Arctic Worlds

EXTRACTING HOME IN THE OIL SANDS

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN SUBARCTIC CANADA

Edited by
Clinton N. Westman, Tara L. Joly, and Lena Gross

ROUTLEDGE

Extracting Home in the Oil Sands

The Canadian oil sands are one of the world's most important energy sources and the subject of global attention in relation to climate change and pollution. This volume engages ethnographically with key issues concerning the oil sands by working from anthropological literature and beyond to explore how people struggle to make and hold on to diverse senses of home in the region. The contributors draw on diverse fieldwork experiences with communities in Alberta that are affected by the oil sands industry. Through a series of case studies, they illuminate the complexities inherent in the entanglements of race, class, Indigeneity, gender, and ontological concerns in a regional context characterized by extreme extraction. The chapters are unified in a common concern for ethnographically theorizing settler colonialism, sentient landscapes, and multispecies relations within a critical political ecology framework and by the prominent role that extractive industries play in shaping new relations between Indigenous Peoples, the state, newcomers, corporations, plants, animals, and the land.

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Arctic Worlds

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Foreword

In 1948 my settler maternal great-grandfather purchased land on the western shore of Baptiste Lake, a few kilometres west of the town of Athabasca, to build a hunting cabin alongside his friends from Edmonton, the Littles. This cabin has stood on sandy banks of this small lake for seventy years, weathering erosion, algal blooms, storms, ice heaves, and all manner of environmental change over the last seven decades. It is where my settler mom and my Métis dad introduced me to so many of the non-human kin I grew up with—perch, spot-tailed minnows, jackfish, walleye, suckers, horsetails, misaskwatomina, high-bush cranberries, wild strawberries, blueberries, spruce, aspen, leeches, red squirrels, moose, black bears, and all manner of critters and creatures who populate my mind and my thinking as a Métis woman from central Alberta. This lake, and this cabin, are a node through which I strive to understand the complex relations between my settler family, my Indigenous family, the land, waters, and the other non-human beings who make up the world I grew up in. It is a site through which I not only theorize, but also practice, my responsibilities to my family and to the beings that comprise the territories that make up what is currently known as Alberta.

Baptiste Lake is a small body of water in north central Alberta that has existed as a productive lake for at least 4,600 years (Atlas of Alberta Lakes, n.d.). It has a creek on its northeast corner that flows into the Athabasca River, tying this small unprepossessing watershed into the broader water flows of the Athabasca River, and by extension, via the Peace-Athabasca Delta and Great Slave Lake, the mighty Mackenzie River watershed, and the Arctic Ocean. In the 1880s, Métis from Saskatchewan took narrow lots along the lake, before the lake was shifted to settler agricultural use circa 1904 (Atlas of Alberta Lakes, n.d.). There are conflicting identifications of the man the lake is named for: Baptiste Majeau. Sources identify him variously as a Métis man who lived on the lake in the nineteenth century (Summer Village of South Baptiste 2018) or as an "early settler" of the lake (Maturié [1972] 2013, 232). In either case, the Métis history of the lake is rich and dynamic, and ties into broader Métis relations across this part of Alberta.

In the summer of 2018 I flew back to Alberta for my first extended visit in three years. My last visit to the lake was in the summer of 2014, just before

global oil prices fell and Alberta fell into a deep recession (Gibson 2016). On that trip, my mom and I stood in muted sadness as we watched fish jump for hours in a pea-soup green algae bloom on the lake and we toured the large McMansions being built up around the lake for folks using the small boreal lake as a permanent, year-round residence and, I suspect, as a commuting village for working in the oil sands (Todd 2015). In 2018 I was lucky to spend time with my maternal (settler) family, taking in the small upgrades to the cabin (a composting toilet, an outdoor rain-fed shower), and bearing witness to still more environmental degradation. As we sat in the hot July sun, our conversation turned to the intense real estate market that surrounds the lake—something unfathomable to me as I looked at the simple, small cabin my settler great-grandfather built just after the Second World War. The lake is now serviced by high-speed cellphone service, so we pulled out our smartphones and googled local real estate and found many of those same McMansions that were being built in 2014 up for sale. I suspect one reason for the sudden return of these massive houses to the real estate market is that the economics of living within a reasonable (three-hour) commuting distance of the oil sands are no longer as favourable as they were four short years ago. I was born in the infamous Alberta oil bust of the 1980s, so it is hard for me to fathom humble Baptiste Lake as a "hot" commodity. I was shocked to discover some of these massive houses—better suited to a suburb in Calgary or Fort McMurray and utterly ill-matched to the small, sensitive ecosystem of the lake—going for hundreds of thousands of dollars (with one down the road listed at over a million dollars). However, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, the ebbs and flows of settler colonial resource economies stretch so much farther than the actual site of extraction. The entire province I grew up in is enmeshed in complex dynamics and reactions to the bitumen drawn from lands in northern Alberta. Even small unassuming prairie lakes are caught up in the impacts of global resource economic entanglements.

