

# TO: THE TAR SANDS | 04-06-23—04-10-23



images: Therese Keogh, Rebecca Macklin, Astrida Neimanis, *cyanotypes with found materials*

Over five days in early April 2023, we – visiting researchers Therese Keogh and Rebecca Macklin and Director Astrida Neimanis of the FEELed Lab – did a road trip. We were headed to Fort McMurray, Alberta, as a way to gain different kinds of insights into the engine of petrocapiatalism that is also known as the Tar Sands.

“FEELed work” might be one name for an embodied, place-based and multimodal kind of research inquiry that each of us is exploring, differently, in our respective projects. Preparation for the trip included archival and other desk-based research (photographs, films, books, TV shows, documents, websites, reports) as well as practical matters (mapping, route-planning, contacting institutions and individuals, checking weather records and road conditions). The trip itself included observation of landscapes (by car, on foot, by air), conversation with a variety of knowledgeable people (from Keepers of the Water, Fort McMurray First Nation, Fort McMurray Heritage Society, Oil Sands Discovery Centre), participation in both touristic and everyday Fort McMurray life (museum visiting, grocery shopping, playing board games in a bar, walking around town), pit stops, time-passing and lots of snacks (hot springs, road trip games, more and less sour gummy worms) as well as a variety of situated, site-specific, arts-based experiments (cyanotype printing, photography, sound recording, freewriting, sketching with found materials). We carried humour with us as a way of processing movements through spaces that were, at times, overwhelming, and where material play offered pathways into the intangible complexities of the place. There are so many ways that we move towards knowing. This can also mean moving away from knowing, or at least away from what we think we already know.

A short trip like ours can yield no sweeping conclusions, but the place feels more real, and more complicated, than it might have before.

# I. (what kind of bitumen are you)

Astrida Neimanis

how do we  
take some  
thing too overwhelming

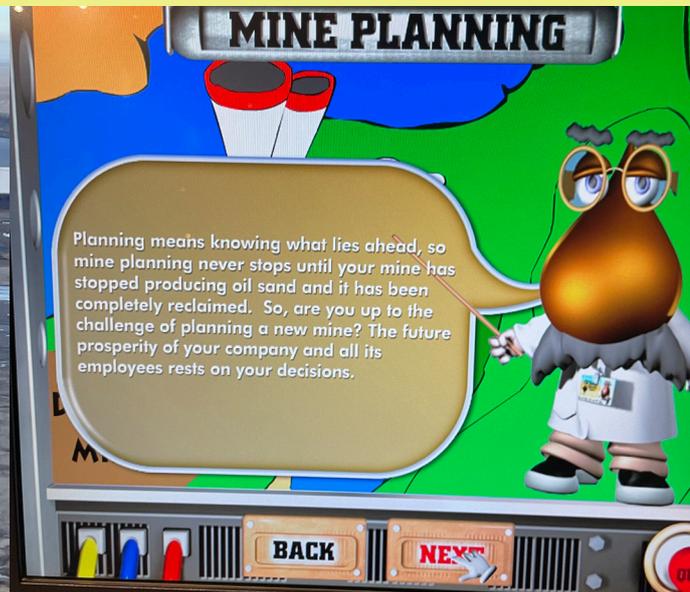
to comprehend, and  
make it some  
thing  
we can hold in our bodies



images: Astrida Neimanis, picture of Jeff / drawing of Jeff



images: Astrida Neimanis, picture of sulphur pyramid from above / photo of lapel pin on my jean jacket



images: Astrida Neimanis, tar sands from above / photo of screen from 'tarsands game' at museum

a skin, stretched  
thin

from holding  
all  
this

everyone  
wants what's  
held, precious



fossil



feeling



data

who isn't hoping for a reclamation?

## *II. Movements through Sand and Snow*

Rebecca Macklin

In three days, it is impossible to comprehend the scales of these sands.

The three of us, visitors, nevertheless try – all the while asking

*why are you here?*



**image:** Rebecca Macklin, *Aerial photograph of a burnt boreal forest landscape adjacent to oil sands operations*

In three images, it is harder still to convey:

The skeletons of trees, burnt boreal bodies lining the horizon;<sup>1</sup>

The strained breath that sticks on your chest, teasing an attack  
*(did you remember your inhaler?);*

The headache that hits between your eyes as you near the Syncrude  
perimeter and sits *right there* for the rest of the day;

The sound of wind through pine trees

occasional birdsong  
*(where are all the birds?)*

the canons' thumping percussion.



**image:** Rebecca Macklin, *Barley in the snow*, Crane Lake Reclamation Area (opened to the public in 1994)

In “reclaimed” spaces: barley grows,<sup>2</sup> snow falls, beavers nest.

