

From the Natural to the Manmade Environment: The Shifting Advertising Practices of Canada's Oil Sands Industry

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ABSTRACT

Background *This article uses basic thematic content analysis (n = 80) and qualitative visual analysis to examine how still advertisements produced by Canada's oil sands industry changed between 2006 and 2015.*

Analysis *The article argues that early industry advertisement campaigns had a strong environment focus with the objective of linking industry's interest in oil with a visual commitment to preserving, reclaiming, and restoring the natural environment.*

Conclusions and implications *In subsequent campaigns, however, industry is shown to undertake a multidimensional campaigning strategy, the most prominent of which is lifestyle messaging that celebrates oil's ubiquity in consumer culture. The shift to "selling oil sands without oil sands" highlights the need for scholars to widen the aperture of what is traditionally considered environmental imagery from the natural environment to the human-made environment.*

Keywords *Environment; Oil sands; Tar sands; Bitumen; Advertising; Extraction*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cet article utilise une analyse de contenu thématique de base (n = 80) et une analyse visuelle qualitative pour examiner comment les annonces statiques produites par l'industrie canadienne des sables bitumineux ont changé entre 2006 et 2015.*

Analyse *L'article soutient que les premières campagnes de publicité de l'industrie étaient fortement axées sur l'environnement dans le but de lier l'intérêt de l'industrie pétrolière à un engagement visant à préserver, récupérer et restaurer l'environnement naturel.*

Conclusions et implications *Dans les campagnes subséquentes, cependant, l'industrie a démontré qu'elle entreprenait une stratégie de campagne multidimensionnelle, dont la plus importante est la messagerie de style de vie qui célèbre l'omniprésence du pétrole dans la culture de consommation. Le passage à la «vente de sables bitumineux sans sables bitumineux» souligne la nécessité pour les chercheurs d'élargir l'ouverture de ce qui est traditionnellement considéré comme une imagerie environnementale, de l'environnement naturel à l'environnement créé par l'homme.*

Mots clés *Environnement; Sables bitumineux; Publicité; Pétrole*

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Introduction

Referred to by supporters as “oil sands” and detractors as “tar sands,” they are a vast deposit of sand, clay, and heavy oil. It is the environmental cost of oil sands production—in energy use, land disturbance, and especially fresh water use—along with the emissions of oil sands operations *and* the planetary cost of continuing fossil fuel extraction at a time when society must transition away from fossil fuels that has transformed the oil sands into a symbol of international contestation. Situated in the sparsely populated boreal forests of northeastern Alberta, the oil sands are a resource relatively few Canadians will ever experience directly. Nonetheless, the oil sands are the subject of much political debate and are arguably Canada’s most contentious natural resource, nationally and internationally. The fate and future of Alberta’s oil sands remains the subject of an ongoing mediated struggle for the public imagination between industry, government, civil society, and Aboriginal people.

Although the large-scale production of Alberta’s oil sands has been underway since 1967, it is only since the early 2000s, and particularly since 2005, that opposition against the oil sands has coalesced (Katz-Rosene, 2017). During this time, Aboriginal groups, as well as local, national, and international environmental networks, have mounted a number of highly visible anti-oil sands campaigns (McCurdy, 2017). Opponents have targeted the industry’s energy-intensive production practices, the environmental impact of oil sands development, the extractive industry’s contribution to global climate change, as well its relationships with Aboriginal people. Oil sands supporters, on the other hand, have responded with publications and advertising campaigns highlighting issues such as their commitment to environmental stewardship, the value of the sands to the Canadian economy, and the ethical and moral superiority of Canadian oil.

In tandem with political contention, a large and growing body of scholarship has evolved debating the oil sands’ future (Gailus, 2012; Kelly, 2009; Laxer, 2015; Levant, 2010; Marsden, 2007; Nikiforuk, 2010; Sweeny, 2010). As will be discussed later in this article, less scholarship has considered how stakeholder representations of the oil sands—the risks and rewards have evolved overtime. This research gap is significant as mediated representations, from advertisements and corporate reports to campaign materials and fact sheets, offer vital resources for making sense of the social, cultural, political, and environmental issues tied to this resource and petroculture more generally (cf. Szeman, 2017). Consequently, this article, which draws from the larger research project *Mediatoil* (n.d.), is interested in how oil sands industry stakeholders have portrayed the costs and benefits of oil sands development in their print advertisements between 2006 and 2015 ($n = 80$). The timeframe studied here begins just prior to the oil sands’ politicization through to the end of data collection for the *Mediatoil* project (December, 2015). In what follows, the article offers both a basic quantitative content analysis as well as a qualitative critical visual analysis of select advertisements from oil sands industry stakeholders with particular attention given to the ads of Cenovus Energy and Enbridge. In so doing, it explores themes across the still advertisement corpus analyzed, places them in a broader context of oil sands campaigning, and considers the patterns and consequences of shifts in industry discourse. To this end, the article begins by establishing media as a site of struggle. This is followed by a selective

review of environmental communication and, in particular, oil sands-related scholarship to both situate the current article and establish its conceptual framework. Next, the methodology is presented, followed by a historical positioning of industry's oil sands campaigning and an analysis of the representation of the natural and human-made environment in industry advertising campaigns.

