Caring for Crude in an Era of Capitalist Crisis:

Migrant Caregivers and the Fort McMurray Wildfire

by

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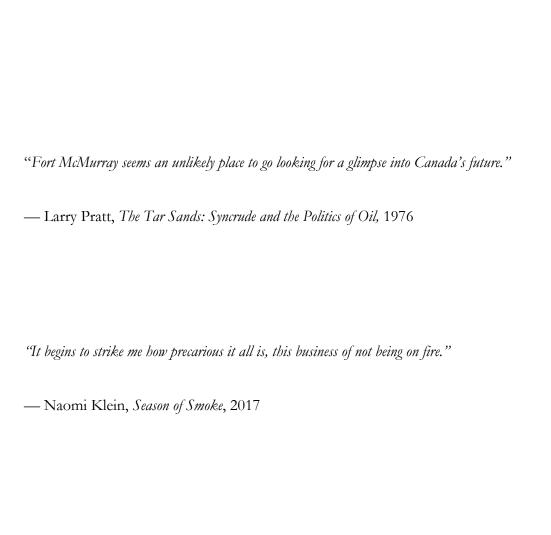
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ABSTRACT

On May 3rd, 2016, a wildfire swept through the Northern Alberta resource community of Fort McMurray, scouring the political-economic landscape of what has become a notorious outpost of transnational capital and leading to the largest prolonged evacuation in Canadian history. In serving as the primary service centre for the Athabasca tar sands— the world's third-largest known oil deposit— Fort McMurray has also become a notable outpost of transnational labour. Migrant caregivers, in particular, are precariously tied to this 'land of opportunity'— bound by short-term employment contracts tied to single employers. Thus, in following the assertion that "there is no such thing as a natural disaster," this thesis draws upon their experiences to reveal how the everyday manifestations of capitalist crisis that exist in this place were responsible for rendering the wildfire *into* a disaster in the lives of tens of thousands of people. In drawing upon the experiences of this social reproductive workforce, I argue that the crisis of social reproduction, in particular, is *the* thread of capitalist crisis capable of illuminating the other strands of crisis at the foundation of this disaster and explicating the interconnections between them. Moreover, it is in specifically focusing on the crisis of social reproduction, I argue, that we are able to not only understand the political-economic foundation of this disaster but also how its impacts were reabsorbed into everyday life through the social reproductive labour of this largely disposable workforce. In drawing upon the concept of surplus value, I argue that in much the same way that this value is extracted from workers to rebuild the physical infrastructure of communities in the wake of disaster, families extracted migrant caregivers' *social reproductive* surplus value in order to rebuild the social infrastructure of their everyday lives and re-establish the crises at the foundation of this disaster.

Keywords: Disaster; Social Reproduction; Surplus Value; Fort McMurray; Migrant Caregivers

PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Emma Jackson. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Rebuilding Daily Life: Female Foreign Migrant Workers in Fort McMurray's Post-Disaster Recovery ," No. 00073861, 12/07/2017.

"Fort McMurray seems an unlikely place to go looking for a glimpse into Canada's future."

— Larry Pratt, *The Tar Sands: Syncrude and the Politics of Oil,* 1976

"It begins to strike me how precarious it all is, this business of not being on fire."

— Naomi Klein, *Season of Smoke*, 2017

This thesis is dedicated to all those who care— for people and the planet.

And to all those who already building a better world out of the ashes of the old.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

On May 3rd, 2016, I was on my way to Prince Edward Island when my best friend turned the radio on to CBC News. We had just begun crossing the Confederation Bridge when the regular programming was interrupted to announce that the wildfire sweeping through Northern Alberta had officially prompted a mandatory evacuation of the entire city of Fort McMurray. I sat in the front seat in disbelief.

At the time, I had just accepted my offer to attend the University of Alberta with the explicit intent of studying Fort Mac— a community that I had spent the past year researching for my honours degree at Mount Allison University in rural New Brunswick.

A week later, as news coverage continued to stream in from across Canada and around the world of images of charred vehicles and levelled homes, I posted the following to Facebook in an attempt to grapple with the disaster:

> It's been hard for me to wrap my head around the crisis unfolding in Fort McMurray over the past week. I spent an entire year studying this region, reading everything I could about the Indigenous peoples native to the land, interviewing workers who have earned their livings from the extractive industry, and speaking with those who are so often discounted from conversations about Fort Mac— the caretakers, waitresses, and minimum wage earners who have also come to call this place home.
>
> What's happened to Fort McMurray is devastating and I hope that every Canadian considers donating to the Red Cross and other relief efforts to help families get back on their feet. But in offering our support, we need to be sure that it is being extended to all workers, including those who are on closed work permits and are at risk of losing everything they left home for. We need to think about the part-time teachers whose schools have been destroyed and the migrant nannies whose host families are deciding not to rebuild.
>
> No one deserves to lose their home, least of all the people who are on the frontlines of extraction— many of whom have little choice in how they earn their living.

At the end of the day, as "controversial" a statement as some may find it, there's no doubt in my mind that the wildfires currently raging across Northern Alberta are symptomatic of both a climatic and economic system in crisis.

Right now, in light of this disaster, we can't afford to shy away from the important conversations that need to be had, as uncomfortable as they may be. There is of course an appropriate way to approach these conversations; one that includes us all taking ownership for the climate crisis that magnified this disaster, and one that acknowledges the diverse experiences of all those working in Fort McMurray.

But the bottom line is that we are at a crossroads. An inclusive and justice-based future for Fort McMurray, Alberta, and the rest of Canada will not be created without pressure from us all.

I had no idea then that hidden within this post were research questions I would continue to grapple with for another two and a half years in an effort to expand such conversations— that I would spend five months travelling to and from Fort McMurray, traversing the charred landscape of Northern Alberta in an attempt to uncover the hidden labour of rebuilding daily life in one of Canada's most notorious resource communities. But more than anything, I had no idea the extent to which, in studying one disaster, I would come to trace the contours of a much larger crisis— one creating and embedding disaster in our everyday lives.

Thirteen days before defending my thesis proposal, a fire engulfed west London's Grenfell tower block, claiming the lives of 72 people. Like many, I was transfixed by the atrocity. I spent weeks reading everything I could about Grenfell— news articles, blog posts, Twitter threads— for whatever reason, I couldn't turn away.

But Grenfell was far from being the only disaster that I would come to associate with this work. When I began conducting a review of the literature later that summer, the B.C wildfires were raging to the west, prompting me to begin writing fieldnotes before ever entering the field:

I never want to forget that this was the year I sat and read, and tried to make sense of one fire while the air was thick from the smoke of others. There have been days this summer when I can smell the B.C wildfires from my living room window as I sit at my desk reading disaster theory. Whenever it happens, it's a reminder that disasters are always occurring somewhere in the world and that no community is immune (August 13th, 2017).

The first time I travelled north to conduct fieldwork, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston. The second trip, Hurricane Irma bared down on Florida and Puerto Rico. The third trip, Hurricane Maria made landfall, once again, in Puerto Rico. I began titling my field notes with the disaster that was occurring at the time of writing them. "Harvey," "Irma," "Maria"... It was a constant reminder that disasters aren't actually unexpected. Instead, they've become common, although perhaps unpredictable, features of our everyday lives.

Yet, despite all of the "natural" disasters that were unfolding throughout the time that I was interviewing and analyzing my data, I kept coming back to Grenfell. I was struck by how rare it was to come across news coverage and academic writing of "natural" disasters that treated them in a similar way to how Grenfell was being addressed— asking questions about what happened *before* Grenfell that brought the fire into being. Why were we so willing to ask questions about the decades-long production of vulnerability in the case of one fire but not the other? This thesis represents my small attempt to correct this wrong.

Reyna

On May 3rd, 2016, Reyna opened the door of her employers' home only to notice that the sky was dark and it appeared to be snowing. It wasn't until she noticed the orange hue of the clouds before she realized it was ash, not snow, falling from the sky. With the door ajar, her employers' young daughter bolted past her in rubber boots, ready to go the neighbourhood park. "Come back inside baby," Reyna said, attempting to hide the concern in her voice as she ushered her back in. "We'll go to the park later." An hour later, the phone rang. Reyna's employer was on the line. "The city is on fire. Pack some food and Charlotte's clothes. I'll be home as fast as I can," she said. Reyna turned to two year-old Charlotte. "Go put your toys on your bed. Mommy's coming home soon." She proceeded to scramble around the house, intently packing her employers' most important possessions before hurriedly grabbing herself a change of clothes and her immigration documents.

After what felt like hours standing in the window staring at a parked car without a driver's license, Reyna's employer pulled up in her vehicle. She and Reyna spent the

next hour running back and forth between the house and the car, attempting to pack everything they could as quickly as possible. The sky was thick with smoke. By late afternoon, they had joined the thousands of vehicles heading south down Highway 63. They crawled steadily behind muddied trucks, silently predicting the degree of damage to come. Reyna sat in the back, comforting Charlotte and distracting her from the encroaching flames. She stroked her hair until she fell asleep. Seven hours later, they reached their destination. But while Reyna had managed to escape the fire unscathed, she had no idea at the time, that for her, the disaster had only just begun.

Like many of the Filipina women living in Fort McMurray, Reyna had moved to Canada under the federal government's Caregiver Program. Arriving in 2015, she cared for a one year-old girl while her parents went off to work in the Alberta tar sands. When the Horse River wildfire— nicknamed "the Beast"— swept through Fort McMurray that day, Reyna became one of hundreds of migrant domestic workers forced to flee. While caregivers like Reyna consoled children from the back seats of minivans and pickup trucks, parents sat in the front worrying about where to stay, how to get gas, and whether their homes were still standing. But amidst the challenge of juggling these concerns, some employers took to Facebook— consulting friends and neighbours about how to lay off their caregivers. In many ways, Reyna was one of the lucky ones. After evacuating to a small hamlet 200 kilometres south of Fort McMurray, the family carried on to Slave Lake before travelling on to Grande Prairie.

Despite the fact that she continued to work for them, Reyna's employers soon applied for her to be placed on employment insurance (EI) to alleviate their own financial burden. A week passed with Reyna sharing hotel rooms and beds with her employers' daughter. Every morning before heading off to the hotel's continental breakfasts, her employers would turn on the TV searching for an indication of whether their house was still standing and when they would be allowed to return to see for themselves.

 Once it was announced that the evacuation would last for weeks, Reyna's employers decided to travel home to Newfoundland. Like many families living up north, they had moved to the region in search of work. Fearing she would lose her job if she remained behind, Reyna accompanied her employers to St.John's where they stayed for ten days before returning to Alberta. Weeks later, they received the news they had been

waiting for— they were allowed to return to Fort McMurray. On June 1st, they packed the family's two vehicles and joined the steady stream of traffic heading north from Edmonton. As they entered the municipality, fire fighters waved from an overpass above. A Canadian flag suspended between two fire trucks billowed in the wind. Beneath it, a giant banner read, "We Support Fort McMurray." They arrived home to a house that, although fire-damaged, was still standing. Charlotte's tricycle lay on its side in the front yard, unscathed. New grass was already beginning to grow from the charred ground beneath it.

As Reyna's employers returned to work, she spent the next week caring for Charlotte while deep-cleaning the furniture, scrubbing out the appliances, and bringing load after load of smoke-damaged clothing to the dry-cleaners. Days of cleaning passed before her employers called her into the dining room. With papers and receipts strewn across the table, they told her she owed them $2,000 for the evacuation. The total included the cost of food and half the amount paid for hotel rooms for the family of three (plus her) over the course of the evacuation. Reyna was taken aback. Food and accommodation were guaranteed in her contract and she had been forced to share a bed with Charlotte for the duration of the evacuation. She had also spent the past month working overtime without collecting overtime pay. It was a violation she had been willing to overlook given the circumstances but it was one she now found difficult to swallow. Having transferred money back to the Philippines the day before, Reyna explained that she did not have the money. Her employers asked her to send it as soon as her next Employment Insurance payment was issued.

A few days later while her employers were at work, the government called. Reyna picked up the phone. The woman on the other end asked to speak with her. Knowing that she had managed to reach Reyna at her employers' home, she politely asked whether Reyna was back to work. Fearing what would happen if she was caught in a lie, Reyna admitted she was. When her employer returned home that afternoon, she explained what had happened. Her employer was furious. Reyna's admission to the government meant that she would now be forced to pay her salary. She asked Reyna why she had told the truth before insisting that she not pick up the phone for an unrecognized number ever again.

Despite returning to their usual routine, for both Reyna and her employers, the

lingering effects of the disaster had yet to end. Months later, under new management, her female employer's hours working in the tar sands were cut from working eight days on, six days off to six days on, six days off. As a result, Reyna's hours were similarly scaled back below the number she was legally guaranteed. Then, only a few months later, her employer was fired outright. While her employer's company (whom she had worked for for 27 years) cited the combined impact of the downturn and the fire as factors in the termination, they said their ultimate decision came down to her being inattentive at work— an accusation tied to her having developed a habit of frequently checking her phone as a result of the lingering trauma of the fire.

Suddenly, Reyna was working for a single-income household with one stay-at-home parent. Overnight, her already-limited hours were drastically cut. She went from being given 44 hours a week to becoming an on-call nanny for her employers— often receiving less than 20 hours a week while being expected to stay home in the event that she was needed. This arrangement, however, only lasted a few weeks before her employer told her that she could no longer afford to pay her at all. But citing how attached her daughter had grown to Reyna, she insisted that she stay with them— promising to find Reyna alternative employment until she herself could return to work. The following week, Reyna's employer arranged for her to begin working for another family while continuing to live in their home. In being concerned about her ability to find work elsewhere, and in not wanting to delay her permanent residency application any further, Reyna reluctantly agreed.

For five months, she worked under the table for nine hours a day, 5 days a week for (what was at the time) the provincially-mandated minimum wage of $12.20 per hour. In seeking to avoid processing and paying for the paperwork that would legalize the arrangement, her new employer paid Reyna in cash. In order to then ensure that this time was not deducted from the hours Reyna needed to be eligible to apply for permanent residency, every pay period, Reyna would hand this money over to her legal employer who would then issue her a cheque and record the transaction for both their documentation. These cheques, however, were always significantly less than the amount of cash Reyna had been given. Since losing her job, Reyna's legal employer had stopped paying her tax, instead requiring Reyna to pay the required $240 every two weeks.[1]

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[1] This tax is a way to officially mark continuation of the 24-month employment period stipulated by the

By mid-July, Reyna was no longer needed by her substitute employer, bringing the arrangement to a close. And while she would have preferred not to return to the insecure and uncertain circumstances of work under her legal employer, it was, in many ways, a relief after having spent the past five months in fear of being caught and deported back to the Philippines. Fortunately, her legal employer who was working to open up her own business insisted that come August, she would once again be able to pay Reyna full-time. But as August rolled around, the business was still nowhere near operational, once again forcing Reyna to work as an on-call nanny within her employers' home. She quickly went from being given 45 hours a week under her substitute employer to rarely receiving more than ten. Instead, at a moment's notice, her employer would call Reyna upstairs to work two to three-hour shifts while she left to run errands for the new business.

This lasted over a month until her employer approached her once again, proposing another employment arrangement that she approved of. This time, Reyna would work for one month from September until October for a family friend with three children— a newborn baby, toddler, and nine year-old boy with autism. Due to the parents' irregular work hours in the tar sands, the arrangement would require Reyna to wake up between 3:00 and 3:30 a.m. every morning in order to be picked up by this new substitute employer. However, after meeting the children at a birthday party one afternoon, Reyna declined the offer. She felt highly unqualified to care for them and consequently feared for their safety (and her own) if she took it on. But Reyna's employer was far from understanding of her decision. Instead, she was angry that Reyna had declined the tentative agreement and used this as leverage against her. Claiming that Reyna was ungrateful for the opportunity she had found her, her employer said, "If you don't want to go, I don't want you working any other cleaning or caregiving jobs, including for [her former substitute employer]." She then threatened Reyna saying, "We better not find out that you're working for anyone else."

Without being given the hours she was entitled to, by the time I met Reyna in mid-September, the limited funds in her bank account had begun to dry up. As we sat in a secluded booth talking one Sunday afternoon after church, she recited her hours to me from the previous week. She had worked two hours on Monday, zero on both Tuesday

government before caregivers are eligible to apply for permanent residency.

and Wednesday, and four on Thursday, for a total of six hours— a whole 34 hours less than the minimum she was legally guaranteed in her contract. On those days where she was given no hours at all, Reyna remained at home. She had no money to spend and, despite not working, was still expected to be in the house and available to work every day but Sunday. She stayed in her room in the basement, often being given the baby monitor in case she was needed. As she said to me, "She always give me the monitor but no pay, no pay after that." Charlotte had recently turned three and would often wander downstairs during these unpaid hours, insisting that Reyna play with her.

When I asked Reyna why she hadn't left and sought out a new contract, she explained that in only having a few months of work remaining before she was eligible to apply for permanent residency, finding a new employer would require her to navigate the slow bureaucratic process all over again, likely delaying her ability to become a permanent resident by months. Moreover, with the community still reeling from the compounding effects of the wildfire and oil price collapse, she also expressed her doubts over being able to find a new employer at all. Rather, she explained that she was committed to "hanging in there" — filing her application come January and reuniting with her two kids as soon as possible. But in continuing to support them from afar under such circumstances, Reyna described how difficult "hanging in there" had truly become. On a weekly basis, she was forced to decide whether to buy food for herself or send money home. She took out a second line of credit, began working cleaning jobs under the table, and borrowed money from friends to make ends meet. She cried in describing the generosity of other caregivers in helping her get by, but nothing made her more emotional than talking about her employers and the relationship they had had prior to the fire.

As we spoke, Reyna repeatedly described how generous and fair her employers had been before the wildfire. She told me how only weeks after arriving in Fort McMurray two years ago, they went on vacation and still paid her 8 hours a day while they were gone. She described how for a whole year and a half, they bought all her food, paid her wages when they went away and, unlike most employers, never failed to compensate her for her overtime hours. It wasn't until after the fire, she stressed, that things began to change. It wasn't until then that her employers began asking her, while they were standing in the grocery store aisle, whether she was paying for her own food

or if they were deducting it from her next pay cheque. It wasn't until then that her employers began giving her unsolicited loans and buying her things she had never asked for— including her own birthday cake— only to later charge her for them. And it wasn't until then that the mere idea of "overtime hours" became unthinkable. As we parted ways that evening, I left perplexed by how people could change so dramatically in their treatment of others. I left wondering whether their relationship would ever return to how it once was. But most of all, I left struck by how deeply a disaster could worm its way into people's everyday lives and pull at the very threads holding them together.

It's Not Just About the Fire

Wildfires can create their own weather. Burning through vast patches of dry fuel, intense heat rises from the ground, carrying water vapour and ash that condense into clouds. Sometimes these clouds produce lightning, sparking new fires as they strike. They are unpredictable, yet expected— stripping back decay and making space for new life. Fire, as Nigel Clark (2010) points out, "is a vital element in the mediation between local conditions and the wider world. Around fire bodies sway or strain the rhythms of matter and energy. Through fire [communities] remake themselves, make over their worlds, and make contact with others" (p.34).

As Reyna's story makes clear, this was the case in May 2016 when the Fort McMurray wildfire, nicknamed "the Beast," raged through Treaty 8 territory in Northern Alberta, leading to the largest prolonged evacuation in Canadian history. Fueled by the political and economic climate of extractive capitalism— of which Fort McMurray is a notable outpost— the wildfire ignited new crises in the lives of tens of thousands of people, including migrant caregivers like Reyna. This thesis is about them. In drawing directly upon caregivers' accounts of the wildfire, it is about the new crises that this disaster sparked in their everyday lives. It is about how the conditions of their labour were altered and their relationships to their employers transformed. Consequently, this thesis is about far more than just caregivers' individual experiences. Rather, as Reyna's story demonstrates, caregivers' accounts of the fire are also a window into the disaster's financial, psychological, and social reproductive impacts on families and their strategies of mitigating such effects.

But this thesis is not just about the *outcome* of the fire. In fact, studying the outcome is, in many ways, just a means of achieving its central objective, which is to understand the political and economic *making* of this disaster. As such, this thesis is about uncovering the *human foundation* that rendered the wildfire *into* a disaster in the lives of those undergoing it. Put another way, my aim is to expose the "vast patches of dry fuel" that exist in everyday life in Fort McMurray— patches that, when lit by the ecological event of the fire, simply exacerbated the community's *pre-existing* crises. So while Reyna's life was dramatically altered by the fire, in scouring the surface of her experience, we are able to see that such dramatic changes were unlikely to have materialized had it not been for a set of *enabling* conditions already embedded in both her and her employers' everyday lives. By this means, in moving across Fort McMurray's political-economic landscape, the fire in many ways revealed the unfolding crises of capitalism— of finance, ecology, migration, and social reproduction— that were constitutive of the disaster.

In following the experiences of those who serve as 'the invisible threads of capitalism,' this thesis is about how these crises are both woven into and reproduced in our everyday lives. At its core, it is a qualitative study on the experiences of migrant domestic workers in the wake of the Fort McMurray wildfire and an exploration into what said experiences tell us about how these crises of capitalism are unfolding in this particular socio-space (Fraser, 2014). In drawing upon thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with caregivers and key informants, it examines— through the lens of this social reproductive workforce— the process of re-establishing daily life amidst growing political, economic and ecological insecurity. Because stories like Reyna's reveal far more than just individual experiences, they provide a glimpse into how these crises are sutured together and absorbed through the social reproductive labour of this largely disposable workforce.

Most critically, they illustrate how in much the same way that communities are physically rebuilt through the extraction of workers' surplus value, they are socially reconstituted through the extraction of caregivers' social reproductive *surplus value*. And while the experiences of migrant caregivers make clear that this surplus value is *always* being extracted to mitigate the effects of crisis, stories like Reyna's vividly depict how the shifting conditions of care in the wake of the fire exacerbated this practice. Indeed, it is arguably these shifting conditions that demand the use of this analytical concept to provide theoretical clarity. For as Reyna's experience demonstrates, in so effectively blurring the distinctions between paid and unpaid labour, the fire cries out for a conceptual apparatus that can help explain "what is really going

in." Finally, in rupturing daily routine and throwing open the relationship between production and social reproduction, I see the fire as an apt case in which to interrogate the interconnectedness of these crises and the role of social reproductive surplus as a binding agent of these relationships. So while this thesis sheds light on the multiple strands of capitalist crisis whose impacts are mitigated by such extraction, in holding this concept of social reproductive surplus central to my analysis, the theoretical questions and contributions at its heart concern the crisis of social reproduction, in particular.

Straddling the boundary between paid labour and the unpaid work of everyday life, social reproduction is a powerful tool to illuminate the growing insecurity and instability engendered by our capitalist productive system. Conceptualized by Marx and Engels as the processes that transmit social inequality across generations, social reproduction is most often used to invoke "the varied processes involved in maintaining and reproducing individuals and societies over time" (Strauss, 2012, p.182). As a concept, it often refers to three interrelated processes: biological reproduction, the reproduction of the labouring class, and provisioning and carework (Strauss, 2012; Katz, 2001; Bakker and Gill, 2003; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Luxton, 2006; Luxton and Bezanson, 2006; Bakker, 2007). Or, as feminist geographer Cindi Katz (2001) puts it, it is "the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfolds in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension" (p.710).

I use the crisis of social reproduction as an ontological entry point for examining how capitalism, as a contradiction-laden system, operates as an everyday disaster hollowing out the social bases upon which accumulation depends (Matthewman, 2015). This is inevitably a spatial process (Massey, 1994). As Katz (2001), writes:

> By looking at the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed— and the havoc wreaked on them by a putatively placeless capitalism— we can better expose both the costs of globalization and the connections between vastly different sites of production (p.709).

I see such attention to spatiality as having the potential to address ongoing critiques of political economy's tendency to homogenize subjects, experiences, arrangements, and family forms in an increasingly mobile and globalized world (Dunaway, 2014; Mohanty, 2003; Parreñas, 2008; Pratt and Yeoh, 2003). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) asserts, "Crises are spatially and sectorally

uneven, leading to different outcomes for different kinds of people in different kinds of places (cf. Smith, 1984; Walker, 1995)" (p.55). Thus, in upholding this assertion, it becomes clear that *place matters* in our attempts to lay bare the material consequences of global capitalism and how they manifest in everyday life.

With this, I am not asking these questions just anywhere. I am asking them in Fort McMurray— in a notorious outpost of transnational capital known for its excavated boreal landscape and 21st century 'boomtown' culture. I am asking these questions in a community that sits atop the world's third-largest known oil deposit, in a place where everyday life is shaped by the price of a barrel of oil. Located on Treaty 8 territory in Northern Alberta, at the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers, Fort McMurray is a frontier urban settlement and the primary service centre for the Athabasca tar sands. Occupying the colonized traditional territory of Cree, Dene and Métis peoples, the community served as a remote Hudson's Bay Trading Post of less than a thousand people until the establishment of the Great Canadian Oil Sands Company in the 1960s. However, it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that the region underwent a period of massive transformation, becoming— in large part— a community closely resembling the one it is today. It was at this time that over 100 billion dollars were poured into the process of extracting bitumen from beneath the muskeg bogs and boreal forest (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy, 2013), provoking migration from across Canada and around the world, and swelling work camps throughout the region.

By the early 2000s, this tremendous expansion of industry had positioned the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo— of which Fort McMurray is the largest centre— as the fastest growing municipality in Canada (Foster and Taylor, 2013). As Sara Dorow (2015) notes:

> The population of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) grew from over forty thousand to approximately a hundred thousand in the booming first decade of the century (RMWB 2012), and according to Statistics Canada, it had the highest median family income in the nation in 2010, at $169,790 (Statistics Canada 2012). (pp. 277-278)

By 2015, at the time of the most recent census before the fire, the overall population stood at 125,032, with close to a quarter of households reporting annual incomes exceeding $250,000 (RMWB, 2015). However, the impact of the oil price collapse, which began in 2014, had yet to fully materialize by the time the census was conducted (Reith, 2015). Rather, as Dorow (2015; 2016) and other scholars active in the region have noted (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy, 2013; Major and Winters, 2013; Foster and Taylor, 2013), in Fort McMurray, thousands of contract

workers are needed at particular times, in particular amounts, and for particular durations—resulting in there often being a lag before the full brunt of a recession sets in (Reith, 2015).

Consequently, this means that I am investigating the crisis of social reproduction, in particular, in a contemporary resource town where social reproductive labour is extracted to sustain the simultaneous extraction of the fossil fuel industry— an industry whose existence, in an era of climate crisis, increasingly threatens life itself. In Fort McMurray, as in the rest of Canada, the devolution of social reproduction onto the household level has intensified gendered and racialized inequalities (Gazso, 2009; Harder, 2003). However, while production and social reproduction are inextricably linked everywhere, this highly gendered and mutually constitutive relationship is rendered particularly observable in this place that is so intimately tied to a single resource industry. As Dorow (2015) notes, in Fort McMurray, "gender inequities are not (only) side effects of the energy economy (Ross 2008) but are integral to the broad social arrangements that allow for wealth accumulation" (p.276). Indeed, the high-income opportunities offered by the oil industry have created a highly stratified economy, whereby women and visible minorities are overrepresented in the largely invisible, feminized, and precarious industries of service and carework. And while these sectors are gendered and racialized throughout Canada and much of the Global North, this trend is particularly pronounced in the tar sands region where the percentage of these jobs occupied by women is higher than in both Alberta and Canada as a whole (Dorow, 2015). Like Reyna, many of these workers have largely entered the country under two of Canada's migrant workers programs: the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and Canada's Caregiver Program.

However, in Fort McMurray, the capitalist valuation of bitumen does more than simply create a highly-stratified economy that exacerbates the division between productive and social reproductive labour; it also profoundly alters the rhythms of everyday life and binds other crises of capitalism tightly to that of social reproduction. Here, oil's inevitable boom-and-bust tendencies dictate everything from elementary school class sizes, to the cost of childcare, to the wait time at the Tim Hortons' drive-thru. During boom-time conditions, modular classrooms extend from corporate-branded school buildings in an attempt to accommodate class sizes hovering close to 40 students (D'Aliesio, 2015); the high rate of employment and competition from higher-paid opportunities intensify the community's dire childcare shortage and send the costs of daycare soaring; and the lines at Tim Hortons' drive-thrus snake out onto main thoroughfares. With this, all strands of capitalist crisis coalesce in this place, bearing

consequences for the fulfillment of social reproduction.

Fort McMurray's primary resource dependence also demonstrates in raw form how the conditions of production and social reproduction are shaped by our physical environment. Consequently, Fort McMurray "facilitates the exploration of both precarious work and precarious life as mutually constitutive conditions of subordination and oppression" (Strauss and Meehan, 2015), and demonstrates how both these forms of precarity are intimately tied to, and in part produced *by*, the material and environmental circumstances of *life's work* [emphasis added] (p.1). Fort McMurray thus exists as an ideal site in which to respond to feminist theorists' call to further integrate ecological perspectives into a social reproduction feminist (SRF) framework (Katz, Marston, and Mitchell, 2015; Strauss and Meehan, 2015; Fraser, 2012)— an endeavor that becomes all the more critical as we are confronted globally with the effects of climate change.

Related to the temporalities unique to an oil economy, I am also not asking these questions at just anytime. Rather, I am asking them at a critical moment where these overlapping crises have begun to widen existing social welfare gaps and deepen the insecurity of everyday life in this remote outpost of transnational capital. As Kendra Strauss and Katie Meehan (2015) put it, "long after the workday expires and the shop floor is shuttered, these crises hemorrhage into the spaces of life's work" (p.3). In Fort McMurray, the rapid slide and subsequent stagnation of the price of oil in recent years has resulted in 'For Sale' signs lining the community's suburban streets and building cranes standing idle above unfinished condominiums. Before the wildfire occurred, the low price of oil had already provoked project cancellations and widespread layoffs, creating a cloud of uncertainty that loomed large overhead.

However, these crises have been rendered all the more observable by the existence of, and the community's subsequent recovery from, the wildfire. Indeed, as previously mentioned, in drawing upon critical disaster studies, I view the disaster as being produced by the existence of these interlocking crises. Thus, in studying Fort McMurray in the wake of the fire, I am interrogating social reproduction in a rare moment where daily routine has been ruptured and the connection between production and social reproduction suspended (at least temporarily). For this reason, I see the wildfire as a critical opportunity to theorize how these crises are woven into our everyday lives through processes of social reproduction. In having to re-establish everyday life in the wake of such extreme events, I view disaster as a critical window into the crisis of social reproduction and how it manifests in our everyday lives.

Regrettably, thus far, the value of studying natural disasters as a *means* of building and extending upon social reproduction feminism (SRF) has largely been overlooked by feminist theorists.[2] Yet, even the most shallow dive into disaster literature reveals the theoretical and practical insight offered by such events. As anthropologist Susanna Hoffman (1998) writes:

> To use, I think, an apt metaphor, in the starkness of disruption as a people recover and reconstruct, they expose the foundations of their cultural structure, the framing of their ties, the joists beneath their cultural character, the divisions by which they organize space, time, and objects, the doors of their conflicts, and the elevation of their ideology. All of it lies open to the ready observer (p.56).

With this, one would clearly expect social reproduction feminists to take interest in the theoretical insights offered by natural disasters, *especially* those who see connecting social and environmental concerns as essential to building a more robust social reproduction feminist framework (Katz, Marston and Mitchell, 2015). In illuminating the "coevolutionary relationship of human societies and nature systems" (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p.45), natural disasters require political-ecological thinking and are thus fertile grounds for examining the ecological foundations of social reproduction (or what Katz (2001) refers to as "the material grounds of reproduction").

Core Contributions

This thesis is intended to accomplish three things. First, in drawing upon the experiences of migrant caregivers, this thesis is a deliberate attempt to tell the stories of those that fell outside the limelight. In the wake of the fire, public attention was drawn to the resurrection of Canadian citizen families' everyday lives and still today, it is this narrative that so often resurfaces every time a commemorative statue is erected, an anniversary of the wildfire is marked, or a relief effort in support of other communities afflicted by disaster is mounted. But as with other "natural" disasters, I see the fire as a "lens for focusing on the unequal distribution of flourishing that render some bodies, some workforces, and some communities far more

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[2] A notable exception to this is feminist geographer Cindi Katz's paper entitled, "Bad elements: Katrina and the scoured landscape of social reproduction" (2008), in which she uses Hurricane Katrina to draw attention to the failures of both the state and capital to address issues of social reproduction. She compellingly argues that "Hurricane Katrina scoured the political economic landscape of New Orleans revealing the toll of decades of disinvestment in and 'hostile privatism' toward social reproduction in a city with corrosive inequalities around class, race, and gender" (p.15).

precarious than others" (Strauss and Meehan, 2015, p.2). Since the first evacuation order until today, there have been thousands of migrant workers labouring in the background— supporting families and reconstituting this resource community from the margins. Caregivers prepared the meals left behind on stovetops, comforted children amidst the flames, and absorbed the shock of families in crisis. And still today, it is caregivers who continue to brace the everyday lives of a community that has not yet recovered. This thesis is an attempt to share their experiences and to expose the conditions which similarly rendered the Fort McMurray wildfire *into a disaster for them.*

Second, I seek to reveal how disaster (especially when viewed through the perspective of this social reproductive workforce) is a critical lens into the crisis of social reproduction— one capable of illuminating its roots and intersections with other strands of crisis. I argue that when we see disasters for their *human foundation,* it becomes clear that social reproduction lies at the heart of what renders any natural hazard disastrous in the lives of those impacted. Disasters reveal the social reproductive fault lines that bring them into being. As such, I aim to construct a framework capable of illustrating how disaster is, in part, *produced by* the interlocking crises of capitalism. In laying a foundation of social and economic insecurity, I argue that these crises (of finance, ecology, social reproduction, and migration) enhanced both the "socially disruptive and materially destructive capacities" of the wildfire (Barrios, 2017, p.253). In being fueled by the political and economic climate of extractive capitalism, the Fort McMurray wildfire and the experiences of those subject to it indicate that there is no such thing as a "natural" disaster. Rather, the stories I was told prove that disasters are deeply political, although unexceptional, events. In following the work of Cindi Katz (2015) and other critical feminist geographers, my intent is thus "both to take stock of the ways anxiety about the future has crept into the pores of the contemporary social formation *even in its more privileged sites* [emphasis added] and to show how their responses affect those whose existence is historically more precarious" (p.183).

Furthermore, in disrupting daily routine and rupturing the relationship between production and social reproduction, disasters allow us the rare opportunity to observe the material social practices through which people rebuild and organize their everyday lives. Therefore, in holding the crisis of social reproduction central to my analysis, I aim to demonstrate how this crisis, in particular, offers a way into understanding how the crises of capitalism are intimately bound together and absorbed into our everyday lives. Social

reproduction, I argue, is *the* thread suturing these crises together— allowing them to be resettled and re-produced on a daily basis.

These two goals— of recounting caregivers' stories and demonstrating the analytical power of disaster as a *lens* into the crisis of social reproduction— both work in service of my third and final goal: to expose exactly *how* everyday life is re-established amidst the rubble of crisis, whether it be financially, politically or ecologically produced. It is through the extraction of their *surplus value*, I argue, that migrant caregivers in Fort McMurray exist as the 'invisible threads of capitalism,' enabling the oil industry's process of accumulation to persist by fulfilling the unique social reproductive demands of a community tied this industry. In filling the gaps created by a lack of affordable childcare, a frenetic pace of life, and long and irregular hours, this racialized and feminized workforce braces "the gendered infrastructure of a political economy built on oil" on a daily basis (Dorow, 2015, p.276). By this means, I view caregivers as an embodiment of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) claim that, "in the rubble of extensive restructuring, individuals and families have developed alternate modes of social reproduction, given their utter abandonment by capital" (p.74). As caregivers' post-fire experiences reveal, it was through the extraction of their *social reproductive* surplus value that citizen-households living in Fort McMurray were able to re-establish their daily lives and reconstitute community in the wake of the wildfire.

However, this disaster has not only taken a toll on caregivers, but has also impacted their families halfway around the world. In a global economy where processes of social reproduction are stretched across borders, their stories are proof that the impacts of crises reverberate around the world. As migrant workers precariously tied to this 'land of opportunity,' the experiences of caregivers prove that both disasters and crises are entangled with new patterns of immigration policies, transnational 'care chains', and border regimes. In an era of global climate change, their stories beg us to ask what it says about a community's capacity for resilience when those rebuilding their everyday lives are considered disposable.

Surplus Value Extraction and Social Reproduction

It is through the everyday practices of social reproduction— life's work— that a social formation as much as its laboring bodies and the conditions of production are made and remade, and where the toll of neoliberal governance and various forms of oppression and dispossession is experienced in visceral ways.

Before proceeding any further, it is worth positioning social reproduction in relation to production in order to explain surplus value extraction and its value as an ontological entry point and key theoretical thread. While often treated as an analytically distinct process separate from that of production, feminist scholars have long-emphasized that social reproduction subsidizes global commodity chains and is thus inseparable from its parallel process of production (Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2004). For this reason, I connect surplus value extraction to productive commodity chains to foreground the extraction of *social reproductive surplus,* which directly subsidizes global capitalism and is thus essential to sustaining the crises.

As Melissa Wright (2006) notes, "Marx begins his analysis of capital with the commodity precisely to demonstrate that the things of capital cannot be understood without seeing their intimate relationship to the people who make them" (p.79). He writes of commodities as containers of hidden social relationships— ones capable of concealing structures of power and strategies for resisting capital's exploitation. For Marx, the extraction of surplus value is one such practice disguised by the "black box" of the commodity (Collins, 2014). In selling workers' commodified labour power for a sum less than the value of what they have produced, capitalists are able to profit off workers by extracting their 'surplus value' (Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2014). Surplus value can thus be understood as simply "the difference between the value a laborer adds to the thing he makes [...] and the money he receives for his work" (Hochschild, 2014, p.253). As Sayer (1991) explains:

> If [a worker's] working day or week exceeds the labour-time embodied in their wage, they are creating surplus value: a value over and above the variable capital investment, for which they will receive no recompense… Profit can thus arise… Its premise is exploitation of labour (p.3 quoted in Anderson, 2000, p.227).

Marx was largely concerned with how this exploitation operated within the public realm and largely failed to extend his theory of surplus value to the private realm of the household (Anderson, 2000). But as Marxist feminists and feminist political economists have long argued, examining the materiality of commodities' production and circulation— that is, cracking open these black boxes— demands that we focus on social reproductive relations and the surpluses (both visible and hidden) that are extracted from households (Brenner and Laslett, 1991; Colen, 1995; Glenn, 1992; 2002; Hochschild, 1989; Federici, 2001; 2012; Bezanson, 2006).

In a notable 1977 article, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein conceptualized the commodity chain as a "network of labor and production processes," arguing that such a chain must capture "the reproduction of the labor forces involved in these productive activities" (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1977, pp.127-28). As Wilma Dunaway (2013) notes, they focused on a pivotal question: "If one thinks of the entire chain as having a total amount of surplus value that has been appropriated, what is the division of this surplus value among the boxes of this chain?" (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1994, p.49). With this, they complicated what had previously been regarded as a relatively straightforward network, arguing that the entire chain was incomplete without considering the gendered and racialized exploitation of workers, the intermingling of waged and unwaged work, the extraction of surplus value from households, and the persistent devaluation of household labour (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1977, 1994).

Thus, in positioning the household as a critical site of production (Yeates, 2004), we are able to observe how (often) unwaged labour maintains workers on both a daily basis, as well as intergenerationally (Glenn, 2010). Furthermore, as sociologist Jane Collins (2014) has noted, investigating these hidden relations:

> allows us to recover some of what neoclassical economics makes us forget: living, breathing, gendered, and raced bodies working under social relations that exploit them; bodies living in households with persons who depend on them and on whom they depend; and bodies who enter into the work of making a living with liveliness, creativity and skill (p.27).

Consequently, this way of analyzing commodities is particularly valuable insofar as it reminds us that, "production and reproduction share the same material and social bases, even though theorists artificially separate them" (Dunaway, 2014, p.5). Of course these lines have become increasingly blurred as social reproductive labour, such as carework, has been inserted into the for-profit market. As such, it is important to note that in an era of increasingly privatized care, surplus value is not only being extracted *from* households in the interest of sustaining capitalist production but is also being extracted *within* households through commodified forms of care like the hiring of and subsequent exploitation of migrant caregivers, in turn creating a 'chain' of surplus extraction. I turn now to the global commodity chain to which Fort McMurray is tightly bound, in order to bring these concepts and relationships between production, social reproduction, and surplus value extraction to life in the context where the wildfire occurred.

