The cultural politics of a just transition in the Canadian Oil Sands

by

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Abstract

In order to prevent the most severe impacts of climate change, we must transition to a low-carbon energy system. However, the process of decarbonization faces significant cultural and political barriers, especially within fossil fuel producing regions where the impacts of decarbonization policy are felt most directly. To overcome these barriers, both scholars and policy makers have begun to call for a just transition for affected communities in an effort to centre justice and equity concerns in the process of decarbonization. While the limited attempts at implementing a just transition program have largely been confined to the coal sector, the Canadian Federal Government has started to develop a more expansive just transition framework for the entire fossil fuel sector. Little is known, though, about how those living and working in the Canadian Oil Sands, home to 97% of Canadian fossil fuel reserves, feel about this proposal. To address this gap, I orient this study around the question: how do those living and working in the Canadian Oil Sands interpret the proposal for a just transition? Using data collected through 18 semi-structured interviews with industry and community members in the Oil Sands town of Fort McMurray, I show how the cultural and political conditions endemic to fossil fuel producing regions are largely incommensurate with a just transition program as it is currently conceptualized in the scholarly literature and materialized through government policy. Drawing on my participants' perspectives on climate change, low-carbon energy alternatives, regional politics, and the proposal for a just transition specifically, I offer evidence for this conclusion while also advocating for the continued development of just transition programs, albeit ones that center the localized cultural conditions and concerns of the communities for which they are intended to serve.

Lay Summary

In response to climate change, the Canadian Federal Government has begun to implement policy aimed at transitioning the country away from fossil fuels. This process brings with it a number of challenges, including the question of how to best support those living and working in fossil fuel producing regions which are economically reliant on the industry. To account for this, the Canadian Federal Government has started to develop a national just transition program. A just transition program typically includes financial support and retraining opportunities for affected workers, as well as regional development plans for affected communities. However, through interviews with workers and community members in the Canadian Oil Sands, I find that those connected to the industry evaluate the proposal for a just transition in overwhelmingly negative terms. This raises a number of challenges for the Canadian Federal Government in their efforts to decarbonize.

Preface

This thesis draws on original, primary research conducted by Parker Muzzerall. Dr. Emily Huddart Kennedy provided direction on the development of this project and offered substantive feedback on earlier drafts of this thesis. Parker Muzzerall was independently responsible for recruiting and interviewing participants during the data collection process and led the data analysis with the support of Dr. Amin Ghaziani (Professor, Sociology, UBC) and Dr. Emily Huddart Kennedy. This research was granted approval by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at The University of British Columbia [H21-01605].

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Introduction

To stave off the most catastrophic impacts of climate change we must decarbonize our energy systems – and quickly (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). This places a great burden on fossil fuel producing regions and communities where both the economic and cultural identity are often inextricable from the industry itself (Bell & York, 2010). To account for the disproportionate burden of energy transitions, many have begun to call for a just transition for affected communities (Evans & Phelan, 2016; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Such an approach seeks to centre concerns of justice and equity in the energy transition process to ensure that those currently embedded in the fossil fuel industry are not left behind in the pursuit of a low-carbon future (Carley & Konisky, 2020). In material terms, this can involve both compensatory economic programs and reskilling opportunities for affected workers, as well as regional planning and development programs for affected communities (Gürtler et al., 2021; Pollin & Callaci, 2019; Stevis & Felli, 2015). Having only recently entered the discourse of mainstream climate governance, however, the few existing just transition programs have largely been contained to the coal sector (Goddard & Farrelly, 2018; Gürtler et al., 2021). Recently, some states, such as Canada, have begun to propose a much broader just transition program for the entire fossil fuel sector in an effort to achieve newly minted national climate priorities, such as the target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (Government of Canada, 2020). Given its infancy, though, little is known about how those working in the Canadian Oil Sands, home to 97% of Canadian fossil fuel reserves and accounting for 11% of total national emissions, feel about this proposal. To address this gap, I orient this research around the question: how do those living and working in the Canadian Oil Sands interpret the proposal for a just transition?

Using data collected through 18 semi-structured interviews with industry and community members in the Canadian Oil Sands, I show how the cultural and political conditions common to fossil fuel communities are largely incommensurate with a just transition program as it is currently conceptualized in the scholarly literature and materialized through government policy. Drawing on my participants' perspectives on climate change, low-carbon energy alternatives, regional politics, and the proposal for a just transition specifically, I offer evidence for this conclusion while also advocating for the continued development of just transition programs, albeit ones that center the localized cultural conditions and concerns of the communities for which they are intended to serve.

To do so, I first provide a review of decarbonization policy, both internationally and within the Canadian context specifically, before turning to the scholarly literature to demonstrate the necessity of foregrounding the localized cultural politics of fossil fuel communities in the study and development of potential just transitions. Then, I provide details on the case that I draw on, as well as the methods used to collect and analyze my data. Next, I detail and interpret my findings, which I organize around the themes of climate change, energy transitions, energy politics, and just transition. I then discuss more substantive conclusions from these findings, before concluding with a reflection on the limitations and implications of this research for both just transition research and policy.

Chapter 1: Background

1.1   Decarbonization: policy and context

In light of reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (IPCC, 2018, 2021, 2022), the science is abundantly clear: in order to avoid the most severe impacts of climate change, we must decarbonize our energy systems (Rockström et al., 2017). The process of decarbonization is an immense one, as much of the world continues to rely on fossil fuels for everything from transportation and heating to food production and plastics. Decarbonization, then, requires a multi-faceted approach including short-term efforts to dramatically reduce carbon emissions in the production of our current carbon-intensive forms of energy, like coal and oil (Papadis & Tsatsaronis, 2020); mid-term solutions, including the use of lower-carbon forms of energy, such as natural gas, which can be used as bridging technologies (Gürsan & de Gooyert, 2021); and most importantly, the long-term prioritization of low-carbon forms of energy such as wind, solar, geothermal, and tidal (Panwar et al., 2011). Moreover, decarbonization must also happen at scale, ranging from the daily practices of individuals (e.g., electric vehicles) and municipalities (e.g., electric buses) to corporations (e.g., infrastructure) and governments (e.g., national energy grids) (Bridge et al., 2013). In response to this complexity, scholars have increasingly begun to think of decarbonization as a "deep" and "socio-technical" process that must overcome not just technical barriers but cultural and political ones, as well (Burch, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2018; Sovacool & Griffiths, 2020). Decarbonization, then, is a fundamentally context-specific process including a wide range of practices, norms, material conditions, and actors, each of which shape the potential for various decarbonization scenarios (Loftus et al., 2015).

While the connection between carbon emissions and climate change has been understood since at least the 1980s, it was not until the 2015 United Nations' Conference of the Parties (COP21) and the attendant *Paris Agreement* that the global climate governance community began to put substantive and actionable decarbonization policy in place (Bernstein & Hoffmann, 2018; UNFCC, 2016). As the first multi-lateral climate governance treaty to be signed by all 193 represented parties, the *Paris Agreement* is significant for its recognition of the need to rapidly reduce carbon emissions in an effort to keep global warming below 2° Celsius. To achieve this target, the agreement requires signatories to draft their own Nationally Determined Contributions, or formalized domestic emissions reductions strategies, that are in accordance with the global target of less than 2° Celsius of warming. Importantly, the *Paris Agreement* also includes a clause in the non-legally binding preamble which recognizes the need for states to develop decarbonization policy while "taking into account the imperatives of a just transition" (UNFCC, 2016). This inclusion marked the first time that the global climate governance community officially acknowledged the concept of a just transition, which catapulted the concept into mainstream climate politics and scholarship more broadly (Bernstein & Hoffmann, 2018; McCauley & Heffron, 2018).

Following its emergence at COP21, the concept of a just transition gained further development and attention in 2018 at COP24 in Katowice, Poland. Here, over 50 states, including Canada, signed the *Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration* (UNFCC, 2018). The *Silesia Declaration* is important for its explicit recognition that a just transition is a critical component to achieving a just low-carbon society and does so by outlining seven requisite elements for state-level just transition policy. These include the need for just transition policy to be participatory and representative, the recognition that a just transition can and should serve as a

major source of job creation, and that it must center the renewal of fossil fuel communities. The declaration also notes that not only can just transition policy structure the low-carbon energy transition, but it can also help garner social support for decarbonization by making a low-carbon future seem possible and even desirable to communities where decarbonization might be perceived as irrelevant, unfeasible, or threatening. In this sense, the *Silesia Declaration* conceives of a just transition as both a catalyst for decarbonization, and a response to it.

Having been elected less than two months before COP21 when the concept of a just transition was first widely introduced, the Liberal Federal Government headed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau used the proceedings in Paris as a platform to assert that "Canada is back and ready to play its part in combatting climate change" after a decade of diminished participation during the tenure of former-Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Government of Canada, 2015; Smith, 2008). Since then, the Federal Government has advanced several noteworthy climate policy initiatives, including the *Pan Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change* in 2016 (Government of Canada, 2016). While environmentalists criticized this plan for not living up to the lofty climate aspirations often touted by the Trudeau Government, *The Pan Canadian Framework* was significant for its inclusion of a federal price on carbon—which has since survived multiple court challenges by different Conservative Provincial Governments—as well as its focus on an accelerated phase-out of coal-fired power plants. The latter was of particular importance as it recognized the need for this process to include a just transition program for affected coal workers and communities. This was the first official use of just transition language federally in Canada, and resulted in the subsequent report, *A Just and Fair Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities* (Government of Canada, 2019), the current benchmark for federal just transition policy in action.

The next major step in Canadian climate policy came in December of 2020, when the Federal Government released its updated climate plan titled *A Healthy Environment and Healthy Economy* (2020). Presented as an emboldened update to the *Pan-Canadian Framework* (2016), the new plan included an increase to the federal price on carbon, a number of consumer incentive programs oriented towards green growth, and, in accordance with its Nationally Determined Contribution to the *Paris Agreement,* an additional and ambitious emissions target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (Government of Canada, 2020). However, *A Healthy Environment and Healthy Econom*y still failed to commit to significant near-term reductions in domestic fossil fuel production, which remain the number one source of carbon emissions in Canada (ibid.). [1]
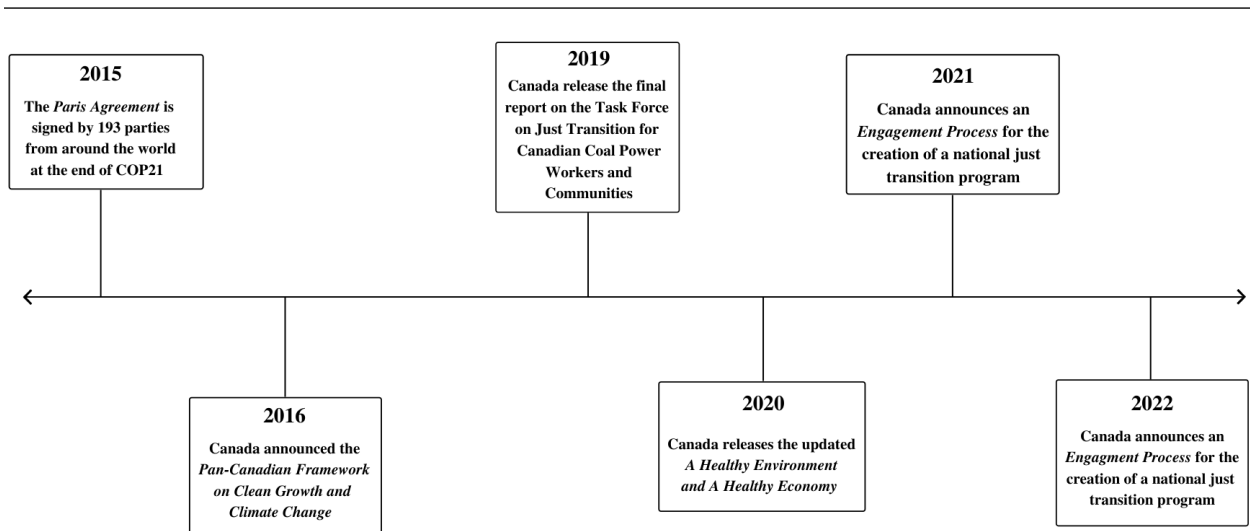