Media and the environment as sites and sources of political

Representation matters. Mediated representations of social and political issues are both sites and sources of political contention (Castells, 2009; Couldry, 2013; Silverstone, 2007). The concept of the media frame and the process of framing (Entman, 1993; Fisher, 1997; Van Gorp, 2007) has been adapted by media scholars to explain and analyze the media's presentation of reality and the struggles over and through this representation (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). Responding to Nick Couldry's (2013) challenge to decentre media studies, the act of framing can be understood as a "media practice" that involves deliberately creating and positioning media texts with the aim of crafting an intended representation to a public or audience (Fisher, 1997; Scheufele, 1999). Drawing from the sociology of practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2002), this media practice orientation can help avoid a media-centric analysis by viewing media framing as part of other social practices and, indeed, part of a larger social struggle. This is particularly important given the complexities of the oil sands debate and its links to social policy, and the need to acknowledge the larger political, social, and economic context (Van Gorp, 2007).

To be clear, media representation is not just undertaken by the media but *for* the media by individuals, organizations, and their proxies—such as ad agencies and public relations firms—in their interactions with media, but also in producing their own media. From press releases to social media feeds, from corporate sustainability reports to branded national advertising campaigns, a multiplicity of media texts feed into the construction, representation, and contestation of social issues. In the context of such struggles, stakeholders have differing resources (economic, political, social, symbolic) available to them and both work with and compete against each other to promote their preferred framing of an event or issue in what William Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld (1993) call "symbolic contests" (p. 119). Media—in the broadest sense of the word—can thus be viewed as representational arenas where actors with competing ideas and resources actively engage in symbolic contests with parties deliberately packaging and framing issues to best represent their stance and stake in the matter at hand (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Given that the length of symbolic contests varies, William Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson (1992) stress the importance of studying the representation of a contested social issue over a long period of time so as to capture an issue moving from an uncontested to a contested realm. Such a perspective, they argue, offers greater context by allowing analysts to examine how, on various sides of a symbolic contest, competing representations emerged and evolved, and also to chart their shifting outcomes, alliances, and attributes (Gamson, Croteau, & Hoynes, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1988). This elongated approach is particularly helpful in order to track the increase in activity and attention, as well as changes in players and campaigns for stake-

holders active in the struggles over the oil sands, and to situate the specific advertising campaigns this article focuses on within a longer social and political trajectory.

While general media theory helps establish media as a reflexive site and source of social struggle, it is scholarship from environmental communication that offers insight into how environmental issues have been represented in the mediated arena. This article is particularly inspired by the emerging body of scholarship analyzing the visual representation of environmental issues (Hansen, 2011; Hansen & Machin, 2008, 2013; Meisner & Takahashi, 2013; Parak, 2013; Schlichting, 2013; Takach, 2013, 2017).

Much, though not all, of the scholarship studying oil sands and the media has focused on journalists or news media output (Perron, 2013). For example, Jillian Paskey and Gilliam Steward (2012) studied the sources used by oil sands journalists in their stories. Meanwhile, Laura Way (2011, 2013) compared the uptake of what Prime Minister Stephen Harper labeled Canada's "emerging energy superpower" frame in oil sands-related stories across three Canadian newspapers. Journalistic practices and news output remains an important and active area of inquiry. However, less scholarship has analyzed other oil sands texts, such as promotional and marketing material (e.g., advertising campaigns, annual reports, investor notes), which contribute to this issue's public representation. Paskey, Steward, and Amanda Williams (2013) tracked the economic, environmental, and social discourses in Alberta of a collection of oil-sands related terms, yet focus strictly on text at the expense of analyzing oil sands visuals.

Visuals are key resources in any mediated struggle and thus are critical features to study, along with texts, to better understand the context, evolution, and attributes of contention. Way (2013) acknowledged the need for research into the visual elements of the oil sands debate. Some recent academic work in this area includes Geo Takach's (2013) critical visual discourse analysis of an oil sands-related branding presentation produced by the Alberta government's Public Affairs Bureau. Chaseten Remillard (2011) studied the visual communication of risk as portrayed in a *National Geographic* photographic essay about the oil sands. Rebecca Kim (2012) focused on newsprint advertisements produced by Shell International in relation to the Alberta oil sands. Kim (2012) concluded that new legislation is needed to prevent misleading advertisements about the oil sands industry. Perhaps the most relevant research in this domain has been undertaken by Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi (2011, 2012), who conducted archival research into the visual history of the oil sands from its early development in the 1880s to the rise of industrial production in 1967. Their insightful visual analysis charts the development of an industrial gaze during this time, arguing that two "exceptionally positive storylines" (2012, p. 69) are present in the oil sand's historical representation. The first is "the application of human ingenuity, science, and technology to release useable crude oil from the bonds of sandy bitumen" (2012, p. 70), and the second focuses on "the key importance of the Alberta state and public investment in the process to open Alberta's northern wilderness to commercial investment and industry." This research is particularly interested in the storyline of technology, "scientism and technologism" (2012, p. 98) identified by Gismondi and Davison. Indeed, the theme of technology and progress is a common trope in environmental communication (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016; Hansen 2011).