Extracting Crude, Extracting Surplus

Domestic work … is the work that makes all other work possible.

— Ai-jen Poo, *Disposable Domestics,* 2016, p.vii

Picture for a second fracturing open the black commodity box of crude oil originating from the Athabasca tar sands. In breaking it apart, we are left with a tangled mess of productive and social reproductive practices that have brought this commodity into being. We are exposed to the process of extraction, to the giant heavy haulers and electric shovels traversing the open pit mines and excavating ore from the mine face. We are taken to the processing plants, to the steam generation facilities, to the upgraders and refineries. We are thrown into a complex process of production— one of such scale and magnitude that it becomes difficult to fathom.[3]

Yet, at each of these stages of adding value through processing, oil workers' surplus value is being extracted in much the same way that the high-value bitumen is skimmed off the water, sand and silt, and transformed into capitalist profit. In not being paid the full value of the product they are producing, oil workers' surplus value is expropriated by their transnational corporate employers and converted into profit. Some have even attempted to quantify this parallel form of extraction. Canadian labour economist Jim Stanford (2011) calculated that in 2010, the top multinational corporations operating in the resource sector— including many of the tar sands' "Majors" such as Suncor, Imperial, and CNRL— made approximately $325,000 in profit from the labours of *each* worker in the sector overall (which includes, but is not limited to, the production of petroleum)(Major and Winters, 2013). But while these productive processes are perhaps the easiest to visualize outside the black box, entangled with them are parallel processes of social reproduction. For every worker driving a heavy hauler or inspecting equipment on-site, there are others on the periphery ensuring they are clothed, fed, and housed— wives doing laundry, hotel housekeepers making beds, or worksite cooks preparing meals. Add children to the picture and we are left with yet another invisible workforce enabling the extraction of these workers' surplus value: migrant nannies caring for workers' children in their absence and raising the next generation of labourers. However, in many instances, these

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[3] At the time of writing, Suncor's $17 billion Fort Hills project was opened. The Fort Hills mine is larger than the City of Vancouver, with the existing boreal forest— or what the industry refers to as *overburden*— having been cleared from the area to enable access to the bitumen ore below the surface (Bakx, 2018).

caregivers are also performing carework for the workers themselves— cleaning their homes, preparing their meals, and laundering their clothes, among a wide range of other tasks.

Overall, in shattering the black box of crude oil, we are able to see that this commodity is produced not only through a process of physical extraction but through myriad parallel processes of surplus value extraction, particularly that of social reproductive surplus (Dorow, 2015). As Nancy Fraser (2016) reminds us:

> Non-waged social-reproductive activity is necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism as such. None of those things could exist in the absence of housework, child-rearing, schooling, affective care and a host of other activities which serve to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production in capitalist society (p.102).

In having its economy firmly tied to a single industry, the tensions between production and social reproduction are arguably magnified in Fort McMurray yet often obscured from view. The preponderance of work and the "co-naturalization of oil and community" (Dorow, 2017, p.91) in this place results in us often forgetting about the social reproductive practices this community shares with all others.[4] Rather, in fixing our eyes on the productive processes of bitumen extraction, we overlook the parents preparing children's lunches, the packed recreation centres on Saturday mornings, and the lengthy waitlists for daycare facilities. But it is here, in this sphere, where the tensions and contradictions of the oil economy exert a structural pressure over everyday life. It is here, in these everyday practices of social reproduction, "that a social formation as much as its laboring bodies and the conditions of production are made and remade, and where the toll of neoliberal governance and various forms of oppression and dispossession is experienced in visceral ways" (Katz, 2015, p.185). Most importantly, it is here, "in the mundane and unspectacular practices by which we construct ourselves and reproduce society," where we find the potential for rupture and transformation (Katz, 1991, p.262).

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[4] As Dorow (2017) notes, "As it has underwritten new arrangements of global capitalist accumulation over the last century, oil has offered up community by reconstituting the possible forms and imaginaries of collective social life [...] At the same time, the co-naturalization of oil and community has served to distract from the very forms of inequality and violence it entails" (p.91). For more see "Community" in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*.

The Seeds of Catastrophe:
A Crisis in Four Dimensions

At times of crisis, the irrationality of capitalism becomes plain for all to see.

— Sharad Chari, *Subalternities that Matter in Times of Crisis,* 2012

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed an escalation in global crises that have arguably laid bare the contradictions of capitalism, including that of social reproduction (Harvey, 2004; 2010; Conway and Heynen, 2006; Chari, 2012; Fraser, 2012; 2014; 2016). While often theorized at the macro-scale, such crises have resulted in an aggressive reordering of people's everyday lives as financialized capitalism has extended deeply into the household and reproductive spheres of society (LeBaron, 2010; Fraser, 2015). Yet, in the wake of such events like the 2008 global financial crisis, the majority of analysts have turned their attention almost exclusively to the economic realm thus failing to capture the profound complexity and interconnectedness of our present crisis (Williams, 2017; Fraser, 2013; 2014).

A notable exception lies in the work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser who, in recent years, has recalled Karl Polanyi's contributions and constructed a conceptual framework of overlapping crises (Fraser, 2012; 2014). Fraser (2014) argues that today's crisis is multidimensional, extending far beyond the realm of economy and finance to include crises of ecology, society, and politics. As Kendra Strauss and Katie Meehan (2015) similarly point out:

> From global warming to the most recent financial meltdown, crises have dramatically reshaped conditions of economic production and social reproduction, in turn destabilizing— and sometimes fracturing— the relations that we have historically understood as grounds for political change. Governments enact drastic cuts to social spending and welfare services in the name of deficit reduction; states "get tough" on immigration but not financial profiteering; hurricanes and other natural disasters scour livelihoods and landscapes; and unregulated and informal employment balloons as old certainties expire with the standard employment relationship (p.2).

It is this *convergence* of crises— of finance, environment, and social reproduction— that demands a new critical theory that resists "critical separatism" and captures each crisis in relation to its others (Fraser, 2012).

According to Fraser (2012; 2014), such a theory would both elucidate the interconnections between these crises and "explore the possibility that all three derive from a common source in the deep structure of society and that all three share a common grammar" (p.4). It would point to the way in which speculation sparked the global financial crisis, resulting in a destabilization of investment and intensification of neoliberal policies that have further embedded social relations into the global capitalist economy (Williams, 2017; LeBaron, 2010). It would also capture how the commodification of both care and the natural environment has resulted in their devaluation and subsequent exploitation around the globe (Mies, 2014; Moore, 2015; Salleh, 1997; 2009; 2010). As sociologist Fiona Williams (2017, p.31) makes clear, such a theory demonstrates that "these crises are linked by the ways in which each jeopardizes security, human solidarity and sustainability."

I echo Fraser's call for a revision of Polanyi's framework that "not only overcomes economism and ecologism but also avoids romanticizing and reifying "society" and thereby whitewashing domination"(p.5). Therefore, in committing to this critique of power and its accompanying hierarchies and exclusions, I follow Fiona Williams (2017) and add the crisis of migration to Fraser's three-dimensional framework. I see this inclusion as critical if we are to construct a theoretical model capable of capturing global injustice in an era of capitalist crisis. However, I believe such a theory must also resist the macro-level tendency of creating a homogenizing narrative of crises and their associated impacts. In holding the potential to capture the tensions and contradictions that exist both between and within crises, such a framework should instead expose their geographic and temporal specificities. But in calling for the revival of the large-scale project of social theorizing, Fraser (2012) does not hold such a meso-level objective central to her work; yet, it is arguably only through the everyday level that we might come to better illuminate the roots of crisis and the relations between them so as to dismantle them altogether.

Much like the confluence of rivers that lies at the heart of the city, Fort McMurray is host to all four strands of capitalist crises, which are deeply entangled and impossible to understand in abstraction from their others. This became glaringly obvious in the aftermath of the wildfire when all four crises not only converged but were in many ways magnified by the existence of the "natural" disaster. As Reyna's story illustrates, the wildfire *became* disastrous as it moved across the scoured social reproductive landscape of Fort McMurray— magnifying and igniting new crises rooted in austerity and credit-led accumulation (Soederberg, 2016). Thus, in

building on this metaphor, it is fitting that the wildfire was named after one of these rivers. For while the existence of all four crises brought this disaster into being, I argue that in following the crisis of social reproduction, in particular, we are able to trace the disaster's point of origin and expose how the conditions enabling its existence are made and remade in everyday life. For thousands of individuals and families living in Fort McMurray it was unemployment, housing insecurity, household debt, and hollowed out public services that rendered the wildfire into a disaster in their everyday lives.

Disaster as Method

The fault lines of cultures and societies are often exposed when disasters upend the routines of order and hierarchy. But more than fire, brimstone, and cracking earth are necessary for us to see and identify just what is revealed when disasters strike.

— Shelly Brown-Jeffy and Steve Kroll-Smith, *Recovering Inequality: Democracy, the Market Economy, and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire,* 2009, p.98

Disaster requires an ability to embrace contradiction in both the minds of those undergoing it and those trying to understand it from afar.

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell,* 2010, p.15

On June 1st, 2016, as thousands of evacuees returned home to Fort McMurray, Premier Rachel Notley stood before reporters and said, "Today is not the end of this story. It is not a return to normal life and it's not yet a celebration. There is still a lot of work to recover and rebuild. This will be the work of years, not weeks."

Disasters are a lens. They result from human practices and human decisions that have enhanced the destructive capacities of natural systems and have eroded the adaptive capacities of social systems. Consequently, they are fundamentally defined by the communities they target, and thus expose us to the fragility and vulnerability embedded in the everyday lives of those they affect. They expose the pressure points of the systems and structures we have created with their impacts falling along the social, political, and economic fault lines of our own making. As renown disaster sociologist, Kai Erikson (2005), writes:

In the same way that earthquakes seem to seek out the most vulnerable linkages in physical structures, disasters in general seem to seek out the most vulnerable linkages in social structures. It must sometimes feel to victims as though disasters are like heat-seeking missiles, scanning the landscape for its most precarious workplaces, its least protected persons, its flimsiest connective tissues, and its most badly bruised spirits (p.358).

For environmental scientists, they are a lens into the ecological consequences of climate change. For political scientists— a lens into the inequitable distribution of power, into the failures of political institutions, and into the political economic conditions of everyday life. For sociologists, disasters offer a lens into the vulnerabilities produced by poverty, sexism, and racism. They are a way of illuminating the cushioning effects of social capital, the social bonds that brace communities, and the social structures that underlie resilience.

Disasters cry out for interdisciplinary thought. By existing as both material events and complex social constructions, they demand analyses that overcome disciplinary divides (Oliver-Smith, 2002). Yet, despite this, much of the literature on disaster still remains "fragmented along disciplinary lines, with each field focusing on its own domain of interest" (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p.24). For this reason, I approach this study with the deliberate intention of transcending such disciplinary divisions. I draw upon disaster literature from the fields of anthropology, political ecology, disaster sociology, and critical geography in an attempt to collapse some of the theoretical boundaries that persist in our understandings and conceptualizations of disaster. Furthermore, as previously noted, I view an emphasis on social reproduction as a critical way of achieving this aim. By encompassing a multiplicity of interwoven conditions, practices, and relations, social reproduction similarly demands theorizing across disciplinary divides. Like disaster, it also requires that "the barrier between human activity and ecosystem activity [...] be collapsed, thus transforming a relationship of difference into a relationship of mutuality" (Oliver-Smith, 2009, p.13). With this, the aims of both critical disaster studies and social reproduction feminism are arguably mutually compatible and able to be reciprocally achieved.

Research Design and Methodology

This thesis draws primarily upon thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with migrant caregivers and key informants in Fort McMurray, Alberta between

August and October 2017. I travelled to and from Fort McMurray by bus, to conduct my fieldwork, at a time when an unprecedented fire season was raging to the west, sending thick clouds of smoke over Edmonton. Some days I sat quietly on the bus, reading disaster theory over free styrofoam cups of coffee. On other days, I would engage in conversation with the many workers curious about where I was going, what I was reading, and how I could possibly have a reason to head north. We spoke in hushed tones, discouraged from making any noise for the sake of the sleeping passengers working back-to-back shifts for whom the commute was their only break. More than once, the bus drivers assigned young children travelling solo to the empty seat beside me. I watched as their mothers and grandmothers craned their necks from the sidewalk below, looking relieved as I offered them a reassuring smile. With tiny rolling suitcases and backpacks full of colouring books, the kids were mostly travelling north for their dads' days-off.

I took four distinct trips up to Fort McMurray to conduct my interviews. Most were taken over weekends, with one lasting close to a week. I also attended several meetings and events hosted by the Fort McMurray Nanny Network, including their bi-annual Nanny Conference. The Fort McMurray Nanny Network is a collective of migrant caregivers that meets monthly to build community, share employment experiences, coordinate events, and hear of programs and services available to them in Fort McMurray. Through their Facebook page, the Nanny Network also functions as a recruitment tool for individuals and families looking to hire caregivers in the tar sands region; it served as my primary means of outreach and recruitment for the interviews with caregivers. While not directly tied to the study, I also travelled to the region on several occasions throughout the course of writing this thesis for reasons ranging from attending a National Energy Board (NEB) hearing for a proposed open-pit mine to going to an Indigenous-organized "Tar Sands Healing Gathering" on the Fort McMurray First Nation reserve.[5] [6] Such trips still helped to inform my understandings of Fort McMurray as a complex and contradiction-laden community.

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[5] The Tar Sands Healing Gathering was born out of the Tar Sands Healing Walk— a spiritual gathering of First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Athabasca watershed citizens, and environmental groups, which was first held in the summer of 2010. Organized by Indigenous women whose Nations' ancestral lands have been impacted by tar sands development, the 16-kilometre long Healing Walk was intended to bring awareness to the ecological, social, cultural, and health impacts of extraction in the region. At its height in 2013, over 500 people marched the loop past the tailings ponds and smokestacks surrounding Syncrude and Suncor's main plants. Today, the Healing Gathering is a much smaller gathering in Anzac that brings Indigenous peoples and allies together in ceremony for the land and water.

In total, I conducted seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with caregivers. These interviews stood in stark contrast to those I performed with key informants in the private and comfortable spaces of their offices. Caregivers and I met on park benches, at fast-food restaurants, outside public swimming pools, and in the bustling food court of the Peter Pond Mall. Sometimes we were forced to move as I watched them grow tense from the side-eyes of strangers— leaving where we were to walk around suburban ponds or sit in the quiet space offered by public art galleries. The interviews lasted on average between 45-90 minutes, with some lasting over four hours. Many caregivers were initially hesitant to talk to me, being understandably apprehensive about my assurance of complete anonymity given their precarious status. However, once they began, many caregivers often spoke for hours, disclosing that they felt unable talk about such things with others given how small Fort McMurray often felt. The interviews broadly covered caregivers' migration trajectories; their employment experiences and sense of community prior to the fire; their stories of evacuation and conditions of relocation; their employment experiences and sense of community following the fire and upon returning to Fort McMurray; and finally, their hopes for the future. The interviews often followed a narrative arc from pre- to post-fire, however, several caregivers often jumped back and forth between the two— comparing how their employment conditions and treatment had shifted in the wake of the disaster. Several of my interviews involved interviewing more than one person at a time; this was especially the case when I was interviewing key informants working in the same field or place of work, such as at the Red Cross.

All seven caregivers were working in childcare at the time of the fire— six as live in-caregivers and one as a childcare provider in a daycare who became a live-in caregiver following the fire. While several of the caregivers I interviewed were from the Philippines, four were from other developing countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Importantly, this demographic breakdown is not representative of the overall caregiver population in Fort McMurray, which is

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[6] While not touched upon in this thesis, First Nations communities in the region were also impacted by the Fort McMurray wildfire— some, like Fort McMurray First Nation, were directly affected by the fire itself, while others like Fort McKay First Nation were impacted by the resulting process of evacuation. Pointing to the ways in which structural vulnerability is exacerbated by disaster, a report released in October, 2018 found that Indigenous communities were largely neglected during the wildfire response (Thurton, 2018). The study, which took two years to complete, found that First Nations and Métis communities were left out of many stages of the response, reflecting "a major breakdown of communication," according to the author of the report. The report also found that "interactions between Indigenous communities, government officials and emergency volunteers were marked by a lack of sensitivity and fuelled an atmosphere of mistrust" (Thurton, 2018).

predominately comprised of Filipina women.[7] For this reason, I have changed the home country of the four women who are not from the Philippines in order to protect their anonymity. Questioning its relevance to the study, I decided not to ask the women their ages; however, consistent with Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen's 2015 report on caregivers in the region, I can reasonably assume that my participants ranged in age from 25 to 44 years old.[8] Similarly, reflecting the majority of caregivers employed under the Canadian Caregiver Program, each of the women I interviewed had lived and worked elsewhere before coming to Canada, with some working in multiple countries before arriving.[9] All of the Filipina women that I interviewed were mothers supporting children back in the Philippines. None of the remaining four had children.

Six of the seven caregivers I interviewed remained employed with their pre-fire employer for at least a few months following the wildfire while one was dismissed during the course of the evacuation. My initial intent was to restrict my interviews to those who were employed by the same families both before and after the fire but this proved incredibly difficult as many caregivers' employment situations shifted following the evacuation. However, in following a grounded theory approach, my initial findings began to guide my analysis such that this restriction became less important to adhere to.

The key informant interviews were conducted with a range of individuals working in the areas of childcare, migration and post-disaster recovery. Several interviews were conducted with key informants who were previously migrant workers in Canada before moving into migrant worker support roles at various community organizations upon receiving their permanent residency. These key informants, in many ways, also served as gatekeepers to migrant caregivers in the region. I also interviewed two senior advisers with the Red Cross— Guy Choquet, the Director of Alberta Fire Recovery Operations and Judi Frank, Senior Adviser of Safety and Wellbeing with Alberta Fire Recovery— as well as one Red Cross community support worker who works more directly with clients. Finally, I also interviewed a long-time childcare professional in the region who has years of experience working closely with both families and

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[7] In their 2015 report on caregivers in Fort McMurray, Dorow, Cassiano and Doerksen found that 87% of caregivers living in the region were Filipina.

[8] This same report found that 82% of caregivers in the Fort McMurray region were between the ages of 25 and 44. Only 2% were younger than 25 years old, and 16% were between the ages of 45 and 54. Based on the life experiences, migration trajectories, and the mentioned ages of my participants' children, my most educated assumption would place them between 26 and 37 years old.

[9] Most commonly, caregivers had worked in Hong Kong before coming to Canada, as is especially routine for Filipina women working abroad. However, the caregivers I interviewed had also worked in Norway, the United States, and the Netherlands as nannies, au-pairs, and domestic workers.

caregivers in Fort McMurray.

All of the interviews except one were recorded and transcribed before being coded by hand. Detailed notes were taken for the one caregiver who requested not to be recorded out of concern for her anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used for all of the caregivers in this thesis and any identifiable details have been removed. Conversely, all but one key informant in this study requested that their real names and positions be used to identify them. Extensive field notes were also taken throughout the research process and memos were recorded following every interview. I returned to these notes often throughout the process of analyzing my data.

In taking a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Bryant and Charmaz, 2011), coding by hand was selected for the flexibility it offered to conduct rigorous comparative analysis of the data. Initial coding helped direct subsequent data-gathering and allowed me to slightly alter both the questions I was asking and the responses I was choosing to probe. This approach is consistent with grounded theory's emphasis on theoretical sampling with the aim of informing theory construction (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout the initial coding of my data, I used constant comparative methods to find similarities and differences both within and between my interviews. Following my initial coding and simultaneous process of data collection, I conducted more focused coding in which I narrowed in on those codes that I found to have the greatest analytic value for building a theory reflective of the data.

Constructivist grounded theory was largely selected for its emphasis on building new theoretical contributions which are still able to be informed by pre-existing frameworks. As Pacholok (2013) notes, "grounded theory has been misinterpreted as a strictly inductive method; however, it can be grounded in existing theoretical frameworks while it is able to generate theory (Berg, 2001; Strauss, 1987)" (p.23). It was also selected as a method of data analysis due to its acknowledgement of the importance of positioning the researcher in relation to the participants, the data, and the rendering of participants' experiences into a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). With this, constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that the researcher both reconstructs and co-constructs experience and meaning within the research process. As Charmaz (2014) notes, "The constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert" (p.13), and thus demands that one engages in reflexivity. For this reason, throughout the research process, I sought to not only acknowledge how my own privileges and preconceptions were shaping my analysis, but also to interrogate how my own values and positionality as a white, upper-middle class, Canadian-born citizen were also likely to

be influencing my own reading of the data.

The process through which I came to acknowledge my own relationship to this work was admittedly a slow one. It was not until a statement was made in my second key informant interview that I recognized how strongly my own lived experience of carework was connected to this research. I was sitting across from Ramazan Nassery, a former migrant worker and long-time migrant support worker when he said to me:

> The mayor of our city has a live-in caregiver, right? So… a caregiver's job is *as* important as the Mayor of our city because if the caregiver is not in the home than the Mayor should be staying at home to take care of her children. Right? So you have to understand the importance of it but people… don't think that way.

While I am in many ways ashamed to admit it, it took until that moment before I began drawing direct parallels between my own experience growing up with a full-time nanny and those of the children being cared for by migrant caregivers in Fort McMurray.

I was raised in an upper-middle class household in Ottawa where my two parents worked full-time— my father as a labour economist for a national trade union centre, and my mother as a bureaucrat rotating through various departments for the federal government over the course of my life. On account of their employment, both my older sister and I— together with two siblings living down the street from us— were cared for by a Canadian-born woman named Kim. For five days a week, from when I was born until the age of ten, Kim would come to our home to look after the four of us. She would prepare our meals; drop my sister off at school; drive me to dance classes, my sister to soccer practices; and bring us younger kids to libraries, parks, and recreational programs before, we too, were old enough to go to school. Kim was a second mother to us.[10] By all accounts, she raised me as much as my parents did— a fact that I was reminded of as I sat listening to Ramazan. And while his assertion that were it not for caregivers, it would be mothers forced to care for their children at home is a simplified one divorced from the responsibilities of the state and the obvious need for universal childcare, it was no less a reminder of the work Kim freed my mom from having to perform— a dimension, I realized, that only further complicated my relationship to the work.

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[10] Here, I use the word 'mother' intentionally to acknowledge the gendered nature of such carework and the inherent assumption that had it not been for Kim, my mother— and not my father— would be the one expected to fulfill this role and take on these responsibilities.

As I grew older, my mother continued to rise through the administrative ranks of the federal government, eventually becoming a senior bureaucrat in the same department that is now responsible for overseeing the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the various iterations of the Caregiver Program. I say this only to recognize— as feminist research so often does— the complicated ways in which my own understandings and interpretations have become shaped by my own subjectivity and life history (Barrios, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Smith, 1987; Jaggar, 1983; Naples, 2003; hooks, 2000). Sitting with the discomfort of this connection has no doubt shaped my own analytical lens. This tie, however distant, has also become foundational to my own desire to better understand the ways in which neoliberalism is not simply maintained by sheer violence and deceit but rather, consistently reproduced by our own seemingly rational attempts to navigate the everyday tensions and contradictions of capitalism. Much like the employers of migrant caregivers in Fort McMurray looking to fulfill social reproduction and accomplish particular social goals within the confines of a neoliberal care system, my mother was able to go to work for 11-hour days because Kim was at home caring for us. In the absence of adequate social supports like universal childcare, it is consistently privileged families like mine who have been able to stay afloat by grabbing ahold of the individualized and commodified forms of care still drifting within our financial reach.

Finally, in this same vein of acknowledging the experiences that are likely to have influenced my own interpretations of the data, I also feel it worth noting that I have spent the past two years volunteering as an English language instructor for predominantly Filipino temporary foreign workers, including migrant caregivers. In this role, I spend approximately five hours a week listening to the experiences of migrant workers, and while this work is separate from this study, it would be dishonest to suggest that my own analysis of the data could ever be fully removed from this experience. Over time, this role has also turned into being far more than just a volunteer language instructor. It has revealed to me the challenges migrant workers face in their attempts to navigate the everyday manifestations of capitalist crisis unfolding in their own lives. It has also exposed me to dimensions of the crisis of migration that are often hidden from view of Canadian citizens. I have accompanied undocumented workers to doctors' appointments, have cared for their children, and have assisted with drafting policy resolutions in an attempt to get migrant and undocumented workers the most basic human rights to which they should already be guaranteed. Again, I say all this only to make clear that although I may

try to keep them separate, my exposure to the deeply personal consequences of these structural regimes cannot be divorced from this work.

The Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapters Two and Three both provide particular ways of thinking about both Fort McMurray and the disaster so as to set the stage for understanding the unique experiences of caregivers and what said experiences reveal about the critical importance of social reproductive surplus value extraction (the subjects covered in both Chapters Four and Five). To begin, Chapter Two positions the thesis in the realm of feminist geography by pointing to the importance of situating studies of social reproduction *in place* in order to elucidate the situated impacts of capitalist crisis. With this, I situate the four crises of capitalism *in* Fort McMurray and trace their historical and socio-spatial roots. I seek to expose how political and economic insecurity has been produced and embedded in everyday life in this particular place, in part, through the conditions and relations unique to crude oil production.

Chapter Three turns to the wildfire. Building on the assertion that there is "no such thing as a natural disaster," this chapter focuses on both the ecological and political-economic making of disaster in Fort McMurray. Here, I draw largely upon my interviews with key informants in order to demonstrate how pre-existing precarity is what rendered the Fort McMurray wildfire into a disaster for both individuals and families.

Chapters Four and Five turn to the unique perspectives of migrant caregivers and what their experiences reveal about Fort McMurray's crisis of social reproduction. Chapter Four returns to pre-fire Fort McMurray in order to detail how, in everyday life, migrant caregivers serve as "the invisible threads of capitalism" in Fort McMurray by subsidizing the extractive industry and filling the social reproductive gaps left in its wake. Here, I draw upon the concept of surplus value to demonstrate how families navigate the everyday tensions of capitalism by extracting surplus value from their caregivers. However, understanding that this process of social reproductive extraction is largely invisible, I seek to expose the conditions that make this extractive process possible.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I argue that the expropriation of caregivers' surplus value was essential to re-establishing Fort McMurray's *social* infrastructure and re-constituting its social reproductive relations in the wake of the wildfire. In following the post-fire experiences of

caregivers, I maintain that their accounts of the disaster reveal both the extent to which, and the ways in which, they were leveraged as a tool for social recovery enabling families to mitigate the material, emotional, and psychosocial effects of the disaster in order to return to their everyday lives.

Overall, in illuminating the human foundation of the wildfire, this thesis is a call to de-exceptionalize disaster and recognize its embeddedness in our everyday lives. In recounting migrant caregivers' stories, in particular, it is an attempt to demonstrate how everyday life is a disaster for some and, through the hollowing out of our social and material bases, becoming all the more disastrous for us all.

CHAPTER TWO
"A MESS OF PROMISES":
CAPITALIST CRISES IN FORT MCMURRAY

Most descriptions of resource frontiers take for granted the existence of resources; they label and count the resources and tell us who owns what. The landscape itself appears inert: ready to be dismembered and packaged for export. In contrast, the challenge I've set myself is to make the landscape a lively actor. Landscapes are simultaneously natural and social, and they shift and turn in the interplay of human and nonhuman practices. Frontier landscapes are particularly active: hills flood away, streams are stuck in mud, vines swarm over fresh stumps, ants and humans are on the move. On the frontier, nature goes wild.

— Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, 2005

Situating Capitalist Crises in Fort McMurray:
Feminist Geographies and the Everyday

The future turbulent will be addressed through the specificities of location, no matter how loud the neoliberal drum beats.
— Ash Amin, *Surviving the Turbulent Future,* 2013

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed an escalation in the scale and scope of global crises, which have arguably laid bare the irrationalities and contradictions of capitalism (Harvey, 2004; 2010; Conway and Heynen, 2006; Chari, 2012; Fraser, 2014; 2016). In following the work of Nancy Fraser (2012; 2014), I consider these crises to include social reproduction, finance, ecology and, following Fiona Williams' (2017) recent addition, migration. While often theorized at the macro-level and often exclusively within the economic realm, such crises have resulted in an aggressive reordering of people's everyday lives and in a profound restructuring of social reproductive processes (LeBaron, 2010). As Fraser (2012) argues, "Evidently, today's crisis is multidimensional, encompassing not only economy and finance, but also ecology, society, and politics" (p.4). It is this *convergence* of crises, Fraser (2012) contends, that demands a new critical theory that resists "critical separatism" and captures each crisis in relation to its others. As she puts it:

> A critical theory for our time must encompass all three of these crises dimensions. To be sure, it must disclose the specificity of each. But it should also clarify the ways in which the ecological strand of crisis, the financialization strand of crisis, and the social reproduction strand of crisis are intertwined. Finally, it should explore the possibility that all three derive from a common source in the deep structure of society and that all three share a common grammar (p.4).

Such a theory, Fraser insists, would capture how the commodification of both care and the natural environment has resulted in their devaluation and subsequent exploitation around the globe (Mies, 2014; Moore, 2015; Salleh, 1997; 2009; 2010). As sociologist Fiona Williams (2017) such a theory would similarly demonstrate how "these crises are linked by the ways in which each jeopardizes security, human solidarity and sustainability."

However, I strongly believe that such a theory must also critically resist the common tendency of only examining these crises at the macro-level. Rather, as feminist geographers have long emphasized, the tensions and contradictions of capitalism must be studied in the specific spatial context in which they unfold (Bakker and Silvey, 2008). Thus, in situating these crises *in place*, I believe we are better able to capture the relationships that exist both between and *within* crises, and expose their geographic and temporal specificities. It is arguably only through the everyday level that we can come to elucidate *how* these crises are intertwined in the specific spatial and temporal contexts in which they unfold. This is particularly critical in the case of examining social reproduction, for as Cindi Katz (2001, p.715) reminds us, "Social reproduction

always take place somewhere, and the environments for its enactment are integral to its outcomes" (p.715). For this reason, examining the crisis of social reproduction *in place* can be thought of as a lens into the everyday manifestations of these other strands of capitalist crisis.

I seek to build a situated analysis of the four strands of capitalist crisis in Fort McMurray. It is from this foundational understanding of its political economy that we can begin to understand disaster as a process. But more than this, it is feminist geography's intentional inclusion of informal economic, cultural, and political spheres that exist within households and communities and that operate in everyday practices of care, that these crises— and disaster's reproduction and re-making of them— are made contextually specific. Indeed, in often holding social reproduction to their analyses, feminist geographers' approaches to capitalism fundamentally challenge the linear master narrative, replacing it instead with diverse, situated and at times, conflicting accounts of these everyday manifestations of crisis (Nagar, et al., 2002). Thus, in attempting to grapple with the everyday consequences of these crises, in the following chapter, I center social reproduction in particular, arguing that it is only in doing so that we can capture the essential role it plays in both subsidizing global commodity chains and absorbing the inevitable shocks of capitalist crisis. Furthermore, I argue that investigating social reproduction offers a way of situating *all* crises and illuminating their interactions with one another.

While I see resource communities as ideal sites in which to situate *all* strands of capitalist crisis, I argue that they are especially useful for investigating the crisis of social reproduction in particular; for in being strongly tied to one global commodity chain, resource communities often bring the tensions between production and social reproduction into sharp focus. Following the work of critical geographers Jamie Peck (2013a; 2013b) and Michael Watts (2016), I assert that as an oil frontier, Fort McMurray is a site where the "risks surrounding the capitalist production of hydrocarbons which invoke a multiplicity of market, technological, political and environmental dangers" (Watts, 2016, p.205) are rendered observable at the everyday level, holding consequences for the shape and form of its particular crisis of social reproduction. As Katz (2001) writes, by turning to social reproduction, we can see "the myriad ways in which capitalist production and its entailments have pushed people to drastic limits of their own resilience, and how willing capitalists have been to draw on that resilience for their own ends." By this means, investigating social reproduction *in* Fort McMurray enables us to see the *specific* ways in which the capitalist production of crude oil, in particular, has pushed households to the limits of their own resilience— a dynamic that, as I later discuss in Chapter Three and further

explicate in Chapters Four and Five, was rendered all the more visible in the wake of the fire. I turn now to this discussion on the value of situating crises of capitalism in resource communities before providing a political-economic history of Fort McMurray. Following this background, I collectively situate the crises of capitalism in Fort McMurray before shifting focus to the crisis of social reproduction, in particular.

Resource Communities and the Socio-Spatial Production of Capitalist Crises

Like a giant bulldozer, capitalism appears to flatten the earth to its specifications.
But all this only raises the stakes for asking what else is going on…

— Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* 2015

Obviously, in situating capitalist crises, the question of 'where' becomes critical to address not only how crisis is experienced *through* the specificities of place, but also how it is in fact shaped by the specificities of place. As sociologists Kevin Fox Gotham and Miriam Greenberg (2014) assert,"The ultimate development of a crisis is dependent upon the underlying *landscape of risk and resilience,* a landscape itself conditioned by the existing degree of inequality and risk and the strength or weakness of social and environmental protections" (p.6). In drawing upon critical geography and urban sociology, Gotham and Greenberg (2014) have joined geographers like Cindi Katz (2008), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), and Michael Watts (2016) in their attempt to elucidate how crises of capitalism are, in fact, produced by the context in which they unfold. These scholars maintain that not only do crises originate in social conditions but that these "conditions have historical and socio-spatial roots and are reproduced by political interventions at local, regional, national, and global scales" (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014, p.6). With this, studying crises becomes a matter of not only uncovering these underlying social conditions, but also unearthing their roots in the political-economic and socio-spatial production of *place.* As Cindi Katz (2008) puts it, "Geography is always socially produced. And so every landscape can reveal sedimented and contentious histories of occupation; struggles over land use and clashes over meaning, rights of occupancy, and rights to resources" (p.16).

The vast majority of existing literature on the socio-spatial production of crisis has, however, turned to cities to reveal how social conditions producing systemic risk are embedded in historical processes of capitalist urbanization (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Peck, 2007;

Peck and Tickell, 2002; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Campanella, 2008; Katz, 2008; Pelling, 2003). But while there are few comparable studies that take non-urban spaces as their focus, resource communities are arguably ideal sites in which to investigate the socio-spatial production of crisis.

It is through the 'pseudo-commodification' of land and natural resources that resource communities are "mobilized as forces of production and consumption" (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014, p.134), thus bringing the tensions of which into sharp relief. As David Harvey (2004) explains in his oft-cited essay, "The New Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," one of the pervasive tendencies of capitalism is to create crises of overaccumulation, which take form as surpluses of labour and capital without any means of bringing them together. These surpluses, he argues, are subsequently absorbed by several means, including their reallocation elsewhere through the opening up of new markets. The socio-spatial production of resource communities exists as one of such means. As Harvey (2004) puts it:

> The production of space, the organization of wholly new territorial divisions of labour, the opening up of new and cheaper resource complexes, of new dynamic spaces of capital accumulation, and the penetration of pre-existing social formations by capitalist social relations and institutional arrangements (such as rules of contract and private property arrangements) provide multiple ways to absorb existing capital and labour surpluses (p.65).

Resource communities thus exist as 'landscapes of dispossession' (Berg, 2011)— created and shaped by uneven, market-driven processes to absorb such surpluses and unleash new forms of accumulation. So while their pronounced role in the capitalist-economic system is nothing new, what is new, as Peck (2013) and Watts (2016) explain, is how they have been reshaped over time by neoliberal capital arrangements.

Consequently, resource communities are sites where capitalism's pursuit of profits— and its many unintended consequences— are brought into sharp relief. As geographers Young and Matthews (2007) note, "resource economies and regions offer unique opportunities for theory-building because these are sites where the political and economic tensions of capitalism manifest in exceptionally vivid and observable forms" (p.177). They maintain that resource communities are theoretically informative for three broad reasons: they are regions containing tremendous amounts of wealth that influence both local and global economies; they are places

where political and economic systems are strongly entrenched, making alterations to the status quo deeply transformational; and finally, they demonstrate how reforms to resource communities often involve both a rolling-back of the social wage and a rolling-out of neoliberalism (i.e. a withdrawal of the welfare state, followed by a purposeful implementation of neoliberal state forms) (Young and Matthews, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

By this means, resource communities are also places where strains on social reproduction can be especially apparent, becoming focused by the rapid change, social stressors, and care deficits that often materialize in these spaces. Indeed, the value of studying resource communities to examine the gendered and social reproductive tensions of capitalist development is similarly nothing new. Such dimensions were explored in much of the early boomtown literature conducted by rural and natural resource sociologists in mining and forestry communities throughout the late 1970s and 1980s (Santi, 1976; Veit, 1976; Luxton, 1980; Moen, 1981; Marchak, 1983). Much of this early literature reveals that during this time, the populations of these remote resource communities consisted of white, young, heterosexual families for whom the gendered divisions of labour were highly differentiated (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2013). And while this rigid distinction between the 'masculine' public sphere and the 'feminine' private sphere of course existed elsewhere, the literature points to how this dichotomy has long-been exceptionally pronounced in primary resource communities.

Critical here is the fact that many of the passages from this literature still resonate today and hint at the historical importance of *social reproductive* surplus value in upholding the industrial process. For example, in writing on women in forestry communities, Patricia Marchak (1983) found that:

> Though women are not employed in the forest industry in these towns, their presence is an important part of the context for these industrial processes. Women do the maintenance tasks in the homes and the service tasks in the offices, stores, shops, schools, and hospitals. In their absence, the forest company employers could not maintain company towns, and *the overall costs of obtaining a male labour force would sharply increase* [emphasis added]. (p.213)

Moreover, this early literature also points to the role women played in maintaining social cohesion, mediating the tensions of capitalist crisis, and absorbing the shocks of rapid social change (Gill, 1990; Albrecht, 1978; Reed, 2003a; 2003b). Overall, while much time has passed since these accounts— with resource communities having since been dramatically altered by

transnational capital, communication technologies, international labour recruitment, and environmental contestation— these studies still demonstrate the value of adopting resource communities as sites in which to situate capitalist crises and interrogate the crisis of social reproduction, in particular.

Today, regrettably few feminist geographers have turned to resource communities in order to link processes of everyday life with global transformations and power dynamics. However, as spaces that serve as a lynchpin between global commodities and international markets, resource communities like Fort McMurray are *strategic sites* for feminist political economic inquiry, precisely because they bring into sharp focus the inherent contradictions of global capitalism. As we know from Marx, capitalism is "an intrinsically crisis-prone productive system operating beyond collective control, liable to cycles of boom and bust, accumulation and loss, and— for workers— freighted with existential anxiety" (*Political Economy II: Capitalism as Disaster,* p.123). These conditions are rendered particularly visible at the everyday level in resource communities, making these spaces worthy of far greater attention from feminist theorists. Thus, in viewing crises as socio-spatially produced, in the following section, I trace the geographic and political-economic history Fort McMurray, arguing that its resource-driven market processes of development have turned this capitalist landscape into one susceptible to capitalist crises. Furthermore, I seek to reveal how Fort McMurray's value orientations and social relations, including its social reproductive processes, have been strongly shaped by resource extraction, thus holding consequences for how these crises unfold in this particular place.

Fort McMurray: Tracing a Political Economy Built on Oil

Oil, more than any other commodity, illustrates both the importance and the mystification of natural resources in the modern world.

— Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State,* 1997, p.49

Fort McMurray is a real place.

— Paula Simons, *The Edmonton Journal,* May 5, 2016

Nestled in the boreal forest of Northern Alberta, Fort McMurray is a frontier urban settlement and the primary service centre for the Athabasca tar sands— the world's third largest known oil deposit (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy, 2013). As a notable outpost of fossil capital (Malm, 2016), Fort McMurray exists at the intersection of the changing dynamics of the global oil and gas complex (Watts, 2011) and the shifting nature of oil production in the neoliberal era (Watts, 2016; Nadesan, 2016). With the tar sands being host to some of the largest and most capital-intensive extractive projects on the planet, this region is fraught with contradictions and acutely susceptible to capitalism's crisis tendencies.

