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Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions by Jon Gordon

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**Leave it in the Ground: Bitumen,
Literature and Locative Thought**

***Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals
and Fictions* by JON GORDON**

University of Alberta Press, 2015 \$45.00

Reviewed by **PAMELA BANTING**

How do you compose a review that is both ode and elegy? How do you review a first book that is also possibly, and tragically, a last book given that its author, Dr. Jon Gordon, passed away on September 8, 2016 at the age of thirty-six.¹ Maybe all one can do is to trace and retrace points of connection and affiliation — personal, textual, and communal — as Gordon himself does in his Acknowledgements pages.

I will begin by stating right at the outset that Jon Gordon's *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions* is one of those books I was eagerly anticipating a few years before its publication. While I am no longer certain when I first met him or first heard his work, I do know that it was Jon whose work introduced me to the barely emergent field of petrocultural studies. It may have been when he presented a paper at ALECC's inaugural conference, The Ecological Community, held at Cape Breton University in Sydney, NS, in 2010. I remember him, Jenny Kerber, Nancy Holmes, Fred Stenson, and others paddling together out the mouth of the North River into the ocean on the conference's kayaking field trip. I next encountered Jon and his work at the Cross-Pollinations: Seeding

New Ground for Environmental Thought and Activism in the Arts and Humanities Conference, organized by Liza Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones at the University of Alberta in 2011. One chapter of *Unsustainable Oil* was published in that conference's anthology, *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments*.

Unsustainable Oil is an incisive, thoughtful and highly readable text that uses a combination of literary criticism, discourse studies, interdisciplinarity, and deconstruction to develop a petrocultural studies methodology. Gordon analyzes short stories, novels, poetry and poetics, plays, and theory alongside news articles, corporate promotional material, and government documents. But this book is not only about friendly associations and collegial affiliations. To say that *Unsustainable Oil* is in part a rejoinder to Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil* [sic] risks 'tarring' Gordon's book by association with the latter, but Gordon's scrupulously researched scholarly analysis takes on (and then goes far beyond) the necessary task of deconstructing Levant's dissemination of doubt and denialism with respect to carbon and climate change. Without allocating too much space to Levant's screed, Gordon skillfully deconstructs such oil apologia and in so doing steps up to the role of the public intellectual. Unafraid of getting his hands 'dirty' through association with the notorious or through handling sub-literary or non-literary texts, adeptly analyzing literature, corporate websites and government documents often in the

¹ In late 2015 Jon Gordon and Heather Graves issued a call for submissions for papers for an

anthology provisionally entitled "The Rhetoric and Discourse of Oil."

same chapter, Gordon's analysis draws upon Canadian studies, Canadian — especially Albertan — literature about oil, postcolonialism, and technology studies, most particularly George Grant's work on technology and empire and Ian Angus's distinction between empire and inhabitation. If, according to respected American climate scientist Michael E. Mann, we have until 2020 to halt and begin to reverse dramatically the flow of excess carbon into the atmosphere and the global ocean, then we have a pressing ethical responsibility to assume the role of the public intellectual.

Unsustainable Oil opens with "Prologue: Fast Food Vacation," a personal essay written as a series of fragments in which Gordon shares snippets of exchanges between him and his wife, him and his conscience, and him and a public relations questionnaire on the Suncor Corporation website, one of the major bitumen extractors in northern Alberta. Indirectly invoking comedian Tina Fey as his muse, Gordon traces a few of the ironies intrinsic to his own representative complicity as a subject of fossil-fueled modernity — as inflected by parental and family responsibilities, tourism, notions of paradise, air travel, and living within contradictions — the essay is a highly engaging, even mock-slapstick entry into thinking about bitumen. Here Gordon models not (only) the ironic but helpless complicity with which all North Americans are familiar and many are even inured but, as he improvises his responses to Suncor's leading questionnaire, some of the much-needed back-talk and withholding of personal consent. As against the overt

or tacit assent to extraction that is demanded of every Albertan and, at least under the Harper government and to some degree the current Trudeau government, expected of every Canadian, Gordon states that "I accept the improvisational nature of life, but I refuse to say 'yes' to every suggestion; sometimes we need to see what 'no' can do" (xx).

In the Introduction, Gordon sets out his purposes in writing the book, foremost among them to explore "the potential for literature to interrupt the relentless justifications and rationalizations *of* and *for* the status quo" (xxii) particularly when it comes to bitumen extraction. He states that, via literary texts, he would like to harness the same, much-vaunted, 'can-do' Alberta attitude through which bitumen is brought to market in order to craft an alternative, ecologically sound future:

I would like to think that we could also harness this belief to change the narrative: anything is possible in Alberta, so why not leaving oil and gas in the ground? Why not a post-oil future of reduced energy consumption? But the story of technological modernity does not go that way. That narrative remains in the realm of the impossible, the unspeakable. (xxiii)

Gordon's agenda is to short-circuit the extremely polarized debate between team oil and team environment by bringing into play not facts and counterfactuals alone but the power of narrative, storytelling, theatre, theory,

even poetry. To assist him in the process, in chapter one he invokes Jan Zwicky's notion of lyric thinking "as a way of accessing what is left out of purely rational-analytic thought" (3) and performs a reading of Rudy Wiebe's classic short story, "The Angel of the Tar Sands." It is a sad testimony that, given our culture's general disinterest in taking the arts seriously, even literature professors can find it difficult to hold unwaveringly to a conviction in literature's agency and potency.

