Exhibiting the Extractive: Bitumen in Fort McMurray

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Abstract

This article explores how bitumen is curated by the Fort McMurray Oil Sands Discovery Centre and, by extension Suncor's recent, but no longer operational, 'Experience the Energy' tour. In doing so, I seek to examine the visual culture of bitumen as produced from the perspective of industry. The Fort McMurray Oil Sands Discovery Centre is a provincially-funded, industry-sponsored facility operated jointly by Alberta Culture and Tourism and the province's Historic Sites and Museum Branch. The Centre's central focus is education and, to enhance this focus, it incorporates entertainment and interactive exhibitions with bitumen throughout, which help to communicate its representation of the histories of the tar sands. I present Suncor's 'Experience the Energy' tour as an extension of the curatorial practices at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre. To do so, I recount my own experience with tar sands tourism in Fort McMurray, framing Suncor's industrial tourism as a curation of the physical experience of extractive sites, while connecting this to the visual tactics employed at the Centre. In the article, I emphasize how an established visual language, rooted in settler-colonial and extractive-capitalist practices, is adapted to maintain and advance the industrial operations and development of the tar sands. To better understand how visitors come to know bitumen and extraction in these spaces, I consider the sensory as a key component of visual culture to explore how the tar sands industry calls upon visual culture to advance its cause, and suggest that both the tour and the Centre are a kind of multisensory curatorial project—one based on bitumen.

'Bring your camera: Seeing is Believing!'
Fort McMurray Tourism, 'Visitor's Guide: Northern Strong' (2017)[1]

Introduction

Nearly a decade ago, I undertook a research trip to Fort McMurray, in northeast Alberta, to study the visual culture of the Western Canadian tar sands. The time I spent in Fort McMurray (as a white, settler, woman, tourist, and then-graduate student), was marked by a heightened sensorial experience of bitumen mining and the culture of oil extraction. This sensorial experience of the culture of oil often prioritized visuality – an observation that became apparent immediately upon arrival at the airport, which had been recently expanded and was home to several donated and commissioned artworks.[2] For example, local artist Lucas Seaward's *Lasting Impression* (Fig. 1) was hung on the wall of the first floor of the arrivals hall. *Lasting Impression*, a large-scale (approximately 2.4 x 1.2 metres) painting, was a commissioned work consisting of bitumen painted on canvas – a play on the conventional understanding of an oil painting. The black, brown, and amber tones took the shape of a human footprint, with its edges splattering out to form abstract trees, animals, oilrigs, pipelines, transportation infrastructure, and maps. With its splattered perimeter, the darkened footprint looked as though it had been forcibly pressed into the canvas. The images projecting from the human footprint represented past and present influences in the development and definition of the Fort

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McMurray region. Beyond its visual symbolism, the commissioned piece was meant to signal a relationship forged between the human and more-than-human worlds through the medium of bitumen: ecosystems working together, if not thriving, with bitumen as their foundation.

Figure 1: Lucas Seaward, Lasting Impression, 2014. Bitumen on canvas (approximately 2.4 x 1.2 metres or 96 x48 inch), installation at the Fort McMurray International Airport. Photograph by author with permission of the artist, 2015.

Before departing from the airport, I rented a vehicle. I was there to study the visual culture of the tar sands, which are roughly 40 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, accessed via the transport-truck-congested Highway 63. I was thus reliant on the energy consumption of conventional vehicular travel, and in turn, participating in the culture of oil.[3] Although the physical sites of bitumen mining and oil extraction are out of direct view of the city, the infrastructures of oil and its apparent beneficence were readily visible in the urban environment. For instance, driving along the highway, I passed the massive and – at the time – newly constructed Suncor Community Leisure Centre and Shell Place. During my visit, I would explore the city or the region's boreal hiking trails and often encounter other industry-funded spaces.[4] These ubiquitous references to the industry visualized and celebrated the importance of oil to Fort McMurray. Stephanie LeMenager recounts a similar tourist experience of Fort McMurray as a city working to integrate and naturalize the power of corporate investments: '[t]he project of mediating what happens here goes beyond the self-referential corporate rhetoric we normally conceive as greenwashing. Fort McMurray has been set up as a museum of the future, for the benefit of all North Americans' (LeMenager 2014: 161, 166-7).[5]