With every sense, my body reminds me:

life is/was/will be.



**image:** Rebecca Macklin, “SAVE THE PLANET” graffiti at Fort McKay First Nation, photograph taken from the car.

1. The consequences of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire are still highly visible in the burnt trees that remain. The fire started on 3rd May, spreading 590,000 ha over the course of two months, destroying more than 2,400 homes and resulting in the evacuation of 88,000 people.
2. Barley is planted in the process of “reclaiming” sites that have been used for bitumen production. A non-native species, barley is widely used in post-mining sites to remediate contaminated soil and improve conditions for other plants to grow.

### III. Sometimes I Feel

Therese Keogh

*Sometimes I feel*

hands reach, fingers clenched, teeth bared

the feathering of an original mishap

*the* original mishap,

a mis-shapen, a mis-weighten, mis-scaling

*Sometimes I feel*

feathering and dusty

feathering and leaky

feathering from an original mishap, *the*

feathering across distance and dis/covering, live and not-live

an original mis-hearing, mis-taken, mis-taking, of propane blasts and echoed  
mis-fires



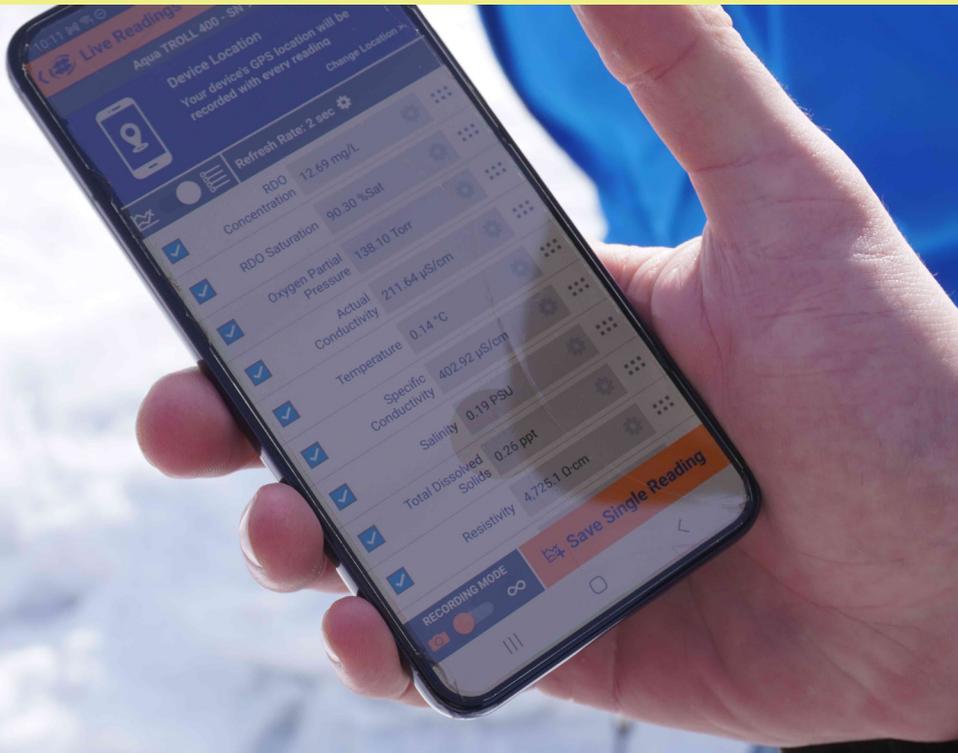
image: Therese Keogh, *Suncor tailings pond effigies*



*Sometimes I feel*  
fouled and fowled  
*the fouled origin*  
*the fowled mishap*

of bleached palms and whitened knuckles  
of a technological touching and transmutional translating  
of words and numbers and pages and pdfs

saturated  
concentrated  
sublimated  
oxygenated  
*Sometimes I feel*  
*Some times*



**image:** Therese Keogh, Athabasca water testing with Keepers of the Water



images: Therese Keogh, Rebecca Macklin, Astrida Neimanis, *The Unctuous Ones*: album covers

## ***Road Trip Playlist: To the Tar Sands***

### ***Caribou***

Tanya Tagaq

### ***Road to Nowhere***

Talking Heads

### ***I Pity the Country***

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

### ***Your Rocky Spine***

Great Lake Swimmers

### ***Fast Car***

Tracy Chapman

### ***Oil***

Gorillaz (feat. Stevie Nicks)

### ***Fire On Babylon***

Sinead O'Connor

### ***Breezeblocks***

Alt J

### ***Born Slippy***

Niyari

### ***Road to Nowhere***

Ozzy Osbourne

### ***Highway to Hell***

AC/DC

### ***We've Gotta Get Out of this Place***

The Animals