Also of interest are what Parak (2013) terms eco images, which are visual images informed by a decisively environmental agenda. Such images, Parak (2013) argues, are “distinguished from other forms of landscape and nature depictions by their purposeful, non-verbal communicative function” and “... enter the public sphere with an explicit political intention behind them, meant to alter environmental convictions” (pp. 5–6). However, as the analysis will make clear, there is a need to extend our conceptualization of what an eco image is, and that it not only includes the “natural” environment but the human-made environment as well. Before exploring this notion further in the analysis section, the methodology deployed in this study must be discussed.

Methodology

The analysis is inspired by Darryn DiFrancesco and Nathan Young's (2010) split method approach to analyzing climate change imagery using both quantitative content analysis and visual discourse analysis. Data has been collected and analyzed through a mixed-methods design involving archival research, content analysis and qualitative document and/image analysis. The advertisements analyzed are taken from a larger research project known as Mediatoil. The Mediatoil (n.d.) project is a purpose-built database of research-generated visuals (Pauwels, 2011) analyzing how the representational practices of select Canadian oil sands stakeholders have evolved over time. All oil sands stakeholders were placed into one of four categories: Aboriginal peoples, civil society, government, and industry. Mediatoil texts were systematically collected by identifying government, industry, civil society, and Aboriginal peoples as active stakeholders in the oil sands. For each stakeholder identified, all available promotional materials (including reports, advertisements, factsheets, trade publications, campaign material, and video) were downloaded from their website. All available material, regardless of the date it was created, was collected during the research period between January 1, 2014, and May 31, 2016. Archive research was also conducted at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, and the University of Calgary, with relevant material being scanned or photographed and deposited in the database. Mediatoil now contains over 2,800 individual entries.

Promotional material by its very nature is ephemeral, evolving in tandem with political currents and pressures. As Anders Hansen and David Machin (2013) note, the “temporal/processual dimension of signification” (p. 156) of environmental issues, which includes the oil sands, is anything but static. This article focuses exclusively on industry stakeholders and is particularly interested in their still advertisements and how they evolved over time. It is based on the analysis of 80 individual industry still advertisements produced by nine industry stakeholders (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers [CAPP], Canadian Energy Pipeline Association [CEPA], Cenovus Energy, Enbridge, Shell Canada, Suncor, Syncrude, Total, and TransCanada) published between 2006 and 2015. Still advertisements include both print ads and billboards. An annual breakdown of the total number of ads by industry stakeholder analyzed for this article is presented in Table 1. While data collection was thorough, consistent, and systematic, the ads analyzed collected for the Mediatoil project may not be comprehensive. It is possible some stakeholder ads may be missing or may have run in markets or in media not captured by the researcher or research team. Despite any such

potential lapses, this article's corpus accurately captures themes developed and deployed by oil sands industry stakeholders.

Table 1: Number of still ads by year and industry stakeholder

Date published	Total number of ads per year	CAPP*	CEPA*	Cenovus Energy	Enbridge	Shell Canada	Suncor Energy	Synchrude	Total Canada	TransCanada
2006	5	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
2009	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
2010	8	7	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
2011	17	13	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
2012	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2013	6	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2014	23	0	12	4	2	0	5	0	0	0
2015	13	3	8	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
All ads	80	28	24	8	4	1	9	3	2	1

Notes: CAPP: Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers; CEPA: Canadian Energy Pipeline Association

The corpus of 80 advertisements was first coded to categorize the ad's primary theme. Thematic interest was theoretically informed by conventions identified by past oil sands scholarship (Davison & Gismondi 2012; Gismondi & Davidson, 2011; Paskey et al, 2013; Takach, 2013) and subsequently developed inductively using Ulrich Flick's (1998) thematic coding. This resulted in nine mutually exclusive themes: environment, economy, emergency preparedness, industry innovation and technology, nationalism, oil-related lifestyles and products, nationalism, pipelines, project consultation and policy, and social development. Each ad was assigned to a primary category based on the totality of the images and text. Patterns suggested in the quantitative content analysis were subsequently explored further via visual discourse analysis to examine dominant themes in industry ads and how these changed over time. As Remillard (2011), in his visual analysis of a 2009 *National Geographic* oil sands photo essay argues, "given the cultural and constructed nature of meaning, visual objects are always produced by and in turn help to reproduce certain existent *ways of seeing*" (p. 132, italics in original). Thus, studying the "ways of seeing" (Hansen & Machin, 2013, p. 155) articulated in oil sands advertisements sheds light on the public vocabulary employed by stakeholders to engage (or disengage) the public in debates over the oil sands.

