

Ultradeep: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Fort McMurray and the Fires of Climate Change

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Abstract

In the spring of 2016, a wildfire consumed the boreal forest that encircles the municipality of Fort McMurray, Alberta. Notwithstanding the severity of the blaze, known as “The Beast,” attention turned to the community because of its link to Canada’s largest industrial project – the Athabasca tar/oil sands in northern Alberta. A moment of controversy erupted in May 2016 when commentary pinned the cause of the wildfire on climate change, a charge that was quickly judged insensitive. With this context in mind, Fort McMurray holds scholarly value in the investigation of discourse related to today’s dominant form of energy – fossil fuels. Using a dataset of opinion discourse (N=40) sourced from four Canadian newspapers (*The Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Calgary Herald*, and the *Edmonton Journal*), this thesis presents a critical discourse analysis of how commentators and editorial boards articulated the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and concerns about the tar/oil sands contribution to climate change. The opinion pages are free from the journalistic pressure of objectivity and thus offer a place for argumentative narratives to reside. As such, my analysis focuses on the use of storylines in the dataset to give meaning to the wildfire and the tar/oil sands industry. The analysis reveals that the storylines cast environmentalist groups as ideologically motivated radicals while the oil industry was positioned as Alberta’s economic champion, thereby fusing the petro-state with the common good.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Thesis Overview.....	1
1.1 Introduction to Chapter One	1
1.2 Contextual Background	3
1.3 Why This Matters and Research Question.....	10
1.4 Overview of Chapters	12
1.5 Conclusion to Chapter One	14
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	15
2.1 Introduction to Chapter Two	15
2.2 Discursive (Re)construction in the News Media	15
2.3 The Climate Change Counter-Movement.....	22
2.4 Petro-Culture, Petro-Capitalism, and Petro-States.....	24
2.5 Mediating Natural Disasters	29
2.6 Conclusion to Chapter Two	31
Chapter Three: Methodology and Research Design	34
3.1 Introduction to Chapter Three.....	34
3.2 Defining Discourse	34
3.3 Describing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).....	35
3.4 Data Sample and Collection.....	44
3.5 Coding Procedure and Analysis.....	46
3.6 Findings	47
3.7 Conclusion to Chapter Three	49
Chapter Four: Villains – Alberta Oil Industry Under Siege.....	50
4.1 Introduction to Chapter Four	50
4.2 Context: Framing the Wildfire in Moral Terms.....	51
4.3 Ordinary People (n=1)	52
4.4 Natural Variability of the Climate (n=3)	55
4.5 Ethical Oil (n=2)	59
4.6 Conclusion to Chapter Four	62
Chapter Five: Heroes – Storyline of Unlimited Growth.....	64
5.1 Introduction to Chapter Five	64
5.2 The Alberta Advantage	65
5.3 Job Creation (n=7)	66
5.4 Wealth Creation (n=4)	68
5.5 Energy Security (n=5).....	70
5.6 Implications of Boom and Bust Economies.....	72
5.7 Conclusion to Chapter Five	76
Chapter Six: The Frontier Metaphor	78
6.1 Introduction to Chapter Six.....	78
6.2 Fort Mac Strong (n=13)	78
6.3 Conclusion to Chapter Six	82
Chapter Seven: Conclusion	84
7.1 Introduction to Chapter Seven	84
7.2 Review and Discussion	84
7.3 Limitations and Future Directions	86
7.4 Final Conclusions	87
References	91
Dataset Items	110

List of Tables

Table 1: Type of Article by Publication.....	46
Table 2: Frequency of codes that comprise the four main themes addressed in dataset.....	47
Table 3: Analysis of tone towards tar/oil sands - Albertan vs. national newspaper.....	49

Chapter One: Introduction and Thesis Overview

1.1 Introduction to Chapter One

Wildfires (also known as ‘forest fires’) manifest routinely in Canada’s forests: each year, approximately 8,000 wildfires occur, burning an average of over 2,000,000 acres (Natural Resources Canada, 2017). Wildfires play a pivotal role in the revitalization of forest ecosystems. However, wildfires that create extensive and destructive impacts to surrounding human communities - thereby creating social disruptions - prompt special attention from several disciplines, including geography, sociology, natural and biological sciences, and also media studies. Of great import is the increasing frequency and magnitude of wildfires (Jolly et al., 2015): recent mega wildfires in 2016 and 2017 that burned Alberta, British Columbia, as well as California and Texas reveal the social, environmental and political implications of this new reality. Specifically, further understanding of the role of climate change in influencing the factors that foster fire-prone conditions is warranted. Indeed, the scientific community continually reminds us that extreme weather and natural disasters are born out of anthropogenic climate change and pose measurable threats to infrastructure, economies, and communities (Stoker et al., 2013). Despite the danger of such calamities, the option to ignore, dismiss, revoke, or reinterpret science-based assertions about the interaction between human activities and the atmosphere remains.

Until recently, separate bodies of literature existed for disaster studies and climate change studies (Venton & La Trobe, 2008). This crossover between disciplines warrants investigation into the ways climate change disasters are discursively constructed by the news media. Thus, the issue at hand in this thesis is the discursive construction of climate change as a social and environmental issue in light of our vulnerability to increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

Primary to this thesis is the public discussion pertaining to the role of climate change had by citizens, policy actors, and key stakeholders - and the news media's role in reflecting and disseminating this discourse. As the review of the literature will elaborate in the next chapter, the news media's role is certainly not neutral: news coverage can emphasize certain meanings of issues while claims makers can equally use the news media to advance desired framings that benefit select interests. Opinion discourse, namely editorial and commentary pieces, is not bound by the norms of balance or objectivity. Thus, opinion discourse plays an important function because it is primarily evaluative: viewpoints are advanced to galvanize readers around a certain ideological position "by resonating in ways that will connect with their ethics and emotions" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 521). This thesis uses a sample of opinion discourse to investigate how the relationship between the Fort McMurray fire and climate change was articulated. Opinion discourse is discussed further in Chapter Three.

The object of this thesis is the wildfire that encircled the municipality of Fort McMurray, Alberta beginning in May 2016. Named "the Beast," the blaze displaced the city's population and the aftermath continues to affect the lives of the residents. The attribution of climate change to the cause of the wildfire triggered debate in traditional and social media and in the statements of prominent federal politicians. As an array of sources and speakers advanced different interpretations of the wildfire, varying degrees of concern were placed on the science of attribution – scientific work that quantifies the extent to which greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions affect the risk of extreme weather events (Corneliussen, 2016). Despite the unseasonably warm and dry conditions leading up to the fire, discourse that made the link between carbon emissions and the wildfire was quickly deemed misplaced and insensitive to those living and working in Fort McMurray given that many community members secure their livelihood from the fossil

fuels sector. As a result, discourse on the subject of the wildfire was closely linked to either opposition or acceptance of the Alberta tar/oil¹ sands.

This introductory chapter begins by offering contextual background on the above-mentioned elements in order to bring them into a meaningful conversation: in what follows I describe the mediated region of northern Alberta that houses Canada's oil industry, the wildfire that swept across Fort McMurray in 2016, and the controversy that erupted as the fire burned. After I state my research question, this chapter will close with a preview of subsequent chapters.

1.2 Contextual Background

1.2.1 An Introduction to Canada's Tar/Oil Sands and Fort McMurray

Since the turn of the 21st century, over 100 billion dollars has been invested into the processes associated with the recovery of bitumen sand from Canada's three deposits (Athabasca, Cold Lake, and Peace River) that are housed beneath Alberta's boreal forest (Dorow & O'Shaughnessy, 2013). Also known as an "unconventional" source of oil, bitumen is extracted and separated from the sandy soil through one of two methods: surface mining, where the substance is dug out of shallow deposits; and in-situ drilling, where steam is injected to lessen bitumen's viscosity and surface it (Dorow & O'Shaughnessy, 2013; Rosa et al., 2017). Over 250 million barrels come out of these processes each day and are piped within Canada or to the United States (Government of Alberta, 2016). The Government of Canada certainly acknowledges the vast financial gains that the deposits offer to national economic growth: the federal government's recent November 2016 approval of two pipeline routes that reach eastern

¹ The terms 'tar sands' and 'oil sands' are used interchangeably in public discourse referencing Alberta's bitumen sands. Kidner's (2010) discourse analysis reveals that the terms are used in distinct and contentious ways by opposing groups. This thesis will use the slashed reference of the terms to uphold this discursive tension.

and western coasts demonstrates that bitumen extraction can be expected to continue.² Objection to the industrial project, however, has heightened in recent, highly mediated protest movements as seen in the opposition of the Keystone XL, Trans Mountain, and Northern Gateway pipelines.

Continued operations at the tar/oil sands are strongly opposed because the extraction and refinement processes are the fastest growing source of carbon dioxide emissions in Canada, and the greatest obstruction to meeting the country's obligations and commitment to reduce GHG emissions (Adkin, 2016, p. 3). As we can see, an opposition between economic gain and environmental protectionism serves as surrounding context to an investigation of discourse on Alberta's bitumen deposits. This duality prompts me to use the 2016 Fort McMurray fire as means through which to examine how meanings pertaining to the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and concerns about the tar/oil sands contribution to climate change were constructed in a sample of opinion discourse. In the section that follows, I provide details on Fort McMurray, Alberta and the resource reserves that motivated the city's initial expansion.

Fort McMurray³, Alberta was established alongside the growth and development of the Athabasca sands beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century. Its proximity to the bitumen sands has made it an attractive work location for tens of thousands of domestic and international workers. Given that the city services this particular resource industry, it is steeped in economic symbolism. Notably, the economy of the boomtown and of the province follows the movements of the price of oil. This economic symbolism influences the multiple meanings that have been assigned to the remote region. To its residents, for example, Fort McMurray represents home. To proponents of the sands, the derived

² Though the federal government did approve the proposal for a pipeline to reach Canada's eastern coast, TransCanada terminated the project in October 2017.

³ This thesis will use the name 'Fort McMurray' to refer to the residential community and the bitumen sands, unless otherwise stipulated.

energy source is considered a profitable investment; while to its protesters the industrial project must be phased out (Dorow & O'Shaughnessy, 2013). These tensions resurfaced in news media, political, and citizen discourse in 2016 when the wildfire swept across Fort McMurray.

To outsiders, remote northern Alberta has gained its reputation through a carefully devised narrative, constructed by regional, national, and international stakeholders since the early beginnings of Alberta's tar/oil sands development. The tar/oil sands have always been a mediated place in the Canadian consciousness, Gismondi and Davidson (2011) explain: "[the region] has become known to most of the world through the diaries, reports, photographs, and film images developed by explorers, travelers, government employees, and early industrialists" (p. 39). Such communication work was (and continues to be) remarkably important in order to gain the public's assent for a long-term and expensive project. Thus, economic indicators like job creation, resource royalties, markets, and foreign investment historically led the discussion on the extractive project (Paskey, Steward, & Williams, 2013). Importantly, this legacy persists in the discourse advanced by industry proponents such as fossil fuel industry conglomerates, international investors in the sands, conservative foundations, politicians, public relations firms, and a minority of scientists.

New to this discussion of the tar/oil sands is the scale of the environmental harm created alongside oil production. As Carter (2011) observes, there are serious concerns about specific impacts, such as the enormous amounts of freshwater used during operations as well as the formation of tailings ponds that catch toxic by-products created during operations (p. 5). These examples of environmental harm, in combination with the immense levels of greenhouse gas

emissions, threaten local and global eco-systems and communities.⁴ Environmental non-governmental organizations (eNGOs), such as Greenpeace, the Pembina Institute, and the Sierra Club, are leaders of the environmental movement though grassroots movements also play a role in advocating for the conservation of the environment. Before turning to Chapter Two, which reviews literature that expands on the news media's powerful role in articulating and disseminating ideas about the environment, the following section contextualizes the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire.

1.2.2 Context: The Wildfire

In May 2016, a wildfire consumed nearly six hundred thousand hectares of boreal forest that encircle the municipality of Fort McMurray. While a state of emergency was instituted, the fire made the town's entire population - almost ninety thousand residents - disaster refugees, constituting the largest public evacuation in Canadian history (Mesley, 2016). Though unanimity on the cause of the wildfire has not been reached, unseasonable conditions contributed to its start: Alberta experienced exceptionally dry and warm winter and spring seasons in 2016, with temperatures exceeding seasonal averages by twenty to thirty degrees in April (Kolbert, 2016). Detected on May 1, the blaze destroyed 2,400 structures in the town after four days. Though no additional infrastructure damage in the town followed, the wildfire was not considered under control for another eight weeks ("Fort McMurray fire," 2016). The wildfire was exceptionally severe as the rising hot air formed its own weather system, producing a lightening storm that sparked additional fires in the surrounding forest once the blaze had begun (Snowdon, 2016). Not only is it Canada's most costly insured disaster at the time of writing, creating nearly four billion dollars in damage, but it was also an "economic setback" in the region as the wildfire

⁴ This chapter forgoes further details on the extraction process and environmental impacts of the tar/oil sands; however, Timoney and Lee (2009) as well as Schneider and Dyer's (2006) report for the Pembina Institute (2006) offer summaries on this topic.

temporarily halted oil production (Levin & Austin, 2016). Despite these substantial damages and expenses, the fire did not claim any lives.

1.2.3 Political and Public Commentary on the Fort McMurray Fire

The following outlines the interaction between Prime Minister Trudeau and Elizabeth May, the leader of the Green Party of Canada, who both addressed causation theories of the fire.

Transcripts of the commentary were used to piece together disperse elements to form the entire exchange between the two politicians: a transcript of the Prime Minister's remarks was attained from a CBC video recording of the press conference where he spoke to this subject while May's statements were made available on the Green Party of Canada's website.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau denied the relationship between specific weather events and climate change. In a press conference on May 4, 2016 at the National Press Theatre that marked the first six months of the Liberal Party's first year, the Prime Minister cautioned against politicizing the disaster by initiating conversations of climate change. He stated:

It's well-known that one of the consequences of climate change will be a greater prevalence of extreme weather events around the planet, however any time we try to make a political argument out of one particular disaster I think there is a bit of a shortcut that can sometimes not have the desired outcome. Pointing at any one incident and saying, 'Well this is because of that,' is neither helpful nor entirely accurate. What we are focussed on right now on is giving the people of Fort McMurray, and across Alberta, the kind of support that they need. (CBC News, 2016)

Though Trudeau did not make the link, other politicians, commentators across social media platforms as well as journalists found the link quite "compelling" (Kolbert, 2016). In fact, Trudeau's statement was in response to Elizabeth May, who on May 4, 2016, responded to a reporter's probing about causation theories. She said:

The fact that the forest-fire season has arrived so early in northern Alberta is very likely a climate event. Very likely related to extreme high temperatures and very low humidity, very low precipitation and it is, as we saw in the quote from one of the firefighters, it's a firestorm. [...] It's a disaster. But it's a disaster that is very related to the global climate crisis. (Lupick, 2016, ¶2)

Critics noted that it was too soon to make this connection (D. Brown, 2016). The same day, May subsequently followed with a written statement to clarify her position:

Some reports have suggested that the wildfires are directly caused by climate change. No credible climate scientist would make this claim, and neither do I make this claim. Rather, we must turn our minds in the coming days to the impact of increased extreme climate events, and what we can do collectively to respond to these events. (Green Party, 2016, ¶2)

In a follow up to the backlash she received, May penned an editorial for the May 19, 2016 edition of *Island Tides*, a Vancouver Island newspaper. In this piece, she interrogates the taboo placed around linking climate change to disasters in Canada. She reminds readers that the media, scientists, and authorities in other countries have not hesitated to make such a connection when experiencing their own natural disasters, such as in the cases of Hurricane Katrina, Typhoon Haiyan, and the 2010 fires in Moscow (May, 2016, ¶7). Though Prime Minister Trudeau had stated that it was not at all useful to make such connections, in this *Island Tides* article, May replies: “If we cannot talk about climate change when we are experiencing it, if there is a public taboo on truth, how do we recognize the urgent need for action? How do we take the steps to prevent future catastrophe?” (May, 2016, ¶12). Adding scientific context to the conversation of the wildfire is not only, as May argues, necessary to prevent future instances, it is necessary to inform our new reality. Redirecting attention to the town’s victims is an effort to not attribute the cause of the fire to the town itself, a producer of a carbon-intensive fuel. The question of when to make the link between climate change and the wildfire is intrinsically a moral one (J. Brown, 2016). Indeed, as Kolbert (2016) writes, “to raise environmental concerns in the midst of human tragedy is to risk the charge of insensitivity” (¶8). I elaborate on the political leader’s duty to define a disaster in Chapter Two.

In contrast to May’s position, then British Columbia Premier Christy Clark used the wildfire as pretext to address the economic significance of the tar/oil sands. Speaking to reporters at an annual conference of western and territorial premiers and leaders on May 6, 2016, Clark reiterated the threat of an economic depression that could ensue as a result of a halt in bitumen production as the fire burned. Citing a Bank of Montreal analysis that reduced Canada’s second-

quarter GDP estimate from 1.5 per cent to zero given the impacts of the fire on the energy sector, Clark stated:

If any Canadian listening today doubts how important Western Canada's natural resources are to this country, they should pay attention to the fact [that natural resources] matter to every single Canadian no matter where you live. [...] As Fort McMurray burns and as the economic infrastructure that has, [for] so long, supported Canadians is threatened, international observers are suggesting that our economic growth is going to suffer disastrously as a result. (Bailey, 2016)

Her discourse went on to validate policy actors' decisions to prioritize securing investments in Canada's western resource economy with the end of taking Canadian natural resources to market (Bailey, 2016). In Chapter Two, I elaborate on political opportunity found in times of disasters, as demonstrated through the example of Clark pivoting the conversation back to economic interests above all else.