The most heartbreaking part of my visit in 2018, however, was the water. The water was rust coloured—washing up on the shore in waves that crashed with each passing powerboat, sea-doo, and the ubiquitous pontoon boats that seem to be the current status markers on Baptiste Lake. As a self-styled "fish philosopher," I pride myself on being able to find the fish in most places, whether it's the highly polluted Rideau Canal next to my employer in Ottawa (Todd, forthcoming), or the nibbling river fish of the River Cam on a visit to Cambridge in 2016, or sunfish and crappies in lakes I've camped alongside in Quebec. Even on our visit to Baptiste Lake in 2014, my mom and I saw evidence of myriad lively fish jumping in the blue-green algae outbreak. But what struck me about this visit in 2018 was the lack of fish. As a little girl, my family and I spent our summers on the lake. My mom, my Métis dad, my sisters, and I would load up the powder-blue family K-car and drive up for our stays on the lake as soon as school was out. Some summers, my dad would pack up his lumbering 1970s Ford pick-up truck, replete with the box he had converted into a plywood and canvas caravan, and my sisters and

I would camp out in the back of the truck on hot summer days. We spent our days collecting leaves and seeds, seeking out the delicious nectar in the red clover that dotted the land around the cabin, and playing amongst the minnows who flashed silver in the shallows below the cabin. We fished, we ventured out into the water on the wooden boats my dad built by hand, and we immersed ourselves in the lake in every way possible for those hazy and all-too-brief Alberta summer days. This was the 1980s, long before the explosion of oil sands investment and building north of us in Fort McMurray and the Peace River region that would flourish in the late 1990s. It was a brief interlude between intensive oil booms and their concomitant exploitation of bitumen and other petro-products in every corner of the province. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, people were discussing the spectre of the proposed Al-Pac pulp and paper mill not far to the northeast near Boyle, Alberta, and the clear-cutting of the forestry sector (Burton et al. 2003, 20; Novek 1993). Oil was a present but relatively less pressing issue.

On any given visit to a lake in Canada, it is the flash and wriggle of minnows and small fry in the shallows that always give me hope. If they are swimming in those waters, they are an indicator that life can flourish, in spite of all that the settler capitalist state has done to lands across the country. And this summer, to my great horror, the minnows were nowhere to be seen in the rust-coloured water of Baptiste Lake.

In 2012 I spent time in the Western Arctic, working with local Inuvialuit fishermen to learn more about how they assert their laws through land- and water-based engagements within their territories (Todd 2014). There, I experienced a landscape where water is incredibly abundant and still healthy. The contrast between crystal clear water in Paulatuuq, into which local community members dip their water bottles and teapots to drink directly while fishing on the land, and the polluted waters of Alberta are stark and upsetting. This is not to say that arctic waters are untouched by global pollution streams by any means, but rather to point out that the heavy resource exploitation of my home province has altered waterways in lasting and deleterious ways.

As I stared out at the altered water of the lake I spent my childhood summers on, I was struck by the cost that the local landscapes across the boreal forest in Alberta have paid for the settler colonial imaginaries imposed upon them. Or, to think more directly with the chapters of this volume, it is evident that Baptiste Lake, already documented to be under stress from cumulative agricultural, residential, and industrial impacts in the 1970s (Atlas of Alberta Lakes, n.d.), has continued to undergo troubling "watery transformations" as settler industrial projects continue unabated in Alberta's boreal forest (Wheatley and Westman, this volume). This is arguably the result of efforts to "improve" the lands of northern Alberta for settler benefit (Spady, this volume). As Sam Spady writes, "Improving the productivity of the Athabasca region is a goal with deep roots in the colonial project. Once the frontier has been settled, the mission then turns to improving the land, or uplifting it to a 'higher purpose' (Veracini 2010, 20). As part of the national myth, the

Canadian National earns his right on the land through labour, which supposedly makes our settlement a peaceful and hard-working one (Ignatieff 2000)."

