MAKING “THE BEAST”: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK MCCURDY

PATRICK MCCURDY AND JORDAN B. KINDER

The Beast: Making a Living on a Dying Planet is a 2018 graphic novel published by independent Canadian publisher Ad Astra Comix. It is the result of a collaboration between communications scholar Patrick McCurdy, writer Hugh Goldring, and artist Nicole Marie Burton. The graphic novel follows two art school graduate roommates who have moved from Eastern Canada to Edmonton, Alberta for work in the design industry, and it closes with reflections by Kanai artist Terrance Houle alongside a feature of his art project “Oily Buffalo.” Emerging from McCurdy’s work on the *Mediatoil* (<http://mediatoil.ca>) database project—a database that gathers together competing visual representations of the Athabasca Oil Sands from several stakeholders—the graphic novel addresses themes that arise from these representations while creatively exploring and navigating the tensions at the core of trying to live well in our current petroculture, a culture underwritten by neoliberalism and economic precarity.

In July 2018, Jordan B. Kinder and Patrick McCurdy discussed *The Beast* through Skype. The interview reproduced below was transcribed and has been edited for clarity.

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Jordan B. Kinder: My first question is about inspiration and the relationship between the *Mediatoil* database project and the graphic novel. Can you tell us more about the relationship between both projects and, ultimately, how the graphic novel came to be?

Patrick McCurdy: The inspiration came from working on the *Mediatoil* database project. With *Mediatoil*, I wanted to try to log and understand how

different stakeholders fought over the tar sands/oil sands/bitumen sands through text and image. This led to a number of academic publications but, at the same time, I was also wrestling with how I could engage a wider public. The direct inspiration came in May 2016 when I was in Calgary having breakfast with a colleague from Carleton University, Benjamin Woo. We were lamenting a bit about the process of always trying to get peer-reviewed academic publications, which is pretty much the focus for a lot of our output—and yes, it is certainly a very important part of our job—but I wanted to engage the public in another way. And Benjamin is, I should say, a comics scholar, and he suggested: “Why not do a graphic novel or a comic?” I thought, well, that’s a great idea; I’ve got the funding for it, so let’s see if we can make it happen. He suggested I get in touch in with Ad Astra, and the process started from there.

JBK: You had been working on the *Mediatoil* database since around 2014, and it launched in 2016, so what is that timeline’s relationship to the graphic novel?

PMC: It took two years essentially from the idea to getting the dead tree version out, and the digital version, which was freely released by the Digital Press at the University of North Dakota in September of 2018.¹ So, two years, that’s like academic publishing timelines.

JBK: The follow-up question is about the form of the graphic novel itself. Why a graphic novel? What about the specific media form spoke to you in relation to the themes that were cropping up during the coding and category-generation of the *Mediatoil* database? In other words, what does a graphic novel *do* that other media forms might not be able to achieve?

PMC: The struggle over the tar sands is a struggle that involves a lot of different publics, many of whom probably aren’t interested in reading peer-reviewed academic articles that critically address advertising campaigns. Certainly, there is a niche for that and it is an important aspect of trying to understand a public relations campaign, but the idea of a comic allowed me to explore these debates differently. I had already done academic research in terms of analyzing the large themes and had written some of it up. For example, I had

¹ *The Beast* can be downloaded for free through The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota here: <https://thedigitalpress.org/thebeast/>.

an article in the *Canadian Journal of Communication* which critically examines some of these themes and these tropes.

What's interesting about the comic form is that it allows you to explore visual tropes that are a large part of the debate over the tar sands/oil sands. It forced me to condense these academic themes into much more succinct ideas because the premise of the comic—and the premise of even the academic work—is that the struggle over the tar sands is a struggle over our imagination, and what is lobbed back and forth are these images or these tropes, or what Bob Hunter, the founder of Greenpeace, called “mind bombs.”² The visual nature of the tropes allows us to capture these elements that language alone doesn't do justice to. For example, the comic has these different full-page, colour advertisements, each of which captures a trope from different stakeholders. This format allows you to capture, condense, and critique how bitumen and the environment are framed; we recognize that there's the material environment and there's the way in which we socially construct the environment through images. The comic format allows us to really pay attention to these and purposefully construct them.

Creating a comic also allows us to engage a public we may not otherwise reach. For example, it could be used to teach Environmental Communication or the social construction of the environment because we have purposefully built-in various sorts of tropes and ideas which are seen as starting points for conversations over the framing of the environment, the framing of social movements, the use of celebrities in social movements, corporate social responsibility, greenwashing—all these sorts of ideas that can be captured through a comic that can kick off larger conversations.

