

# “Stinking as Thinking” in Warren Cariou’s “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto”

What I remember most about the tar sands is the stink. We stood there with our cameras, trying to capture a record of that obliterated landscape, but I could hardly even see. The fumes were like hammers . . .

—Warren Cariou, “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto”

Smells are everywhere and so is oil.<sup>1</sup> Olfactory signatures mark our memories and shape our relationships to the world around us, including our relationships to oil production and consumption. In his landmark 1992 essay on petrofiction, Amitav Ghosh attributes the dearth of “Oil Encounter” novels to the fact that, to American audiences, “oil smells bad” (432), as both a substance and a reminder of global interdependence. More recently, writers like Warren Cariou have turned to the language of smell to investigate the tar sands’ environmental impacts. In “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto” (2012), a text that aims to counteract disinformation about the tar sands spread by corporations and governments and challenge readers’ complacency in the midst of a climate crisis, Cariou plays with smell’s connection to memory and emotion, its emphasis on relationality and transcorporeality, and its link to sense of place and environmental risk to powerful effect. Yet few critics provide an in-depth examination of smell and oil in Cariou’s work. As a white-settler scholar living on Treaty 6 territory in a city less than five hundred kilometres from Fort McMurray, I regularly confront scents that serve as a reminder of my relatively close proximity to the tar sands, particularly when I travel to Edmonton and encounter the powerful odours of Refinery Row. I find Cariou’s literary engagement with smell to be instructive for thinking through questions of resource extraction and proximity in the Canadian petrostate. Rather than perpetuate the marginalization of smell by relegating it to a feature of setting or atmosphere, this essay follows the trail of scents in Cariou’s manifesto and argues for a closer examination of smell’s significance as a

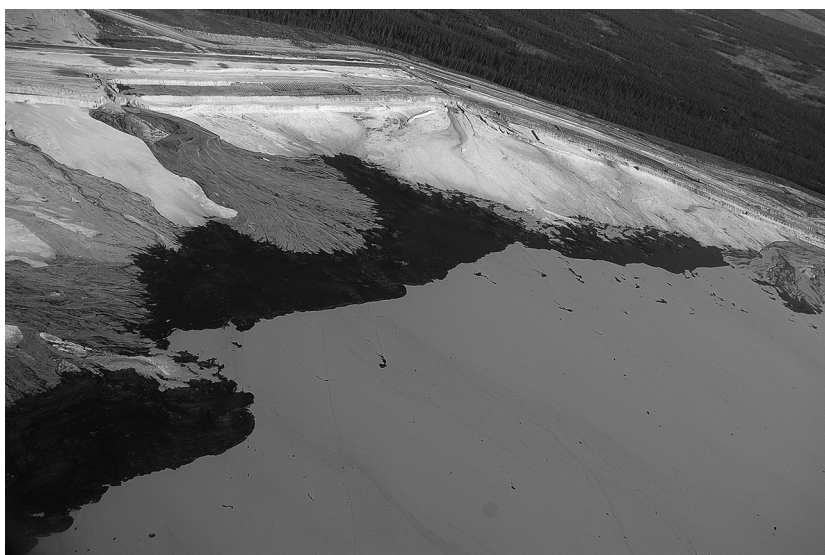
way of knowing and relating to oil. Building on Jennifer Wenzel's notion that "a resource logic is also a resource aesthetic" ("Afterword"), this essay asks: What is unique about the language of smell—and stink in particular—and what does that uniqueness offer Cariou, a Métis writer, scholar, and filmmaker who uses aesthetic experimentation to interrogate the neo-colonial capitalist logic of resource extraction? How does Cariou reimagine the language of scent for his creative, ethical, and political goals? What does his olfactory language offer readers, who have diverse and complex relationships to odours of extraction, oil production and consumption, and environmental risk?

To address these questions, this essay brings studies of resource aesthetics into conversation with recent work on settler atmospherics and olfactory ecocriticism. By pairing photographs of the tar sands with brief narratives and poems that centre stench, Cariou mobilizes smell's association with irrationality to disrupt structures of petromodernity rooted in colonial aesthetic values. In an effort to shift readers' thinking in the hopes of inciting climate action, Cariou attempts to manifest—or make perceptible to the senses—the toxic relations of the petrostate that often remain "hidden" and "silenced." Yet Cariou does not simply expose these toxic relations. Recasting what Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible" (12-13), Cariou develops a rich olfactory language to complicate the notion that scents resist representation in English. By disrupting the very foundation of the Western sensory hierarchy, with its emphasis on the so-called higher order senses of vision and audition, Cariou's olfacto-centric manifesto invites readers—whom he positions as liberal subjects steeped in the traditions of Western thought and colonial aesthetics—to attend more closely to smell as a form of embodied knowledge and way of relating. Building on Cheryl Lousley's suggestion that Cariou's manifesto constitutes a "poetic effort in ecological pedagogy" ("Canadian" 75), I argue that by developing an olfactory aesthetic that foregrounds smell as a medium for communicating environmental risk, Cariou sharpens readers' olfactory senses, providing them with a language and conceptual framework for attuning to smell as a way of knowing and relating—an essential step in transforming the material conditions of Canada's toxic settler atmospheres.

