“You know us for oil,” begins one of the advertisements. “Our story is one of production and money. But . . . there’s a quality of life here that goes beyond money, giving people the confidence to build a future, to raise a family.” Above the text, an image of a young boy high in a swing is superimposed over a line graph titled “Growth in Domestic Product.” Another of the ads, with the heading “Fort McMurray, Indicators of Energy Performance,” avers that “energy is more than a commodity; it’s our way of life.” The accompanying image superimposes a youthful female dancer over one section of a pie chart. In these two ads, in a few deft strokes, productive work and reproductive life are closely co-defined: oil wealth converts to familial and community riches, and energy translates as the “spirit of our people.”

These advertisements were part of the Big Spirit campaign launched in fall 2007 by the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB), the nearly seventy-thousand-square-kilometre municipality that sits atop the vast Athabasca bitumen sands formation in northern Alberta, at the centre of which lies the “urban service area” of Fort McMurray. The campaign’s articulation of energy with community spirit echoes branding in the oil-rich province as a whole. In April 2010, for example, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) and a coalition of Alberta-based businesses announced Alberta Is Energy, “a community-building initiative to raise awareness about the important role the oil and gas industry plays in the lives of Albertans” (CAPP 2010).

Attempts to promote the quality-of-life benefits of the energy economy emanate from both public and private entities, reinforcing the importance of questions about oil, democracy, and the “resource curse” in the Global North. But these promotional discourses and representations also cry out for
an analysis of the gendered infrastructure of a political economy built on oil. The Big Spirit campaign was, in part, a direct response to the negative reputation Fort McMurray had gained as a barely liveable boomtown of raucous single men who allegedly partied away money earned from plentiful work for the short time they were there, especially as the bitumen sands mega-program took off in the early years of the twenty-first century. Central to the message of the ad campaign was the notion that Fort McMurray is in fact a family-friendly place, a good place to raise kids, a place of multiple opportunities for leisure and community, and thus a place to which people might want to move. Central to the message of this chapter is the idea that feminized spaces of work and citizenship provide an important material and discursive link between oil energy and community energy (see also O’Shaughnessy 2011, and see Mercier and Gier 2009 for a historical overview of the gendering of resource extraction economies); in other words, gendered practices—along with assumptions of normative kinship—are integral to the extractive work that makes the bitumen sands region an economic engine of Canada.

Just as the term energy does double duty in public relations for the RMWB, so does the term extraction do double duty for my argument. First, it signals that the business of extracting northern Alberta bitumen—the tarry substance that is mined or coaxed (with pressure, steam, and chemicals) out of the third-largest known source of oil on the planet—is itself directly gendered. The male-dominated work of construction, mining, and engineering combines with a masculinized logic of northern development to shape a form of “frontier masculinity” (Miller 2004; O’Shaughnessy 2011). As one long-time oil industry administrator put it to me, “There really is an energy here and it’s almost a male energy; it’s kind of . . . I don’t want to fall into any of the Alberta clichés but it is a place where you think that you can do anything and get things done.” Second, extraction refers to how multiple forms of less visible gendered work both directly and indirectly supplement oil profits. In this view, gender inequities are not (only) side effects of the energy economy (Ross 2008) but are integral to the broad social arrangements that allow for wealth accumulation. Such an analysis is all the more urgent given the increased promotion of an active, self-sufficient citizenship that is touted as “gender neutral” in official Canadian discourse (Brodie 2008) even as it continues to rely on gendered hierarchies of labour, care, and family. A 7 January 2014 Edmonton Journal article on life for men and women in Fort McMurray, for example, highlights a gender-transcendent pioneering spirit while also celebrating “moms pushing strollers.”

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990295.01
By work, I mean to refer to all forms of work, paid and unpaid, and to the slippery relations between them. The ethnographic evidence I discuss in this chapter, drawn from dozens of interviews and a survey of more than fifty parents and nannies, all conducted in the bitumen sands region from 2007 to 2009, starts with the work of child care but connects and extends to examples of voluntarism, familism (a hyperemphasis on the social centrality of family), consumerism, and paid labour in multiple sectors. A “social reproduction feminism” (SRF) framework understands these productive and reproductive activities to be of a piece and sees the logics governing these two arenas as integrally related (Ferguson 2008, 45). “Economy” and “work” are thus expanded to encompass not only the marketplace of paid work and production but also the social reproductive activities that provide individuals with the social and physical sustenance and care that they need (Luxton 2006). As Cindi Katz (2001, 710) puts it, “Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfolds in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension.”