Despite or perhaps *in spite* of the popularity of visual methods, Luc Pauwels (2011) is critical of the lack of "integration" between the various disciplines, which results in visual methodologies being "reinvented over and over again without gaining much methodological depth and often without consideration of long existing classics in the

field” (p. 4). In an effort to correct this problem, Pauwels (2011) proposes an “integrated framework for visual social research” (p. 4) that emphasizes, among other things, the importance of context and “cultural knowledge” in order to appreciate the context that images were generated in. Writing about visual analysis, Hansen and Machin (2013) break down the concept of context further into three components contemporary scholarship should acknowledge. First, the *communicative* context involves genre conventions, medium (print, radio, television), and the representational limits of that medium, which together “set boundaries for and guide the way in which we, as viewers/consumers, make sense of images” (p. 160). Second, the *cultural* context tasks scholars to make explicit the “deep-seated cultural conventions, narratives and values” (p. 161) that drive, underwrite, and reinforce representations of the environmental. Lastly, by acknowledging the *historical* context of the environmental images, scholars can position their texts under study within a broader and reflexive campaign. This article incorporates aspects of the communicative, cultural, and historical context of oil sands advertising into the below analysis. This is achieved by discussing high-level trends over time, drawn from the initial content analysis, as well as by discussing specific advertisements in detail.

The evolution of oil sands industry advertising

In 1995 the Alberta National Task Force on Oil Sands Strategy (NTOSS) released a report titled *The Oil Sands: A New Energy Vision for Canada* (NTOSS, 1995). Among other things, the report acknowledged the need to brand Alberta bitumen and better sell it to Canadians. However, industry and government stakeholders failed to act seriously on this recommendation. In fact, it was not until 2010 that the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), an industry lobby whose member companies produce about 90 percent of Canada’s crude and natural gas, launched its first serious national advertising campaign. The campaign was instigated following a barrage of culture jams, direct actions, and “image events” (DeLuca, 2009, p. 1) by environmental nongovernmental organizations (eNGOs), such as Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and ForestEthics. The roots of these protests can be traced back to a late-2005 eNGO declaration calling upon the Canadian government to transition away from oil sands development toward sustainable energy (Katz-Rosene, 2017). A key discursive accomplishment of eNGO campaigning was to transform the “tar sands” from a decades-old colloquial term rooted in bitumen’s tar-like viscosity and appearance to a politically loaded signifier that actively opposed the oil sands industry.

Industry has entered the game: Oil sands today

Responding to growing opposition, CAPP hired a risk-communication specialist in 2008 to assist in designing a new public relations campaign, the fruits of which were first made public in 2010 under the banner “Oil Sands Today” (Tait, 2010). Within the corpus studied, seven of the eight still ads published by the oil sands industry in 2010 were by CAPP (see Table 1). In 2011, CAPP accounted for 13 of the 17 industry advertisements (see Table 1). Thematic analysis of industry ads run in 2010 and 2011, the majority of which were by CAPP, shows a strong preference for environmental messaging (see Table 2): 16 of the 25 ads published during this two-year period had the environment as its primary focus. Meanwhile, three ads focused primarily on the eco-

conomic aspects of the oil sands (such as jobs and economic growth), three ads (all from Cenovus Energy’s “More Than Fuel” series, which is discussed later in this article) focused on the role of oil in the consumer lifestyle, and a single ad focused on social development, meaning a reference to public services and community development.

Table 2: Oil sands industry ads by year and primary theme

Date published	Environment	Economy	Emergency preparedness	Industry innovation & technology	Lifestyle and products	Nationalism	Pipelines	Project consultation & policy	Social development
2006	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
2009	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2010	6	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
2011	10	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	1
2012	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2013	0	2	4	0	0	1	0	0	0
2014	2	3	12	0	12	0	3	2	4
2015	2	0	8	2	2	3	0	2	1
All ads	26	12	24	4	18	4	3	4	8

Given that environment was the central focus of the overwhelming majority of ads in 2010–2011, the representation of the environment merits further attention. Of specific interest is CAPP’s “Oil Sands Today” multimedia campaign, which used print, television online, and outdoor ads and accounts for 20 of the 25 ads in the corpus for 2010–2011. A key communicative objective of “Oil Sands Today” was to humanize the industry by profiling individual oil sands workers and emphasizing their commitment to protecting and restoring the natural environment.

The bus shelter advertisement presented below in Figure 1 is representative of CAPP’s efforts to situate the oil sands within a “romantic gaze” (Takach, 2013). Perhaps what stands out most about this advertisement is the proclamation “THE land MATTERS.” The words “the” and “matters” are presented in bold solid white capital letters, while “land” is in lowercase and coloured deep grey with some opacity. Strung together, the importance of the land and thus by extension, the importance of nature, is presented visually and metaphorically as a black and white issue. The position CAPP takes regarding the sanctity of the natural environment is clear: “THE land MATTERS.” Underneath and to the right of this statement is a professional portrait, cropped at the shoulder, of a middle-aged balding Caucasian male wearing glasses. In the portrait, the man, who is identified by simple white text as “Steve Gaudet” of “Synchrude Canada

Ltd.,” sports a moustache and is clad in a light blue dress shirt. By wearing a business casual spread collar shirt, as opposed to a more formal shirt and tie or suit, Mr. Gaudet appears personable, approachable, yet still professional. Accompanying the conventional and nonthreatening headshot is an image of Mr. Gaudet’s signature. The signature serves at least two important functions. First, similar to the portrait, it serves to further personalize Gaudet and, by extension, humanize the oil sands industry. Signatures are both extensions and representations of ourselves; they are unique to individuals and markers of individuality. Second, signatures function as guarantees. Thus Gaudet’s signature functions as a public attestation and contract of his individual commitment to the land and, more generally, as a proxy for CAPP’s industry-wide environmental commitment.