The controversy about the tar/oil sands in relation to the Fort McMurray fire continued across traditional and social media, where the three above positions were reflected. Some journalists described the wildfire as a "black irony": "an oil capital consumed by the climate change it is causing" (D. Brown, 2016, ¶8; Stenson, 2016, ¶2). The debate continued on social media, where some Canadians noted the irony of the situation. For example, one individual tweeted, "I'm glad #FortMacFire is happening in the province most responsible for the climate change that caused the fire in the first place" (@BlakeSiefken, 2016). Another posted to Facebook that he found "it difficult to fully sympathize with the residents of Ft. McMurray" due to the residents' "inability to make connections between their source of income, their lifestyles, and the fires now turning not just their houses, but their toys and pickups, into ashes" (Steve Grant, 2016). An employee for the town of Taber, Alberta, and former NDP candidate, Tom Moffat, received ample scrutiny for referring to the fire as "karmic #climatechange" (Tom Moffat, 2016).

The above examples represent the main discursive positions that erupted in response to the fire. As citizens gain a subject position towards climate change related issues from mediated discourse (Hansen, 2011), the above statements warrant the need for further analysis of the opinion discourse published on this matter in order to understand how meanings on the relationship between the Fort McMurray wildfire and climate change were articulated.

1.3 Why This Matters and Research Question

This thesis is driven by an interest in public engagement with climate change in North America, specifically recent work that has identified a gulf between citizens' environmentally conscious values and citizens' continuous environmentally destructive behaviours (McCright & Dunlap, 2010; Newell & Paterson, 2012; Norgaard, 2011; Stoddart, 2011; Szerszynski, 2007). Recent commentary pieces and academic work writing about climate change describe publics as "sleepwalking," "paralyzed," and "in denial," and their behaviours are characterized by "irony" and "irrationality" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 178; Norgaard, 2011a; Szerszynski, 2007; Gismondi & Davidson, 2011). Michael McCarthy, environmental editor for *The Independent*, writes "global warming is being greeted with a yawn by half of the population of Britain" (2007; as cited in Norgaard, 2011a, p. 178). Despite the scientific consensus on the immediate ecological threats of climate change, McCarthy explains the tension that underscores the public's apathetic behaviour: "[Though] activists are [...] hyper-aware of problems and issues [...] Most citizens [...] are not idealists, never mind activists; their main concerns are naturally self-regarding" (2007, ¶1). The long-term reality of climate change, regardless of mounting scientific evidence of its consequences, is overridden by the immediacy and urgency of several other public issues. Climate change is consequently caught up in a paradox: though it is understood by some as a

contemporary global challenge, it nevertheless has yet to command due public and political attention necessary to halt or reverse its harm.

Moreover, the 2016 wildfire in Fort McMurray, Alberta reminds us that Canada is not excluded from natural disasters. The Canadian case is especially relevant due to the country's historically ambivalent political position towards climate change action. In 2009, for example, Prime Minister Harper ratified the Kyoto Protocol, an international commitment which agrees "that the global average temperature above pre-industrial levels ought not to exceed 2°C" (Newell & Paterson, 2012, p. 5). That same year, however, the International Climate Action Network tagged Canada as "Fossil of the Year" because of its "obstructionist" participation at the Copenhagen Conference of Parties (Young, 2011, p. 446). And though Canada did commit to the Copenhagen Accord, Canada withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2011, the first nation to do so (DiFrancesco & Young, 2011; Murphy, 2015; Suzuki, n.d.). This political decision to withdraw from globally coordinated efforts to mitigate climate change necessitates further insight into mediated discourse on the understanding of climate change in Canada, especially considering that Canada is one of the top ten emitters of greenhouse gases globally (Government of Canada, 2017).

My thesis asks the following research question: How did commentators and editorial boards articulate the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and concerns about the tar/oil sands contribution to climate change in select Canadian newspapers published between May 1, 2016 and September 1, 2016? My research question consists of two sub-questions: (a) How do items of the dataset construct storylines to give meaning to the wildfire and the tar/oil sands industry? (b) How do identified storylines seek to strengthen and protect the (il)legitimacy of Alberta's tar/oil sands development?

1.4 Overview of Chapters

This thesis consists of six additional chapters. Chapter Two provides a review of the theoretical underpinnings and scholarship that informs this thesis. The chapter begins by moving through the primary ways that traditional media disseminates information and ideas about social issues, including environmental issues. The chapter then reviews subjects pertinent to the political-economic context surrounding Fort McMurray, Alberta. The chapter provides remarks on the partisan-influenced counter-movement that has strongly challenged the science of climate change. As well, the chapter introduces the concepts *petro-culture*, *petro-state*, and *petro-capitalism* in order to uncover how the federal and provincial governments and oil industry in Canada establish consent for continued oil development. Finally, Chapter Two reviews literature on the mediation of disasters. This section speaks to the construction of disasters by political actors, who must define what happened, and of course, the news media, which makes the event known.

Chapter Three outlines *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) as the methodology I use to analyze the dataset. The first half of the chapter focuses on defining discourse and describing CDA, including different methodological approaches to studying discourse. I rely on Fairclough's (1995) understanding of discourse, which considers language use as a primary means to either maintain or change larger social contexts. The second half of the chapter sketches my research design: I describe how I constructed my corpus and I explain the dominant code groupings that will lead my analysis. Further, I identify Gunster and Saurette's (2014) work on the use of *storylines* in an Albertan newspaper as the example that I model my investigation after.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six make up the analysis section of this thesis. Chapters Four and Five examine how ideologies are advanced in the dataset by the way of carefully constructed storylines that advance certain interpretations of events, actors, and phenomena (Gunster & Saurette, 2014). In turn, storylines formulate and forward a worldview that readers can then choose to adopt. Focusing on how environmental discourse was represented in the dataset, Chapter Four explains how dataset items constructed environmental interests as a force of subversion by industry proponents. Hence, the environmental movement is consequently cast as the villain in this ongoing debate between supporters and opponents of Alberta's tar/oil sands.

Chapter Five, in contrast, focuses on the discursive representations that cast the oil industry as an economic hero aiding beneficiaries across the country. Because of the job and wealth creating power of the Fort McMurray energy industry, certain items in the dataset positioned the sands as a necessity to Canada's overall economic prosperity, thereby reinforcing the opinion that Canada must continue to support the development of the tar/oil sands project. In Chapter Five I highlight how the economic advantages that are mentioned in the dataset do not represent a well-rounded portrait of the economics of Alberta's economic context. Thus, in line with CDA, I outline the economic challenges that are also associated with the industry and Alberta's economy that are glossed over in the dataset in order to challenge this "truth."

Chapter Six touches on the line of discourse in the dataset focused on the discursive reproduction of Alberta as an imagined community with an identity distinct from that of the rest of Canada. This brief chapter does not explicitly straddle either side of the environment/economic binary but figured the most prominently in the dataset and contributes to an understanding of the surrounding cultural context.

Finally, Chapter Seven concludes this thesis by offering an overarching discussion of the results and related implications that contribute to the formation of cultural hegemony.

1.5 Conclusion to Chapter One

At the time of writing in 2017, the fire season saw 62 wildfires burn through almost 2,000,000 acres in western Canada and the United States (Beaumont, 2017). The impacts are not limited to the affected areas – smoke hung over parts not touched by a wildfire at all (Beaumont, 2017). The Fort McMurray wildfire is just one case. Paradoxically, though, bitumen continues to be extracted, refined, and consumed and consequently emissions persist alongside increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather events. In light of this scientifically demonstrated connection, the objective of this thesis is to demonstrate how communication power legitimizes the status quo, dampens unprecedented environmental impacts, and ultimately glosses over the urgency in our altered environment. Chapter Two begins this investigation by highlighting existing scholarship on the disparate parts sketched above in order to set the stage for this thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Chapter Two

This chapter gives a sense of key contributions to the bodies of literature relevant to this thesis. The focus here is divided in two directions: first, I will look at the role of the media in constructing environmental problems; and second, the political-economic undercurrents of contemporary climate change. Together these will build an understanding of the constitutive role of the news media in environmental and disaster contexts. Crucially, these areas will inform the relationship between today's capitalist system, environmental priorities, and weather-related disasters, elements which all contribute to the larger context around the Fort McMurray fire. At the time of writing, not only has this specific wildfire yet to be studied, but the relationship amongst these elements remains to be interrogated as well. As a result, the content of these bodies of literature overlaps and can be read together to form a strong and necessary conceptual foundation for this study.

2.2 Discursive (Re)construction in the News Media

In an analysis of public perceptions of climate change in a nationally representative British sample, Spence, Poortinga and Pidgeon (2011) found that many individuals consider climate change to be “psychologically distant” from their own lives. Specifically participants reported *believing* that climate change affects only people in other countries and future generations. This is supported by “geographic distance,” where the news audiences surveyed *saw* manifestations of climate change affecting distant locales through mediated representations. In light of these types of distance, how does climate change remain salient in the public mind and/or gain political attention? As Carvalho (2010) states, “media(ted) discourses play key roles in social life as they are both conditions of intelligibility of the world and conditions of possibility of action upon it”

(p. 172). Accordingly, the following sections aim to show how social actors go through a process of claims-making to attribute or diminish legitimacy and significance to a social issue in order to influence public visibility through the news media, thereby linking the research, media, and political arenas. In this effort, the section will first touch on a predominant tradition in communication studies, *the agenda setting model*, that is used to explain the media's role in defining and distributing information to public and political audiences. In light of critiques of this model, the discussion will then focus on *the constructivist model* of claims making. I will incorporate scholarship on these models in relation to environmental issues and journalism wherever possible.

2.2.1 The agenda setting model

The agenda setting tradition explains the ability of the media to influence and develop public opinion. Agenda setting finds its roots in Cohen's (1963) statement that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p.13; as cited in Newell, 2006, p. 68). That is, those issues that are depicted as salient by the media become issues of public and political concern.

In this vein, early studies mapped the flow of environmental concern from the news media and then to the public (Lindahl, 1983; Lowe & Rudig, 1986; Shoenfeld et al., 1979; Strodhoff et al., 1985). Scholars have observed that climate change made its way into the news media agenda for the first time in the summer of 1988 because of the severe heat and drought experienced in North America despite earlier claims and warnings made by the scientific community about the warming of the earth (Ungar, 1992; Mazur & Lee, 1993; as cited in Carvalho, 2010). More recently, Newell (2006) confirms the agenda setting function of the news media in order to address fluctuations in public attention to environmental issues: he explains that the news media

both accelerate and direct “shifts of popular sentiment on the environment” (p. 73). Playing a transmission role, Newell (2006) considers the news media as secondary definers: by reinforcing information generated by “primary definers” – in the climate change context, “scientists, governments, and corporations” – the news media transmits information to audiences “in a way that actively influences the political response to the problem” (Newell, 2006, p. 95). These conditions essentially allow the media to structure the debate on the issues, Newell (2006) continues, in ways that can bring about “intensive” public concern or create favourable conditions for policy movement, as was the case with environmental policy in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States in the early 1990s (p. 76). Given these observations, it is evident that just as the media can bring about public concern or conducive conditions for policy movement, media discourse can easily do the opposite, too.

Hansen (1991; 2010a, b) speaks to the difficulties in relying on the agenda setting model or similar ‘transmission’ models of communication that are predicated on the diffusion of information from the media to news audiences. Speaking in the environmental context, he reminds readers that media coverage is not a “good” indicator of public concern considering that “a drop in media attention does not necessarily imply that the public has lost interest in an issue or has ceased to be committed to dealing with [the] social problem” (Hansen, 2010b, p. 22). He also brings attention to two significant oversights of transmission models: the role of the audience and the interactive nature of meaning making. Studies that have focused on the linear flow of information and resulting impacts fail to consider that audiences can “negotiate and interpret” meanings they receive (Hansen, 1991, p. 446). Moreover, attention must be paid not only to the movement of information from sender to receiver, but also to those parties involved

in meaning construction of an issue or claim (Hansen, 1991, p. 446-448). He finds an alternative in the constructivist model, described next.

2.2.2 Constructing social problems

In several places Hansen (1991; 2000; 2010a; 2010b; 2015) maintains that constructivism provides a useful framework for understanding the role of news media in relation to environmental issues. The emergence of this perspective can be attributed to American sociologists Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1973; 1987), who focused on the collective definition of social problems. While a material reality exists, social actors observe that social issues do not exist in and of themselves. That is, a social problem

cannot be identified and studied independently of what is being ‘said’ about it. Problems and issues of various kinds only become recognized as such [...] through talk, communication, discourse, which defines or ‘constructs’ them as problems or issues for public and political concern. (Hansen, 2010a, p. 14)

The first tenet of this model, then, is that social issues do not exist outside of what is being said about them. The second tenet is the importance of understanding the process by which “claims emerge, are publicized, elaborated, and contested” (Hansen, 2010a, p. 14; Hansen, 2015, p. 27). Together, these tenets remind us that it is of particular importance to also consider why “some claims gain prominence and acceptance, while others – which may be equally valid – do not” (Hansen, 2015, p. 17). As such, consideration of who gains access to news media representation is required to discover what themes and meaning are advanced in the news media’s treatment of an issue (Trumbo, 1996, p. 270). As Birkland (2010) states, “a group that can create and promote the most effective depiction of an issue has an advantage in the battle over what, if anything, will be done about the problem” (p. 122).

Though claims come out of a variety of arenas, additional emphasis is placed on the news media as a site of competition and contestation amongst claims makers and institutions that work to advance their respective issue or problem (Trumbo, 1996, p. 270). Understanding the news

media's role in communicating about environmental issues, then, has little to do with the news media's impact on public opinion or vice versa. As Hansen (1991) writes:

It becomes a question of mapping the dynamic and interactive elaboration of issues as they are articulated, often in parallel, in different fora of meaning creation, bearing in mind that such fora are hierarchically ordered, and that the 'strength' of their interlinkages varies. Thus, in the articulation of environmental issues, there can be little doubt that the forum of formal political activity is near the top of the hierarchy, together with the scientific community and, to a lesser extent, the courts. (p. 449)

As a central arena in this process, then, the news media is not a transmitter, "conduit" or "transparent window"; rather the news media performs "definitional work" itself according to its own restrictions and ideologies (Hansen, 2010a, p. 28; see also Hannigan, 2006; Hansen, 1991; Trumbo, 1996). The real challenge for claims makers then is not only getting the floor, but also battling over "whose framing of reality gets the floor" (Ryan, 1991, p. 53; as cited in Hansen, 2000, p. 55).

As mentioned, mediated discourses are "conditions of possibility of action" upon the world (Carvalho, 2010, p. 172). Discourses on the environment, therefore, naturalize particular notions of humankind's relationship with the natural world, especially when the discourse is ideologically motivated (Milstein, 2009). Dominant notions of nature direct us to communicate about and perceive nature through particular lenses. It is the responsibility of the environmental communication scholar to reveal the power relationships embedded within interested representations of the natural world.

As touched on in Chapter One, the economic/environment binary is often reproduced in discourse. Relatedly, extant literature has identified the resource/romantic binary as a particularly dominant lens through which the natural world is depicted (Hansen, 2010a; Hodgins & Thompson, 2011; Remillard, 2011). The resource half of the binary measures nature according to its use-value to humans: we can control, dominate and pillage the natural world in order to attain the resources that offer our lives conveniences. In contrast, the romantic lens views divinity and

sublimity in nature that is incomparable to human existence: in light of its grandeur, it is humankind's duty to preserve and protect nature (Remillard, 2011). Though this binary is simplistic, it remains an important area of study because it continues to be invoked in compelling ways by various organizations. For example, the energy industry can use images and discourse to promote the economic value of resource industries to gain public assent while protectionist groups can romanticize nature to advance environmental awareness and stewardship. Consequently debate about the environment often occurs within this highly polarized context that seems to lack any common ground. The prominence of this duality in the dataset under study will be examined in subsequent chapters.

Altogether the foundational theory reviewed in the present section sets up the next topic this chapter will turn to: the role of the news media in constructing *narratives* and *storylines* about social issues.

2.2.3 Narratives and storylines

Deliberation about the continued development of Alberta's tar/oil sands is emblematic of a larger public debate about our understandings and use of the environment. Hajer (2006) reminds us "language profoundly shapes our view of the world and reality, instead of merely being a neutral medium mirroring it" (p. 66). This drives me to analyze how items of the dataset constructed storylines to give meaning to the wildfire and the tar/oil sands industry.

The storyline concept is featured in some examples of environmental communication research to date (Chen & Gunster, 2016; Gunster & Saurette, 2014; McComas & Shanahan, 1999). However Hajer (1995, 2006) privileges the concept in his contributions to the field as it plays a central role in his approach to discourse analysis. Specifically, Hajer (1995) understands public debates as struggles between actors, or groups of actors, to gain "discursive hegemony"

and “secure support for their [respective] definition of reality” (p. 59). Part of this involves positioning others in a specific way, and in Gunster and Saurette’s (2014) words, the most direct way to do so is to “tell stories about them” (p. 336). From an analyst’s point of view, a storyline is employed in texts to function as a mental shortcut: they summarize one side of a complex debate and offer listeners with an argument and a worldview to adopt. Thus, the storyline holds multiple functions: it provides a version of social reality or of a phenomenon, it is a form of argumentation that can be imposed on others, and it insulates its adherents from incongruous facts and events (Gunster & Saurette, 2014). Also of note is how storylines cast key actors in archetypal roles, like villains and heroes, to further direct cognitive processing to a certain end. By validating certain actors and phenomena while criticizing others according to these pre-existing patterns, storylines are embedded with power relationships and “suggest unity in the [...] variety of separate discursive component parts of a problem” (Hajer, 1995, p. 56).