In this article, I consider bitumen as a curated mineral within the Fort McMurray corporate, institutional, and industrial infrastructures of oil. I look at both the curation of bitumen itself, as a physical material, and the utilization of bitumen as a signifier in didactic scenes of the tar sands I encountered as an industrial tourist. I begin with the anecdotal discussion above in part to establish the specifics of my encounter with sites of bitumen extraction and to build a framework that supports experiences of bitumen as distinctly mediated and curated by industry. My research-focused experience with industrial tourism in Fort McMurray is not unique, however. As I reflect on my time researching these sites, which includes thinking through the significance of curating and exhibiting bitumen – a hydrocarbon and geologic artefact made up of organic life – I am struck by how the physical extractive sites offer the larger public curated experiences of bitumen. Extractive sites of bitumen mining may conjure

specific and even dramatic or apocalyptic imagery of the tar sands to the popular imagination. This leaves industry leaders such as Suncor Energy and Syncrude Canada (of which Suncor is a majority owner) with the task of creating counter narratives and alternative imaginings of the tar sands. Ultimately, tar sands champions, not unlike their opponents, recognize and utilize the power of visual culture to influence understanding, reception, and interpretation.

With this framework in mind, I consider how the tar sands industry calls upon visual culture and mobilizes the methods of the local museum to advance its cause. When I visited in 2015, I took the 'Experience the Energy' tour, which was sponsored by Suncor. The tour explored Suncor's tar sands operations, projecting the company's view of extraction through visual representations that utilized a settler-colonial and extractive-capitalist narrative of the more-than-human environment as wilderness. The Suncor-sponsored representation of the tar sands contributed to the construction of public perceptions about the practices and presence of industry in the more-than-human environment. The tour served as a kind of multisensory curatorial project which was supported and mirrored by exhibitions at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre and more widely accessible published media campaigns.

Through an examination of my own experience of the tour and interpretation of what was presented, I seek to demonstrate how the oil industry utilized and maintained the wilderness narrative to suggest the coexistence of prosperous industrial pursuits with the natural world. I begin with the part of the tour that took place indoors at the Fort McMurray Discovery Centre, followed by the extended Suncor-sponsored bus trip that took us to the industrial part of the site, followed by the reclamation areas. In addition, I analyze some of the media offered to visitors and tour members. This extended reflection on my visit brings together theories related to visuality, sensorial experience, the discourses promoted by oil industries, settler identities, and curatorial roles.

Historically, the wilderness narrative in Canada, as an apparatus of the settler-colonial nation-building project, was in part reliant on the intentional erasure of Indigenous representation and habitation in favour of a representation of white settlers that was advanced by government agencies, extractive-capitalist industries, and cultural institutions (Mackey 2002 [1998]: 52-9). Canadian nation-building frameworks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included the construction and promotion of symbols that would foster a national imaginary – one key symbol of Canada was its vast 'wilderness'. Here, I call upon the term 'more-than-human environment' to define the ecologies of the physical land itself and I use the term 'wilderness' to denote this cultural construct of the more-than-human environment. For many settler Canadians, the ideological cultural construct of 'wilderness' presumes the more-than-human environment as existing in a pristine or virgin state. Moreover, the terms 'wilderness' and 'landscape' signal representation(s) of the more-than-human environment that are mediated by individual (and collective) experience.

In addition to a wilderness narrative, Suncor's mediation and curation of the tar sands exploited notions of the Toxic and Industrial Sublimes. Thinking alongside Jennifer Peeples, these reflect the complex tensions arising from recognizing toxicity while simultaneously appreciating, or even finding pleasure, in its ability to inspire awe (Peeples 2011). The Toxic and Industrial Sublimes also arise when the experience of the immensity of industrial sites is used to celebrate the sheer scale of manufacturing and technological growth.

In this article I argue that by promoting an awe-inspiring or 'seeing is believing' mentality aligned with both the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes, Suncor strategically relied on the visual to mediate tourists' experiences. Visitors to the tar sands site operated within an environment that Suncor controlled, and which constituted points of interest that could be accessed safely. The tour then offered visitors carefully contrived opportunities to take photographs that would document Suncor's (re)presentation of the tar sands and bitumen, thus fixing carefully crafted impressions in tourists' memories.

