Talking about the Tar Sands: From environmental education to cultural politics

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Responses

Please consider writing a response to this paper in the WePaste forum for JASTE 4.1 (www.wepaste.org).

Introduction

The 2010 award-winning documentary “Water on the Table” by Liz Marshall follows the work of Canadian activist and author Maude Barlow in her pursuit to have fresh water declared a human right. One of the stark realities that flies in the face of her documented quest is the blight on the Earth that removes fresh water from any living use through contamination - the Alberta Tar Sands. Canada Water Week’s metric claims that at “Alberta’s Oil Sands mines, a barrel of oil takes about 2.5 barrels of water to produce” (CWW, 2012). Plainly put, by the industry itself, “currently, about 65% of the water we withdraw from the Athabasca ends up as wastewater. We clean and return about a third of that volume to the river, with the rest being reused in the extraction process and then stored in our tailings ponds” (Suncor, 2012). This statement clearly shows a belief in unlimited abundance and consumption, particularly in relation to fresh water. And water is only one point of contest connected to the Tar Sands. As recently as July 30, 2012, the New York Times featured an editorial titled “Canada’s Oil, the World’s Carbon”, wherein it argues that “the climate question must be addressed, if only to give a full accounting of the range of consequences of developing the tar sands, an effort in which the United States will be complicit if it allows the pipeline” (“Canada’s”, 2012, p.A18), in reference to the proposed Keystone XL pipeline that would carry Tar Sands bitumen to the U. S. Gulf Coast. There was a time when the word carbon had no nefarious connection. But now we must rethink. What does it mean when the short term gain of a mighty few, economically and politically, is so outrageously overshadowing the well-being of human and non-human beings not only in the present but so obviously into the future? How can we afford not to lay politics out in the open?

The choice of the Alberta Tar Sands as topic of discussion for JASTE doesn’t require much detailed explanation, as the tar sands continue to be one of the most dangerous examples of environmental crime to date (Smandych and Kueneman, 2010). In Canada it has become increasingly difficult to ignore – with the political battles over tar-sands revenue and new pipeline projects – how deeply this anti-environmental thinking has become entrenched within ideologies of the political right. Any decision or action regarding Alberta’s Tar Sands consequently involves precise engagement along many points of confrontation, not only those involving environmental protection and climate science, but ones that directly confront the ideological structures and cultural politics that allow tar sand development to not only continue but accelerate. In Canada, there are myriad ways which to ideologically critique the political right’s use of its so-called “ideologically-free” position – one which disguises its own political agenda and is used to attack anyone who opposes tar-sands development. Current Natural Resource Minister Joe Oliver, in an open letter, recently declared the Northern Gateway Pipeline project (a project to carry bitumen to the British Columbia coast) under attack by radicals groups (Payton, 2012), effectively lumping together all environmental and Aboriginal groups who oppose what the Conservative party sees as the national interest of Canada. Simply by participating in public hearings about the proposed Pipeline, which threatens thousands of square kilometers of wild-life and natural commons, Mr. Oliver claims these groups – which he alleges are backed by foreign financiers – “threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda” (The week before this editorial will be published online a former Canadian Environment minister, not your
The irony of the situation is of course that the development of the tar sands is dependent upon foreign investment by transnational oil companies, who are given a voice, without government harassment, in the public regulatory process. While this kind of ideological, politically driven rhetoric may seem run-of-the-mill in fields that deal directly with Parliamentary politics, this issue of JASTE brings forth the consideration of ideology as one aspect of how science students can engage with complex socio-scientific issues. Using the example of the Tar Sands, there is little evidence it has been considered in fields like science education. As Slavoj Žižek (2008) maintains, ideology is not an illusion masking the real (though it can include this) but the very stuff (unconscious fantasies) that constitutes reality itself. The rather widespread belief that we are somehow living in a post-ideological age may do more to ensure our participation in ideological practices of which we are both unaware and also aware. Žižek (2010) also makes the case that ideology functions today through a kind of cynicism where violent practices and actions continue whilst we tell ourselves that we are not fooled by corporate messages, and political rhetoric – this inversion on Marx’s “they know not what they do, but they are doing it” becomes “they know what they are doing, and they are doing it!” This also calls to question the role of education and particularly science education with regard to the knowing and learning to know is and is not being taught and experienced by our students.