The SRF approach has also emphasized the importance of intersectionality, the idea that unequal relations of race, class, age, and sexuality are not just relevant but crucial to the gendered dynamics of work (Arat-Koc 2006; Ferguson 2008). Rachel Simon-Kumar (2011, 458) even argues that “class, age, and ethnicity are more likely to throw light on the current modalities of gender relations within contemporary forms of Western democracy” than are dichotomies of male-female or masculine-feminine. In the context of the high levels of domestic and global labour mobility that mark the northern oil economy of Fort McMurray, seeing the various ways in which gender articulates with race, class, and age is imperative to understanding forms of inclusion and exclusion. Women and visible minorities, many of whom are noncitizens (most notably, participants in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program), are overrepresented in the feminized, precarious, and invisible work of service, retail, and care in Fort McMurray. And while this is true of the global division of labour more generally, bitumen extraction and production shape and sometimes intensify these inequalities in particular ways.

Indeed, the particular character of the bitumen sands region as a work destination is critical to understanding both intersectional modalities and gendered dichotomies. The population of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) grew from over forty thousand to approximately a hundred thousand in the booming first decade of the century (RMWB 2012), and
according to Statistics Canada, it had the highest median family income in the nation in 2010, at $169,790 (Statistics Canada 2012). Yet this is also a highly mobile population—the 2011 National Household Survey found that two-thirds of the sixty thousand permanent residents (an undercounted population) had lived somewhere else five years previous (Statistics Canada 2011c), and according to the 2012 RMWB municipal census, one-third of the total population in the region were mobile workers with permanent residence elsewhere (17). This mobility cannot be chalked up solely to the short-term need for high numbers of fly-in, fly-out construction workers. High housing costs, relative isolation at the “end of the highway,” the uncertainties of oil boom and bust, and the social stresses and frenetic pace that accompany boom times all contribute to high levels of turnover and low levels of retention in the workforce. In short, while Fort McMurray is home to many people who have lived there for decades or generations, it is largely a place to work, a place to make money while you can. That “people are just working, working, working to make money, money, money,” as one interviewee put it, was one of the most consistent themes in my interviews. The effect of this working frenzy on time and consumerism was a key concern for many interviewees, as they watched the relentless pursuit of the “good life” promised by high wages, overtime hours, and long shifts.

The gendered practices that supplement the production of oil are complicated by a combination of two factors: the burgeoning economy that makes Fort McMurray a place of employment opportunity for both men and women and the special premium that both government and industry place on family-oriented social life for attracting and keeping workers in the area. Alberta’s brand of late neoliberalism contributes to this sharpened yet depoliticized set of gendered relations. As in the rest of Canada and other parts of the Global North, the devolution of social responsibility onto families and local communities contributes to the reproduction of gendered inequalities (Gazso 2009; Harder 2006), while the valorization of the productive entrepreneurial subject both de- and re-genders subjectivity (Simon-Kumar 2011). In some ways, the resource extraction economy of Alberta intensifies “the neoliberal and social conservative threads [in Canada] which simultaneously cast gender as being irrelevant and wives and mothers as critical to the reproduction of families, family values, and society” (Brodie 2008, 160–61). And this in a province with a history of political inattention to issues affecting women, as the Parkland Institute and the Alberta College of Social Workers reported in 2012: “Alberta is the only jurisdiction in Canada without a minister or advisory council
responsible for the status of women. Alberta is alone in having no mechanisms for gender analysis of social and economic policy, or even a council acting in an advisory capacity to government” (2).

**Gendered Work in Fort McMurray: A Snapshot of Paid Work**

The gendered picture of paid work in the RMWB (more than 90% of whose residents are in Fort McMurray) during the boom that began in the early 2000s is especially pertinent, given the combination of high median incomes and high labour shortages that have marked this period. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, both male and female employment rates among residents in the RMWB were higher than in the province as a whole: 88.3 percent for males and 68.6 percent for females, compared to 74.6 percent and 63.4 percent for the province, and there is a higher percentage of women employed in trades and transportation than in Alberta or Canada (Statistics Canada 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). These statistics seem to support Ross’s finding (2008, 121) that in countries with large and diverse economies (like Norway and Australia), women are not as likely to be crowded out of employment in an oil and gas economy.

