Voices from the Shadows: Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Contemporary 'Boom-Sphere' Context of the Alberta Oil Sands

by

Angela Corinne Angel

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Department of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology
University of Alberta

Abstract

Mobile workers are those individuals who commute to and from resource development projects and who live temporarily in work camps, lodges, hotels, private rental suites, or other short-term accommodations. My thesis specifically explores the over-stereotyped and under-researched lives of male mobile workers living and working away from home in the industrial mega-project of the Alberta Oil Sands. The aim of my research is three-fold: 1. to develop a more accurate understanding of the contemporary boomtown context; 2. to gain a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and identities of male mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands; and 3. to better understand how the mobile work arrangement affects mobile worker wellbeing. To elucidate the lived experiences of male mobile workers I used a narrative approach, informed by narrative inquiry and the life story interview. This study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 34 research participants. My research participants comprise three categories: mobile workers (16 in total); key informants in the helping profession (11 in total); and 'mobile work experts' (7 in total). From these narratives, I documented the 'storied identities' of mobile workers and explored mobile worker wellbeing as it is conceptualized in the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* model developed by Dr. Dennis Raphael and colleagues (Raphael et al. 1996, 1997). Additionally, in following with my narrative approach, and interweaved within my thesis, are what I term 'narrative threads'. These narrative threads consist of my own personal stories related to mobile work, as well as stories told by my research participants; together, these stories vividly illustrate and reinforce my key research themes.

My research findings speak to the three research areas that I have described above. First, to account for the new 'liquid modern era' (Bauman 2001a) and the 'new world of work' (Beck 2000), I reconceptualize the traditional notion of the boomtown and offer a new boomtown model that specifically centers on the mobile worker's experience. The boom-sphere comprises the 'home-sphere', the 'commute-sphere', and the 'work-camp-sphere'. Second, in terms of mobile worker identity, my research reveals that mobile workers generally fall into one of two 'archetypal' identities that I conceptualize as existing at two different ends of a sliding continuum. The 'Thrivers' – those who are doing fairly well to very well by overcoming the challenges of mobile work, such as being away from family, working long hours for an extended period of time, living in remote settings, on one end; and the 'Strugglers' – those who are really struggling with the mobile work lifestyle due to issues related to money, relationships, and substance abuse – on the opposing end. Third, I identified five key themes related to how the mobile work arrangement affects worker wellbeing. These themes are: 1. the 'identity-tension' and stress experienced by workers as they move along the 'home-sphere', 'commute-sphere', and 'work-camp-sphere' trajectory; 2. the danger and opportunity of high pay (facilitates the accumulation of debt/facilitates the achievement of goals); 3. the identity-limiting and alienating spaces of some work camps that made workers feel like they were in prison; 4. 'The Oil Comes First' maxim that was loudly implicit within the work sites during the oil boom and that left workers feeling undervalued, alienated, and like a mere "cog in the machine"; and 5. the 'Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon, which involves some workers putting their mental and physical health 'on hold' due to

the pressures of shiftwork and due to the 'Big Boys Don't Cry' work culture, and then eventually reaching a 'breaking point'.

In terms of the policy implications of my research, I introduce the idea of a Mobile Worker Wellbeing Assessment Tool as a way to assess and improve mobile work environments and, ultimately, as a way to enhance mobile worker wellbeing. Finally, I identify a number of areas that require future investigation, including the need to better understand the relationship between masculinity and worker wellbeing in contemporary resource development settings.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Angela C. Angel. No part of this thesis has been previously published. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from University of Alberta's Department of Sociology Research Ethics Board in February 2008; and from the Physical Education and Recreation, Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences, and Native Studies Research Ethics Board ("Voices from the Shadows: Exploring What it is Like to Work in the Mining Sector in the Canadian North", No. 09-44) in May 2009.

Dedication

I wait for you

When I am up late reading, writing, and the papers surrounding me

Scream white silence

I think

I hope

When are you coming back?

Where did you go?

Why didn't I do more to help?

I miss you

I imagine someday I will catch you

From the corner of my eye

You'll be there with your snap buttons barely done up

Your chest hair poking through your western shirt

Your brown feathered hair and soft eyes looking out

For me?

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my brother
Jason Mark Miskuski
(January 22, 1972 to July 27, 2007)

You are forever in
My highway heart

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction. "Linking Social Issues to Personal Troubles in the Alberta Oil Sands"

Part I: Statement of the Research Problem

> *Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Mills 1959:3)*

In his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, sociologist C. Wright Mills implores social scientists and others to exercise what he calls the 'sociological imagination'. The sociological imagination involves seeing the connections between social issues and personal troubles as way to better understand and improve the quality of life within society. My thesis takes up this challenge for the contemporary resource development context of the Alberta Oil Sands.

Transnational corporations, volatile energy prices, megaprojects, and large mobile workforce populations increasingly characterize today's resource extraction sites. Despite the new social and economic milieu of contemporary resource development contexts, the boomtown concept and the scope of social impact assessment has remained relatively static over the past 50 years. In essence, my research problem involves the current thinking that boomtown effects are a local phenomenon only and are

predominantly attributed to the influx of temporary construction and resource workers. In light of this significant theoretical gap, and in light of our lag in effectively developing and applying new social impact assessment tools within these vastly transformed settings, my thesis has two main purposes. First, to expand and reinvigorate our thinking about boomtowns and to re-conceptualize this outdated concept into one that includes the hypermobility of workers, as well as the root causes and wider distribution of boomtown effects. Second, to shift the spotlight of social impact assessment from the host community to mobile workforce communities, and to increase our understanding of how these contemporary resource-based contexts affect mobile worker identity and wellbeing (which in turn affect the wellbeing of home communities across Canada and beyond). Via my two research foci – the boomtown concept and mobile workers – I strive to stimulate the sociological imagination within resource sociology with respect to the mobile work arrangement. That is, I strive to link the social issues of the Alberta Oil Sands to the personal troubles of mobile workers as way to challenge mobile worker stereotypes and bring significant worker wellbeing issues to the forefront of public, government and industry dialogue – *and action*.

Background to the Research Problem

One key 'effect driver' of social disruption in rapid resource development contexts is the influx of temporary workers (Orenstein, Angel, and Lee 2013). These workers are also known as the shadow population, fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers, long distance commuting (LDC) workers – or as I refer to them within this thesis: *mobile workers*. Mobile workers are those individuals who commute to and from resource development projects and who live temporarily in work camps, lodges, hotels, private rental suites, or

personal recreational vehicles (RVs). These workers have been linked to shifts in behaviours and attitudes among local residents (e.g., decreased trust, increased fear), as well as increases in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), housing and food prices, and traffic volumes and collisions (Brown, Dorius, and Krannich 2005; Goldenberg 2013; Food and Water Watch 2013; Northern Health 2012; Northern Health 2013; Ruddell 2011; Ruddell and Ortiz 2014). While it has been documented that mobile workforce populations tend to place a certain degree of stress on local communities (as indicated by STI rates, traffic data, and local residents' comments in media and research interviews), within North America, very little research has been conducted on understanding the relationship between mobile workers and host communities. Instead, I contend that the degree of stress is frequently exaggerated, and often times, the root of this boomtown stress is exclusively attributed to the perceived 'outsider': mobile workers.[1]

The Mobile Workforce Population in the Alberta Oil Sands

The mobile workforce population in the Alberta Oil Sands – which is largely situated in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) – has increased substantially over the last 12 years. In 2000, the mobile workforce population was first recorded at 6,000 (Alberta Government 2012). In 2010, the mobile workforce population was 23,000; and between 2010 and 2012, this population increased by almost 60% to 39,000. The mobile workforce population for the Alberta Oil Sands now accounts for nearly 34% of Wood Buffalo's total population (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo [RMWB] 2012b). Furthermore, there is an increasing trend within resource development projects toward

[1] For a fuller exploration of this 'insider' versus 'outsider' (local residents versus mobile workers) phenomenon in modern-day boomtowns, see Chapter 2: The Social. "From Boomtown to Boom-Sphere: Reconceptualizing the Boomtown Concept for Fort McMurray, Alberta".

the mobile work arrangement and camp builders have predicted that the mobile workforce population in the Alberta Oil Sands may increase to an upwards of 75,000 workers over the next few years (Vanderklippe 2012).

Demographically speaking, mobile workers are often perceived as young, single men, with little education and high incomes. While the high incomes of mobile workers are substantiated in the most recent RMWB Census, the mobile workforce population is actually older, more attached, more educated, and "less male" than we think (RMWB 2012b). More than half of the mobile workforce is actually over 35 years old; 51.2% are in common-law relationships or are married; and 61.1% are either an apprentice, or hold a trades certificate or a post-secondary degree (with only 7.4% of workers having less than a high school diploma). Finally, the mobile workforce is becoming increasingly female. In 2007, 92% of the mobile workforce in the RMWB were male and 8% were female (Nichols Applied Management 2007); in 2012, 82.9% of mobile workforce in the RMWB were male and 17.1% were female (RMWB 2012b).

As the RMWB Census data reveals, the mobile workforce population is not entirely comprised of the stereotypical demographic of young, single men, with little education. Within this thesis, I challenge the singular identity of mobile workers and attempt to open up this singular identity to the varied lived experiences and identities of mobile workers. In the next section, I describe why reducing a highly diverse workforce population to a singular identity can be harmful.

'The Danger of the Single Story'

> "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Ngozi Adichie 2009).

> "…acceptance of attributed identity instill myth with its greatest power, the power to go unquestioned" (Couto 1975:471).

Perpetuating stereotypes or a single story for an entire social group can be dangerous in that it can overlook important implications for a social group's identity and wellbeing. The single story is also known, within narrative research, as the 'grand narrative'. Stories that challenge, resist or oppose this grand narrative are known as 'counter-stories' (Lindemann Nelson 1995). As described above, mobile workers are frequently framed within a single story or grand narrative – that they are young, single males with little education and 'money to burn', and, therefore, engage in a myriad of deviant activities[2] such as alcohol and drug abuse, drinking and driving, bar fights, and sex with prostitutes. Some research has even referred to construction workers as "psychopathic types whose lack of ability causes them to drift from job to job" (Fahys-Smith 1983:104). Thirty years ago, a prominent rural sociologist and boomtown researcher, the late William Freudenburg, noted that there was a tendency for the general public to overgeneralize mobile construction workers. In 1982, Freudenburg wrote:

> *One frequent assumption about construction workers (and other "temporary newcomers") is that they are single-handedly responsible for the broad range of problems often encountered in boomtowns. The assumption may be consistent*

[2] Within this thesis, 'deviant activities', and more generally, 'deviance', is understood as "any social behaviour which departs from that regarded as 'normal' or socially acceptable within a society or social context", including – but not limited to – criminal behaviour (Jary and Jary 2005:153).

> *with a number of stereotypes, but it does not appear to be supported by anything more than circumstantial evidence. (Freudenburg 1982:144)*

If you fast-forward 26 years, the mobile workforce population, I argue, has remained over-stereotyped in the media and under-studied by academia. Below is an excerpt from the 2008 book, *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, written by Alberta journalist Andrew Nikiforuk. Nikiforuk (2008) writes:

> *Thursday and Sunday evenings are the worst. That's when the shifts change at the mines and thousands of workers return to their families and girlfriends in Edmonton. Most are exhausted; many are drugged on amphetamines or pissed to the gills. A lot of people won't drive at all on those days, particularly with children. They don't want to be remembered as another white cross decorated with a blue hard hat, an empty Russian vodka bottle or an overstuffed teddy bear along the roadside. (37-38)*

Mobile workers, in the text above, are portrayed as exhausted and careless substance abusers, who pose a fatal threat not only to families with children, but also to themselves. Even mobile workers have been known to contribute to and celebrate this deviant identity among their occupational group – as evidenced by the quote that follows. Below are lyrics from a song called "Rig Pigs Never Cry (The Alberta Dream)" that two workers in the Alberta Oil Sands wrote and posted on YouTube. Although the lyrics are imbued with humour and self-mockery, the level of pride in who and what they represent is evident:

> *I was born on Alberta dung, I smoke cigarettes like I've got four lungs*
> *As soon as I could drive a diesel rig, I took the 63 all the way up to Fort Mac*
> *Pink slips and DUIs, you know they took my truck but they can't take my pride,*
> *Cause rig pigs never cry (Mckerral and Befas 2011)*

While mobile workers are often perceived as deviant (and while some mobile workers exhibit deviant attitudes, behaviours, and practices), beneath this perceived and real

exterior of deviance, there are clear signs of vulnerability. For example, a report by Sheppell-fgi, the company that provides the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to workers in the Canadian oil and gas sector, reported that EAP access for alcohol dependency rose 481% between January 2006 and December 2008 – a period of time which marked the height of the economic boom in Alberta (Shepell-fgi Research Group 2009). In addition, crisis workers in Fort McMurray reported that there was a significant increase in suicides during the boom period of 2006-2008, predominately by men in the oil patch. In response to this disturbing trend, the crisis society in Fort McMurray developed the "Twisted, Mister?" program which ultimately seeks to dismantle the 'Big Boys Don't Cry' mentality and provides men with healthy outlets for coping with issues like stress, anger, pain, loneliness, and frustration. These vulnerabilities reveal a different 'face' of mobile workers and act as counter-stories to the grand narrative that mobile workers are intrinsically deviant.

Mobile Workers are Deviant, Mobile Workers are Vulnerable: Why it is an Important Area of Study

Within the Alberta Oil Sands, mobile workers are an over-stereotyped, under-researched, and increasing population. Studying mobile workers in this area, therefore, is a critical sociological undertaking for three key reasons.

First, mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands are driving extensive extra-local effects – both positive and negative ones. While income and employment opportunities offer a boost to family and community wellbeing, the extended time workers spend away from families and communities, due to shift-working schedules, can create considerable stress for all parties. In this way, mobile worker wellbeing – whether a worker has a high level

of wellbeing or a low level of wellbeing – has far-reaching impacts. For example, if one mobile worker has a family unit of three, then, given the current workforce numbers (39,000), approximately 120,000 individuals (which represents the size of a medium-sized city), would potentially be affected by the wellbeing of the mobile workforce population in the Alberta Oil Sands. Therefore, there is a critical need to better understand how the mobile work context affects worker wellbeing and, in particular, how worker wellbeing can be improved.

Second, how individuals 'see' or perceive other individuals or social groups matters. Becker's 'labeling theory' (1991) says that if a population (the mobile workforce) is perceived a certain way (deviant), they may tend to act according to this identity. Therefore, society's perception of mobile workers has real and interactional effects. Relatedly, how community residents perceive mobile workers can have real effects on how *they personally* feel and behave. A study by Brown, Dorius, and Krannich (2005), for example, found that local residents' negative perception of incoming workers led to "anticipatory shifts" in the residents' attitudes and behaviours even before the workers physically arrived in the community. This finding indicates that it is not necessarily the actual physical presence of workers that creates stress, but the negative thoughts and feelings toward this incoming population. Understanding whom mobile workers are, what shapes their attitudes, behaviours, and practices, and what they might need to improve their working and living conditions, I contend, can go a long way in influencing the types of social and health effects that are 'co-produced'.

Third, the danger of the single story also means that the deeper roots of issues, such as substance abuse, are not explored and opportunities for effecting positive change are not identified. When I describe my research to people, I am often met with comments such as, "Who cares about men in camps? They make loads of money, so who cares about their wellbeing?" Even during my university ethics committee meeting, in which I was seeking their approval to conduct my research, one committee member (representing the 'public at large'), not only expressed that she thought it was unsafe for a female researcher to be up in Fort McMurray, but she also stated that most of these men were illiterate and would not be able to read the information sheets and consent forms that I would be giving to them.

The general public discourse around men in camps is that they are young, single, uneducated, and have "money to burn", and because of this, are deviant. Or are they? Or are mobile workers' attitudes, behaviours, and practices also related to the stereotypes we circulate about them, and to the physical and social environments of the work camps that they inhabit? Adopting the former discourse – *mobile workers are deviant* – fails to recognize the varied identities of these workers. It also fails to identify what workers might need to improve their working and living conditions and thus potentially improve their attitudes, behaviours, practices, and, ultimately, their wellbeing. By opening up the dialogue to workers' counter-stories, we can begin to recognize the diversity of lived experiences and identities, begin to unpack the various challenges of the mobile work arrangement, as well as begin to identify opportunities for improving the physical and social conditions for these men (and women).

Even the prominent Canadian fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) researcher and geographer, Dr. Keith Storey, stated that little is known about what mobile workforce populations need in Fort McMurray. Dr. Storey, at the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) conference in Calgary, Alberta, in May 2013, remarked in his presentation: "Nobody ever asks the workers. We have to find better ways to accommodate the workers. We have to find ways to make sure the community doesn't bear the cost" (Storey 2013 pers. comm.).

Key Research Questions

My research problem involves the outdated notion of the boomtown, as well as the tendency for the general public to stereotype the mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands. This is problematic as the boomtown context has dramatically changed and as the mobile workforce remains an under-researched and growing population. To address this research problem, I propose three key research questions:

1. How can the traditional boomtown model be re-conceptualized so that it better represents the contemporary resource development context?
2. Who are the male mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands? That is, what are the varied lived experiences and identities of these men?
3. How does the mobile work arrangement affect the wellbeing of male mobile workers?

The next section describes the theories that I use to frame my understanding of the contemporary resource development context, worker identity, and worker wellbeing.

Part II: Theoretical Tools

In an effort to address the questions above, this section describes the theoretical tools or theoretical lenses that I employ within my research. To inform my understanding of the contemporary resource development context, I draw upon the ideas of a number of social theorists, such as Ulrich Beck's "new world of work" (Beck 1992, 2000), Richard Sennett's "corrosion of character" (Sennett 1998), and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" (Bauman 1997, 2005). For my theoretical understanding of identity, I primarily draw upon Robert Atkinson's "storied identity" (2007). Finally, to inform my understanding of wellbeing, I draw upon the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* model (Raphael et al. 1996, 1997). These theoretical lenses are described below.

Conceptualizing the New World of Work

A number of contemporary sociologists have written about the present economic and global era as predominantly characterized by risk and uncertainty, an era in which, for instance, traditional life-long job paths have been replaced with a guarantee of temporariness and insecurity (Beck 1992, 2000; Sennett 1998). Much of this critique centers on the rise of globalization, the new "flexible capitalism", and the implications these phenomena have for not only social organization, but also for personal identity. This area of investigation is not new, however. The relationship between work and self has been a central focus in sociological thinking since the discipline first emerged. The founding fathers of sociology, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, developed a number of important theories concerning work and an individual's sense of self. Concepts, such as Marx's alienated labour, Weber's bureaucratization and the disenchantment of the world, and Durkheim's anomic division of labour endure as

relevant and insightful concepts for sociologists today (McIntosh 1997). Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, work has been a primary source of identity, status, and power for men (Hearn 1992; Krahn, Lowe, and Hughes 2007). With the changing world of work, however, contemporary theorists have expanded upon these classical theories and have developed new ones – a few of which are relevant to the mobile work context. I describe these below.

Sennett's Corrosion of Character

Sociologist Richard Sennett, in his book, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), argues that the modern workplace, with its focus on short-term episodic labour, projects, and flexibility does not allow people to shape their experiences or construct a coherent narrative of their lives. Sennett (1998) explains, "The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives" (31). This inability to construct a whole out of a fragmented work-life contributes to what Sennett has termed "the corrosion of character". Essentially, Sennett (1998) theorizes that the evaporation of the 'long term' from peoples' lives "disorients action…loosens bonds of trust and commitment, and divorces will from behaviour" (31). While pessimistic about the present human condition, Sennett (1998) does outline three critical questions related to flexible capitalism and personal character that require further exploration:

> *How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually redesigned? (10)*

These questions, I think, are important ones to think about with respect to the industrial labour arrangement of mobile work. Another prominent social theorist who sees the world as becoming increasingly flexible or *fluid* is Zygmunt Bauman.

Bauman's Liquid Modernity, and Tourist & Vagabond Metaphor

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has been referred to as "a sociologist with a certain poetic or literary edge" (Jacobsen and Marshman 2008:798). Bauman uses a number of metaphors in his theorizing of 'the social'. Some of these metaphors include liquid modernity, the tourist, and the vagabond. Liquid modernity, Bauman explains, is used to describe a world that has changed so significantly that it can be thought of as having "melted" and, as a result, it no longer resembles its previous form. Bauman (2005) states, "Liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty" (2). This uncertainty is theorized to affect all facets of our lives: work, education, love, sex, etc.

According to Bauman, human actors in this new liquid life are constantly on the move, though for different reasons, and generally fall into one of two disparate identities: 'the tourist' or 'the vagabond'. Tourists are those individuals enjoying the 'good life', a life characterized by free choices and abundant opportunities – tourists are individuals who *choose* to be on the move (Jacobsen and Marshman 2008). In contrast, vagabonds "move because they find the world unbearably inhospitable" (Bauman 1997:2). Vagabonds essentially lack what the tourists possess: wealth, choice, and opportunity (Ibid).

These three metaphors by Bauman present another interesting and potential way to 'read' the life stories of mobile workers. On which end of the spectrum do mobile workers

position themselves? What types of conditions allow mobile workers to be tourists? What types of conditions reduce mobile workers to vagabonds?

In the next section, I describe the theoretical frame that I use for understanding identity.

Conceptualizing Self (Identity)

> **"Self:** A mental construction of the person, by the person, but inevitably formed from social experience. Thus the person sees him/herself reflected by others, in their reactions, and these are interpreted through the lattice of self-perception" (Jary and Jary 2005:547).

While the investigation of *subjectivity*, *self*, *self-identity* and *identity*[3] has had a long history within social theory (Collinson 2003), the individualized empirical self, or individual subjectivity, is still a relatively new phenomenon in Western history. As such, our contemporary selves and contemporary self-identities should be regarded as "a distinctive version of subjectivity" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:11).

The notion of 'self' or 'identity' that I am using as a guide is grounded in everyday experience and interaction, and is something that a storyteller actively and selectively constructs. Therefore, in terms of 'identity', I conceptualize it from the theoretical lens of 'storied identity'. That is, "…the identity that one has shaped, a glimpse of personality one has developed, the important interpersonal and social relationships one has formed, and a sense of one's values, beliefs, and worldview in the storyteller's own words"

[3] I use *self*, *self-identity* and *identity* interchangeably within this paper.

(Atkinson 2007:234). Trinh Minh-ha (1992) suggests that the notion of self-identity has shifted from the traditional question of: *Who am I?* – to a more progressive notion of identity: *When, where, and how am I?* In this way, my mobile workers' stories (supplemented with the contextually-enriching stories of key informants) represent first-person scripts of actively unfolding identities. In this way, I see identities as "open, negotiable, shifting and ambiguous" (Collinson 2003:534). These storied identities are also the basis from which I assess wellbeing.

Conceptualizing Wellbeing

In terms of wellbeing, I examine workers' subjective wellbeing – that is, workers' individual perceptions of their quality of life (Phillips 2006). I assess worker wellbeing both directly (or by what workers say) and indirectly (by themes that I identify within the interview data). For example, 'living the good life' is often implied, within our everyday discourse, as the ultimate measure of wellbeing (Vaillant 2012). While I directly asked my research participants if mobile work contributes to the living of 'the good life', I also recognize that 'the good life' is a highly individualistic notion; and, as Clifford Cobb (2000) states, "In order to measure quality of life, one must have a theory of what makes up a good quality of life" (6). Therefore, I also assess worker wellbeing by reading workers' stories through a specific quality of life framework.

Within my study, the concept of subjective wellbeing is informed by Raphael and colleagues' quality of life model: *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* (Raphael et al. 1996, 1997). This model defines subjective wellbeing or quality of life as "[t]he degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his/her life" (Raphael et al.

1997:120). I use the three domains (*Being, Belonging, and Becoming*) and their subdomains to operationalize 'wellbeing' within my research. That is, my interview questions related to worker wellbeing are grounded in the three wellbeing domains and subdomains. For example: Has the mobile work lifestyle affected your physical health? Has the mobile work lifestyle affected your stress levels or mental wellbeing? Has the mobile work lifestyle affected your ability to set and achieve goals? (See Appendix A for my *Mobile Worker Interview Schedule*.) These domains and subdomains are outlined below.

- **Being – *Who one is***
    - Physical being (physical health)
    - Psychological being (mental health); and
    - Spiritual being (personal values and personal standards of conduct).
- **Belonging – *Connections with one's environment***
    - Physical belonging (physical 'fit' with one's home, workplace, community); and
    - Social belonging (social connection to family, friends, and community).
- **Becoming – *Purposeful activities to express oneself, and achieve personal goals, hopes, and aspirations***
    - Practical becoming (achieving work goals, tending to health and social needs);
    - Leisure becoming (participating in activities that promote relaxation and stress reduction); and

- Growth becoming (engaging in activities that promote knowledge and skills; and adapting to change).

The next section presents my research methodology.

Part III: Methodology

> "Narratives cannot be suppressed in sociology because it is ineluctably tied to the human experience; trying to suppress it undermines the very foundations of the sociological enterprise" (Richardson 1990:124).

Narrative Research

Within the discipline of sociology, including rural and resource sociology, there has been a renewed interest in narrative research.[4] A number of sociologists have recognized, applied, and advanced the methodological strengths of the narrative approach (Berger and Quinney 2005; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Denzin 1989; Harris et al. 1995; Maines 1993; Plummer 2001; Richardson 1990). Narrative research is constituted by several key assumptions and principles: humans are story-telling animals (e.g., "Homo narrans"); the self is storied; stories integrate lives; stories are told in social relationships; stories change over time; and stories are cultural texts (McAdams 2008). Narrative research strives to help us understand the "complex personhood" or the inner world of an individual or how one thinks about his or her own experiences, situations, and problems (Gordon 1997:4). Narrative research also strives to elucidate the social and historical world that an individual inhabits, as well as to illuminate the causes and deeper meanings of relevant

[4] Narrative research is an expanding field and includes methodologies such as interpretive biography (Denzin 1989), the life story interview (Atkinson 1998; McAdams 2008), narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), storytelling sociology (Berger and Quinney 2005), autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis 2006), and narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

events, experiences, and conditions (Runyan 1984, cited in Lieblich et al. 1998). As McKee (1997) describes "a compelling story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, a best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence" (McKee 1997:12).

