CONCERNING LABOUR MARKETS AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCE IN THE ALBERTA OIL SANDS

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I consider ethnographic conversations I had during fieldwork in Fort McMurray and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 2016 with two sets of workers: Albertan trades-workers employed in the oil sands (pipe-fitters, welders and boilermakers) and Filipino/a Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) employed in the local service sector (cooks, caregivers and kitchen helpers). I analyse these workers’ self-reflections on their own work routines as providing a sightline into the ways labour market processes and regulatory frameworks are manifest in and negotiated through their lives. I draw especially on the theories of Karl Polanyi and Karl Marx in my analysis. Through ethnography I also show how the labour market processes these thinkers analyse shape, and are shaped by, social differences they each tend to neglect (e.g. nationality, citizenship, migration status, race, ethnicity, gender), and which more recent post-colonial, feminist, and critical race theorists have emphasised. Hence from the Albertan context, I conceptualise how state-regulated labour markets re-fashion, and are re-fashioned by, the cultural identities of workers. I show how local labour market processes re-make and aggravate social differences between Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta, in ways that are not superficially or simply motivated by forms of discrimination (e.g. xenophobia, racism, sexism), but which nonetheless agitate and divide an emergent “precariat” (Standing 2011). I hope this thesis can provide the basis for further ethnographic and comparative research.
Lay Summary

In this thesis, I consider ethnographic conversations I had during fieldwork in Fort McMurray and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 2016 with two sets of workers: Albertan trades-workers employed in the oil sands (pipe-fitters, welders and boilermakers) and Filipino/a Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) employed in the local service sector (cooks, caregivers and kitchen helpers). I analyse these workers’ self-reflections on their own work routines as providing a sightline into the ways labour market processes and regulatory frameworks are manifest in and negotiated through their lives. I suggest this is of broader significance for our understanding of the ways state-regulated labour markets re-fashion, and are re-fashioned by, the cultural identities of workers.
Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Ewen MacArthur. The fieldwork reported throughout this thesis was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H16-01624.
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<tr>
<td>AER</td>
<td>Alberta Energy Regulator</td>
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<td>CIC</td>
<td>Citizenship and Immigration Canada</td>
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<td>CLAC</td>
<td>Christian Labour Association of Canada</td>
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<td>CMWRC</td>
<td>Coalition for Migrant Worker Rights Canada</td>
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<td>FIFO</td>
<td>Fly-In/Fly-Out</td>
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<td>IELTS</td>
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<td>Temporary Foreign Worker</td>
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This thesis is written in the hope that I will be granted the privilege to continue these conversations.
Dedication

To those who strive with others
**Introduction**

During ethnographic fieldwork in Fort McMurray and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 2016, I encountered Albertan trades-workers employed in the oil sands (pipefitters, welders, boilermakers) and Filipino/a Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) employed in the local service sector (caregivers, cooks, kitchen helpers). Both groups were protesting the terms and conditions in which they sell their labour in Alberta.

“There is a need for self-determination in the world,” Dave, a boilermaker by trade, called out from the steps of the Alberta Legislature (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). “But after forty years of fucking Tory Rule, we are no longer able to negotiate our own contracts.” I stood among a group of trades-workers from across the Alberta Building Trades, garbed in work overalls, union branded hoodies, and helmets plastered with stickers (illustration 1). They faced the frosted columns of the Alberta Legislature Building, downtown Edmonton, to petition changes to the Alberta Labour Relations Code and appropriate legislation. Their placards read ‘Albertan Workers for Albertan Jobs’ and ‘Fairness for Workers’. An Open Memorandum that circulated ahead of the demonstration explained: “Construction union workers in Alberta are suffering due to job loss, unfair agreements, and having their hands tied preventing them from action”; they are forced “to accept unfair contracts, signed without their consent, to acquire the job before it’s given to a TFW, while employers claim a ‘lack of skilled workers’.” “And I think that is why everyone is here today,” Dave continued. “Because you understand … as Albertans and as Canadians … there is a reason for doing what you are doing. Not just your job, but being a unionised person means you are doing something greater than yourself. You can all be very proud of yourselves for standing up and doing that!”

“For Canadians here, if they want to change rules, it is so easy for them.” Tejano, a Filipino man who entered Canada as a TFW, highlighted the unequal capacity of citizens and migrants to influence labour and immigration legislation in Alberta (fieldnotes: November 13 2016). “The prime minister
just said moratorium, and then there it is, a moratorium.” Tejano referred to the 2014 moratorium of TFWs in Food Services Sectors – following substantive pressure from labour and other civil society groups – which meant thousands of TFWs faced deportation (Penner 2014). I sat with a group of Filipino/a migrant workers employed via the Live-In Caregiver and Lower-Waged Occupation streams of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) after an English class organised by the Filipino/a solidarity organisation Migrante Alberta. They told me about their own demonstrations to protest the terms of the TFWP, such as during the Mayday International Workers Day March (illustration 2) or in response to an anti-TFW demonstration launched by Albertan trades-workers on labour day, September 4, 2014. Their signs declared ‘Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to Stay’ and ‘Defend the Rights of Workers, Defend the Rights of All’. In the words of the Coalition for Migrant Worker Rights Canada (CMWRC), a campaign coalition of which Migrante Alberta is a part: “The Temporary Foreign Worker Program…create[s] a two-tier immigration system…The fact that workers can be deported when they stand up for their rights means that they have no real voice in their workplaces” (CMWRC 2017). “We do jobs Canadians do not want to do…Canada depends on our labour!” Tejano insisted. “So why do we not have permanent residency upon arrival?”

These Albertan trades-worker and Filipino/a TFW protests both call for the radical reform if not abolishment of the TFWP as a permanent structural feature of the Alberta labour market. But their demands differ with regards to whether TFWs – who are currently economically included as labour, but socially and politically excluded as permanent residents and citizens – should be further included or excluded in Alberta. In calling for ‘Albertan Workers for Albertan Jobs’ at the Alberta Legislature, Albertan trades-workers seek to pressure the provincial government to re-regulate the local labour market in the interests of domestic workers. In demanding the further exclusion of TFWs as labour, they re-inscribe the ‘foreignness’ and precarious status of TFWs in Alberta in general. Paradoxically, given union concerns regarding labour conditions, this entrenches TFW vulnerability to exploitation
(Anderson 2010; Strauss & Fudge 2013; Faraday 2012). In calling ‘Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to Stay’ at the May Day and Labour Day demonstrations, Filipino/a TFWs appealed to a wider labour movement, from a different position vis-à-vis Canadian state sovereignty to the trades-workers, a position which Filipino/a TFWs argue reduces their capacity to promote their interests as migrant workers. In emphasising the further inclusion of TFWs as permanent residents and citizens, they call for improved capacities to challenge exploitation and abuse, which have been shown to mitigate the negative labour market impacts of migrant worker programs, as sources of cheap and disposable labour (Anderson 2010).

As these demonstrations illustrate, calls for the exclusion of migrant workers cannot be explained as simply in the rational economic interest of a domestic class of workers, though these calls are issued in response to escalating economic inequality and precariousness. Some scholars have emphasised ‘racism’ and ‘xenophobia’ as driving animosity towards the TFWP in Canada (Sharma 2006), as well as in analyses of the rise of popular nationalisms and ethno-politics across North America and Europe (Saunders 2016). Others have returned to critical studies of capitalist political economy to comprehend contemporary social and political dynamics (Piketty 2016; Streeck 2012 2016). Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs themselves draw comparisons in their analyses. Sam, an organiser of the ‘Alberta Workers for Alberta Jobs’ demonstration explained:

> It's going on all around this system...Brexit is exactly the same thing. They go pick the migrant workers from inside, you know, let's say Poland. And they say like this is how much a pound's worth. This is what the Polish are making. Let's bring them all in... I know what's going on... And I don't know how to fix this, but they are, it seems, pushing to make a Third World system right across the world is what I feel.

Because of the capacity of certain racial, ethnic and cultural differences to appear at certain places and times with different significances and to seemingly or totally disappear at others, the social salience of these differences cannot be grasped through an empirical mapping of phenotypical attributes, but demand contextual understanding. At the same time, because the social categorisation of workers as well as the work that they do invariably mediates workers’ relations to their jobs as well
as to one another, labour relations cannot be grasped through quantifications of pecuniary interests, but require qualitative analysis. Rather than pursue reductive mono-causal explanations (Butler 2017), analysts need to consider how “we often argue about class through discourses of race and gender even as class is co-constituted with them in complex ways” (Walley 2017, 232). Most anthropologists now admit that social differences of class, race, gender, sex, ability, citizenship, residency status ‘intersect’. The question is how?

Organisers of both the ‘Alberta Workers for Alberta Jobs’ and ‘Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to stay’ demonstrations emphasised to me that their protests were about ‘labour’ and not simply about race or racism, even as they organise almost exclusively ‘white’ Albertan or ‘brown’ Filipino/a workers. Adonis, a Filipino community organiser, raised hesitations about how I might re-inscribe the very forms of racial discrimination he hopes to challenge in researching the situation facing Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta. “I’ve seen a lot of people play ‘the race card’ in talking about the TFWP and it is problematic. You know there is a problem with Filipinos being seen as hard-working and as the best nannies. I think not putting the race card at the forefront is good. Avoiding it will create more discussion on working class struggle.”

Sam also voiced qualms about how I might interpret the struggle of Albertan trades-workers. “I really worry,” he said. “What I hate is that nothing has to do with race, religion and politics. And everybody tries to put all of that in. Or sexuality. Or any of it. None of it really matters... Labour has nothing to do with any of the above! …We don't need bleeding hearts!”

“How do you think it plays into it at all?” I decided to ask.

“It doesn't, it's – no! It's Third World! This is where you lot of people are missing it! Because they are Third World! And they can sell the lie. It doesn't matter what race you are. It's that you are in a Third World and your wages are down here. So, we can easily recruit you at a very minimum cost and enslave you for a year – I know what's going on my friend.”
I am sure my ‘whiteness’, ‘maleness’, metropolitan upbringing, British accent, and Canadian university affiliation affected the ways Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs related to me as a researcher, and sought to valorise their own political agendas. Identified as both “you lot of people” and “my friend” I felt tested by Sam at a time when an affirmation-based diversity politics is commonly associated with ‘out-of-touch’ metropolitan elites, and the universities that train them. I also felt tested, when affectionately identified as a “white boy” by Migrante members and at one point, jokingly, as a “Filipino”. There is perhaps an ethnographic bias in the way we anthropologists, focus on – and increasingly commodify knowledge about – the more exotic, visible identity projects of certain racialized and gendered groups, while overlooking the political significances of an ‘unmarked’ ‘middle class’ “fear of falling” (Sampson 2016; Ehrenreich 1989). Yet we cannot crudely identify the abstract concerns of ‘labour’ with one (usually implicitly ‘white’ and male) group of workers, and thereby ignore the escalating labour-struggles of many racialized, gendered and migrant workers (Castles et al 2014).

