

# **Slow Burn: The Future as Seen from Wolf Lake**

*Humans, Persons, Water, and Volcanoes in  
Indiana's Rust Belt*

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This is an essay about coming after the fact.

This is a politics of the given, of the already-marked, the pre-emptive and the over-signified. It is a call for action that erupts out of what is already in place—and that breaks placedness in the process. Any political project carries within it a theory of change and power. This theory, then, is rooted in a descent into the everyday workings of extractive capitalism, rather than a break with them. It takes as its starting point the fact that we all have arrived *too late*: we get here in the middle of things, and the conditions of our present moment—a reality founded on oil reliance, lead poisoning, and the seemingly ever-weakening distinction between those protections afforded the *human* subjects of human rights and the corporate entities personified through the law—stretch out into both past and future. But it is exactly this lateness that generates the force for change. We imagine life in a language so marked by continuing histories of abuse that we are going to speak on that abuse's terms, even by negating them.

“Human rights” have a history freighted with contradiction. Both an idiom and practice of liberation, and a vehicle for militaristic neo-imperialism; a doubled optic that describes rights as the basis for freedom in the same breath as it calls up rights as an achievement *of* freedom; a practice that requires prescribed debasement and a show of rightlessness in order for victims to claim dignity that is supposedly inherent to them to begin with. Human rights span the giant gap between the “human” who has rights and the legal “person” who claims them; a created “universality” that is wholly dependent on being able to point to and claim cartooned “particulars;” on one hand, the seeming inability to curb even the worst environmental and humanitarian harms caused by Exxon and Chevron, and on the other, the power to create a language of respect and purposiveness that allows

Berta Cáceres and an 11-year old in Bainbridge, OH, to each recognize their belonging to the planet...the list goes on (Schultheis Moore 3).

And yet the political and moral pull of human rights is predicated on their simplicity; on their lack of contradiction: you have these rights because you are human.

So the question becomes: *Do* you have these rights because you are human?

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We have driven past them more often than I can remember and more often than I can forget: Ten-foot-high flames burning off gas from BP's oil refinery in Whiting, Indiana. My sister called them "volcanoes" when she was six years old and the name has stuck; now we drive through a ring of fire that has become as natural as it is pretty. My parents have memories of a sky that was perpetually orange; my tongue has a memory of the air that is thick enough to taste. A process of invisibilization: you look at something for so long that it disappears. This is how landscapes are made. People too.



**Two of BP's volcanoes as seen from I-90, April 2015. Photo by author.**

The volcanoes cluster a dozen thick in what the newspapers call the Calumet region's rustbelt: an area that spans East Chicago, IN; Hammond, IN; Gary, IN; Whiting, IN; and the outskirts of industrial South Chicago. They look brightest at night against a black sky but you can always see them, no matter the density of fog or smog or familiarity or whatever it might be that day that veils the eyes. You read about them in the paper, even, with the increasingly-common flare-ups: "The refinery's south flare started spitting out a column of fire at around 11 a.m. No equipment was damaged during the malfunction" (Pete Nov. 2015). —Lines that leave you guessing if *equipment* is a synonym for *workers* or if that is the wrong question to be asking.

Rosa Estrada can see the volcanoes from her front door. "It seems like an imminent threat," she says. "One of their towers had a huge flame rising out of it with black smoke. It went 200 to 300 feet in the air. It was just enormous." 1,100 refinery workers have been on strike since February. The people brought in to "replace" them are not well trained, and flare-ups have, consequently, become a regular occurrence. Doublespeak: "BP spokesman Scott Dean said the flare-up was part of normal operations, and the replacement workers are properly trained" (Pete Feb. 2015).

Learning to live with the end of the world. You have no other choice.



**A volcano visible in Hammond, IN, as neighborhood kids play baseball. Photo by Steve Tomasula, c. 1968**

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We are driving to Wolf Lake and counting volcanoes as we go. \$1 Burgers. Work-Related Injuries. *1 Volcano*. Gentleman's Club. Next Exit. Next Right. Left. Cancer Lawsuits. ArcelorMittal Plant No. 1. Clark & Clark Attorneys. Exit 32. 1 ½ Miles Right. *2 Volcanoes*. *3 Volcanoes*. Best BLT in Town. Domestic Abuse. How did your Congressman Vote? Diabetes Clinic. *4 Volcanoes*. Children's Hospital. Industrial Strip Club. Number One Cancer Treatment in the Country. Showgirls. Family First. Join Today, Pay Tomorrow. *5*. South Shore Slag Co. Lions' Den Adult Superstore. Fridays at Ten. Unilever. BP Oil. Standing with American Farmers. Cancer Lawsuits. *6*. *7*. *8*. Horseshoe Casino, Next Exit. Cash for Gold.