The Fort McMurray Oil Sands Discovery Centre and Exhibit Gallery

My 'Experience the Energy' tour began at the Fort McMurray Oil Sands Discovery Centre. The Centre is a provincially funded, industry-sponsored facility operated jointly by Alberta Culture and Tourism and the province's Historic Sites and Museum Branch. The Centre opened on 2 September 1985 (the updated Exhibit Gallery opened in September 2002), with an expressed

mandate to serve as an educational facility 'committed to increasing public awareness and knowledge about the oil sands', in a place where visitors can come and 'experience the history, science, and technology of the oil sands'.[6] The central focus on education is enhanced by the incorporation of entertaining and interactive exhibitions throughout; these help communicate the representation of bitumen and tar sands history. For example, during my experience, visitors had the opportunity to view *Pay Dirt: Alberta's Oil Sands, Centuries in the Making,* a 45-minute documentary recounting the discovery and development of the tar sands (McMaster et al. 2005). Additionally, in both the Robert Fitzsimmons Theatre and the Exhibit Gallery, visitors were offered multiple opportunities to witness a 'Hot Water Extraction' demonstration in which samples of bitumen were passed around in beakers while a guide explained how oil is separated from sand in an 'environmentally-friendly' process involving natural resources, hot water, and steam. This demonstration offered a benign interpretation of the bitumen extraction process.

The design of the Exhibit Gallery (Fig. 2) reinforced this educational and largely industrial focus by means of what Kirsty Robertson calls 'corporate-friendly display strategies' (Robertson 2017: 254), where bitumen extraction is displayed in relation to the products of industry rather than in terms of its effects on the environment. For instance, in a display dedicated to technological achievements in extraction, 'From Oil Sand to Oil', an explanatory panel, was posted onto an oil drum. Samples demonstrating the extraction and upgrading process of transforming bitumen into synthetic crude oil rested on a surface covered in industrial sheet metal. The walls and floors of the gallery consisted partly of rubber tyre treads. The latter were highly suggestive, as rubber is a petroleum by-product created by processing synthetic crude oil, and tyres are crucial to the heavy hauler trucks used in extraction. As visual way finders, bright yellow pipelines guided visitors from bitumen in its natural state through to technological advancements in extraction, culminating in the industry's dedication to reclamation in the 'Environment' presentation. This final series of displays reflecting 'ecosystems and Environmental Science' involved images of the boreal forest and its inhabitants. Here, visitors could gaze upon living plant specimens, such as barley, growing in soil composed of consolidated tailings and potting soil, with the apparent aim of demonstrating the possibilities of corporate land reclamation.

Figure 2: Oil Sands Discovery Centre, Fort McMurray, Alberta. Installation view(s). Photographs by the author, 2015.

The gallery encouraged the visitor to see the tar sands through the Toxic and Industrial Sublimes, both through aesthetic techniques and strategies of presentation that narrated industrial progress. Throughout, immersive interactive exhibits allowed visitors to touch

bitumen and helped to convey the awe-inspiring scale of the tar sands. Visitors could climb a staircase into the lofty cab of a truck to become a tar sands operator or gauge the immensity of a heavy hauler tyre as they stood beside it. In the background, a looped recording played the sounds of extraction (primarily truck engines and mechanical digging), and the gallery was dimly lit to evoke the mysterious or foreboding quality of the Toxic and Industrial Sublimes. Outdoors, they could explore the J. Howard Pew Industrial Equipment Garden, a seasonal exhibition of historical and retired machinery used in the tar sands. This enabled them to better understand the sheer size of the equipment and the progress in technological development.

The Bus Tour of Suncor Mines

After our guide provided the tour group ample time to explore the Oil Sands Discovery Centre, we were asked to sign a safety waiver, which included a specification that photographs taken during the tour of Suncor property were for personal use only and would not be shared publicly. I was given a security pass and was loaded onto a chartered tour bus with fellow visitors (students, tourists, and family members of tar sands workers, amongst others). The paradox of encouraging tourists to take photographs while prohibiting them from sharing the results is evidence of Suncor's efforts to control imagery of the tar sands (Nikiforuk 2010: 53).[7] The Oil Sands Discovery Centre and Suncor also offered displays, pamphlets, films, demonstrations, and other forms of visual culture for tourists to consume, but at the same time, Suncor was taking care to ensure that images would not be used to substantiate a negative perception of the industry or its activities.