Certain Albertan trades-workers may side-step questions of race and gender to emphasise legitimate employment concerns. Certain TFW organisers may downplay the significance of racial discrimination to foreground the importance of inter-racial class struggle. Nonetheless, the different ways groups of Albertan trades-workers and as Filipino/a TFWs seek to further their class interests as different categories of worker, through calls for the further exclusion or inclusion of TFWs in Alberta, are implicated in the reproduction and transformation of these very categories of social difference – of what it means to be a ‘foreign’ or ‘Albertan’ worker, categories which remain bound-up with logics of race and gender (Thobani 2007; Goldberg 2002; MacKinnon 1989; Strauss 2014) – even if this is not these workers’ primary intention.

Rather than consider labour market dynamics and cultural identities separately – as abstract calculations of economic interest or as narrow expressions of cultural Geist – in this thesis, I consider
how market logics of abstraction and cultural logics of identity intertwine and interact in mutually transformative ways through the complex social enactment of wage labour in Alberta. I draw on ethnographic conversations I had with 37 Albertan trades-workers and 19 Filipino/a TFWs during fieldwork in Fort McMurray and Edmonton in 2016, comprising of participant-observation, semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions. I analyse these workers self-reflections on their own work routines as providing a sightline into the ways labour market processes and regulatory frameworks are manifest in and negotiated through their lives. Rather than fetishize the identities of these workers or reify their social circumstances, I engage a multiplicity of perspectives through which social differences are perceived and performed and labour market processes are enacted. I consider the labour market as a site for the performance of scripted identities (McDowell 2009). And I consider the articulation of cultural identities as a regulatory influence on labour market dynamics (Bear 2013).

Throughout the process of research and analysis, I tried to bracket my own preconceptions, through a kind of ethnographic defamiliarization. And then, I attempted to hold different research participants’ interpretations of their own experiences, as well as my own interpretations of them, at a critical distance, by contextualising these different accounts within wider historical and geographical frames of analysis, and reflecting on the causal relations between them. In this way, I situate workers’ own cultural articulations of identity in relation to the material economy in which they live and work. This does not constitute the primary, but it does constitute the material cause (in the Aristotelian sense) out of which social markers of identity are recognised (Keith 2005, 59). But rather than identify this material economy with a reified conception of capitalist relations of production, by which notions of ‘class’ are typically defined, I focus on the ways in which capitalist relations of production are manifest in contingently-related forms in and through the culturally-mediated, market-mediated labour process in Alberta (Kalb & Carrier 2015; Fraser 2014).
As I will show, what it means to be an Albertan trades-worker or a Filipino/a TFW in Alberta is significantly constituted through the jobs they do as pipefitters, welders, kitchen helpers, caregivers; through the terms of the Alberta Labour Code, the TFWP and associated legislation, which regulates their experiences of work; and through the ways they negotiate workplace demands through their own social lives. I argue this is of broad significance for our understanding of cultures of labour relations. I draw especially on the theories of Karl Polanyi and Karl Marx in my analysis. Inspired by Michael Burawoy (2003 2013) and Jamie Peck (1996), I elaborate certain ways in which a Polanyian approach to the labour market as a contradictory “instituted process” (Polanyi 1944 1957) re-frames the social implications of Marxist political-economy (1867/1990, 1885/1993). But by combining empirically discovered knowledge about labour market structures and dynamics in the Albertan context with theoretical reflection on their causal powers and necessary relations, I highlight cultural dimensions of the market-mediated labour process which Polanyi and Marx both neglected in their different models of capitalist crisis. In doing so, I develop existing arguments about the complex embedding of cultural identity in political economy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Eriksen 2012) and clarify discussions of ‘intersectionality’ (Heyman 2012; Kearney 2004a 2004b).

After I conceptualise the labour market as a theoretical and empirical object of ethnographic inquiry, I plumb the ways labour market structures and dynamics are manifest in and negotiated through the lives and identities of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta in three steps: each of which focuses on a ‘moment’ or ‘slice’ in this unfolding process. First, I describe how the institutionalisation of a market for Albertan and TFW labour threatens the identities of both sets of workers. Second, I show how the articulation and mobilisation of Albertan trades-worker and Filipino/a TFW identities regulate local labour market dynamics. Third, I highlight how the complex interplay of labour market structures and dynamics, on the one hand, and regulatory institutions and processes, on the other, discipline the performance and frame the perception of Albertan trades-worker
and Filipino/a TFW identities in practice. To conclude, I reflect on the broad significance of this analysis for our understanding of cultures of labour relations.

It is only in considering how wage labour impacts, and is regulated by, workers’ encompassing social lives that we can discern the structural powers of capitalist relations of production in invariably cultural processes of class formation and class consciousness. I argue that perceptions and performances of Filipino/a TFW and Albertan trades-worker identities in Alberta both express and resist a kind of commodity fetishism, as these workers and their relations with one another are socially defined.

Illustration 2. ‘Good Enough to Work, Good Enough to Stay’, May 1, 2014 (photograph: Migrante Alberta).
Toward an anthropology of labour markets

Despite the extensive literature on neoliberalism and an older tradition of Marxist anthropology, the specific ways in which labour market structures and dynamics re-fashion, and are re-fashioned by, the articulation of cultural identities remains a major research task which anthropology is especially well-suited to address. The growing precariousness of work and diversity of populations that has accompanied the ‘neoliberalisation’ and ‘globalisation’ of labour markets has rightly challenged cultural conceptions of ‘class’ anchored around the productive Fordist male breadwinner, on the one hand (Kalb & Carrier 2015; Standing 2011), and structural-functionalist notions of ‘culture’ as bounded and homogenous, on the other (Appadurai 1996; Abu-Lughod 1991). Yet anthropologists rarely ethnographically scrutinise the social ontology of labour market structures and dynamics, which post-structuralist accounts of cultural change and identity formation typically pre-suppose (see McDowell 2009; Graeber 2001; Springer 2012). Even in the main two dominant approaches to the critical study of neoliberalism in anthropology, the labour market is not adequately problematized as a theoretical and empirical object (see Ganti 2014); it is usually taken as a function of other powers.

In the first, neoliberalism is figured as a set of policy programs designed to further capitalist class interests, following Marx. Here, market discourses are registered as a hegemonic ideology that misrepresents underlying class interests (Harvey 2005). In focusing on national and international economic management, such accounts tend to be too unwieldy to account for complex configurations of institutions, programmes and actors through which market-orientated governance is differently reproduced and contested at different places and times (Ong 2006 2007). This is not surprising given Marx never satisfactorily integrated his theory of history (namely, historical materialism), adumbrated in the 1859 Preface (Marx 1977), with his economic theory (or critique) of the capitalist mode of production, as primarily developed in Capital (1867/1990, 1885/1993) (see Bhaskar 1979/1998, 71-77). One symptom of this is that subsequent Marxists have struggled to reconcile Marx’s theory that
the totality of the “relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” with his analysis of the capitalist mode of production itself: in which the market is considered both as the mystifying realm of exchange in which fetishized commodities with an exchange value circulate and veil the “hidden abode of production” (Marx 1867/1990, 163-177), and as the defining feature of those relations of production (Marx 1885/1993, 19). To develop a theory of capitalist society (as opposed to a theory of capitalist economy), the social significances of market-mediated commodity production and consumption must be recognised through a diversity of interrelated market and non-market social practices.

In the second dominant approach to the critical study of neoliberalism in anthropology, neoliberalism is conceived of as a form of governmentality, following Foucault. Here, market discourses are registered as a generative (rather than mystifying) regime of truth, implicated in the production of subjectivities (Ong 2006 2007). Yet as Jason Read (2009) has emphasised, “[b]ecause Foucault brackets what could be considered the ‘ideological’ dimension of neoliberalism, its connection with global hegemony of not only capitalism, but specifically a new regime of capital accumulation, his lectures have little to say about its historical conditions” (Read 2009, 30). In Foucault’s lectures on The Birth of Biopolitics (2004) and Security, Territory, Population (2007), the ‘economy’ is principally apprehended from the perspective of governing through the veridiction principles of market discourses; the causal powers of material and social relations of production and reproduction are sidelined, presented as an object of liberal or neoliberal reason and as ultimately unknowable (Brown 2016; Sayer 2012). As a result, Wendy Brown (2016) has emphasised that Foucauldian and Marxian approaches each offer indispensable ways of analysing the political and economic powers of neoliberalism, but they each tend to skew the analysis of one – the political or the economic – through the other in ways that are not easily commensurable. It would be reductive to
understand neoliberal governmentality as the ideological product of capitalist relations of production. It would also be reductive to understand capitalist relations of production as the function of neoliberal governmentality.

Karl Polanyi provides an alternative starting point for conceptualising markets, including the labour market, not as mere mystification of material relations nor only as a generative order of reason, but as an inherently contradictory “instituted process” (Polanyi 1957). In *The Great Transformation* (1944/2001), an *avant la lettre* critique of neoliberalism, Polanyi argued that efforts to establish a “self-regulating market” are ultimately unrealisable, principally because of the fictive nature of labour as a commodity. In terming ‘labour’ a “fictitious commodity” Polanyi does not mean to suggest that the commodification of labour is simply ‘fake’ or does not happen. Rather, Polanyi’s moral insistence that labour is not a true commodity is rooted in an ontological claim about the inherently social nature of ‘labour’, being “another name for human activity which goes with life itself” (Polanyi 2001, 71-80). The reproduction of the human capacity for labour continues to depend on kin or other social relations characterised by bonds other than self-interested commodity exchange (e.g. of ‘love’, duty, reciprocity). At the same time, the commodification of labour continues to depend on certain state institutions that render human beings available for employment (e.g. through the policing of private property and populations or through the regulation of money supplies). Because labour is generally not produced according to market logics of supply and demand, as true commodities are, Polanyi argued efforts to govern labour as a commodity deny its inherently social nature and destroy its use-value; the subjection of labour to unregulated exchange undercuts human capacities for productive activity (Burawoy 2013, 37).