Billboards and other testaments to curated desire give way to a narrow strip of grass, and a sudden cut to the left. If you turn to the west, you can see the volcanoes, blurring red heat into grey smoke on the horizon. If you turn east, you see geese, reeds,

sand—water.

“Mayor Thomas M. McDermott, Jr. Welcomes You to Wolf Lake Memorial Park—Open Water, with a Real Lake Bottom!” The guidepost is your first introduction to the lake, an 804-acre body of water on the Indiana/Illinois border divided in half by a floating I-90 highway and half again by the Harbor Belt Railroad causeway. The water is nestled between two ArcelorMittal and a U.S. Steel works, a BP oil refinery, AmeriStar and Horseshoe casinos, Exxon Mobil and Marathon Petroleum Bulk operations, and a Unilever chemical plant. On upwind days, my parents had picnics here growing up, accompanied by the roar of passing cars.



**Wolf Lake’s Welcome Sign: “A Real Lake Bottom.” April 2016. Photo by author.**

Most lakes in the area—including a large portion of Lake Michigan and the wetlands surrounding Wolf Lake—were man-made for mill usage, or were filled with excess slag during the region’s steel heyday. In fact, until we saw the welcome sign, itself put up only a few years ago as part of the area’s redevelopment plan, my family had assumed, for

decades, that Wolf Lake was another fake. *A Real Lake Bottom*: Wolf Lake is sold as the more natural nature; it's presented as a glimmer of real in an expanse of postindustrial fiction. –If you wanted, you could put on your rose-colored glasses and call this scenery an example of rust-belt magical realism. But to do so would be to miss how very everyday this is.



**A swan on Wolf Lake, with I-90 in the background. April 2016. Photo by author.**

Timothy Morton writes that the very idea of “nature” is far from natural itself. In fact, it seems to hover supernaturally above things, like a ghost. —That is, the “natural” slides noiselessly over a list of *stuff* that it metonymically stands for but is not reducible to: “Fish, grass, mountain air, chimpanzees, love, soda water, freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets...Nature” (14). It is a concept that is at once full of meaning, and oddly empty. At Wolf Lake, “nature” can stand for steel, slag, and pollution as much as it can stand for cool breezes and sandy soil. It can stand for the market’s prerogative to

destroy as many people and as much land as is “necessary”—to borrow one of capitalism’s favorite words. It can stand for the slow burn of unspoken consent that you slip yourself into, that this is the way things are.

Seemingly more phantom than anything, “human” also carries its own metonymic list: Agency, personality, citizenship, self, community, race, children, autonomy, choice, individuality, consciousness, home, homo sapiens, sex, personhood, education, purposefulness...Human. All these things are thought to be *inside* what we mean by the word, and yet “human” is somehow also fundamentally *outside* of such particularities.

That is, “human” is meant to be a transcendent principle; a self-reflexive quality that can be assumed instead of needing to be proven. This is what supplies the moral pull of human rights: People just *are* human. Human rights are meant to provide protections that are non-contingent on nationality; on race, on sex, gender, class, immigration status...In making claim to a shared humanity, human rights are meant to carry the weight of axiom. They are set up to be sufficient in their own universalizing definition, and to need no further explanation. –Yet it is only by blanketing over such a list (race, autonomy, etc.) that *human* is able to appear universal.

Ideas about who and what counts as “human,” while perhaps *irreducible* to, are certainly *reliant* on those other terms in the list. And so we begin to take a deep dive into the particular semiotic and power structures of domestic law. Once in the pool, we see that persons have always gained and lost definition through law. We see legal language acting as a massive personifying engine: The corporate person is a fiction; corporations and other organizations “are made up of individuals or ‘natural persons’ but are not ‘persons’ themselves—the law is what personifies them,” allowing them to sue and (theoretically) be



sued, own property, and enter into contracts (Clements 10). *Natural persons*—aka, people of the flesh-and-blood variety. *Artificial entities*—aka, for-profit associations controlled by a CEO and shareholders. Additionally, we can trace the long history of “negative personhood”—the perpetual re-creation of a rightless entity—that has led up to today’s forms of civil and social death occupied by (formerly) incarcerated people, undocumented migrants, Guantanamo Bay detainees—students at the Carrie Gosch Elementary School in East Chicago, Indiana, where even the top six inches of soil has up to 30 times more lead than the amount considered safe for contact (Goodnough).