Storylines are not limited to news coverage. Gunster and Saurette (2014) examined the prominent storylines used to frame the tar/oil sands in both news and opinion discourse in the *Calgary Herald* over a one-year period. In fact, as a rhetorical strategy, where different actors offer competing interpretations of events and phenomena, storylines function in similar ways to opinion discourse. I elaborate on the characteristics of opinion discourse in the next chapter, namely its blame-oriented function.

Before moving on to the next section where I discuss the ideological influence on climate science, it is important to ensure terminology is understood clearly in this thesis. Thus, I am using the following definition of *ideology* developed by Carvalho (2007):

Ideology is understood as a system of values, norms and political preferences, linked to a program of action vis-à-vis a given social and political order. People relate to each other and to the world on the basis of value judgments, ideas about how things should be, and preferred forms of governance of the world. (p. 225).

Next I focus exclusively on one side of the discursive struggle of the climate change issue that is certainly ideologically influenced – public responses of denial, skepticism and uncertainty about climate science.

2.3 The Climate Change Counter-Movement

Climate change denial is a phrase used to capture a range of responses to climate science. According to Sperl (2013), arguments in line with climate change denial include these examples: (1) climate change is a naturally occurring phenomenon demonstrated through fluctuations in short-term weather patterns, thus no action is required; (2) climate science remains unresolved and more certainty is required before we can respond; (3) there are several immediate social issues that require public and policy attention instead; (4) the cost to transfer existing energy systems to renewable alternatives is too great, thus climate change is unavoidable; (5) climate scientists exaggerate the evidence in order to create alarm amongst the public; (6) climate change does not exist. Similar terms, including skepticism, uncertainty, and cynicism, are also used interchangeably to express responses that are contrary to the scientific consensus on climate change. In this thesis, I will rely exclusively on the phrase *climate change denial* to refer to the deliberate denial of the legitimacy of climate science. Importantly, denial refuses evidence available and thus presumes an ideology (Sperl, 2013). Out of this comes the organized climate denial industry, which challenges climate science in public debate in order to protect its own ideology. The denial industry will be uncovered next.

The denial industry emerged in the 1990s in response to climate change being defined as a legitimate global challenge for the first time. Fronted by conservative foundations, fossil fuel industry representatives, politicians, public relations firms, and a minority of scientists, the denial industry works together to disseminate claims to the public that discredit climate science. It is

understood that this movement involves a link to modern conservatism (Jacques, Dunlap, & Freeman, 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). It is therefore necessary to explain how climate science poses a threat to conservative ideology.

I follow preceding literature on modern conservatism to define the term *conservatism*. As McCright and Dunlap (2003) describe, the conservative movement represents “the elite-driven network of private foundations, policy-planning think tanks, and individual intellectuals and activists that directly or indirectly attempt to advance social traditionalism and economic libertarianism on a national level” (p. 352). Conservatism promotes the denial of climate science because government regulation to protect the environment confronts core tenets of neoliberalism – the free market and deregulation (McCright & Dunlap, 2003). Any government action that would mitigate or ameliorate climate change, especially limitations placed on carbon emissions, would stunt economic growth directly in the fossil fuel industry and indirectly in related industries. Moreover, McCright and Dunlap (2003) observe that the large-scale social change that must accompany a shift in energy sources threatens “not only industry, prosperity, lifestyles, but also the entire American way of life” (p. 353). In light of these implications, the denial industry deliberately frames climate change as a non-problem in order to maintain the status quo – neoliberal economic policies (McCright & Dunlap, 2010, 2011).

To create doubt about climate science, deniers leverage the mass media to disseminate their contrarian viewpoint. Specifically, a key tactic of the denial industry is to leverage the journalistic norm of balance in order to lend credibility and visibility to denialist discourse, thus constructing climate change as an unsettled scientific issue (Boykoff, 2007). Indeed, Jacques et al. (2008) observe that the countermovement exalted their viewpoint by saturating mass media through an “endless flow of printed material from books to editorials designed for public policy

consumption to policy briefs aimed at policy makers and journalists, combined with frequent appearances by spokespersons on TV and radio” (p. 355). Moreover, other scholars recognize that contrarian discourse receives a disproportionate amount of attention in the news media because the claims circulate repeatedly via conservative news networks and websites, thereby gaining permanency in public discourse (Boykoff, 2007; McCright & Dunlap, 2010, p. 253). The theft and release of thousands of climate scientists’ emails during the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, which then brought into question the validity of their practices, is an example of efforts undertaken to manufacture uncertainty around climate science. Of course, denialist discourse is not exclusive to the climate change issue. The book and documentary titled *Merchants of Doubt* (2010) reveals that such tactics originated with the American tobacco industry in the 1950s to spread doubt about the health impacts of smoking and protect the interests of the industry stakeholders. Denialist discourse has similarly been employed for a range of issues, including acid rain, DDT insect spray, and the weakening of the ozone layer.

The denial industry, evidently, has less to do with climate change and more to do with incongruous ideologies (Dunlap, 2013). The conservative movement prioritizes economy over the environment. This binary, as reviewed in other sections, resounds throughout this thesis. As such, the next section of this chapter will review the petro-capitalism concept in order to flesh out the dominant economic model implicating the need for continued, and increasing, fossil fuel use.

2.4 Petro-Culture, Petro-Capitalism, and Petro-States

In order to situate this thesis, the reader requires a basic understanding of the role of today’s dominant form of energy – oil – in shaping our society in material ways as well as our values, beliefs, and feelings (Szeman, 2016. p. 9). Hence this section begins by describing three

interrelated concepts in order to flesh out the relationship amongst oil, society, and the economy: petro-culture, petro-capitalism, and petro-states. Szeman's (2013, 2016) work on energy and the environment is central to the discussion of petro-culture while Carter's (2011) contributions to literature on fossil energy and capitalist development will inform this discussion of petro-capitalism and petro-states. As part of explaining this literature, I will also outline how these concepts exist in Canada.

Understanding oil requires understanding of what oil has enabled. Common narratives we have about the energy source focus on today's material conveniences that are attributable to oil: as Szeman (2013, 2016) points out, cars, highways and other means of transportation, agricultural and food systems, the pervasive availability of petroleum-based plastic products, and our fundamental infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and telecommunication systems implicate the need for the energy source. The use of oil is also entwined with values (or desires), such as individual "autonomy and mobility," that have been widely accepted and presupposed (Szeman, 2016, p. 12). Not to be overlooked are the contributions to cultural progression that flowered since the labour-saving transition from coal to oil. LeMenager (2013) highlights these contributions:

The expansion of the U.S. middle class [...] into a mass culture, [...] the cultivation of the world's greatest education system of public education, and essentially middle-class movements like feminism, antiwar activism, and environmentalism presumed cheap energy. (p. 5)

Though we acknowledge the perceived benefits of the energy source, we often neglect that we live in a society not only oriented by oil but also enveloped in it. LeMenager (2013) calls today's relationship with oil "ultradeep" while Szeman (2016) uses the term *petro-culture* to succinctly underline that because oil intervenes in all area of life, we live in "an oil society through and through" (p. 11). He points out the implications and challenges to living in a petroculture.

Exiting the current energy system will require both an infrastructure transition as well as a social

and cultural transition. Of course, a major implication related to petroculture is the paradox it contains. Notably, Szeman (2016) forecasts the collapse of the current petro era by way of either peaking oil supplies, which would bring our industries and systems to a grinding halt; or on the other hand, by way of the impacts of catastrophic climate change, which is ensured by continued reliance and consumption of oil (p. 62). Scholarly work on petroculture, therefore, contributes to revealing how oil is understood as common sense and contributing to the common good. The ideological role of oil is also embedded in the concepts petro-capitalism and petro-state, which I will turn to now to demonstrate how today's dominant economic system is likewise deeply tied into our petro-fuelled society.

To secure its maintenance and expansion, capitalism presumes access to oil in ever increasing quantities (Carter, 2011). In fact, the *creation* of capitalism is attributed to access to oil supplies, which fostered the conditions necessary to enable the industrial revolution (Boykoff et al., 2009; Carter, 2011; Szeman, 2016). Some of oil's characteristics also allowed for the global expansion of capitalism. For instance, it offers the highest energy return of all sources used for transportation energy. It is also easy and inexpensive to transport and can be used constantly once available in comparison to human labour or biotic energy sources. For these reasons, oil provided a "quantum leap in the speed and reach of human activities" as well as the "enormous growth in labour productivity and social surplus production" (Alvater, 1998; as cited in Carter, 2011, p. 3). The crucial tension of *petro-capitalism*, however, is the set of challenges that the fossil fuel industry poses: first, the worsening environmental risk and harm born out of extraction and consumption, and second, peaking oil supplies. Despite these threats, fossil fuels continue to dominate. As Carter (2011) notes, as conventional oil sources are depleted, the industry turns to unconventional sources, such as bitumen, or deposits that are "farther north,

farther offshore and in ever more fragile landscapes,” thereby deepening environmental impacts (p. 6).

In the Canadian context, the federal government has consistently argued that the country’s economic future lies in the extraction and export of its oil deposits. For instance, under the previous Canadian government under the Conservative Party, Prime Minister Harper defined Canada as an “emerging energy superpower” to international audiences due to the country’s vast energy resources (Nikiforuk, 2008, p. 31; Way, 2011). With the approval of two pipeline projects in late 2016, Canada’s current federal Liberals are moving forward on the country’s energy economy in similar ways. Prime Minister Trudeau has explained, for instance, how transition to a “carbon-free” economy first entails generating wealth from fossil fuel exports (Geddes, 2016, ¶5). Thus, the tension embedded in petro-capitalism is visible in Canada. To relate this concept further to the context of my research question – Alberta – what follows is a description of oil-dependent states, referred to as *petro-states*.

Those states that prioritize the interests of the energy sector above, and at the expense of, other segments of society are acknowledged as petro-states (also known as “petro-polities”) (Carter 2011, 2016; Chen & Gunster, 2016, p. 307). Originally developed by Karl (1997), the petro-state concept describes the mutually dependent relationship formed between the state’s government and the oil companies renting public land. Each party is reliant on the other to ensure the health of the energy sector with the end goal of securing profits for each party. Because of this, both work to mobilize public consent for the development of the industry. Governments do this through “funding or subsidies, by actively defending and promoting the industry at home and abroad, by being reluctant to dig deeper into the environmental questions raised, and by not intervening to protect the environment” (Carter, 2016, p. 154). Oil companies

reinforce this “via coordinated lobbying efforts, political financing, and media and community public relations campaigns” (ibid.). Taft (2017) argues that Alberta fits the bill as a petro-state. Regardless of the governing political party, the provincial government, he argues, has not been immune from the oil industry’s influence since the 1990s thus resulting in a provincial government serving the interests of the industry. A series of implications arise out of the symbiotic relationship contained in petro-states. Mainly, by shifting their source of revenue from the taxation of individuals to resource rents, the state makes itself less accountable to its residents and instead becomes invested in the growth of the fossil fuel industry and affiliated corporations. In Carter’s (2011) words, “deteriorat[ed] democracy, weakened state capacity, and political corruption” result (p. 14). Moreover, without access to tax revenue, the state is forced to reduce spending on public services during times of declining oil prices. The petro-state’s focus on maintaining the industry impedes the state from building a diversified economy and demands that the state must also defend the oil industry: thus, petro-states explain away concerns about environmental harm originating from resource extraction activities in order to protect its revenue source. As a result, industry actors remain powerful, the energy economy is prioritized and regarded as common sense, and there is insufficient environmental regulation (Carter, 2011).

Overall, this section has worked to demonstrate the pervasiveness of fossil fuels in contemporary economies and societies. Due to the strong interests shared by governments of petro-polities and industry, both advance consent for continued and rapid oil development. Our ultradeep relationship with oil is what the denialist industry works to protect. Resistance to this ideology and petro projects has certainly emerged. In Canada, Indigenous populations, both local and large scale campaigning organizations, and independent media front opposition to the tar/oil sands. These groups participate in the discursive struggle about the sands by recasting the

messaging disseminated by partners of the sands. What the following analysis chapters reveal, however, is how discourse discordant with the tar/oil sands was drowned out – and tabooed – when a climate-induced weather event threatened Canada’s oil capital.

2.5 Mediating Natural Disasters

Thus far, this review has established that (1) the news media plays a significant role in providing the public with information on public issues and can also influence how this information is received and interpreted, and (2) environmental protection and today’s economic system are considered incompatible priorities by some groups. This marks the intersection between political and media institutions. This intersection of ideas will now be applied to disaster events in order to address the object of this research question.

There is limited academic attention dedicated to considering natural disasters as political occasions. Instead, disaster literature focuses on public response during a disaster and its aftermath as well the public uptake of mediated disaster myths (e.g. Rodriguez & Dynes, 2006; Garfield, 2007). Of late, scholars have taken Hurricane Katrina as a case to examine the strong relationship between political power and messages contained in the mass media about disasters (Klein, 2007; Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). Because natural disasters can be opportunities or “catalysts” to renew public and policy interests in environmental issues (Ashlin & Ladle, 2007, p. 330), scholarly attention from the communications field is warranted. In this thesis I understand natural disasters according to their social impact: when a community lacks the capacity to recover independently from physical and social damage created from natural hazards (floods, fires, earthquakes, landslides, droughts), the event is understood as a natural disaster (Ashlin & Ladle, 2007).

No different than the construction of social issues in the media (Hansen, 2011), the news media constructs a natural disaster: how it is known, responded to, and politically aligned (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2015). Spatial and temporal distances make audiences reliant on the details communicated by news outlets about the event, thereby giving the news media “considerable power to shape opinion and to connect people and communities” (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; as cited in Ewart & McLean, 2014, p. 168).

“Within minutes after a major impact,” Olson (2000) writes, “disasters start becoming political” (p. 266). Though few scholars have considered disasters as political occasions, Olson offers several highly relevant insights to fill this gap. Political elites are challenged to not only manage disasters, but also explain them (ibid.). In any disaster, politicizing questions are posed to government officials in the aftermath, one of which is always “what happened?” (ibid.) As “innocuous” as the question seems, the answer to the question “starts the process of defining the event and constructing its meaning,” which injects what is otherwise a scientific or technical explanation with politics (ibid.). This use of language and symbols to “construct beliefs about the significance of events” is essentially a “critical element of political manoeuvre” and requires that the political official negotiate the placement of responsibility (Edelman, 1985, p. 10; as cited in Olson, 2000, p. 276). Because voters can evaluate a politician’s behaviour post-disaster, constructing the meaning of the disaster, though deeply political, requires sensitivity.

In the aftermath, natural disasters are also politically aligned such that political response to the “exogenous shocks” of a disaster can be used to instate or maintain a political agenda (Olson, 2000, p. 266). Conversely, Pelling and Dill (2005) explain that existing political systems may be put under scrutiny, while other outcomes of political intervention post-disaster can include interventions to “entrench or destabilize current power-holders, change power-sharing

relationships within recognized sectors, or to legitimize or de-legitimize new sectors” (p.1).

Citing extant literature, Pantti et al. (2012) pull on two different approaches that usefully theorize the strong relationship between political power and mediated disasters in the specific case of Hurricane Katrina: “disaster shocks” (Klein, 2007) and “focusing events” (Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). While Olson (2000) confirms that disasters are political occasions, Klein (2007) and Tierney et al. (2006) demonstrate that disasters, and the narratives that surround them, can be steered in specific political directions.

Disasters are further politicized through discussions of responsibility, specifically the use of discourse to speak to the responsibilities and capabilities of authorities in a policy context.

Stone (1989) observes:

In politics, causal theories are neither right nor wrong, nor are they mutually exclusive. They are ideas about causation [...] The different sides in an issue act as if they’re trying to find the ‘true’ cause, but they are always struggling to influence which idea is selected to guide policy. Political conflicts over causal stories are, therefore, more than empirical claims about sequences of events. They are fights about the possibility of control and the assignment of responsibility. (p. 283; as cited in Olson, 2000, p. 276-277)

Literature on agenda control and causal stories provide useful context for understanding the powerful use of language in political commentary post-disaster. By suppressing certain issues through one’s discourse, “conflictual items” can be overridden and the preferred political agenda can be maintained during the disaster response period (Olson, 2000, p. 287). Because causal theories impart certain values onto the event, literature on the politics of disasters in tandem with storylines are useful points of departure for analyzing the injection of ideologies into disasters.

2.6 Conclusion to Chapter Two

This survey of research has intended to provide some indication of the breadth of relevant literature needed to unpack articulations on the relationship between the Fort McMurray wildfire and climate change in a dataset comprised of opinion discourse. As such, the trajectory of this chapter moved through foundational theory that speaks to the news media’s role in advancing

claims on social issues. From there, I touched on literature specific to the context surrounding Fort McMurray, specifically public response and uncertainty towards climate change and the concepts of petro-culture, petro-capitalism, and petro-state. Of note here is how these are informed by ideologies that legitimize the energy culture founded in fossil fuel use. Finally, this chapter brought in literature on disaster politics in order to demonstrate how disaster aftermaths can become political opportunities.

To date, studies have not considered economic, environmental, and disaster contexts together. Indeed, natural disasters are noted when speaking to the consequences of climate change. What remains to be seen, however, are specific investigations of mediation and politicization of disasters. As a result, further research is warranted to explore this relationship.

