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TEMPORARY WORK ON THE BAKKEN SHALE

By

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BA, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2011

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in Sociology  
The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2016

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Temporary Work on the Bakken Shale

Chairperson: Daisy Rooks

In this thesis, I explore what accounts for worker consent to precarious employment in the context of rapid industrial change in the rural United States. In recent years, domestic oil development has transformed the landscape of western North Dakota and Eastern Montana into a zone of oil production now known as “the Bakken.” The acute demand for labor brought about by this development resulted in vastly inflated wages, which in turn drew workers from around the U.S. and the world. State and private labor market intermediaries, including temporary labor agencies, formed to organize and market this labor force for employers in the area. Just as global demand for oil flagged in late summer of 2015, I completed six weeks of participant observation as a temporary laborer in the Bakken. Using the observational data I collected during my fieldwork, I examine how a private temporary labor agency organized and redistributed the labor force still present in the Bakken, as well as how workers themselves participated in and resisted the commodification of their labor. I find that the interplay of worker aspirations for class mobility, the removal of the labor process from worker-employer negotiations, and the inability of migrant workers to invest in the local community account for consent to this precarious organization of labor, and present major obstacles to worker mobilization.

## Acknowledgements

Daisy Rooks gave me the methodological and analytical tools to carry out this thesis, and carefully pored over many drafts. She pushed me to write—and think—with precision. While the faults of this thesis are my responsibility, its strengths are a direct result of her diligent guidance. I am grateful for her mentorship.

Dusten Hollist believed in me from the start. I could not have made this journey without his trust.

Jill Belsky sharpened my critical vision, and taught me the importance of scale in social analysis.

Scott G. McNall oriented me to the theoretical vistas of our discipline. He spurred me to think about the role of sociology, and my own work, in society.

The faculty and staff, as well as my student-colleagues, at the Sociology department offered a safe and challenging environment to explore the ideas in this thesis (and many more). Their dedication to the sociological imagination is humbling. I sincerely thank them for it.

Kelly Webster of the Writing Center at the University of Montana offered key insights in developing the argument and adjusting the logic of my argument.

Sue Wall generously allowed me to drive her RV back and forth across Montana and call it home for my six weeks in the field.

Tim Follos' wit and journalistic instincts softened the hard edges of the journey to Williston.

Finally, my family supported me morally and financially throughout this project. I could not have done this without their strength. This thesis would be a far frailer thing without Kathryn Sears Ore showing me what hard work and scholarship truly means.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the American west could be described in terms of commodities and labor—agricultural land and dry land farming, copper and mining, even housing credit and construction (Hostetter 2011). Population “booms,” often associated with resource extraction and the labor it requires, have been major engines of demographic change west of the Mississippi since European colonization. The remnants of mining towns, oil booms, coal strips and suburban sprawl across the western landscape memorialize these rapid shifts in population. Many of the settlements of the rural west that remain are less the vectors of demographic growth we usually imagine and more decaying fragments of previous booms. Such was the case on the banks of the Missouri River near the Montana-North Dakota border.

White colonists first settled the two major towns on either side of the border—Sidney, Montana, and Williston, North Dakota—in the 1870s and 1880s (Works Progress Administration 1938, Mercier 1985). Since then, periodic, rapid population growth has concurred with crises in global capital and technological innovation. In 1900, homesteaders arrived to dry land farm the area. In the 1930s, flood irrigation technology and global depression brought another infusion of migrants seeking refuge from the dust bowl and the automation of agriculture. The first oil boom occurred in the 1950s. The oil crisis of the 1980s and another surge in domestic oil production brought about the region’s final period of intense growth in the century. After the boom of the early to mid 1980s subsided, the region experienced a decades-long contraction of the populations that swelled there periodically the previous hundred years.

By 2008, another period of acute immigration associated with speculation and resource development (a “boom”) was in full swing. Features from past booms accompanied this one, albeit at an unprecedented scale. Once again, a systemic crisis in the global economy and novel production technologies brought investment and workers from around the world, yet this boom differed in ways that represent broader social and economic shifts since the 1980s. The fact that this boom happened in the midst of a great recession and found its productive medium in hydraulic fracturing technologies (vs. flood irrigation or conventional drilling) have important consequences that I cannot fully examine here. In this thesis, I make sense of another novelty for resource development in the area, one that has become emblematic of 21<sup>st</sup> century work practices in general: temporary labor.

Temporary labor needs to be understood as a site where the politics of “market fundamentalism” (Somers and Block 2014) are negotiated in the daily practices of the men and women who become temporary workers. Understanding these practices requires an investigation of temporary work as a lived experience. To this end, I conducted over 90 hours of participant observation in a temporary labor agency and on jobsites in Williston, North Dakota.

The people I lived and worked with during those six weeks were experiencing the effects of a dramatic decline in the barrel price of oil in a “flexible” economy. Oil had gone from nearly \$100 a barrel in June of 2014 to less than \$50 by February of 2015. For corporations, this meant consolidation and contraction as many smaller operations succumbed to increasingly adverse conditions in the global commodities market. For many young workers in the region, it meant the loss of the overtime wages, benefits, and dignity

oil work had provided. The collapse of oil prices represented a loss of a sense of financial security that has become increasingly rare for a generation of the American working class raised in the neoliberal era.

Many of the men I met in the Bakken were willing to trade the service industry jobs they had in cities for work that, while more precarious, seemed to approximate the legendary status of manual labor during westward expansion. The former oil workers I met at the temp agency were loath to return to jobs serving pizza or cooking on lines, where it was impossible to work like a bread-winning man is supposed to, in their view: as an integral unit of the global economy. Even as these men's labor was redistributed (via the temp agency) from oil to housing and road construction projects, they were still holding out for the boom's return—analyzing economic indicators, talking about trends in the price of gasoline, applying for jobs through the Williston Job Service, and picking apart political developments such as the lifting of economic sanctions on Iran. When I asked them about the future of oil development in the Bakken, they speculated about “professional politicians” in the federal government and corporate elites distorting what they assumed was the natural rhythm of market processes. In short, they wanted to be “free” to sell their labor for the highest wage possible.

In this thesis, I explore what accounts for these men's choice to work and live in a boomtown even as it began to bust. Using the observational data I collected during my fieldwork, I examine the ways in which the Temporary Labor Company (TLC) organized the labor force still present in the Bakken, as well as how workers themselves responded to the commodification of their labor. I find that the interplay of an oil boom ideology, the removal of the labor process from worker-employer negotiations, and worker tactics both



within and outside the labor process explain their continued participation in a collapsing labor market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To help explain and describe temporary work in the Bakken, I appealed to three distinct research traditions: Social Impact Analysis (SIA) or boomtown studies, Political Ecology, and the sociology of work. In the paragraphs below, I summarize the contributions of SIA/boomtown studies and articulate a critique of the field. I go on to suggest that a synthesis of Political Ecology's emphasis on scale, livelihoods, and micropolitics and the sociology of work's understanding of precarity and the labor process offers a perspective on resource booms well suited to the political, economic, and social conditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century boomtowns. While temporary labor is representative of these conditions, it remains unstudied in the context of resource extraction.

### *Boomtown Studies*

Boomtown studies are the most influential Sociological treatments of energy development in the United States' rural west. Founders of the field categorize it variously as community sociology, rural sociology and the sociology of energy (e.g. Rosa 1988, Gold 1985, Albrecht et al. 1983). Its most notable contributor, William Freudenburg, went on to become an influential environmental sociologist (Dunlap 2013). Despite their disciplinary breadth, these social scientific studies of boomtowns share a common progenitor: Social Impact Analysis (SIA) (Albrecht et al. 1983).

SIA was a response to the energy booms and increasing environmental consciousness emerging in the American west from the 1970s to the mid 1980s (Albrecht et al. 1983, Vanclay 2006). The National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) of 1970 included society and social conditions in its definition of environment. As a result, the federal government required consideration of both social and environmental impacts in development projects. Specifically, social scientists were called upon to evaluate the consequences of resource development on social, economic and cultural life.

The scholars responsible for these early technical reports published academic interpretations of their SIA data in the form of boomtown studies. These studies have, in turn, largely framed the questions, scope and methodological approaches of contemporary boomtown studies within and outside the United States (e.g. Lawrie et al. 2011, Halseth 1999, Weber et al. 2014). While the first generation of boomtown studies offer key empirical and theoretical background for this thesis, they also impose epistemological blind spots I highlight here before employing contributions from Political Ecology and the sociology of work.