In addition to incorporating many different kinds of texts and documents and open and honest explorations of his own positionality, Gordon also visited Fort McMurray and the tar sands operations at least twice and analyzes his experiences of the official tour as another screen of representation of synthetic crude. In chapter two, "Oil Sacrifices," he interrogates the doxa of progress that underwrites much of the justification for extraction. Here he draws attention to the 1600 waterfowl that died in the tailings ponds in 2008, the show-herd of bison at Fort McMurray and the standard corporate promise to learn from their mistakes and to do better in the endlessly deferred future. The chapter "Impossible Choices" analyzes Marc Prescott's 2007 play, *Fort Mac* — about some young Quebeckers who come to the town seeking jobs — by way of Bruno Latour's notion of oil as a matter of concern, arguing that literature allows a temporary space in which to dwell within "the impossibility of choosing between forms of sacrifice" (64). "Irrational Oil" is a double reading of the figure of Elder Brother in Warren Cariou's "An Athabasca Story" and

Extraction! Comix Reportage. Via his reading of the activist anthology, *The Enpipe Line: 70,000 Km of Poetry Written in Resistance to the Northern Gateway Pipelines Proposal* and a chapbook anthology entitled *Poems for an Oil-Free Coast*, "Pipeline Facts, Poetic Counterfactuals" explores the question as to whether poetry can stop a pipeline, showing that

as much as there are practical challenges in transporting bitumen from Northern Alberta to various world markets, these challenges are engaged in discourse, by transporting a set of symbolic associations from one location to another . . . Is bitumen freedom or is it toxicity? Is the ocean a playground or is it a home? (141)

[Northern Gateway was cancelled by the federal Liberals, so maybe poetry can stop a pipeline.] "Oil Desires" reads Richard Van Camp's *Godless But Loyal to Heaven* together with a satirical novel entitled *5000 Dead Ducks* in terms of the appetitive and consumptive: figures of Wheetagos and zombies populate this chapter in productive fashion.

One of the primary structuring ideas of the book derives from Ian Angus's dichotomy between empire and inhabitation, colonial patterns of thought and behaviour versus emplaced or locative thought and lifeways. Just as the book opens with a meditation on Gordon's own investments in and struggles with oil culture — or at least its expression in the form of a Florida vacation — it closes with an epilogue about his attempt to holiday at his

grandparents' Centennial cabin near Whitney Lakes Provincial Park in central northeastern Alberta. Just as, in his prologue, he records his discomfort at the words of a fellow tourist referring to the Florida resort as "paradise, paradise," at the end of the book when the spectre of horizontal hydraulic drilling has come to haunt and threaten *his* locale, his inhabitation, he discovers the lived truth of Jamaica Kincaid's statement, which he quotes early in the book, that everyone is a local somewhere.

The book is theoretically astute, Gordon's writing throughout is crystal clear and elegant, and his analysis of texts insightful: this book is an exhilarating and beautiful read. It also serves to highlight or bring to awareness texts, including activist work such as the Enpipeline Project, which may have escaped notice when they were published or performed and begins the groundwork of assembling a field of oil-related literature in Canada. I read *Unsustainable Oil* with both of my classes this past term — a second-year course on Energy in Literature and Film and a third-year course on Selected Topics in Literary Theory, and what the students in both courses expressed was a sense of gratefulness for the way the text opened up their thinking about a subject we have relegated to politicians or scientists. This was a testament to the author: gratitude in classes in which many students in those classes work or had worked in oil and gas, as do their parents and even their grandparents. In Calgary, oil is an intergenerational substance. My copy is wonderfully tracked up with underlining and flutters with multicoloured sticky notes,

imprinted with both my solo and my joint readings of it with my students.

Since its publication *Unsustainable Oil* has, I am sure, forged many affiliations and alliances. In his Acknowledgements, Jon thanks the members of the Association for Literature, the Environment and Culture in Canada for "a sense of belonging in an academic community," saying that "the alchemy of your attention drew better writing from me than would otherwise have been possible" (ix). As an early ALECC member and one of our former treasurers, he himself served and nourished that community. One of the very first Canadian books in the emergent field that goes by the various names of petrocultural studies, petrocriticism and energy humanities, *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfacts and Fictions* is a gift from Jon Gordon to the ecological community — for our research, teaching, pleasure, and for our work as citizens of a petrostate. It is a gift that says no to carbon and climate change and yes to literature, community and locative thought: I hope you will open and share it with others.

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