However, "Fort McMurray" and "the tar sands" are not synonymous. As a community, Fort McMurray existed long before the oil sands industry and will ideally survive long after the industry's eventual demise. And while oil companies have no doubt played a significant role in its development, it is not a traditional company town (Major and Winters, 2013). Yet, it exists in its current form— with its current susceptibilities to capitalist crisis— because of its spatial fixity sitting atop a vast deposit of bitumen that multinational corporations want to commodify (Major and Winters, 2013). In the following section, I trace the history of Fort McMurray's political economy in order to provide both spatial and temporal insight into the resource community it is today. Following this background, I demonstrate how, in serving as a critical lynchpin between a global commodity and international markets, Fort McMurray is an ideal site in which to see capitalist crises at work and in which to understand their imbrications (Barnes and Hayter, 2001). I argue that much like the confluence of rivers that lies at the heart of the city, Fort McMurray is host to all four strands of capitalist crises, which are deeply entangled and impossible to understand in abstraction from their others (Fraser, 2016), thus making it a grounded place from which to understand the overlap of these four crises and how they interact. With this, I proceed by laying out all three "contextual crises"— of finance, ecology, and migration— before explicating the crisis of social reproduction, in particular, and its relationship to these other crises, in this particular place.

The Energy Frontier

Capitalism ... is a frontier process.

— Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life,* 2015

Like most frontiers, Fort McMurray exists as a result of colonial and commercial dispossession. Records dating as far back as the 1700s point to the Cree, Chipewyan, Prairie Dene and Anzac Métis peoples being indigenous to the Athabasca region (Preston, 2017). In 1776, Peter Pond— a fur trader and now the namesake of Fort McMurray's only mall— became the first European colonizer to enter the Athabasca region after crossing the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater rivers. Although Indigenous peoples had been utilizing the region's bitumen for thousands of years, Peter Pond was credited as being the first to document its existence in 1778.

Consistent with Jurgen Osterhammel's (2014) description of a frontier as the "moving boundary of resource development...the spearhead of an invasion" (p.323), in 1870, the land was established as a Hudson's Bay Trading Post and named after William McMurray, the chief factor of the Athabasca region for the HBC (Hein, 2000). As Jeffery Taylor (2014) remarks, at this time, "the area that is now Canada entered the world economy as colonial hinterlands of European empires seeking natural resources" (p.253). As such, the accumulation of commercial, trade-based capital— best exemplified by Hudson's Bay outposts like that of Fort McMurray— drove a project of dispossession and entrenched a colonial legacy of natural resource dependence that has endured for centuries. In 1898, a dwindling fur trade resulted in the closure of the Hudson's Bay Company. However, serving as a gateway to the Arctic, the fort reopened fourteen years later as a large-freight storage warehouse. With river transportation remaining the only access to the North until the opening of the Mackenzie Highway and the Great Slave Railway in 1965, goods were shipped along the Athabasca River from Fort McMurray to Lake Athabasca, then on to the Mackenzie River before reaching the Arctic (Hein, 2000). Fort McMurray was thus a critical site in the colonial project of constructing a white settler nation-state.

Following the discovery of salt at the confluence of the Horse and Athabasca rivers, a salt mine was opened in 1925 by the Alberta Salt Company (Hein, 2000). However, faced with transportation challenges, its life was short-lived with the plant closing in 1927. In 1936, yet another salt plant was opened at the town site of Waterways, which, at the time, was accessible by rail from Lac La Biche (Hein, 2000). The salt plant, however, closed in 1950 with the opening of a new plant in Elk Point, Alberta. So while Fort McMurray's social and spatial form was shaped over time by various natural resource industries, it remained a remote capital

outpost of less than one thousand people until the creation of the Great Canadian Oil Sands Company in the 1960s. It was arguably at this point that Fort McMurray became "a quintessential spatial form in the functioning of global capitalism" (Watts, 2016, p.209). For as De Angelis notes, "capital's identification of a frontier implies the identification of a space of social life that is still *relatively uncolonised* by capitalist relations of production and modes of activity." In the case of Fort McMurray, it was the existence of bitumen that deeply grounded such relations of production and shaped the region's political economy in particular ways. As Watts (2016) reminds us, "frontiers often carry a specificity and particularity because of their association with particular commodities or resources" (p.209). As such, "the material and biophysical properties of the resource and the political economy of the commodity and market sector confers unique qualities to the frontier as a social space." Similarly, frontiers, writes Anna Tsing (2005), are "projects in making geographical and temporal experience" (p.29). However, the tar sands were not born overnight but rather exerted an influence over the social and spatial development of the region for over 200 years.

Motivated by the presence of conventional crude oil and bitumen, the Geological Survey of Canada (GSA) championed the treaty-making process throughout the latter half of the 19th century (Huseman and Short, 2012). In 1870, following the GSA's confirmation of the presence of oil deposits, survey scientist John Macoun began studying the economic viability of extracting, transporting, and selling crude oil (Preston, 2017). Recognizing the potential profitability of the tarry substance, the Dominion of Canada then proceeded with the Treaty Eight process. As political scientist Jen Preston (2017) writes:

> At this point in the white settler colonial project racial extractivism was deeply informed by white supremacist myths like terra nullius, which ignored Indigenous sovereignty, and by social Darwinism and racist and infantilizing conceptions of Indigenous people as unable to self-govern or properly use the land. Land use and European ideologies of property not only motivated the 'resourcification' of Indigenous territories then and now, but also informed the racialization of Indigenous peoples as wasteful, lazy and unable to be productive in the economy or in white settler society more generally (p.358).

Treaty Eight soon followed the signing of other numbered treaties, similarly adopting coercive treaty-making tactics employed by Canadian officials. As both James Daschuk (2013) and Jen Preston (2017) describe, treaties were often written in advance of any meaningful consultation

with Indigenous communities and were grounded in Commissioners' extremely rudimentary knowledge of the specific First Nations involved in the process. Furthermore, often times "signatories were under significant duress and entered into negotiation with little bargaining power and under conditions of mass starvation" (Preston, 2017, p.359).

Treaty Six was signed in 1876 in an attempt to clear the plains of Indigenous peoples for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (built largely by Chinese migrants) thus extending the reach of capital westward. Yet, despite securing access to this massive swath of land and its natural resources, the Crown's treaty-driven process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004) was nowhere near complete. As interest grew in the bitumen deposits of the Athabasca region, the Crown framed Treaty Eight as an inevitability; "settlement and extraction would go ahead regardless but the Commissioners promised that the treaty was a way to ensure [Indigenous peoples] retained some protections guaranteed in advance" (Preston, 2017, p.359). In 1891, the Privy Council Report from the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, stated:

> [...] the discovery in the District of Athabasca and in the Mackenzie River County, that immense quantities of petroleum exist within certain areas of these regions, as well as the belief that other minerals and substances of economic value, [...] appear to render it advisable that a treaty or treaties should be made with the Indians who claim those regions as their hunting grounds, with a view to the extinguishment of the Indians title in such portions of the same, as it may be considered in the interest of the public to open up for settlement. (PAC, RG 10, Vol.4006, file 241, 209-1 in Madill, 1986).

Once again, the insisted social worth of nature (in this case bitumen) led to the formal acquisition of even greater tracts of land for Canada's settler colonial project. The geographical fixity of the tar sands thus propelled geographic expansion, clearly demonstrating how "the logic of capital snatches hold of natural resources." (Keucheyan, 2016, p.17).

Much reconnaissance work on the tar sands soon followed, reaching a breakthrough in 1925 with the construction of a hot-water separation plant at the Dunvegan railyards in Edmonton. Designed by chemical engineer, Dr. Karl Clark, this hot-water separation process became the basis for the thermal-extraction process now used by multinational corporations operating in the region. In 1929, the International Bitumen Company opened the first commercial tar sands hot-water separation plant, which produced 2,000 barrels of fuel oil (Hein, 2000). Other plants soon followed. By 1941, the Abasand plant— which invested a million

dollars in research and development— processed 19,000 tons of sand, yielding 17,000 tons of bitumen, which was then upgraded into fuel oil, diesel, gasoline, and coke (Hein, 2000). In 1947, Fort McMurray was incorporated as a village. That same year, the Canada Mines Branch surveyed the region, estimating reserves of the tar sands to be 1.75 billion tonnes of commercial grade tar sands (Hein, 2000). The richest deposit was located along the Athabasca River at Tar Island— a location that today lies at the heart of industrial activity in the region. However, despite active industrial operations, the industry's economic viability remained in question until 1962, at which time Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS) Ltd. received permission from the Alberta Oil and Gas Conservation Board to produce 31,500 barrels per day at Tar Island. In 1967, GCOS— whose primary shareholder was Sun Oil Company of Pennsylvania— opened the first commercial tar sands plant and demonstrated how bitumen products could be successfully upgraded to crude oil (Hein, 2000). Years of extensive research, development, exploration, and production soon followed as new companies and consortiums acquired assets in the region. By the 1970s, many of the world's largest oil companies, including Shell and Imperial Oil, had staked a claim in the tar sands.

Following a brief attempt to 'Canadianize' the industry under the first Trudeau government, the world price of oil plunged in 1982. As Alberta's unemployment rate soared above the national average, thousands of people resorted to food banks to sustain themselves (Laxer, 2009). Petroleum companies operating in the region drastically reduced their exploration activities in response, causing the province to lapse into a sharp recession. As political economist James Laxer (2009) argues, at the time, the myth spread "that interference from Ottawa had imperilled the well-being of the Alberta oil patch" (p.164). That theory served the interests of foreign-owned oil companies and Conservative politicians who were highly resistant to government interference in the oil sector. In 1984, when Mulroney's Conservatives swept to power in the federal election, they wasted no time in assuring corporations that Canada was once again "open for business" (Laxer, 2009). With the signing of free trade agreements like NAFTA, the Mulroney government actively encouraged foreign investments and takeovers, ushering in an era where "Canada's ability to control its own petroleum industry was dramatically curtailed" (Laxer, 2009, p.165). However, as Preston (2017) notes, "for the development of the Alberta tar sands, the 1980s and early 1990s was a period of relative stagnation; global oil and gas corporations shied away from investing in the region, opting

instead to invest in parts of the world where less technical innovation and capitalist intensive extractive methods were available" (p.365).

However, with such free market measures in place, the region underwent a period of massive transformation in the first decade of the 21st century, as more than one hundred billion dollars were poured into the process of extracting bitumen from beneath the boreal forest and muskeg bogs (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy, 2013; Shields, 2012). Requiring enormous capital investment to extract, transport and refine bitumen, the potential profitability of the tar sands and other unconventional reserves surged at this time as global oil prices rose in the face of strained conventional reserves (Black, et al., 2014). As Black, et al. (2014) suggest, investment and production was further encouraged by streamlined taxation procedures, direct and indirect subsidies, aggressive lobbying, and bilateral and multilateral agreements. In response, large-scale energy and financial corporations set their sights on Alberta's oil patch, dramatically increasing their investments throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

This tremendous expansion of industry quickly encouraged migration from across Canada and around the world, such that by the early 2000s, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB)— of which Fort McMurray is the largest centre— was listed as one of Canada's fastest-growing municipalities (Foster and Taylor, 2013). The population doubled to 70,000 throughout this period, as Fort McMurray became "a national and international work destination for people in trades, industry professions, retail and hospitality, and social and public services" (Dorow, 2016, p.61). In 2008, annual investment in the tar sands stood at nearly $21 billion (Dorow, 2016). By late 2011, a total of $133.6 billion dollars had been poured into the tar sands, fueling construction projects of such magnitude and size that thousands of workers were employed by the industry, swelling work camps scattered throughout the region (Foster and Taylor, 2013). The abundance of job opportunities in construction, mining and engineering attracted a highly mobile (and predominantly male) workforce in "relentless pursuit of the 'good life' promised by high wages, overtime hours, and long shifts" (Dorow, 2016, p.278).

While many have since established roots in Fort McMurray, the dominance of a large, single-resource industry means the community continues to be comprised of a highly mobile population. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo's most recent municipal census, conducted in 2015, reported a population of 125,032, which includes both a permanent

population of 82,724 and a shadow population of 42,308 residents (RMWB, 2015).[11] However, these numbers are expected to have shifted substantially as a result of both the 2014 oil price collapse and the 2016 wildfire. With its economy intricately tied to the price of a barrel of oil, Fort McMurray's population ebbs and flows with the inevitable boom-and-bust tendencies of global commodity prices. As Dorow (2016) notes:

> [Fort McMurray's] mobility cannot be chalked up solely to the short-term need for high numbers of fly-in, fly-out construction workers. High housing costs, relative isolation at the "end of the highway," the uncertainties of oil boom and bust, and the social stresses and frenetic pace that accompany boom times all contribute to high levels of turnover and low levels of retention in the workforce. In short, while Fort McMurray is home to many people who have lived there for decades or generations, it is largely a place to *work*, a place to make money while you can (p.276).

Today, a prolonged glut in global oil markets and resultantly stagnant oil prices have created a cloud of uncertainty that hovers over this place of work. Companies operating in the region are increasingly divided in their approach to the tar sands and how these assets factor into their future business plans. As political economists Éric Pineault and Ian Hussey (2017) assert, the recent exit of major international oil companies from the region has called into question the future of Alberta's oil and gas industry. Between 2015 and 2017, many of Big Oil's most prominent corporations— including Shell, Exxon Mobil, Conoco Phillips, and Norway's Statoil— sold their Canadian assets to domestic firms who are largely banking on their ability to control production costs through cost-cutting (Hussey, et al., 2018). As Pineault, Hussey, Cake and I (2018) further suggest, the new price context has ushered in an era of restructuring for the oil industry. Forced to compete with the far cheaper U.S shale gas industry, the tar sands are now undergoing a "shift from a booming, high-investment, high-growth, high-innovation context of intensive capital accumulation to a more normal, slowed pattern of accumulation characterized by cost-cutting." This shift will have important implications for employment, likely resulting in an intensified pressure on wage levels and growing confrontations with labour in the province. However, in an era of ever-expanding financialization in which oil has become a source of speculation (Watts, 2016), the future of Fort McMurray and the tar sands industry at-large must be considered, today, in the context of the ascendancy of finance capital and its penetration into everyday life.

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[11] While not officially published until after the fire, the 2018 census recorded a population closer to 112,000.

The Intertwined Crises of Capitalism in Fort McMurray

Fort McMurray is intertwined with all the risks and rewards that Canada's vast landscape and raw nature have to offer.

— Mark Milke, *The Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2016

Finance.

Today, the Athabasca tar sands occupy a notable place in the new financial architecture of the global economy, holding many consequences— by association— for the community of Fort McMurray. In hosting many of the world's largest multinational oil corporations, the tar sands exist at the intersection of the enclosure of an 'extreme energy' resource frontier with what Michael Watts (2016) refers to as a 'frontier of neoliberalized risk'— "a lethal product of cut-throat corporate cost-cutting, the collapse of government oversight and regulatory authority and the deepening financialization and securitization of the oil market" (p.197). In recent years, multinational energy firms have adopted financial instruments to mitigate the uncertainty surrounding global commodity prices and enable themselves to continue extracting value under such circumstances. Broadly conceived, this strategy of financialization "signifies a regime of capital accumulation in which value extraction takes place increasingly through financial markets and institutional investors, rather than through circuits of commodity production" (Pani, 2014, p.216). By this means, oil companies' financialization is intimately tied to, and reflective of, a much larger global crisis of finance capital. As Fraser (2012) articulates, the global economy is confronted with "the financialization strand of crisis, reflected in the creation, seemingly out of thin air, of an entire shadow economy of paper values, insubstantial, yet able to devastate the "real" economy and to endanger the livelihoods of billions of people" (p.4).

In places like Fort McMurray, the everyday lives of workers have, in turn, become deeply implicated in this crisis of finance capital. As Aitken and Dorow (2017) note, "Increasingly, reliance on financialization as a *channel of accumulation* also serves as a *technique of management* [emphasis theirs] for carbon fossil firms: as a method that both directly and indirectly organizes a particular kind of workforce" (p.1). With this, "oil workers, as much as the firms that employ them, are often deeply shaped by their own particular experiences of financialization" (p.1). Thus, in the context of Fort McMurray, finance capital has in many ways

become the template for organizing everyday life— resulting, by extension, in energy workers being cast as financial subjects. However, unlike these multinational corporations, families implicated in such processes of financialization are far less successful in fending off such uncertainty (despite how hard they may try) without facing real, material consequences that bleed into their everyday lives and undermine social reproduction. As Aitken and Dorow (2017) put it, these workers have been expected to reorganize themselves as:

> forms of human capital, as risk-bearing subjects but also as indebted/precarious bodies— all of which, in concert with the boom-bust economy of oil production, has facilitated a workforce that can be managed in flexible ways and that is made complicit in the relations of production and financialization that characterize corporate accumulation (p.1).

In Fort McMurray, employees of the oil industry are thus increasingly *flexibilized* in order to match the uncertainty of market conditions. Consequently, in this place where the dominant narrative is that "Fort McMurray is jobs," inherent in this promise of security is a deepening condition of pervasive *insecurity* produced by one's precarious and contingent connection to the workplace, their employer, and the community (Major and Winters, 2013). By this means, employees in Fort McMurray have been forced to reorganize themselves as ideal (financialized) neoliberal subjects, which has created a seemingly naturalized world of belonging where gendered, racialized, and classed inequalities appear absent when they are, in fact, not only present and contradictory forces but also crucial to buttressing the extractive economy (Major and Winters, 2013).

In general, the everyday manifestations of this crisis materialize in largely covert ways in this place. Here, workers' everyday experiences of financialization are "rooted, most importantly, in the crucible of debt, but also in uneven kinds of engagements with both mainstream and fringe financial practices, and in their own innovative but risky speculations about an uncertain and unknowable future" (Aitken and Dorow, 2017). Critical to this assertion is the fact that such practices are largely hidden within the private homes and bank accounts of oil workers and Fort McMurray's residents, intimately affecting, by extension, households' social reproductive processes in ways that are often invisible. However, every once and awhile, we are offered glimpses into the everyday consequences of this crisis. It reveals itself, of course, most clearly in the moments when oil prices decline. In these instances, we see it in the ubiquity of 'For Sale' signs lining the community's suburban streets, in the sharp increase of reported

property foreclosure claims, and in the swelling number of people relying on the community food bank to feed themselves and their families.

However, the crisis of finance capital in Fort McMurray is rendered most observable (and quantifiable) when major banks, insurance firms, and statistical agencies release reports comparing household debt levels from across Canada and North America. Fort McMurray, they repeatedly find, has among the highest average debt load of any municipality across the country despite also having among one of the highest average salaries. Indeed, in 2017, consumers living in Fort McMurray carried the highest average debt load in Canada at $38,359, compared to the national average of $22,837 (Equifax, 2018). The region's delinquency rate has also been recorded as the highest in the country, reflecting residents' ongoing struggle to handle their payments. As Barager and Chernomas (2012) note, "With workers facing stagnant or falling real wages, longer hours and increasing economic fragility, borrowing becomes an increasingly attractive option" (Baragar and Chernomas, 2012, p.320). Such a reality is thus indicative of the fact that in being financialized themselves, workers in Fort McMurray are being increasingly forced to financialize all aspects of their everyday lives— a reality that is rendered all the more acute by the financialization of other industries upon which their everyday lives depend, including (as previously suggested) housing. This reality, of course, holds important consequences for capitalism's ability to flourish both locally and globally. For as Barager and Chernomas (2012) note, "Increased household indebtedness and the attendant debt servicing payments of households are a means through which the rate of exploitation of labor by capital can be enhanced" (p.337). But such reports also indicate that in Fort McMurray, this downward structural pressure of financialization is not only exerted in moments of economic crisis but at all times, being *especially* perceivable, however, at both extremes of this boom-bust resource cycle.

As high wages have flowed from the oilpatch during boom-time conditions, residents of Fort McMurray have redirected large amounts of their income to creditors in the form of interest payments on houses, luxury vehicles, and destination vacations (Dorow, 2015). Throughout these inflationary periods, the highly speculative nature of the real estate market causes housing prices to soar (a reality, of course, magnified by both the shortage of housing and available land for development, relative to the demand in this place), thus requiring workers who wish to permanently reside in the community, to sink a massive portion of their paycheque and accrue substantial debt in order to cover the downpayment and subsequent mortgage

payments on a home. Credit-led household consumption, in general, similarly rises under such circumstances. With this, the high rates of household debt among families in Fort McMurray arguably points to their efforts to not only maintain their absolute material standards of living but also their attempts to reproduce the material living standards of those at the upper end of the income distribution scale. Overall, in organizing workers as financial subjects, capital has "added finance to its arsenal in its attack on labor," ensuring, as Barager and Chernomas (2012) suggest, that— whether in moments of inflation or stagnation— "a worker remains a worker for as many hours as it takes to cover the cost of living" (p.334).

Finally, critical to understanding the crisis of finance capital's intersections with that of social reproduction in this place is the recognition that financialization also permeates the public sector. By this means, Fort McMurray is not only implicated in the crisis of finance capital through its ties to private industries but also— like any community— through its attachment to government revenue in the form of government programs, social service provision, infrastructural investments, etc. As Anna Zalik (2010) notes, while theoretically viewed as a solution for irrational factors in market behaviour, both speculation on futures markets and "*the placing of public savings in the financial economy* [emphasis added] ... has made many in the middle class vulnerable to such risks, while rising volatility has allowed windfall profits for insider participants in financial markets" (p.561). In being host to highly profitable multinational corporations that are leasing a *public* resource that belongs to *all* Albertans, Fort McMurray is arguably a unique site in which this relationship— and its associated tensions— unfold. For much like the households living and working in Fort McMurray, the Government of Alberta has similarly tied its revenue stream tightly to the price of oil, thus rendering *its* fulfillment of social reproduction vulnerable to the unpredictability of the boom-bust resource cycle.[12]

Furthermore, in extending favourable conditions to these multinational oil companies in the form of low corporate taxes, flat royalty rates, and desirable subsidies, the government has abdicated much control over the industry and has, in turn, largely failed in its responsibility to collect the *economic rent* which could provide a steadier and more predictable source of revenue for public expenditures and, most importantly, a "rainy day fund" to help build the foundations

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[12] Due largely to the fact that its political culture has been shaped over time by its reliance on primary resources, the Government of Alberta has developed an inhibiting export mentality that results in it relying on oil revenue to comprise a disproportionate sum of its budgets, and in it extending favourable conditions to foreign-owned oil companies at the expense of "average" Albertans. For more on this relationship see *Oil's Deep State: How the petroleum industry undermines democracy and stops action on global warming* by Kevin Taft (2017).

of a more diversified economy.[13] And while all of this moves us slightly away from the grounded case of Fort McMurray, I highlight it only to make clear that this place, and the financial crisis in which it is ensnared, also hold repercussions for the fulfillment of social reproduction at a much broader level.

Ecology.

While energy firms operating in the tar sands have become increasingly financialized, they have by no means stopped *physically* extracting value from the vast bitumen deposits of the region. It is this through its ties to this productive extractive process that Fort McMurray has become a notorious site in conversations surrounding the ecological crisis of capitalism. As Dorow and O'Shaughnessy (2013, p.129) note, "Sustained global critique of social and especially environmental concerns has put Fort McMurray (as a moniker for both the residential community and the oil/tar sands) into the North American media limelight more consistently than most other resource communities." In being the main service centre to the world's third-largest known oil deposit, Fort McMurray is deeply implicated in the often contentious political debates surrounding environmental issues like biodiversity loss, deforestation, air pollution, species extinction, water contamination and, of course, global climate change. Certainly, from Edmonton to Ottawa to major cities around the world, Fort McMurray is consistently a site of attention as policy-makers draft carbon emissions reduction targets from the offices of provincial and national governments, and supranational unions. This is because, today, the industry upon which the community depends is host to some of the world's largest fossil fuel corporations that, combined, hold a massive portion of the world's carbon budget and thus, a disproportionate chunk of its climate liability.

Indeed, in recognizing that culpability for global climate change is unequally distributed, Fort McMurray can be thought of as a "hotspot" for the productive firms most liable for the crisis. A 2013 article published in the journal *Climatic Change* found that the climate crisis of the

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[13] Economic rent is the financial surplus remaining from resource production after accounting for costs and a reasonable rate of profit. As David Campanella (2012) notes, a reasonable rate of profit in the oil and gas industry is assumed to be 10 percent of investment. Profits exceeding this 10 per cent are termed "excess," as they represent profits accrued by industry rather than the owners of the resource. Constitutionally, it is the people of Alberta who own the vast deposits of bitumen that are found in the province. As the chair of the Alberta Royalty Review Panel, Bill Hunter, noted "[a]s Albertans we own 100 per cent of the resource, and we should expect nothing less than 100 per cent of the rent" (Campanella, 2012, p.11). However, despite such assertions, Albertans have never received more than 20 per cent of the economic rent in the tar sands, and since 1997 have averaged only 9 per cent.

21st century has largely been driven by just ninety companies that have collectively produced nearly two-thirds of all greenhouse gas emissions since the advent of the industrial revolution (Heede, 2013). In 2017, another climate disclosure report released by the CDP similarly found 100 fossil fuel producers to be responsible for 71 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (Griffin, 2017). Notably, every single transnational corporation operating in the tar sands appears on the list, indicating that the capitalist interests in the region have magnified the climatic vulnerability of communities around the world. This reality reflects Amin and Thrift's assertion that today, "the 'footprints of the city' are not only all over the countryside, but are all over the globe" (Fu, 2016, p.367). Or, as David Harvey (2014) writes:

> The temporal and geographical scales of capital's ecosystem have been shifting in response to exponential growth. Whereas the problems in the past were typically localised— a polluted river here or catastrophic fog there— they have now become more regional (acid deposition, low-level ozone concentrations and stratospheric ozone holes) or global (climate change, global urbanisation, habitat destruction, species extinction and loss of biodiversity, degradation of oceanic, forest and land-based ecosystems and the uncontrolled introduction of artificial chemical compounds— fertilisers and pesticides— with unknown side effects and an unknown range of impacts on land and life across the whole planet) (p.255).

Thus, in the case of Fort McMurray, its role in serving as an outpost for fossil capital has implicated it in the manufacturing of risk at a global scale. In a world where a third of all known oil reserves and roughly 80% of all known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground to avoid catastrophic warming (McGlade and Ekins, 2015), the companies operating in the Alberta tar sands are massive proprietors of *both* ecological and financial risk— and, by extension, arguably *social reproductive* risk at a global scale. Indeed, as producers of one of the costliest sources of oil, the companies operating in the Alberta tar sands, in particular, bear a significant portion of the carbon liability created by a warming world. Collectively, these corporations have access to between four and five times the reserves that can be safely extracted and burned to stay within a 2°C rise in average global temperatures (McGlade and Ekins, 2015). By this means, they hold an immense degree of power over the fate of the world in their hands.

While Fort McMurray can easily be situated in this calculus of ecological risk at the global scale, ecological crisis can similarly be situated in the Athabasca region at the local scale— particularly, as has been noted, through the localized environmental destruction of the tar sands.

However, once again, worth noting is the fact that although politically, economically, and socio-spatially tied in distinct ways, Fort McMurray and the tar sands are not one and the same. By this means, and as has been implied above, while the community and energy workers may be deeply implicated in the oil industry's ruination of the local environment, they by no means bear responsibility for the devastation. Rather, it is multinational fossil fuel corporations that have deemed the boreal forest 'overburden,' that have directed the process of excavating the landscape, and that have dredged and filled the giant tailings ponds, the size of lakes, scattered throughout the region.

Yet with the tar sands and Fort McMurray often being conflated with one another, tense relationships have emerged between energy workers and environmentalists in the absence of a more nuanced conversation that recognizes the rational needs of workers to earn a living, *especially*— as noted above— under the increasingly hostile pressure exerted by financialized capitalism. Here, Kendra Strauss and Katie Meehan's (2015) assertion that "the lens of social reproduction allows us to focus not only on the making, maintenance, and exploitation of the labor force but also on the productions and destructions of nature" (p.11) is particularly fitting, as it reminds us that all of the situated manifestations of ecological crisis described above are, in fact, deeply *social reproductive* processes unfolding in response to this structural pressure. It is through this pressure that I turn now to the third and final crisis left to situate before turning attention to the crisis of social reproduction, in particular, and its intersections with these three.

Migration.

Although unfolding in ways that are spatially distinct, financialized capitalism's exertion of this downward pressure is a global phenomenon that, in many places, has driven migration around the world. As William Robinson (2007) puts it:

> The transnational circulation of capital and the disruption and deprivation it causes, in turn,   generates the transnational circulation of labor. In other words, global capitalism creates   immigrant workers… In a sense, this must be seen as a *coerced or forced* migration [emphasis   added], since global capitalism exerts a structural violence over whole populations and makes   it impossible for them to survive in their homeland.

By this means, today, migration can be thought of as "globalization from below" (Wark, 2002), whereby developed countries' unwillingness to forgive debt, extend loans, or trade on fair terms leaves underdeveloped states with few other options than to increase the flow of people abroad. Thus, as a remote outpost of transnational capital offering the promise of "good jobs" (Dorow and O'Shaugnessy, 2013), Fort McMurray has attracted thousands of migrant workers, similarly becoming a notable outpost of transnational labour and thus an ideal place in which to situate the crisis of migration.

Of course, Fort McMurray has long been— since the discovery of bitumen— a community predicated on migration and labour mobility (Foster and Taylor, 2013). By this means, it is possible to excavate the many sedimented layers of migration that have produced this place and built it into the community it is today. Fort McMurray thus serves as a grounded case in which to observe how those dispossessed at the margins of global capitalism have been brought into (often temporary) fixed relationships to suit the needs of capital. Moreover, it is also a place in which to observe and interrogate the highly gendered and racialized relations of global labour— including new patterns of immigration policies, border regimes, global care chains— and the ever-shifting *situated* boundaries between inclusion and exclusion that result from such relations (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy, 2013). Indeed, as has been revealed by the work of many scholars in the region (Major and Winters, 2013; Foster and Taylor, 2013) and articulated by Dorow and O'Shaughnessy (2013) in particular:

> [Today] the high numbers and diverse makeup of mobile workers — who might be seasonal workers from rural or reserve areas of Alberta, Somali-Canadians who have made a secondary migration from Toronto, individuals or families from the Atlantic provinces seeking work in the wake of floundering fisheries, professionals from the oil industries of Nigeria or Venezuela, temporary foreign workers from the Philippines or China — is important to the imagined boundaries and experiences of "community" [in Fort McMurray]. (p.131)

Indeed, since the beginning of the 21st century, the tar sands industry has increasingly relied on this flexible global workforce to meet its labour demands (Foster and Barnetson, 2015). At this time, an unprecedented growth in the use of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) could be observed in the region, largely as a result of federal policy changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). As Jason Foster and Bob Barnetson (2015) argue, this situated example of the migration strand of capitalist crisis in Fort McMurray is reflective of a

much broader neoliberal shift "in Canadian immigration policy away from multiculturalism and toward differential exclusion," (p.248) thus creating a secondary class of workers lacking full citizenship rights. Further to the situatedness of this crisis, as Foster and Barnetson (2015) critically note:

> The use of migrant workers in Alberta cannot be disentangled from the context of an oil-exporting economy. The use of marginalized, vulnerable, and racialized foreign workers to create a conveniently docile workforce is both an outcome of politics in a petroleum-based economy and a part of the process of its construction, with significant implications for democracy (p.250).

Indeed, it is possible to quantifiably prove this claim. For while a surge in migrant labour has been observed in recent decades, across the country, this growth has been most noticeable in the resource-dependent province of Alberta (Foster and Barnetson, 2013). From 2002 to 2012, at the height of tar sands expansion, "approximately 250,000 TFWs were admitted to Alberta, with nearly 165,000 arriving between 2006 and 2010" (p.254). As Foster and Barnetson further note, "This rate of increase in TFWs residing in Alberta has been much greater than in other Canadian provinces and includes a significant increase in the use of unskilled TFWs" (p.254).

In Fort McMurray, this trend is perhaps rendered most observable in the ubiquity of Filipina nannies who have been *dis*placed by the demands of global capitalism only to be temporarily *re*placed to brace the gendered infrastructure necessary for capital accumulation in this place. However, this phenomenon is part of a much larger observable trend, where a permanent class of guest workers, including migrant caregivers, are increasingly concentrated in the caring and service sectors of Alberta— a reality rendered particularly visible in the highly-stratified economy of Fort McMurray. In the case of carework, this growing reliance on migrant domestic workers must be understood within the context of public sector restructuring. As Sedef Arat-Koç (1989, 2006) notes, under the neoliberal state's aggressive withdrawal from social welfare provisioning, this importation of migrant caregivers is cast as a win-win by government— whereby middle and upper-middle class women are able to work while 'providing jobs' for women in the Global South who have become increasingly forced to migrate in the face of neoliberal privatization abroad. Although the social reproductive role fulfilled by migrants caregivers will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters, here it is worth simply highlighting the fact that the preponderance of Filipina nannies in Fort McMurray is attributable to state-sponsored programs whose existence is intended to bolster

capitalist accumulation in many of the same ways that it has succeeded in doing so in Fort McMurray. However, as will be rendered visible throughout the remainder of this thesis such arrangements are not without profound individual and structural consequences.

However, before turning to the situated crisis of social reproduction *in* Fort McMurray, it is worth noting that, although being situated in Fort McMurray, this crisis of migration holds social reproductive consequences around the globe as migrant domestic workers must contend with how to fulfill their own social reproductive duties and care for their own children across space. As Harsha Walia (2010) notes, since workers under the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) (the former name of Canada's Caregiver Program) are unable to bring their families with them until they become permanents residents, a significant outcome of the LCP is intergenerational family separation, with many families being scattered across borders for four to ten years. In hosting hundreds of live-in caregivers, Fort McMurray thus exists as an ideal site in which to demonstrate how migration "challenges the assumption that alienation of labour from its owner occurs in the same place (or at least within the same nation-state or territory) as the site of its reproduction" (Strauss and Meehan, 2015, p.10). Rather, as will be brought to life through the accounts of these workers, in Fort McMurray, migrant women's experiences as "distant mothers," reshape notions of mothering and create social reproductive tensions that transcend borders. I turn now to the crisis of social reproduction in Fort McMurray in order to explicate, in greater detail, why there is such a heightened demand for this migrant workforce and how the crises laid out above interact with this crisis of social reproduction in ways that both create this demand, and shape social reproduction in particular ways in this place.

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Caring for Crude:

Fort McMurray's Crisis of Social Reproduction

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Ensuring our children are well cared for while we are working is important, whether you work at an oil sands operation or elsewhere in the community.

— Syncrude President and CEO, Tom Katinas, 2009

Life's work continues as we care for other and ourselves in hard times, as twenty-first century economic, political, and environmental conditions continue to erode the stability and security of everyday life.

— Cindi Katz, Sallie A. Marston, and Katharyne Mitchell, *Precarious Worlds,* 2015, p.174

As is the case with all three crises laid out above, the business of extracting crude from Northern Alberta's bitumen deposits similarly shapes social reproduction in particular ways. While huge swaths of boreal forest and muskeg are stripped from the earth to enable the physical extraction of crude, an analogous process of social reproductive extractivism upholds this process of capital accumulation and braces the oil economy (Dorow, 2015). As Sara Dorow (2015) notes, in this secluded patch of Northern Alberta, extraction takes on a dual meaning, referring both to the physical process of mining the tarry substance from the ground and to the social process whereby "multiple forms of less visible gendered work both directly and indirectly supplement oil profits" (p.276). As with all processes of production, there is a need for a parallel process of social reproduction (Luxton and Bezanson, 2006)— one, which in the context of Fort McMurray, is strained in particular ways.

As is the case in communities across Canada and throughout the Global North, Fort McMurray's political economic landscape is marked by a corroding social wage and a subsequent devolution of responsibilities like childcare onto individuals and families (Dorow, 2015; Gazso, 2009). Yet, in this outpost of transnational capital, the common problem of finding affordable childcare is "exacerbated by employment turnover and competition from attainable higher-paying work" which further drives up the cost of care in the region (Dorow, 2015, p.281). However, as Dorow (2015) notes, the question of childcare in Fort McMurray extends beyond general questions of provision and affordability, and goes "to the very structures and cultures of the bitumen sands economy: pace, growth, overtime and shift work, ramped-up cost of living, and the promise of opportunity to live the good life" (p.281). Here, paid work governs "life's work" in a way that constrains the fulfillment of social reproduction and erodes the very stability of everyday life.

In Fort McMurray, "the frenetic and constant pace of bitumen production translates into round-the-clock shift work, work schedules like 'ten days on and four off,' lots of necessary and/or available overtime, and long commute times out to site and back" (Dorow, 2015, p.281). These 'spatial-temporal particularities' of work exert such power over everyday life that caregivers and other research participants frequently referred to shift schedules by name, assuming everyone was familiar with the various rotations and how they structure one's day-to-day life. As one childcare professional put it to me:

It's not a traditional Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 town. Very, very few people work that shift. At least one member of a working household is working on-site, on the oil sands and uh… they're working day shifts and night shifts, and their shifts are thirteen or fifteen hours long. It doesn't… Normal, "normal" everyday childcare doesn't do it.

To meet their childcare needs, households are forced to adjust their lives accordingly. However, in being reliant on such a male-dominated industry, it is often women who must become 'flexibilized'— adjusting their paid and unpaid employment schedules around their spouses' in order to meet their families' needs (Dorow, 2015; Luxton, 2006). As Dorow (2015) puts it, in Fort McMurray, "the gendering of social reproduction is seemingly naturalized by the demands of the particular political economy of paid work" (p.283). The long distance commute to and from site prompts many women to find work closer to town, while the exorbitant cost of childcare compels others to forego paid employment altogether (Dorow, 2015; Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015). Such decisions often come down to deliberate cost-calculations where families are forced to weigh the expense of paid childcare against the savings the family would incur if one parent— typically the mother— were to exit the paid workforce to take on the responsibility of child care full-time. This constant calculative process reflects the extent to which market values and finance capital have penetrated everyday life in Fort McMurray, dictating the template by which people organize their daily lives.

Yet, these cost-calculations are not only monetary but include trade-offs being made between money and time. As Dorow (2015) notes, for some families, the financial ability (offered by high industry wages) to have the mom stay at home with the kids exemplifies "the good life promised by oil" (Dorow, 2015, p.284). In such cases, "the opportunity of high-paying jobs for men provided the opportunity to play out a conventional gendered division of labour" (Dorow, 2015, p.284). For others, fulfilling 'the promise of oil' involves both spouses working full-time (preferably in the oil industry) to maximize the monetary benefits their household can extract from the bituminous sands. Indeed, residents in Fort McMurray work the longest hours in the country (Howell, 2014). 32 percent of the population work 50 hours or more, compared to only 17 percent at the national level (Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015). Those working in the tar sands are also often working rotational shift work— working nights, early mornings, weekends, and sometimes holidays. Thus, in Fort McMurray, time is often sacrificed for money— a trade-off often exhibited in households' conspicuous consumption of trucks, boats, beach vacations, and (inevitably expensive) homes (O'Shaughnessy, 2013; Dorow, 2015).

However, this latter scenario, in which both spouses are working to maximize such opportunities, is often only made possible by yet another form of consumption— that of social reproduction.

In response to the frenetic pace and demanding nature of paid work in the extractive industry, hundreds of families in Fort McMurray have chosen to hire a live-in nanny to fill the social reproductive gaps caused by erratic schedules, and incompatible and unaffordable care. As Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen (2015) put it, "live-in caregivers are crucial to bridging work-family relations for their employers, especially those who work in the oil sands industry" (p.9). The decision to hire a caregiver is typically a direct result of such cost-calculations with dual-earner households, in particular, often recognizing the value of having a nanny to supplement this trade-off between time and money (Dorow, 2015). Two longtime caregiver advocates who I spoke with reflected on the level of savings families often incur by choosing to pay for a live-in caregiver:

> *Ramazan:* I think as long as the couple are employed, they are able to afford— Uh, actually they can save money. For instance, if you have three children right? … You would pay for uh… daycare.

> *Cindy:* $1,000 each.

> *Ramazan:* Like $1,300.

> *Cindy:* Yeah, or $1,300.

> *Ramazan:* Thirteen hundred, twenty-six hundred, like three thousand… nine hundred. Almost four thousand dollars per month to take care of three children…

> *Cindy:* Three kids.

> *Ramazan:* From 6 a.m. until 5 p.m.

> *Cindy:* 5 p.m. So there's a time limit… When you have a caregiver, you have them for a certain amount of time as well but you pay less.

> *Ramazan:* So $1,200 is maximum expense like that [for a live-in caregiver], and then you have the luxury of having caregivers all the time, like parents can leave at four o'clock…

> *Cindy:* They don't have to hurry to go pick them up or… bring them to the caregiver right? They have the in-home service.

This way of describing caregivers as providing an "in-home service" also speaks to the enormous *convenience* of having almost round-the-clock access to child care within one's home; the desire for which is directly driven, in part, by the oil industry's exhaustive and protracted demand on its workforce. A 2014 survey conducted with live-in caregivers in the region found that caregivers work longer hours on average than trade workers, indicating the degree to which families download the expenses (both financial and temporal) and pressures of working in the industry onto a largely gendered and racialized workforce labouring within their homes (Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015).