Written in response to Canada's decision, in 2011, to pull out of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change, Cariou's "Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto" invokes the tone and structure of F. T. Marinetti's 1909 "Futurist Manifesto," a text that also emphasizes smell but for different ends.<sup>2</sup> In his own manifesto, Cariou does not endorse Marinetti's "technologized and hyper-individualistic" vision, but rather "map[s] a way toward a different kind of future" (17). Playing with the manifesto form as a polemical genre that is "proudly unreasonable" (Hannah), Cariou offers what he calls a "collage of disjunctive responses" to the Canadian petrostate, one which "embraces irrationality as the last possible mode of engagement with a contemporary public that will no longer listen to reason" (17). Underscoring the limits of listening to reason as a mode of engaging environmental crises, Cariou's manifesto aims "to make visible the physical reality" of the tar sands (17). Evoking vision and the logic of revelation, he writes that this reality "has been occluded by corporate and government disinformation as well as by citizens' unwillingness to face the consequences of their actions and their inaction" (17). Cariou thus "attempts to reveal some of the psychological structures that prevent Canadians from seeing the dirt . . . on their hands" (17).

Given the massive scale of the tar sands and the challenges of representing oil, it is unsurprising that Cariou initially frames his goals in visual and aural terms. As Ghosh argues, the "slipperiness" of oil and the scale of its extraction make it notoriously difficult to represent (433).<sup>3</sup> Many writers and scholars have since grappled with this issue; while multi-sensory approaches to oil certainly exist, visualizing and naming oil have become dominant representational and critical methods.<sup>4</sup> As Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer put it, creative writers attempt to capture oil's "curious invisibility . . . while also trying to render fuels nameable, readable, and visible," while critics "account for the ways in which fossil fuels have managed to hide in plain sight/site, evading inclusion in our economic calculations as much as in our literary fictions" (6). At the same time, photographers like Edward Burtynsky have popularized aerial photography as a method for representing the tar sands. According to Isabel Lockhart, such images and films, which attempt to capture the horror and scale of resource extraction from a bird's-eye view, are one

of the only ways that the public can view the tar sands and have become “dominant tar sands forms” (153). The impact of these visuals has been debated by scholars, including Cariou.<sup>5</sup> In his 2015 essay “Wastewest: A State of Mind,” Cariou contends that because Burtynsky’s images lack geographical context and “can be seen as gorgeous abstracts,” they “can be misinterpreted as validations of industrial processes” (26). In his manifesto, Cariou similarly demonstrates ambivalence about what Lockhart calls “the shock-power of revelation” and questions this approach as a method for effecting change (152). As Wenzel puts it, one does not simply “make the previously invisible visible and thus amenable to change”; oil remains “politically unapprehended,” which results in an “impasse between knowledge and action” (Introduction 11).<sup>6</sup> By pairing the olfacto-centric sections of his manifesto, which I will call vignettes, with his own decontextualized photographs—many of them aerial images reminiscent of Burtynsky’s—Cariou defamiliarizes how dominant tar sands forms rely on particular sensory frameworks bound up in neo-colonial aesthetic and political values, values that inform the public’s resistance to “listen[ing] to reason” or “seeing the dirt on their hands.”



**Figure 1.** Warren Cariou, from “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto,” p. 18.  
Digital photograph reproduced in greyscale, with permission from Warren Cariou.  
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## Tarhands and Energy Intimacy

Scent is notably absent in Cariou's opening vignettes, where he first establishes the representational and critical challenges posed by dominant tar sands forms that privilege vision and audition. The allegorical opening vignette depicts a "hungry" figure, Tarhands, who "[rises] up out of the swamp" evoked by the paired aerial photograph, which shows effluent piping into a large tailings pond in an image reminiscent of an oil spill. Underscoring the nation's complicity in this form of environmental violence, Tarhands is awakened by a personified nation "on his back" whose inhabitants "shovel all kinds of everything at him: trucks, roads, steam, pipes, trains, muskeg, lives, methamphetamines, rivers, *pastahowin*, laws, futures" (18). Yet Tarhands is never satisfied, and in a revision of the King Midas story, he tarnishes everything he touches while "[s]omeone else [gets] all the gold" (18). Tarhands wears "the colourful nation like a cape," but the flag-like presence drags him down, trips him, and at times strangles him (18). In a line that implicates the reader as part of the complacent nation responsible for creating the depicted "swamp," Tarhands concedes, "Guess I'm stuck with you for good," but "[t]he nation [says] nothing, as always" (18). Tarhands is a sympathetic figure who, like Cariou, acknowledges and tries to change the toxic nature of this relationship; however, both are met with silence and inaction. By representing Tarhands as a personification of the monstrous form that bitumen takes within an extractivist framework,<sup>7</sup> Cariou shifts the discourse of blame away from the tar sands itself, an oft-vilified figure in the national imaginary; instead, he positions the toxic neocolonial relations of capitalism's extractivist logic as the problem, implicating himself and his readers as members of the silent nation in the process.

The nation's abjection of Tarhands recalls Cariou's concept of the *wastewest*, a term for the cultural attitudes and practices that suggest people can separate themselves from their waste. This system not only supports a cultural fantasy—waste, which Cariou describes as "the repressed term of modernity," "always finds its way back"—but also produces divisions in society, creating wealth for some while negatively impacting others by polluting their homes and destroying their communities ("Wastewest" 23-24). Indigenous people are

disproportionately affected by this system, as energy megaprojects like the tar sands displace people from their lands and pose a threat to those who remain (Cariou, “Aboriginal” 17). As Cariou’s vignette suggests, the toxic relations of petromodernity reject what he calls “energy intimacy.” As Cariou argues in an essay on indigenizing energy practices, the Western corporate logic of extraction removes energy from its context, transforming it into a commodity that gains value in the global economy through its sameness and uniformity; in contrast, in Indigenous cultures “energy is always contextualized, always specific to a particular place with which the energy user must establish an intimately familiar connection” (19). The nation’s treatment of Tarhands reflects Cariou’s assertion that “[w]hen energy becomes decontextualized and commodified, it no longer seems to be in relationship to us, and therefore we cease to feel responsibilities in regard to it” (19). The fact that the nation thoughtlessly feeds *pastahowin*, a Cree word for “sin against nature,” to a monster of its own making suggests that the transgressor—the nation—will be denied further gifts from nature until, as Cariou suggests in his discussion of energy intimacy, they “[r]e-establish an ethical relationship with the natural world” (18-19). Informed by Omushkego Cree Elder Louis Bird’s stories about people’s ethical obligations to the land and its human and non-human beings, Cariou suggests that “to indigenize energy practices . . . will involve becoming more connected on an intimate bodily level with the sources of our energy—understanding where it comes from and how that source location is affected when the energy is extracted, processed, and delivered to us” (20). By turning to smell—a powerful form of knowledge that emphasizes embodied intimacy with the land and each other—Cariou’s manifesto offers different ways of relating to oil.