Only a handful of scholars have analyzed media coverage of climate change in Canada while a smaller number have used the Alberta tar/oil sands as a case study to advance studies in climate change communication. These studies, for example, have considered relative differences in media coverage of the tar/oil sands by region (Gunster & Saurette, 2014), how images of the sands and place-branding advertisements are imbued with meaning (Remillard, 2011; Takach, 2013) and how political rhetoric can legitimize energy culture that is grounded in fossil fuel use (Murphy, 2015; Way, 2011). These studies reinforce a critical observation: the remote Albertan region that houses the tar sands has always occupied a mediated space. The Fort McMurray wildfire is contextualized by unique circumstances, where the community itself is linked in the public mind with the extraction of fossil fuels. Any reference of linking the fire to climate change, therefore, appeared insensitive, offensive, and a placement of attribution directly on the community's population, especially given that livelihoods of the inhabitants depend on the fossil fuels sector. In an age of petro-capitalism, research attention is necessary to interrogate tensions

amongst the economy, the climate, and disaster in the mediated discourses of the media, which I suggest is a primary definer of climate change as a public discourse. Society's reliance on fossil fuels, and by extension, the manifestation of climate change through the prevalence of weather events, necessitates further insight into how such practices, which carry heavy environmental costs, become discursively legitimized through mediated commentary. Accordingly, Chapters Four and Five analyze the articulation of the relationship between the Fort McMurray wildfire and climate change in a dataset of opinion discourse sourced from select Canadian newspapers.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Introduction to Chapter Three

This chapter focuses on the methodology I used to analyze opinion discourse in select Canadian newspapers: *The Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Calgary Herald*, and the *Edmonton Journal*. Building on my discussion on the role of discourse in the construction of social issues in the previous chapter, I will first turn to a definition of discourse broadly and then to a description of CDA, including its characterizing elements. In an attempt to outline how CDA is employed, I will provide a brief description of two methodological approaches to discourse - structural and post-structural discourse analysis. I then summarize Fairclough's (1989) framework for the analysis of discourse, which guides this thesis. In this theory-based section, I also provide general remarks on analyzing opinion discourse. The second half of the chapter sketches my research design: I describe how I constructed my corpus and I explain the dominant code groupings that lead my analysis.

3.2 Defining Discourse

Stemming from a need within the field of critical linguistics to study language “in a way that would explore the relations between language and thought, language and society” (Doherty, 2015, p. 23), critical discourse analysis (CDA) has since developed into a broad and multidisciplinary field featuring a variety of approaches and frameworks to studying language use in talk and texts. Discourse has been defined in multiple ways. In line with Dryzek (1997), I understand discourse as systems of meaning and representation. He elaborates on this rendering of discourse:

Discourses are a shared way of apprehending the world. Embedded in language, it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts. Discourses construct meanings and relationships, helping define common sense and legitimate knowledge. Each discourse rests on assumptions, judgements, and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements. [...] [They] both enable and constrain communication. (p. 8)

According to Murphy (2011), this understanding has much to owe to Foucault, whose work is grounded in the assumption that powerful and dominant discourses will reappear as hegemonic and naturalized (p. 220). Indeed, Dryzek (1997) asserts dominant “discourses do not need conscious adherence or articulation” as they are “so ingrained and taken for granted that it would never occur to anyone to question them” (p. 45). However the role of the critical discourse analyst is to recognize such areas of social concern in order to shine a light on existing inequities. This will be covered further in this chapter’s discussion on structural and post-structural discourse analysis.

3.3 Describing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Bell and Garrett (1998) claim that CDA is “the standard framework for studying media texts” (p. 6). Given that this thesis investigates how a sample of opinion discourse articulated the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and concerns about the tar/oil sands, CDA is an appropriate method of inquiry. Recent studies in the field of media and communication reinforce this. For example, scholars employ CDA to examine the discursive construction of environment-related issues in the media, such as the construction of climate change and the greenhouse effect in Canadian and British press (Carvalho, 2005, 2007; DiFrancesco & Young, 2010; Doulton & Brown, 2009; Young, 2013; Young & Dugas, 2011) as well as media constructions of the Alberta oil and gas industry (Gunster & Saurette, 2014; Takach, 2013; Way, 2011).

In line with the above definition of discourse, discourse analyses are caught up with examining how discourses permeate texts and the associated “assumptions, judgements, and contentions” contained therein (Dryzek, 1997, p. 8). In Murphy’s (2011) terms, CDA is “primarily a way to seek out and identify how political power is packaged in cultural story lines”

(p. 220). To this end, analysis is primarily concerned with uncovering the underlying assumptions that such discourses are predicated on and the motives of the social actors that advance them (ibid.).

There is little consensus on the steps required to perform a CDA. Jorgenson and Phillips (2002) also point out that there is no agreement on the entire range of scholars that “belong” to the CDA movement, though the important contributions of Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1993, 1995a, 1995b) and Teun van Dijk (1993) pioneered the field. A number of diverse approaches and movements constitute CDA, including socio-cognitive analysis, social semiotic analysis, and discourse historical analysis. In what follows, I describe some of the shared elements amongst these approaches, including the ideological function of discourse, the dialectical relationship between discourse and social phenomena, and the critical aspect of CDA. Following this, I will outline Fairclough’s (1989) three-dimensional approach to CDA, which offers a methodological process, which I use in my analysis.

3.3.1 Common Elements of CDA

The Ideological Function of Discourse

The first point of mutuality amongst the multiple approaches to CDA is the presence of ideological structures in texts. Paraphrasing Fairclough (1989, 1993), McGregor (2003) explains how the objective of CDA is to reveal said ideologies and the assumptions advanced therein. Essentially there is an “opaque” relationship between discursive practices and wider social and cultural practices. By revealing these relationships, power relationships are concurrently revealed, thereby drawing attention to “power imbalances, social inequities, non-democratic practices, and other injustices” (McGregor, 2003, n.p.). Van Dijk (1993) concentrates on the reproduction of unequal power relations in his use of CDA to discern how discourse contributes

to unequal power relations between social groups. Through the “routine and subtle use of talk and text” elites subjugate other groups by “managing [their] minds” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254). “Persuasion, dissimulation, or manipulation” in talk and text can effect “preferred social cognitions” in the forms of attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values in the minds of the public (ibid.). Through this naturalization of ideas, van Dijk (1993) asserts that this use of discourse to disseminate ideology is largely a means to manufacture consent in society. Fairclough (2013) is generally of the same mind but emphasizes the role of the receiver in interpreting a message. He writes:

While it is true that the forms and content of texts do bear the imprint of ideological processes and structures, it is not possible to ‘read off’ ideologies from texts. This is because meanings are produced through interpretations of texts and texts are open to diverse interpretations, and because ideological processes appertain to discourses as whole social events – they are processes between people – not to the texts which are produced, distributed and interpreted as moments of such events. (Fairclough, 2013, p. 57)

Increasing the awareness of the role of language in unequal power relations, then, involves revealing the extent to which people’s language use “rests upon common-sense assumptions, and the ways in which these common-sense assumptions can be ideologically shaped by relations of power” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 4). Despite this, though, it is important to acknowledge that texts carry many possible potential interpretations and therefore resistance of ideological effects is a possibility (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002, p. 76).

Discourse is Both Constitutive and Constituted

The second element inherent to CDA is the dialectical relationship that exists between discourse and social phenomena. Not only does discourse contribute to the “shaping and reshaping of social structures” it also “reflects them” (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002, p. 61). Fairclough (2013) supports the claim that language is never free of social influence by reminding us that language use and conversation are consistently shaped by norms and conventions. In turn, leaning on these norms and conventions maintains them. On the other hand, he explains how

social phenomena are linguistically shaped too. Using examples of non-tangible concepts, like democracy or socialism, he explains how social structures are discursively constituted.

Critical Research

A final foundational characteristic of CDA is the analyst's commitment to critical understanding. In Hammersly's (1997) words, critical work implies that the scholar must evaluate texts in order to reveal surrounding problematic contexts. "The world should not be treated as objective truth," Jorgenson and Phillips (2002) explain in their description of CDA (p. 5). Applying a critical lens to discourse presupposes that "our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality 'out there,' but rather are products of our ways of categorizing the world, or, [...] products of discourse" (ibid.). As an approach that is explicitly political, some scholars see CDA as a means to bring about "emancipatory" social change (Hammersly, 1997; Fairclough, 1989; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Critical analysis therefore also implies directing attention to what is absent or silent in the discourse. In her explanation of *discursive silences*, Gill (2000) says that examination of language "requires a significant awareness of the social, political and cultural trends and contexts to which our texts refer" in order to identify what is absent (p. 185). She elaborates on the consequences of not taking silences into account:

We would be unable to see the alternative version of events or phenomena that the discourse we were analysing had been designed to counter; we would fail to notice the (sometimes systematic) absence of particular kinds of account in the texts that we were studying; and we would not be able to recognize the significance of silences. (ibid.)

This emphasis on critical understanding is associated with the work of the Frankfurt School, which offers a theoretical backdrop to CDA. A common foundation to the different CDA approaches is Marxism, as represented through Gramsci and Althusser. Parallels can be seen between the focus on ideological functions of language in CDA and these theorists'

preoccupation with the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist social relations through language (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011).

In summary, as McGregor (2003) explains, CDA is a method used to “debunk” hidden ideological meanings behind the written and oral word. Though it does not provide answers to the problems, it does enable one to understand the conditions behind the specific problem (ibid., n.p.).

3.3.2 Criticisms of CDA

Along with its usefulness in analyzing media discourse, scholars have identified the limitations of CDA, inviting a considerable amount of scrutiny to it as a methodology. Hammersely (1997), for instance, claims that CDA is a problematic approach because of its “over ambition that undermines sound research” (p. 245). This over ambition leads to speculative results: scholars “over-interpret their data” in order to produce “newsworthy findings” and consequently, equally plausible readings are not considered in the analysis (ibid.). Widdowson (2004) maintains a similar criticism: CDA is a biased method that can be seen as a “functional fallacy” where texts (i.e. words, sentences, paragraphs) are removed from their contexts in order to fit into a certain research project’s argument. This is more akin to “impressionistic commentary” than analysis (as cited in Tenorio, 2011, p. 195). In Martin’s (1992) view, the major shortcoming of CDA applies to those scholars (like Fairclough) that link it to social practice. CDA highlights areas of concern in society but fails in its inability to suggest or apply a tangible plan of action to remedy these.

Despite these criticisms, CDA’s major strength lies in its subjectivity: unlike results seen in traditional theory, the techniques demonstrated in CDA can reveal hidden discourses that

maintain cultural hegemony or marginalized positions in society. Moreover, the meanings that result from this form of analysis provide opportunity for further debate and encourage research.

3.3.3 Methodological Approach to CDA: Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

Now that I have described and defined discourse and CDA, this section will review a developed method of CDA to outline an integrated approach to analyzing discourse. Hough (2015) distinguishes between two dominant approaches to discourse: structural and post-structural discourse analysis. Briefly, structural analysis examines the use of vocabulary and grammar in order to reveal embedded ideologies and value judgements that construct certain knowledges. More specifically, this involves analysis of presupposition, where the researcher examines assumptions carried by certain word choices. Looking at a headline that reads 'The Dangers of Oil-by-Rail' demonstrates this: the headline presupposes an inherent danger in this method of oil transport (Hough, 2015, p. 93). Structural analysis is one step in uncovering assumed ideologies. However a well-rounded study of discourse requires further analysis of the social context the discourse exists in. Related to both van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough's (1989, 1992, 1995, 2013) respective discussions of discourse and ideology, post-structural discourse analysis "goes beyond the level of sentences, writing, and speech to investigate power's influence upon knowledge" (Hough, 2015, p. 93). Post-structural discourse analysis, in comparison, emphasizes the "productive and institutional factors influencing what can be said, by whom, and to what effect" (ibid.). Post-structuralism comes out of Foucault's assumption that meanings are not fixed according to underlying universal structures that influence social phenomena; instead, meanings shift according to surrounding contexts (Carvalho, 2002, p. 85).

Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis encapsulates the objectives of structural and post-structural approaches to form an integrated analysis that aims to

understand the relationship between language use at the structural level, textual production and consumption, and social contexts. By integrating these elements, Fairclough's model is motivated by a need to investigate the link between language use and social practice in order to determine how discourse plays a role in maintaining, reproducing, or challenging surrounding social contexts.

As outlined in Fairclough's model, every instance of language use is a communicative event that consists of three dimensions: (1) it is a *text* (speech, writing, visual image, or a combination of these); (2) it is a *discursive practice* that involves the production and consumption of texts; and (3) it is a *social practice*. Given that all three elements need to be included in a discourse analysis of a communicative event, the analysis will focus on the following corresponding features: (1) the linguistic features of the text; (2) processes related to production and consumption; (3) the surrounding social context that the communicative event exists within (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002, p. 68).

I will provide additional details about the above elements as they relate to my thesis here. The *text* is at the centre of the process. Textual analysis aligns with the aforementioned structural discourse: it concentrates on the linguistic features of a text: vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and sentence coherence. *Discursive practice* considers how the text is produced and consumed or interpreted. Jorgenson and Phillips (2002) point out that analysis of processes related to production and consumption concentrates on intertextuality: "this focuses on how authors of texts draw on already existing discourses and genres to create a text, and on how receivers of texts also apply available discourses and genres in the consumption and interpretation of texts" (p. 69). The final dimension of Fairclough's model is *social practice*, where the analysis considers the larger social conditions surrounding the preceding dimensions. This model implies

that all of these dimensions exist in a relationship: a text cannot be analyzed without consideration or understanding of related texts or the larger social context. As such, discursive practice mediates between text and social practice. Because people produce and consume texts through language use, “texts shape and are shaped by social practice” (ibid.). By analyzing these elements in tandem using Fairclough’s model, the analyst is committed to “analyzing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26). As mentioned, this thesis exclusively examines editorials and commentary pieces, also referred to as opinion discourse, in select Canadian newspapers. Opinion discourse provides a forum to develop and exchange arguments and is therefore unconstrained by the convention of journalistic objectivity seen in news coverage (Greenberg 2000; Hindman, 2003; Hynds, 1990). I address these distinctive characteristics of opinion discourse below.

3.3.4 Opinion Discourse: General Remarks

Though referred to as the ‘editorial page,’ this section of a newspaper contains both editorials and commentary pieces, which should not be conflated.⁵ In fact, in academic literature on the subject of opinion writing, the understanding of an editorial varies. In some places, an editorial is predominantly seen as the “unsigned” perspective of the newspaper: it represents “the ‘official’ voice of a media outlet on matters of public importance” (Greenberg, 2000, p. 520; Hindman, 2003; Hynds, 1990, p. 303). For example, this is specified on the *Calgary Herald* editorial board’s web page: “[editorials] are the position of the paper and not necessarily those of

⁵ Other types of opinion discourse are also found on the editorial page, such as letters to the editor (LTE) and editorial cartoons, but will not be included in my analysis. LTE were excluded to ensure a dataset that was manageable in size. However the opinions of the public can also be captured in commentary pieces, as members of the public can submit commentary pieces for publication. Given that this thesis does not privilege the analysis of visual representation, cartoons were excluded from the dataset.

any individual” (Calgary Herald Editorial Board, 2014). However, McNair (1995) suggests that the mode of address changes according to publication, where an editorial can be “presented as the voice of the reader” and in other cases can be the “calm authoritative voice of the editor, viewing the political scene from a detached distance” (p. 13). In either case, McNair (1995) considers editorials as a form of “political intervention” (ibid.). Commentaries, on the other hand, express the opinion of in-house or syndicated columnists, who are explicitly identified. Public officials, accredited experts, and readers can also write commentary pieces to be selected by the editorial board. Greenberg (2000) adds that “recognized stakeholders outside the media industry” but who nevertheless hold “insider status, for example, a lawyer, physician, NGO, labour leader, or leading academic researcher” can also submit commentaries for publication (p. 520).

In his survey of newspaper editors, Hynds (1994) observed that the role of the editorial section is to “create a public forum for the exchange of information and opinion,” to “provide community leadership through institutional stands on issues,” and to “introduce readers to a variety of viewpoints and ideas” (p. 573, 575). Van Dijk (1996) claims that the institution’s view is more persuasive to readers given that the newspaper is equipped with the “facts and information required for informed opinion formation, which are generally unavailable to the average newsreader” (as cited in Greenberg, 2000, p. 520; McNair, 1995). Studies have yet to determine the truth in van Dijk’s (1996) statement and the investigation of effects is outside the scope of this thesis.

Opinion discourse is not confined to the same norms of objectivity and impartiality as hard news texts (Greenberg, 2000; Hindman, 2003; van Dijk, 1996). Without the need to comply with journalistic norms, opinion discourse is evaluative – when explaining events or issues, this

discourse takes sides and creates narratives. The attribution of responsibility is common in this discourse, and accordingly, Greenberg (2000) claims opinion discourse to be “primarily [...] blame-oriented” (p. 521). A final feature common to opinion discourse is the use of concluding recommendations on what could or should follow, or other “action-oriented” advice or warnings (van Dijk, 1996, ¶90).

The above-mentioned characteristics of opinion discourse are not unlike the use of storylines to build arguments, wherein certain interpretations are privileged and reinforced and others criticized. As touched on in Chapter Two, storylines cast actors in specific, archetypal roles – villains and hero. A chapter will be attributed to uncovering the storylines constructing both of these actors, respectively – environmental advocates as the villain and the oil industry as the hero. This structure follows a model put forward by Gunster and Saurette (2014) in their analysis of the main storylines employed by *Calgary Herald* in both news coverage and opinion discourse to frame the tar/oil sands. This investigation will be operationalized by Fairclough’s (1989) methodological approach to CDA described above.

3.4 Data Sample and Collection

After reviewing theoretical underpinnings of CDA, the second half of this chapter is dedicated to outlining how the dataset was collected and analyzed. I conducted a search in the ProQuest and Factiva databases for editorials and commentaries on the Fort McMurray wildfire published between May 1, 2016 and September 1, 2016. Beginning with the date the fire was identified, this time period brackets the fire’s evolution over 2016’s forest fire season, which officially ended on September 1, 2016.⁶

⁶ Some of the major developments in the news cycle of the fire include the return of evacuees to the community in June 2016, the date the fire was considered under control in July 2016, and flooding in Fort McMurray forcing further evacuations in August 2016.