However, this story deserves further unpacking. First, consider that in 2011 nearly one-third of the resident labour force in the RMWB census area worked in “trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations,” and 90 percent of those workers were men (Statistics Canada 2011c). Thus, the preponderance of images of women donning hard hats in oil industry ads and billboards is, ironically, more a reflection of the work that female bodies do to publicly produce the idea of inclusive economic participation than of the reality of work on the ground. Second, while women and visible minorities are overrepresented in the sales and service industry throughout Canada and much of the Global North, the percentage of these precarious jobs occupied by women was actually higher in the region than in Alberta or Canada as a whole. An increasing percentage of workers in this sector have come to Fort McMurray under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, which, according to a 2011 provincial government report, grew sixfold between 2000 and 2010 (Woo-Paw 2011).

These realities only begin to explain the gendered landscape of employment and income in Fort McMurray. The 2011 National Household Survey showed that among those over fifteen years of age with any income, the percentages of both men and women working full-year, full-time were almost double that in the province of Alberta (Statistics Canada 2011a, 2011c)—so, everyone is
working more. However, income differences are striking. Median earnings for men in the RMWB were almost three times those of women, and were still more than twice as high when we consider only those individuals working full-year, full-time (see table 10.1). This is considerably more of a gap than in the province as a whole, which already has one of the highest gender wage gaps in Canada.\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of individuals</th>
<th>R.M. of Wood Buffalo</th>
<th>Alberta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons 15 years and over with income</td>
<td>28,900</td>
<td>22,605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons 15 years and over working full-year, full-time</td>
<td>25,410</td>
<td>14,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>670,880</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median annual income</th>
<th>R.M. of Wood Buffalo</th>
<th>Alberta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons 15 years and over with income</td>
<td>$112,966</td>
<td>$39,648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons 15 years and over working full-year, full-time</td>
<td>$137,422</td>
<td>$64,337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These numbers underscore the almost mundane and tautological point that oil economies favour male employment because of the full-time, high-wage, male-dominated jobs available (cf. Ross 2008). However, that this is true even in an environment of work shortages and high housing costs demands that we look further. And looking further, we see how the political and cultural economy of the bitumen sands shapes gendered, raced, and classed arrangements of work in ways that supplement this extractive economy.

**Child Care: A Window on Gendered Work**

The work of child care, both paid and unpaid, is an instructive place to launch an examination of the arrangements of production and social reproduction—the
gendered forms of “energy”—that supplement the oil economy. Like Alberta as a whole, Fort McMurray faces a child care shortage. And as in other boom-towns (Gillespie 2007), inadequate child care provision is further exacerbated by employment turnover and competition from attainable higher-paying work, driving up the cost of child care. Even though the province dedicated new funding to child care in Fort McMurray in 2009 and 2010, the municipality’s website continued to advise that “child care in Fort McMurray is among the most expensive in the province” and that “it is important to plan ahead for child care before moving, as there are often waiting lists.” As one long-time resident put it during an interview in 2007,

For all these families who come here, most of them have two people working. Where are the kids supposed to go? We need somebody to invest in daycare . . . And then how do you staff the daycare? . . . And then how can they [daycare staff] afford to live here when they make $14 an hour, let’s say. They can’t afford to live here. So you know it’s a vicious circle of how do you meet the needs of these families and these individuals who are coming to Fort McMurray. There is so much pressure, it’s like a pressure cooker.

This comment, like much of the data we gathered from dozens of interviews, as well as from a face-to-face survey of fifty-four parents and nannies at two sites of The HUB Family Resource Centre in Fort McMurray, suggests that gendered decisions and practices of child care include but go beyond the more general problem of limited provision and high cost of day homes and child care centres, to the very structures and cultures of the bitumen sands economy: pace, growth, overtime and shift work, ramped-up cost of living, and the promise of opportunity to live the good life.