### **(Un)common Sense, (Un)common Scents**

Cariou’s turn to smell grounds his use of irrationality as a method for critiquing Western rationality, the latter inextricably linked to vision and audition. Cariou’s second vignette, a brief and informal essay, demonstrates this frustrated turn to irrationality with its opening line: “Okay, I’ve lost it” (19). Alluding to Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, Cariou’s speaker claims, “I was going to

nail my 95 theses to the parliament door and all that, stand back and listen to the silence, all reasonable like,” but the nation’s withdrawal from an international climate treaty suggests “nobody listens to reason anymore” (19). The speaker desperately wants “to make things manifest: to open eyes, unclog ears” (19), but he also recognizes that making things manifest involves re-evaluating vision and audition as means of accessing reason, as well as reason itself: “[I]f reason doesn’t work anymore, then I’ll have to try something else. Anything else” (19).

Cariou’s turn to smell—a so-called lower order sense within Western philosophy—in the subsequent vignettes develops an aesthetic strategy that undermines the foundation of post-Enlightenment discourses of reason and rationality, concepts privileged by a Western sensory hierarchy that valorizes vision as the pre-eminent sense of objectivity, classification, and reason, with audition—for its association with the realm of language—not far behind.<sup>8</sup> As Taylor McHolm argues, Cariou’s strategy of “insensible realism . . . represent[s] material impacts and social structures that are either not immediately sensible, or have become insensible as a result of familiarity and ubiquity”; the manifesto is thus “deliberately insensible or irrational in an effort to break from the dominant logic that has produced the harms these works target” (430). I read Cariou’s turn to smell as a cornerstone of this strategy, as scents operate outside of conventional Western logics. According to Constance Classen and colleagues, the Western tradition has relegated smell to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy “by virtue of its radical interiority [and] its boundary-transgressing propensities,” which threaten abstract, impersonal frameworks that promote surface, distance, and detachment, post-Enlightenment values linked to vision (4-5). Since olfactory phenomena are diffuse, pervasive, and often invisible, their materiality contributes to the perception of odours as polluting threats, as William Ian Miller points out (342). Given olfaction’s deep ties to the subjective realms of memory and emotion, major thinkers from Immanuel Kant to Charles Darwin to Sigmund Freud denigrated smell as a sense associated with the (racialized, gendered, sexually perverse, lower class) body.<sup>9</sup> While scents may seem visceral and unmediated, Jim Drobnick asserts that olfaction, like other forms of perception, embeds particular cultural values (1-2). Smell’s association with irrationality not only

makes it ripe for aesthetic experimentation, but also underscores its value as a medium for exploring forms of olfactory knowledge and ways of relating that tend to be delegitimated by extractivist logic grounded in neocolonial aesthetics. The late Jon Gordon reads Cariou’s call for “an ‘irrational response to bitumen extraction,’” or “move to ‘uncommon sense,’” as “an attempt to expose the flaws of the ‘rational’ and ‘common sense’ logic of capitalism” through which ideology operates (*Unsustainable* 107).<sup>10</sup> Building on Janice Carlisle’s suggestion that literary scents convey moral character and reflect ideals of “common sense” (5), I read Cariou’s aesthetic strategy as one that mobilizes the link between smell and irrationality to ask: How do uncommon scents become common, and what is the relationship between common scents and common sense in the contemporary petrostate?

To address these questions, Cariou’s manifesto explores how smell—particularly the stench of airborne toxins—links porous bodies and environments through shared vulnerability. According to Hsuan L. Hsu, “[s]mell’s viscosity and chemical vulnerability make it a powerful tool for communicating about atmospheric toxins” (5). Moreover, scents’ ability to facilitate transcorporeal intimacy while extending through space makes olfaction “well adapted to . . . sensing how differentiated atmospheres get into bodies and populations” (21). The West has historically devalued smell for precisely these reasons; indeed, devaluing smell and eradicating certain noxious odours is a central part of the “civilizing process,” which “deploy[s] the sensorium in the service of sustaining a *sensus communis*—the shared sensory order that in turn delineates the limits of community” (20). Common scents thus sustain ideologies of common sense, while uncommon scents—like noxious odours—risk disrupting deodorized spaces and pose a threat to the colonial notion of civilization itself. I argue that Cariou embraces what Hsu identifies as the challenges that have led to smell’s marginalization in environmental risk assessments—namely, “its resistance to description, recall, isolation, archiving, and objectivity” (22).<sup>11</sup> For Hsu, thinking with smell attempts a radical shift in the “distribution of the sensible” by offering a sensory alternative to Western aesthetics, which tend to minimize invisible forms of environmental violence “by framing the atmosphere as an empty space between (ocularcentric) subject and object



rather than apprehending it as a material, biopolitical medium” (20).<sup>12</sup> Cariou recasts the distribution of the sensible by developing “[s]tinking as thinking” as an olfactory aesthetic grounded in the tar sands’ odours of extraction (“Tarhands” 21). In doing so, he takes up the challenge that smell purportedly poses for writers: its complex relationship to language. According to Hans Rindisbacher, the West’s construction of smell as a “surplus” sense that perceives phenomena unnecessary to encode in socio-semiotic systems contributes to the belief that olfactory perception exceeds linguistic and scientific models of classification in Eurowestern thought (viii, 10).<sup>13</sup> Yet critics note that writing is paradoxically one of the few ways to record scents (Classen et al. 3), and “experiments in olfactory aesthetics enrich our language for describing and communicating smells while strengthening our capacities of olfactory distinction and recall” (Hsu 18). Cariou’s manifesto thus constitutes an important literary archive of the tar sands’ seemingly ephemeral byproducts and their significant material impacts.