Polanyi’s insistence that labour *is* commodified and yet *is not* a true commodity may seem contradictory. Yet these contradictions are subsumed within socially and institutionally regulated labour markets, where labour (and the people who perform labour) are governed as a kind of quasi-
commodity (Peck 1996). Understandably Polanyi’s criticism of the liberal ‘disembedding’ of ‘free markets’ from political oversight and his insistence that markets are necessarily ‘embedded’ in social and political processes has spurned alternative readings of his economic theories (Beckert 2009; Streeck 2012; Block & Somers 2014). Yet these structural contradictions can be understood to play out in space and time through a complex interplay between labour market structures and dynamics, which tend to subvert their non-market foundations through “powerful pressures emanating from markets for liberation from social constraints”, and regulatory institutions and processes, “on which profitable capitalist action in fact depends” (Streeck 2012, 25). Thus Polanyi described a “double movement” of market expansion and social protection: he argued the self-destructive tendencies of movements to ‘dis-embed’ the ‘market’ will necessarily spur counter-movements to ‘re-embed’ the ‘market’ and re-assert the primacy of ‘society’ against the markets’ own disintegrating effects.

There is not the space here to elucidate all the theoretical implications of a Polanyian conception of the labour market as an inherently contradictory “instituted process” for Marxist political economy or a Foucauldian framework. Nonetheless for our present purposes, we can note that a Polanyian understanding of the ultimately unrealisable nature of a ‘self-regulating market’ qualifies the powers of neoliberal governmentality to transpose markets around the world (cf. Mitchell 2008); it clarifies the non-exceptional nature of exceptions to neoliberalism (cf. Ong 2006; see Peck 2013b). The relations of Polanyi and Marx are notoriously complicated (see Block & Somers 1984; Peck 1996; Halperin 1994). Nevertheless, I want to recognise the significance of Michael Burawoy’s (2003 2013) observation that a Polanyian ‘double movement’ between market expansion and social protection can be understood to condition subsequent class relations of capital accumulation at the heart of Marx’s theory of the capitalist mode of production, as Polanyi himself identified (see Polanyi 2001, 158-171). That said, Polanyi seemed to underestimate the extent to which a ‘double movement’ of market expansion and social protection is itself driven by class forces, compelled by contradictions rooted in
the capitalist mode of production (Burawoy 2013). Polanyi considered the ‘double movement’ to provide a means of grasping the rise and inevitable fall of “nineteenth century society”, characterised by an effort to ‘dis-embed’ the market and institute the economy as a separate domain of social activity, which he considered a singular historical experiment he implored humanity to never attempt again. Yet subsequent waves of marketisation, including of neoliberalisation, merit closer ethnographic investigation of market and social tendencies Polanyi glossed in sweeping theoretical terms as a ‘double movement’ (see Burawoy 2013).

The Albertan oil sands present a particularly illuminating case. The extreme extent to which social settlements in otherwise remote regions of northern Alberta are built around dramatic changes in the labour market demands of local capital-intensive resource extraction projects makes it an especially acute instance of market-oriented governance. Yet the multicultural nature of social settlements in Alberta confound sweeping abstract conceptions of the ‘market’, as possessing a singular logic, or of ‘society’, as having a commonly agreed upon definition – liberal abstractions which Polanyi reproduced, despite his own critical efforts (Hart & Hann 2009). The diversity of the local labour market in Alberta allows for comparisons of the human consequences of commodification for different cultural groups and of culturally specific responses to those consequences.

To plumb the social consequences of the commodification of labour however, we need a more precise understanding of what exactly is being commodified than Polanyi’s rather loose historical account allows. Here Marx’s theorisation of the abstraction of human activity as labour is of assistance. Although Marx’s category of “abstract labour” is often associated with his controversial labour theory of value, it can be considered separately as a description of a central aspect of the capitalist production process (Chibber 2013). Under capitalist relations of production according to Marx, workers possessing only their labour-power are economically compelled to sell it in exchange for a wage in order to secure their own means of subsistence. At the same time, employers possessing the means of
production purchase the necessary quantity of labour-power from workers for the production of commodities, which they sell for a profit. Thus, by means of the market logic of the wage labour transaction, labour is abstracted from the concrete workers who perform it, as it is calculated according to employers’ own demands for labour-power. “Abstract labour” cannot be identified with any particular person or concrete act. It refers to the human capacity for labour. It figures in the quantifications of labour costs and associated profits. But it cannot be understood as a mere discursive effect. It signals the systemic inter-association of acts of labour, as the expenditure of human energy employed in the production of commodities, which certainly exceed peoples’ comprehension. Marx describes,

Men do not…bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it. (Marx 1867/1990, 166-167)

Hence according to Marx, the production of commodities for exchange involve the making of a real abstraction: ‘labour’. It is through the development of the capitalist mode of production that labour-power itself comes to assume the form of a commodity belonging to the labourer which is sold in exchange for a wage. For Marx the abstraction of labour in thought is the reflex of this systemic process. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) reminds us, it is in relation to the systemic emergence of the category of ‘abstract labour’ that a dialectic of class-in-itself and class-for-itself plays out.

Now, we need not deny the systemic abstraction of labour nor its sociological significance to identify that a teleological account of the systemic emergence of ‘abstract labour’ ignores the way in which capitalist relations of commodity production are themselves enabled and regulated by social practices other than those formally employed in production of commodities. In Capital, Marx assumed the emergence of a ‘free market’ of ‘free labour’. But far from being historically realised, new forms of ‘unfree’ labour, regulated by political coercion, have proliferated in parallel to the expansion of ‘free’ labour, motivated by economic compulsion, in ways that problematize neat distinctions between
the two (Brass 2011 2015; Cohen 1987; Miles 1987; Strauss & Fudge 2013). This will be seen through a comparison of the institutionally and socially regulated terms and conditions in which Albertan trades-worker and Filipino/a TFW labour is abstracted and commodified in Alberta. In capitalist societies much, though not all, of the work of social reproduction, through which human beings are mutually constituted, or of the state governance of property and populations, which renders them available for wage labour, goes on outside the market. It is precisely the social relations which are not characterised by commodity exchange, but which form the social and cultural conditions for the capitalist relations of production – a system of the “production of commodities by means of commodities” (Sraffa 1960) – which Polanyi alerts us to in his account of the inherently contradictory marketisation of labour in The Great Transformation. Insofar as these non-market practices are essential to the reproduction of capitalist relations of commodity production they cannot be romanticised as simply non-capitalist. But at the same time, insofar as these practices are not in themselves produced by capitalist relations of commodity production, they cannot be understood as narrowly capitalist or as a function of the market (see Fraser 2014). Through ethnographic study of the complex social enactment and regulation of wage labour I suggest we can witness the differently regulated ways in which labour is abstracted and incorporated in the commodity form and trace its contested social and cultural impacts.

Consequently, the argument of this thesis is developed through three related propositions about the mutually transformative interaction of market logics of abstraction and cultural logics of identity through the social enactment of wage labour.¹ I will elaborate each through a comparison of the work experiences of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in the ethnographic sections that follow.

¹ I would like to highlight my indebtedness to Jamie Peck’s conceptualisation of “a complex and dialectical interplay between labour market structures and dynamics on the one hand and regulatory institutions and processes on the other” in his ground-breaking book Work-place: The Social Regulation of Labor Markets (1996, 17). A chief contribution of this
1. The institutionalisation of a market for human labour presents the constant danger of the destruction of social relations and disintegration of cultural identities, both of which are variously realised at different times and places, according to the institutional and social regimes by which labour markets are regulated.

2. Insofar as institutionally and socially regulated labour markets threaten cultural identities, they condition the re-articulation of cultural identities without determining their specific forms; and these forms of cultural identity, in turn, re-regulate labour market structures and dynamics.

3. The complex interplay of labour market structures and dynamics, on the one hand, and regulatory institutions and processes, on the other, thus not only condition the articulation of cultural identities, but, in turn, discipline the performance and frame the perception of these identities, by encouraging people to unevenly relate to one another as kinds of differently regulated labour-commodities.

thesis is thinking through how such a Polanyian conceptualisation of the labour market might inform ethnography and illuminate, and be illuminated by, anthropological discussions of identity and cultural process.
Instituting labour

The bituminous sands that coalesce over thousands of years in the sedimentary basin around the Athabasca River, Peace River and Cold Lake, Alberta have long been known about by local indigenous Cree, Dene, and Métis peoples. Their resource potential was an object of British imperial interest. But it was only after the international price of oil dramatically increased in the mid-1970s that it became profitable to extract the crude oil from the oil sands (see Chastko 2004; Riche 2007). The provincial government currently leases the mineral rights to the oil sands – appropriated under the terms of Treaty 8 and bequeathed to the Province of Alberta by the Government of Canada – to energy corporations, most of which are now foreign owned. These corporations hire trades-workers necessary for the construction and maintenance of Alberta’s 30 000 oil facilities and 21 000 gas facilities (AER 2017). They recruit using oil sands contractors, trades-union halls, labour associations, and personal networks. Since its inception the oil sands have depended on both permanent and transitory labour, including a large fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) population who migrate to mining operations for a set number of days, stay at work-camps where food and lodging are provided, and then return home (Ferguson 2011). In combination with the ‘boom and bust’ nature of the local economy, pegged to the fluctuating international price of oil, this has created unique challenges for social planners, especially in Fort McMurray, the town at the center of Alberta’s largest oil sands formation (Keough 2015).

In a time-poor economy characterised by an increase in dual earner families and a decrease in state service provisions, oil sands workers came to increasingly depend on commercial cooking and caring services for their own social reproduction (Dorow 2015; Steward 2015; McDowell 2009, 25-49; Parreñas 2001). Yet employers of low-wage food retail and care workers struggle to find and keep suitable employees, especially in otherwise remote sites connected to the oil sands. In ‘boom’ times citizen workers can relatively easily find higher paying work in the oil sands. But even in ‘bust’ times, there is a relatively consistent labour demand in low wage care and food retail work, in testament to
local labour market segmentation. Despite its social importance, previously unwaged work performed for ‘love’ or ‘duty’ in the home typically remains undervalued compared to industrial work (McDowell 2009, 25-48). In 2002 the Federal government expanded the TFWP to encompass Lower-Waged Occupations and the Live-In Caregiver Program to help employers satisfy labour demands which were not filled by locally available labour forces in Canada. Since 2007, the Philippines has become the largest provider of TFWs in Canada. A combination of Philippines state institutions and private employment agencies broker Filipino/a migrant workers for global markets, since Ferdinand Marcos founded the Labour Export Program in 1974 to counter escalating unemployment in the Philippines and a growing balance of payments to the world bank and IMF (see Rodriguez 2010; Guevarra 2014).

By supplying a stream of workers legally bound to their employers, the TFWP provides a partial market-based solution to a host of market-failures. Yet in supplying employers with people they can treat like ‘abstract labour’ (Marx 1990), the TFWP offsets comparable, often intensified negative market externalities to TFWs and their friends and families.

In this section I will show how the institutionalisation of a market for Albertan trades-worker and Filipino/a TFW labour creates concerns for these workers. The work demands required to realise the exchange-value of labour (that is, the wage on which people depend for their subsistence and prosperity) can contradict other social values that sustain workers as people (e.g. of family, friendships, health), and threaten workers abilities to maintain important social relationships and articulate aspects of their cultural identities, as we will hear.