Figure 1. Climate policy timeline

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[1] In fact, it actually allows for 20% and 17% increases in domestic oil and gas production, respectively, which are not forecasted to peak until as late as 2039 (Government of Canada, 2020)

Despite this apparent near-term commitment to the fossil fuel industry, in July 2021, the Federal Government announced that, given its desire to reach net-zero by 2050, it would be launching a just transition "engagement process asking Canadians how the Government of Canada can ensure a just and equitable transition to a low-carbon future for workers and their communities" (Government of Canada, 2021). Whereas the previous just transition program was limited to the coal sector specifically, the current process is intended to be inclusive of the entire fossil fuel sector, including the Canadian Oil Sands. The government reports that this engagement process has already involved 15 roundtables with experts, unions, and industry representatives, over 17,000 written submissions from the public, and several stakeholder meetings with Provincial and Territorial governments and Indigenous groups.[2] This commitment to a more expansive just transition program was bolstered further in March of 2022, when the current minority Liberal Government and the left-leaning New Democratic Party of Canada signed a "supply and confidence agreement"—functionally a coalition—to ensure that the Liberals will stay in power through 2025 (Government of Canada, 2022). This agreement is contingent on the prioritization of several policy initiatives called for by the New Democrats, one of which is the development of a robust just transition program for the fossil fuel sector.

Even with the Canadian Federal Government's commitment to reaching net-zero by 2050, and their intentions of using a just transition framework to guide the process of achieving that target, little scholarly attention has been paid to this case. This is surprising given that issues around climate change, and energy in particular, are highly politicized and divisive; that just

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[2] The submission period for this engagement process ended on April 30, 2022, however as of May 7, 2022, the status remains "ongoing" (Government of Canada, 2021).

transition scholarship has found early examples of the process to be deeply contested; and that research on contemporary cultural politics reveals a set of challenging dynamics already at play in the settings where just transitions are most likely to play out. It is around these themes that I organize my engagement with the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Climate change and energy politics have emerged as central objects of research across the social sciences in recent years as scholars have come to recognize their escalating importance to the contemporary and future wellbeing of society. Within this broad area of research, I narrow my focus to three specific discourses. First, I draw on the expansive body of research aimed at mapping public opinion on the topics of climate change and energy, which consistently finds that both have become contentious political issues, especially in fossil fuel communities. Second, I offer a thorough review of the nascent field of just transition research to reveal key conceptual developments, as well as early empirical evidence that suggests energy transitions will be socially fraught and contested processes. Finally, I turn to the literature on moral and cultural politics to demonstrate a broader dynamic of resentment that already conditions many fossil fuel producing regions.

2.1   Public opinion on climate change and fossil fuels

Since entering public discourse in the 1980s, the topic of climate change has developed into a highly politicized, and at times polarizing, cultural issue. While scholars have identified significant variation in the public awareness and perception of climate change risk globally (Lee et al., 2015), it is in the United States, and to a lesser extent Canada, Australia, and increasingly Europe, where the trend of polarization is most striking (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a; Mildenberger et al., 2016; Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021). Across this expansive body of public opinion research, the data consistently shows that conservatives tend to be much less accepting than liberals that the climate is changing (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Dunlap et al., 2016; Hornsey et al., 2016; Leiserowitz et al., 2021), and even more so that this is due to

anthropogenic causes like emitting carbon (Howe et al., 2015; Leiserowitz et al., 2020).

Additional socio-demographic research has found that white, conservative men in particular are the most likely to deny the existence of climate change or to support climate policies (Krange et al., 2019; McCright & Dunlap, 2011b). This partisan, and to a smaller degree gendered and racial, sorting is especially pronounced when climate initiatives are seen to be at odds with economic prosperity (Schimpf et al., 2021). For example, in the United States, Republicans primarily view decarbonization in terms of economic utility and offer little support for any type of regulatory or legislative initiative aimed at accelerating or incentivizing decarbonization (Gustafson et al., 2020; Hazboun et al., 2020). Democrats, alternatively, are more likely to see personal climate impacts, such as one's carbon footprint, as holding moral valence and are broadly supportive of policies like carbon pricing and rebates for renewable energy (Horne & Kennedy, 2019).

While much of this data comes from the United States, a smaller body of research situated in Canada has identified similar trends. For example, Canadian conservatives are far less supportive than liberals of both climate science (Lachapelle et al., 2012) and decarbonization policies like carbon taxation (Mildenberger et al., 2022), and are less likely to perceive climate change as posing a societal threat (Davidson & Haan, 2012). Research also suggests that in addition to this partisan divide, Canadian public opinion on climate change is noticeably patterned by region. Nationwide, 83% of Canadians accept that the earth is getting warmer and 60% agree that humans are, at least in part, to blame (Mildenberger et al., 2016). However, within the fossil fuel producing province of Alberta, only 70% of the population accepts that the earth is getting warmer (13% below national average) and just 42% agree that this is due to

human activity (18% below national average) (ibid.).[3] This regional division has also been shown to condition citizen acceptance of fossil fuel infrastructure, and pipelines in particular, with those in Alberta demonstrating a much higher level of support for increased development than any other region in Canada (Axsen, 2014; Brunner & Axsen, 2020). As a result, climate centered policy initiatives and efforts to decarbonize are often met with significant political and cultural opposition within the region (Afanasyeva et al., 2022; Davidson & Gismondi, 2011).[4]

This dynamic of regional difference between the fossil fuel producing province of Alberta and the rest of the country is supported by research on fossil fuel communities specifically. In a study of a southern Albertan community deeply connected to the fossil fuel industry, Haney (2021) found that participants were highly skeptical of the scientific consensus on climate change even after their community experienced a catastrophic flooding event that many participants were affected by personally. Born out of this skepticism, Haney (2021) also noted that community members saw little need for climate policy interventions. Climate skepticism within fossil fuel dependent communities exists across other geographic contexts, too. For example, in Norway, those who work in the fossil fuel industry are far less supportive of climate policies than the general population (Tvinnereim & Ivarsflaten, 2016), and in rural Utah, community members from a fossil fuel producing region described feeling like they are being punished by the increasing cultural and political focus on developing renewable energy over fossil fuels, and as result, strongly rejected proposals for local renewable energy developments (Olson-Hazboun, 2018). Additionally, research has shown how some rural, conservative

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[3] This trend is even more pronounced within the northern region of the province where the Oil Sands are located, which I detail in the Findings.
[4] I provide additional detail on this opposition in the case description in the Methods section.

communities in Pennsylvania have mobilized in support of contentious fossil fuel developments—in this case hydraulic fracturing, or 'fracking'—despite an assumption within the environmental justice literature that these practices are always "locally unwanted land uses" (Jerolmack, 2021; Jerolmack & Walker, 2018). Instead, Jerolmack and Walker (2018) find evidence for broad support and mobilization in favour of fracking across the community, which they describe as a form of "please in my back yard" activism (see also Dokshin, 2016). More importantly, the authors reveal how this assumption has largely been "based on analysts' own risk assessments rather than residents' subjective perceptions," which they suggest explains why scholars have not yet been able to adequately "explain why some communities mobilize in favour of the same land uses that other communities protest" (p. 487-88). This latter point in particular reveals how localized interpretations of contentious energy projects are more salient to the study of energy transitions than are broader cultural or academic assumptions about the merits of particular energy choices. Especially when we know that certain cultural forces endemic to fossil fuel communities, like political conservativism, rurality, and economic dependence on fossil fuels, all diminish the likelihood of garnering support for climate and decarbonization policy. However, many in the just transition literature argue that such a framework, one founded on justice and equity, is the ideal means of accounting for these differences of opinion.

2.2   Just transitions: the conceptual development of a contested process

Emerging out of environmentally conscious labor movements in North America in the 1970s, the concept of a just transition was first developed to address health and safety concerns for workers in hazardous industries—including the fossil fuel sector—through a transition to a

green economy (Stevis & Felli, 2015). This first wave approach to just transitions prioritized industrial labor concerns over more expansive issues of social justice and equity (Ciplet, 2022). This changed during the second wave, however, when members of the environmental justice movement adopted the concept as a framework to address the "spatial and structural dimensions of environmental injustice" in advocating for frontline communities exposed to environmental harms (Ciplet, 2022, p. 3; see also Stevis & Felli, 2015 for a more comprehensive review of the history of just transition organizing). Since then, the term just transition has been used by a wide range of labour, environmental, and climate organizers as a conceptual framework for addressing systemic oppression caused by existing fossil fuel-based power structures as well as mitigating the inequitable burdens that emerge through economic, industrial, and environmental transitions.

Over the past decade, an emergent interdisciplinary body of scholarship has begun to ground the concept of a just transition within the arena of energy transitions specifically. Recognizing the innately political (Healy & Barry, 2017), economic (Pollin & Callaci, 2019), and cultural (Sovacool & Griffiths, 2020) dimensions of energy transitions, much of the just transition literature has, to date, focused on synthesizing thematic consistencies across the previously adjacent fields of energy, environmental, and climate justice (McCauley & Heffron, 2018). This integrative approach has been immensely generative in terms of conceptually refining what a just transition is in the context of energy transitions (Carley & Konisky, 2020; Ciplet, 2022), as well as developing frameworks for implementing and evaluating just transition policies across different contexts (Ciplet & Harrison, 2020; Gürtler et al., 2021).

As a result of this syncretic conceptual work, scholars in this field widely agree that just transitions for energy systems must take into account four central dimensions of justice (Evans & Phelan, 2016; Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Kalt, 2021). These include: *distributional justice*, which

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concerns the allocation of resources and environmental harms across a population; issues of *recognition justice*, which concern the fair representation and inclusion of different groups, identities, and regions; *procedural justice*, which involves the participatory capacity of justice processes for different stakeholders; and *restorative justice*, which seeks to address the reparation of existing harm in and through transition processes (Jenkins et al., 2018; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). While each of these dimensions are important, I agree with Gürtler and Herberg's (2021) assertion that "understanding the nexus between recognition and redistribution is key to determining which procedures are needed for overcoming grievances and targeting injustice claims conjointly" (p. 3). Given that the scope of the just transition policy around which this research is oriented is still very much in a development phase, here I focus on the dimensions of recognition and distribution specifically to better understand the potential grievances and injustice claims at play in the Canadian context.

In addition to the dimensions of justice that condition just transitions, it is also important to consider the scales at which transitions occur, and justice claims are made (Gürtler et al., 2021; Healy & Barry, 2017; Stevis & Felli, 2020). As contested processes involving multiple stakeholders and tiers of government, energy transitions, and the justice claims therein, can occur at once locally, nationally, internationally, and even at a planetary level, as Stevis and Felli (2020) call for in their framework for interpreting the inclusivity of just transition proposals. The concept of scale is particularly important in large national contexts, such as Canada, where just transition programs are first defined in relation to international climate governance targets set by bodies such as the UNFCC, then drafted into policy at the national level by the Federal Government, before materializing through lived experience at the local level in communities where fossil fuels are produced (Morton & Müller, 2016; Nash et al., 2020). Gürtler et al. (2021)

point out that tensions and conflicts often emerge in the chasm between "national priorities and their local impacts" as efforts to decarbonize result in "highly concentrated burdens" in particular regions (p. 3). The concept of scale helps us understand how the implementation of just transition policy gets diffused across contexts and encourages us to consider how competing notions of justice may vary across scales.