_Time, “Good Jobs,” and the Flexibilized Fort McMurray Woman_

The frenetic and constant pace of bitumen production translates into round-the-clock shift work, work schedules like “ten days on and four off,” lots of necessary and/or available overtime, and long commute times out to site and back. In this context, complained the spouse of an oil industry professional, “as much as the companies certainly say, ‘Balanced life, that’s what we want,’ there’s certainly that dichotomy between ‘Make sure you’re staying healthy and not working too much’ but ‘Could you come in and work tomorrow?’” These spatial-temporal particularities of paid work in the bitumen sands zone intensify the gendered experience of “flexibilization”: women adjusting paid and
unpaid work to accommodate the contradictory demands of economy and society in heteronormative, liberal democracies (Luxton 2006; Thorin 2001). First, time and distance between the city and the oil sites prompted some women to take jobs in town to be closer to home and children (see also Leach 1999). This included women who at one point had worked in the oil industry. One woman, referring to commuting time, said,

It started to get almost an hour now, each way. And I just felt that, you know, my time was best served in town. If one of us was working at the plant sites, that was fine: one could be in town with the son and one could be at the plant site. So I focused my careers, all my little careers, in town.

A second form of flexibilization entailed women taking a paid job that worked around a male partner’s schedule in the oil patch. Often this was part-time work found in public, nonprofit, or service industry employment in town, given the relative dearth of part-time work with the oil companies themselves. One of these women told me, “I’ve been able to choose my hours and that has enabled me to work around my husband’s schedule [at site] . . . . I’m able to work on one of the days that my husband has off.”

These decisions were shaped in part by the lack of child care facilities and options. Indeed, half of the women we surveyed at The HUB in early 2009 who were not engaged in any kind of paid work indicated that a major contributing factor was that child care was unaffordable or unavailable; this included a lack of child care outside of standard work hours. With so much shift work and overtime and long commute times, this is an especially acute problem (Preston et al. 2000; O’Shaughnessy 2011). It is even more acute for people who do not have extended family in the area, which is typical because Fort McMurray is a relatively remote work destination. Several women we talked to counted themselves very “lucky” that their own mothers lived in town and could provide child care; in a couple of cases, older women had left their own lucrative jobs in the oil industry to look after grandchildren whose parents did not have such good jobs.

A “good job” in Fort McMurray usually translates as a job in the higher-paying oil industry, and this has further implications for the gendered distribution of child care in heterosexual families, especially given its cost. One young mother said that “things would be different”—namely, that her family would be able to afford the leeway for her to participate in some kind of paid work—if her husband had a job in the oil sands. Because he worked in less lucrative

282    Sara Dorow

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990295.01
employment, when they weighed the cost of child care against the “extra” income she would make in a paid job, it made more financial sense for her to do the unpaid work of child care. Even when people who worked in nonindustry jobs (such as education, government, social services, etc.) began to receive an extra cost-of-living allowance (implemented in 2007 and 2008), their salaries were still not enough to cover the cost of housing and child care. A firefighter’s wife told me that with the already high cost of housing, paying for daycare was just not a viable option, so she did the child care and then worked part-time on her husband’s day off. “Lots of women are doing that,” she said, and, with a shrug of her shoulders, added, “That’s just the way it is.”

This nexus of productive and reproductive work supplements the extractive needs of oil capital through both gendered and classed arrangements. To begin with, a “good job” is itself not just a matter of pay but also of time, and these were quite different for people in trades versus professional jobs in the oil industry. A retired professional summed up one class difference:

[At the lower levels] you work fourteen hours, you get paid about six hours overtime, that’s a lot of money . . . [Maybe] your wife is doing the same and you are working night and day, night and day. So it’s the money is what is inviting that. To the professionals, they don’t pay overtime so you go in the morning and you come [home] in the afternoon. That’s it. So you are home every night and even if you are a little late, you’re here at six or seven.

The desire and/or demand for overtime among men (and the limited number of women) who work in trades and construction combine with women’s “flexibility” to deepen gendered arrangements. In many families where the father worked in the trades and the mother did part-time or no paid work, there was talk of adjusting to “daddy time”—when daddy returned for a few days after working out at site for a week or two, or longer. One long-time child care professional in the region noted that couples might not be able to find time together “because they can’t afford child care or it’s nonexistent, so somebody’s doing a part-time job, so every second that daddy’s off work he’s at home because mommy’s going to do something.” One of the few fathers at The HUB with whom we spoke described a stressful transition each time he came off of five twelve-hour days in a row. “But what are you going to do, you have to work,” he said.

“You have to work” becomes a masculinized ethos that contributes to seeing women’s flexibilized labour as “just the way it is.” In this instance, in this context, the gendering of social reproduction is seemingly naturalized by the demands of the particular political economy of paid work. But then, “you have
to work” also attaches itself to the different versions of the “good life” promised by the neoliberal oil economy.