‘pipefitting and welding’

A distinction between ‘work’ and ‘home’ is instituted in the spaces and routines by which trades-workers live and work in Alberta: in the tenements of Fort McMurray; in suburbs like Timberlea; in journeys to work by coach or plane; in the pass-protected hallways of work-camps; in the patrolling foreman on site; in morning safety-checks. “Guys are groggy… thinking about the hockey game the
night before”, one welder described. “You know, damn kid can’t sleep at night. And then the toolbox talk [each morning] gets you in the frame of mind to go to work.”

Nevertheless thoughts of ‘home’ suffuse trades-workers lives at ‘work’: in acts of heaving large pieces of pipe with a crane in the cold; in moments alone behind a lowered mask; in smoke-pits where people chat on break; in single occupancy rooms where people sit and sleep in camp; in phone-calls at night. “Your mind is on your family,” a pipe-fitter averred. “Whether little Johnny at home is not doing his homework and is pissing mom off.”

The social enactment of wage labour is not simply a tale of rational, individual, calculating *homo economicus*, as many economists would have it. It is innervated by the concerns of people, who negotiate the different demands of ‘work’ and ‘home’. Sometimes they flourish. Sometimes they struggle.

Take Graeme, an out-of-work welder and long-term Fort McMurray resident. I sat with Graeme in the provincial office in downtown Fort McMurray (fieldnotes: November 25, 2016). “That's probably the biggest thing, being in the right frame of mind, like when you’re at work to think about work, not to be thinking about problems at home or anything like that,” Graeme explained. And when you are in the “right frame of mind”: “it’s all production”. Consider how Graeme described his work welding, an act of labour:

Well setting up, you know, you get your welding machine make sure it's on ready to go. Make sure your stick is warm. Climb up. Lie down. Roll around wherever you got to go. Start welding. Back and forth, back and forth. Watch that little bead of hot molten metal form and make those two pieces of pipe at the weld the strongest two pieces of pipe. You know there's something to say about putting your mask down and being alone and just working. And having your mind on the task.

Graeme, like other trades-workers I spoke with, told me how welders and pipefitters often work closely together on site. A welder may help a pipefitter as they wait for them to finish grinding and preparing pipes. A pipe-fitter may stand nearby and pass a welder metal rods once they have fulfilled
the main responsibilities of the pipefitters’ job. But when the welder puts their mask down, they are alone and, in Graeme’s words, “just working”.

“There's something to say about a person that goes to work everyday and makes money and supports themselves and their family or maybe even their parents,” Graeme continued.

“What is there to say about that?” I asked, curious about the nature of the meaning Graeme found in this experience.

It makes people feel good. People like to work, they like to feel good about their work. Maybe even they got a nephew who just moved up and is trying to get to work out here…You know it gives you a sense of belonging and, you know, completing something. That was my favourite thing about work. To step back and look at the job and go wow. I accomplished that. It makes me feel good. Yeah you know it is like an artist. You know, that's how I look at it. An artist can sit there and do it for three or four weeks or maybe for three or four hours and then he starts having that sense of pride. I know pride is a deadly sin. But people like that though. They probably wish that they can bring their families out and be like, look what I did. But they can't [Graeme laughed].

A host of values — of work, friendship, skill, pride, family — are wrapped up in the exchange-value Graeme secures by working as a welder, but they cannot be reduced to it. Graeme secures the exchange value of his labour and realises other values associated with it in different spaces and at different times. The well-being of Graeme’s family is bound up with what Graeme does at work; the reasons Graeme does what he does at work are bound up with his family. Nonetheless, Graeme can not bring his family to work to show them what he produced, even if he wanted to. Graeme’s work-life and his home-life are institutionally separated, as Graeme sells his labour as a commodity, abstracted from his encompassing life. Values of ‘work’ and ‘home’ are inseparably enmeshed; but they are not synonymous. They can and do contradict (Fraser 2016; Polanyi 2001).

As Graeme explained, “Even the good guys, after 18 days of working. You just go eat, sleep, and come back to work. And that's all you're thinking about is work, work, work. And by day 18, your mind is going no. Today I'm not thinking about work. Today I'm shutting down.” Graeme described social and physical limits that prevent him being reduced to ‘abstract labour’ (Marx 1990). “Just
looking at the same thing every day right...And then all of a sudden you walk through the same door...your mind shuts down. And the scaffolders have put in a new pipe. Doink!” Graeme described the experience of hitting one’s head out of exhaustion. “That kind of thing.”

“That happens?”

“Oh yeah that happens a lot.”

“There's a lot of contributing factors,” Graeme reflected. “Like family, what’s going on at home. What your bills are. Are you catching up. Did you spend too much money going to town the night before.”

‘the divorce maker’

The extent to which the social forms of Fort McMurray were built around the labour demands of local resource extraction projects has led social-scientists to “rethink the sociology of community” (Dorow & O'Shaughnessy 2013) and identify “community by necessity” (Major & Winters 2013; also Westman 2013). Its urban forms have provoked social theorists and architects to classify “feral suburbia” (Shields 2012) and describe a “future city” (Krim 2003). These social characteristics should not be fetishised, as if they were a function of the town, as a thing-in-itself. The patterning of urban events in Fort McMurray cannot be explained through a Chicago School inspired empiricism (e.g. Banfield 1970). They must be recognised in relation to the tendencies of the politically instituted market forces, which re-incorporated this significant trading post for local indigenous Cree, Dene and Métis peoples at the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater rivers into an ‘urban servicing centre’ for local resource extraction projects in the 1980s (Keough 2015).

Several Fort McMurray residents I spoke with took pains to emphasise: the town is not like stereotypes of “Fort McMoney” or “FortMcCrank” suggest. “If you spend time here, you will find a strong community.” “There are some very generous people here,” I was told on several occasions. The social solidarity evidenced in the wake of 2016 wildfire underlined a reality of Fort McMurray pride
and community identity. It is evidenced in the phrase “Fort Mac Strong” printed on billboards and car bumper stickers in town. But often people who seek to distance Fort McMurray stereotypes did so by suggesting their basis. “The town is tarnished by the things a transient workforce does,” one long-time resident explained. “It’s all a numbers game,” Den, another, repeatedly told me.

“Well you need to earn money, you know. Got to eat,” I stated the obvious.

“Yeah. Or buy a Ferrari,” Den laughed.

The social challenges facing Fort McMurray residents cast in high relief the human consequences of governing social life according to labour market demands. All the trades-workers I met valued money as their primary means of prosperity and survival. Money permeates the experiential landscape in which they live. Even the sulphurous scents of mines are commonly said to reek of “the smell of money” (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). When I asked Graeme “How come you think there is so much drugs and alcohol?” after he brought the topic up, he answered:

The money. Back in the ‘80s and the ‘90s, there was a lot of people smoking pot and stuff like that. And then they put in the drug tests and you know pot can stay in your system for 30 days or longer and cocaine can be out within a week. So, they've turned everybody from potheads to coke heads. [Graeme chuckled]. You know they've got the money to spend as well. And plus, it is also a little hierarchy thing...I do cocaine and it is a high price drug and shipped so (fieldnotes: November 25, 2016).

When I asked a group of boilermaker-welders what we mean when we speak about the “economy” they articulated the views of many (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016).

“Circulation of money. It's the movement.”

“Yeah” Jason agreed.

“Is the same amount of finite money, but the more it moves the better everyone does. And if it’s moving out of here, then we're worse off!”
Yet to fetishize money, as if it were in itself the source of human flourishing, is to undervalue the expansive sets of social practices that sustain a market-economy, but which are not expressed in pecuniary values or which do not carry high financial reward.

Albertan trades-workers repeatedly told me stories of social breakdown. “You know, the divorce rate is really high,” I was told again and again (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). A few people told me about the increase in the number of suicides since the downturn in the local economy when people were no longer able to earn what they once did. One oil sands worker described an earlier suicide on site. “Yeah, his family had fallen apart. He was earning money. But what for?” He paused. “Money can’t buy happiness”. A number of oil sands workers felt a need to say this to me.

“When people go a bit mad,” Jamie noted, as we sat on a Greyhound bus driving along the AB-63 highway from Fort McMurray to Edmonton (fieldnotes: November 25, 2016). “You've got this isolated community that's, you know, 500 clicks away from anything right?” Jamie explained. “So they're jammed up there with all this money. And nothing to do.” We cut along the Athabasca river basin and through the vast Boreal forest. It was night. “Plus, you're working like 15 to 16 hours a day right. That's pretty typical. It gets to people's heads right. It is a lot of stress.” He sipped a Mountain Dew. “Then you come home and your family life is not generally the greatest usually, as you've been working all the time…And if you've got kids, the kids are wild, because they got all this money from their parents. And then there's all the drugs and stuff. So, the two kids are going nuts as well.”

Jamie was on his way to his new home in Le Duc. Beneath our seats, in the under-bus storage compartment, were boxes full of Jamie’s belongings. Like a third of Fort Mac residents (according to rumour), the wild-fire earlier that summer prompted Jamie to leave this boomtown already deep in bust. Jamie was critical of the oil sands way of life. But his unease was rooted in a longer life-story. He had worked on site since he was fifteen. Although he kept “trying to stop”, he kept coming back. “[I]t’s hard to take another job when you know you could be earning so much more.”
“Some people have got it figured out, where everything runs smooth. But I think you'll find that it is few and far between,” Jamie reflected. “You work all these hours and you come home and you're tired right…. You have a hard time being there, mentally or emotionally.”

“Are you able to speak to that from experience?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, oh yeah.”

“Could you say little bit about –”

“Well the same thing happened to me, with my kids and stuff like that,” Jamie cut in. “Say my ex, like she was working for Syncrude for the last 10 years. And that's what it was like for her. She like would come home after work. And, you know, I would want to have a conversation. And she's done. She's drained. She doesn’t even want to hear my voice right. And I don't blame her, like it makes sense.”

“What was she doing?”

“Welding, she's welding. That's how we met actually, I was a pipefitter and she was the welder right.”

‘cooking and caring’

Filipino/a TFWs also negotiate an instituted separation of ‘work’ and ‘home’ in Alberta: in applications to work in Canada; in portioning off wages to send to family and friends in the Philippines; in long-distance Skype conversations with children and parents; in relations with co-workers and employers in a country where they do not have permanent residence. Employers are often required to provide housing for workers on the Lower-Wage-Occupation stream of the TFWP. One cook told me he was housed near a mountain without easy access to transport. Another told me he lived in a shared house with other Filipinos. Live-In Caregivers are required to live with their employers. Several caregivers described valuable time out of the house with friends. Others described watching movies in their room. One caregiver expressed upset as her employer complained about the
smell whenever she prepared Filipino food in the house. All had to negotiate blurred boundaries between their work and the rest of their social life.