Using the ProQuest and Factiva databases, I constructed the dataset by searching for pieces of opinion discourses that mention “Fort McMurray” AND “fire” OR “wildfire” AND “Alberta” (n=52) in Canada’s two predominant national publications, the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* and two regional publications, the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*. Though the fire was contained in one regional area of Alberta, the events attracted national attention. Thus, in selecting this group of newspapers, the objective was to ensure items were sourced from newspapers that served national and regional audiences.⁷ Common to three of these newspapers is the Postmedia Network brand: the *National Post* as well as the two regional newspapers are part of the newspaper chain, which owns a majority of the regional newspapers across Western Canada (Gusnter & Saurette, 2014).

Before coding, I read each item to ensure each adhered to the search parameters. I discarded 12 false-positives: six duplicated and syndicated items and six items that featured unrelated and/or irrelevant content. Items that were deemed unrelated and/or irrelevant were those that appeared in the database results because they mentioned the above keywords but did not explicitly concentrate on the subject of the Fort McMurray fire. The false positives covered various topics, for example: a conference regarding free trade in Canada, a visit by the Ontario Premier to the Alberta legislature, the census, and Canada150 were some of the areas of focus. These items were therefore discarded because they were not useful in helping explore my research question. Remaining articles (N=40) were then subject to the coding procedure described later in this chapter. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the corpus according to publication. Evidently, physical proximity to the tar/oil sands did not hugely impact the number

⁷ I considered including a local publication in this corpus – *Fort McMurray Today* – to gather an exclusively localized account. However, the databases returned no opinion discourse items from that publication.

of items published, with the national newspapers running 45% of the items in the dataset and regional newspapers running the remaining 55%.

Table 1: Type of Article by Publication

Publication	Editorials	Commentaries	Total
<i>The Globe and Mail</i>	3	10	13
<i>National Post</i>	1	4	5
<i>Calgary Herald</i>	4	9	13
<i>Edmonton Journal</i>	7	2	9
Total	15	25	40

3.5 Coding Procedure and Analysis

I collected the digital copies of the individual dataset items (N=40) in Atlas.ti qualitative research software. A cursory scan had already removed 12 false positives; now I re-read each item to familiarize myself with the texts. From here, I assembled and defined a set of codes that aligned with the surrounding context of the wildfire and with the secondary literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Using the research software, I moved my way through the dataset and began assigning the codes I had developed, which Flick (1998) refers to as theoretically driven thematic coding (p. 318). In instances where codes grounded in established literature were not applicable, I began open coding (Hindman, 2003, p. 672).

After this first attempt, I refined my set of codes: broad themes (for example ‘environment’ and ‘economy’) were broken down into several specific codes. With this revised set of codes in mind, the dataset items were submitted to a second reading. This second review led me to identify four main aspects that authors focused on in their discussion of the Fort McMurray fire: (1) what the cause of the fire was attributed to; (2) discussion of economic indicators related to the tar/oil sands; (3) discussion of climate change; and (4) a focus on the well-being of Fort McMurray residents. Table 2 shows these categories, the codes that comprise each one respectively, and the frequency of each code. After this coding process, the content of each

dataset item was analyzed in line with the three dimensions of Fairclough's (1989) CDA model.

Given that CDA is interpretative work, validity is ensured through quotations taken from the texts under study (Ashlin & Ladle, 2007).

Table 2: Frequency of codes that comprise the four main themes addressed in dataset

Category	Codes	Frequency of codes				
		GM	NP	EJ	CH	Total
Attributing the cause of the fire	Karmic retribution	3	3	0	3	9
	Forest fire patterns	2	1	1	0	4
	Natural variability of the climate	1	1	1	0	3
Climate change	Broad environmental impacts of changing climate	4	0	1	1	6
	Denial, dismissal, skepticism	1	0	0	1	2
	Scientific evidence linked to climate change	1	1	1	1	4
	Politics of climate change	0	1	0	0	1
Economy	Boom and bust economy	7	1	0	2	10
	General reference to Fort McMurray's contributions to the economy	8	0	0	1	9
	Normalizing oil	4	1	0	2	7
	Discrediting critiques of fossil fuels	2	4	0	0	6
	Job creation	3	1	0	3	7
	Energy security	4	0	0	1	5
	Wealth creation	3	0	1	0	4
	Ethical oil	2	0	0	0	2
Regional focus	Compassion from Canadians for Fort McMurray	7	3	2	3	15
	Humanizing effect of the fire	3	4	2	5	14
	Albertan frontier	6	1	3	3	13
	National impacts of the fire	5	1	0	2	8
	Alberta as mediated space	3	2	0	3	8
	Scrutiny placed on region	1	2	0	0	3

3.6 Findings

Of the 40 articles included in this analysis, coding showed that over a third of the articles (18 instances in 14 articles) were focused on human subjects. That is, authors were consistent in bringing attention back to the experiences of the evacuees. This was consistent across all publications included in the analysis. Moreover, the unique circumstances contextualizing the Fort McMurray wildfire informed how the cause of the wildfire was discussed in the coverage.

Any reference of linking the wildfire to climate change appeared insensitive, offensive, and placement of attribution directly on the community's population. As climate change became a tabooed subject, authors in the dataset worked to protect and uphold the reputations of Fort McMurray, its residents, and the oil industry. In fact, the dataset indicates that authors worked to protect Fort McMurray's reputation against the perceived threat of opposing environmental advocacy groups. The prominent themes in the dataset under study, therefore, align with the previously reviewed tension between economic and environmental priorities in the petro-state context. I will give attention to these storylines in subsequent chapters.

Part of this analysis is focused on the tone of the articles, which captures the expression of positive or negative sentiment towards the Alberta tar/oil sands industry (Finch et al., 2014, p. 278). Following Deephouse and Carter (2005), I assessed the items in the corpus using three levels of tone. I assigned a favourable rating when the discourse towards the tar/oil sands was positive overall, meaning that the evaluation granted legitimacy to the tar/oil sands. I assigned an unfavourable rating when the discourse towards the tar/oil sands was negative overall, meaning that the evaluation challenges the legitimacy of the sands. A neutral rating was assigned when the article balanced positive and negative sentiments towards the tar/oil sands. Finally, those articles that did not feature evaluations of the tar/oil sands were coded for this absence of discussion (Finch et al., 2014, p. 278). As visible in Table 3, which compares tone by the regional and national newspapers in this dataset, the results show that the majority of the corpus did not offer an evaluation of the sands (n=25, 62.5%). Another ten authors (n=10, 25%) present support for the oil sands. There is one piece (n=1, 2.5%) that present discourse that challenges the oil sands. Though no items in the regional newspapers presented a balanced evaluation of the sands, a small number (n=4, 10%) did in the national newspapers.

Table 3: Analysis of tone towards tar/oil sands - Albertan vs. national newspapers

	Number of articles	Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral	Do not discuss tar/oil sands
Regional newspapers	22	2	1	0	19
National newspapers	18	8	0	4	6
Total	40	10	1	4	25

3.7 Conclusion to Chapter Three

I began this chapter by presenting a definition of discourse that will be used to inform this thesis. From there, the chapter described the purpose of performing a critical discourse analysis as well as its constituting elements that contribute to its overall suitability for studying news media texts. Next, the chapter touched on two methodological approaches to CDA - the structural and post-structural - and reviewed Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model as an example that captures these divergent approaches. After noting some of the limitations of CDA, the second half of the chapter concentrated on this thesis's dataset and coding process. In the analysis chapters that follow, I analyze the use of storylines in the corpus pertaining to the Alberta oil industry using a model put forth by Gunster and Saurette (2014) in order to uncover how the relationship between the Fort McMurray wildfire and climate change was articulated. In my analysis, I will not refer in detail to each item of my dataset. Though each item is coded, I will only present those that I consider most relevant to answering my research question. Providing evidence through verbatim quotations from dataset items, I will present the main aspects of selected articles according to the methodological guidelines outlined above and then discuss how the storylines give meaning to wildfire and the tar/oil sands industry.

Chapter Four: Villains – Alberta Oil Industry Under Siege

4.1 Introduction to Chapter Four

Alberta's oil sands are a heavily polarized subject with contending ideologies shaping the ongoing public debate concerning economic growth and environmental trauma in Canada. This chapter is the first of two to examine how ideologies are advanced in this thesis' dataset by way of carefully constructed storylines, that, as covered in Chapter Two, advance certain interpretations of events, actors, and phenomena (Gunster & Saurette, 2014). In turn, storylines formulate and forward a worldview that readers can then choose to adopt.

The present chapter is dedicated to how environmental advocacy in relation to the oil industry in and around Fort McMurray is constructed in the dataset. As I will discuss in greater detail, discourse advancing environmental advocacy was largely absent from items in the dataset ($n=1$, 2.5%). Instead environmental interests were constructed as a force of subversion by industry proponents: the dataset suggests that environmental advocates, in their criticism of the sands and suggestion of the karmic nature of the fire, are intent on subverting and destroying the industry, and by extension, the livelihoods of its employees and surrounding residents. Proponents construct advocates as antagonistic to the ideals housed in the oil industry, namely those of economic opportunity, individual determination, and dominance over the landscape. The environmental movement is consequently cast as the villain in this ongoing debate between supporters and opponents, especially in news and social media commentary that transpired at the outset of the 2016 Fort McMurray fire.

In the sections that follow, I first expand on a specific social media comment that was widely interpreted as an act of subversion by oil sands proponents. To diffuse this opposition and bolster the image of the industry, authors in the dataset used these storylines: (1) ordinary people,

(2) the natural variability of the climate, and (3) ethical oil. The rest of this chapter will describe how authors used these storylines to respond to environmental critique in the ongoing debate between pro- and anti-carbon-based energy.

4.2 Context: Framing the Wildfire in Moral Terms

As the country's major source of oil extraction, some journalists described the Fort McMurray wildfire as a "black irony": "an oil capital consumed by the climate change it is causing" (J. Brown, 2016; Stenson, 2016). Social media commentary made similar connections between the changing climate and the wildfire with a sizeable amount of attention going to a public servant in the town of Taber, Alberta and former NDP candidate, Tom Moffatt, for describing the fire as "karmic" on his twitter account⁸ (Tom Moffatt, 2016). Moffatt received backlash for openly suggesting that the Fort McMurray fire was a force of retribution on the community given that Fort McMurray is home to the carbon intensive bitumen extraction process. Moffatt's comment orients a portion of this dataset, with authors directly referencing and denouncing his subversive opinion (n=9, 22.5%). No dataset items supported or defended his view.

The sharp attention focused on Moffatt's single criticism is revealing: dataset authors exaggerated the impact of his discourse in order to frame environmental criticism as unfair and immoral. Specifically, authors leveraged Moffatt's dissenting opinion to argue that the industry was under siege by environmentalists in its time of need. Instead of silencing or ignoring the discourse, dataset authors highlighted the criticism in order to lend strength to the ideology that supports the tar/oil sands. This allows proponents to "pre-determine how such criticism will be heard and understood" (Gunster & Saurette, 2014, p. 353). With this context in mind, the next

⁸ In its entirety, Tom Moffatt's tweet reads: "Karmic #climatechange burns CDN oilsands city #uspoli #FeelTheBern #ykl #yyc #yvr #Toronto #cdnpoli" (Tom Moffatt, 2016).

sections focus on the three above-mentioned storylines to uncover how select items in the dataset diffused the perceived threat of environmentalists. As we will see, by highlighting the political salience of contending groups, and by casting advocates in a specific role within the storyline, the moral conclusion favours the dominant interest of the tar/oil sands.

4.3 Ordinary People (n=1)

The first storyline is concerned with partisan intervention in the conversation about the oil sands (n=1, 2.5%). As previously reviewed in the literature, studies have documented how political affiliation is closely tied to political response to global climate change: with policymakers on the Left willing to identify the negative environmental consequences of industrial capitalism and policymakers on the Right working to dismiss and deny such claims in order to protect the fossil fuel industry's economic interests (McCright & Dunlap, 2011). This storyline relies on privileging the political Right ideology in order to smear environmental arguments, and leverage critical comments in order to legitimize petro-capitalist activities. As I will address below, this storyline casts opposition to the oil sands as an aggressive force that is interfering with petro-capitalist priorities – priorities that are essential to supporting the interests and values of ordinary Canadian families. To unpack this storyline, I will rely on a *National Post* commentary in the dataset by Philip Cross (2016) that strongly advances a partisan response to Moffatt's criticism. Of note are Cross's professional affiliations: he is employed by The Macdonald-Laurier Institute - a right-leaning public policy think tank.

Cross's (2016) commentary emphasizes divergent values between opponents and proponents of Alberta's oil industry, which he associates with the political Left and Right, respectively. Using Moffatt's comment to launch into a discussion on the petroleum industry, Cross argues that opposition to the sands is opposition to "timeless Conservative values" held by

“ordinary people” (p. FP9). Examining his linguistic choices confirms how he perceives Conservative ideology as unequivocally superior to encroaching liberal principles. This is plainly visible, for example, with the assortment of identifiers he inconsistently uses when referring to individuals or groups that fall on the Left side of the spectrum, including “progressives,” “collectivists,” “Leapers,” “leftists,” “environmentalists,” and “elitists” (p. FP9). In his application, these terms are menacing in contrast to his consistent use of the term “ordinary people” when referring to members of the political Right. Using a malleable term like “ordinary people” is strategic: it casts a wide net that allows Cross to appeal to a huge swathe of the population - namely the average Canadian working-class family. As mentioned, Cross only defines “ordinary people” according to Conservative values, which he identifies as individualism and market liberalism. He lists no other qualities that determine membership to this blanket term.

Cross’s (2016) aim is to use Moffatt as an exemplar to demonstrate the need to resist liberal ideology. Liberal values pose a threat to how Canadians “organize their lives,” especially around fossil fuel use (p. FP9). To do this, he frames environmental concern as an “elitist” issue. He explains how moving away from oil extraction and consumption would alter material and social relations:

[Liberal elitists] distrust ordinary people to ever make the politically correct decision to disavow materialism, sell everything, move into huts and live off organic vegetables grown in their backyards, all the while taking mass transit to the local Employment Insurance office, given the mass disemployment that would occur in a world without cheap fossil fuels. (Cross, 2016, p. FP9)

The above passage shows Cross’s effort to construct a world without fossil fuels as not only undesirable but also to be feared. Cross also heightens the storyline that poses environmentalists as villains by employing language associated with warfare, thereby demonstrating how this group is intervening in Alberta’s (and Canada’s) petro-capital interests: “Since capitalism did not *self-destruct*, activists [...] shifted to exploiting environmentalism to achieve their goal of

torpedoing our economic system, this time by *choking off* access to cheap energy sources” (p. FP9, emphasis added).

Casting environmentalists as radical was similarly seen in the discourse of other dataset items. Authors used charged language to refer to members of the environmental movement, using terms like “eco-propagandist,” “eco-evangelist,” and “environmental extremist” (Cosh, 2016; Gerson, 2016; Manning, 2016). The use of such terms implies environmental advocates are intolerant and insurgent, perhaps even militaristic. These exaggerated terms strongly contribute to constructing advocates as a force waging war on innocent “ordinary people” (Cross, 2016, p. FP9). Heightening the binary between opponents and proponents through this use of language, though, is an effort to advance simplified and linear judgements about antagonistic groups.

Also of note in Cross’s (2016) discourse is his concentration on ideology. Similar to the reference to “propagandist” and “evangelist” Cross uses “ideology” as a dirty word. This is clear when he anchors the “elite environmental movement” to an “ideology” while he grants “values” to “ordinary people” (p. FP9). This application of ideology carries undercurrents of social power, with the implication that an elite group is working to impose its influence on the masses. He persists, arguing “members of the environmental movement regularly put ideology before the well-being of ordinary people” (p. FP9). He takes specific aim at “Leapers,” supporters of author Naomi Klein’s *The Leap Manifesto*.⁹ He sharpens the conflict across partisan lines further in his discussion about this document when he claims that Leapers view ordinary people with “contempt,” “distrust,” and “disdain” (p. FP9). Despite how Cross strategically contrasts

⁹ Released during the 2015 federal election campaign, the *Leap Manifesto* contains a series of proposals related to Canada’s energy future. Chief among these is a shift away from fossil fuel extraction and consumption entirely by 2050 and a full transition to renewable energy sources. Other proposals include an end to all pipeline projects, the collective ownership and control of energy sources, the expansion of low-carbon jobs, and advocacy for Indigenous land and treaty rights (“The Leap Manifesto,” n.d.). The Manifesto is not affiliated with the Liberal Party of Canada.

ideology and values, though, his argument in favour of timeless conservatism is no less ideologically motivated. While his commentary works to slander liberal environmental advocates, he is simultaneously building a case for and promoting a conservative, pro-fossil fuel ideology that caters to a hard-working contingent of Canadians working to protect and maintain certain moral standards.

In summary, injecting the conversation around the oil sands with partisan values dramatizes the debate. Moffatt's "karmic" comment threatened Cross's (2016) ideological principles and existing political and economic orientations. Accordingly, he did not hesitate to discredit the reputation of opposing political parties. His interpretation of the debate attempts to elide critical thinking in readers by embodying a certain political and ideological position of his own. This reputation of partisan bias spills over into the next section of this chapter where I examine another storyline present in the dataset - the natural variability of the climate - where political stripes influence the representation of climate science.

