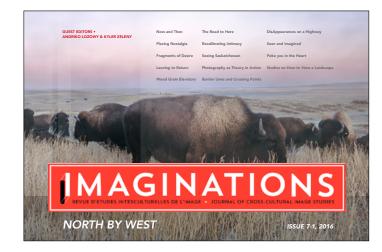
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SEEN AND IMAGINED: A NORTHWESTERN CROSSROADS CITY

DOUGLAS HARPER & TARA MILBRANDT

Résumé

Cet article est une étude interprétative de la ville d'Edmonton qui combine photographie, réflexion écrite et analyse. En mêlant des points de vue externes et internes, cet essai représente la ville à travers l'imagerie d'une frontière postmoderne réaliste. Edmonton est peinte comme un lieu d'énergies diverses et souvent contradictoires, qui sont associées de manière significative avec son caractère du nord-ouest. Le projet s'est développé à travers un processus de photographie et de dialogue et, par nature, est subjective et partial. Il nous offre un engagement visuel sociologique avec un environnement social et un paysage culturel particulier, dont l'apparence et le ressenti sont représentés à travers un mélange d'images et de textes.

Abstract

This paper is an interpretive study of Edmonton, Alberta that combines photography, written reflection, and analysis. Blending insider and outsider voices and perspectives, the essay represents the city through the imagery of a gritty, postmodern frontier. Edmonton is depicted as the locus of mixed and often contradictory energies, associated in significant ways with its northwestern character. The project developed through a process of photography and dialogue and is by nature suggestive and partial. It offers a visualsociological engagement with a particular social environment and cultural landscape, whose look and feel are represented through a combination of photographic images and written text.





Fig. 1. Edmonton, late-summer evening, a lingering sunset in a city at the 54th parallel. A discernible yet distant urbanity.

This essay interprets the social landscape of contemporary Edmonton through a combination of photographs and written text. We represent it as a gritty, "postmodern-frontier" city, emphasizing how its ambiance suggests a settlement located at the borderline of different worlds, the locus of conflicting elements and energies.

This essay was produced through a reflexive process of conversation, exploration, photography, and writing. We traversed Edmonton over several months, photographing it separately and as a team; we discussed our impressions of the city, including the question of how to represent it visually. Our dialogues were influenced by our differing backgrounds (Canadian and American); our overriding commonality as sociologists interested in photography and the urban lifeworld produced a basis for dialogue from which a shared vision of the city emerged. We made several hundred photographs and studied them in a photographic software editing and management system, using a keyword system to classify and sort images in relation to emerging themes. This enhanced our ability to compare and study the images, which influenced how and what we photographed on successive outings.

The creative tension in the narrative reflects our different backgrounds: for one author Edmonton is a place to live: a site of structural contradictions, colliding energies and contested versions of alternative futures. For the other the city was originally a visual and experiential impression, interpreted comparatively against the backdrop of a post-industrial American city (Pittsburgh). In dialogue and successive photographic outings, these two perspectives on the city produce a relatively coherent vision.

In the beginning stages we characterized Edmonton's look and feel as a "postmodern frontier." Postmodernity was first used to describe architectural forms in which contradictory elements playfully confronted the authoritarian blocks of modernity, combinations of styles that contradict each other but make an interesting, engaging totality (Jenks). Frontier, on the other hand, connotes a boundary between the settled and unsettled: a "meeting place between two or more cultures" (Spurgeon viii), it is a point of contact and struggle, material and symbolic. Taken together, "postmodern" and "frontier" offer creative tensions, both within their own interpretive universes and between them. These tensions and contradictions resonated for both authors and led to the identification of the following themes that offered specific challenges and possibilities for visualization:

-The mix of north and west as a source of order and tension;

-the centrality of river and bridges as sites of connection and separation;

-transient and affective energies implied in "boom" and "bust";

-the textual and architectural inscription of the past in the present;

-the interplay of ambient light and built form.