Miranda is one such caregiver. Until Miranda received permanent residence just a couple months before we met, she looked after two children as a Live-In Caregiver. The family mother worked in the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. The father worked for the oil company Suncor. Every morning, Miranda would wake up their four-year-old boy, prepare him lunch, and get him ready for school. Once their nine-month-old baby girl woke up, Miranda would change her diaper. Miranda would give the two children breakfast, while the parents prepared to go to work “[s]o they don’t have to do anything”. During the day, Miranda would clean the house, do the laundry, and look after the baby, which could be challenging – she was crawling, and Miranda did not want “her little one” to get hurt. After Miranda finished her “chores”, she liked to take the kids out. “They can play with the toys, but at the same time I want them to go and run, catch some fresh air, just for them,” Miranda explained. “I want them to experience and see little bugs. Like something new to them, that you don't see inside the house [sic].”

“You felt that was important?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her quick affirmation rang true.

“What was it like spending so much time looking after the kids?”

“It's developed love though! To treat them like your kids,” Miranda smiled. She described how the requirements of her job entailed personal feelings, which cannot be reduced to the wage she receives in return. “But for me I try not to really give fully love for them [sic]” Miranda explained. “Because if I'm going away, I'm going to hurt them. That's what I think.” Consider how Miranda reflects on her work:

If I put her in the bed and she's crying and crying, I feel bad. So, I will sometimes put her in my bed and we sleep together, same as the little one [sic]. I just always bring her into the bed most of the time, unless her parents are home. When she was a baby it is not really that hard. But as she grew up, like one and a half, two, like that. So yeah, they will come and come into
my room, knock on my door. Can we stay here? Like, well, for me I want to. But at the same
time, mom and dad. I’m trying to encourage them in a nice way, like mom and dad is home,
so you have to give them a hug. Just tell them what we did today, and mommym will put you
into the bed. She will read you a story book and then she will give you a prayer. I always tell
them. But for me, I'm not going to say that, because mom and dad's home. You know what I
mean.

I listened to Miranda reflect on her feelings at work, where she sells “care” for a wage (see also
Hochschild 2003, 185-197). Miranda rationalised her behaviour according to sets of normative
expectations bound up with her understanding of the obligations of wage labour. These deeply affect
Miranda’s relations with her employers and their children, where market logics are negotiated in
relation to other relational logics, for instance of “love”, with which they intertwine.

Miranda had good relations with her employers. Sometimes in her free time they would invite her
to watch movies with them. But it didn’t feel like work. “I'm kind of like bonding with them,” Miranda
explained. “They always tell me, you’re part of the family. Like, don’t be someone else!” But cross-
cutting relations of commodity-exchange and family-like dynamics can create challenges (see also
Parreñas 2014). Many caregivers reported to me how they work many more hours than what is in the
contract. “That's the problem if you are live-in caregiver,” one woman reflected in a focus group
(fieldnotes: December 3, 2016). “Because you live in, so they can easily call you anytime. Because
you are there around [sic].”

‘strangers to each other’

The compulsions of the labour market push and pull people devoid of an alternative means of
subsistence apart in time and space according to employer’s demands for ‘abstract labour’ (Marx
1990). This can threaten workers very means of social reproduction (Polanyi 1944). The extent to
which mothers are encouraged to work overseas has even been diagnosed as a major cause of a ‘care
crisis’ in the Philippines (see Parreñas 2001). But here I want to highlight how an instituted disregard
for workers’ social lives implicates workers’ cultural identities. In one focus group, Deion, a man on
the TFWP, described “one thing also that changed, when I came to Canada. I can say, Canada, there
is no life. There is no life compared to in the Philippines. In Philippines, before work, after work you go home. You see friends, you see your neighbors.”

“Yes!” Expressions of agreement reverberated around the room. A couple people chuckled.

“Parties,” Beatrice, a Filipina caregiver noted.

“But here –”

“Sleep, Work, sleep, work”.

At another focus group, I asked how work affects family and friendships (fieldnotes: November 20, 2016). Laughter broke the silence around the room.

“No, it's okay” Jane, a caregiver, assured, just as I was about to speak. “Because I'm a mother of three in the Philippines and it is almost 4 years since I haven't seen them.” Jane explained how her decision to migrate for work was bound-up with concerns for family at home. “That's our goal – to give – especially me as a mother, I wanted them to give more privilege in coming here in Canada [sic].” But wage labour and other social values nonetheless contradict: “The adjustment is very hard. Although we have communication via media, it seems like a backlog. Because it seems like I'm still thinking that they are still young. That they are still little. So, every time I talk to them it seems like we don't understand each other.”

“Actually the family separation for so long is one of the things that keep parents and children separate and strangers to each other” another woman explained. Scholars have noted the difficulties of family separation for Filipina migrants, but less attention has focused on similar estrangement among male migrant workers, who also leave family and friends at home to work abroad. Tejano, a Filipino man who entered Canada on the TFWP described his changing relationship with his niece. “I only see this child through Skype. And we talk every week. And after a while and she is one year old she kept being like all, ‘Oh I'm probably going to play.’” His voice faltered. “She's not excited anymore to talk to me.” He laughed. “Because of the separation they become strangers [sic].”
Regulating abstraction

The terms of the TFWP and the Alberta Labour Code, as well as associated legislation, condition the ability of Filipino/a TFWs and Albertan trades-workers to regulate the social impacts of wage labour. The TFWP stipulates that TFWs’ permission to stay in Canada depends on the will of their employers (CIC 2017; Strauss 2015). Live-In Caregivers need to be employed for twenty months, provide at least 3000 hours of registered work, and pass an English exam, before they can apply for permanent residency. A number of Live-In Caregivers explained to me how they do not complain, “even abuse”, because they are waiting for their “papers”. Kitchen helpers and cooks on the Lower-Waged Occupation stream of the TFWP have no official route to permanent residency in Canada. Several such workers described how they appealed to and attempted to please their employers in an effort to be promoted to a skilled worker category, which would allow them to apply. By comparison, the Alberta Labour Code protects Albertan trades-workers’ ability to unionise, even as it also curtails their ability to collectively bargain. Many Albertan trades-workers expressed fear that TFWs undermine the market-competitiveness of Albertan labour, as TFWs are rumoured to not demand the same labour conditions as domestic workers.

In his account of proletarian class formation, Marx read the systemic abstraction and alienation of labour incorporated in the commodity form back onto concrete workers, as their own social alienation (Marx 1844/1964 1867/1990; Bear 2013). This underestimates the constant importance of political representation and coercion: in socially protecting workers against the demands of their employers; and in enabling employers to treat workers as if they were just ‘abstract labour’ (Marx 1867/1990). It also ignores ways in which workers regulate the impacts of wage labour on their social lives. Workers articulations of their identities as Filipino/a TFWs and Albertan trades-workers are significantly conditioned by labour market dynamics and regulatory frameworks; and these forms of cultural expression, in turn, re-regulate the local labour market, as we will hear.
‘they don’t really bother what is in the contract [sic]’

The terms of the TFWP do not predetermine employer-employee relations. Of course, these depend on the people involved. But the TFWP does institute conditions in which abuse and super-exploitation is enabled and incentivised. The ability of TFWs to stay in Canada depends on the will of their employers. This is a major source of unfreedom for many of these workers, though some TFWs have good relations with their employers. Compare the experience of Miranda, already described, with that of Lovelyn and Kara, two other Filipina caregivers.

Lovelyn and I ate chicken nuggets at McDonalds while we waited for Kara, a friend of hers, in an Edmonton Mall (fieldnotes: December 3, 2016). Lovelyn told me how she is employed to look after an elderly lady with Alzheimer’s, who she calls “Granny”. It is not in Lovelyn’s contract to clean Granny’s daughter’s flat upstairs, but “the daughter”, as Lovelyn calls her, is her “employer”. “She’s sometimes nice, sometimes no [sic].” It is not in Lovelyn’s contract to cook “the daughter” food either. But Lovelyn’s “employer” often comes home asking what she is able to eat. When “the daughter” cooks, Lovelyn is asked to visit her flat upstairs to wash the dishes. “No, I don’t complain about that,” Lovelyn explained. “Because I’m living there, I need to cooperate with them. Otherwise I’m fired. She’s always telling me like that. If you’re not happy here, you can go anytime.”

Kara joined us after her volunteer work. In her spare time, Kara helps other Live-In Caregivers with their taxes. “You know, before I came here I didn’t know how to pay tax, phone-bills, sim cards,” Kara explained. Kara is contracted to look after her employers’ kids. But she told me her employers run a daycare, where she is required to look after ten children at a time. “With ten kids, my head is hurting”. Kara’s employer told her they would not hire a Canadian, because “a Canadian wouldn’t do anything else [outside of the contract].” Kara’s employer installed a camera to watch Kara work. “If you don’t get on with your employer it is hard,” Kara reflected. Kara described how her employer is “helping run the day care”, though “she’s sitting there not doing much”. “But she’s good. She bought
me a bag.” Kara raised her handbag with flowers on it so I could see. I considered the pain of telling one’s own story of exploitation and abuse – and wondered whether Kara did not want to accept it, or even to acknowledge it, because of her options.

The work of male TFW cooks and kitchen-helpers in Alberta is not coloured by gendered family-like dynamics in the same way as the work of caregivers. They are commonly figured as “foreigners” at work – a racialized subject position which can further their treatment at work as if they were just ‘abstract labour’, abetted by the terms of the TFWP (Marx 1867/1990). “They [employers] know you do not have any other choice than to work,” one TFW cook averred.

“My kitchen is big, huge, and there’s only two [people working] in the morning,” one TFW cook, Louis, explained to me during a focus group (fieldnotes: November 20, 2016). “It is supposed to be eight [people]. But only two. Do you think you can manage all that area? No! I’m a cook and also I’m to wash all the plates!”

“You're the cook and the dishwasher at the same time!” A caregiver extrapolated.

“And if they need you,” Louis parodied another Canadian worker: “‘Hey you, can you wash the plate for me, I need that?’ Really!” He exclaimed.

“We work all around,” another male TFW cook corroborated.

“Sometimes I complain like this,” Louis lowered and shook his head, jokingly, muttering angrily to himself in pantomime. He illustrated how the TFWP silences him, as a person. Everyone burst into laughter around the room.

“Complaining to yourself while –” another male TFW exclaimed, laughing in agreement.