The quote, portrait, and identifying information are set against a sublime aerial picture of a section of Alberta boreal forest. The aerial photograph, which uses a colour pallet saturated with vibrant and earthy greens, shows a lush and densely packed coniferous canopy that appears to expand well beyond the frame’s four edges. Consequently, the photograph’s subject, aerial perspective, and colouring help construct “the land” as vast, vivid, and virginal. Nature’s expanse is further communicated in the visual contrast between the size of Steve Gaudet’s portrait and the subliminal immensity of the background photograph. Man—Gaudet in portrait form—is symbolically eclipsed, dwarfed, and enveloped by pristine and seemingly undisturbed nature. Taken as a whole, the advertisement epitomizes Hansen’s (2002) romantic gaze on nature as pure, wild, wholesome, unspoiled, and worthy of protection, stewardship, and rehabilitation. Moreover, using individual employees such as Gaudet humanizes the extractive industry and personalizes the romantic gaze. Industry demonstrates that there are individuals—with names, faces, and signatures—who care about the environment and whose job is to protect and restore it.

As discussed above, the bus shelter ad presented in Figure 1 was part of a larger series featuring Gaudet and other employees. Gaudet himself featured in a 30-second CAPP television spot in which he speaks about the environment and restoring re-

Figure 1: CAPP’s “Oil Sands Today” bus ad profiling Steve Gaudet, Ottawa, 2011

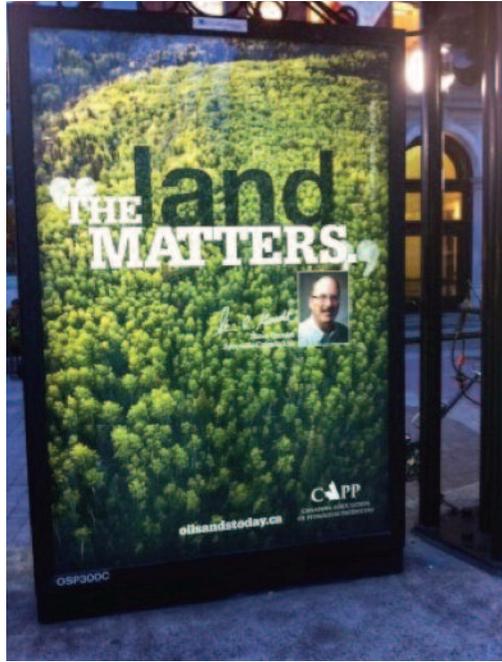


Photo credit: Milan Ilnycky

claimed land to its natural beauty. Meanwhile, a newspaper version of Gaudet's ad includes the following quote, "A forest should look and feel like a forest. Thirty years ago, reclamation meant planting trees. Today we create a much more diverse and natural landscape including wetlands and a variety of trees, shrubs and plants. We want to leave restored land that makes everyone proud" (CAPP, 2011). Both Gaudet's expanded quote from the newspaper version as well as the 30-second video provide important context to the bus shelter. These ads make it apparent that the forest featured across Gaudet's advertisements is not untouched wilderness but an industry-initiated reclamation project.¹ In both the bus shelter and newspaper ad, the viewer is also invited to see these forests firsthand. Geolocation coordinates (56.999031, -111.605086) are provided that lead to the location where the photograph was taken: a spot by Beaver River in Wood Buffalo, Alberta, that straddles the Syncrude and Suncor operations.

The romantic gaze CAPP turns toward this remediated forest merits unpacking. At a base level, the image communicates the message that reclaimed forest can be as beautiful and pristine as the wild, untamed, and sublime nature that dominates the public imagination. Moreover, the fact that the oil sands industry remediated the forest is meant to demonstrate its level of skill and commitment; the land matters. Yet an extractivist logic underwrites any such industry preferred reading. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers is not using the romantic gaze to protect the environment but to encourage and rationalize its ongoing development. It is precisely because oil sands operations sites may be remediated to a state that satisfies our socially constructed sublime view of nature that extraction can be justified. Seen from this perspective, the romantic view of Syncrude's remediated forest offered in the Gaudet advertisement is firmly and inescapably embedded in a logic of extraction; it is a product of our petroculture rationality. In sum, and as Takach (2013) argues, both the romantic and extractive gazes are underwritten by a logic of extractivism.

Oil sands, tar sands, and steam-assisted gravity drainage

As argued above, CAPP's "Oil Sands Today" campaign was reactive. It was a response to eNGOs labelling the oil sands industry as harmful to the environment and the "tar sands" as "the dirtiest oil on earth" (Greenpeace, 2009; Newswire, 2009). Typical "tar sands" tropes included aerial depictions of Albertan oil sands surface mining operations as vast, black, and dirty industrial moonscapes with clear signs of human disturbance and degradation caused by massive machinery either in or out of view. Images of gushing, sludgy tailings ponds were also commonly invoked (Greenpeace, 2009; Newswire, 2009). Understanding the context of CAPP's campaign as a response to eNGO criticism situates the 2010–2011 advertisements as part of an ongoing mediated struggle—a war of images—over the oil's mediate representation and our petroculture more generally. What played out in the advertising arena was a public struggle between industry's environmental framing of the "oil sands" versus eNGOs' representation of the "tar sands." This mediated debate became a powerful anchor for framing representations of the oil sands during the 2010–2011 period and is exemplified by Cenovus Energy's "environmental" ad campaign: "A Different Oil Sands" (see Figure 2).