Understanding just transitions as both multi-dimensional and multi-scalar becomes particularly important when considering the challenges associated with policy programs that attempt to pursue both sustainability and justice outcomes concurrently (Ciplet & Harrison, 2020). Just transitions necessitate the rapid and expansive development of alternative energy policy and infrastructure, while at the same time upholding justice values of inclusivity, recognition, and equity (ibid.). However, as a process involving actors from multiple regions, and an array of political, class, and cultural identities, just transitions have the potential to be deeply politicized processes (Healy & Barry, 2017).

In one of the few empirical studies available on a just transition program in action, Gürtler & Herberg (2021) advance the concept of "moral rifts" to describe the normative and spatial contestation contouring Germany's national coal phase-out program (p. 4). Through interviews with local mayors in Lusatia, the main coal producing region of Germany, the authors found that significant tensions and justice concerns emerged between the nationally legislated processes and policies put in place to phase coal out of the national energy system and localized normative conceptions of a just outcome for affected communities. As others have noted, energy transitions that do not sufficiently address justice and equity concerns will produce distinct winners and losers (Carley & Konisky, 2020), and in the case of Germany, those in the coal-producing region felt marginalized, culturally devalued, and excluded from Germany's vision for

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the future. Significantly, during this time the region also experienced a "strong populist

mobilization," with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; Alternative for Germany) becoming

the most successful party in the region during the 2019 election (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; pg.6).

So, while just transition programs attempt to centre justice and equity concerns in the process of

decarbonization, exactly what constitutes a just outcome is largely determined by the political,

class, economic—that is, cultural—identities of those involved in the process.

The argument that just transitions will lead to moral rifts and contestation between the

scales of conceptualization and implementation is supported by research that shows the more fair

people perceive decarbonization policies, like carbon pricing, to be, the more likely they are to

support them (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019). It is vital, then, to foreground the localized

perspectives of energy producing regions in the empirical study of just transitions, as the

potential for a successful just transition program is largely contingent on how those involved in

the process interpret their necessity, feasibility, and fairness. However, reaching a consensus

over these outcomes—fairness in particular—is as challenging a task as decarbonization itself,

especially given the cultural politics of polarization and resentment that already condition many

fossil fuel producing regions.

2.3   The cultural politics of decarbonization

In addition to documenting the polarization of public opinion on climate change and

decarbonization policy, scholars have also offered a number of explanatory frameworks to

account for this trend. While many point to the political economy of the climate change

countermovement (Brulle, 2014; Brulle et al., 2021) and climate change misinformation

campaigns funded by right-wing fossil fuel interest groups (Farrell, 2019; Oreskes, 2010), other,

more cultural explanatory frameworks have also emerged. In this vein, scholars argue that polarization over environmental issues, such as climate change, is fundamentally about morality and emotions, and how individuals and social groups evaluate themselves against broader cultural ideals of environmentalism (Kennedy & Muzzerall, 2021). Across socio-demographic indicators, people consistently imagine an ideal environmentalist as someone who is white, urban, liberal, and engaging in practices such as recycling, eating less meat, and riding a bike. However, by failing to recognize more traditionally conservative environmental practices, such as hunting and conservation, this archetype creates tension between liberals and conservatives over who is perceived and, more importantly, culturally valued as being pro-environmental (ibid.; Kennedy, forthcoming; Kennedy & Horne, 2020). Farrell (2015) demonstrates this dynamic playing out in a local case study of changing land use practices around Yellowstone National Park. As rural Wyoming experienced an influx of young, liberal, urban "cappuccino cowboys", the conservative "old-westerners," many of whom had multi-generational ties to the land, quickly found their extractive cultural and economic practices being morally devalued by the more conservationist newcomers (Farrell, 2015, p. 67). This demonstrates how, as the cultural consensus around what constitutes environmentally appropriate practices changes, those who fail to meet the new archetype feel morally devalued and, as a result, grow increasingly antagonistic towards those who they perceive to be devaluing them.

This framework centered on the moral dimensions of polarization complements other accounts of polarization over environmental issues, which suggest that during localized conflicts over environmental protection, "polarization happens when a new narrative gains legitimacy by problematizing existing environmental norms" (Warner, 2019, p. 3). In other words, those who fall out of alignment with new environmental norms, such as reducing one's carbon footprint in

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response to climate change, are morally sanctioned, which in turn drives division when such norms are not universally accepted or adhered to. More importantly, this dynamic has been documented in fossil fuel communities. For example, in an Appalachian coal community, local coal companies have been shown to wage campaigns involving the sponsorship of infrastructure projects and social programs in an effort to construct what Bell and York (2010) call a "community economic identity" (pg. 112). Such an identity seeks to bind the cultural identity of the community with the economic prosperity of the industry, which then contributes to the cultivation of an us-versus-them dynamic when the industry falters economically or is challenged by outsiders (Bell and York, 2010). More broadly, others have documented a growing "politics of resentment" between white, rural, conservative areas, where fossil fuel production is typically located, and more diverse, urban, liberal centers where rates of climate change acceptance and support for decarbonization policy are typically higher (Cramer, 2016).[5] Not only has this dynamic of resentment been shown to exacerbate polarization over particular issues that are important to local communities, such as increased environmental regulation in Louisiana (Hochschild, 2016), but it has also been connected to a rise in support for populist political leaders more generally (Cohen, 2019).

With this as a backdrop, the fossil fuel industry has also been subject to intense and increasing political and moral scrutiny in recent years for its role in directly contributing to climate change (Ferns et al., 2021). This pattern is evidenced by recent waves of global divestment from the fossil fuel industry (Healy & Barry, 2017; Hestres & Hopke, 2020), pledges

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[5] Jerolmack (2021; with Walker, 2018) makes the case that a politics of resentment also conditioned the tensions they identified between communities mobilizing in support of fracking and those who protested against it, who locals perceived to be liberal and urban outsiders.

of net-zero emissions by a number of national governments in an attempt to meet the goals set out in the *Paris Agreement* (Höhne et al., 2021), the mobilization against and cancelation of several major North American pipeline projects and fracking developments (Dokshin, 2016; Gravelle & Lachapelle, 2015; Janzwood, 2020), and the emergence of numerous climate activist organizations which increasingly leverage moral authority as a primary legitimation strategy (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021; Misch et al., 2021). Together, these developments all signal waning public and political confidence in fossil fuels, and a mounting moral critique of the industry overall. So, even when we consider the entrenched nexus of conservativism, climate skepticism, and support for fossil fuels, in the face of such a moral critique of the fossil fuel industry, it would make sense from a rational-actor perspective for those working in the industry to begin to question their own moral identities in relation to their involvement in a politicized and contentious industry. By extension, this should presumably create more fertile conditions for garnering support for a just transition program aimed at providing an equitable pathway out of the industry. However, we also know that early attempts at just transition programs, in Germany in particular, have been highly contested processes, and that the potential for a successful just transition is largely contingent on localized normative conceptions of justice, equity, and fairness. Therefore, it is vital to better understand the unique, context-specific cultural dynamics of the Canadian Oil Sands and the perspectives of those who work there in order to assess the potential for a just transition for the region.

Chapter 3: Methods

Given that actually existing just transition programs are few and far between, there remains a "lack of empirical studies on the contested politics of just transitions" (Kalt, 2021, p. 1136). In the few examples of empirical work, researchers have primarily focused on the German (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Kalt, 2021; Morton & Müller, 2016) and Australian (Goddard & Farrelly, 2018; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022) coal phase-outs. As a result, there is a surprising absence of research on the empirical conditions of just transition politics in Canada.[6] Moreover, across this work, researchers largely focus on the perspectives of government officials, union organizers, industry representatives, and climate activists to examine how major stakeholders negotiate and contest the implementation of just transition frameworks through mobilization strategies and political engagement. Remarkably, though, the voices of frontline fossil fuel workers are largely absent from this empirical work (MacNeil & Beauman, 2022 are a notable exception). This is despite the fact that those directly employed in the fossil fuel sector, and residing within fossil fuel communities, stand to lose the most through the low-carbon energy transition (Carley & Konisky, 2020), as not only their jobs but in many cases ways of life, grow progressively precarious. It is critical then, that we seek out the perspectives of those living and working in fossil fuel communities to better understand how they evaluate efforts to decarbonize society through a just transition framework. Fort McMurray offers an ideal case to do so.

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[6] For an exception, see Gürtler et al.'s (2021) comparative analysis of the Canadian and German coal just transition programs. Additionally, some conceptual attention has been paid to just transitions in Canada, though mostly by policy researchers (Mertins-Kirkwood & Deshpande, 2019; Mertins-Kirkwood & Duncalfe, 2021).

3.1　Fort McMurray and the Canadian Oil Sands

Within Canada, fossil fuel production is highly concentrated in the western province of Alberta. Colloquially referred to as "Texas of the North" (Mustafa, 2012), Alberta is home to the third-largest known fossil fuels reserve in the world, the Oil Sands, which accounts for 97% of all Canadian fossil fuel production and 11% of total national carbon emissions (Natural Resources Canada, 2020). Alberta is also one of the most politically conservative regions in Canada. With the exception of a left-leaning New Democratic government from 2015-2019, a conservative party has been in provincial power there since 1971. In the 2021 Federal Election, 30 out of a possible 34 seats in Alberta were won by members of the federal Conservative Party, most by overwhelming majorities. In the northern riding of Fort McMurray-Cold Lake, where the Oil Sands are located, 80% of the vote went to either the Conservative Party of Canada (67%) or the Peoples Party of Canada (13%) (Elections Canada, 2021), an emergent far right party who champions the unbated development of Canadian natural resources.

As the cultural and economic hub servicing the Oil Sands, Fort McMurray is synonymous with the Canadian fossil fuel industry. Once a small trading outpost and gateway to the north, Fort McMurray is now home to 66,000 full time residents, who, during the last significant boom in 2015, boasted a mean annual household income of $195,000, nearly triple the Canadian average (Statistics Canada, 2016). Much of the regions' development has occurred during these booms, or periods of rapid economic growth and capital expenditure, when both the price and demand for oil is high, and public coffers are flush. Because of this, Fort McMurray benefits from a great deal of modern infrastructure, including new highways and a bridge to ease traffic congestion, several new greenspaces and outdoor recreation facilities, and the largest community sports and leisure complex in Canada. All this makes Fort McMurray a very attractive

community to raise a family in. But given its dependence on the Oil Sands, which is made clear by the visible sponsorship of much of this development by Oil Sands companies, both the infrastructure and cultural identity of Fort McMurray are inextricable from the fossil fuel industry itself.

Over the past decade, though, life in Fort McMurray has grown increasingly complex. Two significant crashes in the price of oil—first in 2016 and then again 2020—led to deep layoffs and corporate merges in the Oil Sands industry as producers sought to remain viable in a depreciated market.[7] This trend was emphasized by announcements in 2017 from several major multinational energy companies, including ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell, that they were ceasing operations in the Oil Sands altogether (DeRochie, 2017). The announcement from Royal Dutch Shell was particularly damaging, as the CEO cited a "disappearing" public faith in the fossil fuel industry as the primary reason for their decision (Johnston, 2017). The Oil Sands industry then suffered yet another blow in 2021 when the Keystone XL pipeline project was officially cancelled less than a year after the Albertan Provincial Government committed over $1.5 billion in equity investment and a $6 billion loan guarantee to the project (Alberta Government, 2020). Many in region, including the Albertan Premier Jason Kenney, blamed this event on the Canadian Federal Government for failing to stand up for the Oil Sands (Anderson, 2021). Taken in concert, these structural changes expose the unique economic challenges faced by single-resource communities reliant on a highly volatile and politicized commodity.