The underlying motivation of many early SIAs and boomtown studies was to make a case for including social and cultural considerations in industrial development. Raymond Gold's 1985 ethnography of the construction of coal-fired power plants in Colstrip, Montana, highlights what Vanclay (2006) calls the "proponent-adversary approach" typical of early SIA. Gold attributes residents' "increasing sense of vulnerability" to public and private agencies giving "relatively little weight to the locals' sociocultural concerns compared to...the technological and economic ones of the corporation and its customers" (Gold 1985:50). Early SIA's greatest contribution is the rigorous argument it made for

balancing environmental and economic concerns with sociological insight when assessing the impact of resource development.

Arguably the most widely-cited boomtown scholar from the 1970s and 1980s is William Freudenburg. In landmark studies, Freudenburg demonstrated that boomtown conditions in northern Colorado result in increased mental health caseloads for mental healthcare providers (Freudenburg 1982), increased levels of alienation among adolescents (Freudenburg 1984), and a diminished “density of acquaintanceship” (Freudenburg 1986). Freudenburg’s work indicates that the social impacts of rapid population growth on community cohesion and long-term stability are difficult to detect in official economic or crime statistics. Exhaustive secondary data analysis or tailored survey instruments need be employed, he argued, in order to quantify how boomtown conditions affect residents. Further, social change impacts are expressed differently among different local populations.

Raymond Gold, who strenuously advocated ethnographic field methods, was one of the few SIA scholars to define social impacts from the point of view of local residents (both “newcomers” and “long-timers,” in his terms), rather than preconceived social scientific indicators. This is, at least in part, a product of his qualitative methodological preference—a rarity in SIA. Gold (1985) found that the introduction of non-local, impermanent residents have the effect of enclosing extant social circles in residential communities, creating enclaves of “locals” amidst a “growing proportion of newcomers” in the community (Gold 1985: 68). Social islands of long-timers, in turn, tended to heighten long-term divisions and balkanize local resistance to change—for better or worse.

Summers and Branch (1984), in an article that closely aligns with the sociology of work and Political Ecology traditions summarized below, discuss the key economic effects of industrial development and resource extraction. They demonstrate that while economic benefits can accrue for communities under certain conditions, they are almost always distributed unevenly throughout the community (pp 140-156). Further, they found that large-scale industrial construction or resource extraction projects rarely employ locals in high-wage technical positions. Instead, project coordinators house technical workers temporarily on-site or have them commute long distances (pg 149). Importantly, Summers and Branch locate resource booms in the context of broader political economic changes:

The growth of boomtowns and plant shutdowns are predictable consequences of capital mobility; both cases are accompanied by hardships for some workers and communities. There is an underlying tension between the free movement of capital, on the one hand, and community stability and worker welfare, on the other. (1984: 159)

Summers and Branch's analysis, then, suggests a linkage between the concepts of flexible accumulation and boomtown studies. The "tension" they describe between free market principles and worker welfare in resource booms is central to this analysis.

#### *Boomtown studies: an international critique*

SIA and boomtown studies had its heyday in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, a lull in domestic resource development caused many scholars in the U.S. to turn their attentions elsewhere. Simultaneously, the predominance of "market-oriented solutions and top-down, instrumental global governance" to development problems resulted in an emphasis on economic and environmental impact statements (Scoones 2009: 6).

As SIA declined in the U.S., it found a receptive audience internationally, where the practice was taken up and modified to suit different environmental, intellectual and social contexts. International practitioners and scholars developed their own version of SIA through systematic critique.

Frank Vanclay, an Australian advocate for and practitioner of SIA, summarizes the international discussion of SIA as practiced in the U.S. (Vanclay 2002, 2006). Vanclay suggests the epistemological orientation of SIA leads to a flawed theoretical structure of impact variables. Echoing a critique articulated by Gold in early debates on social impacts (Albrecht et al. 1983), Vanclay explains that SIA-defined “impact variables” rarely measure impacts directly. Instead, he argues, crime rates, the presence of sexual “predators” (cf. Berger and Beckmann 2010), and other statistics are *indicators* that impacts may exist, given the right social conditions (Vanclay 2002:188)—just as a thrown rock will shatter ice but ripple water. For instance, the “influx or outflow of workers” (Guidelines and Principles 1993:19) might differentially impact a community, depending on (for example) the number, composition, relative difference between non-resident workers and pre-boom residents, and presence of a “work hard, play hard” mindset among non-resident workers (Vanclay 2002:194). In the words of Raymond Gold, a focus on quantifiable variables in the absence of ethnographic fieldwork can result in a study of the “indices of human behavior rather than the actual behavior itself” (Gold, in Albrecht et al. 1983:353).

The value of this body of boomtown literature is in articulating some of the social impacts of resource development. My inquiry into work in the Bakken draws heavily on aspects of the boomtown tradition: Freudenburg’s work on mental health impacts, Gold’s iconoclastic ethnographic approach, and Summers and Branch’s political-economic survey.

However, as Vanclay's critique suggests, SIA is inadequate for investigations that seek to understand the symbolic struggles for meaning associated with resource development (Moore 1993). To compensate for this, I employ findings from the sociology of work and Political Ecology, fields that provide well-developed, empirically-driven definitions of work, industrial change, and natural resource development.

### *Political Ecology*

Where boomtown studies emerged out of the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century resource development in the United States, Political Ecology explored resource development in non-Western contexts. Early works such as Piers Blaikie's *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985) examined resource exploitation on multiple political and economic scales. Similar to the SIA scholars who advocated for sociological inquiry in resource development, Blaikie and other early Political Ecologists sought to explain "the integration of social factors" in analyses of environmental problems (Blaikie 1985:81). In contrast to SIA, applying a multiscalar political-economic approach allowed Blaikie and others to explain problems such as soil erosion in Africa as the result of a global system of inequality, rather than the product of local resource mismanagement and/or overpopulation.

While Political Ecologists employ a wide range of methodological styles, they share an emphasis on "empirical, research-based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power" (Robbins 2004:391). Moore (1993) stresses that these changing social/environmental systems are shaped by both "micropolitics" and "symbolic

contestations” (pg. 381). In this section, I discuss a few of Political Ecology’s conceptual tools that I made use of in this thesis. I also point to the linkages between Political Ecology and contemporary approaches to analyzing precarious work.

*Analytical tools: scale, livelihoods and micropolitics*

While arguing for the application of Political Ecology to the “developed” world, McCarthy (2002) identifies its “ten major themes.” While every theme he identifies may apply to oil development on the Bakken, three are of particular interest to this thesis: the use of multiple scales of analysis (in Robbins’ terms cited above: “linkages”), an emphasis on livelihoods, and careful study of micropolitical struggles over the meaning and history of resources (McCarthy 2002:1283). I discuss below how these themes have concrete applications to temporary work in the Bakken.

In contrast to the typical SIA, Blaikie (1985: 82) describes the successful integration of social factors in terms of a “‘bottom-up’ analytical approach.” This approach begins with the “smallest decision-making unit,” then traces the political and economic factors that underlie this unit’s interactions with resources at local, regional, national, and global scales (ibid). Thus, analyses of environmental issues begin with local understandings of livelihood, landscapes and natural resources and then seek to link them to large-scale structural conditions. My effort to forge these linkages included an emphasis on exploring temp workers’ understandings of the Bakken landscape, their personal motivations and histories, and their experience of the post-fordist organization of labor. In clarifying who is doing what to whom in the Bakken, I attempted to identify patterns and causal linkages across multiple scales.

While this thesis is focused on the micropolitics that take place in the temporary work environment, it would trivialize the struggle of temporary workers to isolate these from the broad spectrum of activities they engage in to stay alive. Scoones (2009) offers a political-ecological definition of livelihoods that goes beyond one-dimensional approaches that only examine wage-earning vocations or resource use. Instead, he theorizes livelihoods as a “complex *bricolage* or portfolio of activities” used to enable human life in a given context (Scoones 2009:2). A political-ecological analysis of livelihoods begins with a “local” perspective, attempting to understand the complex, changing systems by which individuals and groups literally make their living. Political Ecologists most often achieve this by observing these practices directly.

This definition of livelihoods is a reminder that wage-work alone does not constitute a living. Rather, workers employ multiple practices to sustain themselves and their households. In the Yukon forests, livelihoods practices encompass timber operations, firewood collection, and gathering non-timber forest products (Natcher 2004). As I explain below, for temp workers in the Bakken, these practices included transportation and housing arrangements (or alternatives to housing) while on- and off-shift, among others. In keeping with a Political Ecological approach, I engaged in direct observation to understand how these activities constituted a temporary livelihood in the Bakken.

Political Ecology’s multiscalar approach winds up creating a tension between “macrostructural frameworks” and “the nuances of social actors’ livelihood struggles” (Moore 1993:381). A palliative to this tension, Moore (1993) suggests, is to root analyses in direct observation of the enactment of power and resistance. Moore argues that this is the primary site of the struggle for meaning. Moore illustrates (among others, e.g. Neumann



2003), that symbolic and material struggles over the definition of landscape are associated with the coercion and alienation of local populations. The meaning of nature and natural resources is “produced” in the contest to control resources and landscapes (Neumann 2003). Moore’s use of de Certeau’s concepts of strategy and tactics illustrate this dynamic on a micropolitical scale.