The tar sands have become publicly known largely through visual representations, while the physical sites of industrial infrastructure, and bitumen itself, have remained mostly hidden in plain view. Debra Davidson and Michael Gismondi draw attention to the fact that the Alberta tar sands are geographically remote, mediated, and seldom-publicly visited spaces (Davidson and Gismondi 2011: 29). The physical and metaphorical distance of the tar sands works in favour of industrial pursuits because it effectively limits the public's encounter with and view of the social and environmental damage industries cause. Even Suncor's 'Experience the Energy' tour strategically framed and curated onsite destinations in a manner that distanced viewers. The North Steepbank Mine Viewpoint, however, was the only stop that offered an opportunity to document *active* extraction of bitumen, and then only from a great distance. The Giants of Mining Viewpoint (Fig. 3) also provided an opportunity to photograph massive retired industrial equipment that now rests offsite. On the other hand, at Wapisiw Lookout and Bison Viewpoint, both of which focus on reclamation, visitors were invited to have a more immersive sensorial encounter with the environment.

Figure 3: Giants of Mining Viewpoint (photo-op, Suncor "Experience the Energy" Tour), Fort McMurray. Photograph by the author, 2015.

Our experience with these sites unrolled in a carefully planned sequence. After we arrived on Suncor property and passed through security clearance, our tour guide highlighted points of interest as our bus passed them on the way to our first destination. These included industrial plants, product tanks, coker towers, refinery facilities, and pipelines. The North Steepbank Mine was the first physical site where we were invited to exit the bus, with encouragement to have our cameras ready. At this secure site just north of Suncor's older Millennium Mine, our bus parked at a spot that was above the active mine – seemingly a safe distance away. Our tour guide suggested key vantage points from which to take photographs and emphasized the scale of the mining achievement below. Viscerally aware of the bitumen deep beneath my feet, with camera in hand, I was prompted to gaze at the systems and infrastructures of oil in which I was so entangled. Our guide utilized analogies to help us grasp the size of the heavy hauler truck, mentioning how such trucks are larger than two-storey homes – the largest of their kind ever made, an impressive industrial feat. By seeing how miniscule the trucks were in comparison to the mine itself, we tourists were meant to conceptualize the size of the active worksite. Furthermore, the guide drew our attention to a white pickup truck driving along the same road, almost unnoticeable in comparison to the heavy haulers. In comparison with familiar objects, the North Steepbank Mine was rendered a spectacle. After we left the North Steepbank Mine, we were driven through a parking lot full of ordinary pickup trucks, which further enhanced our perception of scale, and then we had another opportunity to take photographs alongside one of the heavy hauler tyres.

Before visiting Suncor, I had studied numerous images of the tar sands extraction sites near Fort McMurray, most ranging from those which might be considered apocalyptic to those evoking the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes. Nevertheless, I expected to see a devastated landscape – the more-than-human world exploited in the name of settler-colonial-capitalist systems. I found the site overwhelming: small hints of the remaining green landscape

disappeared into the periphery of a dark and barren environment;[8] sound cannons boomed in the distance to deter birds from landing on toxic water in the tailings ponds; the layered harshness of engines and digging noises rang in my ears; and sulphur fumes engulfed my sense of smell. Although my sensorial experience (influenced in part by my expectations) aligned with the foreboding Industrial and Toxic Sublime landscapes, the tour guide worked hard to counter those expectations. The guide kept the focus on the scale of the spectacle and on the necessity of bitumen mining and oil in our culture, alluding to the idea that oil extraction is required and sustainable. Although the bitumen around us was largely described rather than closely seen, we still engaged in a didactic experience of the culture of oil. The guide provided a narrative to correspond with the visual focus of an active open-pit bitumen mine; at the same time, these explanations normalized environmental degradation, and, for the moment, avoided the concept of wilderness.