This brings me to the works presented here in this volume: each chapter sweeps the reader into a different facet of human-environmental and sociopolitical relations in the Alberta petro-state economy, elucidating different aspects of the complex entanglements between humans, capital, and environment that shape the province today. Questions of toxicity (Lee-Jones), deferral (Wanvik), "improvement" (Spady), interconnection (Baker), accidents (both environmental and social) (Gross), spectacle (Joly), watery transformations (Wheatley and Westman), and the "multiple and deeply entangled" ontologies that inform life in the oil sands (Westman, Joly, and Gross) animate the contributions to this collection.

What each chapter really comes back to are matters of relationality, reciprocity, and relationship. Each author demonstrates, in different ways, how relations between humans and the environment are thrown out of balance in the social, economic, and political entanglements that foster the Alberta oil sands. But the chapters also offer hope and insight, weaving together stories of the lived experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people dwelling in and around the major oil sands projects in northern Alberta. Each author exposes a different complex knot of relations in the oil sands, providing further nuanced insight into the dense structures and relationships that shape life in the bitumen economy. For example, Indigenous interlocutors that Gross interviewed discuss the ways they are navigating the impossible paradoxes of working in an industry premised on the long and visceral "accidents" through which settler colonization and capitalism deploy their worst human and environmental violations. Wanvik demonstrates how Métis and First Nations communities come together to refuse the settler colonial "deferral" of help and support for Métis community members, after Métis communities mobilized their own resources to help settlers displaced by the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire. Spady demonstrates how the notion of "improvement" of lands and people by settler colonial actors is premised on the stripping of reciprocal relations between humans and non-human kins in order to re-order the world around individualist white settler imaginaries of personal achievement. Lee-Jones demonstrates the lengths to which state and corporate actors will go to, quite literally, gaslight and stymie landowners who are intimately aware of the visceral poisoning of themselves, their livestock, lands, and communities through the long and pervasive leaks, haze, clouds, plumes, and spills of the petro-state economy.

These out-of-balance settler capitalist relations to lands, waters, and other non-human beings in the carbonscape (Wanvik, this volume) of the oil sands are shaped by the legal imperatives the state set out in its land grabs of the region in 1899 (Longley, this volume). These legal frameworks, manifested through distorted settler understandings of Treaty negotiations, lay the groundwork for contemporary violations of kin relations and reciprocal obligations between humans and non-humans. As Joly demonstrates, settler legal frameworks evacuate Indigenous legal orders from dominant understandings

of appropriate ways to engage with the land, water, and other non-human beings. As a result, bison as non-human persons are co-opted into the spectacles of land reclamation and environmental harm mitigation in oil sands management. These same frameworks disrupt the watery environs of Baptiste Lake, evacuating the minnows and small fry, leaving the rusty waters washing up against eroding lakeshore with an eerie emptiness.

So what can we do to refuse (Simpson 2014) the settler state's imaginaries of its carbonscapes and petro-economies? And how do we disrupt dominant settler capitalist narratives of improvement (Spady), deferral (Wanvik), and surveillance (Lee-Jones) that drive the current petro-state? We must turn to the possibilities opened up to us by the imperative of relationships and reciprocity, as Baker and Joly demonstrate in this volume. We must tend to one another and to the landscapes around us with greater care, honour the relationships that sustain not only human life but the entirety of existence in northern Alberta. This requires tending and attention. As Janelle Marie Baker illustrates in this volume, "tending means collecting, hunting, trapping, and, in the past, it also meant starting fires under the right conditions. When people do not tend to their responsibilities and cycles of respect, imbalances occur, and massive uncontrollable fires ignite, or bears attack. (Gross 2016). Sometimes those imbalances are more subtle: bears eat garbage instead of berries because it is simply easy and pleasant to find, or the bears change their habits and spend more time during the summer in inland berry patches rather than along the river. Living creatures, humans included, adjust and adapt, but when do imbalances become chaos, and a threat to food security and sovereignty?"