### *Tactics and ideology*

De Certeau’s definition of strategy involves the isolation of “a subject of will and power” from its environment (de Certeau 1984: xix). Strategists define the spaces in which power operates. Colonial map-making and modern urban planning are illustrations of this relationship, where powerful others shape both symbolic and material space, thereby defining the parameters for both domination and resistance. Tactics, on the other hand, are employed by those without power over space. Rather than spatial manipulation, tactics depend on patience, a temporal practice—a tactic “is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (ibid.:xix). As I demonstrate below, the Temporary Labor Company (TLC) shaped both the geographic and labor mobility (Smith 2006) of workers in the Bakken labor market<sup>1</sup>. Rather than behaving like economic widgets, however, temp workers developed a wide variety of tactics to “keep their feet”: i.e. survive long enough to find desirable positions in the labor market.

Datta et al. (2007) argue for displacing the concept of “coping strategies” with “coping tactics” in studies of precarious economic and social conditions. This is not a quibble over vocabulary, but a theoretical nuance that pays attention to the experience of contemporary inequality. Datta and her co-authors argue that, under a flexible economy,

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, TLC not only strategically organized workers in space, it also helped its clients (jobsite supervisors) deny workers their tactical advantage in time.

migrant workers' ability to form long-term goals and aspirations—AKA strategies—is compromised. Thus, like temp workers, their concerns are limited to daily survival and the tactical maneuvers that enable it.

As I discuss later, however, temp workers in the Bakken did have long-term strategies that accounted for their presence there. Rather than rational calculations, these strategies had their basis in ideology, defined by Dant (2013) as a “process of socially contingent values, interpretations and taken-for-granted knowledge that is necessary for the operation of society” (pg 5). Importantly, this definition of ideology does not posit some Truth by which to judge the validity of a system of beliefs. Rather:

...ideology is cast not as the bogey of false knowledge to contrast with the purity of [social and natural] science as truth, but as a process that is intertwined with all other social processes including science. The analysis of ideology demonstrates that cultural forms which obscure the concrete relations between human beings do not do so willfully by following the conscious intentions of particular humans. (pp. 5-6)

In the practice of everyday life, actors strategically employ ideologies to formulate and justify their tactical choices<sup>2</sup>.

Analyzing power and creative resistance in the Bakken region allows for a more complete understanding of the dynamic between structure (strategy) and agency (tactics)

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<sup>2</sup> In a preliminary interview I conducted, a Bakken well-site geologist made use of what I term oil boom ideology to portray the need for her job. When I pressed her about the ramifications of her work for climate change, she cited what she saw as the geopolitical benefits of fracking:

We need to frack ... in order to get our dependence off of foreign oil. That would be huge for this country...The Middle East has quite the hold on us, right now. That's all petroleum based. We want it. Why do you think we've been over in the Middle East so long? It's not because we care.

That is, her work is not only an escape from living paycheck to paycheck (something we discussed earlier in the interview), but also a political-economic fix to global conflict. I will discuss the relationship between temp worker tactics on the Bakken labor market and this narrative of historical significance and bounty in my findings section below.

on the Bakken Shale. In this thesis, I focus on the micropolitical struggles of temp workers in the Bakken labor market. I ask how these workers—whose lives on and off shift are framed by the strategies of TLC and its clients—tactically engage with these strategies in pursuit of a secure livelihood.

Gold (1977) suggests that the most significant social impacts of energy extraction are the introduction of non-local values and lifestyles. Examining the micropolitics of a precarious organization of labor will add another dimension to Gold's observation by revealing some of the ways these non-local values and lifestyles condition, and are conditioned by, the temporary labor process.

### *Sociology of Work*

Casas-Cortes (2014) documents the development of the concept of precarity in European social movements, where academic definitions were taken up and transformed in struggles surrounding *les intermittents*, cognitive (“immaterial”) work, migration rights, and feminist activism. Through contact with these movements, precarity moved from category to process, from structural invention to bodily state. In keeping with this development, I briefly discuss the scholarship on the structural shift to precarity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century below, then situate the development of the temporary work industry (an institution that derives profit from precarity) within this shift, and, finally, discuss precarity in terms of human activity—the labor process.

Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) define work precarity as the absence of living wages, unions, statutory protections, stability, and benefits coupled with heightened work intensity (cited in Young 2010). Scholars of work in the United States and elsewhere (Mills

and Täht 2010) have found that work precarity is unevenly distributed across gender—with women disproportionately occupying such jobs (Young 2010); and race—where minorities tend to be in “less desirable and less secure employment” (Vallas 2003).

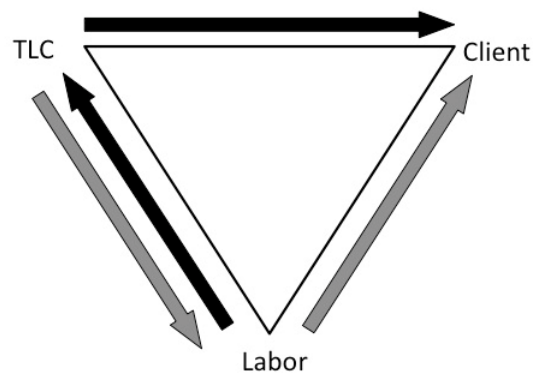
The contemporary “economy that never sleeps” (Presser 2004) is a product of the social, political and cultural processes that shaped the development of capitalism since Ford (Vallas 2012). Fordism was characterized by stable institutional structures and the resocialization of people into effective work instruments (Meyer 1980). The 1970s and 1980s saw the decline of large firms and their replacement by networks of smaller, highly specialized firms that sought to minimize investments in employees (Lambert 2008), especially in “dynamic, uncertain economic environments” (Vallas 1999:86). The rise of precarious work is part of a post-Fordist adaptation to changing global socioeconomic conditions by means of “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1989, cited in Vallas 1999:88).

Flexible accumulation refers to the capacity of corporate networks to collapse or expand market activities to maximize the accumulation of capital (Vallas 1999). In terms of work arrangements, flexible accumulation requires the downsizing of fixed labor and inventories. Instead of the lifelong occupational arrangements characteristic of Fordism, subcontracting, the use of nonstandard work hours (i.e. nights, long-term shifts), and labor market intermediaries—including temporary work companies—are hallmarks of flexible accumulation. This new occupational paradigm shaped the development of the Bakken labor market. For the first time, the system of employers overseeing rapid industrial growth in the area had a formal institution to manage surplus labor: the TLC.

### Temporary work

Temporary labor arrangements are characterized by “triangular employment relationships” (Córdova 1986:643), where workers are subject to both their nominal employers (the temporary labor company) and their jobsite supervisors (the temporary labor company’s client). As I discuss at length in the following sections, this relationship complicates, but does not fundamentally alter, the production of consent described by Burawoy (1979).

The figure below illustrates this relationship. Workers and temporary labor companies (TLC) are accountable to both of the other parties in the arrangement, while “clients” (i.e. jobsite supervisors retaining TLC services) are accountable to no one, or perhaps only weakly to the temporary labor companies:



Thus, the daily life of the temporary worker is marked by competing demands. On the one hand, they vie for a “return ticket” (Bartley and Roberts 2006)—a document signed by the client to secure the workers’ labor from the TLC for another day. On the other, they must present themselves as “reliably contingent” on the TLC (Peck and Theodore 2011). This dance is, as one of the workers at the Bakken TLC put it, the essence of “keeping your feet” in this precarious work arrangement.

The legal and economic institutions that make temporary work (as we know it) possible developed along with flexible accumulation and the neoliberal state. Formally recognized labor market intermediaries have existed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has only been since WWII that temporary labor companies negotiated, and eventually secured, an important legal distinction: employer status (Gonos 1997). This allowed the temporary labor company Manpower, Inc. to be among the largest private employers in the United States by the 1990s.

Employer status cemented the primary service temporary labor companies offer their clients: a legitimate way to avoid the legal entanglements of traditional employment (Gonos 1997). As I argue later, moving the dynamics of labor mobility (i.e. moving to a different employer) from the jobsite to the temporary labor company also helps clients avoid the moral and tactical entanglements involved in allowing negotiation between workers and management over the labor process.

Just as the flexible economy rose to dominance, labor process research and theory identified worker-management negotiations as critical to securing the consent of workers to the Fordist labor process. Yet the dynamics of consent and the labor process after the divorce of jobsite supervisor and employer have yet to be sufficiently theorized (under temporary labor arrangements: these roles are transformed to “client” and “dispatcher,” respectively). Below, I summarize Michael Burawoy’s *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), the foundational study of consent on the shop floor, and preview how I apply these theories to the temporary jobsite.