The Opportunity for the “Good Life”: Family Values and the Fast Track

If neoliberalism valorizes the economic (productive-consumptive) citizen and at the same time reproduces the gendered norms of responsibility for family and community, this has particular effects on child care and other social reproductive work in Fort McMurray, where oil production promises opportunity. We might think of the promise of plentiful work in the energy economy and of the ability to translate it into the “good life” as a corollary to the “rentier effect” (Ross 2001)—that is, it may dampen not only broader political challenges but also challenges to gender inequities. In Fort McMurray, this translates into a network of gendered arrangements that variously support the opportunity to exercise family values and/or to get on the fast track to a handsome income.

The coupling of traditional family-based values and female-based community work constitutes one version of the good life promised by oil. Sometimes, this was narrated as a slowing down of the frenetic cycle of work, money, and consumption in which the oil boom catches people. As one long-time resident put it, “Some people sacrifice living a lifestyle where they have more stuff, I guess, where they do keep one parent home. Like, there are women here who stay home.” A handful of women we interviewed and surveyed said that their families consciously had chosen to move to Fort McMurray because their husbands’ jobs in the oil industry allowed them to be stay-at-home moms. In other words, the opportunity of high-paying jobs for men provided the opportunity to play out a conventional gendered division of labour. Some of these same women were also active volunteers in the community. If in the late neoliberal state “there has been greater involvement of citizenship participation and community partnerships in the formulation and delivery of policy and services,” this is still to some degree feminized work (Simon-Kumar 2011, 42; see also Luxton 2006). But in Fort McMurray, there is a particular premium on volunteer time: while voluntarism is essential to providing the “community energy” touted in the Big Spirit ads, the dominance of paid work and a relative shortage of retired people and women with “extra” time squeezes social reproductive time for volunteering, giving it all the more currency as a component of the good life.
While this first version of the good life sacrifices money for time, a second version, in which both male and female spouses participated in full-time (plus overtime) paid work to maximize the monetary benefits of the boom, sacrifices time for money. These benefits were often signalled through conspicuous consumption, such as investments in a home (and by default, an expensive one), sun-destination vacations, adult toys like a new truck or boat, and shopping trips to larger cities to acquire the latest consumer goods or children's toys. One source of social anxiety was the concern about overworked parents substituting hard cash or extravagant toys for quality time with children and family: as one interviewee recalled, "Our kids were telling us that among their peers, both of [their parents] work tremendous overtime and they get a lot of money and they don't spend time with the kids...[instead] they opened their wallet full of money."

This sacrifice of time for money seemed to apply whether the families of individual oil industry workers were in Fort McMurray or far away; in both cases, time spent in paid work was maximized to fast-track monetary provisions for family. For some, this meant deferring fulfillment of the first kind of "good life" (time for family and leisure) into some unknown time in the future, usually in some other place (Dorow and Dogu 2011). It also entailed the commodification of social reproductive work, revealing the globalized intersections of race, class, and gender that supplement the fast track to individual income and corporate profit.

Stratified Social Reproduction and the Global Service Economy

Exchanging earnings for paid child care is perhaps an obvious response for full-time dual-earner families, especially for people in middle- and upper-class forms of work. But these practices of stratified reproduction (Colen 1995) also highlight the reality that as highly educated women in liberal democracies find it easier to compete alongside men for better paid jobs (McDowell 2006) and as neoliberal governance places particular labouring bodies in differentiated global spaces (Ferguson 2008), we see new kinds of classed and raced divides among women. Life in the heart of bitumen production adds a couple of twists to this scenario. First, in a good number of well-off dual-earner families in Fort McMurray, two people are earning $30 or more an hour working in construction and other trades. Second, if one can afford child care at all, hiring a live-in nanny is especially attractive given not only limited and expensive day care but
also exorbitant housing costs. In this context, the “savings” of an extra room in
the house more than offset the $10 per hour wages for a live-in caregiver.

One-quarter of the fifty-four people we surveyed at The HUB were nan-
pies, all of them Filipina. While exact numbers on live-in caregivers in Fort
McMurray are hard to obtain, the number of Filipina nannies alone is in the
hundreds. In almost all of their cases, one or both of their employers worked in
the oil industry, with about half in administration or professional jobs and the
other half in the trades. One of the mothers we interviewed at The HUB was on
maternity leave but planned to hire a live-in caregiver when she returned to her
engineering job—part of a larger plan to stay in Fort McMurray for another five
years and save for her and her husband’s early retirement.