Touring Suncor's Reclamation: Wilderness and Sensory Experiences

Later in the 'Experience the Energy' tour I noted that Suncor utilized the visual language of environmentalism and the concept of wilderness as 'green' communication or 'greenwashing'. Further, as I will demonstrate, at this point in the tour Suncor reframed and presented wilderness in a manner that supported industry. Specifically, at another stop, the tour guide celebrated Wapisiw Lookout[9] as the first tailings pond to be reclaimed by a tar sands operation. This belies the fact that Syncrude – and not its majority owner Suncor – is the first and only tar sands operator to have received Canadian government certification for its reclamation of land; in the early 1980s, a 104 hectare area of land, now called Gateway Hill, received government certification for reclamation. According to Suncor, few lands have been certified as reclaimed in part because, under current federal regulations, tar sands operators are only able to apply for certification when the land in question has become a fully functioning ecosystem, a process which takes many years to achieve. Wapisiw Lookout was formerly Suncor's Pond 1, and it served as a tailings pond from 1967 until 1997, after which Suncor took steps toward reclamation.[10] The process included covering the pond with a fifty-centimetre deep layer of soil, planting oats and native grasses from local greenhouses, and cultivating other seedlings.

The stop at Wapisiw Lookout evidenced Suncor's self-presentation as promoting wilderness. There, the tour followed a prescribed route, which, like the exhibitions at the Discovery Centre, led from one didactic panel to another, presenting cropped and mediated views. Wood-framed panel titles included: 'Welcome to Wapisiw: A Behind-the-Scenery Look at Reclamation in Action'; 'The History of Wapisiw Lookout'; 'Renewing the Landscape'; 'Covering Ground'; and 'Planting by and for the People'. The landscape at the lookout comprised relatively flat grassland with young seedlings and human constructions that mimicked natural formations such as rock piles. Designed for small, ground-dwelling animals, these outcrops were intended to encourage the return of wildlife. LeMenager, in her analysis of the Wapisiw site, noted that 'scientists disagree about whether or not the boreal wetlands that are destroyed by bitumen mining can ever be restored; nonetheless Suncor offers tourists a model "reclaimed" tailings ponds' (LeMenager 2014: 162). Wapisiw Lookout is located in relatively close proximity to the boreal forest, and Suncor's representation suggested that in the future this site will become a pristine landscape once again. Yet as Jacob Goessling and Jordan B. Kinder poignantly observe, Wapisiw Lookout as a successful reclamation site serves primarily as rationalization for further extraction within settler-colonial and extractive-capitalist discourses, which present landscapes as resources for the taking (Goessling and Kinder 2023: 238).

The tour stop at Wapisiw Lookout was positioned so that Suncor's plants, pipelines, and mining operations were visible in the background. Although – or because – we had just visited and consumed these sites on the bus, our guide did not refer to their juxtaposition with the lookout. Instead, we were invited to spend time in this 'reclaimed' natural world – a landscape made possible by industry. As tourists, we walked short paths and read the didactic panels about Suncor's environmental and community achievements. Thus, for the first time on the tour we had an interactive experience with the more-than-human environment.

Like the previous parts of the tour, this experience is best understood when placed within a discourse which mediates between the more-than-human and human, and the sensory and strictly visual. In the centre, curatorial choices, such as lighting and hanging techniques, guided

our viewing experience and established visual points of interest. At the same time, physical barriers and sociocultural etiquette often discouraged proximity to objects of visual interest. In some ways, Wapisiw Lookout functioned in a similar manner – the Lookout was a curated site of bitumen; the walking path, didactic panels, and the guide's script directed the tourist's gaze and elevated the importance of sight. Sound and touch were also called upon in service of visuality and the wilderness reclamation narrative. In one instance, our guide referred to the return of local songbirds and birds of prey. When it became evident that we would not see these animals, our guide turned to sound. Although we could not hear songbirds, we were directed to listen to the repetition of the alarmingly loud boom of nearby tailings-pond sound cannons. The cannons, we were again told, go off when they sense movement, such as birds flying above, to deter animals from landing in toxic water while reclamation of the tailings ponds is in progress. We were to understand the loud noise as an indicator of the presence of birds. Ironically, even though the vibrations of the cannons contradicted the wilderness ideology, in Suncor's curation, they were presented as tools toward the recovery and protection of the pristine.