In my own work (Todd 2016), I gesture to the notion of tenderness as a state of being in constant awareness of, and/or relation towards, those around us. As Baker demonstrates, in this state of shared awareness, we are better equipped to respond collectively to our shared entanglements with humans and non-humans alike. It is our responsibility to enact these acts of attention. As anthropologist Anna Tsing argues, "I have suggested we watch patches of livelihood come into being as assemblages" (2015, 132), or as Donna Haraway (2016) argues, it is necessary for us to "stay with the trouble" in these chaotic times. Through these "arts of noticing" (Tsing 2015) and through tending and interconnection (Baker, this volume), or as Haraway (2007) argues, the labour of "becoming with," we are better equipped to observe the relationships necessary to respond to and engage with the rapidly shifting realities of the environments we inhabit. And, just maybe, we will be better equipped to console and care for one another through the changes ahead. This volume helps to move us towards these crucial conversations and re-orientations and opens space for us to ask difficult questions with earnest attentiveness. Indeed, these are the only things we can count on as systems, structures, landscapes, and whole orders of being shift tectonically before us.

Zoe Todd

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Preface

Our book is the product of multiple scholarly networks, including social media–based groups such as the Social Scientists in Alberta's Oil Sands research collective. Nevertheless, one possible founding moment for part of this relational nexus came when Janelle Baker and Clint Westman each enrolled in a graduate-level oral history methods class taught by Professor Andie Diane Palmer at the University of Alberta in 2003. Both of us interviewed a member of our own family: Westman interviewed his grandmother, a respected founder in her northern Alberta pioneer community, and Baker interviewed her Métis great-grandmother, who had come from a farming settlement in Saskatchewan to Alberta to find work as a single mother. As we shared our results with the seminar, a striking point of commonality in our family and community histories emerged: the importance of oil and forestry, as well as agriculture, in providing an economic base for rural people in Alberta, including women, during the second half of the twentieth century, though not without ups and downs. Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and communities have had similar experiences, grappling with both the risks and rewards of fossil fuel extraction (see Gross; Lee-Jones; Wanvik, this volume).

While several of us knew one another previously (as the above example demonstrates), it was conferences that brought us together as a group. Many of us came together to meet through panels and meetings funded by the Cultural Politics of Energy in Northern Alberta research partnership, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and directed by Westman. For some of us, mutual conversations also occurred through our participation in other research groups led by David Anderson, Robert Crépeau, Ståle Knudsen, and Colin Scott. When a few contributors to this book presented (mainly in different panels) at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Denver 2015, those of us who met or spoke there soon realized that we needed to collaborate more closely as a group. Among other work, this collaboration led to two panels, one at the joint conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society and the Society for the Anthropology of North America in Halifax 2016, and one at the American Anthropological Association meeting the

same year in Minneapolis. These panels—the first-ever sessions on oil sands at major anthropology meetings—provided an opportunity to discuss and work through much of the data presented in this book. Some of us also participated in a panel on related themes at the Canadian Anthropology Society conference in Santiago de Cuba in 2018. We are grateful to our discussants and interlocutors at each of these panels. Through sustained international meetings and more informal conversations, we laid the groundwork for this book.

Profoundly, this collection relies on collaborations with Indigenous and other northern communities. Many of the collaborators describe their research partnerships in detail herein. As an example, the Cultural Politics of Energy research partnership, which has involved many of our contributors, draws on members' engagement with multiple Indigenous communities and environmental organizations. This partnership includes a steering committee composed of Indigenous representatives and senior scholars, who provided direction on the research program and funding priorities, including the conference panels that were the basis for this book and some of the research behind it. This book would not have been possible without these and other collaborations. We especially honour the Elders who guided our meetings.

Together with our research participants, we and other colleagues have been building momentum towards a new line of investigation in this extreme extraction zone. We have developed our international partnerships and our community-engaged research strategies through a combination of fieldwork, professional consulting, contributions to grey literature (including overviews of the field), partnership meetings and steering committee sessions with community representatives, conference panels and presentations, invited lectures, and peer-reviewed publications.

Crucially, one of the two 2016 panels (organized by Whitney Larratt-Smith and Westman) focused on human/non-human relations in the oil sands, while the other (organized by Lee-Jones and Joly) focused more on themes of political economy and settler colonialism. Each of the chapters in the book stakes out ground within one of these theoretical frameworks, often while simultaneously making interventions in others. As editors, it is the productive intersections between these questions of ontology, materiality, identity, ecology, economy, politics, and history that interest us most.