My Narrative Approach: A Blending of Narrative Inquiry and the Life Story Interview

I chose to take a 'narrative approach' within my research due to this methodology's distinct ability to investigate the human lived experience, to illuminate the complex inter-linkages of 'the personal' and 'the social', to allow individuals to actively construct their identities, and to project themselves and their lives into the future. My research, which explores the "anarchy of existence" for mobile workers, is uniquely informed by both narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007) and the life story interview (Atkinson 2007; Berger and Quinney 2005; Carr 1986). I 'blend' or draw upon specific aspects of narrative inquiry[5] and the life story interview to inform my overall research methodology. I describe these aspects, and the suitability of taking a 'narrative approach', below.

First, narrative inquiry and the life story interview are appropriate methodologies to draw upon as both seek to study the human lived experience. Specifically, I employ narrative inquiry's theory of experience to inform my understanding of the human lived experience within my research. In narrative inquiry, the concept of 'human lived experience' is

[5] The key ways in which my 'narrative approach' diverges from the pure form of narrative inquiry are two-fold. First, I expand the number of research participants from one to four in narrative inquiry to 34 in my narrative approach. Second, my narrative approach is less relational than traditional narrative inquiry, in that my contact with research participants was limited to one or two research interviews versus narrative inquiry in which research relationships develop over the span of one year or longer.

largely informed by the Deweyan theory of experience.[6] Drawing upon this theory, narrative scholars Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) define 'experience' in narrative inquiry as "a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment" (39). Within the whole of my thesis, and consistent with narrative inquiry, I also intertwine my own personal stories with that of my research participants to vividly reveal my social location; and, positioned alongside my research participants' stories, to contribute to an emergent story and meaning.

In terms of the life story interview, I draw primarily upon its unique structure and 'output'. The structure of the life story interview can help a research participant convey meaningful experiences from the past, the present, and an imagined future (Atkinson 2007). This is particularly helpful for my research as I investigate how a mobile worker's identity and wellbeing has been shaped and affected by the mobile work arrangement. During the interview, I specifically investigate a research participant's work life before becoming a mobile worker, his life as a mobile worker, and telescope out into the future to explore whether or not the mobile work lifestyle is a part of his future plans. The life story interview also has a particularly valuable 'output': the storied identity of an individual. That is, the life story interview provides research participants an opportunity to actively construct their identity through the telling of their experiences. Carr (1986) describes this identity-making process:

[6] John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educator, first introduced this theory on human lived experience in his book *Experience and Education* (1938) as a way to articulate his idea of 'progressive education'.

> *The unity of the self, not as an underlying identity but as a life that hangs together, is not a pregiven condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed, it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it. What we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others the story of what we are about and what we are. (97)*

In this way, the life story interview also provides individuals a channel for the telling of counter-stories. These counter-stories have the potential to both increase the awareness of certain conditions and to effect positive social change. For example, Atkinson (1998) describes:

> *The life story interview is one of the best ways of giving full voice to those who would not normally be heard, to those who might be at the margins of any number of communities, and those whose valuable insights and reflections would not otherwise come to light. (239)*

In practice, the life story interview is straightforward research tool that involves two basic steps. First, in the telling of the story, the researcher's task is to help the research participant – through open-ended and reflective questions – access his 'storehouse' of subjectivity and express himself through story. Eliciting a life story typically involves one to three one-hour interviews with each research participant. The product of a life story interview is basically a verbatim transcript, which has been rid of repetitions and irrelevant information. Text might also be reordered to ensure clarity of content and readability. The transcript is then often 'member checked' with the storyteller to make certain the 'authentic' author feels comfortable with the content and arrangement of text (Atkinson 2007). Second, in the reading and interpreting of the story's text, a researcher focuses on identifying themes, issues, and connections within and across stories. My data analysis approach is described in greater depth in the following section.

My Research Process

This section provides a detailed description of my research process: my ethics approval, methodological map, research setting, sampling method, research interview tool, research participants, and data analysis technique.

Ethics

I received ethics approval from the University of Alberta's Department of Sociology Research Ethics Board in February 2008; and from the Physical Education and Recreation, Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences, and Native Studies Research Ethics Board in May 2009.

Methodological Map

My study investigates the identities and lived experiences of mobile workers. During the interview, my research participants and I verbally visit many different sites, the sites in which he lives (home-sphere), commutes (commute-sphere), works and lives (work-camp-sphere). All of these sites (spheres) are embedded within the larger boom-sphere. My Boom-Sphere Model conceptually expands our understanding of the traditional boomtown and is centered specifically on the mobile worker and his trajectory and lived experience. It recognizes that the effects of a resource boom are not simply a *host community* phenomenon, and that these effects are experienced by mobile workers and across the various transportation networks (commute-sphere) and straight through to a worker's home community (home-sphere). All of these different sites, and the interrelationships or flows among these sites, synergistically produce a mobile worker's lived experience, and in storying this experience, his self-identity. My methodological map is based on the idea of multi-sited ethnography. Saukkow (2003) defines multi-sited

ethnography as "a practice of studying how any given phenomenon takes shape in and across multiple locales or sites" (177). (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of my methodological map or Boom-Sphere Model.)

Research Setting

My research setting was characterized by a major economic event: the global financial collapse and the boom-to-bust transition. In June 2008, oil hit a record price of $147 per barrel; then, in December 2008, the price of oil plunged to less than $40 per barrel (Khan 2009). While I originally developed my thesis proposal to examine the lived experiences of mobile workers during Alberta's unprecedented economic boom in early 2008, I found myself, in the summer and fall of 2009, interviewing mobile workers during Alberta's economic bust. In the first three months of 2009, the province lost 54,300 jobs; 14,900 of those jobs were lost in the month of March alone – and mostly in the construction and energy sectors (Audette, Gerein, and Henton 2009). In February 2009, CBC News reported that since the early fall of 2008, 16,000 of the 24,000 temporary mobile workers in the Fort McMurray area were not called back to work (CBC News 2009). While the economic and employment momentum of the Alberta Oil Sands has picked back up since the recession (Construction Sector Council 2013), the precariousness of the mobile workforce, during 2008-2009, was highly evident. This economic and social climate – from boom to bust – is important to consider in relation to my research findings.

Sampling Method

I conducted my interviews with mobile workers and other key informants. In terms of my sampling method, I located my mobile worker research participants via the snowball sampling technique. This technique is helpful for locating information-rich research

participants. Within this non-probability method of selection, it is assumed that members of the target population know each other and that this particular population is difficult to locate or contact in that the population is somehow "socially invisible" (Singleton and Straits 2005:138). Fittingly, the fluid nature of mobile workers and their intermittent presence within their work and home communities make these individuals partly socially invisible. I began my snowball sampling with developing a list of all my personal contacts who were working in the Fort McMurray area as mobile workers. I then asked these individuals if they could provide names and contact information of other mobile workers who were working in the Alberta Oil Sands. For my key informant interviews, I identified my research participants through local directories and Internet searches. I also asked these key informants to provide me with the names of other key contacts who could help to inform my research on mobile worker identity and wellbeing.

Research Interview Tool

For my mobile worker interviews, I used the life story interview as my research tool. The life story interview is an in-depth, semi-structured interview in which the researcher asks the research participant questions about his life – as it relates to the past, present, and future (Atkinson 2007). My interview questions centered on my research participant's process of becoming a mobile worker, living the mobile work lifestyle, and plans for the future (see Appendix A for my *Mobile Worker Interview Schedule*). For my key informant interviews, I used a semi-structured interview. My research questions were organized into four main areas: the research participant's professional role, mobile worker wellbeing, work culture and mobile worker identity, and mobile workers' experiences during the boom-to-bust transition (see Appendix B for my *Key Informant*

Interview Schedule). In total, between March 2008 and October 2009, I interviewed 16 mobile workers; I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 key informants (see Appendix C for the *Project Information Sheet* that each research participant received before the interview). Each interview lasted from one to three hours and all interviews were audio-recorded.

Research Participants

Overall, my mobile worker research participants came from a number of different provinces, from a variety of educational and family backgrounds, and were employed in various positions within the Alberta Oil Sands. While I did not specifically set out to interview only Caucasian workers, all of my mobile worker research participants were Caucasian males between the ages of 21 and 59 and all were Canadian residents. I also interviewed workers in different types of camp settings – from small- to large-scale camps, and from basic to executive camps. See Appendix D for a detailed overview of my mobile worker research participants: their age, level of educational attainment, the number of years as a mobile worker, the size and type of work camp that they lived in, and the date and location of the interview. To gain a more robust understanding of workers' experiences, I also interviewed 11 key informants in the helping profession, including: addictions counselors, a victim services coordinator, a crisis prevention worker, and men's outreach counsellors. Furthermore, I interviewed seven 'mobile work experts', including: a NAIT instructor, an industry consultant, a social planner, and a labour union representative. Additional background information on these key informants is also provided in Appendix D.

Data Analysis Technique

In terms of data analysis, there are a number of possibilities for reading, interpreting, and analyzing narratives. Lieblich et al. (1998) have identified two main and independent dimensions of the analysis of narratives: holistic versus categorical (this refers to the 'unit' of analysis); and content versus form (this refers to the focus of the analysis). For my first research question *(Who are mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands?),* I used a holistic-content approach in which I examined each worker narrative as a whole and interpreted the parts of the text within the context of the entire narrative. For my second research question *(How does the mobile work arrangement affect worker wellbeing?),* I used the categorical-content approach in which I coded each of the worker and key informant interview transcripts into pieces of text (codes) and placed these excerpts into various categories (emergent themes). For both of my research questions, I focused on the 'content' of these narratives (the meaning of the story and what happened and why) versus the 'form' (the structure of the plot, the sequence of events, the style of the narrative, etc.).

My data analysis process involved a number of steps. First, I personally transcribed each interview. Second, I employed a 'Thematic Analysis' approach to analyze my worker and key informant interview transcripts. Thematic Analysis (TA) is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006:6). For the TA approach, I followed six phases of analysis: 1. familiarizing oneself with the data (reading and re-reading, jotting down initial notes on potential codes); 2. generating initial codes – "codes" are defined as "the most basic segment, or element, of

the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis 1998:63); 3. searching for themes among codes; 4. reviewing and refining themes (and developing these themes into a thematic 'map' to check for internal consistency and external distinctiveness); 5. defining and naming themes (identifying the 'story' that each theme tells, and describing how this story fits in with the overall 'story' of the data); and 6. writing up the themes into a coherent story (Braun and Clarke 2006). While this section provided details on my research process, the next section focuses on the highly important details of my social location.

My Social Location

The researcher is an "instrument of inquiry" and "[d]eveloping oneself as an instrument entails an honest understanding of what one brings to an interpretive inquiry" (Piantanida and Garman 1999:140). Thus, a researcher's 'social location' – her values, experiences, and life roles – all shape the questions she asks, the influence she has on her research participants, the details she hears, and, ultimately, the thesis she writes. As such, it is important to make transparent one's social location within the introduction of a thesis.

Born and raised in north central rural Alberta, I am the daughter of a mobile working electrician. I have experienced many early morning goodbyes, with my Dad's duffel bags and lunchboxes packed, and his diesel idling in the gravel driveway. I also know the highway well. When I was 15, I personally experienced living in a work camp and then later in a motorhome during my summer-long job as flag person for a paving crew near Drumheller, Alberta. As a teenager, I also spent a number of summers staying in a

mobile camp setting with my Dad and brother, who were both truck drivers, as they paved numerous secondary highways in northern Alberta.

In my early career, and prior to commencing my thesis coursework and research, I spent three years as a researcher, first as an Environmental Scanning Researcher with the Department of Human Resources and Employment (Government of Alberta) and then as a Research Officer with the Canadian Forest Service (Government of Canada). In my position as a Research Officer with the federal government, I conducted an extensive amount of qualitative research on a variety of topics, including substance abuse in the boomtown setting of Hinton, Alberta. This substance abuse study was one of the catalysts that led me on the path to pursue graduate studies. In particular, it was my inability to access and interview the shadow population, which compelled me to make them the focal point of my graduate research.

While I conducted my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, the writing of my thesis has taken an extended amount of time due to a series of personal events in my life, which caused me to step away from my writing. During this extended time away from my thesis, I have been consistently engaged in assessing the impacts of resource development on human communities; and, because of this, my interest and knowledge in mobile worker identity and wellbeing has only increased. At present, the topic of mobile work remains acutely relevant; in fact, over the past three years (2010 to 2013), research related to mobile worker wellbeing has increased significantly – predominantly in Australia. Without skipping a beat, my thesis includes this recent and relevant literature alongside my own

primary research findings. In addition, my professional work experience in the field of health impact assessment (HIA) over the past two years has been invaluable in expanding my understanding of health in resource-based contexts, and, ultimately, for the thesis that you are about to read.

My Research and Methodological Rigor

> "Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility" (Morse et al. 2002:13).

Ensuring methodological rigor is vital to academic research. Methodological rigor within positivist research typically involves the measures of reliability and validity and is crucial to the building of new and robust theory and knowledge. However, much debate exists over how to measure rigor within qualitative research. This debate arises out of the fact that, epistemologically, qualitative research and quantitative research are distinct from one another. That is, qualitative research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm (i.e., reality is subjective and is socially constructed) and quantitative research is grounded in a positivist paradigm (i.e., reality is objective and can be measured). Given this epistemological divide, how should qualitative researchers assess the methodological rigor of their research projects?

The debate over establishing rigor in qualitative research is generally comprised of three competing perspectives. First, some scholars assert that qualitative research should be judged by the same standards as quantitative research; second, others charge that a different set of 'rigor' criteria is necessary for qualitative research; and, third, there are

those who question the appropriateness of evaluating the rigor of qualitative research via a set of standardized criteria (Rolfe 2006). For my thesis research endeavor, I align with the second perspective, and agree that assessing the rigor of a qualitative study requires a unique set of criteria.

A number of qualitative scholars have put forth a range of criteria for ensuring the overall soundness and methodological rigor of qualitative research (Creswell 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Morse et al. 2002; Piantanida and Garman 1999; Richards and Morse 2007). To ensure the methodological rigor within my thesis research, I primarily draw upon the widely accepted criteria set out by methodologists Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), rigor is not defined by reliability and validity, but by "trustworthiness". Their concept of "trustworthiness" involves four key aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within these four aspects, I also attend to narrative-specific measures of rigor. I outline my efforts in satisfying the measures of methodological rigor below.

The first criterion of Lincoln and Guba's "trustworthiness" is credibility. Credibility refers to the internal validity of the research or how well the description of the research fits with the lived experience or phenomenon under study. I satisfied this criterion via a number of ways. The first way I accomplished this was by developing strong rapport with my research participants, which then allowed them to tell their stories in an open and frank manner. In fact, I had known four of my mobile worker research participants for 10 years or longer. These long-term (though not necessarily 'close') relationships added to

the depth of my interviewing and to the depth of their stories. This depth in the researcher-research participant relationship is strongly encouraged within the narrative approach as a way to more fully understand and capture the human lived experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Interestingly, my research interviews with the other 12 mobile workers, who I had not known prior to the study, were also similar in nature to the known four, in that these 12 research participants were extremely open, sharing their experiences and emotions without reservation. Overall, I feel that my social location – being a female and the daughter of a mobile worker, and having had extensive qualitative research interview experience in a boomtown setting – was an advantage to me in my research and helped me to facilitate the building of rapport and trust with my research participants. I found that the mobile workers that I interviewed were genuinely grateful to be able to share their stories. Many of these men were reflecting on their mobile work lifestyle for the first time and the interview process appeared to be cathartic for them. In addition, I also interviewed individuals in the helping profession and mobile work experts to add to the richness of perspectives. These interviews yielded similar themes as my mobile worker interviews and thus helped to triangulate and validate my research findings. In narrative research, the concept of "verisimilitude" or "authenticity" is also a measure of the credibility or "truth value" of research; these two terms refer to the power of stories to evoke the vividness of the human lived experience (Berger and Quinney 2005). My research findings and my presentation of these findings in quotes and in stories capture the sense of immediacy and cleave closely to the lived experiences of my research participants, thus satisfying the credibility or "truth value" criterion.

The second criterion is transferability. Transferability refers to external validity or whether or not the research findings could be applied in a different context. Transferability within my study has been achieved by presenting a "thick description" of my study's setting (i.e., the Fort McMurray area), including the important economic event – the boom-to-bust transition – in which my research was situated. Appendix D also describes, in great detail, the demographic description of each research participant. Given this contextual information, a reader would then be able to judge whether or not my findings could be transferred to or 'fit' other specific research contexts.

The third criterion of trustworthiness is dependability or auditability. Dependability involves the researcher providing the reader with an ample amount of information so that the reader can determine the trustworthiness of the research findings and the researcher. With respect to the dependability of my research findings, I have provided a detailed description of my research methods and research questions, as well as detailed demographic information for each of my research participants and interview contexts. I have also triangulated my research findings among mobile workers, mobile work experts, and key informants in the helping profession. While I was the sole researcher who analyzed my data, this is the accepted protocol within narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry sees the stories that emerge in research as uniquely co-constructed by the research participant and the researcher; as such, it does not see inter-coder reliability as necessary or appropriate in legitimizing narrative research findings (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). With respect to the dependability of the researcher, I have been fully transparent with regards to my family background (growing up in a rural and resource-dependent family),

my professional background (my previous research experience in investigating substance abuse in a boomtown setting), as well as to the catalysts that incited me toward my specific research topic: the tragic bus and truck accident on Highway 28 on May 20, 2005 which killed six mobile workers and a bus driver, and my inability to access the significantly impactful shadow population in my previous boomtown research.

Furthermore, I fully acknowledge that my personal and professional background has, in part, influenced my research topic, research questions, and research findings. Lewis (2009) states, "Eliminating reactivity is virtually impossible, but the researcher must be aware of it and how it affects what is being observed" (12). In fact, I feel that my social location – the daughter of a mobile worker, a relatively young female in a male-dominated sphere, and my extensive amount of qualitative research experience in a boomtown setting – allowed me to create an open, empathetic, and unintimidating or 'safe' space for research participants to tell their stories. The goal of my thesis research – to dispel the stereotypes of male mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands and to reveal the actual face of workers and their varied lived experiences – was motivated not only by my academic curiosity and by the major gaps in the boomtown literature, but also by my compassion for those men experiencing challenges with the mobile work lifestyle.

The fourth and final criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability relates to how well the researcher demonstrates how the findings and conclusions have been reached. Confirmability has been achieved through the detailed description of my data

analysis approach, via my clear and detailed identification of themes, and via the logic of my conclusions.

Part IV: The Organization of My Thesis

My thesis is structured around two main papers, four 'narrative threads', and a concluding chapter. Paper One, "From Boomtown to Boom-Sphere: Reconceptualizing the Boomtown Concept for Fort McMurray, Alberta", which comprises Chapter Two, centers on 'the social' aspect of the contemporary resource development context. Paper One offers a fresh reading of the social dynamics at play within the contemporary boomtown context via innovative social theories related to the new world of work and liquid modernity. Paper Two, "Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands", which comprises Chapter Three, 'zooms in' to the personal lived experiences of mobile workers and examines how the mobile work arrangement affects worker identity and wellbeing. In my final chapter, Chapter Four, "Activating the Sociological Imagination", I integrate the findings of the two main papers and describe how these findings facilitate a greater understanding of the linkages between public issues and personal troubles within the Alberta Oil Sands context.

As described above, my research methodology is informed by a narrative approach. Therefore, also creatively threaded throughout my thesis are my own personal stories as they relate to mobile workers, as well as workers' stories. I term these stories 'narrative threads'. In this way, an emergent story and meaning are co-constructed by both the research participants and the researcher (myself). These narrative threads are also meant to: bring to life my social location for the reader, reinforce the novel themes emerging

from the research, and encourage the reader to engage in a three-way dialogue of experience (the nexus at which the researcher's, the research participant's, and the reader's own personal stories all meet).

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Part VII: Narrative Thread 1. My Catalyst – "Boom. Crash. Burn."

Narrative Thread One elucidates my early connection to and thinking about mobile workers. I wrote the story, "Boom. Crash. Burn." in May 2005 – shortly after a devastating truck and bus accident occurred on Highway 28. It was shift-change Thursday in the Alberta Oil Sands and the bus was full of mobile workers traveling home to Edmonton from Fort McMurray. The accident took place approximately seven kilometers away from my parent's home – or a short 10-minute drive. It is a very familiar stretch of highway for me, having travelled it thousands of times to and from school, and to and from my home in the City of Edmonton. It is also the main highway that connects central Alberta to Highway 63 – the major single-lane highway that heads north up to Fort McMurray, Alberta. This accident, which claimed the lives of six male mobile workers and the woman driving the bus, was one of the key catalysts that ignited my interest in studying the wellbeing of mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands.

*

Boom. Crash. Burn.

Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!

A black Diversified Transport bus traveling from Fort McMurray to Edmonton on Highway 28 grinds to a full stop. Half a kilometer ahead, a RCMP cruiser's blue and red lights dizzily illuminate the night sky. Two vehicles, visible by the red glow of their taillights, lie on their sides like crushed juice boxes on a sidewalk.

Three men aboard the bus wake quickly.

"Aw, shit, an accident. Road's completed blocked."

"We can't waste our time out here! Bypass it! Bypass it!"

"Turn the bus around! Take Coronado Road!"

The bus driver, a woman in her 50s, gets flustered. She yanks the steering wheel in haste, struggling to maneuver the bus amid the blaring darkness. Her sharp tugs on the wheel and frustrated punches on the gas erroneously position the bus perpendicular to the highway. Its back tires slump off the curb and sink into the muddy shoulder.

"Aw, no way!"

"*Son-of-a-bitch!"*

"*Oh man, we're stuck.*"

The other forty passengers aboard the bus emerge sluggishly from their half-conscious slumbers. It is May 20, 2005, at 12:01 a.m. Four and a half hours ago the men, most of them electricians and pipefitters, had just finished a 21-day, 12-hours-per-day stretch in the industrially bleary landscape of Fort McMurray's oil sands. Muscles tight, mouths dry, and eyes heavy, a number of them pile out of the bus to have a couple drags on what will be their last cigarettes.

A sleek black Kenworth pulling stacks of dense and earthy peat moss and headed to Edmonton thunders down Coronado hill, one kilometer behind the bus. The Kenworth's weary operator notices some taillights in the distance but does not see the bus, which sits camouflaged by the dark night, spanning the width of the asphalt.

Kabooooooom!

The truck smashes into the backend of the bus and sets it spinning in delirious motion – the bus skids over the warm asphalt and plows into the cool grass of the ditch – striking four men dead. The smell of metal grinding on metal, smoldering rubber and suffocated cigarettes infiltrates the air.

Abrupt screams. Sobbing. Shock.

***

Stephen Joseph Batherson **(**age 56**),** William Carl Ingram (53), John Daniel Hernon **(**54), and Steve Raymond Wallis **(**42) were killed instantly at the scene. Hugh Kiernan (65) and Andrezay Daszuta (47) died next day in hospital, the bus driver died a week later, and another twelve passengers were treated for serious injuries.

Shortly after the devastating accident, Albertans found numerous people to blame. Some Albertans pointed their fingers at Alberta Transportation, *They need to twin Highway 28*. Meanwhile, a number of Albertans stuck the blame on the truck driver for careless driving, *How could you not see a full-sized bus right there in front of you*? Others faulted the bus driver for trying to turn the bus around at the bottom of a hill, *What the hell was she thinking*?, whereas some criticized the RCMP for doing a shoddy job of directing traffic, *Why wasn't an RCMP officer out there directing traffic? It was pitch dark in the middle of nowhere*! There were even those Albertans who said the six men, whose graves now mark the site of the accident, were in the wrong for vacating the bus to have a cigarette. *What it boils down to is a safety issue. Those men should have never exited the bus; they should have never been standing on the side of the road at twelve in the morning*.

Every time I try to pinpoint the cause, the impetus of this tragedy, my mind gets sucked into a kind of a vortex with the blame residing somewhere among the semi-excited, semi-anxious energy whirling about the province: the incessant flow of goods, people, and money up and down our highways. The May 20th crash on Highway 28, I believe, is a symptom of something larger – the frenzied race to extract, process, and export the thick gooey mass we call the oil sands. In this mad rush of the oil boom, societal costs are huge, yet go largely unaddressed.

Traffic accidents are one such cost. Highway 63, the exclusive single lane route to Fort McMurray's oil sands, ruefully boasts the most vehicle deaths per kilometer in Canada.

Most deaths involve oil sands workers – oil riggers, pipefitters, welders, millwrights, electricians and general labourers.

"I don't even want to travel on 63 anymore. It's ridiculous. You see these assholes speeding to Fort Mac, blowing by you at 160 clicks and you wonder how long until they crash, how long until they burn," says my Dad when I ask him what his commute is like to Fort McMurray.

My Dad is an electrician and works in Fort McMurray. He worked closely with a couple of the men who were killed in the bus accident. "It's a shame, it's such a damn shame. I just saw Hugh that morning. He was beat and said to me, '*You know what, Mel? I am just too freaking old to be doing this shit anymore*.' And I said to him, '*You and me both*.'"

Foreword to Chapter 2

In the opening chapter of *Work in Tumultuous Times: Critical Perspectives* (2007), a well-known Canadian sociologist, Wallace Clement, underscores the importance of integrating the theoretical, methodological, and substantive within social science research. Clement instructs researchers to specify what is to be foregrounded and what is to be backgrounded in their research programs and goes on to state that "investigations without a foundation of theory and method result in mere description or assertion, not scholarship" (Clement 2007:32). Chapter Two (Paper One) mainly serves a theoretical purpose. Its purpose is to describe my research context – the Fort McMurray area – and in doing so, build the foundation of theory which I see underlying, situating, and animating the human actors within my study. While the 'human actors' within my study (and focal point of my thesis) are male mobile workers from various parts of Canada, this specific paper focuses on the larger research context in which these human actors are embedded. The attention to my research context in Chapter Two sets the stage for a greater understanding of my theoretical interpretation of worker narratives in Chapter Three.