“– while I am preparing the food. And the manager, can you wash the utensils? Or the plates! Oh my God! Have to do this!” Everyone in the room was laughing. “It's too much!” We catch our breath. “But if [you are] the white guy, they just stay in the line doing nothing.” People chuckled to themselves. “No preparation. Just stay in the line if they're [the manager is] not [telling them what to
do. And then] they ask you. ‘Hey, can you do this?’ Oh my God he asked me again! Just grab the foreigner!” “We always complain [sic] each other!”

‘bayanihan’

The terms of the TFWP and the dynamics of the local labour market condition Filipino/a TFWs’ experiences at work as well as their abilities to articulate aspects of their cultural identities. As we already heard, the demands of working in Canada can threaten identities as mothers, uncles, friends, and as Filipino/a. We recall: “There is no life compared to in the Philippines,” Deion reported. “Sleep, work, sleep, work”. People become “strangers” to each other, Tejano and Jane suggested. But labour market processes do not determine the specific ways in which Filipino/a TFWs do re-articulate their identities, and, in turn, re-regulate the local labour market in Alberta.

A few days after I first met Lena, a Filipina caregiver, through Migrante Alberta, we spoke again over the phone (fieldnotes: November 29, 2016). She emphasised the importance of Filipino/a community groups, like Migrante, where people can “communicate and connect with each other regarding Temporary Foreign Worker issues. It’s nice,” she reflected, “if anyone is having issues with their employer or anything they can mention it in those circles.”

“What do you think binds the community together?” I decided to ask.

“Oh, I think mainly that we are all immigrants in this foreign country. And we are kind of concerned about what everybody else is doing...like we care...We call it, there is a Filipino term, ‘bayanihan’. Wherein you help each other. That's the term for that. So that wherever you go, whosoever you are. And you see someone who looks Asian. You just ask: ‘Are you from the Philippines?’ or ‘Are you from Asia?’”

Instead of only negotiating the market logic of wage labour as an isolated individual in a foreign country, in celebrating the spirit of ‘bayanihan’, Filipino/a community groups provide TFWs with a vital forum in which to develop a social life. Community members support one another and think
together about how to deal with their respective employers. By organising as ‘Filipino/as’ who ‘help each other’, an ethnic identity is performed. But this identity is not merely an expression of cultural Geist. It is crucially motivated by relations of mutual concern in light of a concerning labour market in which people and their activity are routinely abstracted and exchanged as labour.

‘there are grievance procedures in a union’

The terms of the Alberta Labour Code, just as those of the TFWP, do not predetermine employer-employee relations. These relations too will depend on a host of other factors, including union negotiation of contracts (if a worker is unionised); the trade and skill level of workers (the expectations of high pressure welders are different to those of a first-year apprentice pipefitter); the type of job site (the experience of working in an on-surface oil sands mine with hundreds of workers is very different to working in an isolated drilling well with a handful of workers). But while the Alberta Labour Code curtails some social protections for trades-workers, it also safeguards others unavailable to TFWs. This includes the ability to form unions. Union representatives ensure labour regulations are enforced in workers’ interests and collectively bargain for more favourable conditions. Yet the ability of unions to negotiate their contracts are weakened by the dynamics of the local labour market.

I sat among a group of welders on coffee break in the lounge of a union welding shop in the industrial outskirts of Edmonton, where union members practice their welds (fieldnotes: November 29, 2016). Conversation soon turned to changing labour market conditions.

“You know, the electricians have just taken an $8 an hour pay cut,” Bill expressed concern.

Sighs echoed across the room. “Isn’t that going to happen to us January 1?”

“It’s not sure yet” Chris responded.

“I heard January 1, all of that will be in effect”.

“It’s not certain how much it will be by, but yeah I’m sure there’ll be rollbacks”.

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“It happens periodically,” Jim, a union old-timer explained to me in the office of this welding shop (fieldnotes: November 28, 2016). “The younger guys, they don’t realise it. But we went through this in the ‘80s. It’s going to get harder still, as old projects end and new ones don’t start until the price of oil picks up.” Jim explained how the ‘boom and bust’ cycles of the local economy and the local labour market affects the bargaining power of unions. During boom-times, the trade union cannot satisfy labour demands with members from the union halls, “so we bring TFWs in”. When it’s a bust: “we need to get our members to work.” Jim evoked workers’ dependence on a wage: “[w]e have to accept the conditions, but they never recover.”

Jim told me how Edmonton was more or less fully unionized in 1980s. Another oil sands union organiser sent me articles describing how, under pressure from multinational oil corporations, successive iterations of the Alberta Labour Code have targeted trades-workers’ ability to collectively bargain, in an effort to ensure a locally available labour force amenable to the changing labour demands of resource extraction projects (Bright 2000; Grabelsky 2007). James, a younger union organiser, decried the rise of what he called ‘unions of convenience’: the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) or Merit Contractors Association are “company unions”, I was told on several occasions. CLAC and Merit do not actively negotiate on behalf of workers, some claimed. But because they are a labour association, trade unions are forbidden from actively organizing workers belonging to them. The need to maintain competitiveness in the local labour market – re-regulated in the interests of oil sands corporations since the 1980s according to many union members – threatens union abilities to guarantee social protections they were able to guarantee in the past.

“We give up a lot!” Tom insisted, as I sat with five boilermaker welders in the backroom of an Edmonton café (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). “You know a lot of us are saying that the lifestyle’s changed. You know 30-40 years ago you could get by on 40 hours a week and have their wife staying
home. Now I'm doing 80 hours a week for my wife to stay at home. And not a fancy house and not a fancy car.”

“It's like we don't pay for things with money,” Tom added. “We pay for things with the missed birthdays and the state of our lives.”

‘brotherhood’

The terms of the Alberta Labour Code and the dynamics of the local labour market condition Albertan trades-workers’ experiences at work as well as their abilities to articulate aspects of their cultural identities. As we already heard, the long shifts of oil sands work routines contribute to family and social problems at home with expansive implications for cultural life in Alberta. But labour market processes do not determine the specific ways in which Albertan trades-workers do re-articulate their identities, and, in turn, re-regulate the local labour market in Alberta.

After speaking in his union office in Edmonton, Michael, a boilermaker welder and long-time oil sands organiser, drove me to a nearby McDonalds for lunch (fieldnotes: November 23, 2016). His phone rang as we each ate BigMac meals in the drive through parking lot. He soon put it on speaker phone. “They are trying to increase the number of name-hires,” a woman’s voice explained. “I told them they could only have so many, but they are insisting.”

“I wanted you to hear that.” He said as he hung up.

“Name-hires are when you hire someone you know right?” I checked.

“Yeah. We have members lining up for work for months and they want to hire their buddies.”

Instead of negotiating the market logic of the wage labour relation through the nepotistic ties of personal networks, in affirming the ‘brotherhood’ of the trade-unions, Albertan trades-workers attempt to institute a more even-handed approach. Union members add their name to union job sheets and whoever has been waiting for work the longest according to union records will be assigned to the next job. Given the demographics of the Albertan trades-unions – predominantly male and ‘white’,
although this is changing – a solidarity ethic of ‘membership’ and ‘waiting in line’ may perpetuate labour market segmentation and associated processes of social differentiation.\(^2\) These processes of social differentiation are not only and simply motivated by notions of fraternity, ethnicity, or exclusivity. They are crucially motivated by relations of mutual concern in light of a concerning labour market in which people are routinely abstracted and exchanged as labour.

\(^2\) I would like to highlight how my thinking on this point is indebted to Michael Keith’s comments regarding the ethical logics by which government might distribute the limited resources of welfare (2014).
Fetishizing identity

In the downtown Fort McMurray Tim Hortons, I noticed complex patterns of social differentiation (fieldnotes: December 4, 2016). I saw a small number of Filipino/as, who were all behind the counter, including the supervisor, though I do not claim this is generally the case. The manager ‘read’ as ‘white’. I noticed one Somali man and another African woman serving coffees. Groups of ‘blacks’ wearing security outfits constellated on one side of the room. ‘Whites’ talking over coffees and donuts were dotted across a number of tables. Very few South Asians were present, though I saw many on the Greyhound bus to Fort McMurray. Some of them had told me they worked as food retail workers in oil sands work camps. Nearly all the taxi drivers in Fort McMurray were Somali.

In his ethnographic studies of London, anthropologist Stephen Vertovec (2007) has suggested that diversity itself has diversified in the last thirty years. Diversity is no longer primarily expressed as ethnic-religious enclaves. Instead it is realised through the dynamic interplay of scattered variables (e.g. legal status, religious affiliation, race, sexuality). These patterns of ‘super-diversity’ are not only found in megalopolises and centres of empire. They can also be observed in outposts like Fort McMurray, where “what might be called the old working class of the First World and the new working class of the Third World” all travel in search of wages (McDowell 2009, 18). Yet the persistence of an entrenched raced and sexed division of labour suggests ‘super-diversity’ must be qualified (Back 2015).

In this section, I consider how cultural forms come to be associated with specific regimes of employment, through the complex interplay of labour market structures and dynamics, on the one hand, and regulatory institutions and processes, on the other, as they are manifest in and negotiated through the lives and identities of Albertans trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta.
'there will be associations’

The explicitly racial criteria for settlement in Canada was abandoned in the 1960’s in favour of a points-based immigration system oriented around human capital considerations of the labour market (Lenard & Straehle 2012). The TFWP was expanded in 2002 to enable the import of “low skilled” workers primarily from “developing countries” on a temporary basis (Strauss 2014). The market criteria that differentiates different sets of workers’ abilities to live and work in Canada – e.g. “human capital”, “highly developed”, “developing”, “high-skilled”, “low-skilled”, “Canadian”, “TFW” – may appear neutral and rational. Yet the social characteristics these categories signify are unevenly distributed, in racialized, gendered, nationalised, spatialized ways, at local and international scales, in patterns fashioned by the uneven nature of global development and overdetermined by state and colonial powers. In this context, we cannot afford not to note that these powers historically re-defined race and gender in an earlier period of history, as categories of subordination underpinning the formation of a capitalist market economy (Goldberg 2002; MacKinnon 1989; Quijano 2000). Sitting in Kingsgate mall, Edmonton, Lula, a Filipino TFW kitchen helper, reflected:

Here in Canada those jobs are available for them, and the Canadian doesn't want to work these jobs…In my opinion…I think the government is aware, or the Canadian government is aware, that we offer these kinds of jobs to other nationalities…I think it [the categorisation of different ‘high skilled’ or ‘low skilled’ streams of migrant worker programs] is a deliberate and intentional design to specify and categorise the jobs occupations according to who will be the workforce to do these jobs…Unconsciously I am not sure if all the employers have that kind of…intention to realise…a categorisation of jobs in terms of you’re from this country or I'm from Canada, and you are from this country. But as you learn and as you work, you can sense, and you can feel this kind of treatment, this kind of categorisation at work (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016).