The photographs and textual analysis develop these themes, offering an approach to representing the city that highlights the dialectical relationship between the material and the imaginative. While we do not envision them as exhaustive, definitive, or exclusively "Edmontonian," we nevertheless propose that there may be something discernibly "Edmonton" in how they comingle and form a unity. They also represent our interpretive choices within the modest constraints of a short essay, as elicited through sociological discussion, walking around, looking at, reflecting upon, and photographing the city. We concentrate primarily on the south-central area of Old Strathcona, and to a lesser extent the urban core and the outlying regions.

The essay embodies an approach to urban visual sociology in which images of landscape and sociological ideas intertwine. The tradition of urban sociology that emerged out of the Chicago School is an important influence that informs this project. In particular, we find inspiration in its call to take sociology into the streets, carefully attending to and accentuating the relationship between the form and experience of the city.

This project also draws on a social-landscape tradition that explores the dynamic relationship between human habitation, material, and land. These studies range from George Tice's 1970s photographs of gas stations and

working-class vernacular architecture, often at night and devoid of humans, to Edward Burtynsky's recent aerial photographs depicting marks made by humans as we transform (and destroy) the natural environment.¹ While we draw upon Tice and Burtynsky (for example) for inspiration, both are art photographers who draw their visions from particular photographic approaches applied to specific subject matter. Tice used a largenegative camera, long exposures, and black and white film to present formally the architectural structures of east-coast American working-class communities; Burtynsky photographs in colour from the air, finding the "above" perspective a means to grasp visually the often fantastically huge issues he confronts, such as water use. Thus, while we study the work of these (and other) art-based landscape photographers to see how they used particular photographic techniques and approaches, we defined our own working method rather than mimicked theirs.

We were also influenced by photographers who produced "portraits of cities," such as W. Eugene Smith's famous photographic study of Pittsburgh.² Smith's Pittsburgh essay offers landscapes in which humans perform the scripts seemingly asked for by their settings: working, laughing, arguing, filling routine public spaces. Pittsburgh in the 1950s came alive for Smith because he photographed with an eye to human action within the context of factory, street, club, and home. As a seasoned photojournalist he was trained to intrude when necessary into these events, and his small camera (a rangefinder Leica) and fluid shooting style made him seem transparent. In other words, he was a master "street photographer": observing, recording, merging momentarily into the setting before disappearing into the next. While we share Smith's interest in exploring a city's identity photographically, we elected not to include images of identifiable persons.

We are both practiced photographers and constructed images self-consciously, with attention to the effects of camera technologies (lens choice, aperture, shutter speed, ISO, and so forth) on the images made. Emphasizing the "how" over the "what," our photos were constructed by our framing and technical choices to exemplify the ideas we wished to communicate. We resisted the temptation to spectacularize the city or present photos as urban "eye-candy" through digital enhancements aimed at bedazzling the reader. We both use moderate wide-angle lenses that foreground objects in the context of their setting and present landscapes at approximately the perspective of the human eye. To reflect on the multiple layers and forms of social existence that the landscapes imply, we have (mostly) emptied them of identifiable human persons through photographic methods, including the use of long exposures in which people moving through space fade or disappear from view.

Edmonton—A City West by North

The cardinal directions west and north begin to locate Edmonton geographically and culturally. Edmonton is a western city, located in the western region of the Canadian prairies. Within the collective imaginary, it is a city "out west" in a sparsely populated region, an intense urbanity surrounded by low-density settlements and agricultural forms of life culturally associated with the west. The city's extensive and connected parks and trails include dense forests that sometimes resemble wilderness territory. There is a vivid sense of urban landscape, epitomized in the view of the city's skyline from the south side of the river along Saskatchewan Drive; yet the experience of the built world is continuously punctuated by natural elements.