4.4 Natural Variability of the Climate (n=3)

Wildfires are an example of extreme weather phenomena that occur naturally. However climate change is now a factor influencing the frequency and magnitude of such events. This section is focused on how select authors conflated weather with climate change¹⁰ in an effort to explain (away) the conditions that fostered the flames. Part of this storyline is the claim that it is not possible to attribute the cause of an extreme weather event to climate change. Indeed, the claim that the wildfire is attributable to natural variations in weather arose in the dataset (n=3, 7.5%) despite leading research in attribution science being completed at the Environmental Change Institute at the University of Oxford that is able to determine if climate change did play a

¹⁰ NASA (2005) offers this distinction between "weather" and "climate": "The difference between weather and climate is a measure of time. Weather is what conditions of the atmosphere are over a short period of time, and climate is how the atmosphere 'behaves' over relatively long periods of time" (n.p.).

role in a specific extreme weather event (Sneed, 2017). In this section I review examples from the dataset that explained the conditions leading up to the fire as natural fluctuations of the environment outside of human control, or in other words, as weather. Like the previous storyline featured in this chapter, by conflating weather and climate, this storyline is part of a dual-sided conversation - first, the view that acknowledges the role of human activities in climate change and second, the view that dismisses and denies such connections in favour of explaining weather extremes through the natural variability and fluctuation of climatic factors. This storyline has much to do with attribution – how the cause of the wildfire was discussed in dataset discourse. As Olson (2000) tells us, politicians are forced to construct meaning around events and answer the question: “what happened?” In light of this, it is clear how partisan bias can influence how the present storyline is advanced in the dataset, not unlike the storyline covered in the previous section.

Some authors make a cause for the natural variability of the climate by conflating weather and climate (n=3, 7.5%). In order to deflect responsibility for the wildfire, Morgan (2016) assumes the role of primary definer and reconstructs climate science data. As the retired President and CEO of EnCana Corporation, Morgan’s stance is aligned with his professional interests. His commentary piece works to deny claims of anthropogenic climate change in relation to the cause of the wildfire by asserting that the weather conditions leading up to the fire are within historical limits. Writing for *The Globe and Mail*, he makes his position plain in the headline: ‘Tying an extreme weather event to atmospheric carbon dioxide simply isn’t credible.’ He supports his position by listing historical examples of extreme weather patterns, suggesting that such examples serve as precedent to explain the Fort McMurray fire as a routine happening. For example, Morgan compares the Fort McMurray fire to a period of severe drought in the

1930s that caused dust storms in Canada's prairies. He continues to build a case for the natural variability of the climate by listing other periods of abnormal heating and cooling in the 20th century. For example, he identifies the 1930s as the "hottest decade on record in Canada" and goes on to explain that the period was followed by forty years of "cooling" (p. B8). He even uses weather patterns to deny the link between carbon emissions and the warming of the Earth's atmosphere. Morgan writes that "scientists struggle to explain" how a period of atmospheric cooling occurred in parallel with a rapid increase of carbon emissions (p. B8). The claims Morgan uses to support his argument are not verifiable – he includes no references to historic weather data or any peer-reviewed studies that corroborate the connections he makes. Moreover, in consideration of the complexity of the scientific subject he is trying to discuss, his argument is heavily simplified.

Morgan's (2016) descriptions of historic climate and weather patterns inject climate science with doubt, which carries repercussions: extreme weather events are constructed as usual, expected, and temporary. By making reference to the Dust Bowl to defend his position, he implies that extreme weather events recur naturally, thereby diminishing the discourse of the scientific community and environmental advocacy groups that demand action. Morgan holds a vested interest in the oil industry and so his professional status lends authority to his commentary. As such, his reconstruction of the science not only evidence put forward by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the relationship between climate change and extreme weather events, but also contributes to discourse of doubt and denial attached to climate science, as discussed in Chapter Two. I will elaborate on this further as I review another example that uses the same storyline.

Gerson's (2016) piece for the *National Post* similarly conflates weather events with the climate variability:

[Alberta] seems to revel in extreme weather: tornadoes, blizzards, floods and droughts. Sometimes in the same month. So it is entirely possible – likely, even – that the current hot, dry spring from whence this inferno began is well within long-term historical norms. (n.p.)

Ultimately her piece is one of very mixed signals: she acknowledges “for argument’s sake” that climate change could be a contributing factor to the cause of the fire, but she diminishes the environmentally harmful consequences of bitumen extraction. In fact, her discourse undermines any urgency or severity attached to climate change when she claims that the introduction of “drastic climate change measures” in Canada would have an “utterly nominal” effect on a global scale since “the [Alberta] oil sands account for a fraction of a fraction of global emissions” (n.p.). First, this diminishes scientific evidence that speaks to the range of impacts emissions cause. Specifically, she diminishes scientific evidence because she overlooks the record-breaking temperatures in the region in the days leading up to the identification of the wildfire. These temperatures were four to five degrees greater than the previous highest temperature records held in the region and were coupled with a low snow pack and an early snowmelt (J. Brown, 2016). By labeling the wildfire as weather, she is failing to acknowledge that ultimately, our Earth is warming, and is thus creating fire-prone circumstances. Second, this promotes passivity in responding to climate change. By downplaying the effects of climate change, inactivity on an individual and organizational level is justified. Though Gerson refers to climate change as a collective problem and uses the pronoun “we” in order to transfer the responsibility onto all Canadians, it is unclear what is expected of readers, Canadians, or policy makers in the project of addressing climate change.

This storyline reveals how ideology can influence the interpretation and reconstruction of scientific facts in opinion journalism. Despite definitive evidence of the impact of anthropogenic

carbon emissions, this storyline amplifies the denialist viewpoint by challenging scientific authority. As a consequence, the sense that climate change is non-problematic is fostered. As mentioned above, emerging attribution science can link specific extreme weather events to climate change, thereby nullifying any individual's claim that the conditions are antecedent. What requires the most attention in this storyline is the complacency this line of reasoning breeds. This bled into the subject of wildland fires in the dataset, where, for example, discourse affirmed that Canadians "can learn to live with the threat of forest fires" (Flannigan & Wotton, 2016). Though fires do occur naturally, claims that the population can persist alongside the rising number of extreme natural disasters is not something that should be unquestionably accepted as truth. The next section considers the storyline that justifies the continued development of the tar/oil sands according to the line of reasoning that Canada's bitumen is sourced under "ethical" conditions in comparison to other petro-states.

4.5 Ethical Oil (n=2)

According to the ethical oil storyline, Canadian tar/oil sands not only produce economic assets, but are also a morally superior source of oil. This storyline concludes that refined bitumen sourced from Alberta can displace "conflict" oil from Venezuelan, Middle Eastern or Russian sources (Levant, 2010). This line of reasoning is credited to Canadian author Ezra Levant, who develops this argument in his book *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* (2010). Levant's argument is based in a syllogism: Canada has an abundance of fossil fuels; Canada comes out ahead ethically on matters of human rights, labour safety, and political freedom in comparison to other petro-states; therefore Canadian sourced oil is the most ethical choice to fill the world's need for the resource. He uses this argument to defend industry practices and also rebut environmental critique. The following passage from Levant's monograph sets up his logic:

Oil is an international commodity; if an oil-thirsty country such as China or the United States can't buy oil from one country, they'll buy it from another. So even if the oil sands were to completely shut down, the world wouldn't use one barrel less. [...] The question is not whether we should use oil sands oil instead of some perfect fantasy fuel that hasn't been invented yet. Until that miracle fuel is invented, the question is whether we should use oil from the [Canadian] oil sands or oil from the other places in the world that pump it. (Levant, 2010, p. 6-7)

In this section I will turn to examples from the dataset (n=2, 5%) that employ this “either/or” logic to defend Alberta’s oil industry in the context of petro-capitalism (Szeman, 2013).

The author in the dataset that relied heavily on this storyline was Morgan (2016), whose commentary piece was also the focus in the previous section regarding the natural variability of the climate. Recall that Morgan’s stance is aligned with his professional interests. As such, by using the ethical oil storyline, Morgan works to bolster the reputation of the sands against criticism. In fact, his discourse closely resembles Levant’s passage quoted above. He argues that oil from the Middle East and Northern Africa is instilled with poor values that are undesirable compared to Canada’s product. Petro-states in these regions have “appalling human-rights records” and support “extremist groups that shatter the lives of people throughout [those] regions and foment terror across the West” (p. B8). He validates continued activities in Canada’s tar/oil sands by presenting readers with an undesirable alternative: oil sourced from countries with non-Canadian values. Moreover, he notes that the global consumption of oil will not decline nor halt if Canada immediately ended its extraction activities. As we saw during the Fort McMurray fire, temporarily closed facilities “took about one million barrels of oil a day out of production. But [...] countries including Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Angola and Ivory Coast quickly filled the void” (p. B8). Morgan even counters claims that bitumen is an unethical source of fuel because of its overly high environmental impacts by claiming that the Canadian sands only contribute “a minuscule one-tenth of a per cent” to global emissions (p. B8). By claiming that the tar/oil sands make minimal contributions to global emissions, Morgan’s discourse omits other environmental impacts the industry has on the surrounding ecosystem. For example, there are serious concerns

about the massive amounts of freshwater the industry drains from the Mackenzie River Basin.

Struzik (2013) describes the unparalleled use of water in order to maintain extraction activities:

In 2011, companies mining the tar sands siphoned approximately 370 million cubic metres of water from the Athabasca River alone, which was heated or converted into steam to separate the viscous oil, or bitumen, from sand formations. That quantity exceeds the amount of water that the city of Toronto, with a population of 2.8 million people, uses annually. (¶2)

Further, there is concern surrounding the water that is diverted after use to tailings ponds and the impact of contaminants contained in the water on groundwater supplies (Struzik, 2013).

Producing two and half million barrels per day (Government of Alberta, 2016), the environmental impacts of the Alberta tar/oil sands certainly cannot be cast as negligible. Though this storyline is a clear attempt to bolster Canadian bitumen against critique, this storyline is essentially arguing that environmental arguments are insignificant because of its “ethical” stamp of approval. This storyline, then, places priorities in hierarchical order, with threats to the environment falling to the bottom of the list.

With Morgan’s professional interests in mind, we are made aware of the force undergirding his persistence in deflecting and assailing opposition to the sands: there is a substantial amount of revenue to be made in the tar/oil sands and accordingly, those economic interests must be preserved by making Canadians more comfortable with the contentious subject. However by prioritizing economics above the environmental harm and damage, this line of reasoning encourages readers to accept that our petro-capitalist society cannot be altered or challenged. As Szeman (2013) notes, a main difficulty is that the argument makes clear that the only alternative to ethical Canadian oil is “something much worse”: “one can reject both in favour of a possibility that exceeds and escapes the necessity of the given in favour of some third term yet to be named” (p. 159).

A powerful storyline shields its adherents from information that challenges the worldview captured in the storyline (Gunster & Saurette, 2014). Accordingly, the ethical oil storyline is crucial to protecting and justifying Canada's petro-state. There are implications, though, in placing a moralizing label on the resource. The frame compares the values embedded in Canada's extractive practices to international competitors while failing to consider Canada's Indigenous populations, whose traditional territories bear the risk of continued oil sands development. Moreover, this line of argumentation fails to consider the disproportionate amounts of profit flowing to oil companies while vulnerable populations, which possess comparatively low carbon footprints, endure ecological calamities. Acknowledging this injustice, it is undeniable that the "ethical" label does not, in fact, fit our dig and burn economy. As Szeman (2013) points out, this frame is a strategy to influence how people within and beyond Canadian borders know about oil. With or without the "ethical" label, however, the asymmetric effects of oil remain.

4.6 Conclusion to Chapter Four

Using Moffatt's dissenting opinion of the link between the tar/oil sands and climate change as a springboard, the three storylines discussed in this chapter – ordinary people, the conflation of weather and climate, and ethical oil – craft a narrative that legitimizes the continuation of the tar/oil sands development. Significantly, all three storylines feature a political slant. While Cross's (2016) piece lists its political persuasion explicitly by drawing battle lines between conservative and liberal ideologies, the arguments that conflate weather and climate and that support the ethical oil line of reasoning also have Right-leaning roots. The argument that conflates weather and climate to diminish the urgency of climate science, for example, is associated with the organized climate denial industry, which is fronted by conservative

organizations. Climate sceptics and denialists continue to reproduce this line of reasoning where cold weather, in light of expected warming, is trumpeted as clear evidence that climate change is a hoax (see Gavin, Leonard-Milsom, & Montgomery, 2011). Trumpeting bitumen as ethical oil is similarly grounded in ideological motivation: namely, the storyline defends the resource in order to promote the petro-state and overlooks the environmental impacts generated by the tar/oil sands. As Gunster and Saurette (2014) argue, a powerful storyline lies in its capacity to “allow us to close our eyes and our ears to what we do not want to see or hear or know or feel” (p. 352). As such, the storylines uncovered presently are an effort to explain away critique of the sands. This is reinforced by the absence of discourse favouring anti-carbon based energy across all newspapers surveyed. Working in tandem with the storylines discussed in this chapter, the next chapter defends the oil sands by framing it as an economic story.

Chapter Five: Heroes – Storyline of Unlimited Growth

5.1 Introduction to Chapter Five

References to the link between Fort McMurray's tar/oil sands and its impact on both the local and national economy proved to be a predominant theme in the dataset. As indicated in Table 2 in Chapter Three, three individual codes – job creation (n=7), energy security (n=5), and wealth creation (n=4) – indicate that on the whole, more than a third of the articles in the corpus mention the economic context surrounding Fort McMurray (n=16, 40%). So much so that authors frequently made reference to the town using monikers that expressed its industrial reputation: referred to as a “very Canadian boomtown,” an “economic engine,” and Canada's “economic cornerstone,” dataset discourse confirmed that the world holds an enduring interest in Fort McMurray due to its “commercial activities” (A natural disaster unlike any other, 2016, p. A14; Lederman, 2016, p. A2; Morgan, 2016, p. B6; Cosh, 2016, p. A14).

Indeed the economics of the tar/oil sands project is embedded in Alberta's cultural consciousness. As a result, this chapter aims to first highlight dataset items aligned with the industry's position. That is, certain items in the dataset positioned the sands as a necessity to Canada's overall economic prosperity, thereby reinforcing the opinion that Canada must continue to support the development of the tar/oil sands project. Not only does Canada take the resource to market (currently with the U.S.) but the industry provides jobs, accounts for a portion of provincial and federal revenues through taxes and royalties, and is a source of energy security (Government of Alberta, 2016). Some authors in the dataset consequently position these economic impacts as serving the public good and contest divisive opinions of the industry (e.g. Breakenridge, 2016; Finch, 2016; Manning, 2016; Thomson, 2016). In what follows, I will review examples that use the above-mentioned economic impacts in order to manufacture

hegemonic consent for the project. In turn, the discursive representations I will highlight simultaneously cast the industry as an economic hero aiding beneficiaries across the country. To align with CDA, the second half of this chapter turns to what is glossed over by the dataset items privileging economic discourse, notably the economic instability born out of resource boom economies. Paying due attention to what is absent from discourse reveals “the alternative version of events or phenomena that the discourse [...] had been designed to counter” (Gill, 2000, p. 185).

5.2 The Alberta Advantage

In addition to housing natural resources, Alberta boasts low taxes, low unemployment, and no debt. Such good economic fortune is captured in ‘the Alberta Advantage,’ a branding campaign used by the provincial Conservatives in the 1990s that quickly communicated the province’s neoliberal trajectory. The phrase has been used repeatedly in the provincial government’s discourse: Alberta’s 1997 Business Plan offers a revealing example of the government’s use of the term:

Across Canada, Albertans are known for their self-reliance, determination, and strong community spirit. Albertans value hard work and initiative. By building a strong Alberta Advantage, we expect the province’s economy to keep growing, producing more and better jobs for Albertans. At the same time, we’re determined to maintain and improve our quality of life. Quality health care and education programs, strong communities, vibrant cultures and support for Albertans who need it. (Government of Alberta, 1997, p. 3)

This is an example of the provincial government actively working to secure petro-hegemony in the province: though petro-capitalism has wide implications on all of us as consumers, such branding is an effort by the government to construct a provincial identity that is inseparable from maximizing the short-term returns of the extractive industry. Indeed, the values listed in the above passage – self-reliance, determination, and strong community spirit – persist in scholarly work on the discursive construction of the Albertan identity by government and industry (Adkin & Stares, 2016; Gismondi & Davidson, 2012). Distinct from other provinces and the nation,

Albertan identity is linked with the established discourse of the frontier where exploitation of the tar sands is a source of excitement: the industrial activity is seen as a “heroic, historic [...] quest” that is “carried out by hardy Albertans” (Gismondi & Davidson, 2012, p. 69). This symbolism appeared in the corpus (n=11, 27.5%) where authors romanticized the sands as a frontier waiting to be conquered by way of individual determination and ingenuity despite adverse conditions (Gismondi & Davidson, 2012, p. 69). By closely associating the industry with provincial identity, resistance to discourse and/or policy that aims to slow or halt growth of the fossil fuel economy is likewise built into the cultural politics of Alberta.

This chapter focuses on the legacy of the Alberta Advantage in the province’s cultural consciousness. Based on the prominence of economically themed discourse in the dataset, and the relative dearth of attention pointed at environmental interests, a neoliberal environment has indeed been the outcome of this component of Alberta’s branding. An analysis of dataset examples that defend the sands based on employment opportunities, wealth creation, and national energy security follows.

5.3 Job Creation (n=7)

Authors continued to remind readers of the job creating power of the oil sands in order to create a situation where there is no alternative but to support the industrial project (n=7, 17.5%). By returning attention to the positive impacts of oil felt by Canadians, oil is conflated with the public interest. This comes across strongly in dataset discourse that establishes support for the sands as everyday common sense. Working to secure hegemonic consent, Breckenridge (2016), for example, defends the industry on the basis of its contributions “in the way of economic activity and employment” (p. A11). More importantly, though, Breckenridge thanks the industry for developing the character of its employees – he writes: “And it’s an industry that is directly

attributable to the determination and ingenuity of many of those who have fled their homes in Fort McMurray” (ibid.). His suggestion is similar to Thomson’s (2016) discourse in the dataset, where he expresses that the industrial project provides a “higher quality of life” to Albertans (p. A15). In the two above examples, the authors assert that the industry provides more than “high paying jobs”: instead the authors’ discourse suggests there is an interested relationship between the employees and Big Oil (Thomson, 2016, p. A15). This is amplified by presenting the benefits as far-reaching, bringing opportunities to thousands of Canadians across the country (Thomson, 2016, p. A15). The good paying jobs, “spin-off work,” and higher quality of life are used to rationalize supporting the tar/oil sands. This also reveals how capitalism is embedded in the common-sense consciousness of its supporters. Chapter Four, focused on dissenting opinions of oil sands development, demonstrated that this common sense is impervious to critique.