JBK: Shifting our conversation more into the content of the graphic novel, I'd like to hear your thoughts on the role of satire in political discussion in general and how that comes out in the graphic novel, particularly in relation to the satirical advertisements within the graphic novel. I noticed that some of the advertisements didn't seem all that dissimilar to already-existing non-satirical advertisements, which is interesting because though they read as exaggerated and, in some ways, silly, they're actually not that much different.

PMC: That's a great observation in terms of how close we're trying to make satire, but how close, really, the arguments are to reality. In some ways, some of the most biting satire holds up a mirror to show that the supposed

² See Robert Hunter, *The Storming of the Mind* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971).

ridiculousness of satire is often not that different from the reality. For me, looking through the oil/tar sands tropes my goal was to see if we could condense the images down to four or five themes, partly because our budget limited how many colour ads we could do. The ads offer single moments ... they work individually to critique stances or tropes used, but they also work collectively to show the idea of this ongoing struggle of how different PR firms, NGOs, and corporations argue for or against bitumen.

In the ads, there's a lot of use of nationalism as a means to try to mobilize people—what I would call “corporate petro-nationalism”—using the Canadian flag to capture the interests of oil. Ad Astra had this great idea to have “As Canadian as Maple Syrup” (see Figure 1), which again is a bit ridiculous but it is not too far off when you look at some of the “I Love Canadian Energy”³ campaigns or the Energy Citizens campaign,⁴ which uses Canadian symbolism and was imported from the American Petroleum Institute which itself has a long history of mobilizing under the flag.

Figure 1: © Nicole Burton, reprinted with permission from the artist

³ Canada Action, “I Love Canadian Energy,” accessed January 31, 2020, <https://canadaaction.store/collections/designs-all-i-love-canadian-energy>.

⁴ Canada’s Energy Citizens, “Canada’s Energy Citizens,” accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.energycitizens.ca/>.

In terms of the NGO ads, again what stood out in looking at these is very much the apocalyptic imagery—and, fair enough, you get an oil spill on the coast and it's a fucking disaster, right? So, the images used show worst-case scenarios such as dead ducks soaked in oil and this becomes synonymous with the oil/tar sands. And, to be clear, the dead ducks trope has its roots in an actual event where roughly 1600 ducks died awful and preventable deaths in a single incident in April 2008 at Syncrude tailings pond.⁵ There have been many other incidents since then. The other popular NGO image is the typical “tar sands” frame, which puts the Mordor-like moonscapes of open-pit mining on full display. We didn't do a colour ad of this trope but it features in the comic itself. As for the “Two Nations, One Energy Future” full-page ad ... the idea here was to have something very safe and very, almost, boring, to capture the theme of government ads. Under former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, we had different one-page ads done in the *New Yorker* and other billboard campaigns meant to persuade Americans in the struggle to get Keystone XL pipeline approved.

My favourite of our satirical ads is the “Oilsands Proud” ad which shows two women kissing on the back of a pickup truck with the pumpjack in the background and a rainbow flag layered over the image. You could read the ad in at least two ways. First, without context, it may just seem like a progressive, liberal ad which is both proud of the oil sands and proud of diversity. However, if you are aware of the July 2016 Facebook ad posted by the grassroots oil sands network “Canada Oil Sands Community” then there's more to it. The group posted a very heteronormative image of two women kissing which had the text: “In Canada lesbians are considered hot! In Saudi Arabia if you're a lesbian you die! Choose Equality! Choose Canadian oil.”⁶ I sometimes show the Canada Oil Sands Community ad in talks and, more often than not, people think it is a parody but it's not, even though our ad in *The Beast* seems less satirical than the real ad. Together with Ad Astra, we wanted to capture the debate around the tone-deaf and crass Canada Oil Sands Community ad as it captures the level of discourse surrounding oil/tar sands debates. The ad conforms to the logic of social media trying to mobilize publics based on affect and not based on a Habermasian idea of public discourse. It,

⁵ CBC News, “Syncrude Guilty in Alberta Duck Deaths | CBC News,” *CBC*, June 25, 2010, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/syncrude-guilty-in-alberta-duck-deaths-1.882380>.

⁶ See, for example, Jen Gerson, “‘Hot Lesbians’ Ad Bashing Saudi Oil Backfires on Canadian Oilsands Advocates,” *National Post*, July 25, 2016, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/hot-lesbians-ad-bashing-saudi-oil-backfires-on-canadian-oilsands-advocates>.

along with the other ads, captures where public discourse and the public imagination is currently at.