Chapter 2: The Social. "From Boomtown to Boom-Sphere: Reconceptualizing the Boomtown Concept for Fort McMurray, Alberta"

Part I: Introduction – Conceptualizing my Research Context

> *Thursday and Sunday evenings are the worst. That's when the shifts change at the mines and thousands of workers return to their families and girlfriends in Edmonton. Most are exhausted; many are drugged on amphetamines or pissed to the gills. A lot of people won't drive at all on those days, particularly with children. They don't want to be remembered as another little white cross decorated with a blue hard hat, an empty vodka bottle, or an overstuffed teddy bear alongside the roadside. (Nikiforuk 2008:37-38)*

The sociological study of boomtowns and the social disruption caused by the rapid influx of workers into a community is nearly a century old. Despite the vastly different social milieus characterizing life in resource-based communities across North America, overall, the meaning and application of boomtown concepts have remained relatively static. In general, boomtown researchers, popular media, and the larger public continue to apply the term "boomtown" to any rapid resource development context without question. In addition, people generally continue to perceive temporary oilfield and construction workers as the "folk devils" or as the all-pervasive source of social disruption within boomtown settings (as illustrated by the excerpt above).

My aim in this paper is to delve into the changes within the social milieu of rapid resource development contexts and, with an awareness of these changes, challenge the traditional understanding of the boomtown and the source of social disruption. To accomplish this, I focus on one case example: the modern-day 'boomtown' of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada.

Via the Fort McMurray case example, I re-conceptualize the boomtown concept by using contemporary social theories of modernity, work, and place. Based on this new theoretical frame, and upon emerging literature related to moral panics, I offer a fresh reading of the social dynamics at play within the contentious 'us versus them' or the 'we-they' split that commonly occurs between locals and newcomers in boomtowns. Ultimately, through this re-conceptualization, I submit that it is imperative to re-visit the traditional notion of the boomtown and re-examine the nature of social disruption within modern-day boomtowns, recognizing the effects that globalization is having within rapid resource development settings.

This paper is organized into five sections. First, I explore the rural and urban dimensions of my research context and introduce its well-known descriptor: the boomtown. Second, in light of the recent debates around what constitutes 'the rural', and in light of the unprecedented size and global connections of my research context, I problematize the boomtown concept for Fort McMurray, Alberta. Third, I attempt to transcend the "conceptual struggle" of providing an accurate and meaningful definition for my study site by presenting a new theoretical frame through which to view the Fort McMurray area. I term this new theoretical frame the 'boom-sphere'. In the fourth section, and within this new theoretical frame, I revisit the concept of a boomtown and the nature of social disruption in boomtowns. Through this exercise, I illustrate why the 'us versus them' phenomenon can no longer be attributed to social disruption on merely the local level, and why we need to 'zoom out' and take into account how globalization is affecting the social relations within resource-based communities. In the fifth and final

section, I extrapolate from my research study site to the wider field of rural sociology, and propose a reconceptualization of the way we define and understand modern-day boomtowns – a reconceptualization which acknowledges the extra-local forces at play, and the new modernity which, arguably, animates our the lives.

My Research Setting

Fort McMurray was first established as a Hudson's Bay Company trading post in 1870. The first oil sands activities began in the area in the early 1900s, with Alcan Oil Company and Abasands Oil. Since that time, the region has experienced massive growth in the oil sands industry and a significant increase in population. In the last decade alone, the cumulative investment in the oil sands has surpassed $100 billion. In 2012, the total regional population was 116,407, including a mobile workforce population of 39,271 (Arcand et al. 2012; Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo [RMWB] 2012a).

The Fort McMurray area, which I define as the community of Fort McMurray and its outlying region (the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the Alberta Oil Sands, the project work sites, and work camps), is an area of multiplicities – in terms of its social character and reputation, and geographical and political boundaries.

First, the Fort McMurray area holds a reputation of both great prosperity and great notoriety. On one hand, the Alberta Oil Sands is touted as being one of the largest oil development projects in the world and the 'economic engine of Canada'. In fact, over the next 25 years, the Oil Sands are expected to generate 456,000 direct and indirect jobs and $1.7 trillion in economic activity across the country (The Oil Sands Developers Group

and Alberta Chamber of Resources 2011). People travel from all over the country to Fort McMurray to capitalize on the employment and income opportunities, and many residents that I interviewed expressed a great sense of pride in the community that they live in and the northerly landscape that surrounds them. On the other hand, the Fort McMurray area is notoriously known around the world as the source of "Canada's dirty oil," "the apex of disaster capitalism" (Klein 2011), and "the scar sands" – as the ecological impact of mining for bitumen is so staggering that it can be seen from space (Gillespie 2008). The water adviser to the United Nations, Maude Barlow, has even referred to the Alberta Oil Sands as "Mordor" – a fictitious land of darkness and evil – from J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings* (Saskatoon Star Phoenix 2008).

Second, the Fort McMurray area also has many geographical dimensions. How does one accurately define, using terms from the disciplines of geography and rural sociology, the Fort McMurray area? As I set out to conceptually define the Fort McMurray area, the task proved to be difficult. Is it urban? Is it rural? Is it a resource hinterland? Is it a boomtown? Or is it all of these things combined, and in need of a new concept to accurately and meaningfully define its emergent character? The Fort McMurray area is indeed, to quote geographer Paul Cloke, "a site of conceptual struggle" (Cloke 2006:18).

The descriptor that perhaps trumps all other descriptors for the Fort McMurray area is 'Fort McMurray, the boomtown'. However, to avoid losing sight of other concepts that can apply to the Fort McMurray area, and to help unpack the taken-for-granted term

'boomtown', I explore the concepts of 'rural versus urban' and 'resource hinterland' below.

If we think about the Fort McMurray area through the theoretical lens of the 'rural-urban continuum', then where would it fall? The rural-urban continuum sees communities falling along a rural to urban spectrum; that is "rather than a simple contrast between rural and urban communities, there exists a gradation of types of community in terms of their size, density of population, extent of division of labour, isolation, sense of community solidarity, rates of social change, etc." (Jary and Jary 2005:533).

On one hand, the community of Fort McMurray, with a population of 72,944, would be classified as 'urban' (as its official designation as an 'urban service area' denotes) (RMWB 2012a). On the other hand, due to its northern and remote location, my research findings suggest that Fort McMurray somewhat elides this 'urban' designation. Many local residents described that due to factors such as its rugged landscape, resource-based nature, and geographical isolation[7], Fort McMurray feels more like a big, bustling town (with major infrastructure deficits) than a full-fledged city. Also contributing to its 'rural-feel' is the larger political jurisdiction in which Fort McMurray is embedded: the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). The Municipality, which covers a vast 68,454 square kilometers, is home to an additional 10 small communities (many of which are Aboriginal communities), with the collective population of these communities totaling 4,192 persons (RMWB 2012a). In addition to the roughly 77,000 people living

[7] The nearest major metropolitan centre of over one million persons to Fort McMurray is Edmonton, Alberta. It is approximately a one-hour flight or a 5-hour drive from Fort McMurray to Edmonton.

in the Fort McMurray area permanently, there exists another distinct though temporary population: the mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands. These mobile workers, comprised of 39,271 individuals from all over Canada (RMWB 2012b), live mainly in remote work camps, which are scattered throughout the Alberta Oil Sands region. Therefore, based on the region's varied population densities and its northern location, the Fort McMurray area exhibits both 'urban' and 'rural' dimensions. Or, would a more accurate descriptor for the Fort McMurray area be a resource hinterland: "a source of natural resources, raw materials and labour-power that is essential to the economic well-being of a nation" (Dunk 1991)?

My research study site could be described in many different ways, such as falling along a point on the rural-urban continuum or as a resource hinterland. However, I focus on and problematize the 'boomtown' descriptor in the next section.

The Traditional Notion of the Boomtown

The boomtown concept first emerged in the late 1800s to describe the rapidly expanding frontier towns across North America. Dawson City, Yukon – the site of the famous Klondike Gold Rush – is one colourful example of an early northern boomtown (Coates and Morrison 2005; Poynter 1979). The quintessential boomtown conjures up images of a bustling roads and streets, brimming with opportunity, young men, free-flowing money, liquor, and deviance. Concentrated academic study of boomtowns, however, roughly began after the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973-74. During this time, there were significant incentives for domestic energy extraction and production. These incentives spurred on the construction of several major resource development projects and caused rapid growth

in neighbouring communities. Davenport and Davenport (1980), two early boomtown researchers in the United States, define a boomtown as:

> *A community experiencing above average economic and population growth, which results in benefits for the community, e.g., increased employment opportunities, but which also places or results in strain on existing community and societal institutions, e.g., familial, educational, political, economic. (43)*

One popular idea emerging out of boomtown studies is the theory of 'social disruption'. Social disruption refers to the weakening of social ties and "loss of traditional routines and attitudes" in boomtown contexts (England and Albrecht 1984:231). The theoretical basis of 'social disruption' is informed by the rural-urban continuum theory, which assumes that a community is 'rural' in nature before the onset of a boom. Burdge, Field, and Wells (1994) further describe this continuum:

> *Communities were placed along this scale depending upon the degree to which urban and rural characteristics were identified. The influx of outsiders due to development was presumed to move the community toward the urban end of that continuum. Although not explicitly stated in the SIA literature, rural values, social structure and lifestyles were presumed to dominate in isolated areas. The impact event was seen as leading to a more urban type of social organization. (165)*

Boomtown literature states that one of the consequences of social disruption is 'boomtown bifurcation', or a 'we-they' split. Davenport and Davenport (1980) list a number of dichotomies that might emerge such as "oldtimer versus newcomer; rural versus urban; young versus old, and westerner versus easterner" (44). Further, they describe these dichotomies as having a multitude of contributing factors, including value

differences amongst the divided populations, as well as changes in the socioeconomic hierarchy of the community due to the influx of new economic opportunities and people (Davenport and Davenport 1980).

Implicit within boomtown research and social impact assessment literature is the community-centered perspective of change. Typically, social scientists within these fields ask the following key questions: How does Project 'X' affect the local community? How does the influx of temporary construction and resource workers affect local residents? While the purpose of these questions is clear (to determine social and economic impacts of a resource development project on a community), a more fundamental question remains: Is the traditional concept of the boomtown – a concept that is underpinned by the theory of the rural-urban continuum – and one which focuses specifically on community- and local-level impacts, still an applicable concept in contemporary resource development contexts, in which globalizing forces are predominately at play? In other words, if one assumes, for example, that incoming workers could threaten what constitutes a 'normal' rural quality of life and set of rural characteristics, without verifying the present-day accuracy of these 'norms', the social impacts observed may be misattributed to specific elements of the new development. In the section that follows, I attempt to illustrate why the traditional boomtown concept is problematic for Fort McMurray by drawing on new theories of modernity, work, and place.

Part II: Problematizing the Boomtown

When I chose my research study site, I knew that the boomtown of Fort McMurray was in fact much more than what had been described in the boomtown literature to date. The traditional notion of the boomtown is problematic for the Fort McMurray context for two key reasons: first, due to the changing notions of 'the rural'; and, second, due to the unprecedented magnitude of the Alberta Oil Sands.

Recent Debates over 'The Rural'

What was once simply referred to as 'the rural' has recently come under critical examination and redefinition by rural and urban scholars alike. In fact, 'rural', which had been long held as the unproblematic opposite to 'urban', has now become "a site of conceptual struggle" (Cloke 2006:18). Halfacree (2006) writes that there is no consensus – either at the official, cultural, or popular level – on what constitutes rural or 'non-urban spaces'. The quandary of 'What is rural?' has arisen largely due to advanced capitalism and the subsequent economic and social restructuring within non-urban spaces. As such, no longer is 'the rural' necessarily remote – statically resting along the periphery – and sparsely populated (Hoggart and Paniagua 2001). Marini and Mooney (2006) assert that understanding this new rural space requires a political economy approach; that is, an approach that takes into account the space's political and economic linkages to national and international spheres. Given this global reach into the local, they declare that "there is no longer any space or place that can be or should be understood, meaningfully, as distinctly rural" (Marini and Mooney 2006:92). If no spaces or places can be considered wholly 'rural', then what does this say about the people that inhabit these areas?

Mormont (1990) argues that rural society and rural space can no longer be "welded" together, but that the line between urban and rural societies has become increasingly blurred. The problematizing of 'What is rural?', therefore, calls for the critical scrutiny of concepts which have their basis in 'the rural', such as the boomtown. Given the blurriness of the rural, how does one begin to study it? And what implications does our new understanding of 'rural' space have for the boomtown concept? Cloke (2006) provides us with a simple framework for studying complex and dynamic rural spaces; and, by extension, a framework for studying boomtowns. Cloke (2006) states that there are actually two distinct tracks of change in rural spaces – the theoretical and the material:

> *…it is important to emphasize that understandings of rurality are influenced by twin tracks of changing perspectives – not only do we need to survey how different theoretical frames illuminate very different pictures of rurality (and indeed steer rural research down very different pathways) but we also need to be fully aware of the (sometimes rapidly) changing conditions of rural life, rural place, and rural political economy which together constitute important shifts in the material manifestation of rurality. The changes occurring in rural areas themselves are such that even a consistent theoretical frame will need to cope with considerable dynamism within its rural subject. (18)*

Within the scope of this paper, I take up both of these tracks of changing perspectives for the Fort McMurray area. The first track that I describe is the changing material dimensions of the boomtown under study: Fort McMurray, Alberta. I take up the second track – the new theoretical frame that I apply to my study site – in section three and then describe the implications this particular theoretical frame has for the traditional boomtown concept.

The Material and Temporal Dimensions of the Boomtown of Fort McMurray

The Alberta Oil Sands and the Fort McMurray area surpass the typical parameters of 'the boomtown' found in earlier texts, in terms of: 1. the scale of the oil sands development; 2. the size of its workforce; and 3. the temporal dimension or projected 'life' of its resource projects. First, with oil sands deposits covering an area of 140,200 square kilometers, the scale of present and future oil sands development is unprecedented (Oil Sands Developers Group and Alberta Chamber of Resources 2011). In fact, in a speech in 2006, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper described the mining of the Alberta Oil Sands deposits as "an enterprise of epic proportions, akin to the building of the pyramids or China's Great Wall, only bigger" (Wells et al. 2012). While this statement appears a bit exaggerated, the magnitude of the Alberta Oil Sands needs to be appreciated. That is, unlike traditional boomtown communities, there is not just one resource development project that is the focal point of concern; there are 114 active oil sands projects in the Fort McMurray area and more being proposed (Alberta Government 2014). In an attempt to capture the staggering magnitude and uncertainty of the environmental and social impacts of the Alberta Oil Sands development, social scientists have begun to put forth new terminology to describe the Alberta Oil Sands, such as 'gigaproject', 'teraproject', and 'megaprogram' (Joseph and Gunton 2010). Second, the size of the mobile workforce in the Alberta Oil Sands is significantly larger than the mobile workforces of earlier boomtowns. At 39,271 workers (RMWB 2012a), the Alberta Oil Sands workforce is similar in size to that of a small-sized Alberta city. In fact, the mobile workforce alone makes up 33.7% of the RMWB's total population and has increased from 23,325 in 2010 to 39,271 in 2012 (RMWB 2012b). The nature of the workforce involved in the mining

of the Alberta Oil Sands also differs from that of the traditional boomtown. That is, there is not just one largely visible and homogenous group of temporary workers coming into a centralized camp and placing stress on the community. Instead, there is a hypermobile, exceeding large (and difficult to measure) workforce, commuting to Fort McMurray from across Canada and all over the world. These workers are scattered throughout the Fort McMurray area – in work camps of various sizes, hotels, motels, camping sites, and private (and often illegal) suites within the community (Haan 2010). Third, another dimension of the Fort McMurray area which distinguishes it from a traditional boomtown is its temporal dimension. Typically boomtowns have a shorter temporal period of three to 10 years; in this case, the Alberta Oil Sands is estimated to contain roughly 170 billion barrels of recoverable bitumen, which would theoretically be enough to produce three million barrels per day for the next 150 years (Government of Alberta 2009).

As illustrated above, Fort McMurray does not fit the parameters of a traditional boomtown. In addition, from the three unique parameters of the Fort McMurray area – the scale of the Oil Sands development, the size and nature of the workforce, and the temporal scope – there emerges a fourth distinct characteristic of the Fort McMurray area: its social impact zone. That is, to adequately discuss the oil sands development in the Fort McMurray area, it is not enough to just talk about the social impact zone as the community of Fort McMurray and its residents. I propose that we need to expand our concept of the social impact zone to the spaces in which these workers live, work, and move. I contend that the boomtown effect extends beyond the community's borders into the various-sized work camps scattered throughout the Boreal forest, down the network

of transportation routes connecting workers to Fort McMurray and back to camp. And, arguably, the boomtown effect extends to the mobile workers' home communities within Alberta and within other provinces across Canada, where many families and communities are adjusting to the long-term absences of spouses, fathers, sons, and friends.

For the scope of my research, I visualize the borders of the 'boomtown area' under study as extending beyond just the host community of Fort McMurray. Figure 1 presents a visual of this new boomtown concept, which I refer to as the Boom-Sphere Model.

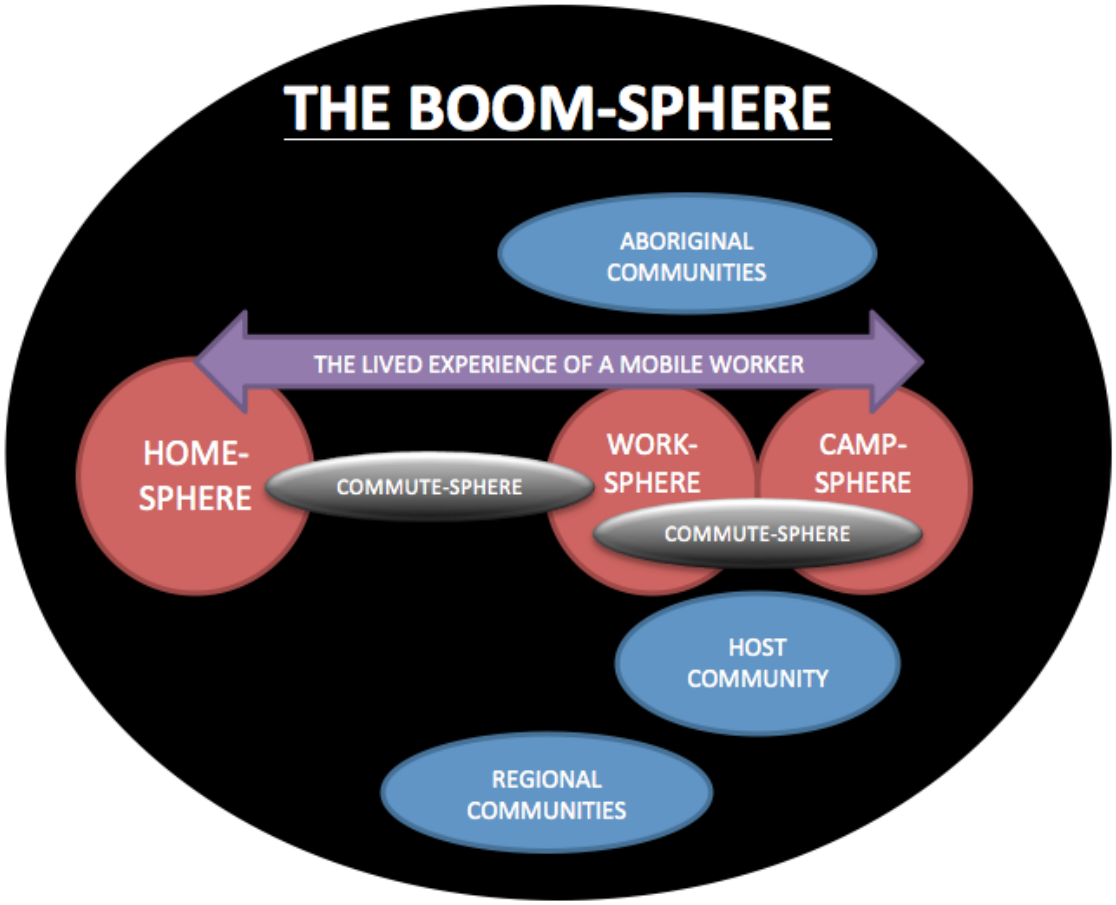

Figure 1. The Boom-Sphere Model

Unlike the traditional boomtown concept, which is grounded in a host community perspective and focuses on how a resource project could potentially affect the adjacent host community residents, the Boom-Sphere Model is grounded in the mobile worker's perspective and trajectory and focuses on the way in which resource projects, economic booms, and the mobile work arrangement affects mobile worker wellbeing and how this can, in turn, potentially affect the different spheres within the boom-sphere. The model also shows that boomtown effects, as they relate to worker wellbeing, have the potential to be widely distributed across the boom-sphere due to worker mobility. Via the model, one can see how low levels of worker wellbeing can potentially negatively affect the work-camp-sphere, the commute-sphere, and the home-sphere – three spheres that have generally been overlooked within present-day social and health impact assessment. In this way, the Boom-Sphere Model underscores the need to focus on improving mobile worker wellbeing due to the implications it can have for not only mobile workers, but also for other individuals within the boom-sphere, such as those residing in the host community, the neighbouring Aboriginal communities, and the regional communities.

The Boom-Sphere Model includes the social-physical area of: the numerous work sites and work camps scattered throughout the Alberta Oil Sands (the work-camp-sphere); the transportation networks which handle the flow of workers (the commute-sphere); the workers' home spaces, which include their households and communities (the home-sphere); the host community of Fort McMurray; the neighbouring Aboriginal communities; and the surrounding regional communities. The Boom-Sphere Model presents a more global and expansive way of thinking about boomtowns, the distribution of boomtown effects (which includes boomtown effects on workers themselves), and the extent of the social impact zone. In the Boom-Sphere Model, the social impact zone includes all spheres and communities within the boom-sphere. The purpose of the Boom-Sphere Model is to provide a new *mental* mapping of the boomtown space, one which accounts for the mobile workforce population. But how does one begin to theoretically conceptualize this social-physical area?

Part III: The Contemporary Boomtown Context of Fort McMurray, Alberta

> "Thinking sociologically is a way of understanding the human world that also opens up the possibility for thinking about the same world in different ways" (Bauman and May 2001:5).

The conceptual struggle over rurality, as explicated above, signals a need for a new theoretical lens in viewing rural spaces. While the cultural turn in rural studies has opened up new and exciting opportunities for thinking about what is 'rural,' such as "an emergent emphasis on the mobilities and fluidities (rather than fixities) of rural life and landscape" (Cloke 2006:23). In this section, I assemble a theoretical frame to help bring to light the mobilities and fluidities of the Fort McMurray boom-sphere, which I argue, are both giving rise to a new rurality and to a new notion of a boomtown. I enter the boomtown or boom-sphere through the eyes of a mobile worker; this unique vantage point opens up a new understanding of the boom-sphere/boomtown context. I explore three important and interconnected dimensions for mobile workers – modernity, work, and place – and develop a new theoretical frame for understanding the Fort McMurray area.

This new theoretical frame serves to 'see' Fort McMurray in a new light and thus reinvigorate our thinking about the traditional boomtown, the sources of social disruption and the distribution of boomtown effects. The assembly of this theoretical frame also introduces new terminology; this enables me to identify phenomena that would otherwise

remain obscured by outmoded terms or 'zombie categories'.[8] Drawing on a number of different theorists to construct this theoretical frame, I first describe modernity and work, and then I describe new understandings of place.

Modernity and Work

Modernity is an astounding concept to grasp. Emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries, modernity can be understood as "a replacement of traditional society by modern social forms" (Jary and Jary 2005:395-96). These emerging social forms include the rise of nation states, capitalism, mass media, faith in science, and large-scale industrial enterprise (Mautner 2005:397). Thus, modernity is multifaceted and has been variously described. In recent decades, innovative social thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck propose that a new modernity is now upon us. Giddens (1991) labels the new modern character of our times as 'high modernity', emphasizing its dynamism and theorizing its relation to self-identity. It is Bauman's account of modernity – 'liquid modernity' – and Ulrich Beck's 'risk society,' which I draw upon for my theoretical frame.

Bauman writes about both 'liquid life' and 'liquid modernity'. He defines 'liquid life' as "a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society"; that is, "a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines" (Bauman 2005:1). Therefore, "Liquid life

[8] Ulrich Beck coined the term 'zombie categories' in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford on 3 February 1999. Zombie categories are defined as categories which as 'dead but still alive'; such as the family, class, and neighbourhood (Bauman 2007:32).

is a precarious life, lived under the conditions of constant uncertainty" (Bauman 2005:2). In this way, Bauman (2000) describes that:

> "Individuals in liquid modernity therefore experience insecurity of position, entitlements and livelihood, uncertainty as to their continuation and future stability, and unsafety of their body, self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood and community" (161).

While the condition of insecurity is not new to the history of humankind, Bauman contends what is new is that almost *everyone* is now significantly influenced by insecurity. To understand the new modernity with respect to work, for instance, Bauman contrasts liquid modernity with its predecessor: 'heavy modernity'. While the heavy modern period saw capital and labour as mutually dependent and firmly entrenched in one place for the long term, the liquid modern era sees capital and labour as highly mobile entities and loosely bound under a new short-term mentality (Bauman 2001). As a result, with liquid modernity, lifelong employment with one company has been replaced by individuals engaged in short-term, episodic labour contracts with many companies. The ephemerality of work and the shifting place of work, consequently, affect worker–workplace ties. The examples Sennett (1998) and Beck (2000) use to illustrate the insecurity of paid work relate to the frequent mergers, and the way in which technology replaces jobs or outdates skill sets, the trend of mass layoffs, employment insecurity, and accompanying mobility; many of these examples apply to the employment situations of mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands. Below, for example, Bauman (2001a) expands

on the unique circumstances of liquid modernity – circumstances that, interestingly, bear a strong resemblance to the mobile work context:

> *When the employment of labour has become short term, having been stripped of firm (let alone guaranteed) prospects and therefore made episodic, and when virtually all rules concerning the game of promotions and dismissals have been scrapped or tend to be altered well before the game is over, there is little chance for mutual loyalty and commitment to sprout or take root…The place of employment feels like a camping site which one visits for but a few nights and which one may leave at any moment if comforts on offer are not delivered or found wanting when delivered, rather than like a shared domicile where one is inclined to take trouble to work out the acceptable rules of interaction. (25)*

Like Bauman, social theorist Ulrich Beck also writes about the proliferation of temporariness and insecurity within the new modernity – a society which he terms the 'industrial risk society' (Beck 1992). Beck distinguishes the previous class society from the newly emergent risk society in the following passage:

> *The driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase: I am hungry! The movement set in motion by the risk society, on the other hand, is expressed in the statement: I am afraid! The commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need. The type of the risk society marks in this sense a social epoch in which solidarity from anxiety arises and becomes a political force. (Beck 1992:49)*

Following this, the risk society is broadly defined as a society in which 'manufactured uncertainty' (e.g., nuclear war, the risk of ecological disasters) has become ubiquitous and unavoidable (Beck 1992). Beck also writes about the specific implications the risk society has for the world of work (Beck 2000). Namely, he contends that work is becoming increasingly flexible, short-term, and insecure; hence, we are witnessing "a redistribution of risks away from the state and the economy towards the individual"

(Beck 2000:3).[9] As a result, Beck (1992) describes "the occupation has lost many of its former assurances and protective functions. Along with their occupations, people lose an inner backbone of life that originated in the industrial epoch" (140). Beck further specifies the effects of these risks on individual identity:

> *From the individual perspective, labor society is becoming another form of risk society. Full employment society presented the individual with a set of calculable risks. Flexible work is presenting her with a set of uncertainties. It is not clear to what extent this set-up can provide the secure foundations that an individual existence needs to flourish over the middle or long term. There is the potential that we could pass from risk biographies into biographies that are simply fragmented and that can't be fitted together. (Beck and Willms 2004:162-63)*

As such, this new world of work is characterized by increasing uncertainty and fear, and has direct and significant impacts on individuals and their identity.