However, the convenience of having a live-in caregiver extends beyond childcare alone. As numerous scholars have pointed out— and as my own research suggests— caregivers are often expected to perform household duties that fall well outside the scope of their contracts (Dorow, 2015; Pratt, 2012; Bonifacio, 2016). This trend is arguably exacerbated in Fort McMurray where long irregular hours and lengthy commute times intensify the demand for caregivers to cook the family's meals, care for their pets, book appointments, manage their household budgets, do their grocery shopping, and perform long lists of household chores (Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015). (Vivid examples of this are provided in Chapter 4, which details the extraction of caregivers' surplus value in this community.) Overall, the role of caregivers in upholding the process of (extractive) capital accumulation in the region cannot be understated. As one community member put it to me, "I'd go as far as to say that live-in caregivers are a *necessity* for the success of this town." Of course, such a claim calls into question how we define "success." Success for whom? At whose expense? And with what social, environmental, and political-economic consequences? For as we know, in an era of climate crisis, the "success" of extractivism implies the slow degradation of a safe and habitable climate, pointing once again to the inextricable crisis we find ourselves in and the complexity of its unending contradictions. Having situated these crises in Fort McMurray, I now turn to "the

Beast" in order to reveal how these crises constituted the political ecological and political economic foundation of this disaster, and were responsible for turning this fire *into* a disaster for tens of thousands of residents living and working in this remote resource community.

CHAPTER THREE
"THE BEAST" AS A WINDOW
INTO CAPITALIST CRISES

In a disaster a collectivity of intersecting processes and events— social, environmental, cultural, political, economic, physical, technological— transpiring over varying lengths of time are focused. Disasters are totalizing events. As they unfold, all dimensions of a social structural formation and the totality of its relations with its environment may become involved, affected, and focused.

— Anthony Oliver-Smith, *The Angry Earth,* 1999, p.20

Fort McMurray's "Natural" Disaster

On Sunday, May 1st, 2016, two hectares of forest were discovered ablaze near the southwest edge of Fort McMurray. Wildfire crews quickly moved in with two air tankers unloading water overhead, while a small crew of skilled workers tackled the blaze on the ground. However, with Alberta experiencing one of the driest springs in decades, the fire quickly spread eastward towards the city, growing to 60 hectares in the first two hours. Mayor Melissa Blake announced evacuation notices for 4,500 people that officials felt were most in danger. By 10 p.m. she had declared a state of emergency, issuing a mandatory evacuation for

approximately 500 of the city's residents (Markusoff, Macdonald, and Gillis, 2016). By Monday morning, the 60-hectare fire had grown to 750 hectares. However, with the fire moving westward and air pressure keeping it at bay, some evacuation notices were downgraded. The morning of Tuesday, May 3rd brought north/northeast winds, pushing the fire— which at this point had doubled in size— within 1,100 metres of the town's edge. By 10:30 a.m., the fire had jumped the Athabasca river, reaching the town two hours later. By 2:00 p.m., Fort McMurray issued a voluntary evacuation for all residents. However, with sparks and ash raining into the backyards of those living in the Abasand and Beacon Hill neighbourhoods, many were already on Highway 63— the only road in and out of Fort McMurray (Warnica, 2016). By 5:30 p.m., the majority of the city's residents were ordered to leave, cramming Highway 63 both north and south of the city.

Nicknamed "the Beast," the Fort McMurray wildfire prompted the largest prolonged evacuation in Canadian history, with more than 88,000 people evacuated from their homes. All of Fort McMurray's residents—making up two per cent of Alberta's total population— became disaster refugees scattered throughout the province in oil sands work camps, evacuation centres, campus dorms, and friends' homes. Rather miraculously, no lives were lost from the wildfire or in the mass evacuation. However, two teenagers leaving Fort McMurray lost their lives the following day in a collision with a tractor-trailer 200km out of the danger zone (Markusoff, Macdonald, and Gillis, 2016). In total, the fire burned an area of 589,552 hectares, destroying roughly 2,400 structures or 15 percent of the town (Warnica, 2016). On July 7th, 2016, the Insurance Board of Canada (IBC) announced that its estimated cost of damages was expected to reach $3.58 billion, making it the costliest disaster in Canadian history (Cryderman, 2016). According to the Conference Board of Canada, the fire also brought oil sands production to a lull, cutting production by 47 million barrels, worth approximately $1.4 billion in revenues. As the media widely noted, the wildfire hit Fort McMurray at a time when the city was already grappling with a two-year slide in crude oil prices, resulting in project cancellations and industry lay-offs (Stewart, 2016; Thurton, 2017). With this, the confluence of natural and economic crises left many residents reporting to the media that they were unlikely to return (Cryderman, 2016; Markusoff, et al., 2016; Warnica, 2016). Yet, when staged re-entry began in early June, tens of thousands did return home, determined to rebuild their homes and re-establish a sense of normalcy in their community (the Canadian Press, 2017). According to city officials, by September 2nd, 77,158 residents had registered at information centres in the municipality. They

caution, however, that the numbers offer an incomplete picture of reality, with many residents likely returning without registering, while others possibly registered multiple times. Yet, while the efforts to rebuild persist, it seems the media has dimmed the lights on Fort McMurray. As the novelist AA Gill (2010, p.45) puts it, "Nobody has the budget or the audience for the grim, dull depression of resurrection."

There is No Such Thing as a "Natural" Disaster

It is precisely the seemingly insignificant daily activities of social reproduction—what to eat, what to drink, where to live, how to get to work—that operate synergistically to produce effects that devastate the global environment.

— Kendra Strauss and Katie Meehan, 2015, p.14

In an era of climate crisis, disasters have become common features shaping the global landscape. Often portrayed as unavoidable and unpreventable events, disasters profoundly impact political, economic, and social processes at all scales— from the transnational to the everyday. However, as anthropologists Susanna Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (2002) note, "disasters do not just happen," they are created (p.3). Increasingly, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians engaged in disaster scholarship are theorizing the human foundation of "natural" disasters (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, 2002; Enarson; 2012; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman; 1999; Wisner, et al., 2004; Barrios, 2017; Adams, 2013). They emphasize the existing forms and structures of society that create the conditions for disaster— in many cases, asserting that there is no such thing as a "natural" disaster. Rather, as political economic and cultural-ecological scholars have especially helped us to see, disasters are "functions of ongoing social orders, human-environment relations, and historical processes" (Oliver-Smith, 1999, p.22). Such understandings serve to *de-exceptionalize* disaster, pointing to the ways in which the root causes of disaster lie more with society than with nature. As Anthony Oliver-Smith (2009) notes:

> Researchers now see most natural disasters as more understandable in terms of the "normal" order of things, that is, the conditions of inequality and subordination in the society rather than the accidental geophysical features of a place (p.13).

Despite this emerging preoccupation with political-economic approaches to disaster, there remains little consensus on the definition of disaster. As Oliver-Smith (1999) has also

noted, "Since disasters are characterized by external variability and internal complexity, the conceptual challenges presented by disasters is doubly problematic," resulting in the concept having "blurred edges" (p.19). Here, I align my own conceptualization of 'disaster' with the work of anthropologists, political ecologists, and critical geographers who view disasters as "complex material events and, at the same time, as a multiplicity of interwoven, often conflicting, social constructions" (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p.24). I understand disasters to be *processes*— not events— unfolding in both the material and the social worlds. I see disasters as involving a wide range of intersecting processes, where "all dimensions of a social structural formation and the totality of its relations with its environment may become involved, affected, and focused" (Oliver-Smith, 1999, p.20). By this means, I maintain that disasters offer a theoretical opportunity to collapse the nature/society dualism and grapple with the complex social, political-ecological, and political-economic making of disaster. With this, I aim to take a more nuanced approach to disaster— one that is capable of capturing the mutual co-constitution of environment and society, while paying particular attention to the social reproductive processes wrapped up in this process of mutual co-constitution.

Thus, in seeking to uncover both the physical and social causation of this disaster, I draw inspiration from Anthony Oliver-Smith's (1999) claim that:

> To understand disasters in the context of the complex internal differentiation that is particularly characteristic of contemporary human societies thus requires the combination of an ecological framework with an analytical strategy that can encompass the interaction of environmental features, processes, and resources with the nature, forms, and effects of the patterns of production, allocation, and internal social differentiation of society (p.2).

Importantly, patterns of social reproduction have largely been absent from such analyses. Yet their inclusion is absolutely critical if we are to understand how pre-existing conditions lay the groundwork for disaster. The following chapter thus aims to demonstrate this critical inclusion in practice.

In following recent critical disaster scholarship, including especially the work of anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith (1999; 2009), I see particular value in articulating how a "society's pattern of vulnerability is a fundamental feature of disaster," deeply rooted in its existing forms and structures of social reproduction (Oliver-Smith, 2009, p.14). This focus on pre-existing vulnerability enables us to see how disasters are formed, in part, by their political-

economic foundation of capitalist crises, which are themselves *intersectionally* produced (Collins 1994; 2000, Crenshaw, 1991). Indeed, vulnerability enables disaster researchers to grapple with how existing social structures intersect to determine one's vulnerability along axes of race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and citizenship status. A focus on vulnerability also expands the social and temporal scales of analysis— allowing us to see how crises of capitalism are produced over time and shaped by the particular spatial contexts in which they unfold. Disasters are thus potential moments of exhumation, enabling us "to excavate the layers of process that produce particular places and to see their intersections with material social practices at other scales of analysis" (Katz, 2001, p.1228).

So while disasters are often defined according to their 'non-routine' nature, I make the case that in holding social reproduction and everyday processes of care central to our analysis, we are able to see how social reproduction is tied to all other crises of capitalism. Moreover, in looking to the crisis of social reproduction in the wake of disaster, we are offered a glimpse into not only how these underlying crises are interrelated, but how they are *reproduced* to renew this human foundation of disaster. As Oliver-Smith (1999) notes:

> While the stress on the nonroutine dimension of disasters seems close to common logic, these descriptions seem to incorporate an almost functionalist assumption of general societal equilibrium prior to disaster onset. Such an assumption dangerously ignores that more disasters are ultimately explainable in terms of the normal order (p.23).

In drawing upon data from interviews conducted with both migrant caregivers and key informants in Fort McMurray, this chapter makes the case that the social and physical causes of the Fort McMurray wildfire indeed lie in the 'normal order' of this capitalist community. I begin by describing the disaster's political-ecological production, arguing that the oil industry is not only responsible for situating this community in a fire-prone ecology but has also contributed to the destabilization of our atmosphere, thus creating the necessary conditions for disaster at both regional and global levels. Following this political-ecological focus, I turn to the social and political-economic making of disaster, arguing that much of what made the Fort McMurray wildfire into a disaster for families was its occurrence during a time of economic crisis, which further embedded human insecurity in everyday life. By this means, I argue that the Fort McMurray wildfire reveals in sharp relief "the contours of our political and social predicament" created by neoliberal policies and market-driven governance (Adams, 2013, p.5). However, as I have sought to demonstrate in Chapter Two, in Fort McMurray the contours of this

predicament are profoundly shaped by its resource dependence and the resulting precarities unique to its political economy. Thus, overall, the purpose of this chapter is to expose how the situated crises of capitalism laid out in the preceding chapter were brought to life *by* the fire, thus rendering it into a disaster.

The Political-Ecological Making of Disaster

Feminist political ecologists have long emphasized that the production of nature is a fundamental *part* of social reproduction (Katz, 2001). As such, any destruction or alteration of the physical environment should be understood as holding profound consequences for social reproductive practices. However, as Katz, Marston, and Mitchell (2015) contend, the literature on ecological crisis has often neglected the crisis of social reproduction and vice versa. But as they note:

> [T]he production of nature happens in the course of everyday life and through the material social practices of everyday life, [and thus] attending to environmental concerns in this fashion…is a way of bringing together social and environmental or political-economic and political-ecological concerns with the possibility of making them new (p.184)

Thus, in holding this assertion central to my analysis, in the following section I seek to trace how Fort McMurray's political-ecological arrangements were, in part, responsible for bringing this disaster into being both *directly* through the manipulation of the community's physical environment and *indirectly* by influencing the form of the political-economic crises at its root.

The Built Environment of Fort McMurray and the Athabasca Tar Sands.

Disaster not only shapes the built environment, but it is the consequence of the built environment.

— Albert Fu, *Connecting Urban and Environmental Catastrophe,* 2016, p.366

As a remote outpost of fossil capital, Fort McMurray and the Athabasca tar sands demonstrate in raw form the degree to which people in their social institutional relations modify the environment often to their own demise (Oliver-Smith, 2002; Fu, 2016; Peluso and Watts,

2001). Under 'boom' conditions, the meandering streets of Fort McMurray's scattered suburbs overflow with muddied Ford F-150s and Dodge RAMs. Bright orange flags attached to pliable 'safety whips' hint at the vehicles' regular commutes north. Beginning as early as 4 a.m., they crowd Highway 63 on route to one of the hundreds of active tar sands projects in operation outside the city's limits. The 25-kilometre stretch north to Tar Island passes through a stark, industrial landscape designed entirely to facilitate the accelerated development of the bituminous sands underlying the muskeg and boreal forest. Immediately outside the 'downtown core,' a 10-lane, 108-foot-wide steel and concrete bridge crosses the Athabasca River. Upgraded between 2008 and 2011, the bridge is the largest in the province and was designed to accommodate more than three times the average weight of most bridges (Flatiron, 2018). The highway curves alongside the Athabasca where bitumen seams are left exposed by the river. As Tar Island approaches, bright blue Alberta Transportation signs begin to appear, displaying the names not of municipalities, but rather of transnational oil companies. Everywhere, the power and presence of the Athabasca tar sands is inscribed on the landscape, serving as a reminder that society and environment are not separate entities but are mutually constituted and always in flux. In following the work of environmental sociologist Albert S. Fu (2016), I see Fort McMurray's disaster risk as something that cannot be fully comprehended without examining its built environment as a tool of extractive capitalism evolving in tandem with its crisis tendencies (p.367).

The threat of disaster is deeply ingrained in Fort McMurray's social and spatial fabric. As David Harvey (2006) asserts, "Elements in the built environment have spatial position or location as a fundamental rather than an incidental attribute." Fort McMurray's spatial fixity in a fire-prone ecology is of no coincidence. The city's location in the boreal forest of northeastern Alberta is a direct result of the vast bitumen deposits contained below, demonstrating how "there is a connection between a city's location, resources, and its disaster risk" (Fu, 2016). In Fort McMurray's case, its source of economic wealth and, by extension, supposed strength— best epitomized by the existence of groups like 'Oil Sands Strong'— is also its greatest source of vulnerability. Tar sands extraction has shaped Fort McMurray into a landscape of ecological and technological risk. As Oliver-Smith (1999) asserts, "in the way we structure consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, our interactions with the environment, we can frequently be the cause of our own hazardous situation" (p.27). Yet, these interactions are not somehow free of power relations (Keucheyan, 2016). Rather, disaster risk is deeply embedded in

processes of capitalist accumulation and shaped by unequal power relations (Freudenburg, et al., 2009), thus, requiring us to ask such questions as, "who profits from building in fire-prone ecologies?" (Fu, 2016).

The same capitalist logic that sees the environment as an inexhaustible fund of resources is arguably, in part, responsible for the 'anthropocentric hubris'[14] of humans believing they can outsmart wildfire (Fu, 2012, p.833). We often forget that environmental hazards are normal features of the ecologies in which we live. As Fu (2016) notes,"While natural disasters are only recognized when they cause social catastrophe, they are also climatically and geologically real phenomenon that are tied to natural rhythms, cycles, and patterns" (p.368). Intense wildfires, like the Horse River fire, are common features of the boreal landscape— having shaped Canada's forests and maintaining their ecological integrity for millenia (MNP, 2017). As a region dominated by black spruce (a species highly susceptible to wildfires), Fort McMurray and the Athabasca tar sands region are particularly susceptible to such extreme fires (MNP, 2017). The presence of industry only magnifies the region's disaster risk. Following the Horse River fire, the Government of Alberta conducted an investigation of the disaster, remarking that:

> Compounding the challenge for Alberta is the significant level of community and industrial values found throughout the forested landscape that require protection. [...] Key infrastructure and industrial related values are common in many wildland areas, and include electricity transmission lines and stations, telecommunication sites, pipeline related infrastructure, resource extraction facilities and industrial camps or lodges hosting hundreds of thousands of workers (MNP, 2017, p.11).

Fossil fuel corporations' obsession with growth has driven industrial expansion in the region, further collapsing the boundaries between nature and the built environment. And while surface mining is the most obvious example, companies' encroachment into fire-prone ecologies is driven by all facets of their operations. Just one of many examples of such expansion includes the over half a dozen private aerodromes scattered throughout the region, making up an entire shadow airline industry responsible for flying workers in and out of major mine sites.

As the tar sands have sprawled, so too has Fort McMurray. Beginning in the early 2000s, the neighbourhoods of Timberlea, Thickwood, and Parsons Creek swelled in response to rapid

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[14] Embodying this 'antropocentric hubris,' in a long-form article on the fire published by the CBC, Chief Darby Allen was quoted saying, "I was freaking mad at it— pissed off. This fire is all around us. It just seemed, whatever we did, it just laughed at us and did something else" (Warnica, 2016).

growth in the oil sands workforce (Turner, 2017). Urban neighbourhoods rapidly encroached further upon the forested 'interface' fringes of the city as the boreal forest was cleared to make way for meandering suburban streets, strip malls, and car dealerships (Westhaver, 2016). Seeking to meet homeowners' insatiable appetite for square footage, builders erected vinyl-siding clad homes within metres of each other in the newly-constructed suburbs. But as oil prices began to fall in 2014, construction slowed. By the time the fire rolled through in May 2016, dozens of dirt roads led to vacant construction sites with no sign of building activity (Turner, 2017).

Critically, the spatial fixity of the tar sands relative to the community also holds important consequences for shaping what social reproduction looks like in Fort McMurray. As the following interaction with Isabelle— a childcare professional in the region— makes clear, the spatial relations of Fort McMurray's built environment contributes to the community's crisis of social reproduction in particular ways that were rendered most visible in the immediate and, as this account demonstrates, long-term aftermath of the wildfire:

> I think the biggest issues that we've seen for caregivers… From a caregiving perspective, it was— whether it was parents or a nanny or what not-— it was…being able to resume normal life. That *separation anxiety* [emphasis added] from their perspective— So being, being… dropping a kid off at daycare and being triggered with the fact the last time I dropped them off at daycare, I didn't know whether I was going to get to them before we were all evacuated and uh going… You know, it's not— For me, I have two small children and I dropped my kids off at daycare a couple times after that and I wasn't comfortable with it. Um… I took them out of daycare and put them in a day home, where I was more comfortable knowing there were a couple kids and it was a more home-like environment. For a parent who works um in the oil sands… they don't have the comfort of knowing— For me, it's five minutes. If I need to go, if… it's five minutes.

> *It's not half an hour, it's not forty-five minutes…*

> Yeah, it's forty-five minutes, an hour *if* they're even allowed to leave, *if* there's transportation to leave the oil sands, you know?

> *Right.*

> So it was just compounded by the type of work and the hours, and everything here is
> that separation anxiety and that wellness for parents and… "Am I doing the right
> thing?" "Should I be there for my kid right now?"… And um… a cloudy day would
> resemble smoke and the kid— People were overparenting, you know?

Thus, in shaping both productive and social reproductive processes in particular ways, the built environment of Fort McMurray was also critical to laying the *political-economic* foundation that rendered the wildfire into a disaster for those who underwent it. And while I return to this political-economic foundation of disaster in the following section, I wish to remain for a moment on the wildfire's political-ecological causes. For while the built environment of Fort McMurray provided the necessary fuel and spatial conditions to feed the 'Beast,' the source of ignition, in contrast, remained a mystery for months. In the days and weeks following the fire's retreat, investigators combed the scene in search of its 'point of origin.' However, in scouring the minutia of the landscape, many failed to recognize the tar sands industry's role in feeding the flames (Lukacs, 2016).

Fanning the Flames of Disaster:
Climate Change and "the Arsonists of Fort McMurray."[15]

> *In this world which is so respectful of economic necessities, no one really knows the real cost of anything which is produced. In fact the major part of the real cost is never calculated; and the rest is kept secret.*
>
> — Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* 1994
>
> *At the centre of the analysis of capitalism's relation to nature is its inherent and unavoidable dependence on fossil fuels, and particularly on oil.*
>
> — Elmar Altvater, *The Social and Natural Environment of Fossil Capitalism,* 2007, p.39

While science may resist tracing a causal link from one fire to global climate change, the existence of a relationship between the two is undeniable (Groot, et al., 2013; Fu, 2016; Wang, et al., 2015). It is widely-recognized among the scientific community that wildfire risk has

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[15] In an article published by *the Guardian* newspaper on May 12, 2016, journalist Martin Lukacs referred to fossil fuel corporations as the "arsonists of Fort McMurray." The article soon drew thousands of polarizing comments from readers around the world. Some called for international tribunals for climate crimes, while others pointed to our own personal culpability as consumers of the same products these corporations sell.

increased from worsening drought conditions and longer fire seasons (Fu, 2016b). The anthropogenic root of the climate crisis is also indisputable (IPCC, 2014; 2018). In attempting to quantify the influence of human emissions on extreme fire risk in Western Canada, a 2017 article published in the journal *Climatic Change* found that the combined effect of human and natural emissions made extreme fire risk events 1.5 to 6 times more likely compared to a climate influenced by natural emissions alone (Kirchmeier-Young, et al., 2017). The area burned by wildfires in Canada has doubled since 1970, further putting to rest any doubt over anthropogenic influence (Flannigan, et al., 2013). And while the Fort McMurray wildfire was unanticipated, it was not altogether unforeseen. In fact, just two years prior, Glenn McGillivray, the Managing Director of the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR), predicted in a blog post that Fort McMurray could become the next site of a catastrophic wildfire (McGillivray, 2014). Such forewarnings indeed demonstrate that in an era of ecological crisis, such events are perhaps unpredictable yet entirely expected in a world wrought by catastrophic warming.[16]

The 2016 onset of an unseasonably warm spring in northeastern Alberta created the conditions for extreme wildfires throughout the region (MNP, 2017). As the investigative report commissioned by the Alberta government outlines, warm temperatures, a lack of precipitation, and strong winds all combined to create the conditions for the Horse River fire (MNP, 2017). In 2016, monthly temperatures for March and April were well above average— in some cases, by as much as 5°C— and by early May, the temperatures in Fort McMurray exceeded 25 degrees. An unusually warm winter was also a contributing factor, resulting in abnormally dry conditions following the snowmelt (MNP, 2017). As has been outlined in the previous chapter, in being intimately bound to an industry that hosts many of the world's largest fossil fuel corporations, Fort McMurray was, in many ways, implicated in fanning the flames of this ecological crisis.

The Political-Economic Making of Disaster

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[16] In the midst of writing this thesis, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report, which warned that without drastically cutting carbon emissions within 12 years, the world will be locked into a global temperature rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius, catalyzing what can only be described as a climate catastrophe for billions of people around the world.

While the fire itself was produced by the convergence of the right ecological and geographic conditions, the *disaster*, in contrast, was produced in part by the particular ways that the crises of capitalism play themselves out in the context of extractivism. Caregivers and social service workers' testimonies and analyses of Fort McMurrayites' experiences of the wildfire and the community's recovery speak to the everyday disaster of living under neoliberal capitalism and having to navigate its inherent contradictions. As Steve Matthewman (2015) reminds us, we must "consider the ways in which ordinary operating everyday capitalism is itself disastrous" (p.123). As is arguably the case with all supposedly "natural" disasters, the Fort McMurray wildfire reveals in sharp relief "the contours of our political and social predicament" created by neoliberal policies and market-driven governance (Adams, 2013, p.5). However, in this particular case, the political and economic making of disaster in Fort McMurray was inextricably tied to its resource-dependence and the resulting precarities unique to this political economy. As Isabelle, a childcare professional, noted in reflecting upon the recovery:

> We were trying to take our lessons from High River and Sl— Sylvan Lake, or Slave
> Lake, and they don't have the same, the same demographic. They weren't five hours
> from a major centre. They weren't Northern Alberta. They weren't *the oil sands.*

In attempting to tease apart this assertion, the following section demonstrates the extent to which the disaster and the resulting strains it has placed on both individuals and families have deep systemic roots in Fort McMurray's political economy under a financialized capitalist system.

Undeniably, phenomena observed before the wildfire, such as increased pressure on the local food bank and a growing reliance on women's unpaid carework, points to the degree to which economic insecurity had already infiltrated everyday life in Fort McMurray, laying the groundwork for the disaster to come. Such observations reflect Nancy Fraser's (2016) assertion that "capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" (p.100). They also expose the intertwined nature of this crisis, revealing the deep entanglement of its ecological, financial, and social reproductive strands and (ideally) making clear the impossibility of untangling any one of these strands from its others.

And while all of these strands of crisis were rendered more visible in the wake of the fire, in adopting Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz's (1988) assertion that "crises occur when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of social

relations" (p.96), I have chosen to focus specifically on the crisis of social reproduction, arguing that it is a powerful lens through which to understand the political economic foundation of this disaster. With this, I also aim to expose how the everyday rationality of neoliberalism was threaded throughout disaster recovery, transferring the weight of recovery onto the shoulders of individuals and families. As Andrew Diamond (2011) argues, the neoliberal mantra of limited government seeps into post-disaster reconstruction, creating a climate where people feel as though they must individually cope and respond to the demands of disaster. Yet, this shift to the individual and analogous dissociation from questions of structure and power was similarly rooted in the community long before the wildfire occurred, and was magnified by the slow-onset disaster of the financial crisis, to which I now turn.

From Six Figure Salaries to Food Bank Line-Ups:
Navigating the Slow Onset Disaster of Neoliberal Capitalism.

In early November 2014, the business sections of Canadian newspapers began to document a rapid slide in crude oil prices, predicting that the downward trend would continue for months to come. For those remotely familiar with the industry, the headlines were not unusual nor were they particularly unsettling. However, by late December, North America's most prominent news sources were drawing attention to the collapse— stoking fears of large-scale layoffs and project cancellations. By 2015, a dark cloud of uncertainty had settled over the region with little indication of when it would retreat. For those living and working in Fort McMurray, the economic consequences of the downturn were beginning to materialize in their everyday lives as work camps shuttered their doors and local retailers reported slumping sales (Morgan, 2014; Jones and Wingrove, 2015). In February 2016, the region's unemployment rate hit 9 percent, spurring palpable shifts in families' ordinary routines and social reproductive practices (Huncar, 2016). As Isabelle noted:

> When the fire happened, we were getting hit— quote unquote— kind of with the economy and the economic downturn so what *care* looked like pre-fire was that we were starting to see less international caregivers coming into the community. We were starting to see um… more parents— whether it be Mom or Dad— assuming a stay-at-home role, a parenting role. It's just it was more economically feasible to do so. And a lot of the times, female traditional occupations are in the social sciences, caring professions,

and um the employment wasn't there to secure and um, obviously lower-paying

professions as well… So predominately we were seeing men working and moms at

home. That was kind of a trend that we were starting to see. Of course not exclusive,

but it was the trend that we were seeing.

Such everyday observations reflect the degree to which economic insecurity had already infiltrated the realm of social reproduction, forcing families to develop coping strategies and alternative forms of care (Dorow, 2015).

Nowhere was the struggle of maintaining families' most basic needs more evident than at the Wood Buffalo Food Bank where the wait time to receive a food hamper stretched from a day to a week (Huncar, 2016). Prior to the economic downturn, in 2012, the food bank distributed 1,449 hampers to serve the needs of 3,366 people (WBFBA, 2013). 2013 presented a 43.1 per cent increase in clients over 2012. And by 2015, at the peak of the economic downturn, food bank usage had increased by 72 per cent over 2014 (WBFBA, 2015). That year, Paul Williams, the Chair of the Board prefaced the food bank's annual report by deeming 2015 as a "year of caution, concern and fear for our community." He wrote:

Everyday people would wake up wondering if this would be the day that they would

receive the horrifying news that they no longer had a job and with it a means to support

and feed their families. Individuals that once donated to the food bank were now forced

to become clients of the food bank (WBFBA, 2015).

Squeezed between high housing costs and stagnating or decreasing wages, many middle-income earners also turned to services like the Salvation Army for support. In 2015, 6,384 people relied on the agency for assistance with mortgage payments, utility bills, and medicine costs (Huncar, 2016).

The oil price collapse was by all accounts a slow disaster of its own— one which dramatically enhanced the socially and materially destructive capacity of the wildfire. By the time the fire swept through in May 2016, those who remained in Fort McMurray were still reeling from what was now considered to be one of the worst downturns in the region's recent economic history (TD Economics, 2016). For the residents of Fort McMurray, one disaster simply fed the other, undermining their ability to recover from either. As Judi Frank, Senior Advisor for Safety and Wellbeing of Alberta Fires at the Red Cross said, "There's two disasters really. Economic and environment," or, as Guy Choquet, the Director of Alberta Fires Recovery Operations for the Red Cross, put it, "It's a double-whammy." In echoing his words

from the previous year, Paul Williams also pointed to the compounding nature of the crisis in his remarks in the food bank's 2016 annual report:

> Last year [...] I stated that 2015 will be known as the year of caution, concern, and uncertainty. Well that same caution and uncertainty continued into 2016, but with it came additional emotions of fear and desperation. I think it would be safe to say that 2016 will, for most of us, be the most horrific and fearful year in our communities [*sic*] history.

Reflecting the degree to which the disaster magnified the pre-existing crisis, in 2016, close to 8,000 hampers were distributed to meet the needs of over 17,000 adults and children in Fort McMurray— a number more than double the past two years combined. Upon reopening in June 2016, food bank employees and volunteers handed out 150 hampers a day. Between June and July 2016, close to 4,000 hampers were distributed to residents. In comparison, in June 2015, they handed out 270 hampers for the entire month (Red Cross, 2016). And while many of these hampers were delivered to help families get back on their feet, the additional demand persisted for months following re-entry. Prior to the oil price collapse, the food bank rarely distributed over 400 hampers a month but the combined impact of the downturn and fire stabilized demand at over 500 hampers per month throughout 2017 (WBFBA, 2017). According to Arianna Johnson, the Food Bank's Executive Director, ninety per cent of those accessing their services had never used a food bank before (Red Cross, 2016).

For hundreds of families in Fort McMurray, the fire deepened pre-existing ties between the ecological, financial, and social strands of crisis that were already embedded in their everyday lives. While the downturn had forced many families to adjust their everyday practices of social reproduction, the fire further prompted the development of new coping mechanisms. As Isabelle observed:

> I think *post*-wildfire, uh we've seen *a lot* more grandparents. So parents— aging parents— who are coming into the community to um… provide that support for their children as they return to work. And a lot of the times it's come from the need for extra psychosocial support. Um, you know, they've lost their homes, their entire life is in crisis, and um… that's the parent's way, or grandparent's— I guess— way of giving back and helping that family. And it's just there's more social anxiety. There's more um… really, social anxiety in both parents and children so that having that rapport

um… and that comfort of the grandparents seems to be a trend that we're starting to see.

While this emotional dimension is undoubtedly a factor behind this shift, it would be misguided to overlook the cost-benefit analysis of such an arrangement. Such alternative modes of care have become all the more financially appealing at a time when families are being squeezed between disinvestments in the social wage on the one hand, and rising costs of living on the other (Katz, Marston, and Mitchell, 2015). For many without the fortune of having access to full-time, unpaid care, the remaining alternative is to expand consumer credit and take on new debt to cover the costs of social reproduction (Roberts, 2013; Fraser, 2014). This is an approach widely resorted to in Fort McMurray where debt is prevalent.

Red Cross Case Workers or Financial Advisors?
The Convergence of Economic and Ecological Crises.

As detailed in the previous chapter, in many ways, the crisis of financialization holds Fort McMurray tightly within its grip. Despite boasting the highest average hourly wage in Canada, financial precarity abounds in the region (Statistics Canada, 2016). For instance, one might recall the statistic that in 2017, consumers living in Fort McMurray carried the highest average debt load in the country at $38,359, compared to the national average of $22,837 (Equifax, 2018). The region's delinquency rate is also the highest in the country, reflecting residents' ongoing struggle to handle their payments. Thus, in one of the wealthiest regions in North America, it is not uncommon for families to earn well-above the average Canadian household while owing over four times the average Canadian debt load (CBC, 2017).

In the wake of the fire, this was the crisis being exacerbated as families with six-figure incomes lined up at the food bank and as formerly financially secure workers turned to the Red Cross for rent payments. Before the economic downturn, many residents were able to tolerate their high levels of debt given their generous incomes (McMahon, 2016) but for hundreds of homeowners, the fire provoked payment deferrals and mortgage re-amortizations as pay cheques became stretched to cover even their most basic needs. Fort McMurray has since witnessed a sharp increase in property foreclosures, reflecting residents' growing inability to meet their mortgage payments. Between April 1st and October 31st, 2017, Fort McMurray's courthouse received 105 foreclosure statements of claim, nearly double the number seen the

year before (Thurton, 2017). And to this day, many of Fort McMurray's streets are lined with For Sale signs, indicating both a forced need and growing desire among residents to extricate themselves from this landscape of financial precarity.

Of course, in the wake of the fire, this crisis was rendered most acute for those who lost their homes in Fort McMurray or their employment in the tar sands and/or in the community at-large. And while I will return specifically to caregivers' perspectives on such consequences in Chapter Five, the following interaction with Loysa vividly depicts the confluence of financial and social reproductive crises, and their exacerbation in the wake of the fire:

> *How do you think… Or do you think that when the fire happened— because I know that like when the fire happened, the price of oil was already pretty low so there were things that were different in the community already— Do you think that had an influence on things?*
>
> Yes. Huge.
>
> *Mhmm… How so?*
>
> A lot of layoffs, so a lot of people don't have the job. So just imagine that having an income for the family, it's… even with assistance of Red Cross and the government, you not having a job makes you… Sometimes people they feel less empowered because they don't have income.
>
> *So before the… before the fire even hit it was like people were already feeling…*
>
> They, they were feeling it. Just imagine you don't have a job and you lose your home. Just imagine the impact. [...] You know and the treatment, and even how sick conditions some would have to vacate their, their apartments and go live somewhere because they just can't afford it anymore.

This claim that workers were already being deeply affected by layoffs prior to the fire points to the reality outlined in Chapter Two that in Fort McMurray, energy workers have become financialized in the interest of capitalist accumulation, rendering them vulnerable to such disposability in the name of corporate cost-cutting.

Arguably, no one had a better bird's-eye view of this convergence of ecological, financial, and social reproductive crises and its impacts than Red Cross case workers who became de-facto financial advisors in the wake of the wildfire. When asked whether the financial crisis in Fort McMurray affected the Red Cross's approach to their work, Guy Choquet responded by saying:

> Yes, because we have people who come here with financial challenges that they wouldn't have had before. So they need to face that they need a financial plan. Maybe they need to file for bankruptcy. Right? So you can't move forward till you've made those choices and those decisions. That's… who we're seeing now because it's a year out. So we have people who've spent all of their RRSP monies to date and now they're stuck. They have nowhere to go, right? So what is it that they're gonna do?

And while financial planning and assistance is typically involved in recovery operations, both senior advisors at the Red Cross noted that in the case of Fort McMurray, the financial hardship was pre-existing and exacerbated by the fire.

This convergence of economic and ecological crises has evidently unfolded most profoundly in the realm of social reproduction— undermining people's capacity to care for both themselves and their families. Households' increased reliance on the food bank and growing inability to make mortgage payments following the fire reflect Nancy Fraser's (2014) claim that "finance, ecology and social reproduction are not neatly separated from one another, but are deeply and inextricably intertwined" (p.13). But as Fraser (2014) also suggests, struggles over social reproduction encompass far more than households' waning ability to meet their needs without being buried under mounting piles of debt. Indeed, the consequences of the economic downturn extended from the household level to community organizations, stretching their capacity and undermining their ability to meet the social reproductive needs of individuals and families in Fort McMurray. As Guy put it:

> The economic downturn impacts individuals and families and organizations the same way. So if you had full of cash— all the income flowing— and the economic downturn, there's a reduction of income level. I mean household level income. The same thing happens with organizations. So the organizations are poorer because of the economic downturn. And both the organizations and individuals and families are used to living with more expense because they've had more income. So it's all a relativity thing.

The stretched capacity of social services and non-profit organizations is particularly detrimental in a community like Fort McMurray where, even prior to the fire, such services helped to absorb the various everyday shocks of capitalist crisis, as for example is made clear in the case of the food bank described above.

Material Loss and the Neoliberal Distribution of Hope in Fort McMurray.

As is to be expected, much of the financial hardship attributable to the fire was far worse for those who experienced significant material losses. However, similarly mirroring the everyday experiences of the financial crisis, the consequences of material loss were highly relative. By this, I mean to suggest that the impact of losing one's home was highly dependent on other factors, such as one's insurance policy, financial stability, and the shifting value of their home (including its potential resale value). Due to the boom-bust nature of Fort McMurray's economy and its resultantly high cost of living, many of the community's residents have been encouraged and, at times, have had little choice but to wrap up their wealth in property and material assets. As a result, Fort McMurray has long-garnered a reputation for being a materialistic place— a characteristic which was brought up in many people's reflections on the material impact of the fire. In speaking with a live-in caregiver named Loysa, she mentioned this materialism in passing. When asked why she thought this was the case, she responded by saying:

> I think with the money coming in here a couple of years ago, it's like everything is abundant. So you get to own, and you get to change your car like you're changing your socks because there's like abundance of jobs, of finances. And this whole like… there's a community at Wood Buffalo and you see how those houses were high-end. *(Inaudible)* invested so much in those and you see those people that has their houses burnt down, those people who invested most of their earnings were affected more. It's because of their attachment to their, to that um material… uh… It's not really— we don't call material— it is necessary to have a shelter. It's a necessity. But once you're, you start putting in expensive appliance, expensive granite counters… You know, what's the difference when it gets burned compared to just an ordinary table that you do? That's *granite*.

Such comments reflect the degree to which a culture of consumerism took hold during the boom years as households attempted to make the most of the financial opportunity while it

lasted (Dorow and Dogu, 2011; O'Shaughnessy, 2011). For many living in constant anticipation of the next bust, 'making the most of the boom' translated into buying expensive homes, owning recreational vehicles, and furnishing their kitchens with state-of-the-art appliances.

In tracing the spatial and temporal distribution of hope in Fort McMurray, Sara Dorow and Goze Dogu (2011) argue that this community exists as an extreme example of the neoliberal distribution of hope; one in which hope is "traded on a contradictory and transparently shaky promise of economic abundance for all, and in the increasingly narrow terms of better jobs, more consumer power, and thus better lifestyles" (p.275). Drawing on the work of Ghassan Hage (2003), they assert that in Fort McMurray, hope is kept alive through the "*experience* of the *possibility* of upward social mobility" (Hage, 2003, p.13, emphasis in original). So while an ordinary table or vinyl countertop might suffice, granite stands in as a material representation of upward mobility. In this way, they suggest that "hope underwrites political and economic aims, promising a dignified and meaningful life vis-à-vis the contingencies of the market" (Dorow and Dogu, 2011, p.275). Yet, under neoliberal capitalism, such contingencies expand, creating an ever illusory and impermanent sense of hope. For many, losing material possessions in the fire thus served as yet another reminder of the fleeting nature of 'the good life' — a reminder which had, of course, already taken hold during the economic downturn. For the thousands of homeowners whose homes were destroyed in the wildfire, losing them signified a loss of what they had worked for and all they had *made of the opportunity* presented by the oil economy (while it lasted).

Thus, for many families, losing their homes and material possessions resulted in a profound fracturing of relationships and deeply *affective* tensions— a reality which was rendered visible not only to live-in caregivers but also to social service providers and Red Cross case workers. When asked to reflect on whether the fire had placed a strain on intimate partnerships, Loysa articulated how, for many, material loss (and its corrosion of hope) had created a wedge in people's relationships:

> Of course, there's the stress of losing your home, losing anything that you've, you've worked hard for, for this house. You've worked hard for those cars and, you know, just just to lose it in a couple of hours. You know how… when you are so attached to this thing and you work so hard and you just lose it with the blink of an eye— it affects you. It affects you. All aspects of your life will be affected because it's a loss and loss is something that we can't deal it… deal with easily. With the relationship, with this cou—

> with this lady worrying about what they've lost, this guy is worrying how he can, you
> know, gain back what's been lost.