Since our panels, we have continued talking, exchanging our work, and discussing our ethnographic material. Some of us have started a reading group, while others have collaborated on co-authored articles. Several contributors initially met in Fort McMurray through consulting work. Still others met regularly in their shared research groups. We also acknowledge the long-term contributions that Patricia McCormack has made to this project (including providing detailed comments on several of the chapters for this book and at our Cuba panel) and to ethnological research in northern Alberta. As well, we honour the ongoing connections and inspirational dialogue that many of us enjoy with Zoe Todd.

Our episodic conversations soon led to the conviction that we needed to write something together. We all were aware of the surprising gap in anthropological or ethnographic literature on oil sands extraction and its impacts on the inhabitants of the region, albeit some of the participants in this volume have already taken strides to fill this gap by advancing and defining the state of inquiry through our scholarly studies and contributions to grey literature.

While our research intertwines, we were struck by differences in our approaches and variations by case and region. However, broadly speaking, our findings and conclusions concurred with one another. Also, our regional foci are complementary, covering nearly the whole region of oil sands extraction (an area larger than many European countries), within all three oil sands zones, partly overlapping with one another while mostly breaking our own ground through our engagements with specific individuals and communities. One outcome of these conversations, collaborations, and friendships—our book—lies in front of you.

The editors would like to thank the communities and people with whom we work, who have made significant contributions to each of our learnings as both scholars and individuals. We also thank each of the contributors to this volume for their hard work and dedication over the past few years in bringing this volume together, and for helping to build a network of researchers. Thank you to Joanne Muzak, who provided profoundly helpful copy edits to the entire volume. Additionally, Alessandro Pasquini created the maps for our volume. Two anonymous reviewers provided feedback that has been helpful to us in developing the ideas in this book. Finally, we are grateful to our editors and peers David Anderson and Robert Losey for creating a dynamic book series with which our volume is in conversation. This book is dedicated to those who call northern Alberta home.

Contributors

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Introduction

At Home in the Oil Sands

Clinton N. Westman, Tara L. Joly, and Lena Gross

What does it mean to make a home in the middle of one of the world's largest extraction sites? This question has driven us for years, and each contributor to this volume has grappled with it in their own way. We all work in northern Alberta, and collectively we show how industrial activity there creates and disrupts homes and livelihoods in uneven and contradictory ways (Figure I.1). Our book is the only one to provide detailed ethnographic accounts of production processes and lived experience in all three oil sands zones.[1] It includes reference to both mining and in situ extraction processes. Most of us work primarily with Indigenous communities and topics. Boreal forest Indigenous Peoples, including those in both urban areas and small, isolated communities where most people eat bush foods and speak Cree and/or Dene languages on a daily basis, are on the front lines of globally significant expansions in the energy sector's investments. Yet, as we show, northern Alberta and the oil sands have historically been understudied by social scientists (see McCormack, this volume). This region, although often described as frontier, wilderness, or hinterland by both national and international media, has a history of trade, cultural exchange, and habitation that dates back millennia. Within western Canada, Alberta connects the prairies and parklands with the boreal forest to the north and mountainous environments to the west. Linked by different watersheds to the Arctic Ocean and Hudson Bay, the province's northern boreal forest region lies in the Canadian subarctic, which links moderate climate zones to Arctic ones, contrasting forest with agriculture on its fringes and in parts of the Peace River region. We contend that northern Alberta merits study as a homeland rather than a hinterland—and as a paramount site of capitalist extraction. We add that the region's importance also lies beyond a sole focus on bitumen itself, but also with the people and other beings who relate to it in varied ways (see Todd and others, this volume).