### *The labor process*

Burawoy's shop floor ethnography at Allied Corporation's machine shop is considered a classic in the study of the labor process (Smith 2016). Burawoy outlines the work process under Fordism's late configuration—what he and other Marxist economic sociologists term “monopoly capitalism.” I make parallels to Burawoy's analysis throughout this thesis. In particular, I consider how the internal labor market, internal state, and worker “games”<sup>3</sup> have transformed under flexible work arrangements. I summarize these concepts below.

In many ways, TLC represents an evolution of both the internal state and the internal labor markets Burawoy describes at Allied. TLC, like the internal state Burawoy described in Allied's machine shop in 1979, “organize[s], transform[s], or repress[es] struggles over relations in production and relations of production” (pg. 110). Simultaneously, it functions as a labor market that seeks to “bring the supply and distribution of labor under its control” (pg. 198) for the use of its clients. Unlike the internal state and labor market, the TLC did not provide a system of governance within the firms present in the Bakken. In keeping with other trends under flexible accumulation, the TLC offered the features of the internal state and labor market as a contracted service to clients.

Developing earlier theories of the labor process, Burawoy argues that the pace and efficiency of the labor process at Allied could be explained in terms of an informal set of rules and production techniques he described as “a game workers play” (Burawoy 1979:51). Workers and their direct managers were motivated to play these games to satisfy “repressive needs” while ensuring a mutually agreed rate of production (Burawoy 1979, Marcuse 1964:4). Burawoy's central claim is that participation in these games

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to these as tactics, since the term better captures their temporary, provisional nature under precarious work arrangements.

“manufactured consent” to the production process, thereby both “obscuring and securing surplus labor” (Burawoy 1979:81).

In work arrangements under monopoly capitalism (as opposed to flexible arrangements), the labor process is defined by long-term negotiations between workers and management—a “moral economy of the workplace” (Penney 2006:145). The games described by Burawoy, for example, “emerge[d] historically out of struggle and bargaining” at Allied Corporation’s machine shop (1979:80). In a contemporary example, Penney (2006) describes the influence of distinct “working class collective histories” on unionization attempts in two similar hospitals.

This is due, in part, to the tendency of firms under monopoly capitalism to develop strong internal states that incentivized long-term employment. As a result, Burawoy observed a labor process that, in his view, was largely insulated from the effects of “externally produced consciousness”—ideologies from outside the shop floor. For Burawoy, even the ideology of the “cash-nexus” did not exert significant power over worker behaviors in the games at Allied. Yet, he acknowledges that “the *idiom* of making money” is likely what brought “the worker to the factory gates” in the first place (1979: 138-139, emphasis in original). For many Bakken temp workers, the TLC—and each job allocated to them by the TLC—represented the “gates” to a diffused and flexible “factory” composed of numerous contractors in oil and related industries.

While the sociology of precarious work and the labor process has much to offer my study, its focus remains on urban industrial, or, more lately, service contexts. Gretchen Purser’s insightful ethnographic studies of temporary work (2006, 2009, 2012) describe an urban version—with notable similarities and differences—of what I saw in the Bakken. The



contribution of this thesis is its discussion of the ramifications of temporary work arrangements in a rural, “boomtown,” context. As I will demonstrate, this context was significant for both the functioning of the Bakken labor market, the role of TLC in the labor market, and the ideological and tactical options open to temporary workers.

## METHODS

To understand the role of temporary labor in contemporary rural industrial change, I spent six weeks in the Bakken region as a participant observer. The bulk of my fieldnotes are records of my experiences and observations of the dynamics of job allocation at the temporary labor company (TLC) and the temporary labor process at jobsites. I also recorded my experience as a resident of an RV Park—an affordable place for migrant workers to live long-term—and the lives of my neighbors there.

Two “boomtown” characteristics, discussed in more detail in the findings section, presented practical obstacles to my research: high costs of living and volatile labor markets. While my limited resources (both financial and temporal) constrained my ability to conduct a long-term field study, they also put me in a similar socioeconomic position as many of the people I worked with. I (inadvertently and intentionally) traced similar geographic and institutional pathways to and from the Bakken labor market as other temp workers. I sought work as other temp workers did. I slept, ate, and ached much as they did. By living in an RV Park and working at the TLC, the phenomena I studied began to leave physiological traces, even within the short timeframe I had to conduct my observations. While this literal embodiment generated insights into the temporary labor process, it also highlighted the social distance between my co-workers and me.

I presented myself as a student researcher to my neighbors at the RV Park, and answered whatever questions they had about my fieldwork (which were surprisingly few). Typically, their response to learning that I was a researcher was to tell me everything they knew about temporary labor in the region, including their own involvement in it. Following Purser's (2009) reasoning, I did not advertise my motives at the TLC. When asked, I explained I was a master's student in sociology there to make some money and "check things out." Again, it was unusual to be asked in the first place—young white men with diverse backgrounds circulated into and out of the area on a regular basis. I am certain that, had the nature of my research been disclosed to TLC dispatchers, the project itself would have been compromised. At the least, I would have been dispatched on fewer jobs and been managed differently by the TLC. Needless to say, to protect their identities, I have chosen new names for all the people and institutions mentioned in this thesis.

### *The Advantages of Temporary Work for Participant Observation*

Initially, I was drawn to the TLC as an observation site because it appeared to be a convenient way of accessing the oil industry in the Bakken given my limited resources. As I discovered more about the importance of temporary work in the contemporary economy, I realized that the presence of the TLC in the region, rather than the informal day labor arrangements of the past, was worth studying on its own. I decided to focus on the TLC and the temporary labor process, rather than taking on more steady work, because it represented one of the ways this "boom" was different than any other. While other labor market intermediaries existed in the Bakken, I chose TLC because it was the first place nearly any worker with documentation could get a job upon arriving in Williston.

I worked for and waited at TLC for over 90 hours, and spent my time off scouting abandoned encampments outside Williston, writing fieldnotes, talking to neighbors in the RV Park, and getting by on cold cuts and coffee. I generated over 125 pages (single spaced) of fieldnotes, dozens of pictures, and gathered as many employment documents from TLC as possible. In general terms, my fieldnotes document my experience circulating into and out of the region. I carefully documented the trip to and from the Bakken, community life in the RV Park, the temporary labor process on five separate jobsites, and the experience of “waiting for work” (Purser 2006) in the morning at the TLC. By expanding my observations beyond the worksite, I was able to get a sense of temp workers’ precarious existence in the Bakken—from being far from family, to replacing calories after a long day of work, to trouble-shooting car repairs.

As I discuss below, the ways TLC dispatchers allocated jobs were obscure to temp workers. That obscurity, and the dwindling numbers of jobs, gave rise to a sense of direct competition for jobs in the mornings. This made it difficult to find ways to interact with temp workers at the TLC. Building rapport with other temp workers on the jobsite, on the other hand, was not difficult.

This may be due, in part, to my experience growing up on construction sites, where I learned that laboring with another person is a kind of dialogue. Jobsite supervisors and other high-status workers expect subordinates to anticipate their movements. I was taught at a young age that an effective assistant studies their superior’s habits of movement closely, learning to be prepared to hand over the right tool, handle-side out, without any verbal direction.

Among peers, this anticipation goes both ways. Working with one or more people on a manual task, especially an arduous one, means coordinating movements and (ideally) the tactical logic behind them. Even in temporary work, where both co-workers and the jobsite are unfamiliar, I found that a sense of solidarity rises spontaneously out of the common rhythm this kind of manual labor<sup>4</sup> promotes. For example, Fred (a temp worker around my age) and I had long-winded debates on climate change, the nature of capitalism, and other social issues. Yet the fact that we worked well together (i.e. we worked at similar paces and operated under compatible logics) gave rise to a mutual respect that overrode our ideological disagreements.

While temporary labor is a difficult way to make a living, it provides ample opportunities for note taking. After a short period in the field, I settled into a rhythm of working for a day (or more, if I was given and chose to accept a return ticket) and retreating the next day to the Richland County Public Library to write accounts of the experience based on memory, voice memos, and notes recorded in my smartphone (an innocuous way of recording details in the field). While I found this time essential for writing exhaustive fieldnotes, the demands of recording these experiences meant I did not seek work or labor like other temp workers. As I describe in my findings section, my coworkers had more incentive than I did to protect their bodies from the stresses of manual labor, since they had to plan on working as much as possible. On the other hand, I had the luxury of working as hard as I wanted since I could plan on being sedentary as necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> This may be specific to construction sites, where the movements it takes to complete a task are shaped by the particular conditions at each site. In a factory setting (for example), the labor process is more readily isolated, constant, and predictable.