Another social theorist writing on this topic, Richard Sennett, posits that the modern workplace, with its focus on short-term episodic labour, projects, and flexibility does not allow people to shape their experiences or construct a coherent narrative of their lives (Sennett 1998). Sennett similarly explains, "The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives" (Sennett 1998:31). This inability to construct a whole out of a fragmented work-life contributes to what Sennett has termed "corrosion of character" or the "loosening bonds of trust and commitment and the divorce of will from behaviour" (Sennett 1998:31). In

[9] Despite the instability and insecurity in the world of work, or rather because of this, Beck sees an immense opportunity to develop new ideas and models of work, political engagement, and leisure. See Beck's book: *Brave New World of Work* (2000).

fact, Bauman contends that in order to survive (and thrive) in this uncertain 'liquid' modern milieu, one needs to develop a certain 'trained incapacity to love', or nonattachment to relationships and circumstances:

> *Having no bonds that are unbreakable and attached once and for all, the hero of this book – the denizen of our liquid modern society – and his successors today must tie together whatever bonds they want to use as a link to engage the rest of the human world by their own efforts with the help of their own skills and dedication. Unbound, they must connect…None of the connections that come to fill the gap left by the absent or mouldy bonds are, however, guaranteed to last. Anyway, they need to be only loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change – as in liquid modernity they surely will, over and over again. (Bauman 2003:vii)*

With the volatility of world energy markets, the inevitable boom-bust cycles, and the sheer ephemerality of fly-in/fly-out work camps, Fort McMurray appears to represent a spectacular microcosm of liquid modern life, complete with its concomitant risks and uncertainties. The unprecedented economic boom in the Alberta Oil Sands from roughly 2006 to 2008, for instance, was rather unpredictably and abruptly interrupted by a bust period in late 2008 and early 2009. As a result of the economic downturn, 16,000 of the 25,000 mobile workers living in work camps of various scales, hotels, motels, campgrounds, and illegal suites – and working in the Alberta Oil Sands – lost their jobs (Lieb et al. 2009). At the time of writing this paper (early 2014), the high unemployment of the bust period has long faded, and the oil sands activity and employment in the Fort McMurray area has rebounded. Still, the longevity of this economic activity and the duration of employment security for resource workers – mobile and otherwise – remains unknown. Liquid modernity and the risk society permeate all aspects of an individual's

life and slices to the very core of one's identity.[10] Bauman's writings on liquid modernity and Beck's writings on the risk society illuminate a new way of seeing the hypermobile and transient nature of the Fort McMurray context. Through these theories, we are able to see mobile workers, and the temporariness and insecurity of their jobs, as not just a provincial or regional phenomenon, but as emblematic of the new modernity. Given the global nature of this temporariness and insecurity, by extension, this insecurity would also affect the lives of those individuals who work live *permanently* within Fort McMurray and work in the Alberta Oil Sands and in other places. With this in mind, the sources of anxiety among the local residents of a boomtown require closer scrutiny.

Mobility and Place

> "The social is no longer seen as bound by "societies", but as caught up in a complex array of twenty-first century mobilities" (Urry 2000:18).

A core feature and a chief necessity of short-term episodic labour and its uncertainty is the ability to move from opportunity to opportunity and from place to place. As a resource worker in the Alberta Oil Sands, mobility is paramount. In fact, this mobility can be seen as part of a global social phenomenon, as British sociologist John Urry alludes to in the quote above. Yet, as Cresswell (2006) highlights below, mobility in sociology has been under-theorized:

[10] An exploration of mobile worker identity is explored via mobile worker narratives in Chapter Three of this thesis. The main aim of this paper is to describe the broad social theories that inform my research context.

> *[M]obility bears a number of meanings that circulate widely in the modern Western world. Mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity, sits side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance. Mobility, then, is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before. And yet mobility itself, and what it means, remains unspecified. It is kind of a blank space that stands as an alternative to place, boundedness, foundations and stability. (2)*

Formulating a useful and contemporary concept of mobility requires revisiting notions of 'place'. Should mobility be understood as simply an alternative to place? Should 'place' be understood as merely a fixed point? British geographer Doreen Massey troubles our typical understanding of place as 'fixed' by posing the following question, which is particularly relevant in the liquid modern world: "If there are no fixed points then where is here?" (Massey 2005:139). As with mobility, Gieryn (2000) states that "place" has also not received the attention it should within sociology. In fact, places and people located on the periphery have been referred to as liminal spaces, or 'neglected geographies', often shrouded from direct inquiry (Lawrence 1997). Mobile workers and the mobile work context are also infrequently investigated. New theories on place, however, have emerged, opening up the possibilities of understanding these liminal spaces in more fluid and nuanced ways. Below, I draw on a number of social theorists, and introduce some new ways of thinking about mobility and place. I contend that these new modes of thought capture the dynamic global character of the Fort McMurray area and, by doing so, bring to life the new rural space of a contemporary boomtown/boom-sphere.

Massey is exceptionally helpful in bringing alive our notions of space and place in the 21st century – and, by extension, in the Fort McMurray area. Massey builds on the work

of David Harvey, who argued that it is capitalism and its manifestations, which have given rise to our understanding and experience of space (Harvey 1990). Central to capitalism's ordering and assemblage of space is the idea of 'time-space compression'; which refers to the "movement and communication across space…the geographical stretching-out of social relations and to our experience of all this" (Massey 1994:147). We can clearly see time-space compression in the case of the Fort McMurray context. The incredible national and international mix of workers and capital, the fly-in/fly-out worker rotations, and the regular 'Skype' calls and ubiquitous text messages that workers use to link in with their spouses, children, and friends throughout the day, are just a few examples. Given this new era of time-space compression, Massey argues that we also need a new and complementary way of thinking about 'place'. In my theoretical understanding of the Fort McMurray context, I employ Massey's 'progressive concept of place'.

Massey's concept of place is based upon four main points. First, she does not see places as static things, but as processes, always in the state of becoming. Second, she does not see 'boundaries' as particularly important in the definition of places, but emphasizes instead the linkages and interconnections of a place to 'the outside'. In other words, linkages of one place to another – not simply its boundaries – are what, in part, constitute a place. Third, Massey does not see places as characterized by one singular identity. Places are complex and multi-faceted, exhibiting many different identities and internal conflicts. Fourth and finally, Massey writes, "the specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which results from some long internalized history"

(156). In this way, Massey contends that places are a "distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations" (156). Thus, Massey sees the distinctiveness of a place emerging from the layers and layers of its different linkages – both its local and wider world linkages. These four points form the basis of what Massey refers to as: "a global sense of the local" or "a global sense of place". In sum, Massey (1994) writes:

> *It is a sense of place, an understanding of 'its character' which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place. (156)*

Massey's concept of place and of "a global sense of place" effectively troubles the rural-urban continuum theory, which underlies the boomtown concept. In particular, the social disruption phenomenon, as described earlier in this paper, depicts boomtown communities as rather static and closed rural spaces, which are then rapidly disrupted by outside forces. I argue that attempting to apply the rural-urban continuum to the Fort McMurray context as a way to understand social disruption and the boomtown effect is inadequate. Instead, my theoretical frame, as informed by Massey, enlarges the scope of influence and recognizes the "global sense of the local". Also writing about the fluid and boundless nature of globalization are authors Inda and Rosaldo (2002); in particular, they describe how "people readily cut across national boundaries, turning countless territories into spaces where various cultures converge, clash, and struggle with each other" (3). This certainly appears to be the case in the Fort McMurray context. Still, much of the attribution of disruption in Fort McMurray appears to remain placed upon the mobile workforce population.

So far within this paper, I have introduced the Fort McMurray context, I have pointed out why the traditional boomtown descriptor fails to capture the unique nature of the Fort McMurray area, and I have offered a new theoretical frame for viewing it. What implications, then, does this theoretical frame – a frame that enlarges our scope to see the worldwide proliferation of insecurity and anxiety of the liquid modern era and Massey's idea of "a global sense of place" – have for the Fort McMurray context and for the reading of the 'us versus them' boomtown phenomenon? The next section explores these questions.

Part IV: Discussion – Re-reading the 'Us vs. Them' Phenomenon in Fort McMurray

In a conventional reading of the boomtown of Fort McMurray, the influx of mobile workers would be identified as the external force that causes social disruption to the local population. Boomtown research suggests that the disruption of traditional routines and attitudes within the community often results in fear, anxiety, and social distancing and lack of trust (Davenport and Davenport 1980; Freudenburg 1981, 1984, 1986; Krannich and Greider 1984; Massey 1980; Smith, Krannich, and Hunter 2001). This characteristically leads to 'boomtown bifurcation' or the 'us versus them' phenomenon.

My research indicates that there exists a definite 'us versus them' cleavage between local Fort McMurray residents and the shadow population or the mobile workers. For instance, when there was a proposal to place a number of work camps in the city core, a public uproar ensued, with residents voicing various safety concerns over having a concentrated population of male mobile workers housed within the city limits (CBC News 2006). In

my interviews with Fort McMurray residents, many described mobile workers as triggering an increasing drug trade, exacerbating traffic snarls, littering, speeding, and stripping the shelves of food in the local grocery stores.

The common social phenomenon of resource-based towns forming of an 'us versus them' split, or an in-group/out-group has been a primary interest for contemporary sociologists, such as Becker (1991), Elias and Scotson (2008), and others. Bauman and May (2001), for example, describe the basis of such a division:

> *…an out-group is precisely that imaginary opposition to itself that the in-group needs for its self-identity, for its cohesiveness, for its inner solidarity, and emotional security. The ideals that sustain this include solidarity, mutual confidence and what might be termed, following the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, a 'togetherness' or 'common bond'. (31)*

Taken one step further, an in-group might exaggerate the significance of the effect that an out-group has on their wellbeing, resulting in what Stanley Cohen has termed a "moral panic" (Cohen 1973). In the first edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1973), Cohen describes that a "moral panic" occurs when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (9). Cohen's study of moral panic, which is considered a classic in media sociology, was conducted in the 1960s and focused on the construction of a deviant youth culture (the 'Rockers' or 'folk devils') in Britain by the Mods (non-rockers) and by the media. In this way, moral panics "act as a form of ideological cohesion which draws on a complex language of nostalgia" and thus strives to maintain "the dominant social order" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995:562). Hier (2003), in his study of Cohen's work, states that "although moral panics center on a particular folk devil, the locus of the panic is not

the object of its symbolic resonances, not the folk devil itself," rather "folk devils serve as the ideological embodiment of deeper anxieties" (6). Thirty years later, in the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), Cohen points out that moral panics continue to occur now more than ever, but against a new backdrop: "the global scope of the risk society" (xxvi). Within this backdrop, Cohen writes that "[s]ome of the social space once occupied by moral panics has been filled by more inchoate social anxieties, insecurities and fears. These are fed by specific risks: the growth of new 'techno-anxieties' (nuclear, chemical, biological, toxic and ecological risk)…" (xxv).

As the theory of moral panic was developed nearly 40 years ago, a number of scholars have put forward that we need to revise our thinking around the process of moral panic construction (Hier 2003; Hollway and Jefferson 1997; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Unger 2001). Hier (2003), for example, forecasts that there will be "a proliferation of moral panics as an exaggerated symptom of the heightened sense of uncertainty purported to accompany the ascendency of the risk society" (3). So, in this way, not only are moral panics increasing, but the sites of social anxiety from which they emerge are shifting to global technological risk-based ones (Unger 2001), and converging with anxieties contained at the local community level (Hier 2003).

In the case of the Fort McMurray boom-sphere, some of the anxiety felt by residents is likely linked to the competition for material supplies and services in the community. I posit that a portion of this insecurity and "inchoate social anxieties" has its roots elsewhere – within the larger liquid modern risk society. Therefore, instead of

exclusively attributing the boomtown effect to the mobile workforce population and making them the 'folk devils' of Fort McMurray, I put forth that social scientists need to recognize the new social milieu which characterizes contemporary resource development contexts; and further, social scientists need to 'rearticulate' the linkages between social relations and emergent anxieties within these new rural and resource-based spaces. Drawing from the field of cultural studies, 'articulation' is defined as:

> *The construction of one set of relations out of another; it often involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate others. Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located. (Grossberg 1992:54)*

If we use this idea of 'articulation', we can think of the 'practice' as the forming of negative attitudes and stereotypes by Fort McMurray residents (and beyond) toward the shadow population, a practice strongly influenced by the 'forces' of insecurity and anxiety. But it is the *sources* of this insecurity and anxiety that, I argue, we need to reexamine. In the quote below, Bauman (2001b) suggests that in liquid modernity – which is punctuated by high uncertainty and insecurity – individuals seek a scapegoat upon which to pin their resultant anxieties:

> *Strangers are unsafety incarnate and so they embody by proxy that insecurity which haunts your life. In a bizarre yet perverse way their presence is comforting, even reassuring: the diffuse and scattered fears, difficult to pinpoint and name, now have a tangible target to focus on, you know where the dangers reside and you need no longer take the blows of fate placidly. (145)*

In much the same way, I suggest that local Fort McMurray residents and others identify the mobile workforce population as 'folk devils', 'unsafety incarnate', and pin their

'inchoate social anxieties' predominantly upon the 'nameless' and 'rootless' men traveling to and from the Alberta Oil Sands.

If one sees Fort McMurray as embedded within the larger milieu of the 'liquid modern risk society', then it would be inaccurate to solely attribute social disruption in the local community to the incoming mobile workforce population. Could it be that the classic boomtown concept is parochial in its focus and that the source of local disruption is actually found in the wider expanse of the global? Could the scapegoated strangers of liquid modernity, in the Fort McMurray context, be the shadow population, the mobile workforce? As my theoretical frame suggests, temporariness in employment, mobility of workers, as well as the insecurities and anxieties that emerge from these conditions are not just 'boomtown blues,' but are characteristic of our current modern era. Therefore, if Fort McMurray is viewed through this theoretical frame, does the boomtown concept still apply? Is there a need to develop a new terminology to more accurately describe our new resource-based settings? It is accurate to apply the term boomtown to current resource development contexts; and, in our social impact assessment studies, proceed to ask the typical questions associated with rapid resource development: How does Project 'X' affect the community? How does the influx of construction workers affect local residents? Or, are there other key questions that social scientists should be asking?

Part V: Conclusion – Reconceptualizing the Traditional Notion of the Boomtown

By reconceptualizing the 'boomtown' of Fort McMurray, we are able to see the broader social forces at work – beyond that of the boomtown itself – which produce social anxiety amongst those that live and work there. I contend that these forces now also contribute to

the ‘us versus them’ boomtown phenomenon and subsequent stereotyping of incoming resource workers. I suggest that social scientists need to take note of the changing nature of contemporary resource development contexts. In particular, social scientists need to more fully acknowledge the extra-local forces at play, and more fully realize the new modernity, which, arguably, animates our lives.

The Alberta Oil Sands and the Fort McMurray area do not fit the traditional boomtown concept. This paper offers a new language and understanding of the social forces at play within current resource-based communities. I present the ‘boom-sphere’ model as a way to capture the large, widespread area that the Alberta Oil Sands activity affects (i.e., the social impact zone), and its embeddedness within liquid modern life. The term ‘sphere’ also is a more neutral term than ‘town’, and I purposively use it to denote a space in which both local residents (‘insiders’) and the incoming residents (‘outsiders’) occupy on equal terms. By viewing this space as not necessarily belonging to one group (the ‘insiders’), it becomes clearer to see that the Alberta Oil Sands has impacts on the wellbeing of both mobile workers, as well as on the resource workers who call Fort McMurray home. Too often within boomtown literature, the impacts of resource development on incoming resource workers has been overlooked. Given the magnitude of the mobile workforce population in the Fort McMurray area and the spillover effects it has on the larger family and social networks of these workers, I argue that the social and health impacts of mobile workers need to receive greater attention (this specific research aim is taken up in Chapter Three of my thesis).

In drawing greater attention to the mobile worker experience, it is necessary to first examine the stereotypes that exist, and arguably, the moral panic and the folk devils that have emerged within this context. Interestingly, if we borrow from the insights gained in the newly emerging literature of the risk society and moral panics, we see that much of the anxiety and subsequent stereotyping of mobile workers could actually be fueled by the "inchoate social anxieties" of living in a liquid modern risk society. This recognition of the new social milieu in which we are living in effectively troubles our taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional boomtown theory: social disruption and the local-level causes of this disruption. It also opens the door to new theorizing in 'rural', resource-based spaces, theorizing that actively takes into account the new worlds of work, place, and modernity.

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Part VII: Narrative Thread 2. Derrick's Story – "A Drunk in the Hallway"

Narrative Thread Two is a story told by one of the mobile workers [MW10] that I interviewed. This story takes the reader from the previous social-theoretical exploration of Chapter Two and into the work camp and personal troubles of mobile workers, which is the focus of Chapter Three. "A Drunk in the Hallway" is a counter-story to the grand narrative and stereotype that labels mobile workers as 'rig pigs' and as deviant. This counter-story challenges the 'Big Boys Don't Cry' work culture and persona, offers a glimpse into the vulnerability of mobile workers, and presents a preview of some of the mobile worker wellbeing themes that I identify within my research and that you will read about in Chapter Three.

*

A Drunk in the Hallway

Derrick: There are a lot of drunks here, you know. Yeah, there are a lot of guys on drugs too. I almost got into a fight in the hallway one time because these guys were screaming down the hall and then woke up one of my coworkers and then he told the guy to shut up and then they were yelling and then I came down there. And it turns out one of his buddies had an altercation with one of my crew at the work site and so he started poking me in the chest. So here I am, 35 years old, a father of two, just trying to fucking sleep in my room and I am up in a fight with a drunk in the middle of the night with a drunk – so that stuff is just bullshit. That shouldn't happen. But you know, there are other choices too. I didn't have to leave my room. I could've just turned on my TV, you know what I mean?

Angela: It sounds like it's easy for things to escalate here at the camp?

Derrick: Oh, very. Very. To the point where finally security came and he just started crying. So he was having a bad day. And then the next day, he came up and apologized to me, and talked to me everyday after that. But that night I was getting ready to kill the guy because he was getting ready to attack me. Even knowing full well I would of lost my job here. And I just wanted to get some sleep.

Angela: And he cried afterwards?

Derrick: Oh yeah, he just started bawling. He was just upset. I mean that's the thing. I mean especially for workers from eastern Canada – I mean they are gone for so long, some of them. Yeah, like they are in here for six weeks, away from their wife and kids.

*

Foreword to Chapter 3

Mobile workers are often 'scapegoated' or exclusively blamed for the negative issues arising in boomtowns. However, mobile workers are an under-researched population. Furthermore, overgeneralizing and stereotyping a social group means that the deeper roots of potential issues are not explored and opportunities for effecting positive change are not identified. If these issues worsen over time, negative impacts could further spillover into family and community life. Chapter Three (Paper Two) of my thesis aims to 'zoom in' to the lived experiences of mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands to better understand the how they are affected by the contemporary resource development context of mega-projects and hypermobility.

Chapter 3: The Personal. "Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands"

> *The offshore worker is thus commonly portrayed – in the media and common talk – as privileged and irresponsible, reckless and slightly immoral, with lots of loose money and idle time. This stigmatized identity does not provide a very good basis for social interaction. Many offshore workers find it very difficult to explain to others the reality of offshore life and work, and to make their work conditions a topic for serious discussion. (Solheim 1988:159)*

Part I: Introduction

Oil extraction in the Alberta Oil Sands has been touted as one of the largest industrial mega-projects in the world. It is estimated that, based upon current technology, 170 billion barrels of oil lie in waiting of extraction and processing (Alberta Government 2013). As of July 2013, 114 active oil sands projects were operating within Alberta (Alberta Government 2014), with the lifespan of these oil sands projects ranging from 10 to 50 years (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers [CAPP] 2010). In total, over $60 billion in oil sands-related projects have been proposed, and approximately $20 billion has been invested to date (National Energy Board [NEB] 2013). These massive investments have in turn generated approximately 121,500 jobs; and in 2012-2013, contributed to $3.56 billion in royalties to the Alberta Government (Alberta Government 2014). While employment and income can bolster individual and community wellbeing (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC] 2013), rapid resource development can also negatively affect wellbeing through environmental degradation, strain on local infrastructure and services, and social disruption (Bacigalupi and Freudenburg 1983; Dorow and O'Shaughnessy 2013; England and Albrecht, 1984; Jacquet 2009; Lawrie, Tonts, and Plummer 2011; Northern Health 2012; Seydlitz et al. 1993; Witter et al. 2008).

One key 'effect driver' of social disruption in rapid resource development contexts is the influx of temporary workers (Orenstein, Angel, and Lee 2013); these workers are also known as the shadow population, fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers, long-distance commuting (LDC) workers – or as I refer to them within this paper: *mobile workers*. Mobile workers are those individuals who commute to and from resource development projects and who live temporarily in work camps, lodges, hotels, private rental suites, or personal recreational vehicles (RVs). These workers have been linked to shifts in behaviours and attitudes among local residents, such as increased fear and decreased trust, as well as increases in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), housing and food prices, and traffic volumes and collisions (Brown, Dorius, and Krannich 2005; Goldenberg 2013; Food and Water Watch 2013; Northern Health 2012; Northern Health 2013; Ruddell 2011; Ruddell and Ortiz 2014). While it has been documented that mobile workforce populations tend to place a certain degree of stress on local communities as indicated by STI rates, traffic data, local residents' comments in the media and research interviews, within North America, very little research has been conducted on understanding the relationship and effect pathways between mobile workers and host communities. Instead, I contend that the degree of stress is frequently exaggerated, and often times, the root of this boomtown stress is exclusively attributed to the perceived 'outsider': mobile workers.[11]

[11] For a fuller exploration of this 'insider versus outsider' (local residents versus mobile workers) phenomenon in modern-day boomtowns, see Chapter 2 – "From Boomtown to Boom-Sphere: Reconceptualizing the Boomtown concept for Fort McMurray, Alberta".

The Mobile Workforce Population of the Alberta Oil Sands

The mobile workforce population in the Alberta Oil Sands – which is largely situated in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) – has increased substantially over the last 12 years. In 2000, the mobile workforce population was first recorded at 6,000 (Alberta Government 2012). Ten years later, the mobile workforce population grew to 23,000; and between 2010 and 2012, this population increased by almost 60% to 39,000. The mobile workforce population for the Alberta Oil Sands now accounts for nearly 34% of Wood Buffalo's total population (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo [RMWB] 2012b). Furthermore, there is an increasing trend within resource development projects toward the mobile work arrangement, and camp builders have predicted that the mobile workforce population in the Alberta Oil Sands may increase to an upwards of 75,000 workers over the next few years (Vanderklippe 2012).

Demographically speaking, we often perceive mobile workers as young, single men, with little education and high incomes. While the high incomes of mobile workers are substantiated in the most recent RMWB Census, the mobile workforce population is actually older, more attached, more educated, and "less male" than we think (RMWB 2012b). More than half of the mobile workforce is actually over 35 years old, 51.2% are married or are in a common-law relationship, and 61.1% are either an apprentice, or hold a trades certificate or a post-secondary degree (with only 7.4% of workers having less than a high school diploma). Finally, the mobile workforce is becoming increasingly female. In 2007, 92% of the mobile workforce in the RMWB were male and 8% were

female (Nichols Applied Management 2007); in 2012, 82.9% of mobile workforce in the RMWB were male and 17.1% was female (RMWB 2012b).

As the RMWB Census data reveal, the mobile workforce population is not entirely comprised of the stereotypical demographic of young, single, and uneducated men. Within this paper, I challenge the singular identity of mobile workers and attempt to open up this singular identity to the varied lived experiences and identities of mobile workers, exploring how these identities are shaped by the mobile work context, and how the mobile work context affects worker wellbeing. In the next section, I describe why reducing a highly diverse social group to a singular (and inaccurate) identity can be harmful.

"The Danger of the Single Story"

> "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Ngozi Adichie 2009).

> "…acceptance of attributed identity instill myth with its greatest power, the power to go unquestioned" (Couto 1975:471).

Perpetuating stereotypes or a single story for an entire social group can be dangerous in that it can overlook important implications for a social group's identity and wellbeing in two key ways: 1. Overgeneralizing and stereotyping a social group (mobile workers)

means that the deeper roots of potential issues, such as substance abuse, are not explored and opportunities for effecting positive change are not identified. If these issues worsen over time, negative impacts could further spillover into family and community life.

2. How individuals 'see' or perceive other individuals or social groups matters. Becker's 'labeling theory' (1991) postulates that if a population (the mobile workforce) is perceived a certain way (deviant), they may tend to act according to this identity. Therefore, society's perception of mobile workers has real and interactional effects. Relatedly, how community residents 'see' mobile workers can have real effects on how *they personally* feel and behave. A study by Brown, Dorius, and Krannich (2005), for example, found that local residents' negative perception of incoming workers led to "anticipatory shifts" in the residents' attitudes and behaviours even before the workers actually arrived in the community. This finding indicates that it is not necessarily the actual physical presence of workers that creates stress, but the negative thoughts and feelings toward this incoming population. I propose that understanding whom mobile workers are, what shapes their attitudes, behaviours, and practices, and what they might need to improve their working and living conditions, can go a long way in influencing the types of social and health effects that are 'co-produced'.