In 2011, Cenovus Energy launched a print advertisement with the headline "Welcome to a different kind of oil sands" as part of its "A Different Oil Sands campaign

(Cenovus Energy, 2011a). Unlike companies that mine the oil sands, Cenovus Energy uses steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) to target bitumen that is too far down to surface mine. As the process of SAGD takes place deep underground, it disturbs far less surface land and thus looks visually “different” and far less environmentally threatening than surface mining. The ad in question features Cenovus Energy’s Foster Creek project, which is shown at a distance and from an aerial perspective. A washed blue horizon occupies the upper 43 percent of the ad while the remaining 57 percent of space is taken up boreal forest.² Shot from a distance and taking up under 10 percent of the total ad space, the Forest Creek SAGD project is nestled comfortably within the woodland that surrounds it. While SAGD cut lines are visible, their intrusion is in strong visual contrast to the conventional “tar sands” imagery of surface mining. Cenovus Energy is clearly seeking to use its “different” and “innovative” oil sands technology to bolster its green credentials.

At first glance Cenovus Energy appear to be on the offensive: technological innovation allows for the oil sands to coexist with the natural environment (cf. Davidson & Gismondi, 2011). However, much in the manner of CAPP’s “Oil Sands Today” campaign, Cenovus Energy is in fact on the defensive. Civil society campaigners have defined what the oil sands are, read: tar sands, and industry, including both CAPP and Cenovus Energy, is responding to and trying to shift this framing.³ If industry’s initial and belated response to tar sands campaigning was to try and prove its environmental credentials, as the next section argues, 2011 also saw the start of a significant shift in this strategy, in which Cenovus Energy took the lead: an effort to sell the oil sands without the oil sands.

Life in the petrosphere: The rise of lifestyle advertising

In 2011, alongside its “A Different Oil Sands” advertisements, Cenovus Energy (2011b) launched the “More Than Fuel” campaign. The series of three thematic print and television ads sought to illustrate the ubiquity of fossil fuels in our lives. According to Cenovus Energy (2011b):

**Figure 2: Cenovus Energy (2011),
“A Different Oil Sands”**



Our More than fuel ad [sic] shows how oil and natural gas can be used as a building block in thousands of products – from detergent, glue and ear plugs, to innovative advancements in touch screen technology, ultrasound equipment and artificial limbs.

Nearly everything we use is either made from oil and natural gas by-products, made by machinery or in facilities powered by oil and natural gas, or transported by fuels refined from oil such as gasoline or diesel.

With advertisement titles such as “Ultrasound,” “Touch Screen,” and “Artificial Limbs,” Cenovus Energy sought to shift public thinking about oil sands from an environmental issue to a lifestyle issue. The campaign was underwritten by a secondary theme of technology and innovation. The print version, “Ultrasound” (see Figure 3), is set in what appears to be a baby’s nursery. It shows a beautiful, smiling, and visibly pregnant woman standing and touching her stomach with her right hand while gazing down at a man (presumably her partner). The man is crouched lower—perhaps on bended knee—looking up lovingly at the woman while holding a picture from a 3D-sonogram of an unborn child level with the woman’s protruding belly. The advertisement’s headline reads, “125 years ago, it illuminated a room. Today, it illuminates a life.” Meanwhile the campaign’s tagline is: “Oil is more than just a source of fuel” (Cenovus Energy, 2011b). In this ad, Cenovus Energy couples the familiar and powerful emotional appeal of wanting to have (or having had) children, with oil—and therefore the oil sands. Oil not only powers the “cutting-edge” technology that ensures healthy children but also fuels innovation. Oil, as represented in petrochemical form is technology; the ultrasound picture of an unborn child offers the viewer proof of this point. Because of the oil sands, mothers can, through the graces of technology, see their unborn children and even have a material keepsake.

While technology has a prominent role in the ad-

Figure 3: Cenovus Energy, “Ultrasound” (2011), part of the “More Than Fuel” advertising campaign

125 years ago, it illuminated a room.
Today, it illuminates a life.

Oil is more than just a source of fuel.
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vertisement, the primary connection being made with oil is a lifestyle one. The trifecta of Cenovus Energy ads accounts for the three 2011 “lifestyle” ads coded in Table 2. The “lifestyle” code sought to capture advertisements in which the primary emphasis is on the lifestyles and experiences enabled by petroleum and/or consumer products enabled by or produced from petroleum. This was not new ground for the oil industry. Previous communication campaigns, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, sought to sell oil’s benefits, products, and by-products (cf. Johnson, 2014). Yet, in the context of the environmental struggle over Alberta’s oil sands, industry’s uptake of lifestyle messaging is significant.