### *Ethical Considerations of Participating in Temporary Work*

Early on, it dawned on me that when I was dispatched on jobs I was replacing someone who may have needed the work to eat dinner that night, send money back home to their families, or develop contacts in the region. I did not find any answers to the ethical questions this raises, but I salved my conscience by putting other workers first when possible. I waited for others before volunteering for jobs<sup>5</sup>, consistently arrived late (after the first few days), left my tools behind (even a decent pair of work gloves signaled prestige to workers, dispatchers, and jobsite supervisors), and turned down jobs from employers that I knew were looking to hire temporary workers in less-temporary positions. As I discuss in the findings section, none of these choices prevented me from finding work.

Similar ethical problems arose on the jobsite. Because I had less to lose and more to gain (e.g. gathering information on jobsite dynamics) from interacting with jobsite supervisors than other workers, I often represented my coworkers if, for instance, there was an issue with our tools or we needed clarification with a task. This meant jobsite supervisors did not immediately dismiss me as they did temp workers who were nervous about approaching them<sup>6</sup>.

I soon realized that it was ethically and methodologically imperative to avoid some return tickets, volunteer my workmates for prestigious jobs, take on tasks that would cost some coworkers too much physical strain, and downplay my own construction experience. I considered it important to do these things because the men I worked with strove for and,

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<sup>5</sup> On rare occasions, dispatchers would desperately ask for volunteers for jobs. Usually they were looking for someone with a vehicle.

<sup>6</sup> Jobsite supervisors often assumed this meant they were “fucked up on something” (Williston: 7/15).

in most cases, needed any opportunities that might arise from our work. Additionally, within the short timeframe of my fieldwork, I decided it was more important to embark on a horizontal survey of the experiences of temporary workers at multiple sites, rather than a vertical survey of work on a single jobsite.

These choices at TLC and on the jobsite likely biased my data somewhat. I purposely remained in an indeterminate phase in labor circulation (described in the findings section), and thus have less information about what it is like to acquire a job through TLC and become incorporated into a more “stable” work environment (as well as be laid off from that stable environment and return to TLC). However, this approach was both ethically and methodologically sound because it compensated for the structural (education, class background) and tactical (my livelihood as graduate student was only supported by TLC) privileges I carried with me to the field. Based on what I know about other temporary workers, my experience approximated theirs more, not less, closely because of these choices.

## FINDINGS

Many of the institutional practices that constitute the low-skill labor market<sup>7</sup> in the Bakken were produced and contested at The Temporary Labor Company (TLC). I was also part of a diffuse national network of over 60 other TLCs of the same brand. TLC was at once a local and a national institution—a site where the structural dynamics of neoliberal capitalism and the choices of local actors collided on a daily basis. TLC fed on and perpetuated the contradictions of “scalar politics” in Jamie Peck’s (2002) sense of the term.

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<sup>7</sup> Somers describes markets as analytical constructs that are based empirically in “a complex of institutional practices” (2008: 87).

Unlike Burawoy's co-workers at Allied, temp workers in the Bakken did not negotiate the terms of their employment with jobsite management, but struggled to sell it to the market itself (as represented by the TLC). In this context, the drive among workers and managers to develop games in the labor process under monopoly capitalism was repurposed to develop tactics in the Bakken labor market.

Rogers (1995) describes how temporary labor arrangements subject temp workers to heightened alienation from self, others, and the work process. In the Bakken, alienation extended to the history of "struggle and bargaining" (Burawoy 1979: 80) integral to defining the work process in the first place. The mechanism for this alienation is the process, under temp labor, of grafting labor "markets" (i.e. TLC) onto worker-employer relations, in effect removing the temp worker from the history of the production process. The benefits won and concessions made in prior workers' tactical engagements with employers appear to temp workers as either institutional arrangements or entitlements they will only deserve once they find stable work.

Moving the employment relationship outside history prevents workers' comprehension of "[themselves] by knowing [themselves] to have been produced as by [themselves] through the production of past subjects" (Habermas 1971:39). In the absence of an unmediated relation to the "alien being" to whom labor is being sold and a sense of past negotiations between management and worker, many temp workers turn to what brought them to the region in the first place: an oil boom ideology. This ideology is a specific form of "market fundamentalism" that explains and justifies worker participation in the production of surplus value as products offered by the TLC to its clients.

Without exception, the temp workers I encountered were economic migrants seeking out the jobs and high wages promised by oil development. As such, they had no long-term relationship with the larger community or TLC itself. Temp workers in the Bakken, along with economic migrants in other contexts, “come from outside and remain apart from the social structure in which jobs are located” (Piore 1980: 34. For a contemporary illustration, see Anderson 2010. I return to this point below). Temp workers’ migrant status made their alienation, and their dependence on TLC, all the more profound.

This section of the thesis will examine the implications of removing long-term worker and management negotiations from the labor process in a “boomtown” context. I discuss how this arrangement defined the ways TLC organized and redistributed the temporary labor force in the Bakken, and how workers themselves participated in and resisted the commodification of their labor. The first half outlines how the formal and informal practices of the TLC constitute labor as a commodity on the Bakken labor market. The second half describes how worker tactics in the temporary labor process interact with oil-boom ideology to form a “mechanism[ ] through which surplus value is simultaneously obscured and secured” (Burawoy 1979: 30). This analysis shows how the institutional practices that constitute the Bakken labor market were initiated by the oil-boom ideology and sustained by the tactics temp workers used to “keep their feet.”

*Managing The Bakken Labor Market*



While the city of Williston, North Dakota experienced explosive population growth during this period of industrial development, it is still a small town in a rural state<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the TLC had a more important and more salient role in developing the regional labor market than it would in an urban context. This section will attempt to define that role, specifically as it relates to the temporary workers themselves. In doing so, I will begin to identify the social and economic relationships to which temporary workers gave their consent.

Benner argues labor market intermediaries (LMIs) not only shape labor supply and demand and the relations between workers and employers, but are “a third significant category of actors affecting the basic structure of regional labor markets” (2003: 622). In Benner’s analysis, LMIs are essential for modulating the “speed and character of adjustments in regional labour markets” (622), especially in volatile economic contexts. Similarly, Purser characterizes urban temporary labor agencies as a “mop” that soaks up “an ‘on demand’ pool of laborers” and “wrings” them out “to meet the flexible needs of capitalism” (2009: 19). Purser and Benner’s observations of urban LMIs largely applied to TLC, but dependence on a single commodity and the relative isolation of rural North Dakota resulted in a starker need to adjust labor markets to wide variations in the price of oil. More to the point, the rural setting resulted in a real need to process and manage labor imported from urban and rural reserves across the US and the world. TLC emerged as an

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<sup>8</sup> The population estimate for Williston in 2014 was 24,562 (2015 estimate not available. <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/3886220> accessed 2/19/15). North Dakota’s estimated 2015 population was 756,927 (<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/38>).

institution that could meet, and profit from, those demands by facilitating the circulation of labor from distant places and of diverse qualities into and within the Bakken labor market<sup>9</sup>.

Specifically, TLC received incoming workers—especially those without existing employment arrangements and/or social networks in the region—and performed basic intake processes, like establishing employment contracts, doing background checks, and identifying skills. After intake, workers were sorted—first the skilled were divided from the unskilled, then, through the judgment of TLC dispatchers, the “hard workers” from others. “Hard workers” were given access to jobs that were more likely to result in long-term employment outside the TLC. Once sorted, TLC helped retain workers on the Bakken labor market by maintaining a pool of surplus workers and providing a means for laid off “hard workers” to continue to make a wage until more long-term employment could be found. TLC redistributed retained workers to ancillary industries as demand for labor waxed in construction and waned in oil, or vice versa.

While it is tempting to imagine these moments as discrete stages in a circular process—intake, sorting, retention and redistribution—on the ground, they happened alongside each other, overlapped, and were repeated, aborted and mixed on a case-by-case basis. Further, temp workers were far from passive inputs in this process. For instance, two of my co-workers had consciously circulated into and out of the Bakken (and elsewhere) for years when I met them. Jon, a born-again southern man in his late fifties, moved around the United States every summer in search of work as an uncertified mason. In 2014 and 2015, Williston (where an unskilled temp worker could earn \$14 an hour at minimum) was

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<sup>9</sup> TLC was not the only temp agency in the Bakken, nor were temp agencies the only type of LMI. The Williston Job Service and other state-run LMIs, as well as websites like bakkenhelpwanted.com also played important roles in shaping the labor market there. TLC was the most important LMI for men who came to the region with little or no resources, however.

his first stop. Matt, a man in his thirties, worked a string of seasonal and temporary jobs in Williston and, most recently, Alaska, for several years. Both of these men lived in makeshift tents hidden at the margins of Williston. While Matt wanted stable employment, benefits, and long-term shelter, Jon (at least in conversation with me) embraced his peripatetic livelihood.