JBK: Another question I had was related to the fictitious oil company in the graphic novel, *OilCan*. Is the company supposed to be government or state-owned, or is the campaign that Mary is working on throughout the graphic novel just producing advertisements for the government in relation to a specific energy project?

PMC: The thinking was ... it was never explicitly discussed or thought of as a government company, but we wanted to have Canada there as part of its corporate identity. It wasn't like Petro-Can in terms of a nationalized oil company, but a private interest looking to mobilize Canadians.

JBK: That's something that's interested me as "grassroots" oil promotion has taken hold. It seems much like the kinds of strategies and discourses and rhetorics that have been taken up by government at this point as well, particularly in relation to the "Keep Canada Working" campaign spearheaded by former Alberta Premier Rachel Notley and the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Alberta. A lot of the strategies and rhetorics used at the time by the NDP in this campaign are indistinguishable from these "grassroots," pro-oil campaigns. I'm thinking in particular of the "Two Nations, One Energy Future" (see Figure 2) satirical advertisement.

PMC: With that one, we wanted to think a bit about the Canadian government campaign, which talked about unity, and you can see it in these ads. They have to be beige yet still try to communicate something. Some of the print and Web campaigns run by the Canadian government have very generic statements looking at the partnership with America. Of course, remember this was under Harper with Obama as President. Two of the ads have the slogan, "America and Canada: Friends and Neighbours," with intertwined Canadian and American flags in different pictures. In another one, America and Canada have the same greenhouse gas reduction targets; America and Canada stand together for energy independence. They're generic, inoffensive, and beige.

Figure 2: © Nicole Burton, reprinted with permission from the artist

JBK: Hugh Goldring's author's note ends by saying that the graphic novel isn't meant to provide answers any more than you came in with. Do you think that is the result of the narrative?

PMC: When I approached Hugh for this project and throughout its development, I wanted things to explore and to really look at the grey area in this debate. In terms of the process of development, my role was like a producer, though it was very much a collaborative process. Hugh would write the dialogue; I would tell him the ideas I wanted in the story. Hugh did an excellent job of condensing these ideas into pithy dialogue between the characters while still advancing the plot in a way that captured the spirit that I was looking for from the start.

When I first met Ad Astra they thought maybe the comic could be done in such a way that one of the characters “sees the light.” Through our conversations, we all realized the issue is not that simple and that the issue of oil sands development, and indeed the role oil plays in our lives, is not like a fairy tale where people just see this is good or this is bad and switch sides—it’s a lot tougher. What I want people to walk away with after reading *The Beast* is an understanding that there’s a lot of grey. News reporting tends to have these dichotomies of “good versus bad” or “right versus wrong” or “anti-oil versus pro-oil” and it’s really not that simple. The fact is we need to move away from fossil fuels, and the fact is we need to do this in a way which is a lot faster than we are acting, but we’re also really entrenched in a petroculture.

The comic was never going to preach to either side, but in some ways may piss off all sides. That said, in the introduction, I challenge readers to get in touch with what we get right but, more importantly, what they believe we get wrong and why. The goal being to use disagreement as a springboard for conversation. I know a comic book can’t do that on its own, but I’m hoping it can at least spark some conversation. I also hope *The Beast* can be used in classrooms to teach Environmental Communication, climate fiction, or other courses as one tool to help us to think through and deconstruct the communications messaging we are bombarded with on a daily basis.

JBK: I definitely think that’s one of the strengths of the graphic novel itself, so I don’t think he’s wrong in what he’s saying, but the takeaway isn’t necessarily that there are no answers. Rather, the graphic novel is identifying the kinds of impasses talked about in *After Oil* and elsewhere through a medium that provides a different articulation of what those impasses are.⁷

PMC: I think you’re right, and this why *After Oil* is such an excellent and important publication. The whole idea of “impasse” in *After Oil* was a huge inspiration in thinking through this project because part of the impasse is our communicative environment. Sure, I understand it from a boots-on-the-ground perspective when you’re trying to mobilize people, as you’re going to use this type of language to get people on your side: either that the world is fucked, which is true, or that we use oil in every moment and part of our lives, which is also true. However, that doesn’t mean these two things are irreconcilable and that we can’t talk about, well, what it means for how we design cities, what we

⁷ Petrocultures Research Group. *After Oil* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia UP, 2016).

eat, how we commute, and everything else. Part of the impasse is communication, and I hope *The Beast* highlights this.

JBK: Following up a bit more on the content and narrative questions, I'd like to meditate a bit further on impasse and how that's articulated in the form of the graphic novel by turning to the characters. What was the process behind the generation of these characters that seem to have similar viewpoints, career trajectories, etcetera, and end up moving to Alberta together as roommates?