Conceptualizing the Identity and Wellbeing of Mobile Workers

This paper specifically explores the varied lived experiences and identities of mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands and examines how the mobile work arrangement affects worker wellbeing. Due to the large proportion of men comprising the mobile workforce population of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (83%) (RMWB 2012b), I

specifically investigate the *male* mobile worker experience.[12] I endeavor to answer the following research questions from my research interviews: *1. Who are the male mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands? That is, what are the varied lived experiences and identities of these men? 2. How does the mobile work arrangement affect the wellbeing of male mobile workers?* Below I describe the theoretical concepts of identity and wellbeing that I employ within my research.

Conceptions of self (identity)

> **"Self:** A mental construction of the person, by the person, but inevitably formed from social experience. Thus the person sees him/herself reflected by others, in their reactions, and these are interpreted through the lattice of self-perception" (Jary and Jary 2005:547).

In terms of 'identity', I conceptualize it from the theoretical lens of 'storied identity'. That is, "…the identity that one has shaped, a glimpse of personality one has developed, the important interpersonal and social relationships one has formed, and a sense of one's values, beliefs, and worldview in the storyteller's own words" (Atkinson 2007:234). Trinh Minh-ha (1992) suggests that the notion of self-identity has shifted from the traditional question of: *Who am I?* – to a more progressive notion of identity: *When, where, and how am I?* In this way, my mobile workers' stories (supplemented with the contextually-enriching key informants' stories) represent first-person scripts of actively unfolding identities. In this way, I see identities as "open, negotiable, shifting and

[12] For an exploration of the lived experiences of females in the Alberta Oil Sands and Fort McMurray area, see the PhD dissertation: *Women's Gendered Experiences of Rapid Resource Development in the Canadian North: New Opportunities or Old Challenges* (O'Shaughnessy 2011).

ambiguous" (Collinson 2003:534). These storied identities are also the basis from which I assess wellbeing.

In terms of wellbeing, I examine workers' subjective wellbeing – that is, workers' individual perceptions of their quality of life (Phillips 2006). My understanding of subjective wellbeing is specifically informed by Raphael and colleagues' quality of life model: *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* (Raphael et al. 1996, 1997). This model defines subjective wellbeing or quality of life as "[t]he degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his/her life" (Raphael et al. 1997:120). Therefore, within my study, I assess the effects of mobile work on worker wellbeing. I operationalize 'wellbeing' via the domains and subdomains of the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* model. These domains are: *Being* (physical health, mental health, personal values, and personal code of conduct); *Belonging* (physical fit with one's material environment, and social connections with family, friends, and community); and *Becoming* (achieving goals and tending to one's health and social needs).

The paper is organized as follows. First, in the methodology section, I describe my methodological approach to the qualitative research that I conducted with male mobile workers and other key informants in the Alberta Oil Sands. Second, to help position my data in an ongoing body of work, I integrate and review the literature pertinent to male mobile worker identity and wellbeing. Third, I present my key findings and discuss how these findings interact with what researchers have found to date. Finally, to conclude, I

describe how my research uniquely contributes to the literature and suggest directions for future research.

Part II: Methods

> "Narratives cannot be suppressed in sociology because it is ineluctably tied to the human experience; trying to suppress it undermines the very foundations of the sociological enterprise" (Richardson 1990:124).

This section provides a detailed description of my research process: my methodological map, sampling method, research tool, research participants, and data analysis technique.

My Methodological Map

Mobile livelihoods, such as mobile work, have been under-theorized to date (Pini, Mayes, and McDonald 2012). To conceptualize my research, and to address this larger research gap, I have developed a methodological map to better inform my understanding of the trajectory and lived experiences of mobile workers. Within one interview, the research participants and I verbally visit many different sites, the sites in which he lives (home-sphere), commutes (commute-sphere), works and lives (work-camp-sphere). All of these sites (spheres) are embedded within the boom-sphere. My Boom-Sphere Model conceptually expands our understanding of the boomtown, specifically from the perspective of a mobile worker. The Boom-Sphere Model recognizes that the effects of a resource boom are not simply a 'host community' phenomenon, but that these effects are experienced across the work sites and work camps (work-camp-sphere), the various transportation networks (commute-sphere), and straight through to a worker's home and

home community (home-sphere). The boomtown effects are also distributed among the neighbouring Aboriginal communities and regional communities. All of these different sites, and the interrelationships or flows among these sites, synergistically produce a mobile worker's lived experience. I use the concept of multi-sited ethnography to inform my methodological map. Saukkow (2003) defines multi-sited ethnography as "a practice of studying how any given phenomenon takes shape in and across multiple locales or sites" (177). (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of my methodological map or Boom-Sphere Model.)

Importantly, my research setting was also characterized by a major economic event: the global financial collapse and the boom-to-bust transition. In June 2008, oil hit a record price of $147 per barrel; then, in December 2008, the price of oil plunged to less than $40 per barrel (Khan 2009). While I developed my thesis proposal to examine the lived experiences of mobile workers during an Alberta's unprecedented economic boom in early 2008; I found myself, in the summer and fall of 2009, interviewing mobile workers during Alberta's economic bust.

Sampling Method

I located my mobile worker research participants via the snowball sampling technique. This technique is helpful in locating information-rich research participants. Within this non-probability method of selection, it is assumed that members of the target population know each other and that this particular population is difficult to locate or contact in that the population is somehow "socially invisible" (Singleton and Straits 2005:138). For my key informant interviews, I identified my research participants through local directories

and Internet searches. I also asked these key informants to provide me with the names of other key contacts that they knew who would help to inform my research in the areas of mobile worker identity and wellbeing.

The Research Interview

For my mobile worker interviews, I used the life story interview as my research tool. The structure of a life story interview can help a research participant convey meaningful experiences from the past, the present, and the imagined future (Atkinson 2007). This is particularly helpful for my research as I investigate how a mobile worker's identity and wellbeing has been shaped and affected by the mobile work arrangement. During the interview, I specifically investigate a research participant's work life before becoming a mobile worker, his life as a mobile worker, and telescope out into the future to explore whether or not the mobile work lifestyle is a part of his future plans. The life story interview also has a particularly valuable 'output': the storied identity of an individual. That is, the life story interview provides research participants an opportunity to actively construct their identity through the telling of their experiences. Carr (1986) describes this identity-making process:

> *The unity of the self, not as an underlying identity but as a life that hangs together, is not a pregiven condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed, it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it. What we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others the story of what we are about and what we are. (97)*

In this way, the life story interview also provides individuals a channel for the telling of counter-stories. These counter-stories have the potential to both increase the awareness

of certain conditions and to effect positive social change. For example, Atkinson (1998) describes:

> *The life story interview is one of the best ways of giving full voice to those who would not normally be heard, to those who might be at the margins of any number of communities, and those whose valuable insights and reflections would not otherwise come to light. (239)*

In practice, the life story interview is straightforward research tool that involves two basic steps. First, in the telling of the story, the researcher's task is to help the research participant – through open-ended and reflective questions – access his 'storehouse' of subjectivity and express himself through story (see Appendix A for my *Mobile Worker Interview Schedule).* Eliciting a life story typically involves one to three one-hour interviews with each research participant. The product of a life story interview is basically a verbatim transcript, which has been rid of repetitions and irrelevant information. Text might also be reordered to ensure clarity of content and readability. The transcript is then often 'member checked' with the storyteller to make certain the 'authentic' author feels comfortable with the content and arrangement of text (Atkinson 2007). Second, in the reading and interpreting of the story's text, a researcher focuses on identifying themes, issues, and connections within and across stories. My data analysis approach is described in greater depth in the next section.

For my key informant interviews, I used a semi-structured interview and my questions were organized into four main areas: their professional role, mobile worker wellbeing, work culture and mobile worker identity, and the boom-to-bust transition (see Appendix B for my *Key Informant Interview Schedule*). In total, between March 2008 and October

2009, I interviewed 16 mobile workers; I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 key informants (see Appendix C for the *Project Information Sheet* that each research participant received before the interview). Each interview lasted from one to three hours and all interviews were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process involved a number of steps. First, I personally transcribed each interview. Second, I employed a 'Thematic Analysis' approach to analyze my worker and key informant stories. Thematic Analysis (TA) is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006:6). For the TA approach, I followed six phases of analysis: 1. familiarizing oneself with the data (reading and re-reading, jotting down initial notes on potential codes); 2. generating initial codes – "codes" are defined as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis 1998:63); 3. searching for themes among codes; 4. reviewing and refining themes (and developing these themes into a thematic 'map' to check for internal consistency and external distinctiveness); 5. defining and naming themes (identifying the 'story' that each theme tells, and describing how this story fits in with the overall 'story' of the data); and 6. writing up the themes into a coherent story (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The next section provides an overview of literature relevant to mobile worker identity and wellbeing. First, I review the progression of work camp research over the last 100 years. Via this review, I highlight the ways in which the identity of mobile workers has been

portrayed and described by researchers; in addition, I highlight the wellbeing issues among mobile workers that have been identified to date. Second, I highlight some key factors which influence health and introduce the determinants of health framework and Karasek's Job-Demand-Control model (1979). Finally, I review relevant literature on masculinity and health in rural and resource-based contexts.

Part III: Literature Review

The Early Bunkhouse Man to the Contemporary Mobile Worker

The Early Bunkhouse Man. A highly mobile, male workforce has been a quintessential part of resource development throughout the history of Canada and the United States. In Canada, for example, the early classification of this population tended to be characterized as rootless men whose lives were forever tied to the frontier. One of the earliest Canadian studies into this camp-based labour arrangement is Edmund W. Bradwin's dissertation: *The Bunkhouse Man: A Study of Work and Pay in the Camps of Canada, 1903-1914.* First published in 1928, when sociology was still in its infancy at Canadian universities, Bradwin's research provided a graphic account of the conditions and culture of bunkhouse men during the building of Canada's railway. Baldwin suggests that the harsh physical and social environments largely shaped the behaviours and relations of these men, which were marked by rowdiness, unscrupulous pastimes, and instability. Bradwin (1928) writes:

> *Workers under these environments are allowed to give but not to take. A restlessness pervades their days which ultimately infects not only their thinking but their habits of life. As the months drag on there is a weariness of heart, a blank feeling that gets the better of the whole man. (83-84)*

It seems as though Bradwin, above, empathizes with (and subtly excuses) the deviant behaviours of the early bunkhouse man due to the monotonous and arduous conditions he is forced to endure. Furthermore, an overarching aim of Bradwin's work was to assert that, despite these men's unruliness, we, as a nation, have overlooked the importance and core needs of the bunkhouse man. Bradwin (1928) states:

> *Canada as a country owes much to its campmen. Down through whole generations, the camps have played an important part in shaping the lives of all frontier workers; qualities incidental to such environments have characterized their ways. Yet, even in Canada, few of us seem to realize just all that this means. We overlook the debt which the country owes the workers in these fields of labour…With the strides made by the Dominion since Confederation, in trade, in increasing wealth, and in education, there has been correspondingly a strange lack of recognition for the place and the needs of the bunkhouse man. (7)*

Another early and fundamental contribution to the understanding of the life and culture within resource development contexts is Rex. A. Lucas's 1971 book: *Minetown, Milltown, Railtown: Life in Canadian communities of Single Industry*. In this book, Lucas, a sociologist, describes in detail the different typologies of workers that are attracted to these resource towns, including the "bunkhouse based workers". Lucas (1971) describes:

> *…these men are "loners" who talk little of their past; it is impossible to tell how many of them are single, divorced, or separated…they tell a story of liquor, women, and robbery…[l]ittle is known about the origins of these career lines or how they end. It can be argued that Canada owes the development of its resources to the work of these perpetually marginal bunkhouse men who are able to live forever in social privation on isolated construction sites. (32)*

Similar to Bradwin, Lucas also underscores the lack of recognition the bunkhouse-based workers have received in the building of the nation. Furthermore, Lucas identified several factors that determined the level of deviance of these workers, including "the

ethnic make-up of the camp, the local customs, the control of liquor, the hours worked, the quality of food, the accommodations, and recreation" (Lucas 1971:35). In addition, we can see, within the above description, where the lawless identity of these bunkhouse men originated.

Within the American context, another classic sociological piece on resource-based towns, and the men who populated these spaces, came from U.S. sociologist Paul Landis. Landis's book *Three Mining Towns* (1938) examines the relationship between human activities and the physical environment via a comparison of three mining communities. Landis describes the men who were drawn to – and who were able to *thrive* – in these early settlements. Landis (1938) writes:

> *The Frontier puts a premium on those with strong physical powers, who are able to survive the rigors of the natural setting, and those with elastic moral sense who can tolerate, if not condone, the non-moral order which necessarily exists when highly civilized men sink to a primitive plane. (114)*

Consistent throughout this early research is the portrayal of camp-based men – as both tough and toughened by their working and living conditions. Masculinity was not only seen as a central part of workers' identity, but also as a necessary and celebrated trait for coping in these camp environments. Issues of worker 'wellbeing', and how camp conditions could be improved, however, were not broached within this early research.

The Contemporary Mobile Worker. Early sociological literature on frontier towns later gave way to more focused studies on boomtowns in the United States, such as in Wyoming, Colorado, as well as the Canadian North (Brown, Dorius, and Krannich 2005; Brown, Geetsen, and Krannich 1989; England and Albrecht 1984; Freudenburg 1981;

Glick and Glick 1981; Hunter, Krannich, and Smith 2002; Smith, Krannich, and Hunter 2001; Wilkinson et al. 1982). Still, within these studies, worker identity was largely assumed but not investigated, and the question of worker wellbeing was left unaddressed. Instead, the centrality of temporary construction workers and the impacts that these workers experienced were largely eclipsed by a focus on the social impacts these workers *imposed on* local communities. A few sociologists did, however, note the limited understanding of the identity and lived experiences of this population; Freudenburg (1982) noted that "…construction workers and their wives…may be surrounded by more mystery and misunderstanding than any other single group in rapid growth communities" (144).

It was only in the early 1980s that a new stream of research emerged which focused on the impacts of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) work on workers and their families. These studies investigated FIFO workers who were situated in offshore oil and gas projects off the coast of the United Kingdom, Norway, and Newfoundland, and in remote mining sites in Canada and Australia. In 1987, for instance, researchers at the University of Aberdeen began an oral history project, 'Lives in the Oil Industry', to capture the experiences of oil and gas workers in the North Sea.[13]

In Canada, FIFO researchers Storey and Shrimpton (1987), studying oil and gas workers off the coast of Newfoundland, found that that poor camp quality was directly linked to worker turnover, vandalism, and worker-management confrontation. Other findings included workers feeling alienated from their jobs (e.g., feeling that they were 'just a

[13] See the 'Lives in the Oil Industry' website: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/oillives

number'), and workers likening 'platform life' to prison life (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988). Furthermore, Shrimpton and Storey (1987) identified seven factors, which could minimize community impacts and enhance worker productivity and wellbeing; these factors were: 1. good quality accommodations with privacy and low noise levels; 2. good food in quality and quantity; 3. effective security and policing of the camp; 4. good pay with opportunity for overtime; 5. work rotation schedules that were not too long or short; 6. a shift schedule that did not give workers too much time in camp; and 7. varied and well-organized recreational and leisure programs (Storey and Shrimpton 1987). Also in Canada, Barton (2007), an outpost nurse investigating substance abuse in remote work camps in northern British Columbia, found that because both workers and their supervisors engaged in substance abuse, heavy drinking and drug use were further enabled, resulting in a thriving "culture of substance abuse". Overall, there exists relatively little research on how employment-related mobility affects health within the Canadian population (Temple Newhook et al. 2011).

Meanwhile, in Norway, researchers found that workers living on offshore oil platforms felt a loss of personal choice, freedom, and self-determination. Many workers also expressed feeling hopelessly "trapped" if ever there were an industrial malfunction; and expressed a loss of "real" social and personal existence on the oil platforms, with one worker stating, "Out there, we don't really live. We just exist" (Solheim 1988:145). In addition, workers expressed difficulty in transitioning from work to home as their entire social and personal context had to be reorganized; for example, some workers expressed that they felt "artificial," "estranged", "excluded", and "out of step with society" when

returning to their home community (Solheim 1988). Positive effects on worker wellbeing were also reported. One Norwegian study found that some men were able to have closer relationships with their spouses and children due to the longer, more concentrated periods of time together; and, due to the shift work schedule and repeated absences, workers reported that they appreciated their spouses and children, and their time together even more (Clark and Taylor 1988). The bulk of studies from this research period, however, focused largely on FIFO-related impacts on workers' wives and children versus on workers themselves. The range of impacts identified on wives and children were both positive and negative; see: Clark et al. 1985; Collinson 1998; Forsyth and Gauthier 1991; Lewis et al. 1988; Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988; Mauthner, Maclean, and McKee 2000; Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005; Seydlitz et al. 1993; Shrimpton and Storey 1984; Shrimpton and Storey 1996; and Taylor et al. 1985. Recent studies on spouse and family impacts have also been completed in Australia (Kaczmarek and Sibbel 2008; Pini and Mayes 2012; Taylor and Simmonds 2009). While a flurry of new research has come out of Australia recently, research in Canada has been limited and not as current.

Two non-academic and slightly dated studies have been helpful in framing the basic demographic profiles of mobile workers in Canada. The first study was undertaken by the Construction Sector Council [CSC] in 2001.[14] After surveying nearly 900 tradespersons and conducting focus groups with 70 more – across Canada – the CSC developed an "archetype" of the mobile worker in Canada:

> *The mobile worker is male, aged 30 to 49 years. He is a member of a traditional craft union and has completed an apprenticeship in his trade…[h]e is married,*

[14] The Construction Sector Council has been renamed "BuildForce Canada" see: http://www.buildforce.ca/en.

> *with at least two dependents under the age of 18 years, and his working mobile has a negative impact on his marriage and family. His motivation for working mobile is financial, but the personal expenses incurred on the job site and at home because of it could become a barrier to his continuing to work mobile. (CSC 2001:4)*

The CSC (2001) also distinguished between three types of mobile workers: the "regular" (this group has developed coping mechanisms and feel the negative aspects less acutely than "occasional"); "occasional"; and "rare" (this group primarily engages in mobile work out of a sense of adventure).

The second and more recent study investigated mobile workers specifically in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). This study was commissioned by the RMWB and a group of oil and gas companies, and was undertaken by an Edmonton, Alberta-based consulting firm: Nichols Applied Management [NAM]. NAM summarizes the mobile worker as being:

> *Males, aged 30 to 49 years[15]; ticketed members of a traditional craft union; married, with at least two dependents under the age of 18 years; and motivated mostly by financial considerations. (NAM 2007:2)*

These mobile worker studies also present a number of factors, which enhance or degrade mobile workers' quality of life. For instance, mobile workers expressed that they resented negative community attitudes toward them, felt that there was "a lack of privacy or personal space in camp environments," and wished for activities, which would "fill the void of no community life" (CSC 2001:12-15). Meanwhile, 84% of mobile workers in the Wood Buffalo Region replied that the greatest challenge of working mobile was

[15] Half are 35 or older and the over 45 group constitutes the largest group of mobile workers (NAM 2007:i).

"separation from family and friends." The second closest "greatest challenge" of working mobile was "lack of involvement in community" (with roughly 6% of workers choosing this response) (NAM 2007:16). These two studies, however, are dated, only thinly investigate mobile worker wellbeing, and only investigate mobile worker identity from a demographic standpoint. At present, there remains a limited understanding of the lived experience of mobile workers in Canada, how they see themselves, and how mobile work affect the various facets of wellbeing (e.g., physical health, mental health, social health) (Temple Newhook et al. 2011).

Over approximately the past five years, there has been a groundswell of new research on mobile workers in various parts of the globe.[16] Within Canada, the Memorial University of Newfoundland has recently launched a seven-year national-scale research study, "On the Move: Employment-Related Geographical Mobility in the Canadian Context", which examines employment-related geographical mobility and its effects on workers, industry, government, and communities (Lougheed 2014). Another major research undertaking is the project, "Lives on the Move: A Qualitative Empirical Account of Long-distance Commute Work in the Russian Federation's Oil and Gas Industries", by Dr. Gertrude Eilmsteiner-Saxinger and other researchers at the University of Vienna. Eilmsteiner-Saxinger and colleagues found that these mobile livelihoods in Russia's energy sector are well regarded (i.e., these well-paying jobs can elevate the social status of individuals and families), are important influencers of community life in the 'sending regions', have

[16] Within the literature review of this paper, I specifically focus on mobile workers from developed countries; however, a number of researchers also explore the experience of mobile or migrant workers from developing countries. For example, see Brusle (2012); Foster and Taylor (2013); and Magana and Hovey (2000, 2003).

become institutionalized in education and training institutions, and that long distance commuting "does not necessarily negatively impact community wellbeing" (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger et al. 2011:1).

Another part of the world that has significantly stepped up research in mobile worker wellbeing is Australia. Due to its rapidly expanding mining industry, the Australian government issued an inquiry into the use of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) workforce practices and its effects on workers. The inquiry report, "Cancer of the Bush or Salvation for our Cities? Fly-in, Fly-out and Drive-in, Drive-out Workforce Practices in Regional Australia", found that a number of negative health effects were linked with FIFO or mobile work. These health effects included alcohol and substance abuse (e.g., a culture of binge drinking and drinking alone); poor diet and physical inactivity; increased sexually transmitted and blood borne infections; mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety); fatigue-related injury; an increase in injury related to high-risk behaviour; and challenges in accessing continual treatment for substance abuse issues due to workers' perpetual oscillation between work and home. The report concluded that these mobile worker health concerns signaled a need for "a targeted health policy focus" and companies should have to prove that there is no other reasonable alternative before flying in mobile workers (Commonwealth of Australia 2013).

A number of academic research studies on FIFO workers in Australia have also been completed recently. A study conducted by the Edith Cowan University for Lifeline WA, a suicide prevention agency, found that while there was a large focus on physical safety, a

focus on the emotional and mental health of workers was absent, citing one in five workers claimed that their employer did not have on-site mental health or counselling services (Lifeline WA 2013). Researchers found that where counselling services were available for workers, the main barrier to accessing these services was stigma and the 'suck it up princess' work culture. This study also found the some workers were financially overcommitted and, because of this, were unable to take time off or quit, leading to feelings of being trapped and powerless. On the positive side, researchers found that workers were purportedly engaging in effective coping behaviours (e.g., communicating with family and friends), more so than non-effective ones (e.g., ignoring personal needs, withdrawing emotionally, substance abuse). Relatedly, a multi-methods study by Sibbel (2010) found no significant differences in psychological wellbeing, relationship satisfaction, and perceptions of family function with mine workers and their partners when compared to the general population in Australia. Moreover, in the first large cross-sectional survey with FIFO workers in Western Australia, Joyce et al. (2013) found lower reported mental health problems in FIFO workers than shift workers and other employment types. The authors hypothesized that this might be due to a self-selection bias (those individuals who choose FIFO do so because they are mentally fit for the challenge). Still, other research asserts that the mental wellbeing of mobile workers cannot be so easily dismissed; McPhedran and De Leo (2013) found that while there was a lack of empirical evidence to indicate that miners face a greater risk of suicide than men in other occupations, they did find that miners were significantly more likely to experience relationship problems prior to committing suicide. This finding suggests that relationship issues may be an important predictor of suicide among male miners. In

addition, a study by researchers at the University of Queensland, found that while a majority of workers surveyed (75%) reported overall good or very good levels of physical and mental health, 20% reported sleep disturbances, 60% stated that the demands of FIFO work interfered with their home and family life, and 40% reported feeling lonely and socially isolated. Workers indicated that wellbeing and retention could be improved upon via camp designs that: maximize peace and privacy for workers, include Internet in workers' private rooms, and have access to online counselling services (Barclay et al. 2013).

Industry has also been actively building knowledge on the mobile work context and how it can be improved. A number of recent papers have been published by Target Logistics, the largest US supplier of mobile workforce accommodations. These 'White Papers' explore ways in which mobile worker wellbeing can be enhanced through housing, sleep, and recreation (Angel 2014; Chandler 2014; Rothstein 2013; Wanjek 2013). Psychosocial stressors for employees in the oil and gas sector, such as substance abuse, shift work, and fatigue, have also gained greater attention by global industry organizations (IPIECA and OGP 2007, 2010, 2013); still, there exists significant gaps in understanding, measuring, and managing psychosocial stressors among workers working in remote and extremely remote locations in the resource sector (Martin 2014 pers. comm.).

Factors Which Affect Health[17]

A central focus of this paper is describing *how* the mobile work context affects worker health or wellbeing. An important tool for understanding how health is shaped within a specific context is the 'determinants of health' framework. While developed much earlier, the determinants of health framework was made popular by Dahlgren and Whitehead in the early 1990s (Dahlgren and Whitehead 1991). The determinants of health model recognizes that there are number of different factors that shape our health – these include: individual lifestyle factors; social and community networks; and general socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions. The Public Health Agency of Canada has identified 12 key determinants of health, which shape the health outcomes of Canadians; these determinants are: 1. income and social status; 2. social support networks; 3. education and literacy; 4. employment and working conditions; 5. social environments; 6. physical environments; 7. personal health practices and coping skills; 8. healthy child development; 9. biology and genetic development; 10. health services; 11. gender; and 12. culture (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC] 2011). Another helpful theoretical tool for understanding health in the work context is Karasek's Job-Demand Control (JDC) model. Karasek's model theorizes that high job demands and low job control lead to job strain; and that this strain can result in negative physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., increased blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, alcohol abuse) (Karasek 1979). Both of these models can help us better understand the ways in which health may be influenced within mobile work settings. Below, I 'zoom in' on the

[17] Within this paper, I use the terms 'health' and 'wellbeing' interchangeably.

interconnections between masculinity and health for men in rural and resource-based contexts.