This story highlights the ways in which live-in caregivers supplement the
tradeoffs of time and money discussed above. Most poignantly, they absorb
the social reproductive time that allows their employers to work odd and extra
hours. One child care professional averred that shift workers preferred to hire
nannies “because of their long hours. Because they don’t have time for the
housework when they get home so isn’t it nice to come home and have some
supper happening that somebody [else prepared] . . . Filipina nannies are the
oil sands workers’ solution because they’ll clean the house, too.” A subsequent
survey conducted in 2014 with live-in caregivers in Fort McMurray corrobor-
ated that they work longer on average than local trades workers and often per-
form household duties outside of the scope of their contracts; long hours and
extra duties are more pronounced among those caregivers whose employers
work in the oil industry (Dorow, Cassiano, and Doerksen 2015).

This can turn into a gendered chain of increasing “surplus value,” as
described by two nannies interviewed together:

Vicky: [My] focus is on the child. And if you have time, you can
cook, you can clean everything. But in my case my employer
is a teacher, the lady. And because the guy is six days on, six
days off [out at site], with the night shift and the day shift, so
it’s difficult . . . she doesn’t have time so I will prepare supper
for us because she’s tired working . . .

Interviewer: It would be very difficult to have a family life working six
days on, six days off and night shifts.

Vicky: So far I don’t have [both of the parents doing] that.
Mia: Because if they [both] work six days on, six days off, you’re working twenty-four hours.

Vicky: You’re making good money for them.

Filipina nannies are part of the flexibilized and feminized global labour force (Cohen 1994; Piper 2008) that articulates the reproductive and productive sides of the oil economy. Many people on other types of foreign worker permits work in the local retail, service, and hospitality sectors of Fort McMurray and in the outlying work camps, all of which have boomed because of oil. These foreign workers do the commodified reproductive work of keeping industry workers fed, housed, groomed, and entertained. They are largely visible minority and officially “unskilled” people, although many of them have degrees in fields like human resources, accounting, or education. And while their wages are often higher than in other places, this is offset by high housing costs and is limited by contracts that tie them to specific employers and that prohibit many of them from bringing families to Canada or applying for permanent residency (Foster 2012). Also overrepresented in service jobs are other visible minority groups, including people who came as refugees or immigrants to Canada.

Interviews with employers in restaurants, big box stores, and cleaning services in Fort McMurray revealed ways in which the particularities of the oil economy intensify intersecting inequalities of race, gender, and class for this global, flexibilized work force. To begin with, many such employers had begun importing labour because of a lack of some of the usual labour pools, which, combined with an abundance of better-paying work (such as in the bitumen sands), created constant turnover and a desperate search for workers. A big box store manager lamented that with so many fly-in, fly-out male workers, “you don’t have the stay-at-home mom or the teenagers or whatever to come to the workforce. Just the dads. And they still want all the services in town but they don’t supply anything [to the sector by] bringing their families.” Given these shortages, this employer had instituted an extra-ordinary “mommy shift” corresponding to school and daycare hours in Fort McMurray in order to attract mothers to apply; he had also hired many immigrant women.

While the plenitude of retail and service work in Fort McMurray creates an employment “opportunity” for immigrant and foreign workers, the boom-and-bust cycle creates its own hierarchical and racialized employment cycle. One employer, for example, told us that the downturn of late 2008 allowed his store the time to conduct proper screening and interviewing, which meant they
could hire more “locals” who spoke fluent English; some of these were people who had been laid off from the oil industry and were working in the store as a stop-gap measure until oil prices and investments rose again.

**Gendered Energy and Democratic Equality**

Globalization produces forms of inequality that make democratic ideals elusive, potentially dampening prospects for “thicker” and more inclusive forms of democracy—even in the most advanced democracies (Bayes and Hawkesworth 2006, 5–6). The case of Fort McMurray focuses these questions on an oil economy in the Global North and shows us how some of the material and discursive facets of that economy produce and normalize gendered, as well as raced and classed, arrangements of paid and unpaid work.