The presence of wild nature often appears as a spectacle: an arresting sunset, an interesting cloud pattern, or a striking rivervalley vista. Edmonton's commanding river-valley system is the largest connected urban parkland in North America, 18,000 acres in size and 48 kilometres in length. Urban energies coexist with relatively isolated natural woods, often located along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. The forest and ravines inside the city with their crisscrossing paths are an invitation to bucolic nature and activities out-of-doors. Sparsely populated and devoid of "natural proprietors" to offer the grassroots security presence that Jane Jacobs identified as "eyes on the street" (35), these public trails can also be fearful sites of potential predation. The allure of the urban wilds coexists with a hint of vulnerability and danger.

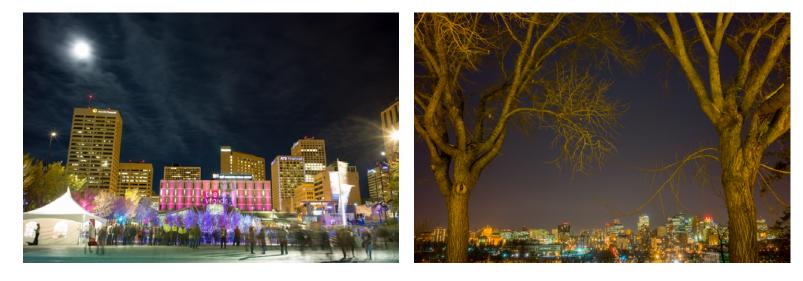


Fig. 2. Edmonton's first Nuit Blanche street festival, downtown core.

Fig. 3. Downtown Edmonton, as seen from the multi-use path along Saskatchewan Drive.

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Fig. 4. The links between the city and the wilderness-like parks are often wooden steps from the surface of the city down into ravines and valleys or conversely, up into the streets of different neighbourhoods and areas.

Symbolically and ideologically, Edmonton evokes the settler imagery of a frontier town at the edge of habitation ("old west") with the promise of subsistence or even prosperity during hard times elsewhere. Tied to the hope signified by going west is a sense of nostalgic longing, captured poignantly in the lyrics of Ian Tyson's 1963 song "Four Strong Winds." The song has been ritually sanctified in Edmonton, collectively performed on the last night of the four-day Edmonton Folk Music Festival that takes place every August in Gallagher Park, near the banks of the North Saskatchewan River: "...*Thought I'd go out to Alberta, weather's good there in the fall. Got some friends that I can go to working for...*"

Edmonton is also a quintessentially northern city. Geographically it is the most populous northern

Fig. 5. Winter clouds above the river and city, as seen from the High Level Bridge.

Fig. 6. The High Level Bridge, 2:00 p.m. on the winter solstice.

settlement on the continent, the only northern census metropolitan area (CMA) with a population exceeding one million.³ The winter nights are long and dark and summer light lasts well into the night. Amongst major Canadian cities, it is the darkest place to be on the winter solstice (approximate 9:00 a.m. sunrise and 4:30 p.m. sunset, 7.5 hours of daylight); conversely it is the lightest major Canadian city on the summer solstice (approximate 5:00 a.m. sunrise and 10:00 p.m. sunset, 19 hours of daylight). Such extremes invite different forms of habitation that fluctuate with the seasons.

Edmonton is a gateway to the remote north, a site of intersection between northern routes and workers en route.⁴ Economically and geographically, its northern character is tied to the extraction of raw materials

and the energy sector; workers on the oil patch, particularly Fort McMurray, use the city as a staging ground, a place of transition between times of work in an industry that is both volatile and contested.⁵ Billowing smoke pumps into the typically blue skies above the city, lingering potently and visibly in the thick cold of a clear and sunny winter day; from the rows of oil refineries located towards its north-east outskirts, these clouds evoke a strangely dreamy and sinister effect. They are also visual metaphors and material traces of Edmonton's deep economic ties to the oil and gas sector, with all of the ambivalence that accompanies this relationship. Indeed this is a time in which critical environmental challenges hang heavily in the political air, both here and around the globe.

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Fig. 7. Cloud-like smoke billows into the air from an oil refinery around Refinery Row on the eastern edge of Edmonton, as seen from a car window.