### **Fumes Like Hammers: Olfactory Habituation**

In a marked turn to stench, it is the smell—not the sight—of the tar sands that overwhelms Cariou’s speaker and marks his memory in the third vignette. Foregrounding the interconnectedness of bodies and environments, the speaker describes how the stench overpowers his vision, preventing him from capturing a visual record of the site:

What I remember most about the tar sands is the stink. We stood there with our cameras, trying to capture a record of that obliterated landscape, but I could hardly even see. The fumes were like hammers: sulfur and benzene and diesel and something else—a dead smell, a charnel residue on the back of my tongue. I had a migraine in half a dozen breaths. I breathed into my shirtsleeve, trying not to retch. How could people work in this, day after day? How could the Cree, Métis and Dene people of Fort McKay live in it? (20)<sup>14</sup>

With its concrete term, the speaker’s hammer simile frames the stench as an assault on readers, many of whom would not live in close proximity to the tar sands. The synesthetic description of “charnel residue” emphasizes how the stench of death registers tangibly on the tongue, refusing the Western sensory hierarchy’s separation of the senses. Here is a form of

energy intimacy, albeit one predicated upon toxic relations rather than indigenized energy practices. The unresolved reference to “something else—” gestures toward other deadly chemicals permeating the speaker’s body violently, recalling how companies pollute bodies and environments without consent and underscoring how scents’ resistance to isolation and classification requires creative forms of aesthetic and political engagement that cannot be captured by the West’s discrete terms of molecular classification. Juxtaposing the text with a photograph of a metal fence and signs declaring “No Entry” and “Private Property,” the vignette creates a striking contrast between the fence’s ability to keep extraction sites hidden and its inability to keep noxious odours contained.



**Figure 2.** Warren Cariou, from “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto,” p. 20. Digital photograph reproduced in greyscale, with permission from Warren Cariou. (© Warren Cariou 2008)

In contrast to the “Futurist Manifesto,” which glorifies industrial odours as visceral traces of the links between technology, war, and petroleum, Cariou mobilizes the language of stench to make manifest the link between petromodernity and what Paiute scholar Kristen Simmons calls “settler atmospherics.” Arguing that air is a site of colonial violence, Simmons defines settler atmospherics as “the

normative and necessary violences found in settlement—accruing, adapting, and constricting indigenous and black life in the U.S. settler state.” Reflecting on atmospheric weapons used by law enforcement against Standing Rock protestors, Simmons contends that these violences enact a “relational severing” that asphyxiates political resistance and enacts “toxic strangulations—social and chemical—” that disproportionately affect Indigenous nations and marginalized communities in ways that “we have been trained not to see.” Drawing on Simmons, Lockhart reads Cariou’s vignette as “warzone reporting from the heart of petromodernity” that underscores how settler colonialism “*is itself total warfare*” (159). By raising the question of how Cree, Métis, and Dene communities live in the stench, the vignette emphasizes the tar sands’ olfactory assault as part of this ongoing war. As Hsu argues, “[a]cross a vast range of Indigenous societies, the perception and manipulation of smells provides embodied modes of environmental knowledge and relationality” (154).<sup>15</sup> Since olfactory perception is deeply tied to memory and sense of place, settler colonialism’s transformation of Indigenous smellscapes contributes to the ongoing displacement of people and decimation of species, and has thus “profoundly affected Indigenous experiences of place, environment, spirituality, and identity” (156). By providing no response to the question of how nearby Indigenous communities bear the tar sands’ odours, Cariou frames their suffering as one of the “accepted consequences of growth” associated with resource development in northern Alberta (Gordon, “Displacing Oil” 11).<sup>16</sup> Like Simmons, who suggests that attending to breath’s “porous relationality” opens people up to new ways of relating by attuning them to the material conditions in which others can or cannot breathe, Cariou’s turn toward smell’s porous relationality emphasizes its potential as a mode of relating that attunes perception to the uneven dynamics of settler atmospherics.

A security guard’s engagement with the speaker in this vignette reflects how settler atmospherics also condition industry workers’ olfactory senses.<sup>17</sup> In addition to creating atmospheric disparities, settler colonialism has historically deployed colonial education to invalidate smell as a way of knowing and relating (Hsu 153-54). The vignette shows how the colonial education of the senses operates in the tar

sands’ toxic atmosphere. Conditioned to habituate to the scents—and common sense—in which they are immersed, the guard dismisses the stench as a sign of risk in a response that contrasts sharply with the speaker’s: “Oh I used to smell it, too’ one security guard laughed, after warning us to stay off Company property. ‘But after a week or two you don’t notice a thing” (20). The guard’s response reflects what Douglas J. Porteous calls the “habituation effect,” a term that describes how an odour’s perceived intensity declines the longer one is exposed to it (90). It is unclear whether the guard has actually habituated to the smell or simply denies its impact; the worker could be toeing the rhetorical line of the Company and guarding its common-sense ideology. Yet it is important to note, as Melanie Dennis Unrau does, that oil and gas workers “are not hypocrites, dupes, or too implicated in the system to understand it” (35). The vignette frames habituation as a physiological and psychological process that, while potentially deadly in the long term, is necessary to work in the tar sands. While the speaker’s headache may impair his cognitive faculties, the guard’s ability to function in the stench underscores how settler atmospherics condition workers’ bodies and minds to habituate to resource extraction’s sickening effects. Petromodernity is not only predicated on a fantasy of separating the self from its waste; it also requires that workers habituate to odours that betray the tar sands’ toxicity. These odours expose how the petrostate’s waste cannot be completely contained or eradicated.