Others were stuck in one stage of circulation or another. Hunter and Fred, both Iraq war veterans, were laid off from their oil jobs during the downturn of January 2015. Both were working for the TLC while waiting for another chance at working in oil. Hunter was moving into the informal economy—through under-the-table work via craigslist and possibly his “drug dealer” (his description) roommate. Fred was suspended somewhere between retention and redistribution. He was formally employed by TLC but was housed and given a stipend by his jobsite employer of the last three months (a construction contractor).

The functional explanation given above—intended to quickly describe the ebb and flow of the Bakken’s precarious labor market—implies a strategy with a coherence neither intended nor practicable by TLC or its personnel. In fact, TLC was hard-pressed to process the numbers of bodies it had on hand into sellable labor. In the bustle and confusion of early morning job allocation, dispatchers looked more like harried social workers than street-wise “fleshpeddlers” (Purser 2009: 63). This led to a constant friction between enacting official TLC practices and fulfilling the TLC’s mandate to “address [client’s] dynamic staffing needs.” In other words, labor circulation was the outcome of a set of ad-hoc expectations, values and practices emerging from the interaction between workers, TLC dispatchers, clients and jobsite supervisors to satiate the demand for labor in the

Bakken. This “moral economy” of temporary labor defined worker “expectations of management, sense of fairness in the employment relationship, acceptable and unacceptable managerial actions, and [worker] contributions to the labor process” (Penney 2006:145, footnote).

*Contracting out the internal labor market*

The moral economy of the work process is usually thought of in the context of the historical relations between management and workers on a single work site. Yet the “triangular” workgroup that characterizes temporary labor insulates employers from negotiations with workers over control of the work process. Further, temp workers in the Bakken region do not have a generations-long history within a single institution (e.g. a hospital or factory) to anchor their negotiations.

The removal of the history of the work process in temp work begins with the arrangement of the workgroup. At TLC, the workgroup was composed of temp workers, TLC dispatchers, and jobsite supervisors. Dispatchers, as “employers,” handled intake and sorting: the application process, the allocation of jobs, and the management of behavioral problems among workers. Jobsite supervisors, as “clients,” delegated tasks on the jobsite and supervised temporary workers, usually without intervening in their behaviors. Jobsite supervisors gave temporary workers instructions for completing tasks, but they rarely involved themselves directly in the work process. Instead, temp workers were used for well-defined menial tasks such as jobsite clean up or moving materials by hand. Thus, temp workers’ “expectations of management” were largely restricted to expectations of TLC dispatchers, rather than jobsite supervisors.

The moral economy of temp labor, then, framed the relationship between management and worker not in terms of the work process, but in terms of job allocation. The relevant relationship was between temp worker and dispatcher, not temp worker and jobsite supervisor. While we were picking up sheetrock scraps in a new building in downtown Williston, Hunter related the story of an altercation with another TLC employee that demonstrates this relationship:

Their job was to load appliances from a truck into a newly constructed apartment building. When Hunter started helping [jobsite employees] install the appliances [rather than completing the task he was given], the other [TLC employee] told him to keep unloading. When Hunter refused, telling the other man he's not his boss, it turned into an argument. By Hunter's account, the other man pulled a box cutter on him and Hunter knocked it out of his hand with a 2x4. Hunter said "[TLC] was called there" and they were both kicked off the site. (Williston 7/20)

According to Hunter, the other TLC worker was not given another work ticket at the site, while Hunter ended up working there again a few days later. Even in extreme circumstances, then, TLC clients had almost nothing to do with direct management of TLC workers. The same was true, in most cases, of the work process in general.

On nearly every work ticket I received, Ken, the lead dispatcher, would briefly explain the task before we left for the jobsite. Once we arrived, the jobsite supervisor would give us instructions (that, more often than not, contradicted Ken's<sup>10</sup>). With a few exceptions, we were left basically unsupervised at that point and often had to seek out our supervisors if we needed clarification or further instruction. In practice, this meant that there was very little to no dialogue between TLC workers and jobsite supervisors. In the

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<sup>10</sup> One of the more Kafkaesque features of this division of managerial roles was TLC dispatchers' frequent misapprehension of the nature and scope of the tasks jobsite supervisors needed labor for.

most extreme case I experienced, the nominal supervisor did not recognize me at the end of the workday:

The supervisor looked at me blankly and asked if she could help me. I told her I was from [TLC] and had just finished working the grounds. She apologized for not recognizing me, saying she gets "a lot" of people in her office every day. I tried to articulate what I had done but received no response. She asked me when I arrived. I told her 10:30. She filled out the ticket, giving me an "Exceeded," and thanked me. (Williston 7/20)

The desire for a return ticket and a good employee rating regulated the pace and efficiency of our work, rather than direct contact with jobsite management. If our behaviors and labor practices were deemed inadequate, dispatchers replaced us with other TLC workers the next day. By displacing the moment of negotiation from the worksite to the sale of labor (the TLC common area), the moral economy of temporary work reduced the need for surveillance and other forms of direct control over the work process.

In TLC documents, I found that even the means available to workers for defining a "sense of fairness in the employment relationship" were displaced from the worksite to the temp agency. Temp workers were expected to complete tasks on the jobsite and negotiate for jobs and working conditions solely with the temp agency. In the words of the list of "house rules" included in the application packet, "If you are mistreated or asked to do anything dangerous, and/or the equipment is unsafe tell the client that you must call [the TLC] office." Further:

Under no circumstance is an employee of [TLC] to contact a client! There are to be no phone calls or visits with the clients. In the event of a problem, contact [TLC] staff members to resolve it. You are not to handle any issues by yourself. Any violation of this rule results in immediate termination.

TLC workers, then, were warned to exert labor-power on the jobsite and communicate needs or concerns at the temp agency. To jobsite supervisors, we were pre-packaged

bundles of labor-power of varying qualities and capabilities (though dispatchers had no systematic way of determining them) to be applied to tasks outside the scope of normal activities or in the event their productive capacity was temporarily exceeded. Jobsite supervisors were invited to browse this TLC-curated line of products and select the labor that suited them best for as much use as they saw fit. Meanwhile, TLC dispatchers enforced appropriate behaviors among temp workers primarily through job allocation.

The tactical advantage of Burawoy's workers under monopoly capitalism—rooted in long-term relationships with management and the labor process—was negated under the temporary and mobile labor regime present in the Bakken. Since the handling of labor was divided between jobsite supervisors—the consumers of labor-power—and TLC—the producer of labor-power, bargaining between workers and jobsite supervisors was largely removed from the labor process. This means that tactics of “making out” in Bakken temp labor did not concern disputes over the pace of the work process (as in Burawoy's (1979) analysis), or in its inherent values (as in Penney's (2006) analysis) but in the struggle to sell labor for a wage in the first place. TLC workers engaged in this struggle by making use of creative, contradictory, and sometimes highly effective tactics at the worksite and the temp agency.

Before describing some of these tactics, I outline the ground rules—the strategies—employed by TLC. These rules set the parameters for worker tactics, and as such, helped shape the character of the Bakken temporary labor market.

*Contracting out the internal state*

TLC fulfilled many of the functions of the “internal state” described by Burawoy (1979). In addition to facilitating the circulation of labor, TLC offered its clients a means of distributing the legal and economic liabilities of the work process to temporary workers (rather than clients or the TLC) and mitigated possibilities for solidarity among these workers. Below, I describe how TLC distributes liabilities to workers through the employment contract, obscures job allocation practices through the rating system, and atomizes cooperative groups of workers through job allocation.

I experienced some of the ways TLC bureaucratically framed the “day-to-day” employment relationship the day I was hired. Among other things, the paperwork I signed that day relieved me of my ability to take TLC to court, to hold TLC liable for dangerous working conditions, and of any expectation of employment when I arrived in the morning. By participating in TLC’s initial “training,” I demonstrated that I was aware of the ergonomic behaviors that reduce the mundane risks of labor, such as injuries related to lifting (“lift with your legs”) and repetitive stress. Within a few hours, TLC had effectively mitigated its legal responsibility for my employment, the working conditions I was to labor under, and any injuries or accidents that resulted from working conditions, happenstance, or my behavior.

The contract I signed was nearly identical to the one Purser (2009) describes (as was the reluctance of the TLC employee to give me a copy). The documents, which I quote from directly, included: consent to test for drugs and alcohol should I suffer any “work-related injury or illness” (and another, separate form consenting to random drug screening); an arbitration clause; a waiver relieving clients of all liability for any work-



related injury; a transportation deduction consent; a “best match to dispatch” procedure consent; and a verification that “I understand that my employment with [TLC] is on a day-to-day basis.”

