities" and Petrocultures research cluster. Collectively, *Found in Alberta's* essays expand beyond oil's extraction and abstractions, complex and interconnected as these processes are, to offer an arguably more holistic overview that includes industrial and hunting food cultures, shifting concepts of wilderness, trans-Canadian narratives of nationhood, and the legal protection extended to *certain* economies, values, and aesthetics.

As with any edited collection, it is not the similarities that surface across a diverse field of essays but the differences that illuminate shifts and tensions within an academic field. The question I returned to while reading *Found in Alberta* concerns authorial voice: what is the apposite narrative tone of the Anthropocene, and how does scholarly work reflect its concerns through self-positioning? More pointedly, can we—as scholars, cultural producers, and policy makers—articulate studies of the Anthropocene from the supposedly objective third person perspective expected of academic rhetoric? Is there something disingenuous about this detached narrative style when applied to studies of the Anthropocene? Boschman's chapter, "Bum Steer: Adulterant E. Coli and the Nature-Culture dichotomy," exemplifies a more

personalized approach to academic study. The chapter fuses a localized reading of the Nature-Culture dichotomy with Boschman's firsthand experience of watching his daughters contract and suffer from adulterant E. Coli. A similar first person approach surfaces in Benedict Fullalove's work, which compares historical mappings of and personal expeditions across the shrinking Columbia Icefield, as well as Nathan Kowalsky's personal meditation on hunting food cultures. Geo Takach and Conny Davidson, alternatively, take a distinctly depersonalized approach to academic writing, though both their essays offer reflections on their own documentary and research projects. As a result, these pieces seem almost detached from their authors' works and distanced from the larger complicities and entanglements that define the Anthropocene. It is not that one narrative style inherently makes academic work more critical, engaged, or compelling than the other, but contemporary scholarship needs to consider what its rhetorical self-positioning conveys about individual scholars' approach to the Anthropocene.

While oil's value continues to drop on international markets, it only seems to be gaining critical purchase as a subject of cultural analysis. One decisive way to distinguish between the competing claims that are now being made to this emerging field is to consider whose scholarly work refuses to repeat academic study's past mistakes, its omissions, oversights, and biases. Who will, or gets to, or wants to, or has to narrate the Anthropocene? We know that authorship is one important marker of representation, and of *Found in Alberta's* 16 essays, five are authored or co-authored by women. This ratio is not great. That said, the collection's introduction is by an

established public intellectual and its (excellent) conclusion is by an emerging scholar, both women. I read this organization as an intentional and conscientious editorial choice. Beyond authorship, these essays consider a range of social sites and positionings. Harry Vandervlist's reading of Ali Riley's poetry collection, *Wayward*, explores how the gendered politics of trash, trashiness, and the loss of "away" contributes to the physical, sexual, and cultural violence women experience in western Canada. Sam McKegney, keeping with the overarching caliber of his work, offers a stinging example of literary analysis' potency in an age of climate change. His contribution reads Inuit author Anthony Apakark Thrasher's unpublished prison journals as deconstructing the prejudicial and socially destructive cultural evolutionary thinking that informs scholarly works by Tom Flanagan, Frances Widdowson, and Albert Howard. Likewise, Anita Girvan's concluding essay compares the chronopolitics implicit in Western scientific representations of time—the 100-year graph and deep geological time—to the "longitudinal glacial time" that inform the oral histories of the

Western Arctic's Indigenous peoples. Rather than inspiring panic or complacency, Girvan demonstrates how these Indigenous narratives cultivate behavioral-focused responses to an always changing environment, providing a time-scale western scholars need to consider if we are serious about deploying the humanities and their intellectual force against climate change.

In short, this is a purposefully curated volume whose strengths are clear and weaknesses few. It complicates too-easy dismissals of Alberta as a site of critical consideration, and warrants a place in our academic libraries, reading lists, and research, whether we find ourselves within or outside Alberta.

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