According to Hsu, to decolonize smell, writers must “transform our modes of sensing and relating to the atmosphere, and ultimately transform the atmosphere itself” (161).<sup>18</sup> While he contends that Cariou’s manifesto documents atmospheric violence rather than transforming it (161), I read this vignette, and the manifesto as a whole, as doing essential work that contributes to the material transformation of settler atmospherics. If, as Hsu argues, “olfactory aesthetics matters not just because it represents how we smell but also because it modulates—and, in many cases, sharpens—our (deodorized) sensitivity to odors and their intoxicating chemical intimacies” (18), then Cariou’s development of a distinct olfactory aesthetic may be read as an essential step toward materially transforming the habituation effects of settler atmospherics. By offering a much-needed language for olfactory ways of knowing and relating, which have long

been invalidated by colonial systems of sensory education bound up in common-sense ideologies and resource logics—a process that has involved the marginalization of scent in the English language itself—Cariou’s manifesto begins the crucial work of retraining readers’ olfactory senses.

### **The Tarhands Institute: Making a Stink**

Cariou’s next vignette uses olfactory language to breathe life into oil rhetoric, a realm rife with dead metaphors tied to Enlightenment discourses of discovery.<sup>19</sup> In propaganda for a fictional “Tarhands Institute,” the speaker combines the language of smell with parody, irony, allusion, and other playful strategies to defamiliarize the wastewest attitudes and practices that contribute to settler atmospherics. Beneath a photo of a highway full of cars and buses, likely carrying transient workers as they leave a bitumen processing plant, the text describes a “stink-tank” in Waterways, Alberta (21). Located on the Clearwater River south of its confluence with the Athabasca River, Waterways is now part of Fort McMurray but was once a major shipping hub located at the northernmost point of the Northern Alberta Railway. Parodying the enthusiastic tone of oil propaganda, Cariou’s speaker celebrates the institute’s “chapters, sties and tarpits across this great nation” (21). The tone used to describe the Tarhands Institute, whose website “resides . . . just next door to the national unconscious,” is also vaguely threatening: “some day soon we’ll move in next to you” (21). Challenging the out of sight, out of mind wastewest mentality, Cariou’s stink-tank propaganda plays on smell’s emphasis on interconnectedness to assert that northern Alberta’s extraction projects are connected to the rest of Canada and the world through transportation networks upon which global capitalism relies.

By developing an ironic language of smell, this vignette not only manifests the gap between corporate and government rhetoric about the tar sands and its environmental impacts; it also trains readers in the art of noticing smell and valuing olfactory knowledge. In a call to action, the speaker evokes common olfactory metaphors and idioms: “What do we do? We make a stink. We disturb the proverbial shit. Because something is already rotten in the petrostate, and NOBODY SEEMS TO NOTICE” (21). Echoing the ominous *Hamlet* line “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” the speaker raises

questions about the health of the Canadian petrostate and the moral legitimacy of its leaders, comparing them to the corrupt Claudius who manipulates others through his skilful use of language. In Shakespeare’s play, the ghost of Hamlet’s father is a visible manifestation of Claudius’ crime of poisoning the late king for the Danish throne. On a metaphorical level, the speaker invokes the idiom of making a stink, or creating a fuss (“Stink”), to expose the petrostate’s rotten core, a rottenness that manifests not supernaturally, but materially in the noxious odours of the previous vignette.



**Figure 3.** Warren Cariou, from “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto,” p. 21.  
Digital photograph reproduced in greyscale, with permission from Warren Cariou.  
(© Warren Cariou 2008)

How to convey a stench to Cariou’s imagined readers who are privileged enough to live away from the petrostate’s toxic waste, waste to which even workers can become habituated? The speaker addresses this question by playing with figurative language: “How do you point out that the air smells, when everyone’s already used to it? By making more stink” (21). Here Cariou outlines the “credo” of the institute, which might also be said to be the credo of his manifesto: “Mess as manifest. Stinking as thinking” (21). Given the links between vision,

aurality, reason, and rationality, what might stinking as thinking actually entail? In short, punchy sentences reminiscent of the “Futurist Manifesto,” Cariou’s speaker calls upon readers to join the seemingly irrational work of making more stink, making more mess. His framing of the vignette as a “membership drive” suggests that the stink-tank, like the manifesto itself, manifests stinking as thinking through its use of olfactory language (21). Attempting the “nearly unthinkable shift” toward recasting the distribution of the sensible, Cariou’s Tarhands Institute represents the need to not only remake cultural institutions so they focus on materially transforming settler atmospherics through collective action, but also recast dominant ways of knowing and relating embedded in the Western sensory hierarchy.