This contract goes further than minimizing liability for clients (something they accomplish within a single waiver). Through these documents, TLC structures its employment relationship to minimize the likelihood it will be held responsible for worker injuries, unfair distribution of jobs, or lack of employment. The transportation deduction consent enables TLC to make use of worker vehicles to secure clients that might otherwise be too far from TLC for workers without vehicles to reach by foot. The “best match to dispatch” consent relieves TLC of the responsibility to fairly, transparently, and objectively distribute jobs. Workers’ consent to a day-to-day employment relationship with TLC allows TLC to reduce or expand its use of surplus labor as market conditions fluctuate. Finally, its drug testing policy and arbitration clause erode workers’ ability to take legal action or be remunerated for jobsite injuries. The legal, corporeal and economic risks of employment, then, are effectively transferred to TLC workers as a basic condition of their (day-to-day) employment.

The “training” I underwent later that day consisted of an 18-minute video about lifting heavy objects and avoiding repetitive stress injuries, a 3-minute presentation from Ken (the head dispatcher) about how to assemble and wear our personal protective equipment (PPE), and a brief explanation of TLC’s worker rating system. Ken made it clear to us that the training was another way of making us legally responsible for avoiding risk on the jobsite, rather than a genuine effort to make us safer or more effective workers.

Perhaps in an attempt to gain our trust, Ken belittled the process with an admixture of self-deprecating and patronizing humor. He told the only woman in our group, a small, quiet person in her 60s (who I did not see after that day), that if anyone “messes” with her, he would “get someone else to beat them up” and asked us if it was appropriate to wear hardhats on our butts (Williston TLC: 7/8). At the time, I assumed the perfunctory video and PPE demonstration were far less important, practically speaking, than Ken’s explanation of the worker rating system. As I discuss below, however, the rating system was actually a quantitative front for highly qualitative judgments on the part of dispatchers.

According to Ken, at the end of each working day, our jobsite supervisor (the TLC’s client) would give us one of three subjective ratings: “did not meet expectations,” “met expectations,” and “exceeded expectations.” “Did not meet” was worth zero points on a 10-point scale, “met” was worth five, and “exceeded” was worth 10. Our “personal rating” was the average of our daily scores. Ken went on to explain that jobs would be allocated to workers with a good average rating and appropriate skills. In the unlikely event two workers had the same qualifications, jobs would be given to those who clocked in first. Therefore, he emphasized, we should arrive at TLC “on time” every day (6:00 AM). Later, I learned that even this aspect of our training had little to do with how jobs were actually distributed to workers.

I arrived at TLC around 5:45 AM my second day and found several men already waiting for the doors to open:

[There was a] new black Sentra parked in the TLC parking lot with three men sleeping inside. I parked, listening to the radio for a few minutes. One of the men got out around 5:50 to see if the doors were open yet and got back in the car and laid back down when he discovered they were still locked. He tried again and was successful five minutes later. I followed them inside. They

deftly passed their cards under the scanner at the front desk and sat down at a table. I did the same, awkwardly. (Williston TLC: 7/8)

Ken assigned me to my first job within the hour—ignoring, for whatever reason, the three men who clocked in before me.

A few weeks into my fieldwork, I started to experiment with how late I could arrive at the TLC and still get a job. I arrived at seven AM one day and found about a dozen men already signed in, waiting around the circular tables in the TLC common area or on the TLC porch smoking cigarettes. I was assigned to a job an hour later.

Later, I arrived at TLC as late as 8:20 AM and still found work without difficulty—even if there were men waiting there who clearly arrived before me and had access to vehicles. Further, I had received several “met” ratings during my first job so my average score peaked at about eight. This was unusual because most employers with experience using temp workers gave “exceeded” scores as a matter of course (such as the supervisor described above who did not recognize me at the end of the workday). When I tried to get a better sense of the role of the rating system in job allocation, I found that, in reality, the scores meant very little:

I asked Patricia why my "average employee rating" was 5 today when yesterday it was 10. She didn't understand. I explained that I would have to get a zero today to have an average of 5, and that didn't make sense to me. She still didn't understand: "I'm gonna have to ask Ken, he's the numbers guy," she said, just as Ken said to me, "I see what you're saying," and started looking something up on the computer. I walked over to him, and he explained that my 10 average had been a data entry error. I actually had two fives ... He tried to finish the conversation by throwing up his hand and saying, "I know you're a good guy." I shook his hand and thanked him, telling him I didn't "take the five personally." He explained that "some people do," and that he wanted to make sure that I knew that he knew I wasn't "one of those guys who stands around twiddling his thumbs all day" and that would be taken into consideration when they divide up jobs in the mornings. (Williston TLC: 7/9)

So the rating system and arriving on time meant far less to dispatchers than their subjective assessment of how hard we worked and our quality as persons (i.e. being a “good guy”). The rating system, then, was an “objective” façade obscuring what was, at best, an arbitrary practice.

In addition to administering risks in the employment relationship, TLC represses struggles over production by problematizing the relationship between jobsite supervisors and workers in the definition of the moral economy of the workplace (described above), employing a “best match to dispatch” policy for the allocation of jobs, separating skilled from unskilled workers in the intake process, and maintaining labor circulation. These practices minimize temp workers’ ability to organize around common interests.

The “best match to dispatch” policy, described above, not only allowed dispatchers to arbitrarily assign workers to jobs, it also led to resentment and competition between workers. Workers sometimes responded to this arbitrariness with desperation. One morning at the TLC, I noted a man I recognized from my first morning leaning over the front counter, talking earnestly to the dispatchers:

He wore a loose green t-shirt and jeans. He was asking [the dispatchers], imploring them, for work. At one point he raised his voice and said, "I need work, man!" Ken diffused the situation by saying, in ironic pleading tones: "I know! Yer kinda loud." (Williston TLC: 7/15)

The man left TLC after the exchange. This sense of direct, physical competition is common to other documented temporary work sites that deal primarily in manual labor (e.g. Purser 2012).

The small pool of skilled workers at TLC were carefully groomed and maintained by dispatchers and were the only group of people that did not have to show up at the TLC at dawn. George, a carpenter, had a particularly close relationship with dispatchers:

A thin, tan white man, probably in his early 60s but able-looking, walked in. He was about 5'10," wore a cap, jeans, a dark green tank top, a moustache and glasses. A pouch on his belt held a flip phone. "Morning George," Patricia said brightly as he arrived. He responded genially. He explained that he hasn't had coffee for a few days because he had to be on a jobsite at six, and nothing was open before then. Pam said she heard he was unhappy at the jobsite, he responded that there was nothing wrong with it, but qualified, saying "we stayed busier I guess." He said, "Poker is out, eh?" to Ken. Ken said, apologetically, "For now." Ken called him over to explain a "payout," telling George not to ask any questions until he got a chance to explain. George asked a few questions immediately, which Ken fended off, saying he lumped all the gas payments into one day since he forgot to do it consistently. George seemed satisfied with this. (Williston TLC: 7/20)

Later, I discovered dispatchers regularly texted George to summon him for jobs:

I returned to the TLC and wandered inside. I leaned up against the counter, the only "Field Team Member" inside. Vana received a phone call from someone asking for a finish carpenter. She took down the usual information for the job, then hung up. Politely, she asked if I was a finish carpenter. I said no. Then she called Ken and asked him to text George, telling Ken she would give George 10 minutes to call in. (Williston TLC: 7/23)

As a skilled worker, then, George did not need to mingle with other temporary workers at the TLC, nor was he subject to the same basic expectations.

Since TLC was, for many, the first place a job could be acquired in Williston, it was not unusual for most of the men and women present every morning to be unfamiliar with each other. Further, the random assignment of work teams deteriorated the solidarity among temp workers who worked together on previous jobs. Even if cooperative working relationships among temp workers had been formed on a single jobsite, once the task was over, there was very little chance workers would be assigned together again—or that they would see each other again in any case. By chance one morning at the TLC, I ran into Julius, a black man in his early twenties from outside Atlanta. It had been ten days since I worked with him and two other men. Julius explained the divergent paths each of us took after

working together (and, from my perspective, achieving a sense of camaraderie) for a few days:

According to Julius, they worked three or four more days until James got another job and/or wasn't willing to drive all the way to Watford City anymore. Julius postulated that they dispatched another crew to the site after that. He asked me gravely--eyes down, voice quiet--about where I had been--like I had either let them down or he was seriously concerned about me... Then he asked me if I'd seen "that other guy, the short one." I said I hadn't seen Matt since last week. (Williston TLC: 7/17)

Whether or not temp workers had been working there for months, TLC was a stop on the way to oil-soaked riches, not a final destination—an important feature of consent in this context that I discuss in more detail below.