PMC: The initial idea for the two characters came from my wife, Katrina, when we were on a family vacation on the Sunshine Coast. We were talking through potential storylines for the project and she suggested the idea of these roommates who worked on different sides of the tar/oil sands. I thought it was great. For me, I wanted them both to be somehow involved in advertising, communications, or public relations because the premise of a lot of my work is that the struggle over the oil sands or the tar sands is both a material struggle and a struggle over our communicative environment. Having both characters connected to oil/tar sands communications means they are both active in crafting messaging deployed in the battle over bitumen. Yet, there is certainly a contrast in the financial and symbolic resources available to each character. Mary works in an advertising firm contracted by oil and gas and thus has a lot of this money at her disposal for a campaign. Meanwhile, Callum is on the activist side of things where eNGOs are typically under-resourced, underfunded and, often, out of necessity, resort to guerrilla tactics, banner drops, culture jamming, this sort of thing, to make an impact. Celebrity is also a tremendous symbolic resource that can be deployed with a lot less cost than a slick advertising campaign and celebrity is referenced in *The Beast*.

So, in sum, it was essential for me to have the two characters capture both "sides" of this but also somehow to be connected, and thus being roommates and being friends made sense. In terms of not being from Alberta, a large part of the workforce who come out to these sort of frontier spaces in Fort McMurray are from out of province. It was the suggestion of Ad Astra to have them being from out East. The idea here was that we wanted Mary and Callum to be "outsiders" as well who are brought to Alberta like many Canadians to try and make ends meet, to try and make a buck. That's also the reality of many Canadians. I'm hoping that people can connect with that.

One thing, too, that Nicole and Hugh at Ad Astra were great about in including was to make sure that the comic passed the Bechdel test, "a method of evaluating women in fiction"... the point is seeing whether two women talk

to each other about something beyond their relationships with men. The graphic novel certainly passes this test and it is an element Nicole and Hugh purposefully worked into *The Beast*.

On the topic of characters and storyline, one of the major struggles I had with the work was how to deal with Indigenous issues and the representation of Indigenous land rights. You'll notice that the comic itself has a severe underrepresentation of Indigenous people, and that was purposeful. Reason being, when you look at a lot of the oil sands advertising, Indigenous people are not there. Now, oil sands companies certainly have elements of their website that talk about what they're doing for Indigenous people, and there are lots of pictures and stories and these sorts of narratives, but in large-scale campaigns they're absent. I purposefully mention this in the comic's Introduction, but in terms of "how do I deal with this?" I took the decision not to try to weave in a small narrative about land issues, which might have been seen as only paying lip service to the issue. Instead, I wanted this absence to be acknowledged as a means to look at the communicative power that these groups have and the fact that Indigenous peoples are often overlooked except when there are, say, in partnerships with an organization to help amplify their message. That said, the absence of communication campaigns is also understandable given the amount of money and resources it takes to engage in these campaigns. But this, again, points to the disparity in resources between the various social actors involved in the struggle over the oil/tar sands.

My other attempt to remedy the lack of Indigenous representation was to ask Blood Tribe artist Terrance Houle if I could use his "Oily Buffalo" image in the book and if he could also write a short essay.⁸ I first met Terrance in Calgary in May 2016 when I went to a session he was speaking at called "Is Oil a Dirty Word?" There, not only was Terrance's art on display, but he was talking about apocalypse, and said: "If you want to see what a post-apocalyptic society looks like, look at my people." This really made me think. So, I asked him to write an essay and to use his "Oily Buffalo" as an intervention in *The Beast*. Now, I recognize it's most likely not enough, but it's how we tried to deal with the communicative absence.

JBK: I think that makes a lot of sense considering the campaigns from even more mainstream environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace and then

⁸ A Tribe Called Geek, "SNEAK PEEK of Terrance Houle's Epilogue to Ad Astra Comix Upcoming Comic Release, THE BEAST – A Tribe Called Geek," accessed January 31, 2020, <http://atribecalledgeek.com/sneak-peek-of-terrance-houles-epilogue-to-ad-astra-comix-upcoming-comic-release-the-beast/>.

also oil and gas company campaigns, which contain very strategic uses of Indigenous peoples, voices, and perspectives in tense and sometimes problematic ways. The bison, it seems, are one of the key signifiers here in oil and gas company promotion—particularly in relation to Syncrude’s bison ranch—and in the graphic novel (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: © Nicole Burton, reprinted with permission of the artist

PMC: The bison were actually one thing we definitely wanted to have as one of the tropes used both in the narrative and then in the ads. Picking apart all the corporate social responsibility (CSR) imagery, there’s so much more you could dive down into. In many ways, I’d prefer if CSR didn’t exist. I mean if we live

under capitalism, let capital be as brutal as you'd like and then use legislation and policy to curb it regulate companies. Bend them to the will of the people and actually account for externalities we have long overlooked. I view CSR as cheap cover offering staged and curated pictures of airbrushed and tightly managed realities. Why not actually force something more accountable than letting them use images of buffalo to offer cover for what's being done?