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[7] The oil market has since rebounded significantly as global energy prices have surged in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. This has proven economically beneficial to the Oil Sands. For example, Suncor, a major player in the Oil Sands, tripled their profits over the past year despite lower overall production (CBC, 2022). At the same time, it reveals how susceptible fossil fuels are to geo-politics.

Adding injury to insult, during this same period Fort McMurray also experienced a string of extreme natural disasters. In 2013, and again in 2020, major portions of the downtown core of Fort McMurray experienced severe flooding events, and in 2016 a devasting wildfire tore through the region forcing the evacuation of over 90,000 people and destroying over 2400 homes (Government of Canada, 2018). With insurance claims exceeding $3.7 billion, and total cost estimates exceeding $10 billion, at the time the wildfire was the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history (Government of Canada, 2018; Reuters, 2021). More poignantly, scientists have attributed the extremity of these events, at least in part, to climate change (Das and Lindenschmidt, 2021; Kochtubajda et al., 2016). Despite this, however, scholars have also noted how Albertan media largely failed to draw connections to climate change in their coverage of the wildfire (Davidson et al., 2019). Together, these economic and environmental complexities highlight some of the challenges my participants have endured as a result of their commitment to both Fort McMurray, and the Oil Sands.

3.2 Data and Analysis

The data for my study comes from 18 interviews that I conducted in 2021 with 16 past and present fossil fuel workers and community members in Fort McMurray, home to the Canadian Oil Sands.[8] Given constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews over the video conferencing platform Zoom. Interviews averaged 63 minutes in duration, with the shortest lasting 26 minutes and the longest 125 minutes. With the participants' consent, I

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[8] This research was conducted with approval from the University of British Columbia Office of Research Ethic's Behavioural Research Ethics Boards, project #H21-01605.

recorded the audio and video of each interview and then transcribed them word-for-word, producing 286 pages of textual data.

I organized my interview guide around five primary themes: community, industry, climate change, just transition, and energy politics (see Appendix A). Some questions focused on a single theme, such as: "some people say we need to move away from energy sources like oil and gas in order to slow down climate change. What are your thoughts on that?" (e.g., climate change), or "if you were Prime Minister for a day, or even a year, what would be your priorities to support oil and gas workers?" (e.g., energy politics). Other questions addressed multiple themes at once, such as: "based on your experience, do you think there would be something gained or lost in what makes Fort McMurray 'Fort McMurray' if the oil and gas industry were to go away?" (e.g., community and industry). By using a narrow and consistent set of guiding themes, I was able to prioritize depth over breadth in the interviewing process, and, as a result, participants were able to elaborate on and justify the perspectives they shared in greater detail.

Throughout the interviews, I also used image prompts to provide topical specificity and situational texture in an effort to elicit contextualized, affective responses to some of these themes (for details on the images, see Appendix A). The first image was of a pro-oil and gas bumper sticker that reads "I heart Canadian oil and gas." This logo originated in Fort McMurray and has since gained a widespread presence and popularity across the region. I then showed participants a parody of that sticker that reads "I heart Canadian soil and grass," which the creator describes as being "perfect for the gardeners amongst us and for those who don't 'heart oil and gas' all that much" (Bajer, 2021). These contrasting images allowed me to better understand the cultural meanings that participants attach to pro-industry campaigns, and the tensions that emerge through competing claims of legitimacy when others challenge the worth of

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the industry. The second set of images included a photo of an anti-pipeline protest in Vancouver, a liberal, urban centre in the neighboring province of British Columbia known for environmentalism. I then showed participants an image of a pro-oil and gas protest in a small community near Fort McMurray. Pipeline politics are a highly contentious issue in Canada, and protests have been a popular mobilization strategy for actors both for and against pipeline development (Hunsberger & Kløcker Larsen, 2021). As a result, these images allowed me to better understand participants' perceptions and moral evaluations of actors on both sides of a specific energy conflict and across cultural contexts.

In addition to interview data, I also collected sociodemographic information through a brief online survey (see Table 1). While constituting a diverse cross-section of positions across the fossil fuel industry, ranging from a plant operator and a health and safety advisor to a strategic consultant and CEO, my participants also represent a mostly white, conservative, and high-income "pocket of socioeconomic homogeneity" (Estep & Greenberg, 2020). This was beneficial, as it was both consistent with regional sociodemographic patterns and allowed me to reach a point of sampling saturation quite quickly. As a widely agreed upon metric for evaluating qualitative sample size (Small, 2009), saturation occurs when the inclusion of additional participants no longer yields new analytic insight (Ortiz, 2019) and is desirable because it increases the validity of qualitative data (Miles et al., 2020). I achieved saturation after twelve interviews. As a result, I was able to use the additional six interviews to focus my analytic attention on emergent patterns, contradictory evidence, and affirmations of consistency. So, while my sample size is relatively small, my data are richly consistent in their thematic patterns. Coupled with my focused set of themes, this bolsters the strength of my findings.

To analyze my data, I followed five steps. First, I used NVivo to systematically read the transcripts line-by-line to link expressions in my data with "fundamental concepts" (Ryan and Bernard, 2003:87) in my interview guide (e.g., community, energy politics) and the literature (e.g., polarization, morality). Using both inductive and deductive approaches, I identified themes by looking for repetitions, similarities, and differences (ibid; see also Pugh, 2013). Then, in the pursuit of data reduction, I further refined my codes through the use of analytic memos, integrating thematically relevant categories and properties into focused codes. Through this process, four major thematic clusters emerged: climate change hesitancy, energy transition skepticism, perceptions of devaluation and division, and evaluations of a just transition. I then used these clusters to engage in a process of thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; cf Brodyn and Ghaziani, 2018) which aided in the formation of theoretical linkages between thematic clusters. I then interpreted these findings against both existing theoretical debates and my research questions.

Table 1. Participants' Sociodemographic Characteristics

Name	Age	Occupation	Years in the industry	Income	Education	Political Orientation
Scott	49	Accounts Manager	26	> $140,000	Bachelors	Conservative
Chris*	46	Management	15	> $140,000	Some College	Conservative
Kyle	35	Process Operator	13	> $140,000	Some College	Conservative
Ryan	38	Health and Safety Advisor	14	$120,000 - $139,000	Bachelors	Conservative
Denise	50	Lead Trainer	16	> $140,000	Masters	Conservative
Douglas	40	Director	18	> $140,000	Bachelors	Conservative
Ashley	28	Health and Safety Advisor	11	$120,000 - $139,000	Some College	Conservative
Sadie	49	Comms. Specialist	6	$80,000 - $99,000	Professional	Moderate
Richard	54	Executive Director	21	> $140,000	Some College	Conservative
Brenda	50	Nurse	7	$100,000 - $119,000	Bachelors	Conservative
Tyler	33	Director of Operations	14	$120,000 - $139,000	High School	Moderate
Jackson*	39	Investigations Specialist	14	> $140,000	Some College	Conservative
Michelle	57	Lead Trainer	34	$40,000 - $59,000	Some College	Moderate
Ethan	46	CEO	20	> $140,000	Masters	Conservative
Zach	44	Strategic Consultant	17	> $140,000	Masters	Moderate
Carol	54	Social Worker	0	$100,000 - $119,000	Bachelors	Conservative

*These participants were each interviewed twice. The secondary interviews were conducted post-saturation.

Chapter 4: Findings

In step with the thematic clusters described in the previous section, I organize my findings into four sections. In the first, I detail my participants' attitudes towards the issue of climate change, and how they situate themselves as Oil Sands workers in relation to the mounting cultural and political pressure on their industry to change. Then, I describe my participants' perspectives on alternative energy, and how they remain largely skeptical of efforts to transition away from fossil fuels. Next, I show how my participants perceive their identities as fossil fuel workers to be morally devalued by those outside of the region, and, troublingly, how they see this as contributing to the politicization of and division around energy issues in Canada. Finally, with these dynamics in the foreground, I examine my participants' overwhelmingly negative evaluations of the proposal for a just transition for their sector in an effort to understand why this evaluation makes sense for them.

4.1   Climate hesitancy and shifting the blame

The need to undergo a low-carbon energy transition rests upon the scientific consensus that our current carbon-intensive energy system is a primary contributor to and accelerant of climate change. Therefore, understanding how those who work in the Oil Sands think about the issue of climate change is a necessary contextual pre-requisite to understanding how they evaluate the proposal for a just transition more broadly. This necessity is compounded by our knowledge that climate change is a highly polarized political issue within and across specific contexts (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Howe et al., 2015; Linde, 2020; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a) and that the acceptance of climate science in fossil fuel communities is much lower than that of the general population (Haney, 2021; Tvinnereim & Ivarsflaten, 2016). In accordance with these

trends, I find that my participants are largely hesitant to accept the scientific consensus on climate change and in the instances where they are accepting, they work to shift any blame for climate change away from the Oil Sands.

4.1.1 Climate hesitancy

Despite the IPCC's assertion that a broad and robust scientific consensus exists over the role of carbon emissions in contributing to climate change (IPCC, 2021, 2022), many participants remain hesitant to accept this consensus. Chris, a sales manager with 15 years' experience in the industry, stated plainly that when it comes to "the whole climate change issue, I have a hard time with that." Chris explained how, to him, our current panic over of climate change is no different from previous environmental concerns around acid rain or ozone depletion, suggesting that "they just change the name and come up with something different" to make us worry "that the world is going end." Other participants also felt that much of our response to climate change is overly reactive because, to them, climate change is an uncontrollable, natural process rather than an anthropogenic and mitigable one. For instance, Douglas, an asset director with 18 years' experience in the industry, shared: "If you look at history, we've gone through a couple of major ice ages. There's saltwater deposits in the oil sands, you know. Fort McMurray was once under water because it was a lot hotter, the ice caps had melted, and the world was predominantly flooded." Sadie similarly felt that climate change is not unique to our time, and that it was conceited to think so: "It's kind of arrogant for us to think that it's all because of us. Let's look at the science and look at the millennia before humans even were here, when we had dinosaurs, what happened there? … It's just, it's very short sighted, in my view." Kyle, a process operator with 13 years' experience in the industry, also pointed to

how a record setting heat wave that blanketed much of the Pacific Northwest in the summer of 2021 broke records previously set 60 to 70 years earlier, which he felt begged the question: "if it was that hot then, you know, what's the difference now?" While this same heat wave event led to a sharp increase in climate anxiety among those surveyed in neighbouring province of British Columbia (Bratu et al., 2022), Kyle's comments indicate a lack of climate concern and a reluctance to accept the heat wave as evidence for climate change.

In each of the comments above, participants draw on common counter-arguments from across the spectrum of climate change denial (Norgaard, 2019). Many of these counterarguments feature heavily in prominent climate change misinformation campaigns and texts promoted and funded by right-wing fossil-fuel industry think tanks and organizations which work to challenge the legitimacy of climate science and its indictment of the fossil fuel industry in particular (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Dunlap & Jacques, 2013; Farrell, 2019). By drawing on these common counterarguments, my participants appear to be much more accepting of misinformation that affirms their own identities as fossil fuel workers rather than the broader scientific and public consensuses that fossil fuels are indeed a major contributor to climate change. In fact, several participants accused the climate science community of engaging in misinformation. For example, Jackson, a 39-year-old investigations specialist with 14 years' experience in the industry, shared how: "I'm a data driven guy. I do a lot of data analysis, like I investigate stuff for a living, and I just really question the integrity of the data that we're getting [on climate change] and how it's being driven." Jackson's concerns here are twofold: he felt that both the methods of climate science are flawed and unreliable, and that the climate movement all together is driven by left-wing political groups who use the issue of climate change to "try to achieve their objectives."