Canada's oil sands industry is in the global public eye as both a major source of fossil fuel revenues and a key contributor to climate change and pollution. Alberta's oil sands reserve is one of the world's most important energy sources, as it is the third largest proven crude oil deposit after those of Saudi Arabia and Venezuela; oil sands production is expected to increase from 2.8 million barrels per day in 2017 to 3.9 million barrels per day by 2027

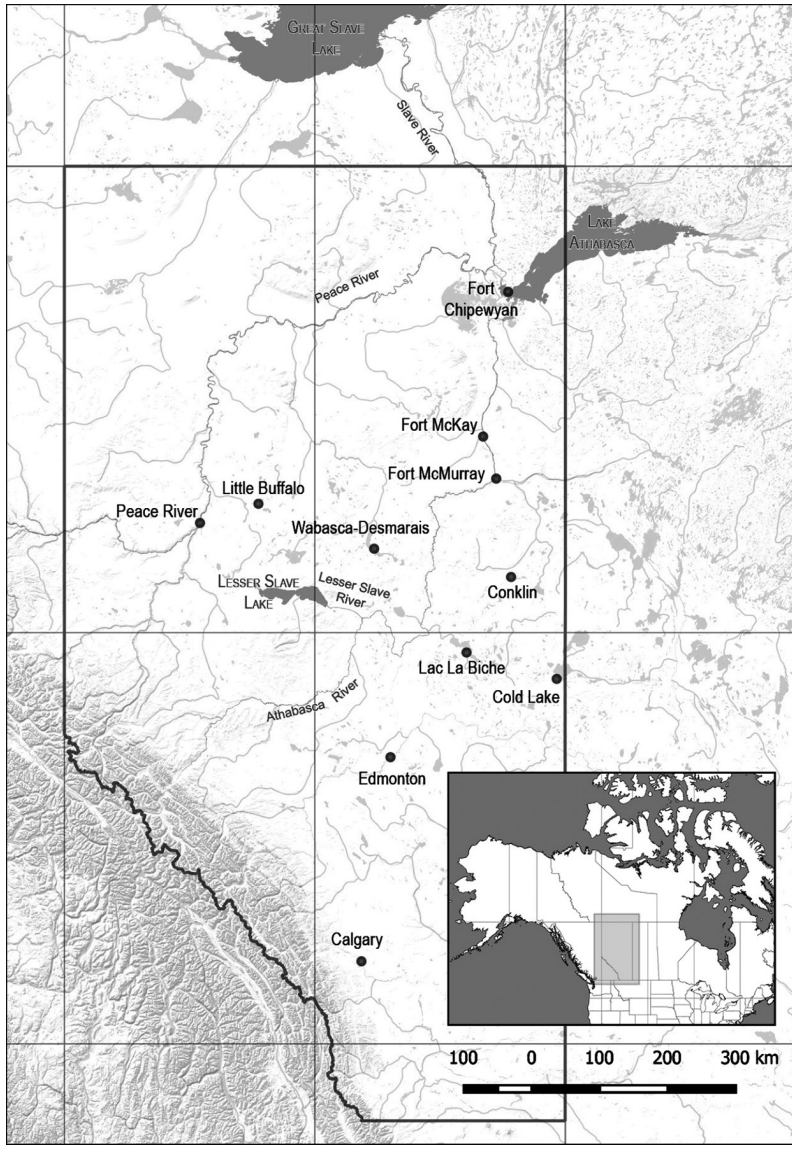

Figure I.1 Map of Alberta showing selected communities and geographical features. Map by Alessandro Pasquini.

(Alberta Energy 2018b). Alberta's proven oil sands reserves equal approximately 165.4 billion barrels. As such, capital investment in Alberta's upstream energy sector (including oil sands, conventional oil and gas, mining, and quarrying) was about CAD$28.3 billion in 2016, estimated around $26.5 billion in 2017, and forecast at $23.7 billion in 2018; correspondingly,

bitumen royalties are the largest single source of revenue for the provincial government: $1.48 billion in 2016–17 alone (Alberta Energy 2018a). Alberta's oil sands underlie some 142,200 square kilometres of land in the Athabasca, Cold Lake, and Peace River areas in northern Alberta.[2] The Athabasca deposits are the most extensive. Reserves shallow enough to mine (up to 75 metres) are found only within the Athabasca oil sands area (Alberta Energy 2018a), to the north of Fort McMurray. In addition to mining, various in situ techniques (the fastest-growing extraction method in the past decade) are used to extract non-mineable deposits in all three regions. Because the oil is mixed with sand and water, and sometimes other fossil fuels, extraction techniques are relatively energy- and water-intensive, with high production costs. Ongoing developments include the deployment of new technologies to access bitumen and heavy oil deposits and to revitalize (often through fracking) dwindling reserves of conventional oil and lower-value natural gas or by-products (for historically oriented discussions of oil sands extraction, see Longley, McCormack, this volume). This same region produces considerable quantities of timber and pulp, as well as sand, gravel, and other minerals. These other industries (some of which are ancillary or symbiotic with fossil fuel industries) also have complex synergistic and cumulative environmental and socioeconomic impacts (in tandem with impacts of fossil fuel extraction) that are not well understood. In spite of the scale of change currently underway in the oil sands region, scholarly investigation of this phenomenon has, until recently, been sparse. Indeed, as prominent water ecologist David Schindler (2010) pointed out in *Nature*, the "tar sands need solid science" to document the impacts of the industry and to support land management decisions. We are also convinced that the "tar sands" (and all energy extraction projects in Alberta and beyond) *need solid social science* to improve understanding and support ecological justice (Ageyman et al. 2009; Joly and Westman 2017). This conviction is what brought us together.