Masculinity and Health in Rural and Resource-Based Settings

'Masculinity', within the context of my research, is understood from a social constructionist and relational perspective. That is, I understand gender, not as two fixed categories, male and female, but as "a set of social constructed relationships which are produced and reproduced through people's actions" (Gerson and Peiss 1985:327). Therefore, gender is not something a person is, but is something a person does, via everyday social interactions (Bohan 1993; Crawford 1995). Furthermore, the concept of 'frontier masculinity' is particularly helpful for understanding the type of masculinity/masculinities within my research context of the Alberta Oil Sands. Frontier masculinity is a type of masculinity associated with resource extraction frontiers. The frontier mentality is characterized by toughness, tenacity, rugged individualism, emotional self-reliance, and personal isolation (Miller 2004; Prasad 1997; Quam-Wickham 1999). Furthermore, new research suggests, that in the Marcellus Shale Region of the United States, this traditional 'frontier masculinity' is being 'undone'. That is, due to the strong emphasis on safety in the oil and gas industry, a new masculine culture, one that puts more onus on personal safety, is being practiced (Filteau 2012). Little is known, however, to what extent this remaking of the masculine work culture is occurring within the Alberta and Canadian resource sector contexts.

> "Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it" (hooks 1998:518).

Furthermore, with the exception of bell hooks, few feminist scholars have recognized the negative impacts that masculine beliefs, attitudes, and practices have on men's health. In fact, "gender studies" in health often focuses exclusively on women's issues, while "[h]ealth concerns associated with men's gender have remained largely unrecognized" (Courtenay 2006:139). Not surprisingly, there exists a dearth of qualitative empirical data on men's health experiences (Robertson 2007). For a majority of people both inside and outside academia, masculinity (e.g., rural masculinity, frontier masculinity) has become naturalized, taken-for-granted, and invisible (Campbell and Mayerfeld Bell 2000). Below is a quote from a rural man interviewed in a study by Fellows (1996) which challenges this 'naturalized' masculine identity:

> "Geared toward being strong, silent and tough, I accumulated lots of layers as I went along. I didn't feel tough at all, but I certainly created a veneer for myself" (13).

Gender has significant implications for the health and wellbeing of men (Northern Health 2010, 2011). For example, a number of behavioral risk factors are more common amongst rural men than among rural women or non-rural men; these include: tobacco use, reckless driving, reluctance to access counselling or health services, poor diet, heavy drinking, limited social support, and perceived insusceptibility to risk (Courtenay 2006:147). Research also shows that men commit suicide three to 10 times more frequently than women (Northern Health 2010). In terms of job site risk, statistics show that the highest fatality rates occur in the resource extraction industries and it is largely

men's lives that are lost (Krahn, Lowe, and Hughes 2007). Despite these findings, little research exists with respect to the influence of rural or frontier masculinity on men's health (Courtenay 2006), with men's shorter lifespan being accepted as a biological given (Courtenay 2000). Moreover, it remains unclear why men in rural spaces adopt attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that undermine their health (Courtenay 2006). Only in the past few years, and predominantly in Australia, have researchers begun to focus on the specific health behaviours and health outcomes for FIFO or mobile workers (Joyce et al. 2012).

Studies in the resource sector have shown that masculinity is deeply embedded within the history, institutions, and psyches of resource-based industries and those who work within them (Hogan and Pursell 2008; Miller 2004; Northern Health 2011; Quam-Wickham 1999; Wicks 2002). Increasingly, more attention is being paid to masculine work cultures and the health implications of 'being a man' in the resource sector. For example, in British Columbia (BC), Canada, a recent study revealed that men living and working in the resource sector in northern BC had higher rates of cancer, suicide, occupational deaths, chronic disease, and lower access to health care than other men in the province (Northern Health 2011). Due to these lower health outcomes, the BC's Northern Health Authority launched a creative social marketing campaign called the "Northern BC Man Challenge". The campaign includes a website populated with men's health information and tips for healthy living. Similarly, campaigns to promote men's health in rural and resource-based contexts are also taking place in Australia (Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health 2011).

In the next section – and via the findings from my in-depth qualitative interviews with mobile workers and other key informants – I explore how the mobile work arrangement affects worker identity and wellbeing in the Alberta Oil Sands.

Part IV: Findings and Discussion

> "What ought to be interesting…is the unfolding of the lived life rather than the confirmation of some theory…Let the story itself be our discovery" (Coles 1989:22).

Much can be learned through story. The analysis of my mobile worker narratives was based on two main research questions: *1. Who are the male mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands? That is, what are the varied lived experiences and storied identities of these men?; and 2. How does the mobile work context affect the wellbeing of male mobile workers?*

Below, and in light of my two research questions, I weave my research data within the existing literature, describe how my data 'speak back' to what is already known, and identify the new insights that my research findings add to this important body of knowledge.

Who are the Mobile Workers of the Alberta Oil Sands?

The 'Thrivers' Vs. the 'Strugglers'

> *You know, I see a lot of guys here – focused. At the same time, they are going to the gym. They look good; they are healthy. They got their iPod on and they are*

> *smiling. And then I've seen some really screwed up guys here, some really sad individuals – not healthy, looking distant, not happy at all. Miserable. [MW10]*

Who are the male mobile workers of the Alberta Oil Sands? What are the varied lived experiences of these men? The identity of mobile workers is often portrayed as a singular one: young single men, with little education, and 'money to burn'. However, my research revealed, via workers' narratives, a diverse array of experiences. Still, worker identities appeared to fall into two main worker 'archetypes'.

The development of archetypes can be an effective sociological tool for understanding the spectrum of actors in the social world, as well as the social forces differentially acting upon them. Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, for example, in describing his theory of 'liquid life', identifies two separate archetypes of individuals in the liquid modern society[18] – the 'tourists' and the 'vagabonds'. The tourists are the 'global elite', they are well-educated, well-heeled, and can travel the world with ease, flowing from one beckoning opportunity to the next; meanwhile, the vagabonds are the global 'refugees', scavenging for work, getting stuck in the lower socioeconomic stations of life, and experiencing sharp insecurities and anxiety (Bauman 1997). Similarly, my analysis of mobile workers' stories revealed that these workers' experiences could also be seen as falling into one of two 'archetypal' identities, which could be conceptualized as being located at two opposing ends of a sliding continuum. These two archetypal identities are: the 'Thrivers' – those who were doing fairly well to very well, by overcoming the lifestyle's challenges, such as being away from family, working long hours across a long

[18] Bauman (2005) describes 'liquid modern society' or 'liquid life' or as "a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty" (2). This is in contrast to the 'solid modern era', which was characterized by stability, permanence, and heaviness (Ibid).

stretch of days, living in remote settings, on one end; and the 'Strugglers' – those who are really struggling, particularly with issues related to money, relationships, and substance abuse – on the opposite end. One key informant in the helping profession describes the key qualities that characterize the 'Thrivers':

> *People who are ambitious, do well. They are grounded. They won't turn to drugs. If you know what you like, who you are, what you stand for, then it is easier to excel here. Motivation makes things better. [HP1]*

Another key informant, a labour union representative, elucidates the differences between the 'Thrivers' and the 'Strugglers' below:

> *The people who have a purpose for being here – and a real clear purpose – they have a new family – they are trying to pay off a house, they are trying to save for their daughter's education, those people are really focused and they don't end up spending $100 a night on alcohol and stupid things that you can get into. The people who come and don't have a clear purpose of why they are up here and why they are making good money – those are the guys who learn to spend money very well. [EX7]*

The same key informant offers his brother's story as an example of a 'Struggler.' EX7 describes:

> *At 24 years old, he had a new Corvette, he had 2 houses, he had all of these things, because he was working like crazy and he also had debt. So you actually get into a rut, you're moving backwards even though you should be moving forward. And because he was single, he really had no clear goal in mind. So he kind of just took it one day at a time and spent today what he made yesterday. That was his life.*

It is important to note that even those men who were doing well still experienced the strain of the intermittent disconnect from family and social networks, a longing for more individual freedom and leisure activities at work camps, and the external pressures of the boom (as I describe in Theme Four – "The Oil Comes First"). One mobile worker, who reported that he was doing well and enjoying the benefits of the mobile work lifestyle, states:

> *I've had some of the greatest times of my life up here, and I've had some of the absolute worst days of my life up here. There are definitely times when you get into your room and you're away from your family and kids, and you think, "What the hell am I doing here?" [MW10]*

However, in general, the 'Thrivers' had well-defined goals, held an optimistic outlook toward their mobile work lifestyle, and employed positive coping practices (e.g., working out, connecting with family via Skype). Not surprisingly, those who were thriving tended to state that the mobile work lifestyle helped facilitate the living of 'the good life', whereas those men who were struggling did not see mobile work as a means to living 'the good life'. My research suggests that living 'the good life' as a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands is not only about making good money, but perhaps more importantly, it is about making good *choices*. As MW16 states: "And from what they say on the radio – go up to Fort McMurray and make $100,000 and live the good life. Well, it depends on what you do with your life. It's choices. It's what you want to do."

MW16 elucidates his own personal philosophy and experience of living 'the good life' as a mobile worker:

> *I consider 'the good life' family and experiences with your family. Money is only an instrument. Basically if you wanted to go somewhere and you had an extra couple of dollars – you could go there. But you don't have to go there to have the enjoyment of the family, right? It's just a different experience. I am not big on the money thing. I understand that you need money to be able to pay for stuff, but it's not the important driving factor. Working up here, it allows you to pay for things, but what is really important is to be able to go back to the family and enjoy the family and the experiences you have with your wife and children.*

In contrast, MW4 stated that mobile work did not allow him to live 'the good life' for various reasons. At 21 years old, this apprentice electrician reported that Fort McMurray did not deliver him the "big bucks" everyone else seemed to be making – and what's more, he was unable to hold onto a girlfriend due to his out-of-town work schedule. MW4 states:

> *You have to have drive, but I just can't do it. I just can't. If I see the same people all of the time, and I really don't know them, and I don't like them, I just, I just hate it. It gets worse and worse and my attitude gets worse and worse. And it gets to the point where it affects my quality of work, because I just don't want to be there anymore. And you just stop caring. It sucks.*

Similarly, other workers who expressed that mobile work did not facilitate the living of 'the good life' mainly attributed it to the separation from home and family life, and the institutionalizing and alienating forces of camp life.

The next section explores the mobile worker wellbeing themes that I identified within my research interviews.

How Does the Mobile Work Context Affect the Wellbeing of Mobile Workers?

Wellbeing, within my research, was operationalized via the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* domains and subdomains. That is, I structured my research questions around how the mobile work context affects physical health, stress levels and mental health, and

personal code of conduct (Being); social belonging and connection to one's physical environment (Belonging); and ability to set and achieve goals and aspirations (Becoming). In my analysis of mobile worker and key informant narratives, I found that the mobile work context poses a number of challenges to mobile worker wellbeing. These 'wellbeing challenges' appear to cut across all three wellbeing domains – Being, Belonging, and Becoming. Overall, I identified five overarching wellbeing themes: 1. 'Living Three Lives'; 2. "Fort McMoney": Danger versus Opportunity; 3. Work Camps: "It's like living in jail only you're getting paid"; 4. "The Oil Comes First"; and 5. 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon. The themes echo, as well as add novel insight into, many of the findings from existing literature; illuminate the complex inter-linkages between identity and wellbeing; and, overall, elucidate a richer, more holistic understanding of mobile workers' lived experiences and identities. I explore these mobile worker wellbeing themes below.

Theme 1: 'Living Three Lives'

'Living two lives' is a theme that has been previously identified in the mobile work literature (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005). This theme refers to a phenomenon which occurs when workers, upon returning home, are forced to 'reorganize' the whole social and personal context of their lives from the 'cowboy culture' of offshore to the family culture of home (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988; Solheim 1988). While 'living two lives' is a theme that runs through my mobile worker narratives, my research also offers a more in-depth look at the full trajectory of experience and highlights workers' experiences in a largely ignored and under-theorized dimension of the mobile work arrangement – what I term 'the commute-sphere'. I revise the 'living two lives' theme to

'living *three* lives' to underscore the importance of the commute-sphere in the wellbeing of workers, and how it is a 'liminal[19] sphere' that marks the transition between home and work. Entering and exiting the liminal commute-sphere is characterized by particularly stressful 'transition points' as workers shift from one identity (one's work self) to another (one's home self). The intensity of stress felt at these 'transition points' depends upon a number of factors, such as a worker's personal disposition, as well as whether or not they worked away from home in the past.

My research revealed that making the shift to mobile work, without any prior experience in a mobile work (or military) setting, is not easy. In the beginning, I found that there is an initial shock and adjustment period for these men as they arrive and spend their first few nights at a mobile work camp. EX7 describes: *First nights were horrible. Actually I remember I cried every night. It was brutal – you go from being at home and it's comfortable – and laying there again – six weeks of this*. Another mobile worker, one from Prince Edward Island, describes his first few hours at a work camp:

> *The toughest thing I ever did in my life was leaving home. Like I lived and worked in Charlottetown all my life. When I first stepped through those doors and into the work camp, I was scared to death. Like I said I never, at 46 years old – it was quite a decision to make, to leave everything that you have, everybody that you know, and go somewhere and start over. I was scared to death. I remember sitting in the camp, and the camp had just opened, and you're sitting there and you're thinking every eye in the place is watching ya because you don't know anybody. And I didn't know a soul. Never knew one person. But it came out pretty good (he laughs). [MW14]*

The mobile worker [MW14] above had been doing mobile work for three years, had

[19] 'Liminal' pertains to the threshold or an initial stage in a process. Victor Turner, an anthropologist in the 1960s, described liminality as the state of being "betwixt and between" (Charles La Shure, "What is Liminality?" Retrieved April 22, 2014 (http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality).

successfully adapted to it, and was on track to retire in less than two years. However, EX7, described that he could not successfully adapt, and did not continue on the mobile work path. Even workers who reported that they were living 'the good life' described the almost 'routinized unease' of having to pack up and head north at the end of their days off.

A second phenomenon of mobile work that I explored was – *living it*. It appeared that as mobile workers shift through the boom-sphere – from the home-sphere to the work-camp-sphere via the commute-sphere (and back again) – so do their identities. My findings are consistent with research on offshore oil workers and suggest that some mobile workers tend to 'take on' a work identity characterized by frontier masculinity (e.g., coarse language, gruffer tone, participating in drinking subcultures) while they are in the work-camp-sphere (Solheim 1988). From my research interviews, I found that the frontier masculine identity reportedly allows workers to "get the job done" and to cope with the discomfort of being away from home for extended periods of time. One mobile worker describes his work-life personality:

> *MW9: I found it easier to almost adapt to – to almost be a different person when I am at work than to be the real me (somebody who maybe looks at the big picture of things). So that is one thing that kind of bothers me that I have to put on a mask to fit in.*
>
> *Angela: So what does that mask look like?*
>
> *MW9: Well, maybe just a little more tougher and rougher; kind if like the old 'Dave', I don't know. Yeah, so I don't know. Just I guess a lot of times up there the only way to get your message through is to force it. That's not just up here – around the Edmonton area and the plants there too. But it's worse, it's definitely worse up here – you know you get a rougher breed of worker and stuff like that.*

The short narrative above elucidates the experience of a mobile worker and the challenge of negotiating his identity and sense of self across the boom-sphere. His reference to the old 'Dave' referred to who he 'used' to be; that is, he felt he was reverting back to his 'angry' days when he had a substance abuse issue. While Dave remained sober during his mobile work lifestyle, his shift in personality, albeit somewhat conscious, was a stressful experience.

In addition, one key informant (a labour union representative), describes what he observes (from the 'outside' looking 'in') with mobile workers and identity:

> *You see that up here, these guys have family, they have kids, they have a life back home. They come up here and they lose that family man identity and they become this other rough, construction worker and they – of course the language is horrible and they'll yell at you and they'll do this kind of stuff. And of course we kind of say, well why do you flick that switch and we'll even say to them – would you talk to your family that way, like what's going on here? [EX7]*

As illustrated in the quotes above, the masculine work culture appears to be present within the Alberta Oil Sands work sites. With some workers, while in the work-camp-sphere, practicing this rougher, gruffer approach. In addition to helping to get the job done, other key informants described that workers tend to take on this rougher, gruffer identity because they feel that there are no consequences or limited 'social control' measures (i.e., family is not present), and that it also an outlet for 'blowing off steam' or channeling work-life stress.

Meanwhile, in the home-sphere, and in the 'home life', mobile workers reported both positive and negative aspects. On the whole, the extended periods of time off were,

second to high pay, the most valued and celebrated feature of mobile work. For example, some workers reported that they were able to enjoy a concentrated time off, unlike other more traditional jobs. MW10 describes: *You basically work for six months of the year. How many people can say that for six months of the year they can live any life that they want? You know, I get two weeks holidays every two weeks.* While MW10 worked a 2-weeks on and 2-weeks off, other mobile workers who had tighter shifts (8-days on and 5-days off, or 10-days on and 4-days off) felt that time in the home-sphere was too compressed, too short, and, given the one to two day commute, acutely stressful. Workers stated that not knowing when they were going to be able to go home was particularly straining, a finding consistent with research in the military deployment context (Buckman et al. 2010). However, as Buckman et al. note (2010) more research is needed to identify the effects of deployment length on wellbeing, and to identify the optimal deployment lengths for the health and wellbeing of individuals in particular settings.

The commute-sphere and the 'transition points' (when workers were either re-entering the home-sphere or exiting the home-sphere) were two specific areas that seemed to acutely affect the wellbeing of workers. For example, when I asked the question, *"If there is one thing you could change about your work situation, what would it be?"* the majority of workers who travelled to Fort McMurray, via their personal vehicles, described the anxiety and unease associated with their commute on Highway 63, and how the commute was the single worst aspect of being a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands. A number of workers described motor vehicle accidents that they were involved

in, near-misses, and the accidents in which one or more of their co-workers were killed. Other workers, when asked about the challenges of mobile work, were drawn into talking about what I have termed 'transition points'. MW9 describe his negative experience related to leaving the home-sphere:

> *I was really depressed on Thursday when I had to fly back up to Fort McMurray. Like two days before I am coming up, I get anxiety. My heart rate will increase and I will feel stressed out. It's kind of stupid because once I get here, I calm down, and once I am through a day or two of work, I am just in the groove. No big deal.*

Similarly, other mobile workers also revealed that preparing to leave the home-sphere and saying goodbye to family members, especially young children, was particularly stressful. MW16 describes his experience:

> *One of the biggest things is like my daughter – for the first four and ½ years of her life – she wouldn't give me a hug when I left, right? Now she's 'Daddy's Girl' because this is the most I've been home in my life, right? And one of my buddies that I worked with – same thing, right? Always going and coming back. And his oldest daughter, Savanna – he was basically ready to go and he was giving everybody hugs, and he was getting ready to go to the airport, and he couldn't find her. He couldn't find his daughter! He goes out and he says, okay, I guess I am not giving her a hug. He goes to the back door and calls for her and his clothes were all over the floor. And, here she is, laying in his duffel bag.*

Relatedly, a few mobile workers also talked about the difficult 'transition point' of returning to the home-sphere and not feeling like they 'fit' in. MW15 describes:

> *Sometimes, with me, like when I go home, it takes me awhile to adjust. Do I belong here? You get the feeling 'do I belong here?' because you've been away for so long. Like sometimes I feel like I disrupt the flow of life at home. But it's all in your head.*

While the existing literature describes the psychological disorder – the 'intermittent husband syndrome' (an anxiety disorder for wives whose spouses work in the offshore oil platforms) (Morrice and Taylor 1978) – I am not aware of research focused specifically on male mobile workers themselves in relation to their maladjustment to home-life. I believe that this presents a major gap in mobile work research, and again, demonstrates a disregard for the lived experiences and wellbeing of male mobile workers. Despite these 'transition point' challenges, workers, on the whole, did state that their children eventually adapted to their repeated absences and that they also experienced a number of benefits. One worker talked about having "Daddy alone time"; that is, free time to do the things he liked to do, but didn't necessarily have the free time to do at home – working out, watching sports, reading, meditating, and reflecting on life. Other workers described that being a mobile worker allowed them to conquer fears – and that they felt more independent, more successful, and more pride in providing things for their families (and for their retirement) that they were unable to provide before. Furthermore, many men described that being a mobile worker, and being away for long periods of time, gave them a renewed appreciation for family, friends, and home.

Theme 2: "Fort McMoney" – Danger Vs. Opportunity

> *MW2: What brings me here to Fort McMurray is the money. Not the love of the job. It's the money.*
>
> *Angela: Do you think that is that the same for most people you work with?*
>
> *MW2: Yep, I think so. They just don't want to admit it. I don't mind. (Both laugh.)*

Money was a major factor of the mobile work lifestyle that affected wellbeing – both positively and negatively. All mobile workers cited money as the single most important factor of why they were doing what they were doing. As one key informant notes:

> *There are tradespeople who love what they do and take pride in the perfect weld or the perfect piece of work, but the norm is still just to see work as a means to a paycheck. [EX7]*

One mobile worker highlighted the overall work orientation that exists up in the Alberta Oil Sands; that is, the intrinsic rewards of the job and loyalty to the company are effectively trumped by personal financial gain.

> *You go to work with the idea in mind that you are going to build a paycheck. And that's what it is all about, is building a paycheck. I don't think any of us ever say to ourselves, we're going to build Syncrude, you know what I mean, or that place would never get built. [MW1]*

Due to the opportunity to earn phenomenal money – with most workers saying that after coming up to Fort McMurray they have doubled or, in some cases, have even tripled their incomes – "life can get out of balance here really quick" [HP5]. The research participants below describe the unprecedented level of income they are earning and what it means to them:

> *Like I said earlier, I had months where I grossed $20,000 just working with my bare hands. So if you put that down on paper to having your own business, you have to have $4 million invested to make that kind of money. So there is nowhere on this continent that you can make that kind of money. [MW1]*

> *So you know I remember one guy saying to me, you know how good it feels to be in the lunchroom and nudge the other guy and go, "Hey, look at my paycheck this month." So there is that sense of power, there is that sense of achievement, that headiness of making money, whether we like to admit it or not. [HP5]*

While they are often undiscerningly coupled together, economic wellbeing does not necessarily translate into social wellbeing (Beckley 1995). This appeared to be true among the high-earning mobile workers that I interviewed; that is, while there is immense opportunity to be had in Fort McMurray, my research revealed that this opportunity also could lead to negative effects on worker wellbeing. Many research participants talked about the danger of workers getting addicted to making money and to buying 'toys'. In turn, this 'money' and 'consumer' addiction can lead to a loss in social connections, and to a loss of 'self'. The quotes below illustrate how working hard and making a lot of money can significantly shift your values to resemble what one addictions counsellor referred to as the *'Me, Myself and I Culture'* [HP10]. Key informants in the helping profession highlight the negative effects money can have on worker wellbeing below:

> *HP2: My husband and I have a friend up here who was always struggling with relationships. He has a lovely home, a brand new $70,000 truck, a Harley Davidson motorcycle worth $60,000, and he just bought another motorcycle for $40,000. And he just told my husband that he and his girlfriend just broke up. And my husband pointed out to him, "Well you notice your motorcycle, it only seats one."*
>
> *
>
> *HP5:I think you can get caught up in this lifestyle. You work hard, you've got all this money and you get that brand new truck and that brand new this and that, so there is a lot of showing – look what I can get. There is that power in it of "I can make this kind of money. And this is what I have to show for it." It's almost to show that "I've made it."*

*

HP10: I truly believe that the reason for the amount of addictions out here is because that type of behaviour, in the strong masculine work culture, is a very cold world.

HP11: It's very competitive. I make more money than you. My truck's bigger than yours.

Angela: And you said it was selfish. Why is it selfish?

HP11: I think because of the amount of money that they get paid out here.

HP10: Money compromises values, and consequently if you compromise your values, you are going to be selfish.

The quotes above echo the previously identified theme of 'Keeping Up with the Joneses' culture – a culture in which workers' social status was defined by money and showy material consumption (e.g., 'toys', such as new pickup trucks, quads, snowmobiles) (Parkins and Angell 2010). Similarly, I found that mobile workers, whose identity was built around making money and conspicuous consumption, soon experienced a deep level of unhappiness. Similarly, other studies have found that when individuals set and met only profit goals (versus "intrinsic aspirations" or "purpose goals" – to help others improve their lives, to learn and grow), the same unhappiness results (Pink 2009). When mobile workers placed the greatest priority on money, it appeared that interpersonal connections took the proverbial 'backseat'. One mobile worker describes the money-family tradeoff that can take place in mobile work settings; meanwhile, a second mobile worker offers his personal strategy on how to balance making money with taking care of one's family:

> *And if there is some emergency at home, like some guys are strapped to their work. Like they can't afford to take time off. They will say to their wife, "Look, do you need me to come home? Because I need to make money." [MW10]*
>
> *Another thing too, a lot of us guys that have been there a long time say you make your money as quick as you can and then get out. Don't fall in love with Fort McMurray, because I'll tell you what, the only reason you're there is for the money, eh, and a lot of people get greedy. Don't get too involved with it because while you're there making some money things are falling apart at some so. Just get in there, get her, and get out. [MW1]*

As I highlighted earlier in this paper with the 'Strugglers', earning a high income and making a significant amount of money can also come with the risk of overextending oneself – via acquiring too much credit and racking up too much debt. Interestingly, a recent economic study reports that accumulating debt, despite enjoying the highest incomes in the country, seems to be a broader societal trend for Alberta as a whole – and that the money addiction may not be exclusive to the mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands (CBC News 2013).

Theme 3: Work Camps – "It's like living in jail, only you're getting paid"

The theme of work camps feeling like prison is a theme that is well documented in the literature (Commonwealth of Australia 2013; Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988). While there has been a significant increase in the variety of camps and in the type of amenities offered at new work camps (lodges) in the Alberta Oil Sands, including luxury or 'resort' camps (Berkow 2012); on the whole, my research participants were based mainly in the more basic grade of camps, and thus the below comments reflect these particular contexts.

In general, mobile workers described work camps as very institutional and very neutralizing spaces – where workers existed on a monotonous and dull plane of life. Work camp spaces appeared to limit opportunities for individual freedom and self-expression. The security guards at the camps were also generally not looked upon favourably by workers, with some workers describing them as "patronizing". The below quotes by mobile workers offer various insights into these communal, somewhat nullifying, and alienating spaces.