By this means, families have entered a pattern where regaining hope is, in part, dependent upon their ability to replace their homes and material possessions, yet their ability to do so is constrained by the market. Of course, this is generally the case with disasters, however, this hope (and its precariousness) is arguably exacerbated in the boom-bust context of Fort McMurray. Indeed here, the ever-present reality in which hope for the future is tied to the price of a barrel of oil intensifies such conditions.

In further reflecting the importance of paying attention to the pre-existing nature of disaster, Loysa expressed how the fire's impact on relationships was highly dependent upon their pre-disaster state. Moreover, Loysa acknowledged that as with all social relations in Fort McMurray, relationships are shaped in particular ways by the demands of the oil economy:

> You know like for, for couples that were not strong really, it is the, it is just one problem
> that will drift them apart. [...] Those just are petty things but tho— their relationship is
> not strong enough to, to withstand this shake and that's why they drifted apart. This
> even like… For example, those site workers— You know, um guy comes home every
> two weeks or he comes home during the day— I mean— during the day he's asleep.
> The wife is at work so if you don't do anything to nurture your relationship, it's going to
> die. It's like a plant, if it's not nurtured, it's going to die. Then how you can you nurture
> your relationship when the other guy is sleeping, the guy's sleeping when you're at work?
> How do you make it work? So you know those little disagreements— even hockey
> games for the children, or channel... TV channels that they're watching— even it,
> because you know, you're not working on it. You're not investing your time. You're not
> putting effort on it.

With this, it is not only livelihoods that are rendered precarious in an oil economy but relationships of the most intimate kind. As social service providers and Red Cross case workers made clear, the affective strain of the fire— combined with that of the downturn— materialized in all forms of family breakdown. Red Cross workers often cited the higher rates of domestic violence that were being observed in the community, and remarked upon the frequency with which they were forced to refer women to shelters in the region.[17]

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[17] Largely found within the field of Gender Disaster Sociology, an extensive literature exists pointing to the connection between natural disasters and increased rates of domestic violence. For an insightful overview of this

Disassembling the Disaster

In this chapter I have made the case that while the wildfire itself was the product of dry fuel and a source of ignition, the disaster, in contrast, was the result of Fort McMurray's underlying landscape of capitalist crisis, which has been created over time by neoliberal policies and market-driven governance, and uniquely shaped by the community's primary resource dependence. So while the fire was widely-depicted as a "natural" disaster defined by its 'non-routine' character, I have argued that in holding social reproduction central to our analysis, we are able to see how both its political ecological and political economic foundation is strongly grounded in everyday life.

First, in tracing the political-ecological making of "the Beast," I have argued that Fort McMurray's socio-spatial existence as the primary service centre to the Athabasca tar sands has rendered the community ecologically vulnerable to disaster in several ways. First, the commodification of the vast bitumen deposits underlying the boreal forest is, in many ways, responsible for the form the community takes in a remote, fire-prone ecology. Moreover, in having been socio-spatially produced over time in line with the boom-bust resource cycle, the built environment of both Fort McMurray and the tar sands have sprawled out into this ecologically-vulnerable landscape over time. With this, everything from housing materials to the distance between homes in Fort McMurray has, in some way, been altered by the community's resource dependence and the price of oil. However, Fort McMurray's connection to the oil industry has also implicated the community in the ecological crisis of climate change that rendered this natural hazard far more powerful. I have sought to connect the political-ecological roots of this disaster, in turn, to its political economic foundation. Once again, in holding social reproduction central to my analysis, I have argued that the capitalist crises laid out in Chapter Two were exacerbated by the fire, rendering it into a disaster in the lives of those who experienced the catastrophe. Thus, in continuing to hold onto this thread of social reproduction, the following two chapters turn specifically to the experiences of migrant

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relationship, and that which exists between patriarchy, disaster, and toxic masculinities, see Elaine Enarson and Bob Pease's "The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Men, Masculinities, and Disaster." See also Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek (2007), Enarson (2004), Enarson (2005), Enarson (2012), and Luft (2008). For excellent accounts of LGBT and gender minorities' experiences of natural disasters see Gorman-Murray, et al. (2016) and Gaillard, et al. (2016).

caregivers to further illuminate the interconnections between these crises, and how they were activated or exacerbated in the wake of the fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INVISIBLE THREADS OF CAPITALISM

Capitalism is not maintained by mere violence and deception. If it were, it would be far less robust. It is also sustained by a set of institutions, techniques, and ideas about human affairs and social goals that, for many people in the wealthy world, are unquestionable, as natural as gravity.

— Geoff Mann, 2013, p.5, *Disassembly Required*

Crisis and Surplus

In the following two chapters, I ask what we can learn by looking to migrant caregivers' experiences of rebuilding daily life and reconstituting community in the aftermath of disaster. Specifically, I take interest in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) claim that, "the actual effects of crisis in a particular society are not necessarily paralyzing; rather, they invite remedies that take many forms, and therefore produce varying outcomes that are as likely further to shake up, as to settle, the original political-economic upheaval" (p.56). Thus, in turning to migrant caregivers' intimate reproductive contributions to disaster recovery (as one such remedy), I believe we can better understand not only how crises are mediated but how they come to be settled and *re-*settled in our everyday lives. The value of taking such an approach is further bolstered when we consider, once again, the assertion that, "crises occur when the social formation can no longer

be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of social relations" (Hall and Schwarz, 1988, p.96). In tying these two claims together, it becomes clear that we must centre social reproduction in our attempt to grapple with the effects of crisis and the grounds they create *(or fail to create)* for political change (Strauss and Meehan, 2015). And while Hall and Schwarz's assertion is primarily concerned with reproduction in the Marxist sense of reproducing the conditions of production, I follow Marxist feminists (Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 1975, 2001; Vogel, 2013) in seeing this claim as being equally applicable to the social reproduction feminist view of social reproduction as "the varied processes involved in maintaining and reproducing individuals and societies over time" (Strauss, 2012, p.182).

Drawing upon both Marxist and feminist thought, I consider the ongoing utility of the Marxist notion of surplus value, arguing that this concept, in particular, holds enormous potential for elucidating why certain crises produce radical ruptures while others are simply absorbed into the everyday process of social reproduction. While Marx gave centrality to capitalists' appropriation of paid workers' surplus value within the productive realm, I align my own thinking with socialist and Marxist feminists' long-established claim that reproductive labour "creates surplus value… [and] must be conceived as an integral part of capitalist production (Weeks, 2011, p.119). Thus, following feminist political economists, I view the informal, unpaid, or underpaid labour of migrant caregivers as an essential form of 'surplus value' upon which capitalist profits are based (Constable, 2007; 2009).

In following the work of Nicole Constable (2016), Arlie Hochschild (2014), and Vincanne Adams (2013), I seek to expand our understanding of surplus beyond its narrow monetary conceptualization. Rather, I draw on their use of such concepts like 'intimate', 'emotional', and 'affective' surplus to better capture the type of labour migrant caregivers performed both before and after the fire. As Constable (2016) suggests, "concepts of reproductive labor and intimate surplus are used to discuss who (in the absence of capitalist 'owners' of productive industries) profits or benefits from the migrant domestic worker industry and how" (p.49). Therefore, in a community that is afflicted by multiple crises— however invisible they may be— I view the surplus value of migrant caregivers as essential to preventing these crises from hemorrhaging into everyday life. Caregivers reproduce the same set of social relations that tie these crises together and permit them to be sustained in everyday life.

The following two chapters are dedicated to developing these claims through close attention to the employment experiences of caregivers both before and after the wildfire. I

begin by laying out my own conceptualization of surplus value and outlining how this extraction of surplus is a relational practice, in this case, enabled by caregivers' deep entanglement with their employers' everyday lives. However, with these relations being largely hidden from view, I argue that any attempt to trace the mechanisms through which caregivers' surplus value is extracted requires addressing their social and political erasure and rendering visible their pre-existing working conditions (Dorow, 2015). I therefore draw upon caregivers' accounts of what a typical work day looks like for them in order to illustrate how their employers are able to extract their surplus value through a series of enabling *conditions* and *relations,* which take place primarily (although not exclusively) within the home.

In recognizing that this extraction of surplus value was a pre-existing constitutive force both within households and in the community at-large, I turn to caregivers' experiences of the wildfire to demonstrate how these pre-existing social reproductive practices created the conditions by which means ways of extracting surplus value could be expanded during and after the fire. Indeed, households have always been extracting surplus value from caregivers in order to suture together these intersecting crises underpinning disaster. I argue that following the wildfire, these same forms of extraction were exacerbated and re-deployed to similarly manage these crises and re-absorb them into everyday life to recover some semblance of normalcy.

In Chapter 5, I rely heavily on caregivers' accounts of the disaster to trace how, in its wake, families continued to extract surplus value from their caregivers as a way of coping with the financial, social, and psychological effects of crisis. I argue that the pre-existing conditions enabling extraction were altered, refracted, and exacerbated in the wake of the wildfire; such that new practices of extraction emerged, while others remained the same. Ultimately, I make the case that in studying a community in its moment of reconstitution through the eyes of a largely invisible workforce engaged in the work of care, we are able to see how crises are woven into our everyday lives through existing patterns of social reproduction. It is *through* this extraction of surplus value that the social formation of capitalism is re-established amidst the rubble of crises and extensive restructuring. Furthermore, as the case of migrant caregivers makes abundantly clear, this process of extracting (reproductive) surplus value to re-settle capitalist relations is highly gendered, raced, and classed— unfolding unevenly through time and across space in ways that often re-entrench the global stratification of social reproduction.

The Deep Entanglement of Employer-Employee Relations
and Surplus Value Extraction as a Relational Practice

As many feminist scholars have widely-documented, the demand for migrant domestic workers is symptomatic of the crisis of social reproduction, whereby a rolling-back of the welfare state and subsequent rolling-out of neoliberal forms of carework have incited everyday people to skim off surplus value from those positioned on a lower rung of society's socioeconomic ladder (Katz, 2001a; LeBaron, 2010; Sassen, 2002a; 2002b; Chang, 2016; Parreñas, 2008; 2015). However, while many forms of life's work are now being embedded in the market, carework is particularly unique insofar as it blurs the line between paid and unpaid labour. As Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose (2006) note, the commodification of care "highlights the division between paid and unpaid care as well as the continuities and blurred boundaries as carework moves back and forth from unpaid to paid and back again" (p.22).

These blurred boundaries uniquely define *how* surplus value is extracted in the realm of carework. For while Marx understood surplus value extraction to be a highly relational practice in the productive realm of work, this relationality is clearly magnified and muddied by several conditions unique to the realm of carework. As Bridget Anderson (2000) articulates:

> [D]omestic work… is concerned with the physical, cultural and ideological reproduction of human beings. Paid domestic workers reproduce people and social relations, not just in what they do (polishing silver, ironing clothes), but also in the very doing of it (the foil to the household manager). In this respect the paid domestic worker is herself, in her very essence, a means of reproduction. It is not just her labour power that is being harnessed to the cause of her employer's physical and social reproduction, but it is the very fact that she, the domestic worker, and not her employers, is doing this work, much of which seems invented especially for her to do. *The employer is buying the power to command, not the property in the person, but the whole person* (p.227).

Therefore, with carework often straddling the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour, the process of extracting one's surplus value is facilitated by the existence of these blurred edges and the uncertainty surrounding what constitutes "work." Moreover, as Anderson (2000) points out, today a neoliberal rationality has clearly permeated the household level to such an extent that human beings are treated as mere commodities. Guided by a capitalist mentality, the migrant caregiver is stripped of their personhood and simply conceived as a 'unit of labour'

"torn of all social contexts" (Anderson, 2000, p.108) and free to work unencumbered by any connections to family or friends. Thus, this ability "to command, not the property in the person, but the whole person" (Anderson, 2000, p.108) implies another level of relationality entirely— one which arguably lays the foundation for a much deeper form of exploitation. So while all workers experience a skimming-off of their surplus value, this process is arguably all the more relational for caregivers who are individually tied to their employers and implicated in the minutiae of their everyday lives.

Recalling Marx's conceptualization of commodities as "black boxes" of hidden social relationships, the following section thus seeks to shed light on these less visible and lesser-recognized processes of social reproduction— those which equally supplement this global commodity and render its production possible. In shattering the black box that hides migrant caregivers' labour from view, I aim to outline the conditions of their work and the means through which their surplus value is extracted by their employers. It is through this process, I argue, that individuals and families are able to absorb the tensions and contradictions that inevitably come with living under a financialized capitalist system in this particular resource community.

Unveiling Fort McMurray's Political Economy of Invisibility: Technologies of Servitude and the Working Conditions of Migrant Caregivers

Invisibility can be used as a tool of oppression, because if a people can't be seen, then their work can be discounted, their experience of violence and oppression can go without recourse, and their lives can be devalued.

— Alisa Bierria, Mayaba Liebenthal, and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence Collective, *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation,* 2007, p.32

In the wake of natural disasters, there is a widespread tendency to frame the event as a moment of unmasking and visibility (Pacholok, 2013; Giroux, 2006; Hoffman, 1998). However, as Thomas Jessen Adams (2014) has argued, such analyses rarely reflect on how such physical and social façades came to exist in the first place. Rather, "the problem with the narrative of visibility and invisibility, is its disconnect from political economy— from the very forces that not only produced the invisibility to begin with, but continue to do so, more so now than ever" (Adams, 2014, p.85). In short, disaster theorists have largely failed to interrogate the pre-

existence of "the black box" and its contents, and have rarely turned their focus to its reconstruction in the wake of disaster, however unintentional this process may be. However, it is not only this container of hidden social relationships that demands unveiling but the conditions, relations, and narratives that bring it into being.

In Fort McMurray, caregivers are both essential to erecting the walls of this black box, while simultaneously having their own labour, conditions, and relations contained within it. Put another way, as a largely invisible workforce, caregivers uphold the oil industry's process of capital accumulation and, in so doing, hide the true costs of its production from view. As I have previously noted, caregivers' invisibility is not merely coincidental but rather, systematically produced by the demands of industry who rely on a parallel round-the-clock workforce to fill the social reproductive gaps left by their employees' absence. Thus, in working within the private realm of their employers' homes, caregivers' physical invisibility hides not only their working conditions and relations from view but also those of their employers and, by extension, those of the state. It is these conditions and relations which enable the extraction of surplus value and, in turn, make possible the reproduction of capitalist social relations both within the home and in the community at-large. Thus, the invisibility of caregivers must be understood as a constitutive element of Fort McMurray's political economy— one which allows the extractive industry to continue drawing record profits from the physical landscape regardless of how scoured its social landscape may be.

Consequently, any attempt to trace the practices through which caregivers' surplus value is extracted requires addressing the social and political erasure of caregivers, and rendering visible their pre-existing working conditions that enable this extraction and resultant supplementation of the extractive industry (Dorow, 2015). In doing so, we are able to see that while the fire may have revealed certain crises of care (for instance in the lineups at the food bank), it in many ways furthered Fort McMurray's pre-existing political economy of invisibility in the interest of citizen-households and to the detriment of migrant workers.

There are various mechanisms at play in the production of caregivers' invisibility in Fort McMurray and "though they differ in function and degree, each of these mechanisms obscures the fact that work is performed and therefore contributes to its economic devaluation" (Hatton, 2017, p.337). First, regardless of which version one is referring to, Canada's various caregiver programs are (and have historically been) designed to invisibilize the labour of those participating in them. While no longer a compulsory element of the Caregiver Program, the

previous live-in requirement of the Live-In Caregiver Program rendered caregivers socio-spatially invisible by relegating them to their employers' private homes. It is also widely acknowledged that, "living in an employer's home dampens wages, tends to stretch the work day, and can make domestic workers vulnerable to sexual abuse" (Pratt, 1999, p.225). However, whether living in or out of their employers' homes, the fact that their work is performed within this private sphere contributes to its gendered and raced invisibility (England, 1986; 1992).

As gendered and racialized workers, caregivers' invisibility is not only socio-spatially produced but socioculturally produced as well. In a community dominated by a single, round-the-clock industry, the broad neoliberal trend of assigning social reproduction to racialized bodies is magnified in Fort McMurray— arguably, resulting in a greater normalization of the practice. Indeed, in visiting a childcare center late one afternoon, a white supervisor motioned towards the playroom in an attempt to show me the ubiquity of migrant caregivers in the community. "I mean, here, even if you look out on our floor— I think we're closing right now, so not so much— but at any given time, when you look out here, you'll see more caregivers than you'll see parents," she explained. And while this preponderance of largely Filipina nannies may appear to contradict this claim of invisibility, in reality, these women are rendered visible only as specific subjects. In being discursively constructed as "nannies" or "housekeepers," Filipina women, in particular, are circumscribed to a "limiting space within the labour market" where their occupational trajectories are restricted even after they have obtained their permanent residency (Pratt, 1999, p.218).[18] As Geraldine Pratt, and many other scholars have demonstrated, "the LCP creates deeply exploitative working and living conditions, and leads to the long-term deskilling of the mostly college-educated women who eventually migrate to Canada and often sponsor their families after completing the LCP" (Pratt, 2012, p.76).

In Fort McMurray, the invisibilization of caregivers and, in many ways, migrant workers more generally is also fulfilled by the deployment of neoliberal colour-blind discourses which obscure important distinctions of experience and identity from view. In reflecting on this process of invisibilization, the following interaction with Ramazan Nassery vividly depicts how such discourses are often activated and to what ends:

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[18] According to Dorow, Cassiano and Doerksen (2015), among the live-in caregivers they surveyed in Fort McMurray, attainment of post-secondary degrees was higher than among the average of the general population in the region.

I don't know what happened but the problem is… overall, there is some kind of— I don't know, some problems… Like two, three years ago we had this diversity summit uhh… and suddenly live-in caregivers, everybody talks about "newcomers to Canada," "newcomers to Canada," like the whole the two, two-day conference was going on and nobody said a single word of immigrants or refugees.

At a diversity summit??

Yes! And I said, "Why people are hesitant not to mention refugees and immigrants to come to our town, like why is that?", "Ohhh, we want to be inclusive. 'Newcomer.'" So what they do? They bury the newcomers' issue with newcomer who come from Edmonton to Fort McMac, who come from Newfoundland to Fort Mac, who come from Vancouver to Fort Mac. So, "They're all newcomers, we want to be inclusive." I said, "If you want to be inclusive that way you are not addressing the real issues that refugees and new immigrants face in, in Fort McMurray and that's why you're missing the point." And… and it was a hard topic to, to sell for them. Right?

Mhmm…

But there is overall higher level who makes decision, like uh… immigrants, refugees, TFWs, and live-in caregivers are *aaalll* the way in the bottom like even immigrants that we have here in our population, still they are not on, on their list and when it comes to planning on uh and approving the uh budgets, all those kinds of things… So they chose it— I'm giving you an example that's how *far* people's thinking of from, from the reality. The deployment of such discourses and their effects strongly reflect Andrew Diamond's (2014) claim that, "When the myth of color-blindness is faced with undeniable racial inequalities, the move to cultural racism works to deflect attention away from any consideration of the structural and historical conditions of these injustices. In this sense, it possesses the same individualizing logic as neoliberalism" (p.65).

However, it is not only the invisibilization of caregivers' working conditions that matters in terms of shaping their personal experiences of work and community, and altering the landscape of social reproduction in the region. The political and economic erasure of caregivers

also renders their experience of family separation invisible to Canadians. In often being spatially segregated within the home and, to an extent, in the community at-large, the 'destructiveness of distance' is hidden from view in the interest of the citizen-class who would rather not be reminded of the affective tensions and transnational implications engendered by their own childcare demands (Pratt, 2012). As Geraldine Pratt (2012) notes, middle-class Canadian families are often shielded from this 'geography of separation':

> Filipino mothers may cry in the basement rooms or nanny quarters of middle-class Canadian homes, but are unlikely to make visible their feelings to their employers, not simply out of modesty but from literal fears about losing their jobs: no employer wants a grieving or depressed nanny (p.44).

In keeping the emotional toll of transnational migration out of sight, employers are able to distance themselves from the social costs of the commodification of care. Rather than feeling guilty or contrite about the pain of family separation, the invisibilization of these relations allows employers to continue to see themselves as benevolent employers innocently extending the opportunity of citizenship and family reunification to those living in the Global South (Pratt, 2012).

Promissory Citizenship: A Passport to Exploitation.

Indeed, while the invisibility of caregivers profoundly shapes the circumstances of their labour by hiding both their conditions and personal relations from view, their lack of citizenship rights similarly alters their working conditions in particular ways, creating an ideal climate for the extraction of surplus value. As Geraldine Pratt (1999) notes, "the live-in caregiver is defined in relation and in opposition to the category Canadian citizen, and it is the noncitizen status of job occupantas that structures the work conditions of live-in caregivers" (p.219). Promulgated by the Caregiver Program, "the promise of potential citizenship works in a potent way to legitimate labor conditions acknowledged by the Canadian government as unacceptable to Canadians" (Pratt, 1999, p.220). In the following section I turn to these different facets of invisibility and precarity and how they materialize in practice and lived experience, in order to demonstrate how such conditions enable the extraction of caregivers' surplus value in particular ways.

In tying caregivers to a single employer and dangling a conditional carrot of promissory citizenship in front of them, the Caregiver Program produces an environment in which

caregivers will often endure short-term hardship for the opportunity to apply for permanent residency and, by extension, family reunification after 24 months of working as a caregiver (Bonifacio, 2016; Dorow, Cassiano and Doerksen, 2015). This was reflected in the fact that in every single one of my interviews with caregivers, the women expressed a willingness to overlook contract violations if it meant filing their permanent residency applications as fast as legislatively possible. This resolute desire to immigrate to Canada thus places caregivers on a spectrum where they are forced to decide the level of abuse they are willing to tolerate to only *potentially* become a citizen and be reunited with their families. Both Loysa and Reyna arguably occupy the extreme-end of this spectrum, with Loysa having endured persistent verbal abuse while Reyna withstood unpredictable and insufficient hours resulting in little to no economic security. In both cases, the need to support children back in the Philippines and the long-time aspiration of being reunited with their families on Canadian soil incited the women to endure deeply exploitative working conditions.

Compounding this willingness to tolerate exploitation is the fact that Canada is rarely the first destination in caregivers' migration trajectories. Rather, with the Caregiver Program requiring medical or childcare experience, caregivers have often worked as nannies or as au-pairs elsewhere— often in Hong Kong but also ranging from such places as Norway to the United States. Consequently, coming to Canada and working under a program that provides a pathway to citizenship is often viewed as the final stage in their migration stories; one which, if they persist, will make their entire transnational experience— complete with its many hardships and unexpected obstacles— worthwhile .

Long Hours, Long Commutes: Non-Standard and (Hyper) Flexibilized Work.

Due to both their invisibility and prohibition from participating freely in the labour market, caregivers must confront precarious and often abusive employment conditions controlled by poorly regulated employers (Parreñas, 2001; Parreñas, 2008; Constable, 2007; Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015). As previously described, the frenetic pace of work and life in Fort McMurray shapes these conditions in particular ways, creating a workplace environment in which caregivers are expected to work long irregular hours performing both childcare and non-childcare related tasks.

Employment in the tar sands region involves non-standard and flexibilized schedules with spatio-temporal dimensions (such as long commutes) that often blur the "lines between the places and times of paid work and other aspects of life" (Dorow, Roseman, and Cresswell, 2017, p.2). Such conditions, in turn, affect the demands employers place upon their caregivers and shift the norms of self-behaviour that they, as employers, deem personally acceptable. With residents of Fort McMurray working the longest hours in the country (Howell, 2014), it was not uncommon for caregivers I spoke with to regularly wake up between the hours of 4 and 6 a.m. to prepare breakfast and get their employers' children ready for school. Typically, they would work ten to 12-hour days ending at 5 or 6 p.m, with some working up to 16-hour days on a regular basis. Such experiences mimic Dorow, Cassiano and Doerksen's (2015) finding that, in Fort McMurray, caregivers worked longer hours than the average worker in the community, and that their schedules often shadowed those of their employers. This is rendered visible in the following exchange in which Aum, a Thai caregiver working for a single-parent employed in the tar sands, described the demanding nature of her usual schedule:

You do all the meals and stuff… And so, she would be gone—What? From like nine o'clock in the morning?

4 a.m.

4 a.m?!

Yeah, she leave. But the kid not up yet.

So 4 a.m. and then she'd get back at what? Like 6 p.m. or something?

6 p.m. Sometimes 8 p.m. If she go out after, it's gonna be 10 or… sometimes morning. Under such conditions, what constitutes "work" for caregivers becomes particularly blurred. With the children still typically asleep between the hours of 4 a.m. and 7 a.m., caregivers become on-call workers within the home— capable of being woken up at any moment to tend to the children's needs. The number of consecutive days caregivers must work is often similarly protracted. As Aum described to me, "If the kid home, I have to be home. I work fourteen days before. Never stop."

However, with many employers working shift work— such as six days on, six days off— caregivers' schedules were adjusted accordingly such that they might work 60 hours one week, and only ten the next, again mirroring the social reproductive reality described in Dorow, Cassiano and Doerksen's study (2015). As Maria, a non-Filipina caregiver explained to me:

> So if, if even in your contract says that you have to work or you're going to work for your 44 hours— they can, they can say, "Okay, I just need you 30 hours this week. And next week, I need you 35. Next week, I need you 50," or something like that. Because it's, you're just— they just have to take you under like full-time employment. But even that… I think some people, they're like, if they don't need you, they think, "Ohhh she's just here for me and she's just working for me." Some people are like that but some people are like, "Okay. I don't need you but I'm still going to pay you because you're my responsibility."

Evidently, live-in caregivers have little to no control over their schedules and are subjected to a great deal of authority from their employers (Parreñas, 2001). Under such circumstances, the rotational nature of their employers' jobs encourages a hyperflexibilization of both caregivers' time and pay, and a broadening of their responsibilities. Moreover, as Maria's reflection makes clear, employers are often cognizant of their caregivers' vulnerability, recognizing the improbability of them seeking work elsewhere given the lengthy and bureaucratic process of solidifying a contract. Again, as many scholars have noted, this hyperflexibilization and irregular scheduling greatly blurs what constitutes 'work' and 'non-work' in live-in caregivers' day-to-day routines (Parreñas, 2001). In fact, as Reyna's story described in the introduction and the following interaction with Aum make clear, sometimes this relationship is blurred to such an extent that caregivers have no idea when they are "on" and when they are "off." As Aum described to me:

> And then— I don't know how… I never know my time. I work late. I don't know how… She leave 4 a.m. and she come back home 8 p.m. Maybe the kid already in bed. I like… […] Before I come here she said, "It gonna be Monday to Friday. I'm off Saturday and Sunday." But after that, I never know… I mean, I never know. I just. I don't know. Sometimes I come up and she talk to me, "Why you come up? You're off today."
>
> Okay. But you never knew?

Yeah but I get up because I think I'm working. But she was, "Okay but you already come up, so you..." "Really? Why you not tell me yesterday?" I'm okay, if you tell me yesterday, but really? I'm already up and you tell me like, "Why you come up? You're off."

The Broadening of Responsibilities.

With childcare being particularly constrained throughout Fort McMurray, it was also not uncommon for employers to share their caregivers or expect them to care for children beyond those agreed upon in their employment contract. This often included the friends and classmates of their children, employers' friends' children, and extended family members and stepchildren. Maricel, for instance, reflected on this broadening of her childcare responsibilities when I asked her about her employment situation:

> It's not good. Honestly? Not very nice, not very good. I have to take care of five dogs, three kids, and sometimes five kids because she is married again to a man who have two kids, and she have three kids also so some days, combined, five kids.

Aum was similarly employed by a blended family and expected to care for stepchildren with little notice. In this regard, caregivers' surplus value is extracted by extending the scope of their responsibilities. This also occurs when employers expect their caregivers to perform long lists of household chores— a practice that is incredibly common.

However, despite overloading their caregivers with non-childcare related tasks to complete throughout the daytime, employers often conceive of the hours when their children are at school as 'downtime' for caregivers. However, as Aum described, in being tasked with preparing meals, cleaning the house, and caring for pets, this perceived 'downtime' rarely feels as such. Instead of resting after dropping the kids off at school, Aum would typically return home to care for the family's dog: "I have only the dog. So I let the dog in, out, in, out, in, out." While they differed in their opinions on the matter, all of the caregivers I spoke with reflected upon the widespread practice of their employers assigning them duties that fell far beyond the scope of their contracts.

In speaking with a caregiver named Veronica, she explained how her purpose in trying (and failing on numerous occasions) to come to Canada was always about her desire to care for

children. However, after spending only a few months with her employers (who she had been with for three years at the time of interviewing), her role in the household began to shift:

> Buuutt, after a few months, it's going to be a change a little bit. More responsibility, more "do this, do that"… And now, I am responsibility, charge for everything! The house and, and kids, and, and everything so...

> *Like cooking? Cleaning?*

> Everything! Sometimes cooking, sometimes cleaning…

> *And so that happened over a little while even though you thought it was just kids? So you work a lot... Like what are your normal hours sort of?*

> 10 hours. 10 hours. Every day. Each day.

Besides highlighting the surplus value that is extracted from caregivers, such accounts speak to the enormous influence the oil industry has on *all* aspects of social reproduction, including those that fall outside the scope of childcare. In having to commute for long hours and work such irregular schedules, employers' ability to simply do "life's work"— like going to the bank, purchasing groceries, and attending their children's recitals and hockey games— becomes nearly impossible to accomplish such that, in an era of neoliberalism, these everyday practices are simply downloaded onto commodified workers.

Debt, Discretionary Pay, and the "Cobbling Together of Subsistence Wages."

The absence of regulation and unequal relations of power between caregivers and their employers also affect the arbitration of caregivers' pay. With wages mandated by the provincial government but payment left up to the discretion of employers, the amount caregivers receive differs substantially from individual to individual. However, while both the rate and frequency of compensation varies, one practice that is widespread is employers' failure to pay overtime wages for hours worked beyond the 44-hour minimum. In many cases, this contract violation is directly tied to this blurring of 'work' and 'non-work' (Parreñas, 2001; Parreñas, 2008). However, both employers and caregivers also justify this violation by pointing to what they

see— or, in the case of caregivers, are *encouraged* to see— as 'quasi forms of compensation,' such as particular favours, gifts, or generosities, which stand in for real wages. This was evident in Aum's explanation for why she was not bothered by her employer's constant failure to pay her overtime:

> Yeah but she didn't pay me. She didn't pay me. What happened— I'm okay with that because she let me borrow her car sometimes. I can buy what food I want to buy. I can make anything. I mean, I cook for her kid. I cook for myself too, like… I'm taking care of everything. Take the dog. Cut the hair. Keep appointments. Everything.
>
> *So she paid for everything but she didn't give you a salary?*
>
> She give me a salary but not overtime like…
>
> *Ohh okay, okay.*
>
> Yeah, I don't get overtime but…
>
> *But you worked.*

Aum's personal means of rationalizing the violation illustrates the degree to which these employment relationships become muddied by quasi familial relations and practices, such that 'borrowing the car' or getting groceries of her choosing stand in for monetary compensation. Such practices thus exist as a direct way for employers to extract greater surplus value from their caregivers. In Aum's case, not receiving overtime meant that she only received the provincial minimum wage for the extra hours she worked instead of the legally-mandated "time-and-a-half." However, in other cases, such as Loysa's, not receiving overtime meant being paid nothing for the hours worked beyond the 44-hour-a-week minimum outlined in her contract.

The following exchange with Loysa clearly demonstrates the compounding relationship that exists between irregular hours, the blurring of what constitutes work, and the discretionary nature of pay, and renders observable how this nexus of surplus extraction is shaped by the unique context of Fort McMurray:

> *Did you know what your hours were? Did you get paid if you worked overtime? Like how did that— What did that look like?*

For me… Um, I-- I worked twelve hours minimum, maximum of sixteen hours sometimes because they're both professionals with uncertain schedules. And when they're on-call, so I'm expected to be with the children… So in the middle of my sleep, I can be called and just stay with the kids.

Right.

Till they get back.

Okay.

I was paid… the minimum eight hours but was never paid with my overtime.

Even though you were alway— like usually working twelve hours?

Yes.

In this case, a portion of the surplus value extracted from Loysa can be tangibly measured; however, these four hours worked without compensation still represent only a small share of the total value expropriated from her. Both Aum and Loysa's experiences show how the in-home and intimate nature of caregivers' employment obscures what constitutes work and disguises what is deserving of remuneration.

Worth noting, however, is the fact that having certain needs, such as food, accommodation, and vehicle access covered by their employers does nothing to assist caregivers in fulfilling their reproductive duty of sending remittances home. So while employers may view such acts of generosity as adequate substitutes for monetary compensation, these 'acts of kindness' cannot be transferred across borders or deposited in children's bank accounts to cover the cost of school fees, rent, or groceries. However, as Parreñas notes (2008), remittances are worth more than their monetary value: "Not just a cash transaction, remittances are a means by which migrant mothers establish intimacy across borders" (p.71). Thus, without them, the process of maintaining intimate relations transnationally becomes strained, engendering tensions within the proverbial home that has been stretched across space in an era of globalized social

reproduction.

Finally, related to this issue of receiving adequate compensation and being able to remit one's wages is the matter of having to pay back debt. While being a challenge more commonly faced by migrant domestic workers in other 'destination countries,' some caregivers are brought to Canada "via recruitment and placement agencies on the basis of what may be called the debt-financed migration 'model' where the cost of their migration in the form of agent and placement fees is recouped from the domestic worker's salary via substantial salary deductions" (Yeoh, et al., 2016, p. 423). Again, being based solely on the discretion of their employers, some caregivers are subjected to salary deductions to pay back the cost of their flights or the amount of their recruitment and processing fees (Yeoh, et al., 2016; Bonifacio, 2015; Bonifacio, 2008). Employers also:

> deduct mandatory contributions from the total wage amount such as income tax, Canada Pension Plan (CPP), and Employment Insurance (EI) [...]. Aside from these compulsory deductions by the government, employers can also deduct for room and board expenses for the live-in caregiver, even if most of the time the foreign live-in caregiver will not eat the meals allocated by the employer (Bonifacio, 2015, p.148).

Such deductions thus hinder caregivers' ability to send remittances home and magnify their lack of both physical and financial mobility (Yeoh, et al., 2016). The potential of being shouldered with such expenses exists, in large part, from the fees imposed on employers by the Caregiver Program. As was exemplified by Reyna's story in Chapter 1, and will be further discussed in Chapter 5, when employers are given the opportunity to download any costs onto their caregivers, there is a near-certainty that at least some will capitalize on it.

"A Debt of Gratitude."

Strongly tied to the discretionary nature of wages, debt repayment, and caregivers' willingness to overlook contract violations is another, non-monetary, form of debt: that of profound gratitude. With the Caregiver Program structured to provide a pathway to citizenship, caregivers arrive in Canada often feeling indebted to their employers who have filed their paperwork, paid for their flights and, above all, granted them the opportunity to gain citizenship in a country widely regarded as a place of promise and opportunity. Loysa often referred to this

'debt of gratitude' in her rationale for not changing employers or pursuing rectification for her many contract violations:

> But you see being Filipino, it's one of… they, they sponsored me and you know how you owe this person that you'd do anything to pay, to pay them back. You know that kind of um…

Fidelity, almost?

> Yeah. Like it's a debt of… gratitude that you're trying to uh, do. So… okay, this person sponsored me— except not really, cause I paid for everything— like she was kind enough to hire me from Hong Kong while she can just get anybody from here. But for me to be flying from the Philippines to Hong Kong to Canada, it's a *huuuge* um, blessing for me.

Yeah…

> So I would endure this, this things that I've endured. I've never asked for the pay… for my overtime pay. I never did. It's, it's me telling… telling her and telling myself that, "I owe you so much that I would give my service while you still need me."

For many caregivers, the repayment of this 'debt of gratitude' has an expiration date, which makes it more palatable and encourages them to simply 'grin and bear it.' For instance, after divulging that she was also not paid at the legally-required minimum wage, Loysa explained again how this debt of gratitude deterred her from pursuing rectification for the violation with the Wage Board:

> Having the debt of gratitude, it always— You know, when you think about it, "Okay, she brought me here." I can get, I can get a different job after her. Make sure I don't get extorted again.

As many scholars of transnational migration have noted, for migrants, the future often operates as a productive force, enabling them to endure often difficult circumstances and negotiate the constant tension that exists between risk and aspiration (Pratt, 2012; Yeoh, et al., 2016). Transnational migrants are always in the process of "creating both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present" (Fortier, Ahmed, Castaneda, and Sheller, 2003, p.9). As

such, "localized experiences need not limit future aspirations, and instead the power of imagination inhabiting the individual can transform 'staying put' into a process of being 'situated yet mobile' (Smith, 2011, p.181)" (Yeoh, et al., 2016, p.420).

(Im)Mobility and the Place and Placelessness of Migrant Caregivers.

> *A whole history remains to be written about spaces— which would at the same time be the history of powers.*

> — Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge,* 1980, p.149

Spatiality and a sense of placelessness profoundly shape the conditions of caregivers' employment. As scholars interested in the experiences of migrant domestic workers have found, caregivers are often confronted by the "absence of a fixed geographic space" to call their own, which profoundly limits the spatial actions taken in their everyday lives (Parreñas, 2008). As Parreñas (2008) writes:

Migrant Filipina domestic workers, as part of the peripheralized workforce, seldom can retreat from their experiences of placelessness. Inside and outside the workplace, placelessness is how migrant Filipina domestic workers experience place (p.98).

Thus, essential to any understanding of how caregivers' surplus value is extracted is an appreciation of caregivers' physical and sociocultural spatialization. Both inside and outside of their employers' homes, the spatial integration of caregivers is an essential factor in determining the conditions and relations of their employment and, by extension, the mechanisms through which their surplus value is extracted.

While the live-in aspect of Canada's Caregiver Program is no longer a mandatory condition of employment, in the context of Fort McMurray, the exorbitant cost of housing (for both caregivers and their employers) results in most caregivers living within their employers' homes (Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen, 2015). As Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen (2015) note, "In Fort McMurray [...] live-in caregivers cannot afford to move out unless they are willing to live in shared accommodation and spend approximately half of their net income on accommodation costs" (p.19). While living within their employers' homes, caregivers are typically provided a room or a larger space of their own, often located in the family's basement. However, in occupying a specific place within the home, they are rendered accessible to both

their employers and their children. This is evident in Loysa's account of how her employer's consistent breach of this spatial divide signaled to her children that it was acceptable to do the same:

> *Do you think that the kids understood at all like… when your hours were or was it just like you were always there, they would go see you when they wanted to see you?*

> I was always there. At— You know, that's where I've, I've seen the mistake is their mom made me accessible whenever she needs me. Like I was in my room, "Can you come up here?! Can you er… Can you warm up my food while I take a shower?" Those are the things that you know— She is working a 9 to 5 job and we all know that when the shift ends, unless you're paying that person overtime, you can't let them work. But for her, I was available at her beck and call. And that's how the kids understood it that when they needed me— when they needed a pencil, they can't find their crayons— just knock on my room and say, "Hey, can you help me with this."

This statement vividly illustrates the degree to which caregivers' spatial availability encourages the hyperflexibilization of their labour beyond the stipulations outlined in their contracts. Further bolstering this claim, Reyna similarly spoke of how she restricted her movement within her employers' home in order to avoid being asked to perform certain chores. Being prohibited from eating in her room, she would purposefully stay downstairs at meal times when she wasn't working, knowing that if she went upstairs, she would be invited to join them under the pretense that she would have to either prepare the meal or clean up afterwards without pay. Caregivers' spatial location within the home thus enables the extraction of their surplus value— a reality to which they are acutely aware.

This hyper-accessibility within the home is magnified for those, like Reyna and Loysa, who lack a Canadian driver's license or access to a vehicle in order to leave during their days or hours off. And while Fort McMurray has a public transportation system, its restricted schedule and often limited routes (compounded by the region's long winters) can deter caregivers from using it. Instead, many caregivers are forced to rely upon their employers when it comes to much of their physical mobility— creating, in many ways, a 'geography of dependency.'

However, once mobile in the city, the politics of place still structure caregivers' spatial movements in particular ways, thus determining their spatial integration within the community. As a relatively small city with high real estate costs, Fort McMurray provides little in terms of a

physical space that caregivers can call their own. While there exists a support network for caregivers in Fort McMurray, this group often congregates on the weekends in a childcare centre or in the office spaces of local non-profits and community service organizations; often having to lug around all their materials and large trays of (predominantly) Filipino dishes. This peripheralization within the public realm echoes Parreñas' (2008) claim that:

> The working-class havens that migrant Filipina domestics are able to form are hardly ever geographically fixed spaces; they are often passing encounters in buses or sidewalks, and, if at geographically fixed locations, such as church centers, they are spaces that the immigrants cannot truly call their own (p.106).