As Table 2 demonstrates, 2011 marked the start of a lifestyle angle, but three years later, industry’s efforts were particularly pronounced. In 2014, 12 of the 23 ads (52%) analyzed in the corpus dealt primarily with lifestyle issues. Environment, on the other hand, was the primary focus of only two (8.7%). Energy companies Cenovus Energy [$n = 4$] and Enbridge [$n = 2$], along with the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association (CEPA) [$n = 6$], all produced lifestyle ads in 2014.⁴ It is important to note that lifestyle messaging was not the only strategy used by industry during this period. As Table 2 shows, between 2013 and 2015, nine primary advertising themes were identified across the corpus studied, reflecting industry’s pivot away from defensively battling over the oil sands on environmental terms, and instead taking up a multipronged communicative strategy to shift how the oil sands are talked about. The most prominent theme among the corpus studied, however, is lifestyle messaging, in which industry owns the oil-soaked petroculture their product enables and sells it back to consumers.

In 2014, Cenovus Energy extended themes from its “More Than Fuel” series for a new advertising campaign: “Fuelling Our Lives”. Unlike “More Than Fuel” which had a strong secondary theme of technology and innovation, “Fuelling Our Lives” sought to “show how oil keeps our economy moving and improves quality of life – transporting people, goods and services around the globe” (Cenovus Energy, 2014). Cenovus Energy communicated this through a focus on consumable goods transported by oil (with the ads “Overnight Shipping” and “Morning Coffee”) while ads titled “Exciting Getaways” and “Family Reunions” link oil with the movement of people. Oil, as Cenovus Energy (2014) notes, “enables us to live and work anywhere we want, delivers the materials and equipment we need, and allows people to sell their products around the world.” Oil, and therefore the oil sands, is the foundation of our petroculture (Wilson, Carlson, & Szeman 2017). This point is even more pronounced and arguably taken to its extreme in Enbridge’s 2014 “Life Takes Energy.”

In September 2014, in the midst of ongoing protests over its proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline, Calgary-based energy company Enbridge launched its nationwide “Life Takes Energy” campaign (Cattaneo, 2014). The company’s campaign website featured the headline: “When the energy you invest in life meets the energy we fuel it with, the result is unlimited possibility,” along with still images from a collection of its “Life Takes Energy” advertisements (Enbridge, 2016).⁵ Enbridge’s online, print, and video campaign used motivational text against the backdrop of aesthetically rich aspirational lifestyle images that are so generic they would sit neatly on a Pinterest board or in a stock image collection (Hansen & Machin, 2008). Common across all of the

ads is the blunt reference to Albert Einstein's equation $E = mc^2$, in which the E stands for energy. In the ads, in place of mass (m) and the speed of light (c) are affective slogans that encapsulate moments as personal as they are generically relatable: "E= Dinner With Dad," "E= Making Memories," "E= Amazing Juries," "E= What Matters Most." These taglines firmly plant the images within the energy lifeworld of consumers: the petrosphere. On the one hand, Enbridge's aspirational domestic approach is understandable given its role in delivering energy such as natural gas to Canadian homes. Yet with Enbridge's stake in the oil sands, and given wider industry trends focusing on lifestyle, the campaign deserves closer scrutiny.

In November 2014, the *Globe and Mail's Report on Business* magazine published a special oil sands issue with the cover proclaiming, in capital letters, "OIL SANDS: THE BIGGEST BUSINESS STORY OF THE DECADE" (Salewuicz, 2014). Enbridge ran two *Life Takes Energy* ads in this special issue. The double page ad, "E= Guilty Pleasures" (see Figure 4), which ran on the inside front cover and its facing page, uses rich, saturated colours to create a warm, homey, and inviting image of freshly baked "gourmet" chocolate cupcakes. On the left page, three cupcakes are visible on a thin wire cooling rack that is partially resting on blue cloth. In the ad's centre and extending to the right page are five iced cupcakes arranged unpretentiously on a round white ceramic dinner plate that features hand-painted green lines around its circumference. A bountiful bowl of fresh raspberries, along with a bowl holding a sieve full of icing sugar, are also in frame. The image would not be out of place in a recipe book or kitchen advertisement; however, it is the text that anchors the generic image in the petrosphere. A prominent "E=" in Enbridge yellow is positioned just off the centre of a cupcake on the upper third of the ad's left page. Meanwhile a text box on the bottom of the left page reads:

Figure 4: Enbridge, "Guilty Pleasures" (2014), part of the "Life Takes Energy" ad campaign



Guilty pleasures. We didn't crack the eggs. Or splurge on the Belgian chocolate. But we did heat the oven that baked the gourmet cupcakes that'll be eaten before they've had the chance to cool. When the energy you invest in life meets the energy we fuel it with, sweet things happen.

Enbridge is seeking to positively associate the energy that individuals use in their homes with the oil sands. The oil sands are, at least metaphorically, baked into the chocolate cupcakes whose hues, at their darkest point, parallel the pallet of bitumen. Thus the "guilty pleasure" of baking and consuming cupcakes—a treat that we may take pleasure in consuming, but that may also make us feel "guilty," especially if we overindulge—is equally the guilty pleasure of energy consumption. The message, then, in consuming both cupcakes and in consuming energy is that while we might feel guilty, the act is pleasurable and that is okay. The petrosphere is a safe space where energy indulgence is not just accepted but encouraged. Life takes energy, after all.