### **Olfactory Philosophy: Stinking as Thinking**

Many of the vignettes that follow foreground sight and sound rather than stench; however, the strategically irrational olfacto-centric passages that precede them defamiliarize these sensory frameworks, troubling them as modes of knowledge production and ways of relating. Returning to the language of stench in the final vignettes, Cariou further develops his olfactory aesthetic by investigating stinking as thinking as a philosophy with material implications. Beneath a photograph of a lush landscape, divided by dirt roads, with a tailings pond juxtaposed with a large body of water and smaller lakes above, the eleventh vignette takes up Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher famous for his work on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism in the early twentieth century. Suggesting that Heidegger’s phrase “*Denken ist Danken* . . . thinking is thanking” was “misquoted” (28), the speaker writes: “What I believe he really said was *Denken ist Stinken*” (28). The speaker attempts to make stinking as thinking manifest in this playful vignette, offering interpretations based on what the speaker believes rather than on evidence. This irrational approach underscores how supposedly rational tar sands rhetoric is often based on “corporate and governmental disinformation,” as Cariou suggests in the manifesto’s introduction (17). It also challenges ways of knowing valued by European continental philosophy, a tradition that emerged out of German idealism and a defence of reason inaugurated by philosophers like Kant. Cariou’s

olfactory philosophy attempts to recast the distribution of the sensible embedded in this tradition.

Linking the aesthetic, the philosophical, and the political, the speaker further develops a language of smell to attune readers to the ways in which extractivist logic bridges the metaphorical and the material. Posing a rhetorical question, the speaker questions whether anyone can deny that “some forms of thought create a noxious atmosphere” (28). The stench arises from “people we disagree with” and “ideologies we hate,” but “maybe it’s even true that most thinking creates a kind of exhaust, a residue that lingers in our air” (28). While these claims may seem irrational, the pun on *exhaust*—a term that alludes to both the noxious outcome of burning of fossil fuels and a feeling of exhaustion or loss of physical energy—invites readers to consider the exhausting material impacts of the ways of thinking Cariou critiques. This residue, he suggests, is tangible and material, recalling the earlier description of the tar sands’ “charnel residue.” In turn, noxious odours bear the traces of particular ways of thinking, as society’s hydrocarbon pollution and industrial waste “can be seen as a kind of thinking” (28). For the speaker, these “[t]hought bubbles” constitute an “[o]lfactory philosophy” that, like smell, is fundamentally irrational and therefore “appropriate to the modern human condition” (28). The vignette plays on smell’s metaphorical capaciousness to emphasize the material link between particular ways of thinking and modes of sensory perception. Noxious thinking corresponds with toxic ways of relating which, as other vignettes suggest, have devastating material impacts. Cariou’s stinking as thinking constitutes what Brent Bellamy and colleagues describe as a *resource aesthetic* in that it considers “the material requirements of aesthetic production, while at the same time insisting on the aesthetics of resource extraction and the recognition of infrastructure as form.” The speaker makes his aesthetic and political goal of recasting the distribution of the sensible explicit in this vignette: “I believe we need to learn a new kind of stinking. We need to think outside the nox. It will be like inventing a new language, a new medium of being” (28). Cariou’s experimental language attempts to capture this new medium of being. “Let’s go,” the speaker writes, evoking Marinetti’s same invitational refrain: “follow your nose to somewhere, someone you’ve never been” (28). The vignette evokes Froot Loops cereal mascot Toucan Sam, whose tagline “follow



your nose” suggests going where one pleases based on instinct rather than a preconceived plan (“Nose”). Ending on an existentialist note that plays on the homophonous link between *nose* and *knows*, Cariou calls for a move beyond the “loopy”—as in cyclical, irrational—system of consumer capitalism in a petrostate that undermines the health of the body politic.

### Paradise Lost: Cariou’s Petropoetics

Cariou’s experimentation with olfactory aesthetics extends to his petropoetics. As I have argued elsewhere, poetry is an ideal site for investigating the often unconscious act of breathing in the context of the petrostate’s noxious atmospheres; as an oral form, poetry pays close attention to breath, relying on form to pattern breathing in particular ways (Oliver). The next vignette, entitled “Satan Rouses His Legions on the Shores of the Syncrude Tailings Pond #4,” is a poem reminiscent of Satan’s rousing speech in Book One of *Paradise Lost*. Paired with a landscape photograph of what appears to be a tailings pond in the foreground and a treeline with electrical towers in the background, the lyric poem is written in Satan’s voice, recalling Satan’s speech and the hellish material conditions of Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*. While John Milton’s anti-hero speaks prior to Earth’s creation, Cariou’s speaker, in an ironic reversal, depicts the apocalyptic hellscape as a product of the petrostate’s noxious olfactory philosophy and its afterlives.<sup>20</sup> The three-line stanzas, written in free verse, exceed the tight structure of Milton’s heroic verse and iambic pentameter. To adapt McHolm, the poem’s formal spillage mimics the tar sand’s stench: words spill from line to line, stanza to stanza, without a rigid rhythm or rhyme scheme to contain them. Mixing enjambed and end-stopped lines and sporadic, syntactic caesuras, the poem departs from Milton’s stanzaic form, deploying punctuation and three-line stanzas in a way that encourages deep breathing when stench is evoked. The speaker begins by directly addressing readers: “Inhale, my friends: breathe deep / the bitumen air” (29). The poem then describes a multi-sensory hellscape of oil lakes and billowing smokestacks:

the slick earth itself  
 turned out, spilled like troubled guts  
 into the pipeline of need.  
 The stink that lingers on the back

of your tongues

is the scent of our conjuration. (29)

Recalling the first vignette’s image of the nation-laden Tarhands, the poem blends smell, touch, taste, sound, and sight to represent a “sensorial bonanza,” to use Kent Jones’ phrase (qtd. in LeMenager 98). Yet this cataclysmic scene does not neatly align with the aesthetic properties associated with the gusher, a spectacle that, according to Stephanie LeMenager, symbolizes the “unregulated play” and aliveness of oil as an “excessively embodied figure” in early twentieth-century oil accident reports and literary representations of oil discovery (93). Evoking “oil’s primal associations with earth’s body” (92), Cariou’s simile instead personifies Earth in a painful image of disembowelment. The poem develops a multi-sensory image of the violence that unfolds in the aftermath of oil strikes, whose violence affects land, water, and atmosphere.