This is arguably magnified in Fort McMurray where it was common for the caregivers I spoke with to have developed their connections to the community through the same churches their employers attend. Consequently, many caregivers rarely have access to physical and social spaces where they feel entirely divorced from the presence of their employers.

Fort McMurray's remote location only furthers this sense of isolation and *placelessness*. Caregivers who I spoke with rarely, if ever, left the city limits of Fort McMurray, with the possible exception of taking short weekend trips to Edmonton or Calgary. However, even these visits were often tied to their employers who would bring them along for running errands, going on shopping trips, or attending appointments in the city. The extent to which being spatially peripheralized within the home shapes caregivers' own sense of identity and connection to community was perhaps best summed up by Loysa:

> Once I'm outside the house, I'm not a caregiver anymore and I can just be myself and talk to people at the bus stop, at the bus. And just enjoy what um… what's in Fort McMurray. So this is a beautiful place. It's not true that it's a horrible place. It's a beautiful place.

Overall, in working within their employers' homes in a remote resource community, it is evident that in the socio-space of Fort McMurray, caregivers become "relatively immobilised and constrained in the space and time of their labour" (Dorow, et al., 2017, p.6), thus extending both the spatial *and* temporal conditions for the extraction of their surplus value. As I will later discuss in Chapter 5, the wildfire's dismantling effect on the spatial and temporal boundaries of caregivers' work was critical to enabling the continued— and often exacerbated— extraction of their surplus value, particularly throughout the duration of the evacuation.

"Part of the Family": Relationships of Convenience and the Circulation of Affect.

Reinforced by this spatial proximity to their employers, the final condition of caregivers' employment which profoundly alters their work experiences and encourages the extraction of their surplus value is their "intense enmeshment in the everyday life" of the families they work for (Yeoh, et al., 2017, p.429). As numerous scholars have articulated, carework cannot be reduced to a "kind of domestic labour performed on people" (Finch and Groves, 1983, p.4) but must include recognition of the deep emotional ties that this type of work often engenders. As Mary Zimmerman, Jacquelyn Litt, and Christine Bose (2008) note:

> Rather than simply sell her labor, the paid migrant domestic worker is invariably brought into relations with those she is caring for, making a fiction of the capitalist ideology that labor and personhood can be separated. Yet the very acts of labor can bring about feelings of care, challenging the distinction between labor and care (p.226).

While many of the caregivers I spoke with had to navigate often exploitative conditions and difficult relationships with their employers, each of them spoke about the strong emotional attachment they felt to their employers' children. Following interviews, many would ask to show me pictures of the children they were caring for or describe the birthday parties or recitals coming up in their lives. Such interactions, in many ways, demonstrate how deeply affective these relationships can become.

These moments hinting at such emotional attachment are especially important to note given the reality that the relation of children to their caregivers is, as Arlie Hochschild (2014) notes, "partly visible, partly invisible" (p.253), making it difficult to measure the emotional ties between the two. However, one visible indicator of children's attachment is their tendency to replicate the same habits, mannerisms, and even cultural tastes as their caregivers. In facing "the painful prospect of caring for other people's children while being unable to tend to their own" (Parreñas, 2008, p.47), such forms of sociocultural reproduction often brought caregivers a great deal of joy. This was rendered appreciable in this interaction with Maricel:

> *Do you find that, like, will the kids come and knock on the door and stuff or is it very clear that it's like when your work day ends, it ends?*
>
> It ends. Sometimes they just knock— They want to snuggle with me; they want to sleep with me. They're like that. And they love my Filipino foods! They love my sardines.

So they're pretty attached to you?

Yeah; I love the kids.

The emotional attachment caregivers have to their employers' children often results from the enormous amount of time they spend together. As previously mentioned, part of the role of caregivers in Fort McMurray is to supplement the trade-off parents make between time and money; so while parents may express their love through the gifting of material items, caregivers take on the role of spending time with the children. As Aum succinctly put it in speaking about her employer's son: "He love her a lot but… I don't know. She, she wallet but she is still the same. She don't have time for her kid." Aum further reflected on how this trade-off was visible in her employer's treatment of her children and how it was inseparable from her affective bond to the children, thus enabling the extraction of her surplus value:

> Uh the mom, she can buy anything for her kid. I mean, mom here but she… don't have time for her kids. I don't know how you call… They're…

She spoils her kids?

> Yeahhh. Yeah but not the, not the lo— She give love but one time I see, because I live with them a lot, I see them grow up. I live there like I see the girl *(inaudible)* taking care of the small one— three year-old— until she's *(inaudible)* something. She completely like me before I leave like everything; talked in Thai, everything. When she's scared or when she… Example, if you— Canadian you say, "Ouch!" or something but she will say, "Oy!" Like the same as me because she lived with me a lot, like all the time.

And while there is nothing inherently wrong with children and caregivers growing attached to one another, there is a danger in seeing this love as "natural, individual, contextless" and private. As Arlie Hochschild writes of "care chains" and emotional labour (2014):

> However long the chain is, wherever it begins and ends, many of us focusing at one link or another in the chain see the care's love of a child as private, individual, circumscribed by context… Love always appears unique, and the love of a carer for the child in her care… seems unique and individual (p.251).

Thus, without acknowledging the political-economic and social context in which such relations unfold, this individualized and contextless "love" in part lays the foundation for the extraction of caregivers' surplus value— particularly that of the emotional or affective kind (Lutz, 2011). As feminist theorists have long-emphasized, carework is consistently devalued by the pervasive (and highly gendered) notion that caring for others is, and should be, more than "just a job."

However, this attachment does not simply depreciate caregivers' wages and draw upon their emotional labour but it also intensifies the blurring of 'work' and 'non-work,' and further obscures their working hours. In feeling a sense of emotional obligation to their employers' children and their desires, it becomes difficult for caregivers' to erect boundaries around their work— particularly if their employers fail to play an active role in upholding those which should be legally in place. The fragility and permeability of such boundaries became clear to me throughout my interviews but was made particularly visible when I asked Loysa what her relationship was like with her employers' children:

> Oh, it's amazing! Yes. Scratch the mom and the dad, just leave me the kids— we're happy. That's it— it's one of… I think that now that we're talking about it, the kids we're very close to me. Even to the extent that, "Can Auntie Loysa go with us?" like we're, we're go— they're going to the Keg for dinner like, "We want Auntie Loysa to go with us." "But she's off already!" "But we want to go with Auntie Loysa." And you know like the, it's— there was a relationship strained with that.

Thus, children play a role in extracting caregivers' surplus value by demanding additional care and attention on affective grounds. Under such circumstances, parents can be 'left off the hook' by having the ability to pass such requests off as an inevitable outcome of their children's attachment rather than a failure on their part to regulate the expectations imposed on their caregiver. This was visible, for instance, in Reyna's account of how her employer's daughter, Charlotte, would often sneak down into the basement and request that she play with her. In not paying Reyna for those hours, her employer would often dismiss this breach as Charlotte just "being attached to her."

However, it is not only children who muster this "labor of love" to their own ends. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, employers will also often manipulate family ideologies in the interest of extracting unpaid labour (i.e. surplus value) from their caregivers (Parreñas, 2001; Romero, 1992). As Rhacel Parreñas (2001) notes:

There is a consensus in the literature on domestic work that the perception of domestic workers as "one of the family" enforces, aggravates, and perpetuates unequal relations of power between domestic workers and their employers (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997a, 1997b; Cock, 1980; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Romero, 1992; Wrigley, 1995; Young, 1987). (p.179)

Both the discourse and material reality of caregivers being treated as "part of the family" intensifies the extraction of their surplus value by activating particular conditions and practices of extraction. First, being considered "part of the family," "clouds the status of the domestic worker as a paid laborer, so employees are less able to negotiate for better working conditions" (Parreñas, 2001, p.179). Second, it conflates their contractual duties with "family" obligations that should be performed for free. Third, it furthers the practice of remunerating caregivers' labour with favours and gifts, rather than monetary compensation. And finally, it once again obscures the existence of caregivers' own families and their social reproductive needs.

Aum's account of her employment experience provided vivid examples of how this myth of being "part of the family" is often deployed to the detriment of caregivers. Aum spoke extensively about never knowing for sure when she was "off." Rather, she explained how she would often wake up early and go upstairs only to be told that she was not expected to work that day. The consequences of being treated like "part of the family" were perhaps best exemplified by the following interaction:

When— If I want to go out with my friend, if she ask me, I have to tell her like, "I'm not sure if I'm off or not." Because she [her employer] let me use her car, right?

Right.

So I will be like… I don't know. I can go if I have only the number one, the big kid. He can stay— The mom says he can stay home alone. Like two hour, three hour, by himself. So I can get her car and go like for a quick, see my friends. If I want to, I'll bring him with me but after, I mean… When, after three years, I like hockey so I tell her what days so she give me a day off. I mean not day off like the time off for the hockey so she…

So you play hockey?

No, no, I watch. So she can let me go watch but she pay someone like 20 dollar per hour to watch the kids…

Okay.

"If you tell me— If you gonna pay twenty, I can stay home." Hockey is okay. I don't want hockey. I want money.

This final assertion: "I don't want hockey. I want money," perfectly captures how being considered "part of the family" can cloud one's status as a paid worker and position them as little more than an older sibling who is only sporadically compensated for their work. This is particularly apparent in the fact that her absence from the home resulted in another caregiver receiving $20 an hour for work that she would have likely received $14 for — or, quite possibly, nothing at all. Moreover, in being considered "part of the family," Aum was rarely granted specific hours off but was instead expected to explicitly ask for them, thereby creating the default condition into one of her always being 'on.' As I will argue in the following chapter, in the wake of the Fort McMurray wildfire, it was partly this "labour of love" that was leveraged to shift the weight of shouldering the recovery onto unpaid and underpaid caregivers.

These feelings of attachment were often felt most acutely in moments of separation when caregivers were forced to sever the ties they had forged with their employers' children. Shortly before the fire, after receiving her permanent residency, Aum considered moving on from the family she had been caring for for several years. When her employers caught word of this, they told her to take some time to think about it before confirming whether she intended to leave. However, when the fire swept through Fort McMurray shortly thereafter, Aum questioned her ability to find work elsewhere and consequently notified them that she had changed her mind and wanted to stay. But to her surprise, they responded by telling her they had already found another caregiver and that it was time for her to move on. The separation from her employers' children was difficult for Aum and, as I will later discuss, was rendered all the more emotional by the affective impact of the wildfire. Her reflections, however, critically speak to the emotional bond she had formed with the children she was caring for:

I, I mean I'm sad a lot because I stayed there. I love the kids so easy— I mean they, they get a new nanny, they fine but… I'm the one.

You're the one who feels very sad?

Yeah… When I leave them, I cry too. Everything. But the kids cry. When I see (them), they fine. I know they like me more but they're not really into… But I a lot into. I— Now, I try not to get close. I still get close but I try not to have a feeling because when I leave, I will, it will be hard on me, not on them.

Disposability: The Ultimate Technology of Servitude.

Aum's experience of having her contract terminated points to the final and most extreme form of surplus value extraction: that of outright disposal. Fundamentally predicated on the *systematic making* of surplus populations, the extraction of surplus value is magnified by the constant threat of disposability. As many of the caregivers' stories suggest, households dispose of caregivers in much the same way that capital does: shedding itself of any obligation to workers in the interest of 'maximizing efficiencies.' Much like inmates or undocumented workers, caregivers have been *made* as a relative surplus population "whose everyday life and longer-term expectations are so degraded they can often be viewed and treated as disposable" in the interest of capital accumulation (Ferguson and McNally, 2015, p.15).[19] Disposability thus operates as a central strategy for managing crises and both rationalizes and reinforces neoliberal practices of social reproduction.

The short-lived employment of Veronica— a young woman who had moved to Fort McMurray after working as an au-pair in the Netherlands— clearly exemplifies this condition. As a result of the economic downturn, Veronica had not even obtained the formal documents she needed to begin fulfilling her hours for permanent residency before she was let go by her first employers:

I moved to Fort McMurray but then um the family that brought me, they were, they told me they were going to apply for the LMIA and then— because at that time, you have to go through a process like put an app for four weeks, an app for that app… So they [the

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[19] See Nandita Sharma's *Homo Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada* for an excellent theoretical account of how the systematic making of migrant workers, within the neoliberal era, is essential to the (ongoing) "material, existential, and ideological" production of Canada as a sovereign nation-state.

government] check that every— you're right, and then you can get all the papers to apply but then um, we took— It took them like two months to get all the papers.

Okay.

So we're talking about middle-September when they had all the papers, but then she told me uhh… [...] And uh, then they, they told me, "You know um, we don't know if um…" *(Inaudible)* "We don't know if he's gonna be laid off. So if he, if that happens, we won't need you because he's going to be taking care of the kids." That's what they told me and I told them, "So what should I do?" And they told me like, "We don't know." [...] So, so she told me if I want to, I can start looking for another job.

Veronica's disposability, in many ways, reflects Susan Ferguson and David McNally's (2015) assertion that there are parallels to be drawn between disposability in the paid productive and reproductive spheres. As they argue, the concept of disposability "involves the devaluation of household labour of social reproduction as much as degradation of waged labour in the workplace, highlighting the multiple sites of capitalism's essential impulse to treat labour power as merely a commodity" (p.15). Thus, in a context in which caregivers' everyday lives are inextricably linked to those of their employers' and, by extension, to their employers' waged employment, this relationship is arguably magnified. While energy workers in the region are similarly commodified and rendered disposable in the interest of capital accumulation, caregivers' expendability reveals citizen-households' strategic impulse to download the costs of unemployment onto a migrant workforce in order to cope financially. Here, it is worth returning to Isabelle's claim in Chapter Three that before the fire occurred, the community of Fort McMurray was already witnessing a decline in migrant caregivers as a result of the economic downturn, underscoring the hyper-precarity of this migrant workforce relative to their employers.

By this means, the systematic making of caregivers as a relative surplus population ensures that the social reproductive needs of a relatively affluent class are fulfilled by a largely unprotected workforce who can be disposed of when extracting surplus value *through formalized employment* is no longer desirable (Strauss, 2012; Yeates, 2009). As Veronica's experience illustrates, the Live-In Caregiver Program is instrumental in producing caregivers as a disposable pool of workers. However, while the very structure of the program is predicated on this

production of precarity, this "disposability-by-design" is obscured from view through the program's *individualization* of the employment arrangements it generates. With this, it is arguably only in moments of crisis where it is made "abundantly clear that heightened precarity of migrant workers is deliberate social policy" (Ferguson and McNally, 2015, p.3). Indeed, the longevity of Canada's Caregiver Program underscores the fact that its power does not stem from it being some nefarious conspiracy but rather from it fulfilling seemingly rational needs in an efficient manner. The problem, of course, is that the extension of such a "rational policy" entails creating, reproducing, and expanding a surplus population who can not only be expelled from employment but be geographically evicted from the country, thus positioning them on "the extreme end of the precarity" (Ferguson and McNally, 2015, p.7). This looming threat of deportation following the termination of one's contract, in turn, deters caregivers from both asserting their rights as workers and resisting the extraction of their surplus value.

As I hope to illuminate in the following chapter, in the wake of crisis, caregivers' disposability is exacerbated by this state-sanctioned system of transient servitude which allows citizen-households to fire their caregivers while being assured of a replacement when the need arises and as their ability to pay is reclaimed. As Ferguson and McNally (2015) articulate, "Today, [...] the neoliberal capitalist goal is to create and sustain a temporary migrant workforce that is differentiated from the citizen workforce," thus ensuring that, regardless of the type or scale of disruption, the social reproduction of the citizen workforce is guaranteed without ever having to rely on a publicly-funded social safety net. Similarly, through caregivers' personal accounts of the disaster, I also aim to bring to life how it was the combination of *all* of these conditions and their alterations that determined not only *how* the extraction of caregivers' surplus value occurred in the wake of the fire but also *when* and *where* it occurred and, most importantly, with what repercussions. The following chapter thus examines how, in serving as Fort McMurray's 'invisible threads of capitalism' *before* the fire, caregivers were similarly leveraged as the 'invisible threads of recovery'— re-establishing and re-settling social relations in ways that manage and contain (if barely) the crises of capitalism.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE INVISIBLE THREADS OF RECOVERY

Maricel

Sitting in the back of her employers' car lit up by the red brake lights of the vehicle in front, Maricel strained to hear the hushed exchange taking place in the front seat. Her employers' conversation had grown increasingly muffled with each additional hour stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Now entering hour eight, it had become impossible for Maricel to make out what they were saying but she had a sinking feeling it was about her. For months, she had been anticipating a pre-emptive end to her contract. Her pregnant employer had recently lost her job in town, creating a palpable tension within the home and now, with the near certainty that the wildfire had destroyed their house, Maricel expected to be fired within days. As she said to me, "So I know anytime— I can sense that any time before the fire— I can sense that she's going to fire me, but she cannot say it… because maybe she's pity on me. She's just waiting for the right time." As she went on to explain:

I can feel it because they are always talking, they are always talking. I had the

feeling— They're always talking, they're always… and sometimes she just hug

me because she loves me so much. "Maricel, I don't want to lose you. We are

trying our best to keep you." They're trying. Maybe if we don't have the fire, I'm

still working with them because she wants to keep me. But they lost their home

too, so…

The next morning, following the evacuation, when they woke up in their Edmonton hotel room, her employers explained they would be returning home to Brampton, Ontario for the duration of the evacuation. Being unfamiliar with the community and knowing they were already struggling to pay her salary, Maricel decided not to go with them. As she expressed to me, "I know Brampton is somewhere else. I just decided maybe I'll go to my sister's in Lethbridge. So we part ways in Edmonton." That day, as she was on her way to her sister's, she received a text message from her employers. They explained that in losing their home and all their material possessions, they were no longer able to afford her salary and would have to let her go. Maricel spent the next two months in Lethbridge in a serious state of depression. With her two children back home in the Philippines, an early end to her contract meant a month-long delay before she could apply for permanent residency, extending the time before she would be reunited with her family and threatening the likelihood of reunification altogether.[20]

While Maricel's dismissal was a seemingly rational response on the part of her employers, it was no less devastating for her. Rather, as Maricel described to me, the wildfire catalyzed new crises in her own life, provoking a deeply emotional and affective response:

It's really hard, because I know somewhere somehow they're going to tell me

that they have no work anymore. I just don't know where to start. It is mixed

emotion. Because I love this place, and I don't know when we're going to come

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[20] In February, 2018, the Government of Canada announced an end to the two five-year caregiver programs that were launched in 2014— one for those caring for children, and the other for those caring for people with high medical needs. The end date of the programs was set for November 29th, 2019. While Maricel was fortunately able to return to work and file her application for permanent residence (PR) within the designated time, many caregivers feared they would be unable to complete the 24-month requirement in time to qualify. I heard of this fear firsthand from several caregivers I came to know through my involvement with *Migrante AB*— a migrant justice organization defending the rights and welfare of overseas Filipino migrant workers.

back here again. So it's really hard; mixed emotion, and I had lots of problems after that. I lose my job; I don't know where to go. Luckily I have my sister, and mixed emotion because of my love life also is broken. So everything.

Were you worried for a while that you might have to go back to the Philippines?

Yes, yes. [*inaudible*] If I can't find an employer…when my working visa is expired, so I need to go back home.

Despite being emotionally and physically unwell, this fear of having to leave the country without securing work compelled Maricel to begin looking for a new caregiver contract. A few weeks into her search, she found a job working for a family in Calgary but only a week passed before she decided to quit. As she explained to me, "When I go there in Calgary— it's like my home is in Fort Mac. I didn't feel it. I was working there for a week for a family, but I didn't feel it." The incredibly demanding nature of the work only compounded her feelings of detachment. Maricel was hired to care for three children— two with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and one with epilepsy. Feeling stretched well-beyond her qualifications, Maricel quit. Days later, her friends bought her a one-way bus ticket to Fort McMurray to visit them. The day she arrived, she received a text message from an interested employer in Fort McMurray asking if she would be available for a Skype interview. After notifying the employer that she was in town, she was interviewed in-person later that afternoon. Maricel was hired on the spot and moved in a week later. As she said to me, the moment felt like, "Sunshine. Another rainbow. And a little hope."

But despite the relief of finding a new employer in Fort McMurray, Maricel still longs to return to her former employers who have since rebuilt their home. As Maricel repeatedly expressed, being separated from her previous employers' children throughout the course of the evacuation was incredibly difficult both for her and the children:

I missed them; I missed them so much. They're always calling me, almost every day. They call me almost every day. "Grace wants to hear your voice." "Okay, Grace." They're always calling. So I stopped calling because they were always crying. She always cry whenever "Maricel, we miss you." So the first that we came here, they're looking for me, so we spent time together.

So it's been hard not being able to work for that family?

Yeah.

But even though they've offered you your job back, you can't...

I can't, because of the papers.

I see; so it's not easy.

I have my contract with my new employer now.

But if you could, you would?

Yeah.

The family has yet to hire another caregiver and have told Maricel they will wait for her current contract to end. "They just move last month," she told me. "They even have my spare room still there. They spare me a room there at their home even though I'm not working there anymore." Instead, she visits them on her days off, waiting until she can process her papers for permanent residency and move back in.

Disposability in Crisis:
Caregivers as a Relative Surplus Population

Capital must be able to get rid of workers whose labor power is no longer desirable— whether permanently, by mechanical or human replacement, or temporarily by layoffs— and have access to new or previously idled labor as the need arises.

— Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag,* 2007, p.71

While the number is impossible to come by, Maricel was by no means the only caregiver fired amidst the chaos of the evacuation. When I first spoke to Isabelle, a long-time childcare

professional in the region, she described how as a care provider and parent herself, she witnessed many parents struggling to determine what to do with their caregivers in the aftermath of the fire. She explained how, for many, the decision of whether or not to let their caregiver go came down to a deliberate cost-calculation:

> I know from a… parent perspective from some social media groups that I'm a part of there was a lot of questions around: "How do I lay them off?", "How do I pay them?", "What do I do?", "How do I get this?"… And there were some insurance companies that um… covered that— that was an expense that was covered for whatever reason and there's some that didn't and paren— families just simply couldn't pay it. Um, so there was a lot of questions around the economics of having a nanny but I don't think that social support piece and that well-being piece was really looked at as much as possible. I think… Yeah… Even in recovery. You know, I've been very involved in recovery and from a social recovery perspective, everyone talks about children and parents but you very rarely hear anyone ask how those nannies are doing…

Evidently, with social reproduction already being squeezed before the fire, many households responded in much the same way that corporations do in moments of economic uncertainty: by slashing their workforce and reducing their spending in an attempt to squeeze more out of less. This way, families were able to download some of the costs of the fire onto their caregivers— rendering them jobless for the sake of reclaiming their wages.

Although they ostensibly differed in the degree of compassion they brought to the decision, Aum's, Veronica's, and Maricel's employers' decisions to terminate their contracts points to how the system is set up so as to individualize care arrangements, often requiring families to make choices between which social reproductive needs to fulfill and how. These are decisions that are clearly rendered all the more difficult in moments of crisis. By this means, the rampant disposal of caregivers in the wake of the fire both exemplifies the extent to which they have been systematically *made* as a relative surplus population and underscores just how precarious they are. Paralleling Melissa Wright's (2006) suggestion that the Mexican *maquiladora* worker is a "subject formed in the flux between waste and value," migrant caregivers' disposability in the wake of the fire exposes how they similarly oscillate between the two depending on market conditions and the needs of their employers. But in being regarded as waste, it is not simply the fired caregiver whose livelihood is compromised. Rather, their ability to sustain their own families across borders is jeopardized in the interest of their employers. It is

through the conditions created by this privatized care system that caregivers' lives become so deeply intertwined with those of their employers thereby producing this heightened precarity. These caregivers' experiences thus clearly demonstrate that in the wake of crisis, it is certain bodies, workforces, and communities that are rendered disposable while others are preserved, ensuring the perpetuation of gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchies at a global scale (Thomas, 2008; Wright, 2006; Colen,1995).

Of course, as is particularly evident in Maricel's case, such decisions were rarely made maliciously. Rather, as these cases make clear, the insidious decay of social reproduction has made families reliant not only on their caregivers' employment and affective attachment but also *equally reliant* on their disposability— despite their affective attachment— during turbulent times. In having to navigate a highly individualized and collapsing care system in a moment of crisis (whether it was aroused by the economic downturn or by the wildfire), many families had no other choice but to rid themselves of this private expense (Meyer, 2000). And while they may not have wanted to fire their caregivers, it bears repeating that doing so operated as a sort of financial coping mechanism, allowing them to recover the costs of at least one social reproductive expense to pay the bills of those they could not avoid, such as mortgage payments and grocery bills. This disposability thus demonstrates how individualized social reproduction has become, and how affectively muddied these employment relationships are as a result. Indeed, arguably nothing is more reflective of the extent to which our care system has been stripped of its social roots than people being forced to dispose of the same workers who protected their children and comforted them through a corridor of encroaching flames.

Herein lies one of the most critical takeaways of the value of grounding our analysis of crisis in the lives of those performing social reproductive labour (Nagar, et al., 2002): stories like Maricel's reveal how we *all* reproduce the practices of capital to ensure our own survival. Caregivers' stories in the wake of disaster expose us to the unconscious ways in which we renew capitalism's power in— and arguably, *over*— our everyday lives. With a neoliberal rationality now pervading our most intimate spaces, their experiences prove how we increasingly respond to crises with this same logic, deploying market-oriented strategies to navigate these tensions in the private realm. So while recent attention has been drawn to the nefarious schemes of disaster capitalists (Klein, 2005; Gunewardena and Schuller, 2008; Harvey, 2016; Perez and Canella, 2010; Adams, van Hattum, and English, 2009),[21] in turning to the experiences of workers who

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[21] Naomi Klein (2005) is widely-regarded as the primary architect behind the ground-breaking concept of "disaster

serve as 'the invisible threads of capitalism,' we are able to see the far more insidious ways in which the emancipatory potential of disasters is held at bay. And while disposability serves as one such example of this, the continuation of the extraction of their surplus value serves as another. However, in both being grounded in the same capitalist logic, the two practices are of course inextricably linked.

It is this same logic of surplus value extraction that is responsible for the systematic *making* of surplus populations. For as we know from Marx (1973):

> Capital can only create surplus labour by setting necessary labour in motion … It is therefore equally a tendency of capital to increase the labouring population, as well as constantly posit a part of its surplus population (p.399).

As has been previously mentioned, this tendency, however, is not exclusive to productive labour but also applies to social reproductive labour. As Nicole Constable (2016) asserts, "The free, informal or unpaid voluntary labor of migrant women… can be seen as a contemporary permutation of David Ricardo's labor theory of value in which "surplus labor" creates the "surplus value" upon which capitalist profits are based" (p.47). But as Chapter Four makes clear, it is not only the free, informal, or unpaid labour of migrant women that creates surplus value but also their hyperflexibilization and the exhaustive and protracted demands placed upon them without adequate compensation. In sum, the longer their hours and the lower their wages, the more caregivers' employers are able to benefit from them.

Their disposability is similarly rooted in this same global capitalist logic of affective and reproductive surplus value, and in many ways represents the extreme form of this logic. And while this relationship between disposability and surplus value extraction affects the entire labouring population, it is rendered particularly acute under conditions of invisibilized and migrant labour. Therefore, in focusing on the entire spectrum of this relationship, I now turn

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capitalism." In her book *The Shock Doctrine,* Klein traces how the culprits of disaster are the first to capitalize on the social, political, and economic shock of their aftermath. She has since followed this vicious process of accumulation as it has made its way across the scoured landscape of Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Here, private investors, real estate developers, and cryptocurrency traders are cashing in on what they perceive to be a blank slate primed to become a "visitor economy" for the ultrarich (For more see Klein's many articles in *The Intercept* and her book *The Battle For Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*). An insightful collection of examples also exists in Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller's *Capitalizing on Catastrophe*. Gunewardena and Schuller pull together a series of case studies from around the world that illustrate "the seemingly opportunistic, almost casual profiteering by large firms during periods of recovery from disaster" (Wisner, 2011, p.106). The cases— which range from no-bid cleanup contracts and labour market distortion in post-Katrina, New Orleans to agriculture and aquaculture losses in post-Hurricane Mitch, Honduras— point to a systemic relationship between neoliberalism and disaster, and reveal that even with the best of intentions, humanitarianism is a transnational business.

my focus to the extraction of surplus value, arguing that it is a powerful concept capable of exposing *how* this process of capitalist renewal unfolds. I make the case that although rarely adopted by disaster scholars, the concept of surplus value is a powerful tool for elucidating how labour is exploited in the interest of both physically and socially reconstituting community in the wake of crisis.

Rebuilding the Social Infrastructure of Everyday Life:
Surplus Labour and Surplus Value in the Wake of Disaster

> *Disasters are both expected, yet appear unplanned. Capitalism […] takes advantage of this rhythm.*
>
> — Albert Fu, *Connecting Urban and Environmental Catastrophe,* 2006, p.366

With the rise of extreme weather events occurring across North America, it has become increasingly common for jurisdictions to heavily rely on the labour of surplus populations to manage and mediate the effects of ecological disasters. In 2018 alone, California inmates were paid just $2 a day to fight blazes raging across the state (Lopez, 2018; Gonzalez, 2018) while back in Canada, hundreds of Mexican firefighters were recruited to extinguish the fires sweeping through Northern Ontario (Meyer, 2018). And while this practice of exploiting surplus labour in the wake of crisis is nothing new, it has become a common way for capitalists to mitigate the financial risks that climate change poses to continued accumulation and profit-making.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the federally-funded effort to rebuild the City of New Orleans strategically drew upon a super-exploitable workforce comprised of both undocumented migrant labourers and documented guest workers (Redwood, 2008). As the flood waters receded, it was primarily Latino workers "concentrated in the bottom rung jobs of the occupational ladder" who sifted through piles of debris, installed FEMA-issued blue tarps over storm-damaged roofs, and gutted and reconstructed flood-damaged, water-logged homes (Fussell, 2009, p.377). A study conducted by Tulane University and the University of California Berkeley found that 45% of the reconstruction workers— or 'rapid response labour force'— were Latino immigrants, with two-thirds having been lured to the city post-Katrina by unscrupulous labour recruiters seeking low-wage, exploitable labour (Fletcher, Pham, Stover, Vinck, 2007). Critically, the authors of the study found that many of these workers (especially the near-quarter of them who were undocumented) frequently experienced problems receiving

the wages they were owed, with 36% of undocumented workers reporting being paid less than they expected while 28% of documented workers reported the same (Fletcher, et al., 2007). In post-Katrina New Orleans, rampant wage theft became the norm for thousands of migrant workers.

However, the federally-funded effort to re-establish capitalist relations through the exploitation of immigrants extended well-beyond the realm of physical reconstruction. On August 16th, 2006, 82 migrant workers stood in handcuffs outside a New Orleans federal courthouse. Around their necks hung enlarged copies of their visa papers, symbolizing their legal bondage to their employer, Decatur Hotels LLC. They had gathered to file a lawsuit against the company, claiming it had failed to provide them with the promised 40 hours of work per week (Redwood, 2008). One plaintiff, a Dominican guest worker, showed lawyers a two-week pay stub for $18.08. Indebted to middleman recruiters and bound to Decatur, the workers continued to work for the company despite the gross contract violations. The situation was a far-cry from the reality workers had anticipated and tied their futures (and those of their families) to. As one worker from the Dominican Republic told a reporter, "If I got the 40 hours a week at $6 per hour promised in my contract, I knew I could pay back my debt, send money home and save for the future."

This practice of exploiting the labour of migrant workers to mitigate the physical effects of the disaster also unfolded in Fort McMurray. As the wildfire continued to rage across the boreal forest throughout May 2016, a Canadian non-profit partnered with a South African government-funded organization to bring 300 South African firefighters to the region to help battle the blaze (Giovannetti and York, 2016). On May 29th, the firefighters landed at the Edmonton International Airport. Videos of them erupting into song and dance soon went viral with media framing their involvement as a sort of 'borderless benevolence,' earning them praise from people across the country and around the world.[22] But while slated to work two fourteen-day shifts, the firefighters stopped showing up to work on the fifth day of their first rotation after hearing of media reports back home falsely claiming they were being paid between $15 and $21 an hour. In reality, the firefighters were earning $50 for a 12-hour work day (Giovanetti and York, 2016).[23] However, of this $50 wage, the firefighters received only a $15 allowance per day

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[22] The Globe and Mail described the mission as "the biggest ever non-military deployment of South Africans to help a foreign country" (York, 2016).

[23] This wage was paid in addition to their accommodation, expenses, and regular South African wages, which together totalled as little as $200 a month (Giovanetti and York, 2016).

during their deployment with the South African-based organization purporting that the remaining $35 would be paid out upon their return home.

The pay arrangement reportedly came as a surprise to the Alberta government who paid $170 per day for each South African firefighter, in addition to providing food, accommodation and travel costs (Giovanetti and York, 2016). However, despite Premier Notley's assurance that, "Every hour that every firefighter from South Africa, or anywhere else, has worked on these fires will be compensated in accordance with our laws in the province," the pay dispute remained unresolved. The 300 firefighters returned home with little guarantee of receiving wages on par with their Canadian counterparts (Giovanetti and York, 2016; Lamoureux, 2016).

While few scholars have articulated it as such, past disasters reveal that it is often through the exploitation of surplus populations that capitalist production and the physical infrastructure upon which it depends are re-established in the wake of crisis (Jones and Murphy, 2009; Olam and Stamper, 2006; Montz, Allen and Monitz, 2011). However, despite some scholars motioning towards the importance of such analyses, the literature has paid little attention to how surplus populations of *social reproductive* workers are similarly exploited in disaster recovery.[24] In the following pages, I argue that the expropriation of caregivers' surplus value was essential to re-establishing Fort McMurray's *social* infrastructure and re-constituting its social reproductive relations, in turn, enabling the restoration of capital accumulation. In following the post-fire experiences of caregivers, I maintain that their accounts of the disaster reveal the extent to which they were leveraged as a tool for social recovery, enabling families to mitigate the material, emotional, and psychosocial effects of the disaster and return to their everyday lives.

A Disrupted Landscape of Social Reproduction:

Disaster and the Altered Conditions and Mechanisms of Surplus Value Extraction

It is through the everyday practices of social reproduction— life's work— that a social formation as much as its laboring bodies and the conditions of production are made and remade, and where the toll of neoliberal governance and various forms of oppression and dispossession is experienced in visceral ways.

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[24] The exception to this largely resides in the field of Gender Disaster Sociology, however, even here, it is rarely framed as a form of labour exploitation. Rather, gender disaster sociologists typically point (in a somewhat cursory fashion) to the ways in which expectations on women's social reproductive labour are exacerbated in the wake of crisis (Fothergill, 1998; Enarson and Morrow; 1998). Of course, such findings and articulations provide a critical foundation to this larger argument, however, they have arguably not gone far enough in situating to such analyses in the context of capitalist development and capitalist relations.

Paralleling the cases laid out above, in the remainder of this chapter, I seek to uncover both the *mechanisms* through which caregivers' surplus value was extracted and the *conditions* that enabled such mechanisms to both materialize and expand following the fire. As illuminated by the aforementioned disasters, throughout the process of reconstruction, as donation trucks and disaster response vehicles are being deployed, there is a simultaneous rolling-out of mechanisms of surplus value extraction. It is these mechanisms of extraction, including (but not limited to) wage theft, debt bondage, and the hyperflexibilization of workers that power the process of reconstruction and reboot the engine of capital accumulation.

In the following section I argue that the same mechanisms of surplus value extraction at play in the everyday lives of caregivers, such as hyperflexibilization, wage theft, and the unpaid extraction of their emotional labour, were deployed during and after the fire— throughout the evacuation, relocation, and re-entry— to similarly power the process of social reproductive recovery. As Chapter Four made clear, these mechanisms are enabled and shaped by the particular *conditions* of caregivers' employment and, for this reason, cannot be fully understood without being studied in their context. In upending the material social practices of everyday life and shaking up these "normal" conditions, the fire correspondingly altered and, in many cases, exacerbated these usual mechanisms of extraction. And while it is impossible to fully untangle them or draw direct lines of causation between them, tracing the shifting conditions of extraction enables us to see the kinds of new and exacerbated mechanisms of extraction that emerged in the wake of the fire in the name of "recovery." Thus, in the same way that we cannot fully grasp the pre-fire mechanisms of extraction without viewing them in context, we cannot understand *how* caregivers' social reproductive surplus was extracted following the fire without focusing on the interactions that occurred between the pre-existing, altered, and new conditions of their labour. It is precisely *through* these unsettled conditions of recovery, I argue, that both the mechanisms and underlying logic of social reproductive extraction are laid bare. However, it is similarly through these unsettled conditions that we can also see those which remain powerfully entrenched.

For this reason, in the following section, I draw upon caregivers' accounts of the fire to explain what disasters *do*. In turning to the experiences of those who remained employed throughout the duration of the disaster, we are offered a glimpse into this shifting landscape of

extraction and a window into how the relationship between production and social reproduction was reconfigured along the course of recovery (Katz, 2004). First, in understanding caregivers' labour to be deeply emotional and affective, I begin by outlining the *affective condition* of disaster. I begin here under the assertion that the circulation of affect in the wake of disaster often obscures surplus value extraction from view and is thus critical to see at work in order to uncover both the mechanisms of extraction and how they have been altered or exacerbated in the name of recovery. I see this surfeit of affect as a broad, overarching condition that has persisted— although in different forms and in varying degrees of intensity— throughout the entire duration of this disaster. Second, I turn to the disruptive effects of the fire. I outline how it both *spatially displaced* and *temporally disrupted* the material social practices of everyday life and the usual routine in which such practices unfold. Finally, I turn to the disaster's slow *deterioration of financial security* and, by extension, its cultivation of a growing sense of insecurity surrounding social provisioning and the fulfillment of social reproduction. I view these four conditions— the surfeit of affect, displacement of everyday life, disruption of daily routine, and loss of financial security— as absolutely essential to explaining the re-entrenchment or alteration of pre-existing mechanisms of extraction and the creation of new mechanisms entirely.

However, again, while many of these particular mechanisms of surplus value extraction are not easily discernible, studying the disaster *through* these unsettled conditions lays bare the crises at its heart and enables us to see the logic of social reproductive surplus value extraction at work. I return at the very end to the *entrenched* conditions of caregivers' employment in order to point out how, in persisting throughout the fire, these conditions interacted with those which were unsettled, thereby playing a role in determining how surplus value extraction occurred in the wake of the fire. While the deep entanglement of employers' and caregivers' everyday lives exists as one such condition, its effects are evident throughout caregivers' accounts of the fire. For this reason, I focus my attention exclusively on the entrenched condition of caregivers' lack of citizenship status and "bordered existence" since its influence played out in ways that were perhaps less immediately noticeable but equally critical.

Throughout this Chapter, I turn specifically to Loysa's story in an effort to outline the shifting conditions of extraction and reveal the kinds of new and exacerbated mechanisms that subsequently emerged in the name of recovery and that are inseparable from the relational conditions of caregivers' work. I view her account of the disaster as being particularly illuminating insofar as it sheds light on both these mechanisms and conditions of extraction

from the immediate to the longer-term evacuation, as well as on the eventual progression from surplus value extraction through employment to outright disposal. I follow her story chronologically and weave it throughout a broader analysis of these four conditions in order to illustrate how these conditions altered or exacerbated pre-existing practices of extraction and how they were, in turn, deployed to rebuild the social formation and social infrastructure of everyday life. In vividly depicting this disrupted landscape of social reproduction, Loysa's story brings this connection to life. And while her story in some ways stands apart for being notably exploitative, many of the conditions and mechanisms of extraction contained within it simply represent more extreme versions of what many of the other caregivers faced. For this reason, I have drawn on other caregivers' experiences to construct this broader analysis of the four conditions and create a more comprehensive and varied account of them and how they shaped the mechanisms of surplus value extraction. Overall, I argue that the fire reveals and exacerbates the underlying relation of surplus value extraction precisely because its conditions of displacement, disruption, and disorientation interact with *entrenched* conditions so as to intensify the underlying logic of affective and material extraction.

#FortMacStrong:
Social Reproduction and the Veiling Effect of Affect

[F]rom here on, the development of capital will be unthinkable without the simultaneous development of technologies for the modulation of affect and the capturing of attention.