These concerns, along with the comments above, demonstrate how my participants sought to challenge both the scientific and political legitimacy of climate change (Fischer, 2019). Moreover, this double-barreled critique reveals just how politicized and polarizing the issue of climate change is within the Oil Sands community as participants often framed the issue of climate change as something that only liberals and environmentalists care about. These findings map onto polling data from the Yale Program on Climate Communication which shows that only 30% of residents in the riding of Fort McMurray-Cold Lake accept that the earth is getting warmer due to human activity, a rate 30% below the Canadian national average and 12% below the Albertan provincial average (Mildenberger et al., 2016). Moreover, the particular counterarguments offered by my participants are remarkably consistent with ones documented by other research with fossil fuel workers and community members in a different region of Alberta (Haney, 2021) and in Norway (Tvinnereim & Ivarsflaten, 2016). This suggests that climate hesitancy and the politicization of climate change are both widely held and deeply entrenched cultural conditions across the region, making the broad public acceptance of climate policies, such as a just transition program, unlikely on the moral merits of climate action alone.

4.1.2   Shifting the blame

In addition to challenging the legitimacy of climate science, participants also worked to shift any acute blame for climate change away from the Oil Sands. Requiring unconventional and energy intensive production methods, the bituminous oil that comes from the Oil Sands has a much greater "well-to-wheel" carbon footprint than other, more traditional sources of crude oil (Charpentier et al., 2009, p. 1). This makes the Oil Sands a disproportionately high contributor to global carbon emissions on a per-barrel basis (Swart & Weaver, 2012) and as a result, the Oil

Sands are widely considered to be a supplier of "dirty oil" (Lefsrud et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2015). Each of my participants strongly rebuked this label, however, and instead attempted to reframe how environmentally and socially responsible the Oil Sands are.

For example, Ashley, a health and safety advisor, felt it was unfair that "people think that the Oil Sands and what we're doing is just messing up the climate" because, in her eyes, "we have such a small carbon footprint because we are mandated by the government to have carbon footprint plans in place. We report everything...Like all of our emissions, if something smells funny in the region, it gets reported. So, we're constantly monitoring, it's pretty robust." She then compared this to oil and gas coming from outside of Canada, which she felt is simply "not going to come ethically. It's going to come from Third World countries where they're completely disobeying labour legislations and environmental protection acts." Ryan, a health and safety advisor with 14 years' experience, who accepted that "climate change is obviously real and happening," offered a very similar perspective to Ashley: "we're looking in the wrong direction sometimes. Like the developing world is pumping out ridiculous amounts of carbon with no control at all" because "it's unregulated and they're doing zero about anything" in terms of emissions reductions. He then compared this to the Oil Sands where "we're producing oil and gas in as environmentally and socially responsible way as possible."

Beyond this comparative lens, many participants also pointed to specific initiatives that the Oil Sands are taking to reduce their carbon emissions. These included increasing the capacity and efficiency of carbon capture and storage technologies, as well as the announcement from several of the major Oil Sands producers in 2021 that they are committing to reach net-zero emissions as an industry by 2050 (*Oil Sands Pathways to Net Zero*, 2022.). In fact, Zach, a strategic consultant with 17 years' experience in the industry, felt that this latter development,

known as the Pathways Initiative, actually positions the Oil Sands to be a more competitive

supplier of energy on the global energy market: "if we can, as Canadians, market our product as

net-zero oil, and the international market is demanding that, I think there is a huge opportunity to

showcase and promote our innovation, export our technology to other resource rich areas and

implement that." He justified this position by claiming that: "if we don't do it right, somebody

else will." [9] These sentiments amplifying the environmental and climate track record of the Oil

Sands were consistent across my sample as participants attempted to challenge the notion that the

Oil Sands are a producer of "dirty oil." Instead, they felt that the Oil Sands are an exclusive

supplier of what several participants described as "ethical oil." This label of "ethical oil" comes

from a book of the same title written by Ezra Levant (2010), a right-wing political activist and

media personality, who has been a vocal and antagonistic critic of any and all efforts by the

Federal Government to advance environmental regulation and climate policy. Much like with the

counterarguments participants offered against climate science, here my participants are drawing

on arguments from a broader cultural discourse that affirms their moral identities as oil and gas

workers.

Together, these two forces of climate hesitancy and the deflection of blame for climate

change away from the Oil Sands sector specifically provide fertile conditions for those working

in the Oil Sands to contest efforts by the Federal Government to prioritize climate policy over the

unabated development of natural resources. Yet, a likely necessary precondition needed for oil

and gas workers to accept the proposal for a just transition is to first recognize that the current

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[9] Nationally, the Oil Sands account for approximately 11% of total carbon emissions, and by some estimates, the Oil Sands will need go well being net-zero in to reducing their emissions by 101-120%, essentially becoming carbon-negative, in order for Canada to meet its national emissions reduction targets (Hannouf et al., 2021).

state of the fossil fuel industry is unsustainable and climatically destructive. I did not see any evidence to support that such a foundation exists among my participants. In fact, the climate hesitancy and deflection of blame more often led to a critique of energy transitions altogether.

4.2   Energy transitions as unfeasible and regressive

Both the technical and economic feasibility of renewable and alternative energy sources have increased immensely over the past decade (Simon, 2020; Stringer & Joanis, 2022). Such is the case that, by some estimates, material concerns are no longer the primary barrier to decarbonization (Burch, 2018). Rather, it is the widespread public and political acceptance and adoption of those alternative technologies that remains the fundamental challenge (Jenkins et al., 2018; Sovacool & Griffiths, 2020). At the same time, international governance efforts to enact supply-side climate policies targeting the production of fossil fuels place significant structural constraints on the long-term viability of fossil fuels as a commodity-resource (Green & Denniss, 2018; Le Billon & Kristoffersen, 2020). However, my participants remain durably optimistic that fossil fuels will continue to play a central role in society for a long time to come.

4.2.1   Unfeasible alternatives

One way my participants expressed their optimism was by casting doubt over the feasibility of alternative energy. For example, Chris, a sales manager who left Fort McMurray after the 2016 fires but continues to commute there weekly, thinks alternative and renewable sources of energy are simple impractical: "you're never going to have just green, solar, wind energy. It's just not going to work. You're always going to have to have a balance between both." Ethan, the CEO of an Indigenous-led energy company, similarly questioned the viability of

alternative energy sources: "I don't see an alternative viable solution to displacing oil and gas for society right now. You can't just peg it down to, I'm going to switch over to electric vehicles and there, oil and gas goes away." Many pointed to electric vehicles in particular as evidence that low-carbon alternatives are impractical, citing long-lines at charging stations (Sadie, Michelle), their limited range (Jackson, Scott), and the requirement of precious minerals like lithium and cobalt for their batteries (Douglas, Richard) as fundamental barriers to their widespread adoption. Similarly, Kyle, a process operator of 13 years, felt our current power grid will simply not be able to accommodate a rapid rise in electric vehicles: "they want to hook up four or five million cars to the power grid and with no plans to upgrade the grid itself. And even if you do upgrade the grid, if we're burning coal like we are in Alberta currently, then what's the difference?"

Participants also spoke at length about all the alternative uses for fossil fuels that don't require combustion, such as in the production of plastics and synthetic clothing materials, arguing that "as a raw material, [fossil fuels] are still going to have value for a lot longer than the next hundred years" (Ryan). They often used this later point to also undermine the moral legitimacy of their detractors. For instance, when I showed participants the photo of anti-pipeline protestors in Vancouver, every single participant pointed out how the protestors required fossil fuels to protest, whether it be in the form of transportation (e.g., cars or bicycle parts), clothing (e.g., rain jackets), or petroleum-based paints for their signs. These claims of hypocrisy demonstrate how assured my participants feel in their roles as fossil fuel workers, and the contributions that they make to society more broadly.

Other participants were not as outrightly dismissive of alternative energy, but instead felt that it could play an additive role in our energy systems. As Jackson framed it: "I don't even

think there's a transition, to be honest with you. I think the pie is just going to get bigger as a globe." As a result, Jackson felt that: "realistically, we could significantly grow production in Alberta and grow renewable energy production and probably not meet the needs of the planet for energy by 2050." Energy scholars largely agree with Jackson. York and Bell (2019) argue that over the past two centuries, energy transitions have almost always resulted in an increase in total energy consumption, and show how the current transition to renewable energy has had little impact on our reliance on fossil fuels (York, 2012). However, whereas Jackson sees this as evidence for increasing production in the Oil Sands, energy scholars use these same empirics to argue for more transformative energy transitions that reshape not just the material production of energy, but also the more political elements of energy consumption and distribution (Bell et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2018). This dissonance reveals how localized cultural assumptions can mediate our perception of material phenomena, and, in this case, beliefs about the long-term necessity and utility of fossil fuels.

While the comments above point to more technical barriers, others felt that it is our economic reliance on fossil fuels, especially in Canada, that will ensure the long-term viability of the Oil Sands. Kyle, who above pointed out issues with the electrical grid, also felt that Canada is too economically reliant on fossil fuels to decarbonize and prosper at the same time: "if we don't have our oil and gas industry and we don't have our natural resource sector, then I mean, what's next? We're a country that's essentially survived by mining our raw resources and selling them for profit." As a result, he felt that "oil is not going away anytime soon, and even if it does, if they do meet every target they want to meet here in North America, they're still going to need it overseas and it's going to come from somewhere." Carol, a born and raised McMurryite whose husband and children work in the Oil Sands, similarly felt that oil and gas as a commodity-

resource is durable to adversity: "I'm really optimistic about the oil and gas industry, like I don't see it just disappearing, we're always going to have fossil fuels…I just don't see the oil and gas industry crumbling like other people do." Carol cited her experience living through several boom-and-bust cycles in Fort McMurray as evidence that, no matter what, the Oil Sands will find a way to remain viable, even in the face of economic or societal pressures: "every time a bust comes, it's like Armageddon kind of thing. And for those of us who've been around, we're like, don't worry, it'll bounce back."

This durable optimism in the long-term need for fossil fuels was unanimously consistent across my sample and echoes findings from research in other fossil fuel communities. Those studies show that economic confidence in the fossil fuel industry significantly reduces support for alternative energy transitions (Schimpf et al., 2021), and that those working in fossil fuel communities negatively evaluate proposals for renewable energy development in their communities (Olson-Hazboun, 2018). This again suggests that the cultural dynamics of fossil fuel communities make it difficult for community and industry members to positively evaluate proposals for alternative forms of energy.

4.2.2 Decarbonization as regressive

Along with doubting the technical and economic feasibility of broad scale energy transitions, my participants also felt that decarbonization is a regressive shift for society, and one that brings with it a number of undesirable trade-offs that they are not willing to endorse. For instance, in Chris' assessment of phasing out fossil fuel production, he stated: "to sacrifice our way of life, or sacrifice millions of dollars for small impact, it doesn't make any sense. I can't get my head wrapped around it." Along similar lines, Douglas felt that people don't consider the big

picture in their desire to move away from fossil fuels, and all the ways in which it would affect

them:

> What it means is that they need to go back to burning wood to heat their
> homes, which on a per gigajoule basis is actually going to produce more CO_2.
> They cannot travel, right? If they just, if they walk everywhere, they don't drive
> a car, they don't fly anywhere, they don't consume energy outside of locally
> sourced foods… They cannot use an iPhone, they cannot watch TV, they can,
> you know, basket weave and surf.