> *MW3: Security at the camp is more frustrating than it's worth. I am not saying that you don't need security, I am just saying once I get passed that front door, why do I have to show my ID card again? Why do they care what colour of socks I wear? Which they did. Why do they care what types of shoes I wear? Which they did. Why do they care what I do in my free time? I am not on pay, if I want to wear a hat – I hate people who wear hats at dinnertime – but the point is, they say, with a big sign – NO HATS. Well, I am going to wear a hat, just to bug ya…I understand that I am on your site, but my hat's not going to hurt anybody. It's not like I am some guy on crack running around with a chainsaw chasing people.*
>
> *
>
> *MW5: Everything in your life is taken from you. Your family is taken from you, your friends are taken from you, your freedom is taken from you, it's just like living in jail, only you're getting paid. You go from your room, to the lunch trailer, to the bus, to work for 12 hours, and back to your room. It is very regimented and you fall into a routine and the days blend together and you don't even know what day it is until one day they tell you you're going home. There is no such thing as a weekend; everyday is a Monday morning.*
>
> *
>
> *Angela: Is there room for personal growth, up here?*
>
> *MW8: Not really. It is all just small talk. Small talk, I guess is what you would call it. When you're at work, you are either bitching about the camp, or the listening to the crude jokes that guys like to tell each other, but you know, the same thing. No one is talking about politics or I don't know, the concert in the city last night. That doesn't happen out here – it is all one-topic conversations, so you kind of forget how to talk about everyday things that happen to real people in*

> *real life, right? Another thing is the camp is staffed with 20 security guards roaming around and making sure that everyone is towing the line, or not breaking any rules. It is not a set-up you'd expect for adults making a living going to work. You don't expect to see babysitter wearing fake cop uniforms, right?*

Specific features of mobile work camps, such as a lack of freedom, a lack of recreational opportunities and activities for self-expression, and even lack of colour on the walls in these spaces contributed to decreased morale and a diminishing sense of self for workers. Workers essentially talked about putting their "real lives" on hold until they returned to their home-spheres. Work camps, as extension of work sites, appeared to be 'high demand' and 'low control' settings. In this way, and by using Karasek's Job-Demand Control Model (1979) as a theoretical tool, we can hypothesize that these work camp spaces have the potential to contribute to negative mental and physical health outcomes for workers. While the health effects of mobile/FIFO work have been recently investigated for workers in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2013), the links between work camp settings and the physical and mental health outcomes for mobile workers in the Alberta and Canadian contexts are less known, and stand as a significant research gap.

Theme 4: "The Oil Comes First"

"The Oil Comes First" theme appears to speak to the larger question of: *How does working within a mega-scale industrial project during an oil boom translate at a human-level?* Many mobile workers alluded to this felt lack of value and respect by industry employers during the economic boom. Many workers expressed that during the boom they felt pressure to work long hours, to maximize production and profit, and felt if they did not, they would be replaced. These workers talked about "feeling like a number" or

"a cog in the machine". One worker described that the rapid pace of work and push to move workers and machinery – at the expense of worker safety – resulted in the underlying and implicit mantra of "The Oil Comes First". "The Oil Comes First" also seems to underscore the portrayal of the boom as bringing only benefits to the Alberta economy, meanwhile, underplaying the risks to human safety, human sustainability, and wellbeing. One mobile worker describes:

> *You know, Highway 63 doesn't get the recognition any where near as where it should have. The media, you know what I mean, you'll hear about this guy that died on 63 and it's just quieted down you know they don't want too many people to say much about it because the oil comes first. [MW1]*

The four themes above describe mobile work features and conditions that place varying degrees of stress on mobile workers. The fifth worker wellbeing theme describes how some workers, particularly those moving towards the 'Struggler' end of the spectrum, handle these multiple stressors within the shifting context of mobile work.

Theme 5: 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle'

> "'I am really fucked up right now and I need to go see someone for help,' is not the easiest thing to say." [MW10]

'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon is a theme that describes the worst-case scenario for 'Strugglers' in mobile work settings. Key informants explained that the mobile work context contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation due to shift work schedules and the physical displacement of men from their social support networks – primarily their family and friends. Key informants described how many of these mobile

working men are exhausted, deprived of sleep, intimacy, and connection. Consistent with the literature on masculinity and health, key informants explained that due to masculine work cultures, and what it means to be a man in these spaces, and due to the tight shift work schedules, men do not generally talk about their feelings or seek help. Therefore, men tend to internalize these feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, and anxiety – or put their mental and physical health 'on hold'. 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle', then, is a metaphor that illustrates this process and eventual outcome. HP8 describes:

> *The pressures are so high and some of these guys, they're just, they're hurting, and you can see it in their eyes. They're exhausted. And, and you know there is never an excuse for the alcohol abuse or domestic violence. Ever. And we know that. However, it is almost justifiable to see that some of these guys have had their limit and they snap. Because how much deprivation do we have to have for sleep and lack of intimacy and connection with relationships and our friends? And, I mean, it's only a matter of time, it's like a bombshell. And we say it's like a pop bottle, you put your finger over top and you shake it and shake it and shake it until you can't do it anymore. And you lift your lid and it's going to spew all over the place and everything's going to be affected around you.*

Furthermore, two key informants in the helping profession underscore loneliness among workers as a serious issue that is not talked about:

> *HP7: If I had to say what the biggest issue is for men up here – I would say loneliness. It's broken hearts. Failed goals, failed relationships. It's being emotionally broken somehow.*
>
> *
>
> *HP5: I think there is a lot of loneliness within men that men don't admit. Maybe they are lonely, maybe they are scared. I think it's not talked about.*

Another key informant, a labour union representative, also highlighted a significant issue in work camps likely related to a lack of connection workers have with intimate partners – and that is the rampant pornography in workers' rooms. EX7 describes:

> *Pornography in camp, it's just horrible. And I don't know – I guess some people just don't think it's a bad thing or whatever, but that's another form of coping, I think, from being away from your wife or girlfriend if you have one. It's damaging in its own regard and I would say it's probably more prevalent than drugs or alcohol. It's everywhere. You can't get away from it. You have Internet in all of these rooms, but you never – you can address alcoholism and drug problems because those are diagnosable problems, but you can't diagnose – maybe you can, be we don't diagnose a pornography addiction even though it could be equally as damaging to that guy's family.*

Alongside pornography, the counsellors in Fort McMurray that I interviewed also mentioned that infidelity was also a major issue (for both mobile workers and for their spouses at home). As described previously, but also related to 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon, addictions counsellors talked about the addiction that some men have to working and to making money. HP8 describes the process by which some workers 'lose themselves':

> *HP8: What happens here is that they are overworked and they lose themselves. They don't have any time for themselves. And so we've had guys who said they love to go fishing, or they love to go hunting or hiking and we ask them, "When was the last time you did that?" And they just stare at you. And so they are not embracing the things they love to do because it is work, work, work. If we are not connected to our beliefs and our relationships, then something inside of us really gets destroyed. And I think it starts there.*

It appears, based on the factors above, mobile work in the Alberta Oil Sands, and poor choices by the mobile worker, can contribute to a degradation of a workers' identity and a loss of 'self'. These factors are a lack of productive and positive goals that extend beyond just money, a lack of social support networks, a lack of time for oneself, a lack of

intimacy, and a lack of self worth. Furthermore, entrenched in the masculine work culture, is the practice of unhealthy coping mechanisms. Alcohol and drug use is one such coping mechanism that has been normalized within these oil and gas settings (Shepell fgi 2009), with one young mobile worker [MW4] describing how his boss would send "care packages of booze" via the supply plane to the highly remote work camp he was staying. In my research, key informants identified that up to 40 to 50% of workers engage in illicit drug use – either as a way to enhance work performance, or as a way to cope with stress. Another young mobile worker [MW2], in response to my question, "What does it take to make it as a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands?" replied, "Just keep your nose clean." Another dangerous and unhealthy coping mechanisms that I identified through my research interviews are taking a 'time-out' by driving really fast on the highway.

In terms of solutions, key informants in the helping profession pointed to the need for employers to encourage workers to feel safe in asking for help. As HP8 describes: *It's people caring about people again. We've lost that with the whole survival of the fittest.* This echoes other findings from earlier literature, which calls on industry to make efforts to "humanize the work culture" (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988). Other addictions counsellors pointed out the difficulty workers had in getting consistent help for emotional or addictions issues due to their shift work schedules, as well as due to the firmly entrenched 'Big Boys Don't Cry Culture'. These long-standing substance abuse issues, coupled with the additional stressors of the mobile work setting, require further research.

Key Features of the Mobile Work Environment that Affect Wellbeing

The mobile work context is a distinct yet highly diverse environment, which can uniquely influence the wellbeing of male mobile workers. Based on the determinants of health framework, we know that each mobile worker who enters the mobile work context has a unique personal disposition, which can be shaped by many determinants external to the mobile work lifestyle, such as one's biology and genetic development, culture, and social support networks. In this way, not all 'Strugglers' are languishing due to the *direct* effects of the mobile work lifestyle. For example, substance abuse has been identified as a far-reaching issue for workers in the oil and gas sector and mobile/FIFO work lifestyle (Commonwealth of Australia 2012; Shepell fgi 2009). As literature on substance use and work indicates, some workers arrive on-scene, already burdened with either susceptibility towards substance abuse or a substance abuse issue. In fact, one research participant in the helping profession called mobile work the perfect "avoidance occupation" [HP10]; that is, the high pay and private living conditions (individual rooms for each worker) enable individuals with addictions to both fund their addiction and engage in addiction-related practices without being in view of family, friends, or coworkers. Furthermore, as identified in the "edgework" literature, some individuals are attracted to particular jobs that involve risk, such as in the resource sector (Kidder 2006; Lyng 1990); interestingly, these types of risk-seeking personalities also tend to have a higher susceptibility toward substance abuse and addictions (Nakken 1996). With this acknowledged, there are specific features of the mobile work context, however, that do appear to influence worker wellbeing.

Based on the research interviews and the wellbeing themes above, I identified five key features of the mobile work environment that affect worker wellbeing: 1. rigid shift work schedules and mobility (in which there is high demand on and low control for workers and a division of life into disparate spheres); 2. the institutional-like settings of work camps (these spaces tend to limit opportunities for personal freedom, self-expression, and tend to alienate workers); 3. high pay (this high pay can facilitate goals; on the flip-side, high pay can facilitate the overextension of credit, mounting debt, and feelings of being 'trapped'); 4. emphasis on oil production and money during resource booms (this more intangible factor limits one's sense of importance, sense of self, and can serve to alienate workers); and 5. masculine work cultures (these cultures, characterized by frontier masculine ideals, can reinforce the notion that 'Big Boys Don't Cry' and promote unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse).

Part V: Conclusions

This paper, unlike other boomtown studies, puts the spotlight on the 'shadow population' and the myths and stereotypes surrounding the identity of this shadow population. This paper challenges the notion or 'grand narrative' that mobile workers are 'rig pigs' and that the health outcomes of these men are due to their own personal and destructive choices; and, from the new perspective counter-stories offer, opens up the space for understanding mobile worker experiences, identities, and vulnerabilities.

Given the diversity of stories and experiences, the question of – *Who are mobile workers?* – defies any easy characterization or fixed identity. Still, from the mobile worker stories I collected, there does appear to be two major archetypal identities

emerging. These identities can be thought of as existing on opposing ends of a sliding continuum. I have termed these two identities: the 'Thrivers' (those who are overcoming mobile work challenges and thriving, e.g., reaching financial goals, successfully balancing work and family life); and the 'Strugglers' (those whose mental and physical wellbeing has been significantly degraded by mobile work stressors and other pre-existing stressors or dispositions to the point that healthy human functioning has been impaired, e.g., individual is depressed or has an addiction).

Linked with these archetypal identities, I have also identified five major wellbeing themes arising out of workers' and key informants' narratives. These themes represent major 'meta-stories' (stories of stories), which emerge from workers' individual experiences and which cut across the domains of the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* model. Overall, the wellbeing themes are multi-faceted and speak to the dual nature – that is, both the danger and opportunity – that the mobile work arrangement presents to these men – and their sense of self – and the way these men must negotiate their identities and wellbeing through choices of reward and sacrifice. These wellbeing themes are: 'Living Three Lives' (i.e., living the home-sphere, the commute-sphere, the work-camp-sphere); "Fort McMoney": Danger versus Opportunity (i.e., the danger of debt and feeling trapped versus the opportunity to set and reach not just financial goals, but also more meaningful family and personal goals); Work Camps: "It's like living in jail only you're getting paid" (i.e., the lack of freedom, lack of opportunities for self-expression and for personal growth); the emphasis on oil production and profit during the oil boom and the accompanying "The Oil Comes First" mantra (which made workers feel "like a

number" and served to alienate them); and 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon (i.e., the internalization of stress, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and the reaching one's breaking point).

In addition, based on these wellbeing themes, there appears to be five major factors of the mobile work context that affect wellbeing. These factors are: 1. rigid shift work schedules and mobility (together these factors represent high demand and low control situations for workers); 2. the institutional-like settings of work camps (these spaces limit opportunities for personal freedom, self-expression, and personal growth); 3. high pay (high pay can facilitate goals/can facilitate debt); 4. emphasis on oil production and money during resource booms (the invisible, but felt mantra of 'The Oil Comes First' limits one's sense of importance and serves to alienate workers); and 5. masculine work cultures (these reinforce the notion that 'Big Boys Don't Cry' and promote unhealthy coping mechanisms).

To conclude, I draw three major points to the reader's attention. First, I highlight that mobile workers in the Fort McMurray area are an over-stereotyped, under-researched, and growing population. Early research into "bunkhouse men" painted them as rootless and running from something – with their deviance both inherent in their characters and being further instilled by the harsh physical and social environments of frontier camp life. This perceived image and identity of the camp man, in the 100 years that have followed, has remained relatively static. Mobile workers today are still perceived by local residents, within popular media and public discourse as a outsiders, as a vector bearing ill

things (e.g., substance abuse, impaired driving, prostitution, STIs, violence and crime) – researchers and planners alike even talk about "worker-proofing" our host communities (Storey 2013, pers. comm.). However, we often attribute this deviance to a worker's personal character and work culture – without challenging these roots and linkages. My findings related to identity – the 'Thrivers' and the 'Strugglers' – open up a greater understanding of who these men are, and how these identities are not fixed, but fluid. Furthermore, the themes that I have identified related to worker wellbeing begin to challenge the firmly entrenched belief that 'mobile workers are deviant'. Through these storied themes, I illustrate the vulnerability of workers and the factors that contribute to this vulnerability.

Second, I (re)assert, (much like early sociologists did), that the mobile work context plays a significant role in shaping worker identity and wellbeing – and that these concepts are intimately linked. However, while early sociologists studying the "bunkhouse man" saw masculinity as a positive and celebrated attribute, which helped men survive the early working and living conditions, my study showed that masculine beliefs, attitudes, and practices had a negative effect on men's identity and wellbeing. Moreover, my study revealed that unlike the early camp man who was 'running from something', 'contemporary camp men', and in particular men who fall under the identity of the 'Thrivers', are embedded within a rich network of education, family values, family connection, financial goals, quality of life aspirations, and choice. What has remained relatively consistent throughout the trajectory of the early camp man to contemporary camp man is the psychosocial stress inherent in camp life.

The worker wellbeing themes that I identified all underscore the critical importance of identity (and coherent sense of self) in mobile worker wellbeing. That is, at the core of each of the worker wellbeing themes, a worker's sense of self was being challenged. This is concurs with Sennett's "corrosion of character" idea – that the temporary, episodic, and insecure nature of work in our modern era does not allow individuals to shape a coherent narrative of their lives. For example – as these men shift from the home-sphere (home communities) to the commute-sphere (travel by car, bus, plane) to the work-camp-sphere (work sites and work camps) – so do their identities. The 'transition points' between two spheres (e.g., the first day a worker arrives in the home-sphere, the first day a worker returns to the work-camp-sphere) appeared to be acutely stressful for workers. This stress could be explained by the disjointedness of one identity ('work identity') meeting another identity ('home identity'). I also identified the commute-sphere as an important space that affects worker wellbeing – but is often not considered as part of 'work'. Still, many mobile workers talked about the stressful commute home or commute to work on Highway 63.

Third, I emphasize that the mobile work context is not obdurate, but malleable – and targeted changes to the physical and social environments of work camps have the potential to make real and effective improvements in worker wellbeing. By viewing the mobile work context through a 'determinants of health' framework there exists the possibility of affecting positive change within these contexts via specific improvements we can make to the physical and social environments. These include some material

changes (e.g., improving recreational amenities in camps, and increasing social support capacity via camp-based mental health counsellors or online support), and others involve more ideational and cultural changes (e.g., working to illuminate the strong links between masculinity and poor health outcomes, as well as working to dismantle the 'Big Boys Don't Cry' culture). Finally, there is a critical need to focus on the concept of 'identity' in future mobile work research. I contend that worker identity and wellbeing, and their inter-linkages within the boom-sphere of today's liquid modern society, stand as a new research frontier for resource sociologists and others studying these vastly altered resource-based settings.

Part VI: References

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Part VII: Narrative Thread 3. Eli's Story – "The Oil Comes First"

> *Poems streamline, encapsulate, and define, usually with brevity but always with the intent to plumb the heart of the matter; to bring the reader to live the emotions, the tone, the physicality, the voice and not-voiced moments. Poems spotlight particular events in ways that lift them out of the often overwhelming flood of life so that they can be understood as part of that. (Ely 2006:575)*

Narrative research encourages new and innovative presentations of narrative findings – experimental forms that cleave closely to, and that powerfully convey, the meaning of the story that is being told. Below is one such experimental form of the narrative finding: "The Oil Comes First". It is a 'found poem'. A found poem is one that a narrative researcher creatively assembles from a narrative participant's experience and story. The mobile worker's story below describes his experience of being in a bus accident on Highway 63, just outside of Fort McMurray. It is a story that brings to life the lack of care and safety with this particular event, the vulnerability of the mobile workers onboard, and how this is directly experienced and felt by one of the workers [MW1].

“THE OIL COMES FIRST”

So icy
Could hardly walk across the parking lot
“Are you sure you can handle her out there?” I ask the bus driver, lunch bag in hand.
“Oh yeah, these things are great!”
Cruising down the highway, just coming into Fort McMurray
S-Curve
Buses passing one another
Bus driver hollers
Pure ice
Bus
100 km per hour
Hits us
KABOOM!
In ditch
LIKE RIGHT IN BETWEEN THE TWO HIGHWAYS
Five minutes to six in the morning
Bus leaning, stayed on high side, used feet to hold me
Some of these guys – *have to have a smoke, have to have a smoke*
Back of the bus
Smoking
What if there was a diesel fuel leak?
Couldn’t get out
5,000 6,000 cars sliding skidding by
Pinned there
From five to six till nine-thirty
SCARED – that somebody from oncoming lane was going to hit us
THREE AND A HALF HOURS WE SAT THERE ON OUR SIDE
Finally
A 1958-model bus pulls up
We all pile onto that thing
Two buses stuck together
Pulled it off
Everything gone
Motor was just sitting there
Running
What if there was a diesel fuel leak?
Brought it up at safety meeting
Paid us 3 hours
THREE AND A HALF HOURS WE SAT THERE ON OUR SIDE
Nothing was ever said
Nothing was ever said
That is just one of the accidents
Another thing too
That May 20th bus accident on Highway 28
There’s six guys there
They never should have been killed
You know some of that shit shouldn’t be
Like it’s stupid, **BUT THE OIL COMES FIRST**
As long as you can buy a permit you can get her done
They never should have been killed
What if there was a diesel fuel leak?

Chapter 4: Conclusion. "Activating the Sociological Imagination"

Part I: Key Findings

> "…thinking sociologically is a way of understanding the human world that also opens up the possibility for thinking about the same world in different ways" (Bauman and May 2001:5).

Boomtowns are in need of a new conceptual understanding; I propose the Boom-Sphere Model as a way to theoretically understand the fluid dynamics of rapid resource development in our new liquid modern era. In the same way, the 'influx of workers' into a boomtown can no longer be thought of as just an influx of workers. These workers mark the establishment of new human communities – communities, which also experience the social and health impacts of resource projects and which interact with host and home communities to produce further impacts.

This study, unlike other boomtown studies, puts the spotlight on the shadow population and the myths and stereotypes surrounding the identity of this overlooked population. This paper challenges the notion or grand narrative that mobile workers are 'rig pigs' and that the health outcomes of these men are due to their own personal defects and destructive choices; and, from the new perspective counter-stories offer, opens up the space for understanding mobile worker experiences, identities, vulnerabilities, and needs.

Given the diversity of stories and experiences, the question of, "Who are mobile workers?", defies any easy characterization or fixed identity. Still, from the mobile

worker stories I collected, there does appear to be two major archetypal identities emerging. These identities can be thought of as existing on opposing ends of a sliding continuum. I have termed these two identities: the 'Thrivers' (those who are overcoming mobile work challenges and thriving, e.g., reaching financial goals, successfully balancing work and family life); and the 'Strugglers' (those whose mental and physical wellbeing has been significantly degraded by mobile work stressors and other pre-existing stressors or dispositions to the point that healthy human functioning has been impaired, e.g., individual is depressed or has an addiction). Importantly, despite these two ends of the spectrum, these workers appeared to be silently, but perceptively, bonded together by circumstance, and thus share in a common mobile worker culture of 'making their way'. As MW10 describes:

> *It's hard to stay positive in those rooms when some guy is yelling at his wife over the phone, or a bunch of guys noisily walk by in the hallway, right at the moment you're about to fall asleep. You know, it can wear on you after a long period of time. But then you got to remember, it is their home as well, and they are just trying to make their way too.*

Linked with these archetypal identities, I have also identified five major worker wellbeing themes in the workers' and key informants' narratives. 'Wellbeing' within my study was operationalized via the *Being, Belonging, and Becoming* model (Raphael et al. 1996, 1997). My mobile worker wellbeing themes cut across each of the model's domains. These themes represent major 'meta-stories' (stories of stories), which emerge from workers' individual experiences. Overall, the wellbeing themes are multi-faceted and speak to the dual nature – that is, both the danger and opportunity – that the mobile work arrangement presents to these men – and their sense of self – and the way that these

men must negotiate their identities and wellbeing through choices of reward and sacrifice. These wellbeing themes are: 1. 'Living Three Lives' and the identity-tension that it can create (e.g., living the home-sphere, the commute-sphere, and the work-camp-sphere); 2. "Fort McMoney": Danger versus Opportunity (e.g., the danger of financially overextending oneself and feeling trapped versus the opportunity for workers to set and reach financial goals); 3. Work Camps: "It's like living in jail only you're getting paid" (this involves the lack of freedom and limited opportunities for self-expression and personal growth in work camp spaces); 4. "The Oil Comes First" mantra which involves an emphasis on oil production and profit during the resource boom (and which can degrade a worker's sense of importance, sense of self, and can serve to alienate workers); and 5. 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon (this involves the internalization of feelings, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and the reaching one's breaking point).

In addition, based on these wellbeing themes, there appears to be five major features of the mobile work context that affect wellbeing. These factors are: 1. rigid shift work schedules and mobility (which present high demand and low control settings for workers); 2. the institutional-like settings of work camps (these spaces limit opportunities for personal freedom and self-expression); 3. high pay (this can facilitate goals but also can facilitate debt); 4. "The Oil Comes First" mantra which involves the emphasis on oil production and profit during resource booms (this limits worker's sense of importance, makes men feel like a mere "cog in the machine"); and 5. The masculine work culture (this type of culture reinforces the notion that 'Big Boys Don't Cry', promotes poor coping mechanisms, and contributes to 'The Shaking of the Pop Bottle' phenomenon).

Overall, within this thesis, I attempt to draw four major points to the reader's attention. First, I highlight that mobile workers in the Fort McMurray area are an over-stereotyped, under-researched, and increasing population. Early research into "bunkhouse men" painted them as rootless and running from something – with their deviance both inherent in their characters and being further instilled by the harsh physical and social environments of frontier camp life. This perceived image and identity of the camp man, in the 100 years that have followed, has remained relatively static. Mobile workers today are still perceived by local residents, within popular media and public discourse as a outsiders, as vectors bearing ill things (e.g., substance abuse, impaired driving, prostitution, STIs, violence and crime) – researchers and planners alike even talk about "worker-proofing" host communities (Storey 2013, pers. comm.). However, we often attribute this deviance to a worker's personal character and work culture – without challenging these roots and linkages. My findings related to identity – the 'Thrivers' and the 'Strugglers' – open up our understanding of who these men are, and how these identities are not fixed, but fluid. Furthermore, the themes that I have identified related to worker wellbeing begin to challenge the firmly entrenched and wholesale belief that 'mobile workers are deviant'. Through these storied themes, I illustrate the vulnerability of workers and the factors that contribute to this vulnerability.

Second, I (re)assert, (much like early sociologists did), that the mobile work context plays a significant role in shaping worker identity and wellbeing – and that these concepts are intimately linked. However, while early sociologists saw masculinity as a positive and

celebrated attribute, which helped men survive the early working and living conditions, my study shows that masculine beliefs, attitudes, and practices can have a negative effect on men's identity and wellbeing. Moreover, my study reveals that, unlike the early camp man who was 'running from something', the 'contemporary camp man', on the whole, is embedded within a rich network of education, family values and connection, financial goals, quality of life aspirations, and choice. What *has* remained relatively consistent throughout the trajectory of the early camp man to the contemporary camp man is the psychosocial stress inherent in camp life.

The worker wellbeing themes that I identified all underscore the critical importance of identity (and coherent sense of self) in mobile worker wellbeing. That is, at the core of each of the worker wellbeing themes, a worker's sense of self was being challenged. For example – as these men shift from the home-sphere (home communities) to the commute-sphere (travel by car, bus, plane) to the work-camp-sphere (work sites, work camps, and host community) – so do their identities. Navigating these spheres put into question one's personal values and personal code of conduct. I also identified the commute-sphere as an important space that affects worker wellbeing, but has not been aptly considered in past research or by current industry practices.

Third, I emphasize that the mobile work context is not obdurate, but malleable – and targeted changes to the physical and social environments of work camps have the potential to make real and effective improvements in worker wellbeing. I propose that drawing in the determinants of health framework is an important starting point for such

work. The health determinants provide a basis from which to identify factors of the mobile work context, which are important to, and which influence, health outcomes. One critical area of work related to health determinants for the mobile work context is the development of an assessment and recommendations tool focused on maximizing mobile worker wellbeing. This potential tool is further discussed in the 'Policy Implications' section of this thesis.