— Johnathan L. Beller, *Capital/Cinema,* 1998, p.91

Emotions, one could say, are 'all over disasters.'

— Roberto E. Barrios, *Governing Affect,* 2017, p.3

This brings me to what I consider to be one of the most influential conditions enabling the extraction of surplus value in the wake of the disaster: the production and circulation of a surfeit of *affect* (Adams, 2013). This overarching condition is particularly critical to understanding the extraction of *social reproductive* surplus value, especially as drawn from workers whose labour is already deeply affective (Hochschild, 1983). Thus, I begin with this affect economy because I see it as creating both new mechanisms of extraction and strengthening existing ones with the end result being the *re-establishment* of formerly rooted inequalities. However, before turning to

caregivers, here, it is instructive to return briefly to the 300 South African firefighters who landed at the Edmonton International Airport on the evening of May, 28th, 2016. By the time they arrived, the Fort McMurray wildfire had already swept through the city with all 88,000 residents having been safely evacuated. Videos of the harrowing evacuation and images of the city's charred remains had already gone viral— garnering attention and an outpouring of support from people across the country and around the world. With evacuees scattered across the province in discounted hotel rooms and strangers' homes, the phrase 'Fort Mac Strong' began to trend. First appearing beside hashtags on Twitter during the immediate evacuation, in the weeks following, the label spread to bumper stickers, sweatshirts, window signs, and even evacuee tattoos (Markusoff, 2017) such that by the time the firefighters landed in Edmonton, dozens of people were waiting for them at the airport in Fort Mac Strong attire (Wong, 2016).[25] One man and his son stood in their sweatshirts, proudly waving a Canadian flag duct-taped to a hockey stick as the firefighters began to emerge from behind sliding glass doors.

It was these same sentiments of pride and solidarity that were leveraged by global media outlets as they shared videos of the firefighters erupting into song and dance. Due in part to this affective frame, for a rare moment, the deployment of the firefighters garnered praise from people all across the political spectrum (MacDonald, 2016; Reid, 2016). Yet, it was arguably this sentiment of 'borderless benevolence' that prevented anyone from raising a red flag over the decision to import migrant labour and digging into the terms of the firefighters' contracts to find out more about the arrangement. Rather, it was not until it was too late— once the firefighters had returned to the site of their performance in order to fly home— that this affective veil was finally pulled back, revealing the extraction of their surplus value, and the mechanisms and brokers responsible.

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[25] While well beyond the scope of this thesis, the surfeit of affect created and circulated in the wake of the fire encouraged many companies, from WestJet to Suncor, to engage in various philanthrocapitalist endeavors and branding efforts that were evidently deployed to tap into these collective sentiments of community strength and pride. As Vincanne Adams (2012) writes, "The merging of charity and business philanthropy offers new financial opportunities for the corporate sector as well as those who run aid organizations. 'Philanthrocapitalism' and what is also called 'venture philanthropy' hail a future in which corporations will recognize how much social capital can be parlayed into actual capital" (p.206). By this means, corporations often engage in such philanthrocapitalist arrangements in the hopes of increasing their market share and improving their public image. Of course, "in a context of close and fraught interdependence between private industry and everyday life," philanthrocapitalism took on a particularly important role in Fort McMurray well before the fire, often being leveraged to smooth the tensions of this relationship (Dorow, 2016, p.59). For oil companies, the fire only opened up new opportunities to engage in philanthrocapitalism and refine their corporate image. (For more on philanthrocapitalism and other ethopolitical governing strategies in Fort McMurray see Dorow's 2016 book chapter *Governing Through Community in the Oil Sands Zone*)

Disasters are profoundly affective events. In drastically transforming one's physical environment, disasters provoke extremely affective responses that can often be difficult for those who have endured them to articulate in words. As Roberto Barrios (2017) puts it, "the dramatic impact of disasters on the built, natural and social environments, on whose presence or remembrance affective experience is contingent, presents a unique circumstance that drives disaster survivors to reflect on what is often sensed but is not necessarily brought into discourse" (pp.5-6). This was particularly evident in Aum's description of what Fort McMurray looked and *felt* like as she was evacuating alone with her employer's son:

> It like a bomb. Yeah, and you can see only— every… They turn off the light. Some light will be on but it not a lot. You can't see anything. You see the smoke like… You can't see anything. And everyone, pass, pass. It look like… *Nothing.* This city is gone. Nothing here. And the boy sit beside me, cry a lot.
>
> *He was crying, yeah…*
>
> "What we do? Why it happened here?" he cried all the way and we see Super 8 on fire.
>
> *Yeah, I heard the Super 8 was completely on fire… Yeah.*
>
> Yeah, it hard because you will see everything and the Abasand mountain… Everything gone. It not the same. I don't know if the feeling like— Everything that you can see, only the smoke. Nothing. It's nothing. It's not the same.

It is these most immediate affective experiences that, in many ways, draw people to one another in their attempts to process the trauma and collectively commit the disruptive experience to memory (Moulton, 2015).[26]

Similarly, in being thrown from the familiarity of one's physical environment and daily routine, disaster survivors often respond (at least in the immediate aftermath) by drawing closer to those most familiar to them. This immediate impulse was discernible in most all of my interviews, with many caregivers expressing their initial desire to stay close to their employers.

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[26] Several studies have focused on the process through which individuals and communities engage in multiple forms of 'memory-work' to make sense of the profoundly disruptive experience of having survived a natural disaster. For examples see Harvey, et al., 1995; Fabian, 2007; Moulton, 2015; and Kargillis, Kako, and Gillham, 2014.

Of course, while much of this desire stemmed from their fear of losing their jobs if they separated from their employers, many of their reflections still pointed to there being a much deeper affective dimension at play. Aum explained that while she had thought of leaving her employers before the fire, the emotional and affective toll of the disaster, in part, compelled her to reconsider her decision *even after* she was told that her job could not be assured:

> But during the fire uh… during the fire, I can say I'm depressed too. I'm thinking a lot like when you see something that you think you gonna to die, so you think you want to stay with your family at that time and my boss told me, they have a rumour about Suncor gonna lay off the worker— I mean everyone because the plant have to shut down for the fire, right?

> *Right.*

> She told me. I say, "Fine. Are we going home? It's okay."

With this, Aum returned home with her employers despite the looming threat of being disposed of at a moment's notice. And as we know from before, Aum was let go shortly thereafter with hardly an explanation from her employers other than them indicating that their decision was predicated on it being easier for them to find a replacement at the time. Such shifts in relationships in many ways echo Barrios's assertion that disasters "transform the social relations and built environments that evoke familiar and comforting reactions" (p.7).

And while such physical and social transformations evidently provoked affective responses at an individual and interpersonal level, they also clearly produced and circulated affect at a broader, community scale, as was rendered apparent in the ubiquity of "Fort Mac Strong" bumper stickers. In Fort McMurray, these levels of affect both reinforced and contradicted one another. For example, caregivers often spoke of how close interpersonal relationships, such as their employers' marriages, became strained in the wake of the fire while ties to community, in contrast, were often bolstered. Maricel's experience of returning to work for an unfamiliar, and often times unscrupulous, family while being simultaneously cared for by strangers demonstrates how these affective discrepancies can unfold:

> For me, when I came back here to Fort McMurray, it's really hard. When I came back here, and I go to another family, and the family that I used to work – it's really hard for me. After I – when I saw the burned trees, oh, I cried on the bus.

… Are there things that you've noticed that have changed a lot in the community since the fire?

> Yeah, yeah; we are praying with each other. Yes, emotionally… We're trying to reach
> out— those who are affected, because some of them are not really affected. Only a few
> of us. Yeah, they tried to reach out to me and usually, it's "Maricel, we can go to a picnic
> somewhere like that" so I can't [*inaudible*] my mind. They gave me some stuff; gave me
> some gifts, everything. Yeah, it really helps; community.

As Vincanne Adams (2013) illustrates in her account of post-Katrina New Orleans, in the wake
of natural disasters, human suffering creates a surfeit of affect that compels complete strangers
to care for one another. Other disaster scholars have similarly observed this circulation of affect,
noting the emergence of what they term a "therapeutic community" (Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-
Smith, 2009).

Caregivers' accounts of both the disaster and the subsequent process of recovery make
abundantly clear that an affective surplus was similarly produced and circulated in the wake of
the Fort McMurray wildfire. Loysa, for instance, noted how the pews at her church suddenly
became packed, requiring her and other volunteers to fill the aisles with additional seating in
order to accommodate all the new attendees seeking comfort in the faith-based community.
Serving as a church greeter, she also spoke of how much longer and more meaningful her
conversations became with people as she welcomed them at the entrance to the service. As she
described:

> Our first church service after the fire was *so* huge. It's the first time that I have to worry
> about chairs not, you know, not being available for so many people because even those
> people that doesn't go to church went to church after the fire. And you will notice that,
> you know, people now they're very cohesive li— you try to help each other wherever
> you can and you try to reach out to people. I noticed that, you know, even like in, in
> Facebook if there like people like, "Umm...this house number, we saw them um…
> with— They left with their sprinkler open the whole night and I just went there and
> turned it off for them." Like you know, there is this sense of...um… *caring* for each other
> now. With some people it exist— it existed before but now it's more um… it's their way
> of life to just make sure that your neighbour is um well. So now the community look out
> for each other more.

Aum similarly reflected on how drawn she became to social media, watching as complete strangers offered up free things and extended favours to one another.

In reflecting on such acts of kindness, caregivers I spoke with repeatedly mentioned how this surplus of affect often translated into a greater sense of belonging and a strong desire to "give back." As Aum expressed:

> Yeah. I mean, I, I appreciate little things more. And I try to help people if I can. They have homeless. I mean people that ask for money for food— At the gas station, if I see, I will buy them food. I don't have a lot. I mean I make only… fourteen dollar per hour but if, if I can buy them only one meal, it's good. I mean… But I'm not give them money because I know they gonna buy alcohol so I… I mean, I give more after the fire.

> *But you'll get them meals and stuff? After the fire happened?*

> Yeah, I buy them, I help them as much as I can. If someone put on the Facebook, they want the can to donate to help the family or something— I give. I don't have a lot of… but I give what I have.

As Loysa similarly described, "I feel like I belong more here when, you know, with me working at the church and hearing stories of despair… of recovery and all the joy of these people sharing their stories. I can— I didn't went through, through that but, you know, hearing their stories is really… a way for me to connect to them." However, as Aum's reflection makes clear, while affect may appear to flatten class and other imbalances of power, such inequalities in fact persist under the veil of this surfeit of affect.

There are several reasons why I have chosen to establish the condition of affect before all others in the interest of tracing the extraction of caregivers' surplus value in the wake of the fire. For one, as previously mentioned, caregivers' labour is deeply *affective*. As Ariel Ducey (2007) puts it:

> Caring labor, more broadly conceived, enhances capacities to affect and be affected— arguably for those who provide care as well as those who receive it. Some recent radical political theorists have therefore opted to call it "affective labor"—meaning laboring practices that produce "first and foremost a 'social relationship,'" according to Michael Hardt, or "produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself," in Maurizio Lazzarato's words. This conceptualization suggests the wide

array of situations and settings in which affective labor takes place. It also rightly brings

to the foreground that sociality is actively produced and that those who produce it do

labor of the most necessary kind.

As one caregiver put it to me at a gathering in Fort McMurray, "Being a nanny is not just a job, you have to show them your love and affection." For this reason, in already performing this deeply affective labour, on the receiving end, caregivers were drawn upon by default to perform such carework at both individual and community levels. Similarly, in often (although not always) being affectively motivated to perform carework, caregivers often felt deeply compelled to care— both physically and emotionally— regardless of whether or not the conditions established in their employment agreements were upheld.

By this means, this affective surplus was not only a *condition* of extraction but was, as its name suggests, a form of surplus value in itself. Critically, as in 'normal times,' the extraction of this affective surplus was mostly obscured from view through the largely unintentional masking of caregivers being labourers *paid* to perform such work. This obfuscation was only exacerbated by the existence of this surfeit of affect left behind in the wake of the fire. This became most obvious to me in speaking to Isabelle, the long-time childcare professional who, when asked whether she believed caregivers were taking on more emotional labour in the aftermath of the fire responded by saying, "Of course they are. We *all* are." Put another way, I view this circulation of affect as essential to our understanding of post-disaster extraction because it was responsible for both *creating* a form of surplus value that was extracted from caregivers and hiding mechanisms of extraction from view.

Like caregivers' surplus value, this affective surplus similarly serves as a kind of political-economic glue enabling the re-establishment of capitalist social relations and the rehabilitation of capitalist accumulation (Lazzaroto, 1996). As Adams (2013) writes:

> [t]he affect economy we live within today makes use of affective responses to suffering
> in ways that fuel structural relations of inequality, providing armies of free labour to do
> the work of recovery while simultaneously producing opportunities for new corporate
> capitalization on disasters (p.10).

However, while Vincanne Adams (2013) writes of post-disaster affect economies as producing new opportunities for corporate profiteering, I see this affect economy as similarly creating both new mechanisms of extraction and strengthening existing ones with one end result being the *re-establishment* of formerly rooted inequalities. So while many writers, scholars, and activists have

noted the emancipatory potential of disasters due to their creation of these "therapeutic communities" (Solnit, 2009), the experiences of caregivers demonstrate how this affect can also be leveraged in the interest of upholding the status quo. As Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith write:

> [t]he emergence of the therapeutic community— an unstructured, protean violation of the order of things— requires that a measure of material and symbolic work is employed to secure the restoration of those hierarchical arrangements that reflect and assemble class power and also provide order and meaning to virtually all members of society (p.91).

Thus, in a place like Fort McMurray that is uniquely characterized by a hyper-individualized care system and an already 'scoured landscape of social reproduction' (Katz, 2008), this affect economy has served to disproportionately transfer the work of recovery onto those, like caregivers, who have been suturing the community together in 'normal times' through their affective and emotional labour, and underpaid (or sometimes altogether unpaid) carework.[27] It is this affective surplus that has compelled many caregivers to continue caring for their employers' children regardless of what their pay stubs read, for no one withdraws care from people that they are *affected* by, least of all in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster.

So while this arrangement has not *directly* enabled corporate capitalization, it has allowed families to return to their daily lives and has enabled caregivers' employers to return to work, in many ways paralleling Adams' (2013) assertion that:

> Using labor that is largely free because it is motivated by faith and moral conscience enables this structural arrangement to suture infrastructures of profit making to the problem of need. In this arrangement, the safety net becomes a sort of affective choice, rather than a civil right protected by regulations that are enforced by strong public sector policies and juridical protections (p.12).

Therefore, in attempting to trace both the conditions and mechanisms through which caregivers' surplus value was extracted in the wake of the fire, it becomes essential to both *see*

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[27] Of course, the creation and circulation of this affective surplus is not exclusive to disasters but arises in any crisis-prone economy in the wake of political, economic, and social upheaval. By this means, Fort McMurray (and in many ways, Alberta overall) has witnessed the production and subsequent leveraging of this affect economy many times before. Indeed, an affective surplus is arguably produced every time the price of oil falls and politicians respond by telling everyday Albertans that they must "pull up their bootstraps" and come together to endure the storm. Neoliberal capitalism, in turn, latches onto this affect economy in ways that are rendered particularly observable in crisis-prone sites of production like Fort McMurray. As Ariel Ducey (2007) puts it, "the concept of an affect economy serves to identify and specify a register of production and exchange in which the political stakes of a control society may be rooted" (p.205).

this affective veil at work, while simultaneously pulling it back to reveal what it might be obscuring from view.

Loysa

Evacuating

Loysa was cleaning the windows of her employers' eight-bedroom home in Timberlea when she first noticed the ash falling into the front yard, but without being allowed to watch TV or look at her phone while working, she carried on with her duties. At 2 p.m, her employer returned home. "There's a fire in some neighbourhoods so we might need to leave for the night," he said. Loysa returned to cleaning. By 3:30 p.m, her other employer returned home. "We might need to leave soon," she said. "So just make dinner for us and we'll eat early then go pack the kids' clothes." Loysa retreated to her room to change out of her soapy clothes only to notice that she had dozens of missed calls on her cell phone. "Grab your papers and get out," one text message from a friend read. She called a friend from church back. "Loysa, do you need a ride? We need to evacuate." "No, like my employers didn't tell me we're…" she began. "Yeah, but we're leaving Fort M— We're already out of Fort Mac as we speak," her friend explained. Loysa returned to her employers in the living room. "Um, I got a call from one of our churchmen. They say we need to leave because the whole city's on fire." Her employers immediately dismissed her concerns, chastising her for scaring the kids for no good reason. As we spoke of the interaction, she explained to me:

> *So… Everybody's telling me you have to get out of there. "If they— if they don't give you a ride then find somebody like there are people, there are buses that transports people. Don't go with them. You have to leave there because the whole city's going to be burned down by the end of the night." It, It's just like, I'd show the text message and, "Loysa… Stop, stop doing that."*

So at this point you wanted to evacuate but you had to… You were dependent on your employer?

> *I cannot leave th— I cannot. Yeah. [...] For me not living in Fort McMurray, I don't know. Like they said, "Forest fires is just normal."[28]*

Three hours later, around 7 p.m, a police officer was banging at the door demanding to know why the family had dismissed the mandatory evacuation order. At the time, Loysa was standing in the kitchen preparing a meatloaf and salad for dinner. While most families had evacuated by mid-afternoon, it wasn't until 8 p.m before Loysa and her employers were on the road. As Loysa said to me before she began to cry:

> *I didn't bring anything, just my papers because I was busy packing their things and when it's time for me to pack my clothes, it's time to go. I didn't get to eat my dinner at that time because I was feeding them. I was packing their clothes. I was left with, you know, track pants with bleach. Spots of bleach. Like you can just imagine, I was cleaning the house. I was…*

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[28] This reflection strongly echoes my discussion on the socio-spatial production of risk in Fort McMurray, which is in part contingent upon its existence as a site of extraction located within a fire-prone ecology.

By the time they were on Highway 63 heading south, the flames that had been raging alongside the road just hours before were extinguished but traffic was still moving at a crawl. Loysa, her employers, and their two children spent seven hours on the highway before they ran out of gas. While Loysa was sitting in the backseat with the kids, her employer texted her from within the car. As she described to me:

> The very thing that I remember till now is they told me, "Call your father" — cause I don't have my mom anymore— "Call your daughter. Tell them what's happening." And it was through text message because I was entertaining the kids. I was in the middle. Both of the kids are in my... I'm trying to distract the kids. They're getting anxious with what is happenin—

The next text message read: "We may not be able to make it. We ran out of fuel and the fire is coming." Feeling helpless, they all began to recite Psalm 23. Then, at 6 a.m, a group of motorcyclists arrived with water, chocolate and a jerry can of gasoline.

Loysa and her employers continued onto Edmonton where they stayed at a family friend's house for the next week. As she told me:

> So as soon as we get there, "This is my maid and you can ask her to do your work, instead of you." The grandma was there so, "You can just ask her to iron your clothes or do the cleaning and cooking, so you can take a rest cause my maid is here." Yeah, so basically I just transferred a house for a couple of days. I was there doing the chores and all, and serving... eleven people instead of four.

The second day into their stay, Loysa received a text message from a friend from church asking her whether she was safe and if she needed anything. Having only evacuated with the clothes on her back, Loysa told them she needed clean underwear and a change of clothes. "What else do you need? Where are you?" they responded. But signifying how spatially disoriented and peripheralized she had become in the wake of the evacuation, Loysa told them she had no clue. "Okay, describe," they said. "Go to your Google. Find your location. It will pinpoint. Take a screenshot. I will meet you in half an hour." They arrived in no time with a bag full of clothing and donations from the main evacuation centre in Edmonton that had been set up at the University of Alberta.

But although Loysa had a support system in Edmonton, she stayed there for only a week before she had to move onto Calgary with her employers, where they checked into a hotel. In doing so, Loysa assumed that her household chores would end, allowing her to focus her attention on the kids but it soon became obvious that this wouldn't be the case:

> They have housekeeping but she doesn't want the housekeeping people to go and make the beds or clean the bathroom because it's my job. I'm with them. And so when we went to... Lethbridge and Banff and Jasper, and all those hotels, the housekeeping is wondering why we're not calling house— the housekeeping because I have to do the work for them. So I still have to iron the clothes and hand wash— yep.

Loysa accompanied her employers as they criss-crossed the province, being made to share hotel rooms with the two kids while her employers stayed in the rooms adjacent. Having never travelled outside Fort McMurray or Edmonton, she described how the ability to see new places was the most enjoyable part of the trip— made much worse, however, by having to be in the constant presence of her stressed employers. As she told me:

> I would say, 50 percent I've enjoyed the trip. [...] But it was— to stay with these people the whole day, 24 hours is just... Yeah.

Exhausting?

> It's gonna take your life. (Laughs). There's nothing like, you know, like... they would shout at you. I know they're stressed knowing that they, that they thought their house were burnt.

They would like when, when they're irritated like… at least use your brain.

Do you think they took a lot of that stress out on you?

Oh yeah.

And more so than usual? Like did they treat you worse than they normally did?

Yeah. There's even… We were, you know, we were dining at those restaurants and even the matter of how you use your cutlery is being ridiculed. Or how they tell you that, "Oh gosh, you really can't do anything, even using a knife and a fork is too difficult for you to learn," you know?

When asked, at one point, for one thing she would have changed about the process of evacuation, Loysa responded without hesitation:

To not go with them. Cause that's when I learned their true colours.

Did you— Do you think it took until then for you to really have this moment of clarity of what they were like?

Yes. At— during the fire, you get to know that person when you stayed with them the whole time. Our relationship [before the fire], I don't mind. Okay. Before the fire, I wake up in the morning. They leave at 9 a.m., they come back at 5. I feed them. I do the dishes. I'm gone. But to stay with them 24 hours and every minute I'm with them. It's… it's so different, like I don't want to go back to that. I am… I was a victim of um… I was a battered uh— I'm not, I've never married this person but he was abusive. I was a victim of a abusive relationship. But I would prefer that over… going through that one month of staying with [them] because with the physical abuse once the bruise heals, I'm good. But these people telling me, "You can't do anything. You're nothing. You're a trash. You're just a Filipino coming here looking for a husband— an old man who will give you status." I can't take that. I just can't.

Displacement, Placelessness and (Im)mobility in the Wake of the Wildfire.

As noted in Chapter 4, the spatial integration of caregivers critically determines the conditions and relations of caregivers' employment and, by extension, the mechanisms through which their surplus value is extracted. As Loysa's story reveals, caregivers' usual immobility and sense of placelessness was rendered most acute in the minutes and hours following the issuance of the mandatory evacuation order. While thousands of Fort McMurray residents scrambled back and forth between their homes and vehicles packing their possessions, many caregivers were forced to watch the scene unfold from within their employers' homes. Immobilized with the knowledge that flames were quickly encroaching on the community, caregivers became spectators of this evacuation procession until their employers returned home.

However, as Loysa's story also illustrates, even when their employers were at home, many caregivers still lacked the agency and ability to evacuate, remaining at the mercy of their employers. Yet, even for the few caregivers who were mobile, their placelessness both within the community and in the region at-large affected their ability to safely evacuate. This was the case for Aum who, upon receiving a call from her employer, was told to evacuate north with the eldest child in tow while her employer evacuated south. Aum described how her sense of placelessness was so extreme that she lacked the knowledge of which way north was. Tellingly, her own orientation of the region was strongly tied to the corporate owners of extractive projects scattered throughout the region:

> She just told me to go north, north, north. She didn't tell me where to go. She just told me, "You just go north." That's all.
>
> *Just head north?*
>
> Yeah. I wa— "Where is north you talking about?" Because I never passed Suncor at all. I only, I mean… At the site, you will see the first one I think it...
>
> *Suncor and then Syncrude, maybe? Yeah.*
>
> And then Suncor, yeah. I never pass Suncor. And I ask her, "If I have to pass the…" the *(inaudible)* anymore, I forgot. Anymore…the bison [restoration area]. I tell her, "Do I have to pass that?" She said, "Pass as fast north as you can." And you know… But that day, you cannot go really far. [...] Yeah. I talk with him [her employer's son] like where to go. "Have you ever go anywhere past your mom work?" And he don't know too… Like, I'm [not from here]. I live here but I'm not born here. I don't know where to go— something like that. And I ask her, "Where is north?" I told him to text like— because I'm driving— I told him to text. Do everything. And he text, he says "Mom." She, she don't share the location, she's just like "Take a picture. Send it to me. You go there." I'm like, "Where?? I don't know! Can you give me directi— I mean, the name or something."

Facing so much fear and uncertainty, Aum tried to bring things under her control but lacking any agency in the situation, she was unsuccessful in her attempt. As she described to me, "I told

her, 'I want to go north' but she told me to go— I mean, I want to go south but she want me to go north. Because it her car, so I have to go what she say.''

As Loysa's story clearly illustrates, this 'geography of dependency' persisted long after caregivers managed to evacuate the region. Due to both their financial and geographic attachment to their employers, many caregivers had few options but to evacuate with them. This post-fire immobility subsequently laid the groundwork for the extraction of caregivers' surplus value. In being bound to their employers throughout the over month-long evacuation, caregivers were *re*-placed into spaces where they were rendered even more accessible to their employers and where the boundaries of what constituted work became further blurred. For example, after finally being able to head south down Highway 63, Aum was instructed by her employer to bring her son and multiple pets to an RV located on the outskirts of a relatively unpopulated hamlet. There, Aum stayed with two adults, six dogs, two cats, and three kids. Making this already-cramped living situation even tighter, she was forced to share a bunk bed with the three children— squeezing in with one on the bottom-bunk while the other two shared the top. This living arrangement lasted for the entire month-long evacuation. As one might expect, living in such cramped quarters exacerbated Aum's pre-existing condition of being hyper-accessible to her employers. Now, rather than simply living within easy reach of her employers, she was always within earshot and lacked a space of her own to escape to both within and outside the RV. Loysa's own experience of the evacuation clearly involved this same struggle of being hyper-accessible with no place to call her own.

Moreover, in often being relocated to other families' homes, caregivers' usual feelings of being spatially peripheralized within their employers' home were now exacerbated, as they were forced to navigate new spatial boundaries of homes belonging to people who don't even pay their salaries. As Loysa's story reveals, under such circumstances, caregivers were able to be treated as hostess gifts by their employers who could offer up their caregiver's labour as a sign of appreciation to their hosts. In Loysa's case, this obligation to care for an additional seven people is a clear example of how spatiality played into employers' ability to extract greater surplus value from their caregivers in order to assist themselves in navigating this shifting landscape of social reproduction. This case stands as a clear example of how the mechanism of increasing demands on caregiver's labour was exacerbated by the spatial relocation incited by the fire. And while this was not particularly common, caregivers did reflect on how occupying new spaces that did not belong to their employers often made them feel obliged to perform

extra chores and carework. Again, in feeling affectively tied to their employers, or in often having nowhere else to go, caregivers typically abided by the growing expectations placed upon them (whether intentionally or not) throughout the course of the evacuation. As Loysa's story demonstrates, this often included having to bear the brunt of their employers' shock and stress. This condition of caregivers becoming their employers' de-facto 'shock absorbers' speaks directly to how this affective surplus altered the conditions and mechanisms of extraction at the household level, *especially* when being in such close geographic proximity to one another.

However, for some caregivers, being displaced to unfamiliar places had the opposite effect on the demands placed upon their labour and instead magnified this practice of being treated "as one of the family." For instance, shortly after the issuance of the evacuation order, Maria's employers decided to have her accompany their child to the grandparents' home in Ontario where they stayed for six weeks. As she described to me, in having her daily routine suspended, the experience in many ways felt like a vacation. However, the temporary move also came with new responsibilities as Maria suddenly became the caretaker most familiar with the temperament and everyday routine of her employers' child:

And what was that like? Like what was it…

Well the grandma was a sweet person. I, I thought it was like a holiday… Like she was soo— She was one of those persons that was really grateful that I am there with her, taking care of her grandson because she doesn't, she doesn't know what he likes, what he doesn't like, what is his routine. So she was so, sooo grateful that I was there to tell, to tell her like "He likes that," "He doesn't like that. He's like that…" And, and he was not… He didn't really know what was happening so it wasn't that like, "Ohhh I miss my *(inaudible)."* Well I was like… It wasn't like working, it's like when you're with your family. I didn't have like a schedule like "You have to wake up at 7 or you do this and do that." But it was like being with my grandma and being with them… It wasn't like working. But she made a polite uh… "Okay, I'm going to pay you for like minimum hours." Like 35 hours a week?

Okay. So it was like less hours than it would've been back here?

Uhhh kind of. A little bit less.

A little bit less? But you felt like it wasn't as…

> But I was like, I was like not really working because I'm just helping. Like being with
> grandma…

This claim, however, that she was "not really working" but was "just helping" reflects the extent to which this blurring of what constitutes 'work' was exacerbated in the wake of the fire as a result of both being displaced and having her daily routine suspended. As previously discussed, in being treated as "part of the family" one's status as a paid employee often becomes obscured, resulting in a chipping away of the breaks, schedule, and structure that one should come to expect as a paid employee.

Overall, being spatially displaced from the usual context of their labour resulted in caregivers having to navigate both new and exacerbated forms of extraction. First, their own immobility in the wake of the fire deepened their reliance on their employers and made them highly reluctant— or in many cases, completely unable— to refuse new or greater demands placed upon their labour. For instance, caregivers were often forced to share rooms with their employers' children making it spatially impossible to distance themselves from their work. Furthermore, in often being displaced to unfamiliar or remote places, this lack of having a space to escape to was only magnified. Caregivers' spatial displacement also exacerbated the blurring of work and non-work. So while they differed in how this blurring was experienced, all of the caregivers I spoke with struggled to articulate boundaries that existed around their labour in the wake of the fire, thus pointing to the pervasiveness of this condition.

Living Temporarily

> *For weeks, Loysa travelled across the province caring for her employers' children every day of the week from morning until night. While her employers' continued to work remotely— spending their days on conference calls sorting out their affairs— Loysa was left responsible for entertaining the kids. As she explained to me:*
>> *So all the time it's, it's still the nanny job so I would take the kids to the park, the closest park that I can. The parents were trying to figure out what's happening here so they're on a meeting… So I was with the kids the whole time. We swim…*

Okay. So you had to find activities?

Yeah, I have to find activities and force them to run the treadmill and fake their ages… so that we can go to the gym.

But despite caring for them for over twelve-hour days, Loysa was not paid any of her wages for the first two weeks of the evacuation. Instead, her employers took her receipt of the $1,200 prepaid debit card of provincial government relief funding as an excuse not to pay her. As she explained to me:

Yeah, I wasn't paid when I got the card.

So they were like, "Oh, you've been paid"?

I've— Yeah, I have money. Yeah.

So you don't need money… for the work?

That's what they thought. [...]

So that whole trip of like… Canmore, Banff, Jasper… You weren't being paid for that?

Ohhhh yeah. Mhmm… With me carrying their water bottles, their jackets, their backpacks like I'm, like I'm like a walking cabinet with soo many stuff. You just know that this is the maid because she's carrying so many stuff! Yep and I was not paid.

This condition of not being paid lasted for two weeks before Loysa's employers began to incrementally re-introduce her wages. As she told me, "My first two weeks, I was not paid but then she paid me...after that half of the amount that I'm, I'm receiving because they're not working so I shouldn't be paid full. But I was working." Evidently, she was not only working but, given the shifting circumstances of her employment, was also taking on new chores and responsibilities entirely— being expected to care not only for the children but for her employers as well.

However, as an active member of her church, in the wake of the fire, Loysa cared not only for her employers and their children, but also volunteered her time caring for youth belonging to their church's congregation. With Fort McMurray being a relatively small community, it was not uncommon for Loysa and her employers to run into people they knew while spending time in Edmonton. As a result, shortly into the Edmonton portion of their stay, Loysa's pastor approached her asking if she would help bring the church's youth group out on semi-regular outings to help entertain and distract the youth that had been most impacted by the disaster. As she described to me:

So the, the pastor, the… pastor for students just asked us to begin, just meet up at [the mall]— cause we had the free passes we can use. And I just— I met up those kids and three of them went through this um it's very serious that they cannot sleep. They're seeing fires, they're seeing flames, and one of them— they just feel like it's soo hot like they're feeling the heat of the fire. And one of them lost their home and he… he was trying to um save his Pokémon cards or, you know, like he had worked so hard on those Pokémon cards. And you know, those are superficial things for, for us adults but these children they have like…

It's something that's theirs.

They— Yeah, like...they need to salvage that cause they worked so hard for that and they were soo hurt seeing that their, their house in flames and they cannot… Like there's no guarantee that they'd be able to come back and that's when they started, you know, acting differently. In a sense like they… You know when a person is in a very um stressful situation when just they

get irritated easily like even with um… you know, those cars that you bump in, whatever that's called.

Yeah, bumper cars.

That's when you realize… You just realize that, "Okay, this boy is…" It was the children's like— It's not children's but the youth ministry gathering and I happen to be there taking care of the kids. And, you know, just observing them like these kids that used to be very jolly and very sweet, and it started… it's like raging.
Loysa's time away from Fort McMurray required her to not only navigate new spaces and establish new routines, but also perform new kinds of carework at both the household and community level. Throughout the course of the evacuation, Loysa shouldered the emotional burden of the fire for her employers and others who she was not employed to care for. She became hyperflexibilized and affectively pulled in all kinds of new and pre-existing directions.

The Suspension of Time and Daily Routine.

In the wake of the fire, caregivers were not only thrown from the usual spatial conditions of their labour but also from its temporal circumstances as well. As Loysa's experience clearly demonstrates, tied to this displacement and sense of immobility was a disruption of one's daily routine. In being relocated from the spaces they were most familiar with, caregivers were forced to either re-establish routines or, more often than not, adopt new routines imposed upon them by their employers or, in some cases, by their employers' relatives. Before the fire, caregivers' typically had a degree of autonomy over their schedules and those of the children they cared for. They were able to determine at what time of day they would frequent the neighbourhood park, what days of the week they would bring the children on playdates, and how often they would attend programs hosted by the library or family resource centres located in the area. But in being displaced from this physical environment of care and being replaced elsewhere with their employers, this degree of autonomy and control over their usual routines was often eroded and their schedules became no longer their own. This was particularly the case for those caregivers, like Loysa and Reyna, who evacuated with their employers and remained in their presence for most hours of the day.

However, on the flip side of this, other caregivers like Aum were given complete autonomy over establishing new schedules and routines for their employers' children throughout the duration of the evacuation. So while Loysa's employers were frequently present, she arguably experienced this dimension as well, being expected to find new activities and ways of entertaining the kids. While some children attended school in the places they were evacuated

to, both Aum and Loysa's employers decided to keep their children out of school thus magnifying this already difficult demand of finding ways to pass the time. For Aum, the ability to establish any kind of routine was rendered particularly difficult by the fact that they were staying in an RV that was isolated from services and amenities. As Aum described to me, her and her employer's son were forced to pass their days mostly driving around the campsite in a golf cart:

> I'm, I'm with the boy a lot. I mean, the number one. The nine-year old. So we take the golf cart. We drive. I mean not a lot of people like us because we drive around a lot. There not a lot of people to dr… Because we have nothing to do.

> *So you just kind of went to parks and stuff?*

> Yeah it like… Go to park, take the kid to the park, play something, walk…

> *For a whole month?*

> Yeah, it's boring.

But this suspension of not only caregivers' daily routines but also critically, those of their employers', did much more than just take away caregivers' ability to dictate some of the terms and conditions of their work. Rather, it contributed to a much more insidious and extensive suspension of time— obscuring not only what constituted caregivers' work hours but what counted as work altogether. The suspension of daily routine greatly exacerbated the hyperflexibilization of caregivers' labour. As Maria's experience of being evacuated to her employer's parents' house clearly illustrates, the usual temporal boundaries dictating which hours were paid and which were not were in many ways collapsed entirely in the wake of the fire. Moreover, as both Loysa and Aum's experiences show, in combination with this spatial dislocation, the suspension of these boundaries often resulted in caregivers working significant amounts of overtime, sometimes for no other reason than them having nowhere else to go. In having to share a room (and in Aum's case, even a bed) with their employers' children, both caregivers were rarely, if ever, able to find a space or time of their own.

Furthermore, as Loysa's experience makes clear, there was a discernible "shadowing effect" that resulted from the suspension of employers' daily routines. In not working their

regular 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (or, in many cases, their more likely 6 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m.) schedules, employers were far less likely to either provide their caregivers' with their usual guaranteed hours or, as was most commonly observed, provide them with the *full wages* of those hours. Indeed, it was largely this suspension of time that provided employers with both the opportunity to, and justification for, arbitrarily manipulating their caregivers' wages. This interaction with Aum perfectly captures not only how pervasive this situation was, but also how easily it became rationalized by employers and, often even, by caregivers:

> During the fire, I think the first… During the fire, the first thing you— the worry is: "is your boss gonna pay?"

> *"Is your boss gonna pay?" Yeah.*

> Yeah, because a lot of people would think, "Is the boss gonna pay?" because you can't work, really work… I mean you can, but it not really work because camper, you have nothing to clean. Nothing to do.

> *So it's just like different circumstances around work but…*

> Yeah. A lot of my friend— one of my friend, her boss didn't pay her. Don't want her to work at all. But someday she want. She want, she just call her: "I want you to work two hour. Can you come back?"

Aum's claim that "you can't really work" demonstrates the extent to which caregivers' understandings of their own labour hinges on the existence of these particular spatial and temporal boundaries. This sentiment, of course, is not unlike someone who typically works in an office setting claiming that they are "not really working" when they choose to do so from the comfort of their couch at home. However, with carework being so intangible and difficult to delineate, these boundaries clearly take on greater influence in dictating what constitutes work and is thus worthy of remuneration. Yet, as one would expect, the second I started to ask caregivers about the time they continued to spend with the children or the chores they continued to perform, they all chimed in acknowledging that— although carried out in different spaces and under different circumstances— they never stopped fulfilling those everyday practices of social reproduction. In fact, as many of their experiences reveal, the new conditions

and circumstances surrounding their labour often made their work *more* difficult, not less.

Finally, caregivers' experiences of the evacuation reveal that this "shadowing effect" not only affected their hours and wages, but in many ways influenced the extent to which they continued to be viewed and treated as paid employees by their employers entirely. In inevitably being thrown from their own employment routines and (at least temporarily) freed of their obligations as workers, some caregivers' employers responded by similarly shedding themselves of their usual responsibilities as employers. Reyna's story (told in the introduction of this thesis) demonstrates the extreme version of this impulse. In her case, her employers responded to the disruption the disaster caused of their everyday lives by freeing themselves of the obligation to both pay her wages, and provide her with food and accommodations. Rather, it was this suspension of business as usual that enabled them to apply for Employment Insurance (EI) on Reyna's behalf, and charge her for the costs of food and accommodation that they incurred throughout the duration of the evacuation. Of course, as will later be discussed, much of this downloading of costs is not only attributable to this suspension of time but rather, in large part, driven and justified by employers' own financial difficulties and their attempts to navigate them. However, as Loysa and Reyna's stories reveal, it was largely this disruption that *produced* the new mechanisms and new means through which caregivers' surplus value could be extracted. The most straightforward example of this, of course, is the distribution of provincial relief funding, which many employers used as an excuse not to pay their caregivers' wages or, in Aum's case, simply pocketed it altogether. This finding was triangulated by Red Cross case workers and migrant rights advocates, and directly points to how the changed material conditions of displacement and disruption were passed onto caregivers through the intensification of surplus value extraction— including, in this case, through employers' leveraging of new mechanisms at their disposal.

However, employers also leveraged this disruption of their daily routines in other ways in order to similarly rid themselves of additional obligations they had to their caregivers. One common approach taken by several caregivers' employers was using their caregivers' one-week guaranteed vacation time as a way of alleviating their need to pay them. For instance, prior to the fire, Veronica approached her employer to ask whether she might be able to take her vacation to return home sometime in the coming months. But being extremely busy at work, Veronica's employer dismissed her request and told her that her vacation would have to wait until things settled down— hopefully, she said, later in the year. However, Veronica's request

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stemmed from her needing to return home in order to obtain necessary documents for her permanent residency application. As she described to me:

> I was concerned about that because months before I uh...started a file, I talked with my boss about that and then she said, "I'm sorry Veronica because I have no vacation, I have no time. I have…" You know, "I am very busy."