The city's northern geography also shapes its cultural identity in creatively tangible ways. In recent years Edmonton has officially embraced the identity of "winter city."⁶ Popular cultural events and annual festivals staged in the cold dark of winter suggest a spirit of joyful resilience in the face of a typically bitter (though dry!) cold. Popular annual winter festivals such as Ice on Whyte or the Deep Freeze Byzantine winter festival are two examples that include ice sculptures, snow slides, and other enticements to abandon the warmth of the indoors for the frigid world outside. The north is both a source of physical hardship and collective possibility. Fig. 8. Ice on Whyte, 2016. The festival invited an international ice-sculpting competition, including the submission pictured here, "The Wind Blows from the South," by team Lithuania.



River and Bridges: Connection and Separation

"The bridge becomes an aesthetic value insofar as it accomplishes the connection between what is separated not only in reality and in order to fulfill practical goals, but in making it directly visible" (Simmel 6).

eferred to locally as "River City," Edmonton is bisected by the North Saskatchewan River. A river city is perhaps by definition a city of bridges. Bridges simultaneously connect and separate parts of the city, physically and symbolically (Simmel 5); they help to create, connect, and delineate a north and a south side. Edmonton's bridges are also a vivid reminder of the city's industrial prowess, especially true of the High Level Bridge, an iconic landmark in the city centre. The rough and imposing construction has recently undergone a visual transformation through the Light the Bridge campaign that is visually enchanting, sometimes garishly so. Sixty thousand programmable LED bulbs are illuminated every night. Varying in color, the lights often mark notable local, national, and international events. On Christmas Eve, for example, they were illuminated in green and red; following the Paris attacks in November 2015, they were white, red, and blue. In these instances the enduring functional form plays with the ephemeral, celebratory, and carnivalesque.

Traversing the bridge on foot brings together several defining elements of Edmonton. It has a gritty look and feel; one is exposed to the elements with little protection, at the same time as one is opened up to the dramatic glow of a vivid downtown cityscape. As motorized vehicles on two narrow lanes rush by, pedestrians and cyclists precariously share the narrow, tunnel-like pathway between the river below and traffic, often barely audible to one another amid wind and noise. Juxtaposed against the industrial functions of the bridge, with a train-track on top, one encounters a spectacular, dangerous, and sublime beauty set against a massive and ever-changing sky, overlooking a wide river whose sounds and movements reflect the city in its variable seasons. Even on the coldest days of winter there is typically a thin strip of water 48 meters below, moving too rapidly to freeze completely. From the vantage point of the bridge, the sliver of moving water cutting through the frozen surfaces represents life and movement but also perhaps a strange invitation to jump (as Trevor Anderson suggests in his documentary short The High Level Bridge, 2010). The bridge invites melancholia and an existential moment in the city and perhaps also for the city.7



Fig. 9. The High Level Bridge.

Fig. 10. Entering the pedestrian walkway from the south side of the river.



Transience: Boom and Bust, Population, and Economy

dmonton is marked by tensions between growth and stasis. The city has always been demographically dynamic, creating a cultural, economic, and visual environment that is in perpetual development and always showing its rough edges. In part, these tensions reflect the coexistence of those who use Edmonton as a stepping-off place to northern extraction industries or other endeavors beyond the city boundaries and those who settle in the city, normally drawn by the promise of work or study rather than as a destination in its own right. Marked by its location at the intersection of multiple regions of economic activity, Edmonton is a pathway through and site of arrival for economic migrants. It is also marked by the anomic dimensions that invariably accompany a boom-and-bust economic pattern within an often ruthlessly individualistic, late-modern capitalism (cf. Durkheim).8

Indeed the city accommodates, services, and exploits the transience of significant parts of its population. The embodied and unique biographical energies underpinning this ongoing drama are evoked in the ample pawnshops and predatory lending institutions seen throughout the city core and in the various built forms that meet the mundane needs of people on the move: laundromats, park benches, and self-storage facilities whose monotonous façades conceal the narrative details implied in each interior. Prosaic public architecture, such as the modernist public bathroom in Old Strathcona, suggest Edmonton's attempt to accommodate lives on the move and bodies in between places, from transient and under-housed persons, to suburban visitors, Farmer's Market shoppers, and intoxicated bar-scene revelers.