JBK: My next questions are more centred on circulation and distribution. I was curious about how you used crowdfunding to fund the hard copy, and what your experience was with using a crowdfunding platform.

PMC: First off, it was important for me to pay Ad Astra for the project. I asked: how much will it cost to make this happen? They gave me a price, and I paid it. As often happens, *The Beast* took more work than they thought and I think if they were to price this out now, it'd be a lot different. That said, from the get-go they were going to get paid to make this comic, but the idea is that they were paid to make the digital version and then the crowdfunding would help get a paper version printed.

The thing is, when I approached them, I couldn't afford to do a print run. So we did the crowdfunding to pay for the printing of two thousand copies, and now the comic is for sale for those who want to get a paper version. But, for me, it was also important to have a free version. This is because Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) research money funded the project and this digital version would ensure greater dissemination. So we partnered with the Digital Press at the University of North Dakota to release the "academic" version of *The Beast* in September 2018. This version is available as a free digital download and contains some additional academic articles. So we have the physical artefact, which you can have and read and hold in your hands, and the free digital version that you can read on your iPad and look at. And we receive no money from the digital version. In fact, we received a small grant from the University of Ottawa to help cover the costs of the digital version—which is great—and then Ad Astra sells the paper version for those who want to have the artefact too.

JBK: I'd like to close by offering a space for reflections on the more general reception of the graphic novel and the actual launch of it.

PMC: You know, what's frustrating is that we launched *The Beast* on Sunday, April 22, 2018; on Earth Day. I picked Earth Day because the timing worked well for when we finally got the paper copies, which was sort of symbolic and ironic. We sent out press releases and got lots of emails out to people about the book's launch, but it was bloody difficult to get mainstream media interest in it. I found the lack of media interest incredibly frustrating because *The Beast*'s launch happened amidst a national debate over the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline⁹—a tar/oil sands pipeline! So here you have this ongoing feud between provinces—between British Columbia and Alberta—and then you have this graphic novel which pokes fun at and satirizes the image debate over the oil sands and tar sands. However, there was some mainstream media interest. We did an interview on CBC Ottawa, which was great, but I was rather disappointed that it wasn't picked up by national papers like the *Globe and Mail* or *National Post*. We had a short review in the *Literary Review of Canada*,¹⁰ but, luckily, we did get a thorough interview in the *LA Review of Books*.¹¹ That said, it feels odd to produce a comic on an incredibly current Canadian topic while the most notable attention came from abroad. Perhaps the lack of attention had to do with the hybrid nature of the comic. The work is certainly informed by the tropes of my academic work but isn't itself journalistic ... it's not just reporting various facts from my content analysis, but it's not total fiction either. So, maybe people are figuring out what to do with it, but that was challenging. I'm hoping that because it is now freely available online—I have also pushed it in my networks, and I'm hoping those that use it in environmental communications will use it as a means to talk about environmental framing—that it amplifies its visibility. Part of the challenge is that Ad Astra does its own distribution, so they have distribution through AK Press in the US, which is great, but in Canada we can't get this distributed without a major cost to Ad Astra through bookstores. I'm hoping the digital one can amplify the book and maybe create more interest in the paper version. But,

⁹ Since this interview took place, the Canadian Government controversially purchased the pipeline from Kinder Morgan for \$4.5 billion. Kathleen Harris, "Liberals to Spend Billions on Pipeline, despite Opposition from Environmental, Indigenous Groups | CBC News," *CBC*, May 29, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberals-trans-mountain-pipeline-kinder-morgan-1.4681911>.

¹⁰ Brian Jacobson, "The Oil Stays in the Picture," *Literary Review of Canada*, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2018/06/the-oil-stays-in-the-picture/>.

¹¹ Daniel Worden, "Social Justice Comics Today: An Interview with the Creators of 'The Beast: Making a Living on a Dying Planet,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/social-justice-comics-today-an-interview-with-the-creators-of-the-beast-making-a-living-on-a-dying-planet/>.

for me, I don't care if you read digital or paper. I just want people to engage with the material.

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