By the time the fire swept through Fort McMurray, Veronica was only weeks away from being able to submit her application but without those documents, her file was still incomplete. So as she explained to me, "[The evacuation] was opportunity for me to go to Honduras. It was my chance." Of course, this vacation plan was also extremely appealing to her employer who was not only uncertain about when they would be able to return, but whether or not she, herself, would have a job to return to. As Veronica told me:

> In that time, when— In that week when it started um, the fire. She was very worried because umm I think she got a call from her company. Uhh… she didn't um, she didn't know really about how long it's going to take the… to come back…to the city, so that's *(inaudible)* maybe she said uh, "Uh Veronica, if you find, if you find another job, believe me, you can go. You can take it because I don't know how long it's going to, to be here or… to take uh fire," you know. I said, "That's okay. I just, I wait with you." You know?

Right.

What I supposed to say? "No Señora, uhh I need to work"? I couldn't. That's why.

Because, because they weren't working so you couldn't…?

Mhmm…

So then how long did you go home for?

Um, it's supposed to take uh, for two weeks. And then she, she called and say, "Uhh Veronica, stay two more weeks!" *(Laughs)* So I took a month.

You took a month. And you weren't paid while you were on vacation, right?

Nooo. Nothing. Nothing.

Veronica's story depicts how some employers were able to retain their caregivers by using vacation time as a way of sustaining the employment arrangement without having to pay their wages. Enabled by the disruption and displacement of everyday life, this mechanism of surplus value extraction thus straddled the line between disposability on the one hand, and full-employment on the other. It stands as a clear example of the extent to which caregivers exist as a relative surplus population and offers us a glimpse into how easily this condition could be leveraged by employers in order to suit their needs in a moment of crisis.

Returning 'Home'

On the morning of May 31st, 2016, Loysa and her employers packed up their vehicle in Edmonton and headed north to Fort McMurray. After a month of being evacuated, Loysa's employers were among the lucky ones who, due to the nature of their employment, were able to return home before the rest of the community. They arrived to find that, besides some smoke damage and a very mouldy meatloaf left out on the counter, their eight-bedroom house had been left relatively unscathed by the fire. Over the course of the following week, as her employers worked to re-establish their business, Loysa got to work cleaning up their house while continuing to care for the kids. She began working sixteen hour days— waking up at 6 a.m and often not returning to her room until 10 p.m. She spent her time emptying out the fridge, deep-cleaning the carpets, and bringing load after load of clothes and linens to the dry-cleaners. And although her days were long and the work was tedious, Loysa was just relieved to no longer have to be in the presence of her employers every hour of the day.

The following few weeks, however, were difficult to navigate. With most businesses closed and no buses running, Loysa and the kids passed their time close to home— cooking meals together and going on long walks to assess the damage of adjacent neighbourhoods. In the mornings and evenings when her employers were home, they were often stressed by the demands of work and the damages their business had sustained in the fire. The usual behaviour of Loysa's male employer, in particular, transformed dramatically following their return home. As Loysa explained to me:

> *He is always angry— angry because the one glass was not just dry. You know, you know little things. He's annoyed with his kids cause they're watching too much TV. It's so easy to tell the kids, "Hey! Turn off the TV, you've been watching that for more than hour," right? But "Why are you watching TV?!!" And you know, listening to that coming from a man, you know that he's… he's almost to that point of… exploding. And that was the few weeks after the um… after the return.*

Did you notice differences with like the way the parents treated each other?

> *Yes. It was a strain on their relationship and you could just see like it was… They used to be this and now it's like, they were sliced in the middle and just, you know, torn apart.*

They were very divided?

They were very divided. So the lady, she… she um focused on her children. She wants to make sure that if the husband is on his breaking point— she made sure that the kids were, were not noticing it but you can just sense that something is… um happening with her. And I avoid him, you know? Even, even in the morning, I prepare his— I polish his shoes, I prepare his clothes, I make sure the neck ties are laid down on the bed. I'm… I always make sure that I'm out of the way. I always make sure that he don't see me. [...]

And the kids picked up on this? Like could you tell that the kids knew that something was wrong?

Yeah, something is wrong. And then th— "Daddy's always angry." "He's angry because you've been watching TV for ten years. C'mon, you shouldn't be doing that." So I, I tried to… pacify? If that's the perfect word.

Yep.

Yeaahhh so, "Make sure you, you get your daddy his um— Make sure you return your daddy's things before," you know, "he comes back from work. Or he'll go bonkers again, or he'll go bananas again." That's what I'd do.

In having to placate tensions within the home, Loysa relied heavily on outlets that she had previously found to relieve her stress and emotional exhaustion. Before the fire swept through the community in May, Loysa had just begun to learn how to swim. She spent her Sundays at the Suncor Community Leisure Centre at MacDonald Island Park— a massive corporate-branded community, recreation, and leisure complex constructed on the island adjacent to downtown Fort McMurray.[29] As she said to me, "You know if I didn't learn how to swim, if I don't go to the gym… I'd be insane right now. Like I just need to find an outlet because it's, it's too hard for me." Because of this, for Loysa the most difficult part of the return was being unable to access these facilities for the first month and a half of being back in the community.[30] But as she expressed to me, her ability to get in the pool was about so much more than just decompressing:

I just want to come back and do my Mac Island… I just learned swimming at that time. I was on the kids' pool but for me to, to be able to do the strokes, it makes me feel good because they [her employers] can't swim and there's something that I can do that they can't do. At that

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[29] Operated by the non-profit Regional Recreation Corporation of Wood Buffalo, "the Island," is home to the Suncor Community Leisure Centre, the Miksanaw Golf Club, and Shell Place. The 450,000 square ft. Suncor Community Leisure Centre is home to the Syncrude Aquatic Centre, CNOOC (China National Offshore Oil Corporation) Nexen Field Houses, Canadian Natural Resources (CNRL) Arenas, a fitness centre, community art gallery, and the Wood Buffalo Regional Library. The Centre is a bustling community hub where I spent much of my time while in Fort McMurray, observing oil sands trade shows and National Energy Board hearings; movie nights in the library's CNRL Teen Area; swimming lessons in the tropical-themed Syncrude pool; and children's programs being hosted in the indoor playground. On any given day, the Centre (like most public facilities) offers a fascinating window into the gendered and racialized hierarchies of work, care, and family that exist in Fort McMurray. White businessmen in suits frequent the conference rooms for energy project hearings and community consultations; young men and predominately white women occupy the treadmills at the fitness centre; Filipina women tend to the toddlers in the indoor playground; and many recent immigrants pass their time on the public computers in the library.

[30] The Suncor Community Leisure Centre re-opened on June 13, 2016, with MacDonald Island Park, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and the Government of Alberta partnering to offer all returning residents free access to the park for a 2-week period (Regional Recreation Corporation of Wood Buffalo, 2016).

point, even that's very petty but I feel so empowered doing something that they can't do. (She begins to cry).

Wow…

That's shallow, right?

No, it's not! It's… No. It's so important, I think, to find those things.

In the following weeks and months, while Loysa continued to absorb the shock and stress of her employers, she gained strength from the surfeit of affect circulating in church and throughout the community. She found comfort in conversations with complete strangers and gained a greater sense of purpose in being able to support others. On Sunday mornings, she spent hours both before and after church listening to people's evacuation stories and the struggles they were facing since the return. Such connection and sense of community, she said, stood in stark contrast to how things had felt before the fire:

You know, like… For you to be standing— Rather than say, you know, the generic, generic, um conversation start like, "Hi. How are you?" and you always get the generic answer, such as, "Good. How are you?" But after the fire when we— when I was there, standing (inaudible) "How are you??" and it was like, "I am soo happy to be here. I just lost my house but I'm already…" You know, you know when you asked, when you asked how they are and they just want to open up and share what their experience is. So it's… people are now open. They're very vocal about their feelings, their experiences, and they wanted to be a part of somebody's uh life now. Before they have their own life.

Loysa noted how this surfeit of affect was upheld by those she would least expect: people working "out at site" in the tar sands. She described in detail interactions that she had witnessed between young trades workers and other community members that had clearly left an impression on her. She even recalled Facebook posts and the minutia of people's arrangements to perform favours for one another:

[Before the fire] people working at the site, "I don't care what's happening to you. I need to sleep." But even those people that I, I know that works at the site like… um, "How can I help? I didn't sleep. You let me sleep for a couple hours and I'll, I'll come and pull your truck." Like there's so— There is this guy, he was… Yeah, her, her truck was stuck somewhere and she posted in one of these community pages and like, "I needed help" and "I'm stuck here and I…" [He responded] "Okay, just give me… I'm, I'm so tired just give me an hour or two to just," you know, "take a nap and I'll come and pull your truck." People like, people I know are just really helping each other…

Loss of Security.

As is hopefully made clear by the stories recounted throughout this chapter, what most caregivers' employment arrangements looked like in the immediate aftermath of the fire was strongly determined by their employers' job security and their employers' fears of being dismissed upon returning home. And while Loysa's employers were among the lucky ones who did not have to worry about losing their jobs, as Maricel and Aum's experiences demonstrate, often employers' fears alone compelled many of them to dispose of their caregivers in both the

immediate and short-term wake of the fire. As discussed in Chapter 3, in having swept through Fort McMurray at a time of pre-existing widespread uncertainty, the fire not only compounded the economic impact of the oil price collapse, but also magnified the fears and *affective* strains that had accompanied it. And while many acted on the intensification of this uncertainty right away— whether by firing their caregivers, or deciding in the immediate aftermath not to return or rebuild— for many others, it took until they returned home before the physical, emotional, and financial toll of the wildfire began to truly set in. Indeed for thousands of residents, it would still take months— if not more than a year— for the full costs of the fire to fully materialize in their everyday lives.

Greeted with 'Welcome Home' banners and bright green information booklets hanging on their front doors, thousands arrived in Fort McMurray throughout the first week of June uncertain about the security of their jobs and their financial ability to recover from the various losses they had incurred. In the weeks and months following re-entry, hundreds of families were forced to default on their mortgages, take out new lines of credit, and frequent the local food bank in order to cope with the financial strain resulting from the confluence of these crises. However, as Chapter 3 made clear, this misfortune was not restricted to their bank accounts alone but bled out into all aspects of their everyday lives— magnifying the pre-existing crisis of social reproduction, and its affective and psychosocial consequences. As the experiences of caregivers repeatedly bring to light, in performing the bulk of families' social reproductive labour, much of the financial and emotional burden of these crises was downloaded onto their shoulders throughout the entire process of recovery. However, as their experiences have similarly revealed, not only were their employers downloading costs onto them but critically, extracting value *from them* in their attempts to mitigate the effects of job loss and financial hardship. Arguably, no caregiver's story better exemplifies how job loss and financial insecurity shaped these *mechanisms* of surplus value extraction than Reyna's. And although her story was recounted in detail in the introduction of this thesis, in being the only caregiver I interviewed who remained employed after her employer lost their job, it is a critical one to return to.

One might recall that following re-entry, Reyna's employers both went back to work on-site full-time, resulting in Reyna similarly returning to her usual schedule for several months. This lasted until December when Reyna's employer received a new manager who cut her hours from eight days on, six days off, to only six days on, six days off. As a result, Reyna's hours were similarly scaled back. Then in March, 2017, after only working three months under the new

manager, Reyna's employer was fired outright. After she was laid off, she told Reyna that she could no longer afford to pay her salary but instead arranged for her to begin working for another family with three children while continuing to live in their home. This arrangement lasted for several months before Reyna was no longer needed and was instead forced to return to being an on-call worker within her employers' home. By this means, Reyna went from receiving 45 hours of work a week to rarely receiving more than ten. Instead, she was expected to remain either in the house, or at the very least free and available, from Monday until Saturday in case her employer needed her to care for her daughter.

Reyna's experience clearly depicts how *hyperflexibilization* served as a mechanism of surplus value extraction in the wake of the fire. Indeed, with caregivers already being hyperflexibilized in Fort McMurray in 'normal times' (Dorow, et al., 2015), Reyna's experience in the wake of the fire is perhaps best described as a hyper-hyperflexibilization of her labour. Rather than being provided any consistent hours at all, Reyna was transformed exclusively into an on-call care worker, thereby enabling her employers to avoid paying her wages while still retaining access to her labour at any time.

In many ways, this act of trading Reyna off to other families can be similarly interpreted as a form of hyperflexibilization, only one which transcends the usual spatial boundaries of the employment contract. Indeed, in loaning Reyna out to other families, her employers were similarly able to retain control over her labour without having to pay her wages. Thus, in much the same way that they could call her upstairs from the basement to look after Charlotte at a moment's notice, in still possessing her contract and holding ownership over her labour, Reyna's employers were able to reclaim it for themselves at any time. For as has been repeatedly mentioned, in tying the prospect of citizenship to this legal contract, caregivers are rendered particularly subservient to those who hold it. However, even during the period when Reyna was working for another employer— in having her remain in their home— her legal employers continued to retain a degree of *spatial access* to her labour. In being home in the evenings and on weekends, Reyna was still called upon to perform unpaid carework. By this means, her employers were still able to extract her surplus value by way of leaving her with the baby monitor, requesting that she do the dishes after meals, and asking her to care for Charlotte without pay while they ran out to do errands.

However, as Loysa's story demonstrates, in the wake of the fire, caregivers' employers similarly extracted affective and emotional surplus from their caregivers in order to mitigate the

affective strain of navigating such crises in their everyday lives. This was evident in Loysa's description of how profoundly her employer's behaviour changed, resulting in him often lashing out at her completely unprompted. In this capacity, Loysa saw her role in the home as "pacifying" tensions, and distracting the children from the affective disruption that had been left in the wake of the fire. Red Cross case workers that I spoke with similarly described situations in which the loss of a family's home or means of earning an income, resulted in family breakdown. They spoke of several situations in which domestic violence resulted from such breakdown, prompting them to intervene and place not only mothers and their children in the community women's shelter, but also caregivers as well who were often equally the target of such abuse. Overall, people's loss of financial security increased the affective turmoil of the disaster and magnified pre-existing insecurities related to social provisioning. Households' inability to return to "a semblance of normalcy" magnified the initial grief of the fire and, in turn, exacerbated both the affective and material demands placed upon caregivers' labour.

Holding On While Being Let Go.

After continuing to work for her employers for close to a year following the fire, Loysa attended church one morning only to see a notice on the TV in the entranceway announcing that her employers were leaving Fort McMurray. As she described to me:

I don't know anything and I was there… I was at the church. I was ushering and part of my… part of um, my job ushering is to collect offerings. So the video news was playing and then it says um… "These people are leaving" so I was like…"Uhhh." "And we wanted to give them, you know, a farewell party." That's like it was a public announcement. I didn't, I wouldn— I didn't even know I'm… I'm losing my job. And I'm losing, you know, that sense of security. With, with, with that… news.

Loysa then confronted her employer only to be told that she was no longer needed and could move out at anytime. But with limited savings— of course exacerbated by not being paid her overtime hours or at the minimum wage— and such inadequate notice, Loysa pleaded with them to let her keep working while she sorted out her affairs. As she explained to me, "I needed to work. I needed— I don't have, I don't have savings. I need to, to get that money… to you know, find a room to rent. I told her, 'If you just let me work for a few more weeks just for me to afford a room.'"

Loysa spent the next two months working twelve to sixteen hour days caring for the kids and packing the entire contents of her employers' eight-bedroom home. Towards the end of this time, her employers went on vacation for two weeks, leaving her to finish the packing:

I was left there— she asked me to pack all the beddings, everything. So I packed everything. They came back and she opened… the things that I packed. So it's in a vacuum bag. She saw the, she saw the sheets and all the beddings, it's crumpled and she was so angry. She asked me to take it out, wash it again, and iron it. You know, I don't need to spray water on those beddings because I was really crying. Like from just seventy-seven beddings that I need to iron because it was— I'm going to pack those and going to be stacked and in a year, it's not going to be used and when they open it, it's crumpled and she doesn't like it. So I have to iron all

those things that I've packed and I just want to make, you know…

To end it?

To end it and be in good terms with her because I'm still needing that reference.
However, little did Loysa know at the time that they had offered up her services to the new
owners of the home. As she explained to me:

> *I was cleaning um— Somebody purchased their house and they've arranged me without my*
> *knowledge, you know, they just told the new owner, "This is your nanny and her contract*
> *expires February 18th so you can still use her." Like I'm a property.*

But when her employers finally moved out at the end of August, Loysa similarly moved on. Later that
day, she received an e-transfer containing her final pay cheque. She opened it up, still hanging onto the
hope that her employers had included her overtime pay for the close to 200 overtime hours she had
worked over the previous two months. However, only her usual, below minimum-wage amount was sent.
This, Loysa described, was truly the breaking point for her:

> *I just like… It's like a broken mirror and in just one flick for it to just fall on the ground!*
> *And you know what? They really flicked me… that flick that I was waiting for is… that pay*
> *that they gave me. It's just, it's just… it's just money but no, because they're telling me that,*
> *"You're not worth getting paid. You just deserve 50 dollars Starbucks coffee [gift card] and*
> *that's an upgrade on your level. So it's still— They're, she's trying still to imply that you don't*
> *deserve anything better now. "Good because instead of buying Tim Hortons coffee now you're*
> *buying Starbucks so you're, you're elevated on your status." That's what she's trying to say.*

Gaining Closure and Moving On.

When we spoke, Loysa had just finished moving out of her employers' home and had already
begun searching for a new job in Fort McMurray. In having already obtained her permanent residency
and in attempting to regain her freedom (as she put it to me), she had decided to search for a job outside
of caregiving but lamented how difficult it was to find anything suitable in Fort McMurray. She
described how she had already received three interview requests in Edmonton for administrative and
cleaning positions but still nothing in Fort McMurray, where she wanted to stay. In seeking an
explanation from me, she asked:

> *So why is it— And there's one as an administrative assistant. And why is it that work here*
> *in Fort Mac right now is… so difficult for me aside from caregiving? And from other places, I*
> *was able to get interview schedules and all?*

Why do you think it's so difficult?

I don't know. Maybe it's because the limi— like there's a limit in the job market right now
like not, it's not booming right? Like economically, it's dead. And the only job that is
available is childcare. And that's why. But I heard that if I stay here for a couple more…
months or years, it will— it will, you know, rejuvenate. The economy will get back to its
previous uh state and it's going to be a boom again and that's when they start hiring people.

Who… Like who tells you that? People from church?

Yes. And they are… they work at Syncrude. Like they, they work on different— people
working from different industries.

Mhmm… So they're just kind of like "hang in there"?

"Hang in there." That's what they're telling me. But for me, I need a job because I need to provide for my family. But then I am, I am in this condition where I wanted a job that doesn't scrub floors but it's the only job available in the market. And caregiving, I've got, I've got a few offers. They're willing to pay me fifteen dollars to take care of the kids. That's awesome! From nine dollars to fifteen dollars— I might consider.

Do you think that if it came down to working a job like caregiving and cleaning in Fort McMurray or working like administration or something else in Edmonton— Like what if you had to choose between a job that is not cleaning and caregiving, or staying in Fort McMurray, which would you choose?

I want to stay in Fort McMurray... You know why? Because this is my home.

The Entrenched Conditions of Surplus Value Extraction:
The Deepening of Borders in Moments of Crisis

While the *unsettled* conditions laid out above were a consequence of the fire, their effects and the mechanisms they enabled were greatly shaped by those conditions which were *entrenched* and *pre-existing*, such as the affective nature of their labour, the entanglement of their everyday lives with those of their employers', and the non-standard and hyperflexibilized nature of their work. Similarly, in listening to caregivers' experiences of the fire, it quickly became clear to me that there was never a moment throughout the entire process of the disaster where their lack of citizenship status and dreams of achieving permanent residency ceased to matter.

While I conducted formal, in-depth interviews with only seven caregivers in Fort McMurray, I spoke informally with dozens more throughout the course of my fieldwork. One question I always made sure to ask was what they had brought with them during the evacuation. After conducting only a few interviews, I quickly realized that it was a subject that had become light-hearted with the passing of time. Caregivers often laughed at how ridiculous their selection had been in the chaos of the evacuation. Some had brought only their favourite eyeshadow palettes, while others had stuffed boxes of granola bars and snacks into their suitcases. In general, as Loysa's story shows, caregivers rarely packed anything for themselves, often freeing up space to pack ice skates, roller blades, and boxes of the childrens' toys. But despite how wide-ranging their responses, every single caregiver I spoke with had one thing in common: they

all packed their immigration documents. Maricel, in particular, brought nothing *but* her immigration documents. The following interaction of ours clearly demonstrates the critical importance of such documents to caregivers:

You didn't grab anything. Not even your papers?

I already have my papers.

But you had them on you?

Yeah. I just get from my days off; usually when I go to my days off I always carry my documents. I never leave it with my family because I know this place is a fire hazard place, so I don't know why. Just my instinct that I always need to bring my papers whenever I go…

As an aside, Maricel's impulse to carry her documents with her because of Fort McMurray's high wildfire risk clearly indicates the extent to which disaster risk is embedded into everyday life in this place.

While all of the caregivers I interviewed brought their documents with them, the fire still presented new and unexpected administrative challenges for many, while being narrow misses for others. Maria and her employer, for instance, had their Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) approved in February, allowing Maria to send off her work permit application shortly thereafter. Of course, without her work permit, the hours Maria was working for her employer were unable to be counted towards her 24-months of work required before she would be eligible to apply for her permanent residency. Evidently, such documents and the seemingly arbitrary system to which they belong, clearly dictate the everyday lives of caregivers. Maria's experience navigating the disaster, in many ways, brought this into sharp focus:

Maria: And we were just waiting for it [the work permit]. And then uh, when the fire happened um, I had the letter where it says that it was approved but I did it through my agency so the work permit got there and then she sent it to me like during those days— like during when the fire happened.

Veronica: Her permit lost?!

Maria: No like, it was somewhere, somewhere in Edmonton— somewhere because the mail got stopped, everything because… there was nowhere—

Emma: Okay and then so your work permit was in the mail when the fire happened?

Maria: Yes, yes. So um, luckily I had that approved before the fire because otherwise I couldn't, I couldn't prove that I was living there. That I was working here. So if I wouldn't get that, I wouldn't get the, the like the support money from the Red Cross or from the government that we got when the fire happened. But luckily, I got my work permit, my work permit approved before.

Emma: Got it. So it says "approved" in their, in their system but it was that, that you didn't actually have the physical document saying that you had it. So then were you able to get it in Edmonton? Or in…

Maria: Well, I got it when I came back here. After. Well that was in June.

This story clearly depicts how close Maria came to not being able to access both monetary and material disaster relief in the wake of the fire. Moreover— and perhaps most importantly— this fortuitous acquirement of her work permit also demonstrates how possible it was for Maria to have had to work for another month and a half without it, once again, being deducted from her 24 months.

However, even for those caregivers who had all their necessary documentation, the command of borders over their everyday lives was still exacerbated in the wake of the fire. The most common example of this was caregivers' ongoing need to maintain their families transnationally. For example, despite losing her job and all of her material possessions in her employers' house fire, Maricel was still reluctant to ask for any assistance from them. When I asked her about this, she responded by saying:

No, no. They didn't help me. Just me— when I have a job, I buy a little. I'm not materialistic. Whenever some people give me old stuff, I just keep it. Everything now is a friend just gave it to me. Because I need to support my kids back there in the Philippines. I just don't need to support myself. I have my college— my son is in college

and my daughter is in high school, so— And I'm separated with my husband for sixteen

years. It's only me supporting them.

Maricel was by no means alone in struggling to maintain her family and meet their most basic needs in the wake of the fire. As Loysa's experience similarly demonstrates, she was forced to plead with her employers to continue employing her in order to continue sending money home to support her daughter while at the same time attempting to save to allow her to move out on her own. Reyna's story similarly sheds light on the extent to which the effects of caregivers' bordered existence were magnified in the wake of the fire. Indeed, were it not for Reyna's desire to acquire her permanent residency and be reunited with her family as soon as possible, it is very likely that she would not have endured such exploitative circumstances and instead, would have sought out alternative employment. So while caregivers' citizenship status was not a direct mechanism of surplus value extraction it was— as it always has been— one of the *foundational conditions* enabling such extraction to occur.

Overall, in tracing the unsettled conditions of caregivers' employment in the wake of the fire, the following chapter has made the case that the disaster both revealed and exacerbated the underlying relation of surplus value extraction, and magnified its attendant logic. In drawing upon the experiences of caregivers, and in turning to Loysa's story in particular, I have sought to demonstrate how these unsettled conditions of displacement, disruption, and disorientation interacted with *entrenched* conditions of caregivers' employment so as to intensify the underlying logic of affective and material extraction, and create or exacerbate mechanisms of surplus value extraction. The process of social reproductive recovery was thus powered by this logic and the mechanisms it enabled. In upending the material social practices of everyday life and shaking up the established conditions of surplus value extraction, the fire correspondingly altered and, in many cases, exacerbated these practices of wage theft, hyperflexibilization, and affective extraction. With this, I have argued that it was precisely *through* these unsettled conditions of recovery that both the mechanisms and underlying logic of social reproductive extraction were laid bare.

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

"The Beast" as a Lens

Into the Human Foundation of Disaster.

To the extent that this thesis is about the Fort McMurray wildfire, it is not about recounting the immediate aftermath, nor is it about glorifying stories of reconstruction and recovery. Rather, in seeing disasters as being a product of their human foundation, this thesis is about the aspects of Fort McMurray's everyday political-economic landscape that rendered the fire *into* a disaster for tens of thousands of people. It is about how "the Beast" scoured the surface of Fort McMurray only to reveal how the "seeds of catastrophe" were already embedded in this place. By this means, "the Beast" was not just "another" disaster. It was a lens— a lens into the ecological consequences resulting from the extraordinary hubris of altering the composition of the atmosphere for the sake of corporate profit; a lens into the social and political-economic impacts of this same capitalist logic; and a lens into the strands of capitalist crisis— of ecology, finance, social reproduction, and migration— whose existence and entanglement with one another, in many ways, brought this disaster into being. Thus, in borrowing words from Vincanne Adams (2013), if the fire is a story "about the consequence of an environmental disaster resulting from policies that favored fiscal growth and corporate profits over ecological balance and human risk, than the disastrous aftermath is the story of how some of these same processes and priorities produced a disaster far worse than [the wildfire] itself" (p.185).

Similarly, this thesis is not about the human foundation of just "any" disaster. It is about the human foundation of a disaster that unfolded in a remote outpost of fossil capital— in a community that, in an era of global climate change, serves as a lynchpin between crude oil and international markets. These socio-spatial distinctions matter for they are in large part

responsible for shaping the unique form of the crises that made up the disaster's political-economic foundation. Indeed, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) asserts, "crises are spatially and sectorally uneven, leading to different outcomes for different kinds of people in different kinds of places" (p.55). Therefore, in seeking to expose the human foundation of this particular disaster, I have drawn upon feminist geography in order to *situate* capitalist crises in this place. I have argued that the crises of finance, ecology, migration, and social reproduction all coalesce in unique ways in Fort McMurray as a result of the community's overreliance on a single, primary resource industry which has rendered its economy particularly liable to cycles of boom and bust, affecting all aspects of everyday life.

Into the Crisis of Social Reproduction.

However, while all strands of capitalist crisis were implicated in rendering the wildfire *into* a disaster, core to this thesis is the assertion that social reproduction is the most generative thread through which to understand the human foundation of this particular disaster. By this means, "the Beast" was a lens into Fort McMurray's crisis of social reproduction but the crisis of social reproduction was also a lens into "the Beast" and the multi-layered and intersecting crises that rendered it into a disaster. By interrogating social reproduction in a rare moment where daily routine has been ruptured and the connection between production and social reproduction suspended, the wildfire offers a critical opportunity to theorize how these crises are woven into our everyday lives through processes of social reproduction. For in having to re-establish social reproductive relations in the wake of such extreme events, disaster is an as-of-yet undertheorized way of illuminating the crisis of social reproduction and studying how it manifests in our everyday lives.

To look at "the Beast" through the framework of social reproduction "both reveals the extent and gravity of pressing issues on the ground and makes clear how central social reproduction is to ongoing production, everyday life, and all aspects of recovery and restoration" (Katz, 2008, p.17). In this regard, I have asked and sought to respond to the situated questions of *where* the means of social reproduction come from in this particular place, *how* they have been shaped over time by the region's productive processes, and finally, with what repercussions (Katz, 2008). I have argued that in scouring Fort McMurray's political-economic landscape, "the Beast" revealed the hostile consequences of decades worth of disinvestments

from the social wage and the compounding effects of the more recent financialization of everyday life. Like Katz (2008), I see "this disinvestment and the 'social warrant of hostile privatism' that has propelled and justified it," as culpable for turning the wildfire *into* a disaster for those living in Fort McMurray. By this means, I have sought to make clear how in holding the crisis of social reproduction central to our analysis of disaster, we are able to see how the Fort McMurray wildfire reveals in sharp relief "the contours of our political and social predicament" created by neoliberal policies and market-driven governance (Adams, 2013, p.5).

However, in scouring the surface of this particular place, "the Beast" laid bare far more than just the familiar effects of welfare state retrenchment and disinvestments from the social wage. Rather, it exposed the social reproductive fault lines unique to this particular resource community. Indeed, in situating the particular strands of capitalist crisis in Fort McMurray, I have sought to elucidate how the consequences of this 'hostile privatism' have been shaped over time by the specific socio-spatial context in which they unfold. In broadly conceiving of social reproduction as "the stuff of everyday life" (Katz, 2008, p.18), I have sought to elucidate how *all* aspects of social reproduction— including housing, childcare, food provision, and environmental infrastructure— became implicated in the creation of this disaster. Consequently, "the Beast" brought into sharp focus what the challenges of everyday life, such as raising children, paying off mortgages, and earning a living, look like in this remote outpost of fossil capital and exposed the tensions that arise in tying such seemingly mundane, everyday concerns and means of existence to the price of a barrel of oil.

Adopting "the Beast" as a lens through which to understand the crisis of social reproduction has meant posing distinct questions and centering the experiences of distinct subjects. As Cindi Katz (2008) notes, critical to ask in the aftermath of any disaster is "Who has been responsible for restoring daily life, for reclaiming, reconstructing and reviving the means of production; and for returning the provisions associated with the social wage and remaking the means of its mediation?" (p.17-18). These questions have been at the heart of this project. I have shown that in this remote outpost of transnational capital, a largely disposable, transient workforce has been left responsible for re-establishing daily life and reconstituting community in this place. I have traced how these workers have been leveraged as a tool for social recovery and have been absolutely essential in "reclaiming, reconstituting and reviving the means of production" in Fort McMurray (Katz, 2008, p.17).

Overall, in recounting their experiences, I have sought to reveal how, in studying the

disaster through the lens of a largely invisible social reproductive workforce, we are able to witness "the integrated nature of the material social practices of social reproduction and the ways they are integral to the enduring rhythms of everyday life and recovery" (Katz, 2008, p.19). I have come to understand that these questions and the answers they elicit are *critical* to determining the outcome of disaster and whether it will unfold as a moment of social transformation or one of resettlement. For as Katz (2004) reminds us, "The possibilities for rupture are everywhere in the routine. If in the efflorescence of cultural forms and practices that make up social reproduction hegemony is secured, so, too, might it stumble" (p.xi). In following the post-disaster stories of migrant caregivers, I have argued that it through this concept of social reproductive surplus value that we might come to better understand under what circumstances hegemony is secured in the wake of crisis and *how*. For in suspending the 'normal order' of things and in upending the material social practices of everyday life, disasters are critical windows into not only how the multiple crises at its root are interrelated but how they are *reproduced* and *resituated* through the extraction of this value, which only serves to re-establish, in turn, the political-economic foundation of disaster.

Into Vulnerability and the Uneven Effects of Crisis.

In centering the experiences of migrant caregivers, "the Beast" was also a "lens for focusing on the unequal distribution of flourishing that render some bodies, some workforces, and some communities far more precarious than others" (Strauss and Meehan, 2015, p.2). Their stories are a clear indication that the effects of crisis are not equally distributed but fall along pre-existing axes of inequality, including class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and— as was rendered especially visible in their case— citizenship status. Migrant caregivers' employment experiences in the wake of the fire also demonstrate how the adoption of largely individualized and market-based approaches to recovery only deepened pre-existing patterns of exploitation in their everyday lives. Thus, in being precariously tied to this 'land of opportunity' through short-term employment contracts fixed to single employers, for many caregivers, the wildfire was a bolt of lightning exacerbating a pre-existing crisis of precarity and exploitation.

By this means, the stories of caregivers in the wake of the fire point to the critical need to de-exceptionalize disaster and confront the ways in which global capitalism and market-driven governance has rendered the challenges of everyday life into a permanent disaster for

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many. Their accounts of how the fire's impacts materialized in their everyday lives— whether in the form of mounting levels of credit card debt or in the postponement of their eligibility to apply for permanent residency— point to the deep entanglement of the multiple strands of capitalist crisis, and its embeddedness in their everyday lives. Moreover, their stories offer us unique insight into how, through the ascendancy of a neoliberal rationality, we have come to reproduce the same logic and practices of capital in order to allay the effects of crisis in our everyday lives, resulting in a downloading of costs onto those who are already most vulnerable among us. Finally, in turning back to both Reyna's story and my own, I believe "the Beast" was far more than just a lens into the past and present of Fort McMurray. Rather, it is also a lens into the future that awaits us in a time of crisis.

Into the Future.

> It begins to strike me how precarious it all is, this business of not being on fire.
>
> — Naomi Klein, *Season of Smoke,* 2018

By the time Reyna and I had finished talking on that Sunday in September of 2017, the sun had begun to set. I remember watching it descend below the charred trees along the ridge overlooking downtown, sending wispy clouds of pink out from behind Abasand Heights— one of the neighbourhoods most severely impacted by the fire. While she had been initially reluctant to speak with me, Reyna and I had spent the past four hours talking over a box of donuts in a tucked-away booth. Having been asked not to record the interview, I scribbled notes and timelines in my journal for hours until my hand cramped up. At the end of the interview, she laughed at the dozens of pages I had written before apologizing profusely for having talked for so long. As we were leaving, a Filipina woman began to mop the floors. Reyna wished her goodnight in Tagalog as the door swung closed behind us. Outside, in the unusually crisp September air, she asked to give me a hug before we parted ways.

The next morning, I boarded the Greyhound back to Edmonton. The bus was busier than usual and with the seat beside me occupied, I quickly gave up trying to finish transcribing my notes from the day before. Instead, I sat with my forehead pressed against the window, watching as patches of blackened trees passed by. Two hours later,

I awoke to the smell of smoke streaming through the cracked-open windows. People began shuffling about, standing up to lean over children and help those beside them close the windows shut. It was mid-September. At the time, close to 200 wildfires were still burning throughout British Columbia. I opened my phone to check the active fire count before scribbling it in my notebook where I had left off with Reyna's story. *"156."* I flipped back to my notes from mid-August, recalling how beautiful the sunset had been from the smoky skies on my previous trip up. My notes read:

> *I have a headache on the bus ride north right now. We're only half an hour outside of Fort McMurray and the air is heavy and thick with the smell of smoke. Even from inside the bus, it's the worst I've experienced to date. I'm trying to write an assignment but I can't concentrate because my head is pounding from the smell. Oil trucks continue to whiz past us despite our inability to see the horizon through it all.*

On August 15th, 2018— almost exactly a year since that headache-inducing bus trip— I awoke to an orange, apocalyptic sky hanging over Edmonton. The familiar smell of smoke streamed through my window, having drifted in from yet another unprecedented wildfire season raging across B.C. But this time, the fires were not isolated to the Interior but were burning throughout every wildfire region in the province, prompting the Government of British Columbia to, once again, issue a provincewide state of emergency. I rolled over to check the active fire count on my phone, opening the B.C Wildfire Service page saved in my bookmarks. *"559."* I rummaged through the top drawer of my bedside table, finding a notebook and pen before scribbling the number in the top corner of a page.

An hour later, I stepped outside into the orange haze and began my twenty-minute commute to the university library. As I was walking by an empty schoolyard, a young boy on a tricycle came pedalling towards me. With his ninja turtle helmet falling down over his eyes, he shook his head back, taking a second to squint at the smoky skies above. He sniffed at the clouds before looking at me inquisitively. I offered him what reassuring smile I could muster before he kicked off the sidewalk and continued on his way. A few seconds later, I passed a young woman following him closely behind. We exchanged anxious smiles before she quickened her pace to keep up with him.

By the end of August, estimates put 2018 as having the largest burn-area in a B.C wildfire season, surpassing the historic 2017 season, which had burned through

1,216,053 total hectares. That morning on my walk to school, I was reminded of the very first interview I had conducted in Fort McMurray back in August 2017. That day, as I sat across from Isabelle in her office at a suburban childcare centre on the outskirts of the city, she told me about the journalists and donation trucks that had come flocking to town in the wake of the B.C fires. "There was a large appeal in town— trucks everywhere collecting donations and there was a lot of media and things like that. Those things, the donation collection and the media were *huge* triggers," she explained. "So driving by the trucks full of donations and it was just last year that we were at those trucks receiving. And you know, the media for kids in particular, seeing… They can't tell if it's B.C or if it's Fort McMurray."

As I left the interview that day, Filipina caregivers were in the entrance way helping kids tie up their shoes and put their backpacks on. Like the young woman I passed on the sidewalk on my way to school, I pictured them having to be the ones to explain that the wildfires were not close by. I pictured them having to comfort their employers' children when their nightmares returned. And I pictured them having to absorb the shock all over again while at the same time wondering themselves when the wildfires might, in fact, return— catalyzing new crises in their own lives and throwing new obstacles in the way of fulfilling their dreams for the future.

"The Beast" is a foreshadowing of the future we face in an era of climate crisis— a future rendered all the more precarious by the hollowing out of our social and material bases and the unraveling of our social ties. "The Beast" revealed how disaster is everywhere embedded in our everyday lives and only awaiting a source of ignition. It offered a glimpse into how we will continue to respond to crises in the absence of strong social services that can help us absorb the inevitable shocks of crisis, whether they be financially, technologically or ecologically-produced.

In revealing the conditions that rendered the fire into a disaster, "the Beast" is a cautionary tale of the future that awaits us if we continue to allow neoliberal privatization to corrode the social reproductive foundation of our everyday lives and leave unchecked our economic system that prioritizes corporate profit over planetary stability. However, it is also a cautionary tale of the uncertain and exploitative future that only *selectively* awaits some among us— those who occupy the bottom rung of society's socioeconomic ladder; those who are

considered disposable and are forced to care for families across borders; and those whose first instinct in the throes of disaster is to find the documents that validate their existence and determine the course of their future. But perhaps more than anything, "the Beast" is a cautionary tale of the future that awaits us if we resign ourselves to thinking that "there is no other way." And herein lies, on the flip side, the beauty hidden among the wreckage. For in the wake of disaster, we are able to imagine new worlds, which is why holding onto the thread of social reproduction is about more than simply illuminating the human foundation of disasters, it about fundamentally honouring *the politics of possibility* they bring to life.

Disaster as Opportunity

The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell,* 2010, p.7

In rupturing daily routine and throwing open the relationship between production and social reproduction, disasters offer unprecedented opportunities to not only rebuild the physical infrastructure of communities but to reconstruct the social infrastructure of everyday life. While capitalists have often used disasters to further extend the market's reach into people's everyday lives through privatization, gentrification, and labour exploitation, disasters can, conversely, be leveraged to create profound social change and build futures that serve the needs of people over private corporations. In demonstrating people's willingness to come together, disasters expose us— if only for a second— to the worlds that are made possible when they are grounded in practices of care and solidarity for one another. By exposing us to what we are able to achieve as a collective, disasters hold the potential to catalyze demands for greater democratization, increased public ownership, expanded social services, strong public programs, and, in general, a much more robust social reproductive landscape. Outside the walls of private households, they also offer us a glimpse into the relationships that are rendered possible in the absence of differential exclusion and a secondary-class of citizens. However, the likelihood of people bringing forward such demands is predicated on far more than just the existence of the disaster

itself. Rather, the emergence of such struggles strongly depends on the crises that have brought this disaster into being and the interactions it has provoked between them. Critically, it depends on how easily they can be hidden and reabsorbed back into everyday life. For as Fraser (2016) writes:

> In moments of general crisis, when multiple contradictions—political, economic, ecological and social-reproductive—intertwine and exacerbate one another, boundary struggles have erupted at the sites of capitalism's constitutive institutional divisions: where economy meets polity, where society meets nature, and where production meets reproduction. At those boundaries, social actors have mobilized to redraw the institutional map of capitalist society (p.116).

Thus, a disaster is far more than just the sum of the crises that have brought it into being. Rather, it is a site of possibility, a fleeting reminder that a better world is always within reach.

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