Fig. 11. The spectacular and often garish light show.

Fig. 12. The light-rail transit bridge as seen from the High Level Bridge, suggesting the extraordinary vistas afforded pedestrians and cyclists on the bridge at all hours and in all seasons.

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Fig. 13. Public Laundromat, east Whyte Avenue.

Fig. 14. Modernist public bathroom, open all hours, offering facilities and momentary shelter in a glass box.

Fig. 15. Uncle Ed's, a predatory lending institution.





The Inscription of Past in Present

The past is inscribed in the city's present in different ways, both literal and symbolic. These are marked self-consciously in the city's formally designated historic areas and also implied in the lingering presence of particular historical eras implied by fonts on material surfaces, creating an ambiance of colliding times and memories.

Indeed, the city has created what it calls a living-history museum at Fort Edmonton Park, comprised of working shops, restaurants, and other facilities that combine original and re-creations of buildings from three eras in which Edmonton was a fur-trading outpost (1885, 1905, and 1920). Touted as the largest museum of its kind in Canada, Fort Edmonton presents a sanitized and simplified version of earlier eras, replete with guides in costume during summer months to reinforce the visual presentation of an imagined past.

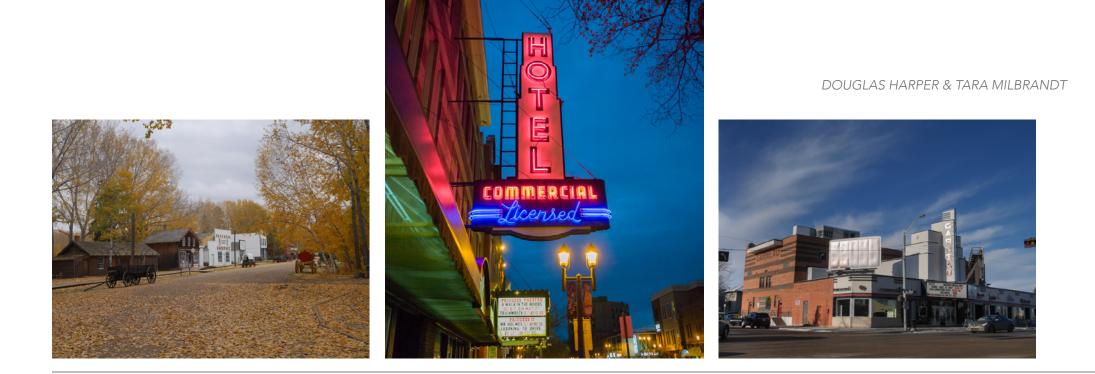


Fig. 16. Fort Edmonton, a museum preserving and codifying a version of the region's history. To wander through these re-created streets is to immerse oneself in an idealized vision of the past and engage in an imaginative involvement with Edmonton's history and identity.

Edmonton's demographic dynamics have contributed to an ongoing tension between original architectural definitions of the city and continual rebuilding, reuse, and redefinition. Buildings combine original historical definition and contemporary uses, most notable in Old Strathcona, a formally designated historic area south of the river that is also the university area and a popular live theatre, restaurant, bar, and shopping district. Historic buildings are often labeled with informative brass plaques and occupied by contemporary and mostly independent businesses. Some historic buildings continue to serve their original uses, though of course in ways that bear traces of the contemporary. Fig. 17. Historic hotel and cinema, in continual use since its construction in 1921. The iconic Princess Theatre is located next to the Commercial Hotel, which houses the popular bar and live-music venue Blues on Whyte.