Fort McMurray also appears as a magnet for job seekers in authors’ representations of the city. Addressing his constituency in a *Calgary Herald* commentary, MLA for Fort McMurray-Conklin Brian Jean (2016), for example, describes Fort McMurray as “a city to which people come from great distances in order to seek opportunity” (n.p.). Here Jean makes the city comparable to Canada’s largest urban centres that similarly attract an influx of residents from diverse educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Another political player, Manning (2016) (who previously served as the leader of the official opposition) reiterates this theme when he judges that the industry creates “tens of thousands” of jobs (p. A9). Such a representation resonates with provincial identity and ties into energy boom discourse that celebrates the substantial contributions provided to Albertans. Though these three above-mentioned examples highlight the opportunities flowing to Albertans and Canadians alike, they all rely on estimations: as seen above, authors use phrases like “tens of thousands” and “people” to create a

generalization. No item in the corpus cites specific statistics stating the number of jobs filled or available in the current resource boom in Fort McMurray or the amount of spin-off work created in other regions, nor the number of jobs negatively affected by the recession beginning in 2014. Thus, these examples base their arguments in vague suggestions of factuality. The idea that the tar/oil sands are an economic saviour is plainly a form of common sense that has flourished throughout the province and across its borders. The cultural and political power this ideology holds cannot be overlooked: importantly, the belief that the petro structures in place are legitimate likewise imparts legitimacy onto the dominant economic system.

Such enthusiastic coverage of the industry validates the character roles this thesis has used to organize its analysis: by presenting the oil industry as aligned with the public interest, it is discursively justified as the hero while divisive opinions are considered as contradictory to the Albertan and Canadian interest and accordingly grouped as villains. The following two sections focused on wealth creation and energy security will also demonstrate how the petro-cultural logic of extraction figures centrally in language that celebrates the economics of the oil industry.

5.4 Wealth Creation (n=4)

Examples in the dataset continue to position the oil sands as Canada's economic engine by emphasizing the prosperity, in the form of government revenue, the industry provides at the regional and national levels (n=4, 10%). At the provincial level, references were made to the prosperity enjoyed by Albertans due to the province's revenue stream. An editorial in *The Globe and Mail* attributes Alberta's budget surplus to its oil wealth: "Thanks to oil, previous Alberta governments delivered the impossible, year after year: low taxes and high spending" (An NDP Alberta one year later, 2016, p. F6). Even during the current economic downturn, oil is praised for putting Alberta "in a better fiscal position than any other province - it has no net debt," the

editorial elaborates, “running a deficit, even [2016’s] remarkably large one, will not spark a fiscal crisis” (ibid.). In this instance, the power of the oil industry is exalted and is evidently positioned as Alberta’s hero: according to this line of reasoning, Albertans are protected from economic instability and uncertainty experienced in other regions. As a result, it is clear that the province puts its status of petro-state above all else - because this economic success simultaneously produces social wealth for Albertans.

In those dataset items that put emphasis on the link between the resource and the national economy, authors turned to the effects of the temporary halt in production activities during the Fort McMurray fire. Noting the financial losses the industry felt during that time period, authors reiterated the importance of the industry’s profits to provincial and national economies. For instance, despite adversarial conditions, Professor Homer-Dixon (2016) argues that “Alberta’s oil patch will roar again before too long” in order to replenish provincial and national “coffers” (p. A9). “The world will continue to need oil for decades to come,” and Alberta’s oil industry will leverage this demand so as to continue generating a revenue stream in Canada (p. A9). Manning (2016) similarly advocates for the significance of Alberta’s “wealth-creating power” respective to the national economy (p. A9). Also noting the temporary shut down of the oil patch, Manning maintains that oil is the primary driver of Canada’s economy:

Fort Mac residents acknowledge that exploiting the oil sands raises significant environmental challenges that need to be better met. But when the crippling of that one community and its production base threatens to reduce Canada's projected growth rate from 2 per cent to zero for the second quarter of this year, that should drive home to all Canadians - including those who oppose the oil industry, and those who take it for granted - just how dependent this country has been on the wealth-creating power of Fort Mac and its resource base. (p. A9)

By openly admitting that select portions of society and community are neglected in favour of the economy, Manning’s opinion situates Alberta, and Canada, as a petro-state. Recall that the term petro-state describes “resource-based economic models” that are legitimized and enabled by petro-culture, where fossil fuels are embedded in everyday consciousness and thereby give life to

a neoliberal reality (Chen & Gunster, 2015, p. 307). By closely linking the provincial economy to that of the nation, Manning's opinion demonstrates that Canada's priority is aligned with the interests of the energy sector, and, as Manning admits, this is at the expense of the environment. Manning is explicit: economic growth and environmental risks are not competing priorities; rather, Canada's economy holds the highest regard. By making fear appeals, Manning further embeds capitalism in Albertans' common sense consciousness. His claim that Canada is "dependent" on oil sands wealth implies that there is no alternative: sustaining a healthy financial outlook necessitates continued extraction activities (p. A9). Although this can be understood as an argument in favour of the interests of Canadians and their economic futures, Manning's discourse in truth homogenizes the interests of all Canadians to be in line with those of the industry.

On close inspection of this discourse, there are no discussions on Alberta's resource wealth put forward in the dataset by economists. This contributes to the conclusion that the discourse that is advanced is generalized and does not offer a complete picture of how the revenue is distributed to public goods in the province or country or, in fact, how it is channelled back to corporate purses. After turning to the energy security storyline, the second half of this chapter will provide a well-rounded conversation on this subject and the overall economics of the oil sands project, including details left out of the discourse covered thus far.

5.5 Energy Security (n=5)

As today's dominant energy source, the energy security storyline purports that it is within the country's national interest to have access to a secure and stable supply of oil. Accordingly, some authors positioned Alberta's bitumen reserves as Canada's strategic asset and granted space to the argument that Alberta's sands provide energy security to Canada (n=5, 12.5%). I

will rely on David Finch's (2016) commentary for *The Globe and Mail* to unpack this storyline. According to the opinion piece, the economic benefits that Canada receives from the sands are two-fold: not only do the sands ensure energy security within Canada's boundaries, but they also make Canada "an exporter of the valuable commodity" (Finch, 2016, p. A13). Being "self-sufficient in petroleum" and also an oil-exporting state is what Finch calls Canada's "silver lining" (p. A13). Finch paints a glowing picture about the opportunities the resource has brought to Canada: Canada's bitumen reserves have attracted "national oil companies and independents from around the world" to develop commercial activities in Alberta, which Finch suggests is preferable in comparison to Canada's former dependence on "imported oil and the volatility of international politics" (p. A13). Here, reference to Canada's historical reliance on international sources of oil during politically turbulent years serves as the foil against which Canada's newfound energy security is compared. Given these advantages, Finch therefore dubs the resource a "national treasure" given its "important" role in providing "most of the fuel that powers industry, vehicles, and economies" (p. A13). Altogether, Finch's opinion piece develops a pro-tar/oil sands narrative founded in the economic benefits of fossil fuel development. By giving exclusive space in his discourse to constructing Alberta as a petro-state, Alberta's status quo is maintained and reinforced. By bringing readers' attention to such tangible economic benefits, he simultaneously directs attention away from the negative environmental risk and damage attached to energy resource extraction and consumption. In Finch's item – and in the dataset on the whole – space is not granted to discourse that calls for a departure from fossil fuel use based on environmental reasoning or more realistically, the finite supply of the reserves. Instead there is large emphasis on suggesting that Fort McMurray and the industry will roar again based on the aforementioned advantages listed in this chapter.

The above themes discursively legitimize the extractive practices that contribute to anthropogenic climate change: each one can be understood as a strategy used to veil the environmental damage resulting from extraction activities. Taken together with the themes presented in Chapter Four that were focused on antagonizing environmental advocacy groups, these examples demonstrate how discourse can interpret certain practices causing environmental damage as non-problematic. The rest of this chapter will concentrate on what the Promethean storyline glosses over: the economic bust of 2014, the asymmetric distribution of bitumen sands profits, and low royalties (Beine, Bos, & Coulombe, 2012; Carter, 2011).

5.6 Implications of Boom and Bust Economies

The aim of this section is to offer a well-rounded conversation about the economics of Alberta's tar/oil sands. Dataset items presented a simplified and limited narrative of the economic benefits of the sands: the assertions that authors made were vague and unsupported. More importantly, those assertions did not present a thorough discussion of all the economic implications of the short-term resource boom. I do not deny the significant benefits that are derived from taking Canada's refined bitumen to market. As Dobson, Lemphers, and Guilbeault (2013) outline, in 2011-2012, the provincial and federal governments received \$4.5 billion and \$1.5 billion in taxes respectively from oil and gas extraction activities (p. 6). The oil industry provided work to 22,000 workers and another 390,000 indirect positions in 2012 (Dobson et al., 2013, p. 6). Boasting about high levels of tax revenue and employment, however, does not offer readers a complete depiction of the economic context of oil sands development. In light of the inherently volatile global oil market, attention must also be paid to the effects of boom and bust

cycles in Alberta and Canada at large. Thus this section will turn to details that were glossed over in the dataset, such as the provincial recession.¹¹

Having reviewed the storylines that sustain enthusiasm for the economic advantages generated by the tar/oil sands in the first half of this chapter, I will now proceed by comparing how examples of boom discourses are exalted in the dataset in comparison to the significant absence of bust discourse. After three cycles of boom and bust since the initial boom in the Alberta oil industry in the 1940s and 50s, Alberta is not unfamiliar with the ephemeral nature of this economic cycle. This theme accordingly made an appearance in the dataset (n=10, 25%). There is a notable difference, though, in how authors discussed booms and busts. Relative to the attention in the dataset given to the advantages of a growing economy, there is a dearth in discourse that discusses the ongoing economic downturn and related impacts felt by employees of the oil industry and residents of the region. Of the 40 items in the dataset, one item outlines Alberta's fiscal position at the time of the wildfire (n=1, 2.5%).¹² That item, an editorial in *The Globe and Mail*, explicitly attributes the province's 2016 deficit to the significant drop in oil revenue. The item also calls for implementation of a refreshed fiscal plan for the province that would bring about a balanced budget again. The editorial does not advocate for continued reliance solely on the oil revenue stream and realistically states "no one can say when or to what degree [oil prices] will bounce back" (An NDP Alberta, one year later, 2016, p. F6). This item is in stark contrast to other assertive writers in the dataset that are certain oil prices will "bounce back," Alberta's "oil patch will roar again," and continued production will replenish provincial "coffers" given that "the world will need huge amounts of oil for decades to come" (Homer-Dixon, 2016, p. A9). Breakenridge (2016) and Gerson (2016) respectively make similar claims

¹¹ In a summary of Alberta's current economic climate, ATB Financial's *2018 Alberta Economic Outlook* confirms that, at the time of writing, Alberta is emerging from a two-year period of recession.

¹² The monthly price of crude oil in May 2016 was \$45.98 USD per barrel (Index Mundi, 2016).

out of the reasoning that global demand for oil will keep Canada's sands open for business. Ironically, though, the current economic downturn is due to a surplus of global supplies of oil relative to the decreasing demand ("The oil conundrum," 2016). It is possible that the lack of attention on economic bust reflects political rhetoric: in 2015, for example, Joe Oliver, then Minister of Finance under the federal Conservatives, denied that the contracting economy was moving into the state of recession while former Prime Minister Harper similarly shrugged off the term and attributed the lull to uncontrollable global conditions (Sorenson & Hutchins, 2015). This discursive silence, though, is misleading given that Alberta-based ATB Financial described the latest economic slump as "one of the largest on record" with "deeper and longer" impacts than expected (p. 61).

Not unexpectedly, the downturn reverberated through the province. Alberta's 2016-17 Economic Statement captures the impacts. Contrary to the claim that the oil industry provides thousands of high paying jobs, incomes in Alberta were not immune to sustained economic weakness: workers saw reduced overtime and the replacement of full-time employment with part-time work (p. 12). This contributed to the overall decline in the average number of hours in a workweek, leading to falls in average weekly wages and household incomes (p. 12). Adkin and Miller (2015) report figures to confirm this trend: following the fall of oil prices, "approximately 14,500 of the lowest-income earners in the natural resources sector were laid off between September 2014 and December 2015 [...] Altogether, more than 30,000 jobs in this sector were lost in 2015 and layoffs continued into 2016" (p. 542). Alberta's 2016-17 Economic Statement also reports that government incomes and corporate profits dropped alongside household incomes. This is represented in the significant drop in the nominal GDP, a measure of income, which declined 4.8 percent in 2016 after declining 12.5 percent in 2015 (p. 12). The above

figures offer a stark contrast to the picture of Alberta as a province with low unemployment, low taxes, and prospering Albertans on account of the province's resource reserves. The use of a discursive strategy to gloss over certain details continues into the next section on the omission of discourse pertaining to the disproportionate distribution of bitumen sands profits and low royalties.

As reviewed in the literature, governments of petro-states are less accountable to citizens because revenue is sourced through resource rents rather than tax dollars and so mismanagement of resource wealth results. As Adkin and Stares (2015) note, the bulk of Alberta's resource wealth has not been used to the benefit of Albertans - the resource's owners. The scholars explain how, instead, the wealth has been transferred to private corporations and not invested in "major improvements in, or expansions of, public goods in the province" (p. 223). The following passage captures this sharp contradiction:

Three economists at the University of Alberta reported in May 2010 that 'from 1989 to 2008, provincial spending per person on health care rose 37 percent; spending on schools rose six percent; spending on social services fell 25 percent; personal incomes rose 39 percent; and corporate profits climbed 314 percent.' (Taft, McMillan & Jahangir, 2012; as cited in Adkins & Stares, 2015, p. 223)

With this context, it is difficult to argue that the priority of the provincial government was channelling its unique source of wealth into provincial public goods. This is also seen through the mismanagement of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund (AHSTF). Established in 1976 for the government to invest surplus oil and gas revenue (the Premier mandated 30 percent of non-renewable resource revenues to be set aside annually), the trust contains approximately \$17 billion today (Government of Alberta, 2017). Subject to ad hoc contributions and withdrawals, the value of the trust is often compared to similar accounts of other oil exporting states, like Alaska and Norway. A comparison of each state's total assets immediately reveals Alberta's folly: in comparison to Alberta's \$17 billion, Alaska has amassed \$46 billion, and prudent Norway over \$1 trillion (Dobson et al., 2013, p. 27; Milner & Lewis, 2015). When Premier

Lougheed's established the AHSTF, his original intent was to save a portion of resource revenues in order to cushion the province from future financial uncertainty that accompanies dependence on oil revenue especially in light of the limited reserves. Provincial leaders did not adhere to Lougheed's original vision of the fund and consequently, forty years since the fund was created, Albertans are much poorer than they could be due to heedless management of revenue. Such mismanagement diverges greatly from the Alberta Advantage image that persists in the dataset.

This cursory section on the 2014 economic bust in Alberta and corporate profits from the sands is an attempt to point to a much more complex economic context surrounding Alberta's tar/oil sands. Plainly, it is not accurate to describe the sands solely on the basis of certain positive economic indicators, like job and wealth creation, as what has historically been done. Given that this is instilled into cultural consciousness, though, highlighting the other side of the coin – notably the economic instability born out of resource boom economies – is critical in discussion of the economic context of the tar/oil sands.

5.7 Conclusion to Chapter Five

This chapter further has presented examples from the dataset that favour oil sands development. Importantly, these examples, which draw attention to good jobs and economic growth, serve the status quo. I opened this chapter with a description of the Alberta Advantage, a branding exercise that carries characteristics much akin to capitalism itself: market-driven politics, individualism, and a neoliberal way of life. Thus, the status quo is preserved because bitumen - a motor for provincial prosperity - interpolates Albertans themselves: because the substance is presented as serving the common good, further development is equally understood as common sense. In *The Globe and Mail*, Manning, for example, excluded the intrinsic value of

the environment in his argument and focused only its resource value. After offering evidence from the dataset, this chapter turned to a portrait of existing economic conditions in Alberta coming out of the volatile global oil market.

The discourse focused on in this chapter answers my sub research question: how do identified storylines seek to strengthen and protect the legitimacy of Alberta's tar/oil sands development? By glossing over part of the economic context surrounding Alberta's oil industry, the storylines covered in this chapter position the sands as the hero and help to sustain public enthusiasm amongst Albertans for the industrial activities taking place there. This is significant when considered in tandem with the long-term consequences of the environmental effects of the oil industry. That is, it should not be overlooked that petro-culture, petro-capitalism, and the petro-state must maintain support through hegemonic consent. This bleeds into the next chapter, where I touch on how oil is built into the Albertan consciousness, and is thus instilled in everyday living and thinking (Haluza-Delay, 2012).