The second Enbridge ad that appeared in the *Report on Business* special issue ran on the back cover. "E= The Great Indoors" shows two young girls, perhaps seven or eight years old, lying on top of a knitted blanket placed on a whitish-grey carpeted floor. The girls, each wearing comfortable indoor clothes, are drawing flowers on coloured construction paper. Sitting beside them is an adult male—presumably their father—who is also engaged in the "family" activity. A prominent "E=" in Enbridge yellow is centred in the upper third of the ad, meanwhile a textbox in the bottom left features the bolded text "The Great Indoors" alongside ad copy and Enbridge's logo. As with "Guilty Pleasures," the aesthetic is generic yet familiar and personal. The text grounds the image in two ways. First, "The Great Indoors" may be seen as a playful reference to the John Hughes comedy "*The Great Outdoors*" directed by Howard Deutch (1988) about a family's failed vacation in the wilderness. While *The Great Outdoors* offers comedic misadventure, the great indoors offers familial comfort and security. The natural environment is replaced with the temperature-controlled, domestic environment. What is presented is the petrosphere: The great indoors, where we are with our family but atomized from our communities. Where we are complicit, hedonistic consumers living the good life. Where everything is permitted and is disconnected from global risk and the planetary consequences of extractivism.

In both the Enbridge and Cenovus Energy ad series discussed, as well as the CEPA ads in the Mediatool database, the natural environment of lush forest and fresh water from campaigns past has been usurped, in part, by the comfortable, familiar, and technologically advanced human-made environment. The focus of industry shifts from appeasing critics on their terms to a multifaceted strategy that involves industry defending itself on its own terms. Part of this strategy involves advertising the oil sands *without* the oil sands.

Conclusion

This article charts shifts in oil sands industry advertisements in the wake of rising "tar sands" protests since 2007. Although nine advertising themes were coded in the corpus studied, specific attention was directed toward the two most prominent themes: environment and lifestyle messaging. This article argues that there has been a conscious and coordinated industry effort by industry to distance itself from the tar sands/oil

sands debate—a debate that industry was both late to and could not win. Instead, selling the oil sands has taken a lifestyle turn and seeks to reinforce the ubiquity of oil in our everyday lives and celebrate oil as the lifeblood of consumer capitalism.

Ads such as “The Great Indoors” are the antithesis of past industry environmental ads that focused on the great outdoors. The selling of oil sands without the oil sands marks a significant departure from the call and response advertising struggle between industry and eNGOs over the environment. No longer are the issues of environmental damage or pollution commonly addressed; no longer is the natural environment visible. It is perhaps Slavoj Žižek’s (n.d.) claim that “On today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol” (n.p.) that best captures the significance of industry’s lifestyle turn. The consumables and lifestyle choices presented are deprived of their malignant property and the environmental consequences, and devoid of an environmental anchor. Instead, what is presented is a technologically advanced and convenient consumer good without risk or consequence. We need not feel guilty about our guilty pleasures.

The shift from the natural to the domestic environment, despite appearing familiar and comforting, is political. This move, along with other lines of messaging by the oil sands industry must be seen as part of an ongoing attempt by an industry to convince us that we need its products—products that we must, in fact, wean ourselves off of in order to survive. It would be a mistake to conclude that industry has moved away completely from environmental messaging. Dedicated websites, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, and other forms of advertising continue messages of sustainable development. While the fossil fuel industry may be slow to diversify its energy mix, its communicative mix has seen a range of strategies included in the themes discussed here. As a consequence, our understanding of what constitutes political imagery related to the environment, and the oil sands specifically, must be expanded to encompass this trend in industry advertising. By conventional standards, these are not environmental images. And yet, they certainly are. The task for scholarship is to expand the terrain of contested environmental imagery—in this case oil sands imagery—to not only include images and promotional tactics such as the ones presented in this article but also to critically engage with such images about their impact on the debate about the environment and climate change. Whether it is dealing with jobs and the economy, technology or the atomized pleasures of consumerism, such as cupcakes and cups of coffee, these images are political and environmental.

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Notes

1. Steve Gaudet’s video advertisement has been set to “private” on CAPP’s YouTube channel. However the ad has been archived by the Mediatool (2011) project.
2. The white textbox of the Cenovus Energy ad explaining the SAGD process is included in Figure 2; it is placed near the bottom of the image across the forest. If it is considered separately then the ad is 43 percent sky/horizon, 46 percent forest, and 11 percent white text box.

3. In 2009, the energy company Total ran a double page ad on the inside cover of the specialized industry publication *Heavy Oil and Oil Sands Guidebook*, Vol 4. Similar to Cenovus Energy after it, Total's ad also referenced SAGD's lack of surface disruption to sell its "commitment to the environment" (Total, 2009). The ad is archived on the Mediatool database.
4. The advertising firm i2 ran CEPA's \$2.5 million campaign, which was coded in Table 2 but not discussed in detail in this article. The firm also ran CAPP's nationalistic Energy Citizens campaign, which was also part of the larger corpus. CEPA consists of 12 member companies, including Enbridge.
5. There were a total of four ads from this campaign within the corpus studied, two from 2014 and two from 2015. The campaign has continued in 2017, but was not logged into the database.

Websites

Greenpeace Canada, <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/home/>

World Wildlife Fund, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/>

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