Certain historical eras, such as the 1950s, are frozen in fonts and design used in large permanent signage, often with corresponding neon displays. For example, an auto-dealer on Whyte Avenue continues to advertises "Olds" in a large tower and sign that preserves the look of the 1950s and '60s, though the last Oldsmobile was produced in 2004. The presence of multiple car dealerships in this relatively pedestrian concentrated and cyclist inhabited area of the city communicates mixed messages. Overall, Edmonton mixes historical eras freely, with self-conscious attention to the historical significance of particular places and structures. The overall look is gritty-historical, with an ad hoc feeling attuned to the rapid development of the city. Edmonton's pragmatic identity is based on its connection to the energy sector in the north and its constant use as a transit zone between places, imagined eras, and regions. Fighting to the surface is a sense of a "new frontier," an urban place deriving from location and purpose.

Fig. 18. Garneau Theatre Building, which houses the art-

the University of Alberta.

house Metro Cinema, restaurants, and a popular cafe near



Interplay of Ambient Light and Built Form

The city's northern latitude creates a landscape of shadows that shape the look and feel of its neighborhoods, streets, and buildings. The sun along the horizon shines into surfaces, rather than down onto the tops of objects, even when the midsummer sun is highest in the sky. This effect influences the experience of the city in subtle yet distinctive ways. By contrast, in cities nearer to the equator, one seeks refuge from the sun's direct and incessant rays; in Edmonton the muted and oblique sunlight is an aesthetically pleasing presence. Prairie clouds are typically textured and dynamic, often interrupted with beams of sunlight that momentarily break through the grey cover, offering an illuminated silver texture to both the sky and building surfaces.

Edmonton also has a relatively high proportion of sunlight hours, generally ranking in the top three or four Canadian cities for total sunlight hours and for the number of days in which bright sunlight is recorded.⁹ As a result, it has a visual energy driven by light, in





Fig. 19. Neon signage celebrating an automobile that has been out of production for more than a decade.

Fig. 20. 1950s font on an auto dealership on Whyte Avenue, where the prevailing businesses are independent shops, restaurants, and cafes. The bold signage recalls an era and is deteriorating before the eye of the public. Fig. 21. Army & Navy department store on Whyte Avenue, opened in 1928. The chain is touted as "Canada's original discount store." Army & Navy's perseverance contrasts with the rapid turnover in adjacent blocks. contrast to the energy of cities with dull, overcast, foggy, or (more) visibly polluted skies.

Edmonton light appears relatively undiluted by industrial pollution in spite of the harmful particulate matter that lingers invisibly in the air. The winter light is muted by the low angle of the sun and the correspondingly soft hues of long sunrise and sunset hours. Although the summer sun is higher in the sky, the mornings and evenings are extended and gradual. At 11:00 p.m. in June the city is still vibrant from

the post-sunset glow. It is also a city in vivid winter blackness, where darkness communicates atmospheric storefront, with a residual sign that reads "TIME IS cold, stillness, and withdrawal into domestic spaces.

The city features light in its environmental designs, particularly in recent projects on the High Level Bridge and winter festivals where colored lights illuminate sculptures made from ice, sometimes juxtaposed against fire. Afternoon light in midwinter illuminating bare trees and the low angle of the sun create visual drama; the ephemerality is intensified by the

appearance of dark afternoon shadows along a vacant PRECIOUS" (see Fig. 28). It is as if the city's material and atmospheric elements are in dialogue with one another.





Fig. 22. Rainbow over an industrial alley, Old Strathcona, early evening, approaching summer solstice.

Fig. 23. Ceiling light reflections from a drugstore window.

Fig. 24. Shopfront of Cleaning by Page against sunlight beaming through moody clouds.

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Fig. 25. Afternoon light in midwinter. Bare trees and the low angle of the sun create visual drama; the ephemerality is intensified by the sign on the vacant store.

Fig. 26. Northern light reflected in Edmonton's downtown office towers.

Fig. 27. Art Gallery of Alberta. In 2010 the new public building was opened in a more prominent and central location near City Hall. Its surreal architecture design contrasts with the urban brutalist style of the previous building and the generic modern towers that surround it.