As in earlier vignettes, the synaesthetic poem alludes to a toxic stench that registers on the back of the tongue, but with a difference: the use of the second person immerses—and thereby implicates—readers in the description of bitumen air. The break after “tongues” leads readers to linger on this olfactory description. The stench has the power to conjure spirits, just as the sounds of heavy haulers and sump pits summon hordes in visual and aural imagery reminiscent of the “Futurist Manifesto.” In an appeal that recalls the Tarhands Institute’s propaganda, the speaker asks, “Which among the hordes will follow?” as he “plant[s] his ensign” in the land, recalling the silent nation on Tarhands’ back. Evoking the Futurist obsession with speed, the speaker compels readers to hurry and join the legion: “the ground is laid for us / wide open. Sniff and you know: / all of it was made to burn” (29). Echoing the opening stanza’s directive to inhale bitumen air, the final stanza captures the petrostate’s olfactory philosophy, suggesting that the tar sands’ toxic odours carry valuable olfactory knowledge that not only communicates risk, but also indexes the harmful neo-colonial capitalist logic that transforms bitumen into a resource to be extracted. The poem aligns Satan with the manifesto’s other speakers, many of whom sound like versions of Cariou in that they echo the frustrations that he voices in the introduction and often use collective pronouns to implicate readers

in their own struggles with complicity. Read within the context of the manifesto as a whole, the foreboding poem suggests that acknowledging one's relationship with the tar sands is a crucial collective process that requires rousing a different legion: one that notices the odours of extraction, perceives these scents as important forms of knowledge that communicate environmental risk, and approaches smell as a relationship with the Earth's human and non-human beings.

Ultimately, Cariou's manifesto moves toward a different future than that of the grim, extractive teleology that Satan and the futurists might celebrate. In the next vignette, the speaker considers the possibility of "a different futurist movement" that "actually cares" about Earth's future generations of human and non-human beings: "The future as life, as what will live on after we're all gone, back to muck and tar, to the mess we were made from" (30). By framing mess as an ancestor, Cariou imagines a future based on a more ethical form of energy intimacy. As Lockhart argues, "Cariou's proximate, grounded aesthetic carries an alternate politics of action that refocuses from representation *of* bitumen to relationships *with* bitumen" (155). Cariou's manifesto suggests that smell, with its emphasis on transcorporeality and radical intimacy, will play a crucial role in creating a different energy future.

Yet the next vignette imagines an apocalyptic future that recalls Satan's earlier poem, suggesting that any number of futures are possible depending on the actions society takes. In "Letter for a time capsule to be opened in 2112," a vignette that rewrites William Carlos Williams' 1934 poem "This Is Just to Say," Cariou's speaker adopts a cavalier attitude that echoes Satan's:

This is just to say  
we've burned up all the oil  
and poisoned the air  
you were probably hoping to breathe. (31)

The "charnel residue" described in the third vignette dominates this world and threatens future life. With a collective *we* that implicates readers, the speaker's opening line minimizes the hellscape that future generations will have to deal with as a result of fossil fuel consumption today. Despite understanding that these actions will negatively impact the future generations to whom the poem is addressed, the speaker

does not care, unabashedly describing the burning as delicious (31). As Wenzel argues in her reading of this “non-apology apology,” “the consummation of intense sensuous pleasure is cited as an implicit justification for expropriation, yet the record of such pleasure would presumably only make the addressee’s loss of anticipated future enjoyment harder to bear” (“Afterword”). Forgiveness is not requested, but rather demanded when it is too late. Through visions of apocalyptic futures that are all too familiar, Cariou’s deadly, poetic smellscapes map the toxic relations of settler atmospherics, offering readers a framework for making sense of the existing smellscapes Cariou seeks to transform.

### **Conclusion: Join Us**

Recalling the Tarhands Institute propaganda, the penultimate vignette combines the visual, the aural, and the olfactory to advocate for an alternative future. Cariou’s speaker writes: “Join us. Together we can make visions that shudder a billion eyes, make a stink to awaken the nostrils of the world!” (32). In this call to collective action, he asserts that numbers, creativity, and community are urgently needed to build a different future (32). Though it may seem like an irrational step to turn toward smell, Cariou suggests that recasting the distribution of the sensible by literally and figuratively “making a stink” is one of the only ways forward. Returning to the pre-eminent sense of vision in a brief final vignette, Cariou invites readers to reflect further on their own relationships to bitumen. Unlike the manifesto’s other photographs, the final image shows the back of a photographer—potentially Cariou—and a tripod-mounted camera near a fence similar to the one depicted in the third vignette. In this image, taken at ground level, the fence seems to disappear into the background of the photo, making the industrial site in the distance—with billowing smokestacks reminiscent of earlier poems—appear to be accessible by foot. Of course, the site would not be accessible to the public, here represented by the photographer. By clearly positioning the photographer in relation to the site, the image evokes the concept of complicity, providing a visual reference point and sense of scale that is difficult to discern from the other aerial photographs. Also suggesting the possibility of trespassing, the photo and final vignette remind readers that dominant tar sands forms engage in a broader

cultural system of sensory perception that embeds particular values and is open to contestation. Evoking the recurring motif of dirty hands, the final lines read: “Tarhands.™ How clean are yours?” (33). The use of the trademark—a form of protection under capitalism that serves to identify the commercial source of products or services—reminds readers that moves toward acknowledging complicity still risk co-optation. As Cariou suggests throughout his manifesto, purity is a fantasy perpetuated by wastewest attitudes and practices; it may not be possible to emerge from this mess with clean hands. This dirt may remain largely hidden and silenced, but new possibilities for detecting and engaging with these messy relationships may arise if we follow our noses.