Like Douglas in the quote above, participants consistently highlighted the myriad ways in which

fossil fuels are woven throughout so many of our modern comforts and necessities. Sadie, a

communications specialist who left the industry in 2016 after the wildfire displaced her family,

similarly felt that there are "so many things that you take for granted in your first world life that

you wouldn't have if you didn't have the production of petroleum products." Participants used

this ubiquity as evidence for their belief that decarbonization is regressive. And to that end, many

felt that even if fossil fuels do have negative consequences, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

As Jackson put it: "at what point do kind of do like a risk-benefit type analysis and say, you

know what, yeah, it could change the climate, but it's so good for humanity that we need to

continue to move forward [with fossil fuels]." He qualified this further by contending that those

who advocate for decarbonization "tend to forget humanity in their desire to preserve the

environment" and highlighted that "many people still live in poverty on this planet that are going

to need energy to get out of poverty." Daggett (2021) refers to this line of argumentation as a

"fossil myth" of progress—a dominant cultural narrative which frames human progress as

contingent on carbon-energy expansion—and argues that this myth of progress is inherently

invested in maintaining energy systems that rely on environmental and social exploitation (p.

647). However, from the perspective of my participants, we also can think of these latter

comments from Douglas, Sadie and Jackson as distributional justice claims over the necessity and allocation of energy resources across society. While many see energy transitions as an opportunity to advance transformative change (Bell et al., 2020; Ciplet, 2022), such as making energy access more equitable and democratic (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015), my participants see a transition away from fossil fuels as an anti-modern and inequitable process that would entrench inequality and limit the distribution of societal and economic benefits that come from the combustion of fossil fuels.

This fear that decarbonization will be regressive is likely influenced, at least in part, by my participants' personal experience in the industry, which they frequently described as empowering, or as offering unique opportunities for personal and community growth. Ryan, for example, described how he knew several "people who grew up rough and then moved to Fort McMurray and have completely reinvented themselves and they're upstanding citizens here." Or Carol, the lone participant who did not work directly in the Oil Sands but instead managed a non-profit organization in Fort McMurray, who acknowledged: "we are, without question, compared to our counterparts across the province and certainly the country, very blessed as a non-profit sector. We are the beneficiaries of huge support from industry." Others pointed to efforts within the industry to become more diverse and prioritize "the empowerment of folks that aren't white males" (Ryan), and specifically amplified a recent shift to promote Indigenous-owned businesses as a means of "Indigenous economic reconciliation" (Zach) as additional justifications for why the industry should continue to be supported. Given their firsthand experience, my participants ultimately felt that to try and replace fossil fuels with unproven and unfeasible alternative technologies would be both economically and socially harmful.

4.3 Energy transitions as devaluing and divisive

As the literature on energy transitions suggests, the process of decarbonization will not be without contestation and conflict as groups with vested interests in widely divergent energy and economic outcomes seek to control the process, or in some cases, prevent it altogether (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Healy & Barry, 2017; Kalt, 2021; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022). This theme of contestation, and divisiveness in particular, was highly salient across my interviews as participants described feeling devalued and even stigmatized as a result of broader cultural and political efforts to decarbonize society. It is largely because of this devaluation that they also perceive energy issues to be highly politicized and polarizing in Canada along existing regional and political fault lines.

4.3.1 Devaluing stereotype of the "Rig Pig"

Constituted by morally devaluing attributes, stereotypes are one of the most salient mechanisms in the production of stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Each of my participants described how, in a culture of rising climate consciousness, they feel negatively and unfairly stereotyped for working in the Oil Sands. As Jackson suggested, people assume that just because you work in the fossil fuel industry, "you're a bigoted, hillbilly, redneck, pickup driving, gun shooting, alcoholic who doesn't care about the environment." These attributes are distilled into what Carol, the non-profit manager and native McMurryite, described as the "Rig Pig" stereotype: a harmful, reckless, ignorant, and uncaring actor consumed by the economic fortunes promised by the fossil fuel industry. In a study of another boomtown in the Marcellus Shale gas region of the mid-Atlantic United States, Filteau (2015) found evidence for a similar stereotype of an "alcoholic, drug addicted, and environmentally destructive" fossil fuel

worker, or "gas bastard" (p. 1158). While the labels might be different, this suggests that a morally devalued stereotype of fossil fuel workers exists across cultural contexts.

I was surprised to hear that the dimension of this stereotype that participants were most apt to perceive as hurtful and unfair was that people assumed Rig Pigs do not care about the environment. As Jackson countered: "You will not find a single [oil and gas worker] who says F the planet, I want to produce oil. You won't. No matter where you look…we're all good, reasonable people who actually care about things." This was a common sentiment among all my participants, who routinely expressed a sense of care and appreciation for the environment, albeit in terms different from standard measures of pro-environmental behavior (e.g., recycling) (Steg & Vlek, 2009) or broader cultural assumptions about what it means to be an "ideal environmentalist" (i.e., young, liberal, urban) (Kennedy & Muzzerall, 2021). Instead, they spoke admiringly about how they live in a remote area surrounded by rugged wilderness ideal for off-roading and hunting, and how fortunate they are to have such access to nature. While different from broader cultural assumptions around environmentalism, these expressions of environmental connection and care are no less valid to those who hold them.

At the same, my participants also feared that this perceived stigma would mar their own identities. As Denise conveyed when asked how a photo of an anti-pipeline protest made her feel: "I worry that's going to put a stigma on who I am…because I know I'm not against the environment or anything like that, I'm just trying to make a living for my family like everybody else." While Denise conveys concern, other participants, like Sadie, describe defensiveness as a common response to the moral devaluation my participants experience as a result of anti-fossil fuel movements: "when you work in the industry in Fort McMurray, because of the culture and the media attention around Oil Sands development, and mainly negative and uneducated media

attention, you get kind of defensive about your industry, your livelihood, the community." In these comments, Sadie demonstrates how the morally devalued stereotype of the Rig Pig Oil Sands worker, which my participants perceived to be widely endorsed by the broader public culture (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015), can create an atmosphere of contention around energy issues in Canada, as those working in the Oil Sands grow defensive about their cultural identities and economic livelihoods in the face of cultural and political pressure, that they feel is devaluing, to change in response to a changing climate.

4.3.2   Energy issues as politicized and divisive

With this perception of being devalued as a backdrop, participants also spoke at length about how politicized and polarizing issues around energy have become in Canada. These comments emerged most frequently in relation to the image prompts used during the interview process. For instance, when asked for his interpretation of the "I heart Canadian oil and gas" image, Zach, a strategic consultant with 17 years' experience in the industry, shared how only "a few years ago this logo was awesome, prevalent," but in light of recent efforts to prioritize climate policy at the national level, "this is now a symbol of divisiveness in Canada, which is sad." Similarly, when asked what the image meant to him, Kyle felt it represents political polarization in Canada: "that's our hot button, you know, that's what divides us as a nation essentially is our oil and gas." When I showed Scott this image, he proudly shared that: "I'm not going to lie to you here, I have that same sticker on the back of my computer… So, when I open it up in an airport or something, that sticker is, you know, shows that I'm with the oil and gas industry." He tempered this pride with an acknowledgment that it also represents divisiveness, and how issues around energy in general "create a lot of tensions between the different

viewpoints for sure… it's two very diverse thinkings and they're very polar opposites."

Participants felt that these two diverse perspectives, which Scott situated on opposites ends of the

political spectrum, fall along regional fault lines as well.

From their perspective in western Canada, the move away from fossil fuels marks a

betrayal of their region which remains economically reliant on the fossil fuel industry.[10] This

reliance has, for the last two decades at least, been much to Alberta's benefit, as the province has

consistently touted the highest per capita GDP of any Canadian province (Statistics Canada,

2021b). As such, the regional industry has contributed immensely to the economic wellbeing of

the nation over the past several decades. However, participants feel like this contribution is not

recognized by the Federal Government or people in other parts of the country. For instance,

Richard, an executive labour officer with 21 years' experience in the industry, described a

political cartoon that was particularly resonant for him: "[it] shows this big Holstein cow, and

she's got the head in the west eating and her udders in the east and they're milking it. You got to

feel used after a while." This sentiment of being "used" by the Federal Government and other

regions in Canada was pervasive across all my interviews. When I asked Carol, the non-profit

manager and native McMurryite, about her perspectives on the "I heart oil and gas" image, she

shared: "it represents to me the division between Eastern and Western [Canada] and our fight to

have our Federal Government be stronger advocates for Canadian oil and gas." She continued on

to describe how the Oil Sands "is an industry that isn't supported" outside of the region.

Similarly, Kyle, who above described how oil and gas is a "hot button" in Canada, also saw the

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[10] From 2000-2020, the oil and gas sector accounted for 21% of Albertan GDP, and 5% of Canadian national GDP (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

division falling along regional lines: "as a country, it's west versus east when it comes to the oil and gas industry."

One example that many participants drew on to demonstrate this unfair relationship between their region and the rest of the country was the issue of equalization payments, a Federal program in Canada that seeks to redistribute financial resources between provinces based on their financial capacity to generate tax revenue. Because of the economic prosperity of the fossil fuel industry, Alberta has long been a contributing province that pays into the system to support other regions, like much of Atlantic Canada, rather than receiving support themselves. But for Chris, this doesn't settle well with those working in the Oil Sands:

> Right now, we feel like the ugly stepchild that just gives equalization payments out and we're just kind of pushed to the side and forgotten about, we're taken for granted. And I think every province needs to have a voice and be supported to a government plan as opposed to the inner fighting that we have provincially.

Many also felt that under the current distribution of political power in Canada, the west is often silenced in the national political process because federal parties cater to large urban centers in the east that offer them a more clear path to power.[11] Specifically, Douglas, the asset manager, said "I don't feel like the Federal Government actually wants to listen to what it is the West has to say right? Whether it be about oil and gas, whether it be about guns, whether it be about environmental legislation and those things." As a result, he feared that this drives animosity between different regions in Canada, pushing some in the west to "start talking separation," a

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[11] This sentiment runs counter to research that finds rural voters are actually overrepresented in the Canadian political system, with their votes counting roughly 20% more than those of urban voters due to the distribution of electoral boundaries (Pal & Choudhry, 2007).

reference to a fringe political movement known as WEXIT (WEXIT Movement, 2022) which advocates for the secession of western Canada from the rest of the nation.

Across all these responses, it is clear that for those working in the Oil Sands, the national prioritization of climate policy and the shift away from fossil fuels marks a betrayal of the region and the industry, which they see as a primary driver of political and regional division in Canada. Moreover, across these concerns, two distinct justice claims emerge. In terms of recognition injustice, which concerns the fair representation and inclusion of different groups, identities, and regions, participants feel like their contributions to national wellbeing are not fairly recognized or appreciated by the Federal Government or people in other regions of Canada. Instead, they feel like "the ugly step-child" (Chris), or the "jerk off cousin" (Ryan), who are not respected by those who they feel they support. These claims of misrecognition are also tightly woven in with claims of distributional injustice in which participants express frustration over the current allocation and redistribution of economic resources, a sentiment exacerbated by the fact that it is orchestrated through a centralized governmental program like Equalization. This latter claim in particular makes it unlikely that participants would then support a just transition program implemented through a similar governance structure.

These claims of injustice should be taken seriously, especially when we consider that they are being made within a broader cultural context in which my participants feel morally devalued for being Rig Pigs. Moreover, in feeling used and left behind, these sentiments are similar to those identified in case studies of other regions with a high concentration of working class, white, conservative citizens (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016). Cramer (2016) describes how "when people feel unsure and insecure about the amount of money available to go around, the situation is ripe for a 'politics of resentment'" in which those, often in rural and conservative

areas, grow increasingly resentful of diverse, liberal, urban centers which they see as holding a disproportionate amount of power and sway over the distribution of economic and cultural capital. More troubling, this dynamic of resentment has been shown to benefit right-wing populist political leaders who are able to channel the concerns of the resentful into political mobilization (Cohen, 2019). I find evidence for a similar sense of resentment among my participants towards those in eastern, liberal centers who they see as prioritizing "virtue signaling" (Ethan, Richard, Jackson) climate policy over the prosperity and material wellbeing of their region. It is within this context of resentment that my participants evaluate the proposal for a just transition.