The articles in this issue highlight, in different ways, how the issue of the tar sands can be apprehended differently, and with hope lead to new opportunities for activism. For example, Randolph Haluza DeLay’s focus on the cultural politics of the TAR SANDS at the level of popular media and governmental discourse opens pathways for further research into how consent to the project continues to function at the level of provincial citizenry. Julieta Delos Santos and Marie Claire Shanahan’s analysis of argumentative structure is useful in separating out evidence and warrants for rhetorical claims from the claims and qualifiers themselves (which often have more impact in the war of words). Louis Helbig’s aerial photographs and short essay offer the contrast of overt political critique alongside “letting the pictures speak for themselves” albeit within their deitic existence. Sarah Carrier offers a more general call for elementary science teachers to engage with issues such as climate change. All the authors from Alberta in this issue refer to the “oil sands”, which is interesting from a discourse standpoint. Even in resisting they take up the dominant industry terminology. Small o - diminutive. Activists against the issue often use Tar Sands: Capitalized, Interrupted, Bold. No one likes tar. Although the information presented in a Tyee article does offer a counter-narrative to the use of the two terms (Dembicki, 2011), explaining that lots of people are fine with oil. Certainly, Louis Helbig reflects on the interactions he had with many folks in Fort McMurray who are just fine with oil. Somewhere in time the CBC had to make an actual decision to use the term oil sands.

Perhaps to avoid confusion when presenting government or industry- sourced information. Fair enough - unlike the “Burma, also known as Myanmar” situation, they have chosen politically, the oil sands choice is a bit trickier, closer to home, and as we see, Albertans are using it too.

**Giving consent in the petrostate: Hegemony and Alberta oil sands**

Randolph Haluza DeLay sets the tone for his essay on cultural politics by reminding us that environmental problems are always already social problems. He describes a situation where, though critique of the tar sands is becoming more acceptable, real alternatives are not being offered or discussed thereby leaving TINA rhetoric (“there is no alternative”) well in place. Government and corporate media have engaged in campaigns to make the tar sands a “natural” and indispensable part of Albertan identity, what Haluza DeLay astutely describes as the merging of Homo Alberticus and Homo Energeticus. This article outlines a deeper sociological challenge for scholars interested in ethnographic work related to the tar sands operation in terms of discovering the everyday representations of hegemonic consent. Thus it is not enough to study the moves of the corporate-government complex responsible for the tar sands; research must
include how the public receives these messages and gives their consent. Implications for educators include a complicit government curriculum, perhaps at the forefront of manufacturing docile citizens. As the author comically points out, any research that appears to disrupt what has hitherto been seen as something naturally within the state’s interest related to the tar sands may be automatically labeled activist, whether this designation is valid or not.

Using online comments to explore public reaction to the oil sands monitoring plan announcement: an Argumentation analysis

Julieta Delos Santos and Marie Claire Shanahan’s analysis raises questions about the Canadian public’s response to press coverage regarding government efforts to implement an “oil sands monitoring plan”. Specifically their analysis shows that official news media (state sponsored or otherwise), online public commentary, concerning official statements from government can be analysed according to argument structures. For example their analysis reveals that there can be a general lack of attention dealing with the rebuttal aspects of argument (see Toulmin’s argument structure) in both media releases and the public reaction. While Delos Santos and Shanahan acknowledge some of the constraints to online commenting and news media releases their point about the lack of rebuttal is perhaps more pertinent than it first appears. Haluza DeLay’s paper contains an anecdote about how an activist catholic Priest’s letter was answered with a common rhetoric by industry and government (a common type of speech that Louis Helbig’s paper notes) that addressed none of the priest’s environmental, ethical or moral concerns. By looking at how arguments are constructed around the issue Delos Santos and Shanahan open the question, “Are we really having an informed conversation about the Tar Sands”? Although not dealt with directly in the paper, its data draws attention to the nature of the public (at least, the online comment-writing public) view of governance, the assumptions it has even before commentary begins and the specific areas the public chooses to challenge the government’s legitimacy; thereby exposing a particular rationality of government (ex. “it is fine to violently extract and sell resources in the global capitalist system already set up, but we the public should take issue in how you assign accountability for clean-up”). As the authors contend, a focus on argumentation can help students and teachers discern what is being said (and how) in public discourse about issues of urgent concern. However, it is our hope that this kind of analysis is undertaken with complex sociopolitical contexts in mind.