Finally, I propose that mobile worker wellbeing also relates to a higher-level cultural change that is happening in our world today. This change is related to the 'new world of work' (Beck 2000). As the social theorists, Beck, Bauman, and Sennett describe, the jobs of 'heavy modernity', when an individual would hold the same job for the length of his or her career, work a steady 9 to 5 workday, rarely miss a meal time, and retire securely with great loyalty and ties to his or her company, may be shifting into more short-term and less secure ones in the modern 'liquid' era. Many people in society have experienced this already – that is, what it is like to work or be part of a family that is employed in a mobile livelihood. And many people, to some degree, have normalized it. The acceptance of the mobile work arrangement, and new way of seeing work, family, and the rhythms of life, I submit, also plays a part of the wellbeing equation. As Zygmunt Bauman describes in his book *Liquid Life* (2005), the twenty-first century is a liquid world, where individuals are mandatorily thrust into a liquid life, where we are demanded by circumstance to transform ourselves to flow with the new societal structures that keep shifting – dissolving and reforming – in order make it. This metaphor illuminates a point that my research is called to make: It is important that we as individuals do not try to

consciously or unconsciously 'freeze' our ideas of what family and work structures should look like. Instead, we should look to broaden our conception of 'wellbeing' for individuals and families within the architecture of the new world of work; that is, we should not necessarily see the expansion of the space for our livelihoods to two or more locations as 'displacement' but rather as 'multiplacement' (Nyberg Sorensen and Fog Olwig 2002). The mobile work arrangement in the resource development context is one part of this 'new world of work' architecture that not only we are being asked to adapt to, but that governments and industry need to effectively respond to. Policy implications and important responses to the mobile work arrangement are described in the next section.

Part II: Policy Implications

If the new era of liquid modernity and the increasing global trend of mobile livelihoods is any indication, the mobile work arrangement in the resource sector is not a fleeting industry trend, but is here to stay. In fact, a recent Statistics Canada study on inter-provincial migrant workers to Alberta found that only one in four workers actually planned to relocate permanently to Alberta (Chapman 2013), suggesting that the work-life model of choice is the mobile livelihood. This increasing trend toward mobile livelihoods and mobile workforce communities has some important policy implications that require a government and industry response.

First, mobile workers cause extensive extra-local effects. That is, due to the hypermobility of workers and the size of the mobile workforce, the population numbers and geographical range of people affected by mobile worker wellness stretches beyond the local context of the Fort McMurray area. In this way, a healthy and content mobile

workforce not only benefits workers, but also their employers and host communities; and importantly, their families and home communities. Therefore, ensuring that mobile worker wellbeing is adequately addressed when we consider the impacts of resource development is paramount. At present, the consideration of mobile worker wellbeing stands as a glaring gap within industry's safety scene, within federal and provincial regulatory standards, and within Alberta's public health agenda. For example, at the recent ENFORM conference (ENFORM is the Safety Association for Canada's Upstream Oil and Gas Industry), which I attended from May 6-8, 2014, in Banff, Alberta, there were no presentations or discussions related to the mobile work lifestyle and safety. Instead, safety professionals talked about 'human factors' as a general and nebulous input into the safety equation. With respect to regulatory standards, at present, environmental, social, and health impact assessments (ESHIAs) see mobile workforce populations as falling outside the assessment scope even though worker and community interaction can produce important social, health, and economic impacts. With respect to Alberta's public health agenda, the mobile workforce, and the unique stressors that they experience and their subsequent mental and physical health needs, do not appear to be on the radar.[20] These represent three key areas where there are critical policy implications and where effective response from industry and government are needed.

As a health impact assessment practitioner, I recognize the gap in the field's current assessment scope. I contend that we need to begin to assess project effects on mobile

[20] Research indicates that focusing on mobile worker wellbeing results in a number of benefits, including monetary benefits. For example, research has found that $1 invested in mental illness prevention will return $9 in the first year; and, over the next 2 to 5 years, each $1 invested will return $48 through reduced absenteeism and workplace accidents and increased employee performance and productivity (Australian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health 2011:13).

workforce populations as a way to more fully understand the impacts to local communities and as a way to provide more effective recommendations on how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of proposed resource projects. As such, I introduce the idea of the Mobile Worker Wellbeing Assessment Tool (MWWAT) here as a way to systematically assess and develop recommendations to improve work camp conditions and, by extension, mobile worker wellbeing.[21]

The MWWAT would be analogous to environmental assessment tools that have been developed and legislated over the last 45 years to assess project effects on host communities – but the MWWAT would be specifically focused on mobile workers and their unique camp environments and the assessment of project effects. Mobile workers, I contend, have been an overlooked population, and have 'fallen outside the fence' from a legislative and regulatory standpoint. This needs to change. Mobile workforce populations are rapidly expanding *human communities* and are intricately intertwined with the project effects experienced by host communities and the extra-local effects experienced by workers' home communities. While there has been a flurry of new research into mobile worker wellness over the last few years (predominantly in Australia), a substantial amount of work is required for improving our understanding in the Alberta and in the wider Canadian context. Rural and resource sociology has much to contribute to this research endeavor through the discipline's holistic scope and nuanced understanding of resource-based contexts – the social groups inhabiting these spaces, the transnational structures in which these social groups operate within, and the mechanisms of social change and adaptation.

[21] I am in the process of developing the Mobile Worker Wellbeing Assessment Tool.

Part III: Research Strengths and Limitations

This thesis has a number of strengths, as well as one major limitation. A clear strength of this thesis was the narrative approach to my worker interviews, which effectively explored identity and wellbeing. Workers tended to tell stories as a way of conveying experience, so findings were rich and contextualized. A second strength was the ways in which Chapter Two (Paper One) and Chapter Three (Paper Two), together, were able to advance the way we look at and understand the new boomtown context – illuminating the inter-linkages of personal troubles and social issues. And, of course, a major (and serendipitous) strength of my research was the timing of my research interviews – in that they took place during the initial onset of the boom-to-bust transition. This allowed me to capture the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and stories of workers during a strangely reflective time – a time in which, without warning, Alberta's boom went bust. Another notable strength of my research is the new methodological map and boomtown model – the Boom-Sphere Model – that I offer to social scientists as a way to expand their thinking about the traditional concept of the boomtown, mobile worker wellbeing, and the distribution and social impact zone of boomtown effects. One limitation of my research was that I only spoke with a limited number of mobile workers (16) and that a broader sample of workers was not interviewed. While my mobile worker findings are rich and detailed, the extent that these findings apply across the 40,000 mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands needs further quantitative and qualitative investigation. More extensive and systematic research on mobile workers' experiences is needed. A longitudinal study on mobile worker experience would also be extremely insightful for learning about worker identity and wellbeing over the long term.

Part IV: Future Areas of Research

This thesis aimed to spark new thinking about contemporary boomtown contexts and the importance of mobile worker wellbeing. While my research presents the Boom-Sphere Model as a way to re-conceptualize the new boomtown context, and presents a number of worker wellbeing themes as a way to better understand the challenges of mobile work, significant research gaps still exist. First, additional research is needed to explore the relationship between the mobile work context and worker wellbeing and, importantly, to explore ways in which we can improve worker wellbeing within these settings. Second, while it appears that the 'Big Boys Don't Cry Culture' is present and operating within the work-camp-sphere of the Alberta Oil Sands, and that it is negatively affecting workers' mental and physical health – more research is needed. Furthermore, given the new research in the US oilfield, which indicates the practice of masculinity has changed over the last two decades due to the organizational emphasis on 'safety culture' (Filteau 2012), further investigation into masculine work cultures within the Canadian resource sector is needed.

Part V: Concluding Remarks

Who cares about men in camps? Those guys make loads of money, so who cares about their wellbeing?

Within this thesis, I attempt to link the social world and issues of the Alberta Oil Sands to the personal troubles of mobile workers. In Chapter Two (Paper One), I 'zoom out' to the social world of the Alberta Oil Sands. I submit that the boomtown concept needs to be re-conceptualized to account for the increasing size and geographical range of the mobile workforce and because of the new liquid modern era and new world of work. I

also point out that because of this large and wide-ranging mobile workforce, boomtown effects are no longer just a localized phenomenon experienced by a host community, such as Fort McMurray, Alberta. Instead, boomtown effects, particularly as they relate to the wellbeing of mobile workers, are geographically extensive and are experienced in the work-camp-sphere, the commute-sphere, and in workers' home communities across Canada (the home-sphere). Therefore, it is important to expand our traditional scope of the boomtown. I present the Boom-Sphere Model as a more expansive and accurate model for the contemporary boomtown context. In Chapter Three, I 'zoom in' to the personal troubles of mobile workers. My research shows that the mobile work lifestyle is characterized by unique psychosocial stressors. If a mobile worker is struggling with a mental health issue due to specific stressors of the mobile work arrangement, this can, in turn, contribute to family and community strife in both host and home communities. I assert that it is critical to recognize the importance of mobile worker wellbeing in both the cause and distribution of boomtown effects. At present, and to my knowledge, the impact assessment field does not assess project effects – specifically the mobile work environment's effects – on mobile workforce communities. Again, due to the size and geographical range of mobile workers, and the firm entrenchment of the mobile work arrangement in resource development projects, this needs gap in assessment needs to be addressed.

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Part VII: Narrative Thread 4. Full Circle – "Truck Driver's Daughter"

Narrative Thread Four returns the reader to the beginning of my mobile work experience. "Truck Driver's Daughter" is a story of change, curiosity, mobility, and remoteness. Visiting the site of a make-shift mobile work camp for truck drivers, after the lengthy read of this thesis, returns the reader to a space where there is now much to think about.

*

Truck Driver's Daughter

"Those are some nice-looking seat covers you got, Mel," Merve chuckles over the CB radio as his Peterbuilt tractor trailer passes my Dad's Freightliner on rather narrow dirt road somewhere in Northwestern, Alberta. My brother, and his red Freightliner "Snoopy", are roaring through the cloud of dust somewhere behind us. The nearest town's name I've now forgotten. Oh, yes, Blueberry Mountain, I do remember – and with a pang of disappointment I might add – the "mountain" was just a big hill. Merve is also a trucker driver and a humorous one at that – and a good friend of my Dad's. My older sister and I are riding the cab with him. Merve's 'seat covers' comment was made in regards to Lisa and I – two "nice-looking seat covers", hanging out in this displaced place.

It is summertime. I think I am about 13 years old, or 14 years old, which makes Lisa 16 and old enough to work on the highway as a "flag girl". I had gone from being a farmer's daughter to a truck driver's daughter in the amount of time it takes to sell the family farm and buy a small fleet of fire-engine red Freightliners and three end dumps. My Dad has

named his new trucking business "Mel's TnT" which is kind of like an acronym, kind of like a joke. Mel's truck and trailer, Mel's dynamite new enterprise. He and my brother and another truck driver named Rocky would head up the fleet. I rode with my Dad a lot that summer, with my head poked out of the passenger side window, taking in clouds of dust and the sharp smell of coarse black asphalt being laid over gutted out lanes.

We lived in an ATCO trailer, a 'wellsite' as my Dad called it, temporary housing that he bought for the summer-long stints in random locations of Alberta which needed repaving. Other trailers were lined up beside it, some motor homes, pickup trucks, a fire pit, cases and cases of empty beer bottles stacked underneath the trailers, trampled and soiled quack grass from where the big trucks would park at night.

I learned that summer a bit about what it is like to live in a mobile work camp. Looking back now, I *was* a seat cover, absorbing the daily rhythms of 5AM wake-ups, and 7 PM finish times, 8 PM suppertimes, the bonfires, the beer bottles, the bug-smeared windshields, and all the stuff behind and beyond these things.

*

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Appendix A – Mobile Worker Interview Schedule

Voices from the Shadows: Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands

Introduction: Thank-you for taking the time to meet with me. I am very interested in learning more about what it is like to work in the *Alberta Oil Sands* and live temporarily in a work camp. But before you share with me what life is like as a mobile worker, I would like to hear about your prior work experiences.

1. Tell me about your early working life, what sorts of jobs you've had, and what your experiences with these jobs were like.

2. When did you begin working in the Alberta Oil Sands as a mobile worker?
    - What is your job title? What does your job involve?
    - How many years in total have you worked as a mobile worker?
    - How long have you been a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands and Fort McMurray area?

3. Why did you choose to work as a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands?
    - For the money?
    - For enjoyment and personal fulfillment from work?
    - Other reasons?

4. Tell me about your first experiences as a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands/Fort McMurray area?
    - What was it like to work and live away from home in those first few weeks?
    - What sorts of things were going through your mind?
        - If he says that he did not like it/it was difficult: How did you cope with these challenges?
        - If he says he really liked it: What are the positive aspects of mobile work?

5. What is the 'work culture' like in *Alberta Oil Sands?*
    - Do people generally get along?
    - Do you work with a lot of different people? People from different provinces? Cultures?
    - What do people do in their "free time" in the work camps?

6. In an interview that I had with a young electrician in March 2008, he mentioned that the work culture in the mining industry is changing. He states:

    > *Then there's a lot of new workers, young workers, guys like me that aren't massive oil rig pig guys. I don't work on rigs, I am not a rig pig, I work*

within a professional capacity. But those big tough guys used to be the norm, and now they're not. We're starting to match them for numbers and there are a lot of foreigners, there's a lot of guys that don't necessarily like this environment, they're trying to change it, there's a lot more safety, safety is the world now.

- Have you noticed any changes in work culture within these mining mega-projects due to the large and diverse mobile workforces?
- Does the 'big tough guy' attitude and behaviours still dominate the work site and work camp?

7. Do you find that mobile workers share the same beliefs and behaviours while working and living away from home? What are some of these beliefs and behaviours?

8. How is working in the *Alberta Oil Sands as a mobile worker* different from the work that you did before?

9. Has working and living away from home as a mobile worker in the Alberta Oil Sands changed your life in any way?
    - Has it changed who are you are?
    - Has it changed how you feel about work in general? About home and family? About your future?

10. How has working and living away from home affected your wellbeing?
    - Physical health?
    - Mental health or stress levels?
    - Your personal values and personal 'code of conduct'?
    - Relationships with family and friends?
    - Your ability to set and achieve new goals? Learn new things?

11. People often talk about wanting to live "the good life", a life that makes one very happy and fulfilled.
    - How would you define "the good life"?
    - What are some of the things that make up this *good life*?
    - Does being a mobile worker allow you to live out this *good life*?

12. Quite recently, the economy seems to have gone from boom to bust in a short period of time. How has the recent economic downturn affected you and your life?
    - How has it affected how you think about your job? Your future goals?
    - How has the economic downturn affected your physical health? Mental health (stress levels or outlook on life)? Your relationships?

Appendix B – Key Informant Interview Schedule

Voices from the Shadows: Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands

Introduction: Thank-you for taking the time to meet with me. I am very interested in learning more about the work that you do, and the insights you can offer with respect to the identity and wellbeing of mobile workers.

1. How long have you been living in Fort McMurray?

2. What is your position and what does your role entail?

3. I am particularly interested in mobile workers and how the mobile work lifestyle – commuting back and forth from home to work and living in work camps for extended periods of time – affects a worker's sense of self and how it affects their overall wellbeing. Can you comment at all on what you may have seen with respect to how the mobile work lifestyle affects an individual's:

- Physical health?
- Mental health or stress levels?
- Ways one may cope with stress?
- Personal values and personal 'code of conduct'?
- Relationships with family and friends?
- Ability to set and achieve new goals? Learn new things?

4. From your experience here in Fort McMurray, can you tell me about what the 'work culture' is like in *Alberta Oil Sands?*

- Do people generally get along?
- What do people do in their "free time" in the work camps?
- Does the 'big tough guy' attitude and behaviours dominate the work site and work camp?

5. Quite recently, the economy seems to have gone from boom to bust in a short period of time.

- How has the recent economic downturn affected the work you do? What have you seen?
- In your experience, how has the economic downturn affected mobile workers? Identity? Wellbeing?

Appendix C – Project Information Sheet

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Male Mobile Workers in the Mining Sector During a Boom-to-Bust Transition in the Alberta Oil Sands Region

Information Sheet

As part of a larger research project looking at the social impacts of rapid resource development in the Canadian North, this study aims to explore the lived experience of male mobile workers working within mining projects near Fort McMurray, Alberta, in the Alberta Oil Sands Region.

As mining projects move further north, mobile work arrangements are becoming more and more common. While much attention has focused on how these resource development projects will affect surrounding communities and local people, very little attention has focused on how living and working away from home affects mobile workers themselves. Therefore, we are interested in talking with mobile workers, such as yourself, who are currently working or who have worked in northern mining projects.

In talking with you and other mobile workers, we hope to give you a chance to share your stories about what it is like to live and work away from home. These stories could help employers, local communities, government, and others, to better understand some of the ways in which this work-life arrangement could be improved.

We are asking for an hour or two of your time for an interview on this topic. With your consent, we would like to record our interview as well as take notes. The interview will be transcribed by the researchers directly involved in the study, and only they will have access to the tapes from the interview. All of the data associated with this study will be stored in a locked cabinet, and only the primary researchers will have access to the data. The information from the interviews will be used as part of a Master's thesis at the University of Alberta, as well as other publications or presentations that may result from the research. The data collected during this study may also be used as part of a longer-term study on the social impacts of resource development in northern Canada.

Upon completion of the interview, all participants in the study will be referred to by a code rather than by name to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Your name will not appear in any publications and you will only be referred to by profession and/or occupational sector (e.g. natural resources sector). In an effort to protect your anonymity, we will not use direct quotes in any publication or presentation that would appear to be revealing of the respondent's identity. In addition, you may decline to answer any of our questions and are free to stop the interview at any time. You may also withdraw from the study at any time upon notifying any one of the primary researchers. Upon receiving your written or verbal request to withdraw, all information associated with your interview will be removed from the study. If you would like to receive an executive summary of our research findings, we would be more than happy to provide one upon your request.

If you have any questions regarding the interview or this study, please contact either of the principal investigators listed below:

Angela Angel
Graduate Student
Department of Rural Economy
University of Alberta
515 General Services Building
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2H1

Dr. Naomi T. Krogman
Assistant Professor
Department of Rural Economy
University of Alberta
515 General Services Building
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2H1

Should you have any concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Wendy Rodgers, Chair of the PER-ALES Research Ethics Board. Dr. Rodgers has no direct involvement with this project.

We sincerely thank you for your consideration in participating in this study, and we look very forward to your reply.

Appendix D – Background Information on Research Participants

Background Information on Mobile Worker Research Participants and Interviews

Research participant code & 'pseudonym'	Age	Highest educational attainment	Total # of years as a MW; # of years as a MW in the AB Oil Sands	Job title	Size & type of camp	Home community	Relationship & family status	Interview date, time & location
***MW1 'Ely'**	59	4-year trades diploma	15 years; 10 years	Electrician	Lived in various sized camps in Fort McMurray, Saskatchewan, and NWT.	Rural area near Edmonton	Married with children (all children over the age of 18).	1. March 20, 2008, home of research participant, in rural area near Edmonton, Alberta. 2. April 10, 2009, home of research participant, near Edmonton, Alberta.
MW2 'Brett'	36	High school diploma	2 years; 1 year	Labourer	Lived in a small (less than 100 persons) camp.	Small village in Newfoundland	Has a girlfriend. Also has a son (8 years old).	March 17, 2008, in the kitchen of my home, Edmonton, Alberta.
MW3 'Jimmy'	29	2 years at NAIT, working towards trades certification	2 years; 2 years	Apprentice Electrician	Lived in a small (less than a 100 persons) camp.	Edmonton	Married with two young children (under the age of five).	March 18, 2008, 1:00pm, NAIT campus, Edmonton, Alberta.
MW4 'Jack'	21	2 years at NAIT, working towards	1 year; 1 year	Apprentice Electrician	Lived in a small (less than a 100	Edmonton	Single	March 18, 2008, 1:00pm, NAIT

		trades certification			persons) camp.			campus, Edmonton, Alberta.
MW5 'Wayne'	25	4-year trades diploma	4 years as a MW; 2 years in the AB Oil Sands.	Electrician	Lived in a large (greater than 5,000 persons) camp.	Edmonton	Single	March 15, 2008, 12:00pm, Trades Fair, Cedar Park Inn, Edmonton, Alberta.
MW6 'Justin'	Early 50s	4-year trades diploma	6 years; 6 years	Electrician	Lived in a large (greater than 5,000 persons) camp.	Edmonton	Married, with children (all children over the age of 18).	July 15, 2009, 5:00pm, McDonalds, Fort McMurray, Alberta.
MW7 'Ken'	Early 50s	4-year trades diploma	9 years; 9 years	Electrician	Lived in a large (greater than 5,000 persons) camp.	Edmonton	Married, no children.	July 15, 2009, McDonalds, Fort McMurray, Alberta.
***MW8 'Rob'**	34	4-year trades diploma	2 years; 2 years	Instrumentation Technologist	Lived in a large (11,000 persons) camp.	Vancouver	Has a girlfriend.	1. July 16, 2009, 4:45pm, at a work camp outside of Fort McMurray, Alberta. 2. August 12, 2009, 12:00pm, at a work camp outside of Fort McMurray, Alberta.
***MW9 'Dave'**	33	2-year trades diploma	2 years; 2 years	Power Engineering Technologist	Lived in many camps of various sizes (small to large); currently lives in a house that he owns in Fort McMurray;	Edmonton	Married with one child (under the age of five).	1. July 5, 2009, 2:30pm, a café in St. Albert, Albert. 2. August 9, 2009, 8:00pm, research

					also has a home in Edmonton.			participant's home, Fort McMurray, Alberta.
***MW10 'Derrick'**	35	High school diploma	3 years; 3 years	Logistics specialist	Lived in a medium-sized (400 persons) Executive Camp.	Edmonton	Divorced with two children (5 and 8 years old).	1. July 8, 2009, 6:00pm, friend's home, Edmonton, Alberta. 2. August 11, 2009, 7:00pm, work camp outside of Fort McMurray, Alberta.
MW11 'Troy'	35	High school diploma	2 years; 2 years	Labourer	Lived in a new, large (approximately 5,000 persons) 'high-amenity' camp.	Town in Newfoundland	Married, with one child (under the age of five).	August 29, 2009, 5:00pm, in research participant's home, small town in Newfoundland.
MW12 'Mark'	40	High school diploma	1 year; 1 year	Steel worker	Lived in a new, large (approximately 5,000 persons) 'high-amenity' camp.	Town in Newfoundland	Married with two children (in their teens).	August 29, 2009, 5:00pm, in research participant's home, small town in Newfoundland.
MW13 'Mack'	40	4-year trades diploma	6 years; 6 years (was also in the armed forces for 10 years and lived in army barracks).	Electrician	Lived in a medium-sized (400 persons) camp.	Town in Newfoundland	Divorced.	September 22, 2009, 10:30am, a union office in Fort McMurray, Alberta.
MW14	49	4-year trades	3 years; 3 years	Carpenter	Lived in a large	Town in PEI	Married with one	September 22,

'Zach'		diploma			(5,000 persons) camp.		child (17 years old).	2009, 1:00pm, a union office in Fort McMurray, Alberta.
MW15 'Stephen'	42	High school	1.5 years; 1.5 years	Labourer	Lived in a large (5,000 persons) camp.	Town in Newfoundland	Married, no children.	September 22, 2009, 1:00pm, a union office in Fort McMurray, Alberta.
MW16 'Jake'	45	Two 4-year trades diplomas	20 years; 3 years	Power Engineer and Electrician	Rented an apartment in Fort McMurray (but has lived in small to large camps before, all around the world).	Leduc, Alberta	Married with a child (in teens).	September 17, 2009, 7:00pm, Stonebridge Hotel lobby, Fort McMurray, Alberta.

Notes:
MW = Mobile Worker
* Indicates that I interviewed this mobile worker twice.

Background Information on Key Informant Research Participants and Interviews

Research participant Code	Job title & organization	Research interview date, time and location
HP1	Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor, Alberta Health Services	July 14, 2009, 2:00pm, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP2	Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor, Alberta Health Services	July 14, 2009, 2:00pm, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP3	Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor, Alberta Health Services	July 14, 2009, 2:00pm, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP4	Director and Counsellor, Some Other Solutions (SOS) Society for Crisis Prevention	July 15, 2009, 1:00pm, SOS Society for Crisis Prevention office, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP5	Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor, Northern Lights Health Region	August 10, 2009, 2:00pm, Northern Lights Regional Health Centre, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP6	Director, Family and Community and Support Services, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo	August 11, 2009, 3:30pm, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP7	Counsellor, Men's Outreach Program	September 15, 2009, 1:30pm, Men's Outreach Program office, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP8	Counsellor, Men's Outreach Program	September 15, 2009, 1:30pm, Men's Outreach Program office, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP9	Assistant Director, Victim Services Program, Fort McMurray	September 22, 2009, 3:00pm, RCMP Detachment, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP10	Addictions counsellor, Mark Amy Treatment Centre	October 19, 2009, 2:00pm, Mark Amy Treatment Centre, Fort McMurray, Alberta
HP11	Addictions counsellor, Mark Amy Treatment Centre	October 19, 2009, 2:00pm, Mark Amy Treatment Centre, Fort McMurray, Alberta
EX1	Head of Electrician Program, NAIT, Edmonton	March 18, 2008, 12:00pm, research participant's office, NAIT campus, Edmonton, Alberta
EX2	Industry Consultant, and Author of a report on mobile workers in the Regional Municipality	March 18, 2008, 2:00pm, research participant's office, Edmonton, Alberta

	of Wood Buffalo	
EX3	Director, Wood Buffalo/Fort McMurray Labour Market Information Centre	August 10, 2009, 10:00am, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
EX4	Career Counsellor, Wood Buffalo/Fort McMurray Labour Market Information Centre	August 10, 2009, 10:00am, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
EX5	Social Planner, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo	September 16, 2009, 3:00pm, Provincial Building, Fort McMurray, Alberta
EX6	Community Planner, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and author of a report on mobile workers	September 22, 2009, 9:00am, research participant's office, Fort McMurray, Alberta
EX7	*Head of a labour union	September 23, 2009, 8:00am, research participant's office, Fort McMurray, Alberta
Notes: *Name of union is confidential. HP = Helping Profession EX = Expert, Mobile Work		