4.4   Evaluations of a just transition for the Canadian Oil Sands

The potential to successfully centre equity and justice concerns in the process of decarbonization is largely contingent on how those working in the oil and gas industry evaluate the aims and intended outcomes of just transition policy for their sector. Yet, to date, few studies in the just transition literature have actually sought out oil and gas workers' perspectives on context-specific just transition policy. During my interviews, I asked participants directly if they were familiar with the idea of a just transition, and specifically the announcement made by the Federal Government of Canada in July of 2021 about the "engagement process" they were launching to develop a national just transition program (Government of Canada, 2021). Of my 16 participants, six were already familiar with the concept of a just transition, and ten were not.

With the exception of two participants, everyone I spoke with negatively evaluated both the need for and intentions of a just transition program for the oil and gas sector. [12]

The first set of concerns participants expressed towards the idea of a just transition was primarily economic. For instance, Chris, who was unfamiliar with the idea of a just transition, shared: "I don't know if I agree with retraining people to move away from oil and gas. It's almost like an incentive to leave oil and gas behind." Similarly, Scott, who was also unfamiliar with the concept, expressed that it would be "very difficult, I think, at this time to support a program like that. Right now, there's a huge labour shortage in oil and gas." Several participants highlighted this issue of labour shortage—a perennial issue in the Oil Sands given its remoteness and boom-and-bust tendency—and how encouraging people out of or away from the industry would hurt both the region and the country economically. This assessment connects to the earlier theme of economic durability, and the belief widely held among my participants that the Oil Sands will remain a necessary and viable industry for years to come.

Another, more political economic rationale expressed by several participants was that a just transition program would be a form of government overreach. Sadie, for instance, who worked in the industry for seven years before pivoting to a new field in 2016, expressed that there is already "too much politics circling around the industry," and that "it's probably better left for that natural transition of what people think that they're going to be able to find employment in rather than the government stepping in to retrain people who don't need to be retrained right now." Others, like Ryan, Douglas, and Ethan, who were all familiar with the

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[12] Denise and Brenda, who were both previously unfamiliar with the concept of a just transition, positively evaluated the proposal for a just transition program. Both had children who had recently started careers in the industry and felt that a just transition program may be beneficial for them if the current pressures on the industry continued.

government's 2021 announcement regarding a just transition, felt that a just transition program would also amount to a gross misuse of tax revenue. Douglas said: "the part that concerns me is, if you continue to take a legislative and a supporting approach from a government perspective, is how do you continue to pay for it? And at what cost on society?" Ryan, who already felt that the "Federal Government has got its fingers in everything out here," expressed concern over how such a program would be funded: "my first thought is where does the money come from? And I know where the money comes from, it comes from our pockets. And that's the problem." For him, such a proposal was "ludicrous," and simply showed how "out of touch" the Federal Government is with the working-class reality of those in the fossil fuel industry.

In the context of the findings I presented above, in which participants expressed concern over unfairly contributing to Federal equalization payments, it makes sense that participants would feel that it is also unfair to fund a just transition program with taxpayer revenue and to do so through a centralized Federal program. As Ryan suggested, "it's like cutting your nose off to spite your face." It also demonstrates how tensions can emerge in the space between national priorities (i.e., just transition policy) and the localized impacts of those priorities (Gürtler et al., 2021). In fact, Chris, who saw parallels to the proposal for a Green New Deal in the United States, which he described as "asinine," "too far," and "not realistic," felt that a program like this "may not be as deep as socialist" but was heading in that direction. Instead, he felt that it should "be incumbent on the companies that are doing the [alternative energy] construction projects to train their personnel rather than the government." Ultimately, he said: "I wouldn't want to see government involved with something like that." This steadfast belief that government should not be involved in catalyzing the energy transition, or even supporting workers through a market driven transition, was consistent across my sample, and demonstrates how the more conservative

political orientation of the region creates a challenging context for large, government-led climate initiatives such as a just transition program, especially when conditioned by a dynamic of cultural and political resentment towards those seeking to accelerate the transition.

Additionally, some participants evaluated the potential for a just transition in more explicitly political terms, and as a hostile threat to their way of life. Jackson, who had followed the just transition program for the coal industry closely, felt that: "whenever they say just transition, it means the devastation of hundreds of thousands of livelihoods in the Canadian industry. That's what it means. That's the result of their just transition." He continued, arguing that when the government uses the language of a just transition, it's "actually a very evil statement because you're not talking fairness. You're not talking about supporting an industry. You're finding the softest way to say we're going to kill the industry." Here, Jackson's comments reveal a deep chasm between his own normative understanding of fairness and how he interprets the definition of justice that is guiding the Federal proposal for a just transition. These competing notions of a fair outcome complicate the implementation of a just transition program.

Others pointed to issues with how the Federal Government was approaching the consultation process. Kyle, who had also been following the announcements around a just transition, shared that, without specific details of exactly how a program would unfold, "it's hard to entertain" any proposal for a just transition because the current consultation process just seems like lip-servicing "propaganda" used by the government to make themselves look good without actually talking to the workers, like himself, that would be most affected. Ryan, too, felt that the motivations behind this announcement were purely political, expressing that the recent engagement process for a just transition was just in an effort "to try to buy votes in places like Quebec." Here, both Kyle and Ryan demonstrate a concern that this engagement process was not

intended to include people like them who actually work in the industry. Moreover, they represent a lack of trust in the Federal Government to actually have workers' interests in mind throughout the just transition engagement process, and evidence concerns over the ability of such a process to center recognition justice for affected communities.

Some also offered more interpretive evaluations, explaining how statements like this make those in industry feel. For instance, Carol, who was not familiar with the concept of a just transition, described how this proposal would likely make Oil Sands workers "feel attacked for working in oil and gas" and as if "their very livelihood was threatened." Zach, who had followed the announcements closely and whose job requires him to bridge gaps between industry and government, decided to "play Switzerland on this one" because he agreed that there should be "a good balance between sort of getting people ready for the transition and sort of staying the course." Yet, he ultimately felt that the announcement about a just transition signals that the Federal Government is "moving past the hydrocarbon molecule potentially, and I would like be as bold as to say embarrassed about our natural resources in this country." These more politicized responses demonstrate how, for some in the industry, any attempt by the Federal Government to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels are interpreted as an attack on their livelihood and community. These concerns were made abundantly clear when I asked participants what Fort McMurray might look like without the Oil Sands industry:

> Chris: Fort McMurray would be a ghost town.
>
> Denise: I don't see Fort McMurray surviving after oil and gas.
>
> Kyle: If the Oil Sands were to shut down, this city would shut down.

Given that we know cultural contention is often driven by conflicting normative visions for the future (Mische, 2009), it makes sense that if participants are unable imagine a future Fort McMurray absent of the Oil Sands industry that they would also be hostile towards any proposal to transition away from fossil fuels, even when justice and equity concerns are central to such a proposal.

Chapter 5: Discussion

As contested and conflictual processes involving a wide range of actors, interests, and ideals, the transition to a low-carbon energy system faces significant political and cultural challenges (Healy & Barry, 2017; Sovacool & Griffiths, 2020). This is large in part due to the reality that energy transitions inevitably result in an uneven distribution of burden across the population. Particularly vulnerable to "losing" the low-carbon energy transition are those who live and work in fossil fuel communities (Carley & Konisky, 2020) where both cultural and economic identities are often inextricable from the fossil fuel industry itself (Bell & York, 2010). To account for this burden, both governments (Government of Canada, 2021) and scholars (Ciplet, 2022; Evans & Phelan, 2016; McCauley & Heffron, 2018) have begun to advocate for a just transition in an attempt to centre justice and equity concerns in the development and implementation of energy transition policy. At the same time, however, we know that issues around climate change, energy development, and the role of government in managing both, have become increasingly politicized and polarizing (Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Healy & Barry, 2017; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a). As a result, even programs centred around notions of justice and equity are ripe for contestation. This becomes even more palpable when we consider the number of stakeholders involved in energy transitions, which range from representatives across the different tiers of government and industry to climate organizers and community members, who each attempt to have their own interests prioritized through the process, or, in some cases, impede the process altogether.

Early conceptual and empirical research on just transitions has shown this to be the case, revealing how tensions can emerge between the scales of implementation and the differing normative conceptions of justice and fairness that are at play across them (Ciplet & Harrison,

2020; Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Kalt, 2021; MacNeil & Beauman, 2022). While most of these studies have focused on national coal phase-out programs, the endeavor of transitioning away from the more ubiquitous oil and gas sector is a much larger task. Yet, few studies to date have focused specifically on the perspectives of oil and gas workers and how they interpret national climate policy initiatives that target their industry, such as a just transition program. This study sought to address that gap by asking: how do those living and working in the Canadian Oil Sands interpret the proposal for a just transition? While a just transition is the central object of this research question, in answering it I organized my findings around the integrally attendant themes of climate and energy perspectives, economic and governance sensibilities, and the cultural politics woven throughout.

As the fundamental catalyst for a low-carbon energy transition, the issue of climate change is innately bound with issues around energy. I show how those who work in the Oil Sands remain largely hesitant to accept the scientific consensus on climate change and the recommendation from the scientific community that we must decarbonize our energy systems to stave off climate collapse. Moreover, I show how they draw on counterarguments common within the broader climate misinformation ecosystem, which attempts to challenge both the scientific and political legitimacy of climate science. These results mirror the findings of Haney (2021), Tvinnereim & Ivarsflaten (2016), and Hazboun et al. (2020) who all found similar reservations among industry and community members who are economically reliant on the fossil fuel industry (in another region of Alberta, Norway, and Utah, respectively). This suggests that these sentiments are consistent both within and across fossil fuel producing regions. This rejection of consensus also extended to how my participants evaluated the environmental and climate impacts of the Oil Sands as they contended that Canadian oil is "ethical oil" despite an

abundance of evidence suggesting that it is in fact one of the most carbon intensive forms of oil on the market (Swart & Weaver, 2012). Both of these findings suggest that my participants are far more likely to accept misinformation that affirms their own moral identities over broader public and scientific consensuses that challenge them.

In addition to this climate hesitancy, my participants were also skeptical of both the technical and economic feasibility of alternative energies, and instead exhibited a durable optimism in the long-term viability of fossil fuels as a commodity resource. They supported this critique by pointing to inefficiencies with electric vehicles, our power grid's inability to accommodate more demand, and all the ways in which we continue to rely on fossil fuels for essential uses beyond combustion. Some were less dismissive of alternative energy but felt it will only ever play an additive role to our energy system. This finding in particular revealed an interesting point of convergence between my participants and the literature on energy transitions which finds that, historically, energy transitions have been more additive than transformative (York, 2012; York & Bell, 2019). However, it also revealed how agreed upon empirical conclusions can lead to widely divergent prescriptive interpretations, with my participants using this as evidence for increased Oil Sands development instead of decarbonization. Moreover, this skepticism towards renewable energy again mapped onto other research which has found that a belief in the economic prosperity of fossil fuels diminishes support for alternative energy sources (Schimpf et al., 2021). Perhaps the most striking conclusion from this theme was that many of my participants view efforts to decarbonize as regressive and anti-modern. This sentiment is in direct conflict with much of the literature on energy transitions, which see them as an opportunity to advance transformative political agendas aimed at increasing energy democracy and justice (Ciplet, 2022; Evans & Phelan, 2016; Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015). However, when

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held alongside the anecdotes my participants provided about all the ways they see the fossil fuel industry as socially and economically empowering, this regressive interpretation holds water. This more empathic reading does not negate the reality, though, that any understanding of decarbonization as socially regressive stands as a fundamental barrier to policies aimed at phasing out the hydrocarbon.