Invariably mediated by cultural forms associated with specific regimes of employment, labour market structures and dynamics in Alberta are not only segmented by pre-existing social differences as is well documented. The market-mediated labour process actually re-fashions the cultural identities of workers, as it is embedded in the lives of different categories of worker, who perform different jobs under differently regulated conditions, rendering the commodification process cultural in turn. The
work of Filipino TFW kitchen helpers is affected by their racialized subject position as “foreigners”. A caregiver’s work is affected by gendered notions of “care”. And the ways these workers evaluate cultures of food retail or of domestic life in Canada affect their performances at work. Yet the specific ways in which the labour of Filipino/a TFWs is abstracted and incorporated in the commodity form through such acts of labour further affects how work-place performances are perceived as a feature of these workers’ person. In the service sector work, “where the output is often ephemeral, weightless or used up in the exchange”, as labour geographer Linda McDowell has noted, “labouring bodies are not memorialised in concrete form but rather in reputation, enjoyment or the prospect of future contracts” (2009, 66).

“They just don't treat them with the same respect as they treat their coworkers because they're in the service industry,” Graeme reflected on relations between trades-workers and local ‘low-skilled’ service sector workers in Fort McMurray (fieldnotes: November 25, 2016). His comments are perhaps unsurprising. When the only reason a client is not doing a task themselves is because incomes are sufficiently unequal for the client to be able to afford to pay someone else to do it, inequality is inherent in the commodity-relation (see Sayer 2007). “I don't think it's a degrading job and I'm sure that anybody who works it doesn't think that,” Graeme continued. “But people just come in and say you're my service and you go do this and this and this to please me otherwise I won’t tip you, that sort of thing…And being looked down on all the time, that sort of affects people after a while, right. It's like the lives that you hear or see become beliefs eventually.”

“Whether it is your subconscious or not, if you see a Filipino [do] you think that they’re a professor or working at Tim Hortons?” Tom, a boilermaker, reflected on racialized stereotypes of Filipino/as in Alberta (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). “It is almost like if you go to a Tim Hortons these days you expect to see a Filipino now…It's a terrible thing to say. But I think it is what people think, whether subconsciously or not. You kind of see, it’s almost like a mild form of racism in a way in a way,
absolutely. I don't know. If that's the job they seem to be getting, then you might associate them with that, right.”

“Like why don't they try harder, you know,” Jason, another boilermaker, laughed, realizing the absurdity. “You don't see them working as nurses, doctors, but that's the basic general association, basic passive racism.”

‘in my observation, we are hard workers’

“They only hire Filipinos, because Filipinos are hardworking,” Lovelyn, a caregiver, explained to me, as I sat with her and her friend Kara (fieldnotes: December 3, 2016).

“And funny” Kara looked fondly at Lovelyn. “Isn’t she funny?”

“And cooks delicious food,” Lovelyn responded.

“I do not cook bad food. All the food I cook is delicious!” Kara grinned.

Kara and Lovelyn took genuine pride in their important work as caregivers, though they were also critical of the ways their employers abused them.

“Yeah we are hard working. ‘T.L.C.’, that is what they call Filipinos,” Kara explained. “Tender Loving Care.”

I was struck by how they spoke of their ethnicity like a brand. Anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2009) have described how under neoliberalism ethnic populations across the world re-make themselves in the image of corporations as these corporations open up new commodity markets by co-opting ethnic practices. The “ethnocommodity,” they suggest, breaches antinomies of “capitalism” and “culture” as commerce produces the ethnic group, and not the other way around. What are the social implications of these market tendencies, when the “ethnocommodity” in circulation are human persons, differently incorporated as racially branded labour goods (see Guevarra 2014)?
“We are well trained,” Kara and Lovelyn described how they can’t leave the Philippines unless they have three weeks training.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. We are graded. If you don’t pass the test, you have to pay.” Kara told me how she was graded on various cooking and cleaning tasks by a government regulated agency within the Philippine Migration Management Infrastructure (Orbeta & Abrigo 2011). “We have to show the examiner how to use the vacuum and explain what we are doing in English. It helps us. Otherwise employers will scold you.” Kara considered the benefits of her training. “Because I didn’t have a vacuum at home. So, I don’t know how to use a vacuum before.”

“Yes, and we have to study the language and culture also,” Lovelyn added.

As Lovelyn and Kara reconciled themselves to their social situation, they internalised aspects of the regulated requirements of their jobs, just as they resisted others.

“In my observation, we are hard workers,” Kara repeated. “You don’t need to tell them [people from the Philippines], because they already know the job. It’s already in us.”

‘what are you, just a tradesman?’

Albertan trade-worker identities are also affected by their regulated labour market positions. Like TFW’s, they are branded as labour goods. As several trades-workers I spoke to insisted with pride, “Albertan trades-workers are world renown[ed]. If you have a trade ticket [a trade certification] from Alberta, you can work pretty much anywhere.” Specific jobs are also associated with cultural attributes. “There can be a tribalism of the trades,” Graeme explained. “I know a lot of people think that electricians are just stuck up snobs who will never get dirty and are just book smart and that's about it. Everybody thinks [sic] of welders as just the guy that puts their mask down and smokes all the time and does his welds. And everybody thinks the scaffolders are just a bunch of party animals.”
But the labour of Albertan trades-workers is differently abstracted and incorporated in the commodity form through the market-mediated labour process.

Acts of labour fitting and welding pipes, boilers and pipelines in otherwise remote regions of Alberta are alienated from the person of an Albertan trades-worker through the distant consumption of commodities – petrol, asphalt, toothbrushes, dishwasher liquids, antihistamines, candles, bandages etcetera – across North America. The identities of specific trades-workers are not associated with acts of filling up a car with petrol, brushing teeth with a toothbrush, burning a candle – all of which they enable through the extraction of crude oil from the bituminous oil sands in northern Alberta – in quite the same way as the act of caring for a child is associated with the person of a caregiver or the act of pouring a cup of coffee is associated with the person of a food retail worker. Nonetheless Albertan trades-workers’ performances of work are associated with their person through their social relations with other trades-workers. Marx assumed that “[a] direct consequence of man's alienation from the product of his work, from his life activity, and from his species-existence, is the alienation of man from man” (Marx 1844/1964). Yet as anthropologist Laura Bear (2013) has noted, “We have rarely left it an open question as to how industrial workers affiliate themselves to their products or through what…ethical idioms they might do this?” Graeme, a welder, described to me how he tends to “step back and look at the job and go wow. I accomplished that”. Tom, a boilermaker, insisted, “people that have been in those [work] situations…they have an appreciation for the things that we do.” The trades-workers I spoke with knew they played an important role in an extensive energy infrastructure, and seemed to treat each other differently in light of this knowledge.

‘it becomes you, right, you become the job’

“There is a level of skill and degree,” one boilermaker-welder explained how the physical and mental demands of construction are inscribed on the bodies and personalities of trades-workers. “If I squish you in a place where metal and bone skid and I make you hold the position and reach out your
arms out and weld. You'll think it looks so easy. But you hold the wire in your arms and then you focus again. It's tough. There is a physical requirement, a mental fortitude.”

“You know there's a certain kind of independent streak in a lot of these tradespeople” Jim laughed. He reflected on how during a downturn in the local economy “most tradespeople aren't going to go and work at Tim Hortons”:

I don't think most of them are suited for that kind of work. It's a completely different culture…We like to do things our way. And if I had someone tell me you got to cut your sandwich a little different you know it would be a lot of conflict I would think... If you're starting out in the service industry then it's part of your daily life. It's what you're used to. And then if you are in a trade you get used to a certain thing. Like you know you have some independent thought. You are given a job to do but a lot of times you're figuring out how you are going to accomplish this thing.

This adherence to the job runs deep. “[W]hat's funny to do with the trades,” Jamie observed, “you'll find guys will retire and about two years later they'll be dead. There's numbers on it.”

“Why do you think it is that people die so soon after?” I asked.

“Like a lot of these guys are getting up at four in the morning and are working hard all day right. They do that their entire life. If you do that for 40 or 50 years or whatever and all of a sudden stop. It's destroys them mentally. There are stories that they lose the will to live. They've done it for 40 years, that's who they are. It becomes you, right. You become the job, right.”
Conclusion

This thesis has ethnographically explored the complex interplay of labour market structures and dynamics, on the one hand, and regulatory institutions and processes, on the other, as they are manifest in and negotiated through the lives of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in the Alberta oil sands. In three parts, I have illuminated three ‘moments’ or ‘slices’ in this unfolding process. First, I described how the institutionalisation of a market for Albertan trades-worker and Filipino/a TFW labour creates concerns for these workers: the demands of ‘work’ can contradict the requirements of ‘home’, and threaten workers’ abilities to maintain important social relationships and articulate aspects of their cultural identities. Second, I described how, in light of these concerns, Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs draw on different cultural idioms from different positions within regimes of market regulation in the formation and pursuit of their class interests. Third, I described how the commodification of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFW labour is differently inscribed on their person, in ways that shape, and are shaped by, perceptions and performances of social difference.

Market logics of commodification and monetization deeply penetrate social life in Alberta, re-fashioning its inner grammar. But the market-mediated labour process, a defining feature of the capitalist mode of production, does not generate a singular reified consciousness, as the super-structural expression of all-pervasive commodification and monetization at its base, as György Lukács suggested in his early work, especially in his celebrated essay on Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat (1923/1971). Rather, capitalist society in the Alberta oil sands appears normatively differentiated, encompassing a plurality of distinct, but interrelated social practices and cultural expressions (Fraser 2014, 67). The market-mediated labour process cannot be registered as a “one-way process of abstraction” (Mazzarella 2003 41-43). It does not eradicate “all vestiges of unalienated existence, any ‘outside’ from which global consumerism can effectively be countered” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009, 23). Instead the local labour market appears as “site[s] of conflicting power relations,
enduring regulatory dilemmas, necessary but problematic forms of institutionalisation, embedded path dependencies and systematic uneven development… institutionally cluttered zone[s] marked by successive waves of restructuring and re-regulation” (Peck & Theodore 2010, 87). Market logics of abstraction can never completely suffuse social life, because the marketisation of labour brings to the fore problems of social reproduction and cultural identity rooted in contradictions inherent in the commodification of life itself. This resonates with Marx’s insistence that the fetishism of commodities can never totally conceal their processes of production. But it is Polanyi’s recognition of the market-economy’s own dependence on a series of non-market social practices, including those through which human beings are mutually constituted as people, that focuses our attention more precisely on why.