I have also tried to show how these arrangements supplement the ability of people who work in the oil industry to take advantage of its opportunities, and also, by extension, the ability of oil profits to proceed apace. While Hochschild (2000) has argued that global chains of care work supply “emotional surplus value,” I argue that gendered chains of care work provide both emotional and material surplus value; in binding oil “energy” to community “energy,” they allow the state to make good on the promises of the petroleum economy.

Neoliberal ideas of citizenship contribute to the feminizing of this relationship. Simon-Kumar (2011, 452–53) asserts that in late neoliberalism, the active citizen is a political actor “located in the intersections between the state, market, family, and community” (see also Sassen 2008); in this context, “citizenship is enacted through activities such as volunteering, and by participating in government-defined engagement strategies. . . . Citizenship, in this discourse, is ostensibly ‘feminized,’ mapped around feminist principles of relationships and mutual dependence” (Simon-Kumar 2011, 453).

At the same time, neoliberal ideologies contribute to the occlusion of gendered hierarchies. Brodie (2008, 161) has argued that in Canadian neoliberalism, “promise[s] of choice and self-sufficiency are . . . masculinist constructs” but are not named as such; gendered relations of power are thus rendered no longer visible “through the lens of social liberalism or the language of citizenship equality.” In northern Alberta, the value put on both family/community and entrepreneurialism seems to narrow the political space for directly addressing gender relations as an issue of democratic equality.
The pressure cooker created at the social epicentre of the bitumen sands economy has been converted into a fraught form of strategic political capital. As Lauren Cutler reported in a 10 March 2009 article in *Fort McMurray Today*, new child care funding for Fort McMurray had come, in part, through political leveraging from the Oil Sands Secretariat, the provincial government unit charged with managing “sustainable” growth of the bitumen sands. And the three-term mayor of the RMWB, Melissa Blake, has effectively used the many social and infrastructural challenges in the region to press for cost-of-living allowance increases for essential services, including child care work. But then, these changes have often been made in the name of attracting workers to feed the labour needs of the oil economy. As a local child care professional told me, “I’m under no illusions that the provincial government cares about quality child care for children and I’m under no illusion that [industry] does. But I know they care about getting workers and so we’ll use that, thank you very much.” What continues to get lost is a series of issues that lie behind such political expedience: how women and visible minorities bear many of the social burdens of the pressure cooker, how both men and women are caught in the gendered structures of the oil economy, and how the oil economy both benefits from and reproduces these unequal configurations.

**Notes**

1. Jodie Sinnema’s article, titled “Fort McMurray: It Is Manly and Moneyed . . . but Has a Soft Side That Might Surprise You,” was part of a series of stories on life in the region.
2. Thanks to Goze Dogu for research assistance in the collection of interview and observational data. I also want to note that we did not have the opportunity to interview any parents or caregivers who identified as LGBT.
3. Because Statistics Canada only counts residents and not mobile workers, its numbers over represent workers with families and females in the region; the RMWB’s own 2012 census report on project accommodations (work camps) found that its residents are 83 percent male and that just over 50 percent are married or common-law (RMWB 2012, 118–19).
4. The proportion of workers (men and women combined) in this category provincially and nationally was 17.4 percent and 14.1 percent, respectively (Statistics Canada 2011a, 2011b).
5. The only categories of mobility status in the RMWB in which women outnumbered men were for those who had lived outside the country (as opposed to census area or province/territory) one or five years ago (Statistics Canada 2011c), which would include both immigrants and foreign workers.

*doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990295.01*
It is further worth noting that the earnings of lone parent families in the RMWB, most of whom are female-headed, equalled just half of the overall median family income (compared to 57% in Alberta as a whole)—a statistic all the more concerning when the very high cost of housing is taken into account.


While high housing costs in Fort McMurray are the result of a complex set of factors, the rapid growth of bitumen development, along with living allowances provided by oil companies, contributed to inflated housing costs during the boom years of the 2000s.

The 2011 National Household Survey profile of the RMWB shows a high average commute time overall, but more than this, finds that the commute time is twice as long for men as it is for women (Statistics Canada 2011c).

This isn’t always necessarily an equally shared desire. One woman we interviewed felt pressure from her husband to enter paid work in order to even further extend his oil industry income, given the plentiful opportunities; another woman stayed home because an oil industry salary meant they could afford it, but she indicated that it wasn’t necessarily her first choice.

References


doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990295.01