Climate Change Education in Elementary School

Sarah Carrier’s paper stresses the need for climate change education in elementary schools within an American context. Like Louis Helbig’s contributions herein, Sarah’s paper underscores the discontinuity between public education on matters of grave environmental importance and what is actually being done at the level of state organizations (or organizations that are private but are affiliated with government such as the University Corporation of Atmospheric Research in the United States). While Carrier’s article does not deal directly with the Alberta’s tar sands she connects us to climate change education as a key site of struggle for science educators in elementary education and its vital importance for public awareness on matters of urgent social and political interest such as climate change. Her ideas bring to mind a connection to the ethical issue of genomics as described by Van Eijck (2010) as similarly calling for the role of teacher to include acts of facilitation between scientists in the field (experts?) and one’s students (citizens), in order to provide more authentic learning opportunities that are specific to the issue. Her article is a more general call for science educators across disciplines to take science education, and its import for social political change, more seriously at the level of elementary Education. And of course, we can easily connect the issue of Climate Change to the Tar Sands, through the New York Times editorial on carbon, for example, or by following the chain of fossil fuel extraction to green house gas emission impacts. Carrier’s paper brings up
the notion of preparedness and developmental readiness with regard to socio-scientific issues of concern - when are our children ready to learn about Climate Change? When do they become (potential) activists rather than passive by-standers? When is it a teacher’s role to infuse the potential to make change in a child’s world? And must we teach all sides of the argument? These are important questions to consider.

**Art versus Mediocrity, Imagination versus Fear: Can we take our heads out of the Tar Sands and put them in the classroom?**

Besides firsthand accounts of the wide-ranging destruction Louis Helbig’s aerial art may be one of the best examples of interdisciplinary activist work via the visual arts. The artist chose to submit a selection of a much bigger collection from [www.beautifuldestruction.ca](http://www.beautifuldestruction.ca). The aerial images on their own are haunting, beautiful, sometimes decontextualized and strange. Only rarely do his captions tell more than a simple description of the geographic location and content of the image, perhaps in his reference to carcinogens – what is not seen. In his essay, however, Helbig speaks his politics much more plainly. He has harsh criticism for the national culture given to Canadian children during schooling, declaring the absence of traits such as self-appraisal and reflection. Like the Priest described in Haluza DeLay’s paper Helbig spurns the language used by NGOs, government, and bureaucrats and the business elite to describe just how stupid and gullible other people (we) are. Indeed, he rightly deems the use of this language as fully intentional. All in all, Helbig is correct in declaring that there is certainly drama here. As can be seen in the attached slideshow of a selection of Helbig’s works, provided in this issue of JASTE, images of the destruction can be a meaningful engagement point for discussion, but more importantly a space for students to imagine. The combination of words and images that we are privileged to encounter here, allow for moments of romanticizing the impact and control that humans have over the earth, by beautifying the scars, capturing the comfort, scale and awe of this unique space on our planet.

As we sign off on this editorial, we feel it is important to stress that the tar sands need to be thought of as an all encompassing issue (crime?) that implicates all forms of life, (from microbe to homo energeticus), and all forms of political organization and action (from what is assumed within family conversations to what is assumed in government press releases). In short, the issue of the tar sands has the capacity to be an orienting object/phenomenon/struggle for many modes of learning, from the arts to engineering. Educators as a whole can scarcely ignore the issue and the need for its direct politicization; neither can we ignore the ramifications of ignorance, dissolution and denial of education as a space to engage with real issues.

As always, we welcome feedback about this issue and the articles it contains on the PASTE website. Thank you.

**References:**