Conclusion

Guided by the idea of a "postmodern frontier," we have explored several themes and tensions that evince perceptible aspects of Edmonton's public ambiance and unique geography. We have been attuned to seen-but-unnoticed dimensions of the everyday and night, in a city not typically revered for its visual or urban qualities. Without a rigidly preconceived framework, we allowed ideas to emerge and develop in dialectical relationship with the images being made, through conversations elicited by these images and in continuous (if sometimes implicit) comparison with other cities. This narrative is a modest attempt to understand and characterize a multi-layered urban identity through written and visual text, an invitation to see and imagine Edmonton sociologically.

*The listing of author names is alphabetical.

Notes

¹ For an overview of social landscape as the basis for a visual sociology of the city, see Harper (2012, 2015). For an introduction to the concept of social landscape, see Knowles and Sweetman. Tice's representative work is found Tice (1975). Burtynsky's extensive work is best accessed via his website (http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/).

 2 W. Eugene Smith's photographic survey of Pittsburgh was an unprecedented visual study of a city. Armed with a letter of introduction from the mayor of Pittsburgh, Smith immersed himself for more than a year in the public life and institutions of the city, making thousands of black-and-white photographs that were not systematically catalogued, exhibited, or published until several decades after Smith's death. See Stephenson.

³ The Edmonton census metropolitan area (CMA) population was estimated to be 1,328,300 according to the 2014 census by Statistics Canada, whereas the City of Edmonton had a population of 877,926. The population has been recorded in censuses performed at five-year intervals and typical growth rates over these five-year periods have been more than 10%. For more detail, see http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/150211/t150211a001-eng. htm and http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/facts_figures/population-history.aspx.

⁴ Dorow and Dogu studied what they termed the "local consciousness" of residents of Fort McMurray by having them draw maps that represent their subjective definition of the city. They write: " ... most of the workers' maps included escape hatches to places that temporarily mitigated the stark reality of spatially deferred hope. ... Mark went regularly to Edmonton on his days off to spend time with activist friends; next to 'E-town' he wrote 'this place keeps you sane." (284). Their study appears in an exemplary collection by Davidson, Park, and Shields (2011) that explores what they term "ecologies of affect," that is, how particular aspects of place (and time) evoke or manifest nostalgia, desire, and hope.

⁵ The energy industry, particularly oil and gas, has become increasingly criticized both nationally and internationally by the association of bitumen extraction and "dirty" oil from the Athabasca tar sands, located in Fort McMurray, Alberta, as well as fears of oil spills associated with pipelines. Further, boom and bust has been the dominant economic pattern within Alberta for decades as a result of how the (now former) Progressive Conservative dynasty government managed the resource economy through close ties to the private oil and gas industry, while boasting of the (low) tax "advantage" in Alberta but leaving workers vulnerable to such events as collapsing oil prices in the global economy. By 2016, under a New Democratic Party government, diversification of the economy has become a more imaginable alternative, although the degree to which this becomes reality remains to be seen. For some critical elaboration of what this might require, see Laxer.

⁶ Edmonton joined a list of other northern cities around the world seeking to engage winter as a positive time of cultural possibility rather than a season of dread. For background on Edmonton's official WinterCity strategy, see the following report: http://www.edmonton.ca/city_ government/documents/PDF/COE-WinterCity-Love-Winter-Summary-Report.pdf.

⁷ In addition to emergency telephones, which were installed by the city in 2015, construction is underway to build suicide prevention barriers, in the form of high-tension wires, along the High Level Bridge. While this is being lauded as an important step in responding to the problem of suicide, it has also led to some controversy concerning its implications for cyclist safety.

⁸ A recent increase in suicide has been attributed to mass layoffs in the energy sector in the past year. For example, between January and June 2014, there were 252 suicides in Alberta, compared to 327 in 2015, a year in which there were mass layoffs in the energy sector. See http://www.cbc. ca/news/canada/calgary/suicide-rate-alberta-increaselayoffs-1.3353662.

⁹ https://www.currentresults.com/Weather-Extremes/ Canada/sunniest-cities.php.

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Milbrandt: 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 25

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