Despite the hesitancy, skepticism and wariness described above, my participants were well aware that climate change has become a national priority in Canada, both politically and culturally. Because of this, however, my participants perceived their identities as Oil Sands workers to be morally devalued and stigmatized widely by people outside the industry, who they feel think of them as ignorant and environmentally destructive Rig Pigs. Filteau (2015) found evidence for a similar morally devalued stereotype of "gas bastards" in the American shale industry, suggesting that this negative perception of oil and gas workers may exist broadly across cultural contexts. This perception of being devalued led my participants to grow defensive of their industry and hostile towards their detractors, which they cited as a primary source of both political and regional division in Canada. They contextualized these sentiments further within a political economy marred by recognition and distributional injustice. Specifically, they felt unfairly recognized and represented with national political institutions, and their one-way economic contributions to the Federal Equalization program to be unfair. This trend of mostly conservative, white, working-class populations growing resentful of more diverse, liberal, urban centres is not unique to this case, however, as Hochschild (2016), Cramer (2016), and Jerolmack, (2021) have each identified similar dynamics in Louisiana, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, respectively. Troubling, though, is that a politics of resentment has been shown to increase support for far-right populist political movements (Cohen, 2019); each of the states mentioned

above voted to elect Donald Trump as President of the United States in the 2016 election.

Moreover, we know that the German coal phase-out program has paralleled a rise in support for

the far-right AfD party in Lusatia, Germany's primary coal producing region (Gürtler &

Herberg, 2021), and that in the most recent Canadian Federal Election, the riding of Fort

McMurray-Cold Lake had the eigth highest vote share (13%) of any Federal riding for the

emergent far-right People's Party of Canada, which marked a 10% increase from the previous

Federal Election just two years earlier in 2019 (Elections Canada, 2021).[13] While additional

cultural political issues, such as those that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely had

some influence on this rise, it nonetheless adds further evidence for a growing politics of

resentment between the primary fossil fuel producing region of Canada and the more liberal,

urban political centres in British Columbia and eastern Canada, a dynamic that heavily

influenced my participants' evaluations of a just transition.

      With the attendant dynamics described above in the foreground, it follows, then, that my

participants negatively evaluated a just transition proposal for the oil and gas sector. Their

evaluations ranged from simply questioning the economic rationale of the program, to accusing it

of being a form of government overreach. This latter point in particular was grounded in a

conservative sensibility that my participants demonstrated consistently, often expressing how

they feel like the Federal Government is already too involved in their lives, and certainly their

industry. It only makes sense, then, that they would be hostile towards a just transition program

aimed at phasing out their livelihoods, led by the Federal Government, and in which they do not

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[13] In the 2019 Canadian Federal Election, the Peoples Party of Canada received just 3.2% of the vote in Fort
McMurray-Cold Lake. This rose to 13% in the 2021 Canadian Federal Election (Elections Canada, 2021).

see their interests and values reflected. That lack of recognition also helps explain some of my participants' more outright hostile evaluations which reveal the deep normative chasm that exists between those who live and work in the Oil Sands and those who wish for them not to in the future. This sentiment was only intensified by my participants' despondent predictions that Fort McMurray would become a "ghost town" in the absence of the Oil Sands industry.

Not only do these findings help us better understand some of cultural and political challenges at play in the process of decarbonization in Canada, but they also force us to reconsider some of the assumed properties inherent to current governmental and scholarly approaches to a just transition altogether. In their case study of a rural community in Pennsylvania, Jerolmack (2021; see also with Walker, 2018) upends a common assumption within environmental justice literature that environmentally harmful forms of energy extraction—for which both fracking and Oil Sands development meet the criteria—are always perceived of as "locally unwanted land uses." Instead, they reveal how researchers' own beliefs about what constitutes environmentally appropriate, or morally good, land uses have prevented them from explaining why some communities strongly support environmentally contentious industries. Implicit in this critique is the recognition that much of the environmental justice literature, and by extension just transition literature, is grounded in predominantly liberal moral foundations of harm, care, fairness, and reciprocity (Haidt, 2012). These moral orientations fundamentally shape how scholars and activists conceive of environmental issues and define what constitutes environmentally just outcomes. Or, in the case of the present study, what justice and equity look like for fossil fuel workers through the process of decarbonization.

At the same, however, we also know that fossil fuel communities tend to be rural, conservative, white, and think of themselves as working class; this is certainly the case in the

Canadian Oil Sands. People with these socio-demographic qualities—conservatives in particular—are much more likely to embody alternative moral foundations of loyalty, authority, and purity (Haidt, 2012), which makes them less receptive to environmental issues which are commonly framed through more traditionally liberal moral foundations of harm and care (Feinberg & Willer, 2013; see also Farell, 2011 on how moral schemas shape environmental activism). Therefore, it is reasonable to think that localized normative conceptions of justice and fairness within fossil fuel communities would be divergent from the ones currently conditioning much of the literature and limited policy on just transitions. My findings provide further evidence that this is indeed the case. In particular, I show how a centralized government-led just transition program founded on liberals' normative conceptions of equity and justice is largely incommensurate with the localized cultural conditions of the Canadian Oil Sands.

While this poses substantial challenges to the successful implementation of a just transition program as it is currently conceptualized in Canada and much of the scholarly literature, it is not to say that the fundamental ethos and practice of a just transition should be tossed aside. Rather, it demonstrates the necessity of prioritizing and centering the recognition-based and distributional justice concerns of those most directly impacted by the transition away from fossil fuels (i.e., those living and working in fossil fuel communities) throughout the entire development and implementation stages of just transition policy. If this does not happen, I've shown how the groundwork has already been laid for this process to be conditioned by a politics of resentment which will increase the likelihood that efforts to decarbonize Canada will be deeply divisive, contested, and polarizing.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

As an emergent area of research, more scholarly attention must be paid to understanding the complex political and cultural dynamics at play in energy transitions. While I demonstrated some of the tensions that can emerge between different normative conceptions of justice and the scales at which justice claims are made, my findings are limited by their preliminary nature, and by a relatively small sample. As such, social analysts attuned to the prospects of a just transition would benefit from quantitative survey research aimed at mapping the extent to which the sentiments my participants conveyed are held across the Oil Sands, and the Canadian fossil fuel sector more broadly. Similarly, more public opinion research set in the Canadian context and about energy issues specifically would help illuminate not only general perceptions of the fossil fuel industry, but also some of the cleavages that my participants perceive as existing along regional and political fault lines. Additionally, an increased qualitative focus on the mobilization and framing techniques used by both pro- and anti-fossil fuel organizers would help better identify how particular narratives and cultural assumptions about environmental and energy issues gain legitimacy through public discourse in Canada. Institutional sociological research set within the Canadian fossil fuel industry would also help shed light on the role the industry plays in intentionally shaping the attitudes and perspectives of those who work in the industry, and what techniques, if any, they use to do so.

Given my use of contrasting images reflective of existing tensions around Canadian energy developments, and my attention to the politics of energy in Canada more generally, it is also possible that the conclusions my findings suggest about the state of politicization and polarization are inflated. However, I feel confident that with the abundance of additional research on Canadian energy politics, public opinion towards climate change, and the contested

politics of early attempts at a just transition, the sentiments and overarching narrative that my participants offered are indeed indicative of a much larger trend within the Canadian fossil fuel industry, and across the country more broadly. As a result, it is clear that in order to decarbonize with the rapidity required to meet both global and national emissions targets, targets crucial to a habitable future, it is imperative for the process of decarbonization to be conditioned by consensus rather than contestation. Just transitions offer a potentially effective framework for achieving this goal as long as all stakeholders, especially those most prone to antipathy, feel fairly represented through the process.

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Appendix

Interview Guide including image prompts

(1) a) I was hoping we could actually start by looking at a couple images together so you can help me understand them a bit better. Let's start with this one. Driving out to BC last summer I saw a lot of these bumper stickers as I passed through Alberta. Can you explain to me why so many people have this bumper sticker on their car?

(1) b) Great, how about this one? I actually just came across this one online when searching for the original one and through it was interesting. Why do you think someone might have been motivated to make this image?

(2) Thanks, that really helps me understand those a bit better. It seems the oil and gas industry mean a lot to the culture of Alberta, and Fort Mac especially. Does that fit how you feel about the images?

   a) Have these feelings changed at all over time? [if yes] How so?
   b) Ok, so it sounds like you didn't [or did] grow up in Fort Mac?
   c) [if based on move to AB or joining the industry] What were some other culture shocks or changes you experienced when you first moved to Fort Mac?
   d) What about the oil industry? Any culture shocks starting out your career?

(3) Based on your experience there, do you think there would be something lost or gained in what makes Fort MacMurray 'Fort MacMurray' if the oil and gas industry were to go away?

   (a) What exactly would be lost?
   (b) What might be gained?

(4) Ok, so what if a bunch of renewable energy development came to Fort McMurray in place of oil and gas? Would that change the town? [Why or why not?]

   (a) What about electric vehicles. Ford has started selling electric F-150's and Mustangs. Would Fort Mac be any different if everyone started driving electric trucks? [Why or why not?]

(5) Some people say we need to move away from energy sources like oil and gas in order to slow down climate change. What are your thoughts on that?

   (a) What about renewable energy like wind and solar, what are your thoughts on those?

(6) Can you come up with a label to describe your position on climate change?

   (a) Can you unpack that a bit for me?
   (b) Do you think most of your friends are [use label] as well?

(7) Are you familiar at all with the idea of a just transition, or the just transition program for the coal industry in Canada?

   (a) [If yes] What are your thoughts on that?
      i. Could that sort of program ever work for your industry?

   (b) [If no] so basically, a Just Transition is the idea that we need to transition from oil and gas to renewables, like wind and solar, but in doing so we need to make sure we look after those currently working in oil and gas by providing financial support and retraining and reskilling opportunities. Making sure nobody gets "left behind" so to speak.

      i. So far, this type of program has only been available to folks in the coal industry. But does that sort of program appeal to you at all?

      ii. Follow up on answers here – perhaps mention "pathway to future employment"

  (c) If you have/had kids, would you want them to work in oil and gas? Do you think that would offer a good future for them? Why [not]?

(8) Ok, so what if you were Prime Minister for a day, or even a year, what would you do to support oil and gas workers?

  (a) Do you think Canadians outside of Alberta could get on board with that?

(9) What about pipelines? They seem to get a lot of media attention. Whether it's the Federal government purchasing the Trans Mountain Pipeline from Kinder Morgan or Biden cancelling Keystone XL, it seems everyone and their dog has an opinion on pipelines. What's yours?

  (a) What do you think people outside of Alberta misunderstand the most about pipelines?

  (b) What role do you see pipelines playing in the future?

(10) a) Ok, so to wrap up I was hoping we could talk through a few photos again. This first one is from a Pro-pipeline rally in 2018 in Rocky Mountain House.

  (a) Who are these people to you?

  (b) What sorts of feelings do you have towards those people?

  (c) What do you think is motivating these people to participate in this rally?

  (d) How does that picture make you feel about yourself and your work?

(10) b) Ok, and what about this one. This was taken an anti-pipeline protest in Vancouver in 2019. See questions above

(11) Awesome, thanks so much. I've really enjoyed our conversation. Anything you feel like we didn't get to today that you would like to talk about?