At this point in the tour, in addition to addressing sound, our guide encouraged us to touch *some* of our surroundings. The didactic panels had gnarled wooden frames that we could feel; these were designed to resemble the bark of newly planted seedlings which we were not allowed to touch. We could experience the muddy and rocky surface of the ground beneath our feet, which reminded us that we were, seemingly, in nature despite not being able to touch the naturalistic rock formations designed for ground-dwelling animals. The reclamation site acted as an exhibition where human constructions signified the more-than-human world and worked as a strategic display technique for our viewing pleasure. Our tour guide was quick to point out that branchless and leafless trees were placed intentionally to act as snags. A snag is a dead or dying tree that has lost the majority of its branches but serves as a nesting or resting point for larger birds of prey. The snags were placed to encourage the return of birds of prey, such as raptors. Suncor's ecologists even planted some of the snags upside down so that their roots resembled natural nesting spots. Thus, visible decay and nature in a state of degradation were mobilized by Suncor as signifiers of regenerative growth. Through this mesh of contradictions, Suncor's reclamation project suggested to tourists that the extractive culture of oil was in fact sustainable.

The 'Experience the Energy' tour's use of the sensorial to aid in its representation of bitumen and the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes, as well as a reclaimed wilderness narrative, was interrupted and complicated, however, by the olfactory sense. We were not alone in noticing this intense odour. Take for instance, one account by writer, photographer, and filmmaker Warren Cariou of his experience on public access roads near Suncor's tar sands. Cariou, a professor who studies the effects of extractive economies on Indigenous peoples, writes:

> 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? ... "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" (Cariou 2012: 20).

The visceral quality of the sulphur fumes and the residue on Cariou's tongue illustrate how the unseen or intangible is at work in the tar sands, and how olfaction is arguably one of the more invadable and intimate senses. John Urry stresses the sensory immediacy of olfaction and argues that 'smellscapes' can mobilize and organize feelings about a particular place: 'olfaction seems to provide a more direct and less premeditated encounter with the environment that cannot be turned on and off' (Urry 1999: 41). In the case of the tar sands, the unmediated scent of bitumen mining and the extractive process posed a challenge to Suncor's efforts to manage visitors' experiences on the tour. The worker Cariou met needed a week or two to acclimatize to the stink; tourists did not have such time in the three-hour period of the visit.

The contradiction of the smell-taste at Wapisiw Lookout, a place where the 'fresh' air of the wilderness might be most expected, was noteworthy. At the industrial sites, such as

the open pit mine, the smell-taste overwhelmed the visitor as a component of the Toxic and Industrial Sublimes; however, it was jarringly out of place at the Lookout. In that moment, scent became a liability for Suncor's narration because it disrupted the wilderness and reclamation narratives. The scent suggested the presence of something unnatural, something unexpected in nature.

Tar Sands Industries in Media Discourse

While I will not discuss every stop on the tour, its narrative was commonly replicated and supported in the visual language of tar sands media campaigns both by Suncor and Syncrude. In a social media campaign on Twitter (now X), Syncrude Canada once again compared the kind of heavy hauler truck I viewed at Suncor's North Steepbank mine with a home (Fig. 4): 'Operators compare running a heavy hauler to driving a two-story house. We'll take their word for it. #oilsands'. The tweet included a photograph comparing an earth-filled heavy hauler and a red pickup truck. The effect of the tweet, like our stop at the North Steepbank Mine, was to conjure notions of the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes, effectively displacing the immensity of environmental destruction with an emphasis on human technological, scientific, and industrial development. This approach was not new, as Davidson and Gismondi explain: 'Government and commercial promoters of the tar sands industry in the 1960s would celebrate this immensity, and images like the bucket-wheel … dwarfing human figures, became a selling feature to the public' (Davidson and Gismondi 2011: 64-5). The scale of the heavy hauler is marketed as a source of awe and wonder, both an awesome element of the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes and a key tool in the narration of bitumen.

Figure 4: Syncrude Canada Ltd., oil sands tweet accessed online via Twitter (now X) February 20, 2016.