As Colin Dayan writes, in law, “We see humans turned into things, ghosts into persons, and corpses into spirits. The intriguing thing is the thoroughly matter-of-fact way these phenomena are dealt with legally” (Dayan 10). Such a project has dictated a situation in which lawyers are today trying to fight the excesses of corporate personhood, by declaring all manner of things on the plaintiff side “persons,” too, to take advantage of the same slippage between figurative and literal: recently, environmental law has been construed so as to grant legal personhood to a river in New Zealand (which has the legal status of a child, with one guardian being the New Zealand state; the other being the Aboriginal community that lives along it), and chimps (Keim and Postel).

People become qualified as “natural persons,” artificial persons take on “natural” characteristics and rights, children’s’ bodies become in large part composed of toxins. What does “human” mean now?

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Those who visit Wolf Lake regularly say that you only have to block out the towering power lines, the 400,000-gallon oil tanks, lines and lines of billowing

smokestacks, and distant red flames, and you have found yourself truly in nature. Transported to another time. You stand on the marshy edge of the water and sink back millennia: Glaciers pant across the ground, melting in stop-motion time into a shallow lake twice as large as it is now. You can walk across the entire span, the water reaching between 2 and 4 feet.

Now speed up time as human histories of genocide and segregation spill into the nineteenth century. Illinois, Miami, and Potawatomi peoples are “removed” (Byg et al). Immigrant Slovak, Polish, and Serbian workers lay down tracks for nine different railroad corporations, making the area North America’s largest center for freight shipping. 1886: the U.S. Supreme Court declares the Southern Pacific Railroad corporation a legal person, protected by the newly-created 14th Amendment (Clements xvii). The 14th, then only twenty years old, is meant to extend full citizenship and “equal protection of the laws” to formerly enslaved people—States are no longer permitted to “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” And yet: between 1890 and 1910, 307 cases were brought before the Supreme Court under the Amendment. Nineteen were by Black Americans. The other 288 were by corporations. Right away, there was a direct transference of “rights” from “natural people,” to, well, “artificial” ones. Standard Oil’s Rockefeller and other robber barons build debt-backed cartoon towns for their company men to live in—or better, to die in (Huppke, Calumet Plan 5).

Fly backwards into the 1950s 40s 30s 20s 10s. Black and Mexican workers fill jobs in the steel mills as they expand. Racial formations shift to make Slovaks and Serbs white, at the expense of the new arrivals. East Chicago becomes a perpetually-growing landfill for its namesake city next door. Uranium clouds the sky as the city’s coal furnaces heat up;

liquid waste and manure from the stockyards lick at sandy beach shores. The lake shrinks in expanse as its edges are filled with steel slag dumped by at least ten different industries. Redlining cuts through Chicago as whiteness is, yet again, reaffirmed as a synonym for ownership. Wolf Lake is divided again and again: by dikes in the water and high-tension lines in the air (Vision).



Corridor boundary lines shown as a general visual reference only.

**A map of the Calumet Region. Wolf Lake is visible, with I-90 cutting across it. Image from Chicago State University: <https://www.csu.edu/cerc/maps.htm>**

Partitioned into ever-smaller areas, suddenly the water grows deeper, its Real Lake Bottom sinking further down as Wolf Lake is dredged in 1956 to build I-90 directly overhead. Most features of this landscape are products of profitability: a few miles over, Lake Calumet, originally six feet deep, was made to be 30 feet so as to be within the minimum depth of navigable waters for international trade (Calumet Plan 4). 1970: The steel corporations eagerly eat and are eaten by ever-larger multinationals. Some transmute into aluminum and plastic behemoths, but most wither. In only five years from 1992-97, employment in the United States grows by 13%—yet the Calumet region instead loses over

2,000 jobs (10). The multi-pronged, unspoken programs of disinvestment, deindustrialization and labor informalization that spell *globalization* hit hard. Mills close and cause a rippling effect of poverty and rage that has not ceased...