Our volume's goal is to examine oil's cultural impacts, ecological consequences, and political processes in a particular period and region of the circumpolar north. We collectively make a significant contribution to knowledge of Indigenous and energy issues in the context of rapid environmental change, allowing for theoretical advances in settler colonial studies, multispecies ethnography, and the anthropology of oil (Rogers 2015). It is our conviction that social science research on the Canadian oil sands is of interest beyond regional (subarctic/Canada) and topical (resource extraction) boundaries. Extractive industry on Indigenous lands magnifies issues of inequality, Indigeneity, land rights, colliding cosmologies, neoliberal markets, and rapid environmental changes.

"Perhaps the Most Interesting Region in all the North"

Alexander Mackenzie, one of the first Europeans to view the oil sands, during the 1770s, referred to the oozing surface deposits along the Athabasca River as

"bituminous fountains" (quoted in Nikiforuk 2010, 8). Over one hundred years later, accompanying the Treaty 8 Commission and the Half-Breed (i.e., Métis) Scrip Commission parties in 1899 (see Longley, this volume), Canadian government official Charles Mair referred to the oil sands region as "perhaps the most interesting region in all the North" due to its evident petroleum wealth:

> In the neighbourhood of McMurray there are several tar-wells, so called, and there, if a hole is scraped in the bank, it slowly fills with tar mingled with sand. This is separated by boiling, and is used, in its native state, for gumming canoes and boats. Further up are immense towering banks, the tar oozing at every pore…and anon, past giant clay escarpments… everywhere streaked with oozing tar, and smelling like an old ship.
>
> Mair (1999, 212)

The most interesting region in all the North? Perhaps indeed.

Notwithstanding such early accolades, in academic terms, northern Alberta has been somewhat neglected until quite recently. Indeed, within circumpolar scholarly circles, the subarctic or boreal region in general often plays second fiddle to the Arctic tundra. Perhaps the Subarctic seems socially and geographically less remote and pristine than its polar counterpart. In some ways, northern Alberta, which includes mid-sized, rapidly growing cites and substantial regions of arable land with agricultural communities, exemplifies this ethnological lacuna. Within Canada, the middle or provincial North has been described as a forgotten North (Coates and Morrison 1992), being less visible and less frequently the site of policy innovations and advances in self-determination seen largely in the federally administered northern territories—though not forgotten by provincial governments, who pursue extractivist policies there. Indeed, the provincial norths have largely been administered as internal colonies. For example, in Alberta, a very substantial portion of total government revenue is derived from extractive activities in the province's relatively lightly populated northern regions. There is thus an inequitable distribution of risks and benefits best characterized by the dynamics of colonialism and environmental racism. Indigenous people remain the most prominent "visible minority" group throughout the region. In some districts, Indigenous people comprise the great majority of the population.

Northern Alberta is inhabited by Athapaskan-speaking Dene (primarily Chipewyan, Beaver, and Slavey [Dene Tha]) and Algonquian-speaking Western Woods Cree (*nehiyawak* or *sakâwiyiniwak*) First Nations Peoples, bands of foragers who learned to live well in the northern landscape. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, European fur traders entered the region, following a century of indirect access to trade goods on the part of local people. Additionally, another Indigenous People, the Métis (descendants of First Nations people and European fur traders), became established in northern Alberta and elsewhere in western Canada. Finally, in a related process, First Nations people from eastern Canada also came west to work in the fur trade. The extent to which each of