This social media communication provided the same controlled visual information as the exhibitions in the Oil Sands Discovery Centre and on the tour, although it could be seen more widely and by different publics. Syncrude used entertaining images to bring the Industrial and Toxic Sublimes to people unable to travel to Fort McMurray to 'Experience the Energy'. The process of producing and controlling the visual culture of the tar sands enabled the physical site to remain and operate behind the scenes. The viewer was not encouraged to see the 'real' more-than-human environment, but rather a representation of it. Syncrude also reproduced the wilderness narrative through media outlets. In one instance, Syncrude tweeted (Fig. 5): 'Wolves are among the many animals captured on motion-detection cameras set-up on our reclaimed land'. Included was a photo of a single wolf, seemingly staring back at the camera as it walked through a woodland. The image served as visual evidence of wildlife while the corresponding text implied that a plethora of other animals inhabited the tar sands landscape

Figure 5: Syncrude Canada Ltd., oil sands tweet accessed online via Twitter (now X), May 29, 2016.

Conclusion

I close my discussion of industrial curation of bitumen with further reflection on the unseen elements of the tar sands landscapes. The suggestion of thriving if invisible wildlife was perpetuated by signs found throughout Suncor's property. In several instances, signs reading 'CAUTION: WILDLIFE SEEN IN THE AREA' zipped by the windows of the tour bus. When we drove past the Matcheetawin Discovery Trails, which are outside the site, our guide recommended that we return to hike the trails, yet advised us not to do so alone because of risks from wildlife.[11] While Suncor's cautionary signage may have served as a reminder to its workers, it also created an anticipation, luring visitors to explore the wilderness and wildlife. The signage highlighted the nearby 'healthy' environment of Gateway Hill and the Matcheetawin Discovery Trails, suggesting that the more-than-humans found in the lush

boreal forests can also be found in the less pristine sites of the tar sands.

While the curated landscapes of bitumen and sites of tar sands extractivism necessarily include a human presence, in the Oil Sands Discovery Centre's exhibitions and through the tour and media campaigns, Suncor accesses the vocabulary of the wilderness narrative to project a positive image of itself. Significantly, in part through its use of a wilderness narrative, the industry effectively reproduces the colonialist and capitalist practices that have enabled tar sands development from the outset.

Settler colonialist ideas about people living in and around the tar sands further these practices. Zoe Todd, in discussing related practices within Alberta's and Canada's national engagement with extractivism, importantly aligns such processes with Aileen Moreton Robinson's advancement of 'possessive logics' (Moreton-Robinson 2015: xi-xxi). Todd explains:

> while overt forms of colonial domination and control are clear in the state's mobilisation of physical, violent police monitoring of and assaults against Indigenous land and water protectors in Canada … there are also more covert or coded forms of white possession that naturalise Alberta's and Canada's understandings of ancient fossil beings (Todd 2022: 7-8).

Both Suncor's and Syncrude's perpetuations of the wilderness narrative are evinced in 'possessive logics'. Consider, for example, Suncor's use of Cree to name Wapisiw Lookout, so that arguably 'Aboriginal people become equated with the land and with nature' (Mackey 2002 [1998]: 77). In this assertion, Mackey makes clear the history of settler-colonial practices of taking possession of the more-than-human environment through a narration of wilderness that conceptualizes it as unoccupied. In this historical-colonial narrative, Indigenous peoples inhabiting the land do not disrupt the perception of wilderness because they are understood as fauna and part of the landscape. The industry-generated visual language of bitumen and of the tar sands relies on such settler-colonial extractive-capitalist narratives of 'wilderness'. The exhibitions, tour, and related social media campaigns evince the continuing viability of the settler-colonial wilderness concept as a cultural resource, one that rationalizes the continuation of extractivism in Fort McMurray and emphasizes corporate rather than Indigenous or more-than-human ownership of the land.

The Suncor 'Experience the Energy' tour presented a curated, first-hand encounter with several restricted-access sites of the tar sands. Alongside the Oil Sands Discovery Centre and the related social media campaigns, the tour offered the opportunity to explore the multiple forms of visual culture of bitumen produced by industry. Unpacking the visual narratives that are the key tools of public engagement for petrochemical industries helps us understand how they narrate and circumvent pressing environmental and social concerns. By identifying these practices and drawing them out in the context of the tar sands and the curation of bitumen in Fort McMurray, as has been done in this paper, we can trouble the industrial monomyth. I have advanced questions of visibility and other senses to demonstrate how industry enables the persistence of dominant colonial and capitalist narratives that aid in a continued industrial extraction through the naturalization of industry and invisibility of other competing interests and understandings of the land.