In this thesis I have developed arguments about the complex embedding of cultural identity in political economy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Bear 2013; McDowell 2009; Eriksen 2012) by drawing on the recent resurgence of critical interest in Karl Polanyi across the social sciences (e.g. Fraser 2013; Streeck 2016; Eriksen 2016; Block & Somers 2014; Peck 2013a; Burawoy 2017). In doing so, I have foregrounded cultural dimensions and implications of Polanyian crisis theory that remain hitherto underappreciated, in part because, regrettably, the resurgence of critical interest in Polanyi’s ideas has been more muted in Polanyi’s (albeit awkward) home discipline of anthropology. Avoiding Polanyi’s overly abstract conception of market-expansion and his deeply rooted methodological nationalism, this thesis has attempted to attend to the heterogeneity of the market and social tendencies Polanyi glossed in sweeping theoretical terms as a ‘double movement’. The commodification of labour, the social consequence of this commodification, and the social responses to those consequences are all culturally mediated. It is an onus on contemporary economic and social scholarship to consider the multiplicity of ways in which people attempt to regulate the human impacts of wage labour, more or less successfully, and the diversity of cultural idioms in which they do so.
This is of analytical as well as normative significance. Insofar as capitalist society has instituted its economy in a capitalist manner, in that it has coupled material provision and the market exchange of commodities, including the exchange of labour as a commodity for a wage, the cultural character of social relations cannot be understood without reference to the dynamics of the capitalist economy (Streeck 2012). Yet insofar as capitalist relations of production are always manifest in contingently related forms, in that a ‘free market’ of ‘free labour’ can never be simply ‘self-regulating’, the dynamics of the capitalist economy must be understood with reference to the cultural character of its multiple modes of institutional and social regulation. Marxist scholars have emphasised the capacities of capitalist relations of production to universalize imperatives to pursue profit while allowing for cultural differences between workers (Chibber 2013). Postcolonial theorists have emphasized the capacities of cultural differences between workers to disrupt the universalising logic of capital (Chakrabarty 2000). Between these poles, this thesis has focused on the mutually transformative ways in which market logics of abstraction and cultural logics of identity intertwine and interact through the complex social enactment of wage labour in Alberta. Inspired by feminist and other social approaches to the study of contemporary capitalism (Bear et al 2015; Fraser 2014; Streeck 2012 2016), this thesis has attempted to systematically incorporate the insights of feminism, post-colonial theory, and critical race theory into analyses of capitalism as an invariably social formation.

In this way, critical re-engagement with the ideas of Karl Polanyi can clarify discussions of ‘intersectionality’, despite the lacunae of Polanyi’s own theories. On the one hand, I have highlighted how labour market dynamics, significantly motivated by class relations of capital accumulation, condition, but do not determine workers’ articulations of cultural identity – including of racialized and gendered identities. On the other hand, I have foregrounded how cultural logics of identity – including, of race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, residency-status – regulate labour market dynamics, in turn. This thesis has attempted to open these questions to further ethnographic and comparative inquiry.
So, how does this illuminate the present situation of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta? How does it help us understand why and how they are protesting? An appreciation of the social and cultural importance of labour market structures and dynamics, as well as of regulatory institutions and processes, directs anthropological attention beyond the bounds of present-orientated, inductive, fieldwork, to engage inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspectives on history and geography. The contemporary labour concerns of Albertan trades-workers cannot be understood apart from the geological formation of bituminous sands in the Western Canadian Sedimentary Basin, the appropriation of Alberta by colonial and state powers, the cultural history of settlement in the province, or the changing fortunes of resource extraction with the fluctuating international price of oil. Nor can the labour concerns of Filipino/a TFWs be understood apart from the economic development of the Philippines, the cultural formation of ethnic, national and diasporic Filipino/a identities, the political formulation of the Labour Export Programme or of the TFWP. Yet anthropologists can do more than ‘contextualise’ ethnography within political, economic, social, cultural, geographical developments theorised by the more rarefied social sciences (Weszkalnys 2010). Ethnographic fieldwork must be situated at the intersections of dynamic structural forces. Yet these structural forces must be registered in contingently-related forms, as they are manifest in and negotiated through the lives of research participants. Vitally, critical ethnographic research can tell us about the ways in which people evaluate their circumstances – in ways that are conditioned, but not determined by those circumstances – and decide to act accordingly, unevenly reproducing and transforming the circumstances in which they act in turn.

As I have described, the market mediated labour process and its modes of institutional and social regulation encourage Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs to differently relate to one another as differently regulated labour-commodities. On the one hand, this unevenly foregrounds intra-worker competition between sets of workers with differently regulated claims to local jobs and resources. As
Jason, a boilermaker, reflected, echoing territorial tendencies commonly associated with the ‘resource curse’ (Weszkalnys 2010; Humphreys et al 2007):

I've always said that the resources belong to the people, the province. We should be able to work there and make the money. That is our economy. We want to make a living off the stuff that's on our land. Just to my mind I'd say Albertans first for Alberta resources. Canada second, North America third, and bigger and bigger if you want to go towards globalisation right. But that's our economy, that's our resource.

On the other hand, the abstraction and incorporation of labour in the commodity form obscures inter-worker contributions among workers who do not work alongside one another. As Diane, a caregiver, reflected to me over the phone while the children she looks after were sleeping:

It's just like they are using us. They use us to boost the economy here right…. We are also paying taxes. And aside from that, without us, some of the companies or the fortune will not exist. It will not function without us, without the workers. The company's there…they depend on the workers… As Live-In Caregivers, we are also helping. Like to our employers, so they can work. They can help to produce or something, like I don't know, to do their jobs. So, we can assist as their replacement (fieldnotes: November 28, 2016).

Jason, a boilermaker, tried to explain the ‘Alberta Workers for Alberta’ jobs demonstration he attended to me: “A big thing we’ve been talking about, especially in union politics is this one word: market share. You got to keep your market share!” Jason stressed how Albertan trades-workers are concerned about the changing conditions in which they sell their labour in Alberta. Yet his remarks raise the question: who is the ‘you’ in “[y]ou got to keep your market share”? Considering nearly every Albertan trades-worker I spoke to emphasised that they valued the multicultural, diverse, and accepting nature of Canada, that it made them “proud to be a Canadian”, it seems glib to suggest that the ‘you’ in “[y]ou got to keep your market share” is simply characterised by a superficial racism on the part of most Albertan trades-workers. Instead, the trades-workers I spoke with often described their ‘flourishing’ as dependent on the “circulation of money” on a market with “economical borders” (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016). As they apprehended territorial regimes of market regulation as a means of social protection, many trades-workers seemed to bind themselves to these regimes of market regulation and identify their person with them, as ‘Albertans’ and as ‘Canadians’. Frequently, scholars
emphasize how cultures of identity – whether articulated in terms of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity – obscure recognition of the shared structural interests of a class of workers. Here I want to suggest that the fetishization and reification of certain regimes of market regulation in the cultural consciousness of many Albertan trades-workers buttress the human reproduction of a racialized and gendered social order, through calls for the re-institutionalisation of labour market structures and conventions to further exclude TFWs in Alberta.

“What we observe is them coming in and taking our work from us,” Tom reflected on the ways Alberta trades-workers apprehend TFWs in Alberta (fieldnotes: November 30, 2016):

They are lowering what we get paid, they are lowering the amount of work and they are lowering the working standards. So that makes us upset. And so that negative association, we get mad at those people. So, I think I can have a disassociation between a person and a human that I see that I hope it is safe and goes home to their family. But at the same time that person, as a concept, they are taking away from us, they are what makes your life worse. They are making us poorer. So, you know, on job sites they’ll be sabotaged, you know some gnarly sabotage affecting people's safety to try and pressure them out.

Tom reflected on the ways he distantiates TFWs “as a person and a human” by figuring them “as a concept”. He described how “as a concept, they are taking away from us”. His claim that “[t]hey are lowering the amount of work” suggests a limited number of jobs on the local labour market. Instead of recognising the generative activities of people employed via the TFWP, who help maintain the social conditions for life in Alberta by means of their labour, Tom seems to figure a supply of TFWs, as a kind of commodity, as competing with Albertans over limited market demand for labour. Further, Tom’s claim that “they are lowering the working standards” suggests TFW vulnerability to exploitation. Instead of focusing on the regulatory institutions and processes which render TFWs especially vulnerable to exploitation, the labour market positions of TFWs appear fetishized, and embodied in their person. The capacity of TFWs for labour (i.e. as a means of labour-power) and their unevenly regulated labour market position (i.e. on the TFWP) combine in Tom’s imagination as a function of their person, “as a concept”, and as a kind of commodity. Accordingly, Tom wants to “pressure them out”.

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But these processes of social evaluation are not certain, and they cannot be guaranteed. This is because, vitally, workers, unlike true commodities, have the capacity to reflect on their own labour market positions and practices, and act accordingly. Tom reflected on how he “can have a disassociation between a person and a human that I see that I hope it is safe and goes home to their family...[and] that person, as a concept”. Notice the perceptual instability. The nature of ‘labour’ as a “fictitious commodity” may have “nothing in common” with the fetish character of commodities Marx describes, which refers to the exchange value of actual commodities (Polanyi 1944, 76). Nonetheless, as ‘labour’ itself is commodified and abstracted from its human and non-human conditions of (re)production broadly conceived, ‘labour’ too tends to be fetishized, as a commodity with an exchange-value, and as a “concept”. Yet the fictive nature of labour as a commodity – the fact that human capacities for generative activity are necessarily reproduced through sets of non-market social practices and valued according to non-market social criteria – seems to destabilise its fetish character, rendering it easier to penetrate than other commodities; its own contradictions are born within. In comparison to the surface appearances of true commodities (like toothbrushes or cups of coffee), the generativity of human activity cannot be so easily obscured in the commodified labouring body. For to value, exchange, and fetishize ‘labour’, as an exchangeable commodity, as if it were a ‘thing’, is ultimately to value, exchange, and fetishize the very capacity for human activity that goes with life itself. The generativity of human and social activity cannot be so easily obscured in the flesh of a person’s humanity.

When I expressed my thoughts that “there is definitely a problem with the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, but I don't think it is necessarily the Temporary Foreign Workers’ fault”, Tom and his fellow boilermakers were quick to recognize the labour market processes and regulatory frameworks at play.

“Oh no not at all!”
“Sure, sure. It's not them, it's the corporations and all them.”

“Saying that we’re gonna make a buck off their back –”

“Don't hate the player, hate the game!”

It is not that Tom recognises the ultimate truth in perceiving a TFW as “a person and a human”. Rather, his description of TFWs as “a person and a human” signals an alternative ethical register than that of market competition through which to evaluate the relations of Albertan trades-workers and Filipino/a TFWs in Alberta, as ‘humans’ rather than as ‘concepts’ or as ‘commodities’. Precisely because the commodification of labour cannot exhaust the alethic truth of human capacities, people can and do perceive people in multiple ways, as they culturally formulate their interests and politically mobilise as a class of labour.
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