Chapter Six: The Frontier Metaphor

6.1 Introduction to Chapter Six

In Chapter Five, I touched on the link between the Albertan identity and discourse on the frontier, an established metaphor that romanticizes economic opportunity found in areas with abundant natural resources. Appealing to the historical context of the frontier in Alberta, some authors in the dataset invoked this line of discourse in order to rouse Albertan pride in the face of a natural disaster. To this end, the fire is understood as another challenge (in a long line of challenges) for Albertans to rally against in their ongoing strife to secure personal well-being in the form of wealth. The results in this section do not explicitly answer my research question – it does not pertain to the link between the wildfire and climate change. Rather, I argue this section functions as an addendum: the results below are an off-shoot of the economic storyline covered in Chapter Five as the emphasis on the frontier works to gain consent for the continued mining and export of the region's bitumen reserves. In what follows I will review claims focused on portrayals of the Albertan identity and community spirit, which appeared in over a third of the dataset (n=13, 32.5%)

6.2 Fort Mac Strong (n=13)

Adkins and Stares (2016) suggest that by drawing on frontier discourse to portray the collective Albertan identity, Albertans carry with them a sense of victimhood: specifically, the narrative is one of a “besieged” provincial population that since Confederation has had to protect its resource reserves, and its right to benefit from them, from “grasping” governments in Eastern Canada (p. 220). Recall that frontier discourse encapsulates a range of other tenets of Albertan identity: individualism, independence, the pioneering spirit, and a market-first approach. In the dataset, emphasis was not placed on what caused the fire; instead discourse centres on how hardy

Albertans draw force from their historically established pioneering spirit in order to rebuild the community and triumph again.

The representation of the Albertan frontier in the dataset is focused on reiterating underlying Albertan values, specifically those of risk taking, innovation, self-determination and fortitude in seeking out opportunity. These values comprise the “pioneering spirit” that is often used to describe Albertan heritage, as was seen in the dataset (Homer-Dixon, 2016). For example, Cosh (2016a) explains that the presence of “ambition and enterprise” in Fort McMurray makes “everybody still living in Fort McMurray, *ispo facto*, still a pioneer” (n.p.). These values are similarly visible in Manning’s (2016) commentary that recounts progress of the tar/oil sands industry since the 1950s. In listing early examples of turbulent developments in the industry and describing recent adversarial conditions, Manning’s commentary echoes how resiliency comes hand in hand with living and working in Alberta’s tar/oil sands.

This is evident when Manning instils an American oil executive, J. Howard Pew, with the Albertan pioneering spirit and, thus, romanticizes him as the hero of Alberta’s oil sands history. For example, Manning describes the combination of factors that enabled a favourable result for Pew in comparison to previous failures: he possessed the “the combination of money, technology, and entrepreneurial stamina” necessary to launch a commercial plant and kick-start the oil industry “that hitherto no one had come up with” (p. A9). What was unique to Pew’s investment in the region, Manning suggests, was his disinterest in turning a profit: rather, he was concerned with obtaining “North American energy security” (ibid.). This differentiated Pew’s undertaking from previous “false starts” while also providing inherent motivation to move forward against early hardships:

So that first plant was developed, with many ups and downs - fires, freeze-ups, technical problems galore. But lessons were learned which benefited others and future plants until Fort Mac eventually became one of the major sources of Canadian petroleum production. (ibid.)

As the region continues to be frequented by similar examples hardship, Manning emphasizes residents' ability to overcome any obstacle they face by situating hardship in the past tense. The more recent challenges Manning lists are economically themed, but they are related to individual and industry success:

Think of all that has been accomplished in that community since those early days: the technological challenges that have been overcome; the hard work expended in developing those plants and building that community; the creation of tens of thousands of jobs; the generation and distribution of billions of dollars in wealth, wages and taxes. (ibid).

Inherent to Manning's commentary is the notion that Alberta is an abundant land of opportunity. His romanticized tale of progress hinges on Albertans' ability and willingness to conquer and dominate the resources housed in the land. By reminding readers of Pew's early experiences, a crucial figure in the region's tar/oil sands story, Manning invokes a common Albertan identity grounded in history and based on shared values.

Other items in the dataset placed emphasis on rebuilding and pulling through in order to return to the previous levels of economic functionality. As seen in this *Globe and Mail* editorial, re-establishing routines is welcomed:

More than 2,400 buildings, most of them private homes, were destroyed. Now the city is virtually empty, its residents relocated to evacuation centres or the homes of friends and family. It isn't easy for them, but they aren't entirely alone, thanks to donations and government financial support. Some of the oil companies that employ them are continuing to pay wages, too. On Monday, workers began flying back into the oil sands in order to get the crude flowing again. ("Fort Mac Strong," 2016, p. A12)

In a different example, physical losses are juxtaposed with what was persevered - the notion of community. For example, when details of distressing circumstances entered the discourse, they were coupled with an optimistic addition that highlighted the strength of the community spirit, as seen in a passage from an *Edmonton Journal* editorial:

Albertans put aside all differences and come together to battle a common foe. We saw it in 2011 when wildfires swept through Slave Lake [...] We saw that generosity of spirit again in 2013 when the flood of the century ravaged Calgary [...] And now we're seeing that same quiet, can-do attitude in action in Fort McMurray. [...] We are a province with an indomitable, determined spirit. We will stand together. ("Strength in Numbers," 2016, p. A12)

The above passage assures that the cherished value of fortitude is still in tact. Likewise, MPP for

the Fort McMurray-Conklin riding, Brian Jean, makes a strong case of a shared Albertan heritage that, in his view, is more powerful than the destruction of the fire. Repeating themes of endurance and persistence, Jean's (2016) commentary piece emphasizes how the values embedded in this Albertan heritage lends Albertans a sense of confidence in moving forward in the wildfire's wake. He writes, "In the face of a crisis, we are at our best [...] Because of the resiliency of our community, and with all of Alberta behind us, we will come back stronger than ever" (n.p.).

The frontier metaphor was present in all four newspapers that make up the dataset. Complimentary to the frontier metaphor was the use of a storyline to unite distant on-looking Canadians within shared emotions, specifically those of compassion and sympathy (n=15, 37.5%). This storyline allows Canadians to understand the events of the wildfire according to a specific interpretation while also allowing them to quickly make judgements and form opinions – either about the fire or about dissenting accounts of the fire.¹³ Values embedded in this compassionate national response, those of inclusivity, goodwill and neighbourliness, contribute to the moral understanding of the event. For example, differences of region, politics, ethnicity and religion disappear in discourse centered on a united national response to the Fort McMurray fire. Though items direct attention to evacuees, discourse equally gives space to constructing the fire as a disaster affecting all Canadians and, thus, establishing a sense of solidarity between Albertans and the rest of Canada. To that end, items shift from a focus on *them* to a discourse about *us*. This is visible in the headline of Lederman's (2016) piece: "In times of crisis, Canada comes together like one big small town." She represents Canada as unified in addressing the distress of distant others:

Canadians are doing their best now to create a larger community; to surround Fort McMurray with support.

¹³ The investigation of audience effects is outside the scope of this thesis.

When all seems lost - or really is lost - it somehow helps to know that people are in your corner, even if you've never met them; even if they're very far away, spread out across the land. (p. A2)

Meanwhile other items emphasized a national response to the fire that is free of political differences. “This is not a time for politics or grandstanding or photo ops,” one *Calgary Herald* editorial reads, “Genuine co-operation across all parties and levels of government will be needed to move this community from tragedy to triumph” (n.p.). Indeed in the days following the onset of the fire, a united national front was communicated to the public by emblematic actions of prominent federal politicians in the House of Commons. In the dataset, Lederman (2016) recounts this in her commentary piece, noting she was “choked up” seeing cooperation amongst Canada’s Liberals and Conservatives when Prime Minister Trudeau crossed the floor to shake Rona Ambrose’s hand, former leader of the Conservative party and Albertan MP, and offer a hug in a show of support. The above examples appeal to emotion while also containing inherent moral arguments on the correct way to understand the fire. Rather than exacerbating social or political divisions, Canada puts forward an integrated and neighbourly response in a time of emergency.

6.3 Conclusion to Chapter Six

This story of the frontier, with values and norms of persistence, resilience, and fortitude offers a coherent identity and worldview for Albertans to anchor to. Though the storyline can be seen as empowering, the certainty it contains does not grant space to different understandings of either Albertan heritage or the Fort McMurray fire. With no room for critical discourse on the causes and consequences of the wildfire, the principal focus of frontier discourse is normalizing the status quo - that of capitalist exploitation of the oil sands legitimized by the provincial and federal governments. Employing frontier discourse equally helps to sustain public enthusiasm amongst Albertans for the industrial activities taking place there. Though this line of discourse

does not position Albertans against others, it easily normalizes trial and tribulation. Indeed, this compelling storyline that pulls on Albertans heartstrings by appealing to the local pioneering spirit can be seen as an ideological front employed to protect the industry against dissenting attitudes. Frontier discourse, then, allows Albertans to quickly develop opinions and judgements about the Fort McMurray fire and explain away growing concern about the development of the resource as subversion.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction to Chapter Seven

This thesis set out to examine how the relationship between the Fort McMurray fire and climate change was articulated in a sample of opinion discourse in four Canadian newspapers in the period beginning May 1, 2016 and ending September 1, 2016. Critics of the tar/oil sands were not slow on picking up on the wildfire's irony. Established to extract bitumen – a carbon intensive energy source – the municipality of Fort McMurray was destroyed by a wildfire motivated by climate change. In turn, the industry's proponents responded to the criticism: pointing to the industry's economic credentials, proponents defended the legitimacy and relevancy of bitumen in the Canadian context against claims that the substance is a source of environmental risk and harm. Chapters Four and Five were focused on unpacking the storylines used by industry proponents in the dataset to defend the oil industry. This concluding chapter reviews my research question and motivation and key takeaways from this analysis. I also present a brief discussion on the moral imperative to politicize – or not – the wildfire, in light of the devastation experienced by the city's residents during this unprecedented event. I also include limitations of my work and possible directions for future research.

7.2 Review and Discussion

Bitumen has a complicated reputation in the Canadian collective consciousness. And as mentioned, the resource remains heavily mediated to Canadians, save those that have witnessed the pit mines in the remote Albertan region where it is recovered or have toured surrounding communities. For the rest of us, we must rely on second-hand information to glean an understanding of the scale of the industrial project underway and the spectrum of impacts born out of it. The content of written and spoken texts, especially those published in news

publications, holds the potential to signal the relative importance of an issue and the possibility of action. This formed the motivation driving this thesis: recognizing the gap between people's knowledge of anthropogenic climate change and people's continued environmentally harmful behaviours, it is imperative in this case to examine the use of language post-disaster as we know that language does not simply mirror our reality.

Setting out to consider mediated knowledge of Alberta's tar/oil sands, my research question asked how editorial boards and commentators articulated the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and concerns about the tar/oil sands contribution to climate change in the opinion discourse of select Canadian newspapers. Results from the dataset indicate an unwillingness to connect the events of the wildfire to the wider phenomenon of climate change. Instead, the human-interest side of the disaster figured the most prominently in the dataset, specifically references to Albertan community spirit as touched on in Chapter Six.

In an effort to examine the environment/economic tension, my analysis produced two chapters dedicated to the use of storylines in the dataset. Storylines cast actors in specific, archetypal roles – villain and hero. Chapters Four and Five were attributed to uncovering the storylines constructing each of these actors, respectively – environmental advocates as the villain and the oil industry as the hero. Chapter Four in particular revealed constructions of bitumen that aligned with political positions. The authors advancing this storyline established an “us” versus “them” logic, with conservative members suggesting that a problem does not lie with bitumen extraction, but with the combatant and subversive liberal environmentalists. Storylines bearing political stripes proceeded in Chapter Five as well: here, authors celebrated the economic contributions the tar/oil sands provide to Canada's economy, thus positioning bitumen as a powerful resource serving the public good. The intention of this analysis is not to label the

emergent storylines as right or wrong. Rather, this analysis is intended to provide a deeper insight into how commentators in this dataset appealed chiefly to economic justification in order to establish a hegemonic interpretation of Alberta's oil industry.

Despite grouping individual storylines into two analysis chapters with the intent of addressing each side of the economic/environmental binary, I conclude that the storylines uncovered share a common way of conceptualizing bitumen and thus form a dominant narrative that seeks to protect the interests of the tar/oil sands industry by imparting legitimacy onto the resource and thus reinforcing Alberta's status as a petro-state. Aside from assessing tar/oil sands opponents as ideologically motivated, scant regard was paid to environmental critique of the industry. Below the limitations of this thesis will be discussed in addition to future directions for research pertaining to the examination of opinion discourse on the subject of climate change.

7.3 Limitations and Future Directions

By only examining discourse pertaining to a single event, this thesis does not offer a comprehensive assessment of news media portrayals of bitumen or resource development broadly. With the series of wildfires that swept through western Canada and United States in 2016 and 2017, an investigation into what mediated knowledge(s) were constructed, upheld, and silenced over the course of these events is warranted. Moreover, the role of the receiver should not be underemphasized. The arguments imparted by the texts under question are open to diverse interpretations. The news media is but one factor among many contributing to an individual's reality, meaning that other factors play a contributing role in a person's understandings of the subject and subsequent behaviours.

Recognizing the discursive silences found in the dominant narrative put forth by the traditional media outlets under study, this thesis leaves to future research a qualitative analysis of

an expanded sample of opinion discourse on this subject that includes items published on both new media and alternative media platforms. The small sample used in this thesis is in no way entirely representative of all viewpoints on the relationship between the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and the tar/oil sands. New and alternative media, though, present avenues for citizens to highlight any discounted information and challenge dominant discourses put forward by mainstream outlets. There is also opportunity to qualify opinions advanced on these platforms' interactive features, like comment sections and discussion boards, in order to examine lines of argumentation that are not constrained by the influence of a powerful editorial board. Moreover, such an analysis might consider how social media might forward solution-based discourse on climate change matters.

7.4 Final Conclusions

The title of this thesis is borrowed from LeMenager's (2013) use of the term "ultradeep" to describe the mutuality between our immersive dependence on oil and our willingness to deepen ecological damage in order to source the substance by turning to farther offshore and more fragile landscapes. Szeman (2016) uses the "deepening" concept too in his work on alternate energy futures by pointing out how our social, economic, and political practices are extensively embedded in oil (p. 18). Because we are suspended deeply in petroculture, it can be difficult to imagine an alternative energy future. This is especially true when a taboo is placed on speaking about climate change in the context of a wildfire hastened by it. Though I am cognizant of the pragmatic implications of existing energy infrastructure, I feel a moral responsibility to shine a light on discourse that misrepresents and obstructs the reality of climate change and its anthropogenic roots.

The attempt to link the Fort McMurray fire to climate change was swiftly swatted down not only by our Prime Minister but also, as seen, by the editorial boards and commentators holding the pen on the opinion items under examination in this thesis. Despite burgeoning research on the science of attribution (Sneed, 2017), the claim that it is impossible to link any single event to climate change was observed in the dataset (n=6, 15%). Alongside this claim, the experiences of the evacuees figured prominently in the dataset with the belief that evacuees received undeserved condemnation during a time of hardship appearing in the dataset (n=6, 15%).

In Chapter Two, I touched on the politicization of disasters, where focusing events direct attention to an issue that may have held a dormant standing on the public agenda, creating a sudden spike of intense interest. In turn, windows of opportunity emerge to discuss and possibly embrace policy solutions (Olson, 2000; Tierney et al., 2006). Bearing in mind Trudeau's caution against politicizing the Fort McMurray wildfire, this window was closed. To echo Elizabeth May (2016), if we cannot talk about climate change in the midst of a visible and proximate disaster accelerated by climate change, then when can we? Readjusting the dominant focus back to those afflicted by the wildfire is certainly the moral thing to do. With the reality of climate change deepening around us, though, I argue that there is a moral and ethical obligation to advance discourse that expresses compassion for disaster victims while *also* entering into discussions on climate change mitigation. With research indicating that the reality of climate change is worsening at an alarming rate (Stoker et al., 2013), there is a case to be made that the public should be kept apprised of the extreme weather-climate change connection.

Putting a taboo on the link signals that we are taking a reactive stance to the increasing number of extreme weather events rather than adopting a concerted effort to lessen carbon

emissions or consider alternate energy futures. Interestingly, we are unwilling to make this linkage in order to avoid disrespecting and alienating the wildfire's victims: Trudeau called the connection "unhelpful" while May referred to it as "unkind." Just as important is what is left unsaid about this linkage – it is inconvenient. Facing the challenge of climate change requires reducing our consumption of fossil fuels, thus altering not only our everyday habits and conveniences, but also our thinking. As Szeman (2016) tells us, oil is "inextricably social" (p. 19). It likewise requires recognizing the deep link between fossil fuels and profits.

A significant implication that emerges from these findings is how the dataset discourse obscures experiences of local and global environmental risk and suffering generated by bitumen extraction and consumption. The Fort McMurray wildfire plainly shows that Canada is not immune to natural disasters. Those most exposed to environmental burdens, though, are the world's most vulnerable communities – marginalized and under-represented populations living in low-income areas (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). When talking about climate change in the context of natural disasters, we must also consider how power relations embedded in race, class, and gender add significantly to our understanding of environmental justice. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's battle against the Dakota Access pipeline is one illustrative example of a community bringing awareness to intersecting structures underlying the specific pipeline project.

Discourse occurring around climate change, and bitumen specifically, is occurring in an ongoing debate in which it seems like there is no common ground. With each new claim to truth that enters the debate, participants become frenzied to deflate and dismiss the new information in favour of the relative position. Despite the 'doom and gloom' of this reality, academics, alternative media organizations, eNGOs, social activists, and filmmakers, amongst others, are

working hard to bring a nuanced and solutions-oriented discussion of our energy present and future to the forefront. These important contributions are not to be overlooked. To reiterate Szeman (2016), transitioning to other energy sources will require more than new technology - we will also need to adjust our values, beliefs, and attitudes in order to transition our social imagination. As Fairclough (1992) argues, social change can occur when hegemonic power encounters resistance. As such, the dominant role of the tar/oil sands in northern Alberta is emblematic of the dire need to discuss our environmental crisis.

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