Notes

[1] Fort McMurray Tourism, 'Visitor's Guide: Northern Strong' 2017, 28. http://www.fortmcmurraytourism.com/2017-visitors-guide, accessed 22 September 2017.

[2] Several artworks by Lucas Seaward, Liz Ingram, David Robinson, and Amy Keller-Rempp were commissioned for the Fort McMurray International Airport. Two works by Jane Ash Poitras, from her Utopia Series (2015), were given to the Fort McMurray International Airport by the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC).

[3] Within this article, I employ the expression 'tar sands' as opposed to 'oil sands'. Both terms are complex. In a Canadian context, the bituminous sands tend to be referred to as 'oil sands'. In the context of this paper, 'tar sands' calls up connections to the word 'bitumen'

(bituminous/bituminis), which describes the thick, dark, natural resource extracted from the earth. Moreover, early twentieth-century engineers, surveyors, and geologists used the term 'tar sands' to describe the site, and this usage lasted well into the mid-twentieth century. With the advent of the environmental movement in the 1960s, 'tar sands' was first interchanged with and later replaced by 'oil sands', because at that point, government officials and oil industry leaders began public relations campaigns to present a cleaner perception of extraction. For further information, see Gray 2004, Sweeny 2010, and Westman et al. 2020.

[4] On 20 August 2009, Suncor officially opened the Suncor Community Leisure Centre in MacDonald Island Park, Fort McMurray. This massive community centre is home to the Syncrude Aquatic Centre and Waterpark; a public library; the MacDonald Island Community Art Gallery; an indoor running track and playground; fitness and dance studios; a climbing wall; an eight-sheet curling rink; four ice surfaces (one NHL-size); and two multi-purpose field houses (one named the Nexen Energy Field House). In June 2015, Shell Canada opened an addition to the Suncor Community Leisure Centre. Shell Place includes an indoor turf field house; a badminton centre; a baseball stadium; an outdoor sport and performance stadium/stage; and conference and hospitality facilities.

[5] For further documentation of tar sands and Fort McMurray tourist experiences see Nikiforuk 2010; Cariou 2012; Szeman and Whiteman 2012; LeMenager 2014; Robertson 2017; and Rowe 2017.

[6] Alberta Culture and Tourism, 'Oil Sands Discovery Centre' 2024. http://history.alberta.ca/oilsands/, accessed 22 September 2017.

[7] Syncrude no longer offers public tours of their facilities. After I arrived home from Fort McMurray, I requested a copy of the script and consent form and was notified that 'this information is not readily available for the public' (personal communication, 17 May 2017). I have yet to receive the requested documents or further response. Further, it appears that Suncor has followed Syncrude's lead and is not currently offering public tours of their sites.

[8] During the tour, our guide informed us that Suncor must legally maintain 'environmental buffer zones', which are 200-1,200 metre zones between industrial sites and the remainder of the environment.

[9] Our tour guide discussed the history and naming of the reclamation area, referring to the first Indigenous person to introduce oil to white settlers, as well as Wapisiw meaning 'swan' in the Cree language ('Experience the Energy' tour, August 2015). Suncor's tar sands operations are north of Fort McMurray, in the region of Wood Buffalo. This is Treaty 8 Territory, the traditional lands of the Cree and Dene as well as the unceded territory of the Métis people.

[10] As part of the certification process, several wildlife surveys were conducted. According to Syncrude, these 'revealed the presence of a number of species, including snowshoe hare, marten, deer, squirrel, beaver, coyote, and various songbirds, raptors, and grouse'. See Syncrude, 'Our Progress'. http://www.syncrude.ca/environment/land-reclamation/our-progress/, accessed 22 September 2017.

[11] Similar signs could be found on the nearby public access Gateway Hill and the Matcheetawin Discovery Trails. The Matcheetawin Discovery Trails are a four-and-a-half-kilometre hiking trail system created by Syncrude to celebrate its Gateway Hill reclamation site. Hikers are welcome to explore the ecological achievements, but at the time were forewarned (and perhaps dissuaded) by cautionary signage that reads: 'CAUTION: BEAR SEEN IN THE AREA', 'Beware of Wildlife', and 'Use at Own Risk'.

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