**Figure 4.** Warren Cariou, from “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto,” p. 33.  
Digital photograph reproduced in greyscale, with permission from Warren Cariou.  
(© Warren Cariou 2008)

#### Notes

1. Thank you to the two anonymous peer reviewers, the editors, and the *Canadian Literature* editorial team for their valuable feedback on this essay.
2. See Caro Verbeek for a discussion of the futurists’ interest in smell.
3. Notably, Cariou published his manifesto in a special issue of an image studies journal devoted to *Sighting Oil*. As Merle Patchett and Andriko Lozowy argue in the same issue, the Athabasca tar sands represent the world’s largest capital oil

project (142). As the world’s largest surface-mined reservoir of crude bitumen, it is also one of the world’s most environmentally destructive projects (142).

4. In addition to Ghosh, scholars like Stephanie LeMenager discuss the multi-sensory dimensions of petroleum aesthetics.
5. For example, some scholars in the *Imaginations* special issue contend that aerial images flatten the landscape and disorient viewers due to the lack of a sense of measurable scale; as a result, these images risk reinscribing a scalar aesthetic that produces “a sense of bewilderment and inertia at the thought of rectifying a problem that exceeds our comprehension,” putting the viewer in a privileged position of “floating free” from the devastation (Patchett and Lozowy 146). Other critics like Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman critique aerial images for failing to capture the experience of people living and working in close proximity to the tar sands (55-56).
6. For a recent discussion of visibility and resource extraction, see the 2021 special issue of *Textual Practice on Writing Extractivism*, especially Justin Parks’ introduction, “The Poetics of Extractivism and the Politics of Visibility.”
7. Cariou expands on this idea in an essay with Jon Gordon on *petrography*, Cariou’s term for images created with bitumen. He approaches the naturally occurring substance “as a kind of medicine” that “requires particular knowledge to use it properly,” and suggests that bitumen becomes harmful “when transformed in the machinery of capitalist modernity” (Cariou and Gordon, “Petrography” 13).
8. See Alain Corbin’s discussion of the perceptual revolution in *The Foul and the Fragrant* (11-135).
9. See, for example, Classen et al., Miller, and Drobnick. Olfaction is physiologically linked to the limbic system, the neurological seat of memory and emotion; as Hsuan L. Hsu argues, “descriptions of unwelcome smells exert immense rhetorical force” (5). I discuss this idea in more detail below.
10. Gordon offers this argument in his analysis of Cariou’s “An Athabasca Story” (2012), a multi-sensory tale that draws on Cree and Métis storytelling to explore similar themes.
11. While Hsu mentions Cariou’s manifesto in his chapter on decolonizing smell, he does not provide a sustained analysis of Cariou’s olfactory aesthetic.
12. Jacques Rancière uses “the distribution of the sensible” to describe “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (12).
13. While smell adjectives exist (*musty, ripe*), descriptions often rely on figurative language (*it smells like*), attribute scents to sources (*the smell of*), apply subjective labels (*good, bad*), or draw on other senses (*sweet, bright*).
14. My analysis builds on other critics who use this passage to illustrate the multi-sensory dimensions of Cariou’s manifesto. Hsu quotes this paragraph in his brief discussion of the manifesto, while Lousley uses it to suggest that Cariou disrupts the “ecological illusion” of the hermetically sealed body, a fantasy that is “impossible to practice” due to the “seeping, leaking, degrading, expelled elements that become all-too-apparent to our senses” (“Into the Muck”). Lockhart also analyzes this passage, though she does not discuss smell at length.
15. For example, Cariou explores the significance of the smell of sweetgrass and Indigenous ways of knowing in “Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land” (2018).
16. Nearby Indigenous communities such as the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and the Mikisew Cree First Nation continue to deal with the destruction of

- ancestral lands and hunting grounds, high levels of heavy metals in wild game, and high rates of rare cancers and other diseases (“Fort Chipewyan”).
17. My use of the word *conditioning* here echoes Hsu’s notion of *air conditioning*, which he uses to describe “techniques of atmospheric manipulation across multiple scales (e.g., filter masks, air-conditioned buildings, gas warfare, the offshoring of toxic industries), as well as the profound and little-understood ways in which these manipulated atmospheres condition human being” (7).
  18. Hsu continues, “To decolonize smell is not to position decolonization as a mere metaphor for transforming consciousness, foregoing decolonial activists’ emphasis on land, bread, and water in favor of ‘decolonizing the mind’; rather, I would suggest adding the increasingly stratified atmosphere to the material stakes of decolonization: land, bread, water, and air” (161).
  19. The term *Enlightenment* itself emphasizes visual illumination. For other examples of dead visual metaphors, see Martin Jay’s opening paragraph of *Downcast Eyes*.
  20. I would like to thank Sarah-Nelle Jackson for their insight about the irony of this passage.

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*Stephanie Oliver is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alberta's Augustana campus, where she teaches Canadian, postcolonial, and diasporic literatures. Her research interests include literary representations of smell and diaspora, writing about sensory encounters with oil, and the poetics and ethics of breathing in settler atmospheres. Her work has been published in Canadian Literature, Transformative Dialogues, and Teaching Innovation Projects. She has also contributed to the collection Living and Learning with Feminist Ethics and Poetics Today and is currently working on a manuscript on smell in contemporary Canadian literature.*