Temporary work illustrates a feature of neoliberalism noted in theory (e.g. Wacquant 2009 and Foucault 2008) but rejected or obscured in popular discussions: the neoliberal political economy does not represent the return of classical economic liberalism, where government is made to step aside to “liberate” market functioning, but constitutes the active re-regulation of human activity by market devices. Temp labor in this context represents a deepening of third party interventions in the employment process, rather than liberating the employee-employer relationship from intervention. TLC, as a subcontracted internal state, is well tuned to the needs of the highly contingent oil industry and its ancillaries, which is itself a system of subcontractors.

Yet this strategic arrangement could not function without the enthusiastic participation of temporary workers. In the following section, I follow Burawoy in asking what accounts for this participation—even in social, economic, and environmental conditions far more precarious than the sheltered shop floors of monopoly capitalism.

### *Tactics and Ideology Among Temp Workers*

Burawoy argues that the strong internal states of firms in monopoly capitalism insulate the work process from outside ideology. For temporary workers in the Bakken, however, an “externally produced consciousness” (Burawoy 1979: 136) inflected with regional language and interests—the oil boom ideology—significantly affected the tactics workers used to secure work, both on and off the jobsite, and thus both the temporary labor process and the nature of consent. In this section, I describe how oil boom ideology and worker tactics perpetuated the temporary labor process. After a brief discussion of the living conditions temporary workers endured in the Bakken below, I describe oil boom ideology and temp worker tactics both on and off the jobsite.

#### *Consent to what? Living conditions for temp workers*

Any given morning at TLC, men with confederate flags mounted on their trucks sat alongside recent migrants from Ghana. The ringing of incoming phone calls from TLC clients punctuated Germanic, Romantic and Afroasiatic murmurs. Men in button-up shirts waited for work with men who carried all their belongings in tattered school backpacks. In short, men (and in rare cases, women) representing a wide range of ethnic, racial, and regional identities, made the journey to Williston and ended up at TLC in pursuit of a common interest: gainful employment. Many left their friends, families, and extended social networks behind in pursuit of arduous, and frequently dangerous, jobs. Yet most of them were aware that, even if they found employment, the high wages they sought were rarely enough to cover basic living expenses. A conversation I overheard inside the TLC early in my fieldwork indicates these men were acutely aware that the costs of seeking work in the Bakken often outweigh the benefits:

They discussed Williston: high wages but high rents. In a big city, wages were lower but so were rents. In a big city, you could "move around" more easily and "fuck bitches." (Williston TLC: 7/8)

People living in the Bakken region between 2008 and late 2015 faced rents as high as \$1900 a month for a two-bedroom apartment<sup>11</sup>, inflated prices for goods and commodities, and few options for transportation, food and gathering vital information (e.g. trends in the barrel price of oil, which ostensibly affected the availability of work). Those attempting to make their livelihoods outside traditional employment relationships, such as the temporary workers I met, had to make the most of wages alone to survive these conditions.

The rapid infrastructural development in Williston was largely oriented to the needs of the oil industry—not, for instance, temporary workers without access to vehicles. Sidewalks were rare or nonexistent in newly developed areas, and traffic was dangerous for large vehicles, let alone bicyclists<sup>12</sup>. The main industrial thoroughfare in the area, Highway 85, was “the most dangerous highway in America,” according to one temp worker, who cited its constant reconstruction and preponderance of sleep-deprived tanker drivers as evidence. Workers with vehicles or access to vehicles not only had access to transportation that was relatively safe and reliable, they were better able to accommodate their basic needs, including transforming paychecks into cash, and finding a safe place to rest (inside their vehicles, in some cases) and nutritious, or at least affordable, food.

Carrying enough food and water to jobsites was a significant daily issue for many temporary workers, especially those without vehicles. Workers arrived at TLC in the morning without knowing whether they would be expected to work four, eight, or twelve

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<sup>11</sup> For comparison, fair market rent prices in San Francisco County are around \$2,000 a month.

<sup>12</sup> In 2014, Williston had a crash rate of 49.2 per 1,000 people—nearly double the crash rate of the largest city in North Dakota, Bismarck (NDDOT 2014:20).



hours, whether they would be inside or exposed to the weather, and if water was available on jobsites. Once off-shift, workers without vehicles had to choose between walking to the grocery store and finding fast food, a gas station, or a restaurant to eat in.

Water was especially difficult to find on construction sites. Water wells were usually not yet plumbed for daily use on construction sites, and most sites were not within walking distance of a water source. Some of the men I worked with were unprepared for this, and had to rely on jobsite supervisors or their co-workers to avoid dehydration:

[The jobsite supervisor] came by and handed all four of us [Julius, Matt, James, me] bottles of water. I drank mine quickly, not realizing how dehydrated I had become. "It's not cold but it's wet," [the jobsite supervisor] explained. "It's not cold but it's not hot," Julius replied, squinting into the sun. It was hot in the sunshine, over 85 degrees, and we sweat through our shirts, caking the dirt creased into our skins. The stillness and heat of noontime on the prairie seemed to settle on us for a moment as we all thirstily drained the water bottles. [Watford City: 7/9]

Matt gave Julius some of his water at lunch that day. I ran out of water more than once (despite carrying a gallon of it with me every day), and finally began storing six gallons of auxiliary water from a gas station in the trunk of my car.

To survive these conditions, temporary workers invested their paychecks in a diverse array of survival techniques, which in turn shaped possibilities for them to manipulate, resist, and consent to the temporary work process. The men I worked with developed various means of raising money, acquiring food, information, and shelter, and moving from place to place. Jon buried all of his camping equipment in plastic containers every winter, Julius convinced other temp workers to transport him to jobsites, and Matt could cite employment statistics from across the American west. One man made his pocket money by selling expired candy:

A beer bellied white man with a long grey moustache balanced his cigarette on the brake of his tricycle and left it there smoking while he went inside [the TLC]. A variety of chocolate candies were displayed carefully on the tricycle seat in their wrappers: a Toblerone bar, a package of Cadbury Eggs, a package of bite-sized Butterfingers, and a King-Size Butterfinger. When he came back out, I asked if they were for sale. "Yup. A dollar each," he said, returning his cigarette to his mouth and smiling smoke out. "Wow, that's a good deal," I said, "Where do you get them?" He hesitated a moment, then said he gets them "wholesale" so he can "sell them cheap." I nodded credulously, then said I'd buy the Toblerone. "Which one?" he said. "The triangular one," I said. "Oh, I love those!" He took my dollar bill and handed me the bar, telling me the Cadbury Eggs were also delicious. I checked the expiration date on the Toblerone later: June 20, 2015. (Williston: 7/23)

Another man carried backpacking gear, a crossbow, and a fishing pole with him on every job. For many, then, temp work was more a matter of survival than a game to meet repressive needs. The amount of calories expended on the jobsite, the prospect of shelter, bodily wear and tear, and exposure to hazardous materials and conditions had to be balanced with the need to prove the value of their labor to TLC clients and extend waged working hours as long as possible.

But why go through the trouble to stay in the Bakken when those wages seemed to be disappearing? Why stay in a place with few women (unless, as Matt put it, you have a job in oil or "look like Brad Pitt"), few transportation options, and unaffordable housing? I argue the ideology that promises plentiful and long-term oil work both justified their sacrifices and formed the basis of their tactical logic.

### *Oil boom ideology*

At least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a narrative of opportunity has marked western industrial history. The Americans who did not benefit from the spoils of the first wave of colonization looked to the west, we are told, for a place where the liberty to render the landscape into a prosperous future (and the liberty to starve in the attempt) was

unfettered by professional qualifications, class or caste. Regardless of the validity of this narrative, for the men I met at TLC, the Bakken oil boom represented such an opportunity.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century variants of this narrative were on vivid display at TLC. In the iconic rushes of the American west, gold and land were the bounty workers sought, but in the Bakken it was steady wages. The temporary workers I met thought they would find secure, plentiful work in oil in the Bakken. The notion of a “boom” connoted plenty, and security was implied by what the media advertised would be a hundred years of industrial development<sup>13</sup>. For the able-bodied, oil work appeared to offer more pay in two months than they would normally see in a year, transportation in company trucks, and, typically, stable housing (even if in substandard conditions). The promise of these material benefits was cemented by the dignity of, as Fred put it, “productive” work extracting a commodity that had clear global and historical significance.

In the conversation about the differences between Williston and urban areas quoted above, one of the men stated he was determined to stay in Williston until the oil market recovered, underscoring his determination by stating, “I changed my address” (Williston TLC: 7/8). This was a common sentiment among TLC workers.

In a conversation I overheard on the TLC porch, where workers talked more freely than when within earshot of the dispatchers, a man from California was describing the state of U.S. society to two men with heavy accents, who nodded patiently to his soliloquy:

“America, this country, used to be a great place,” he said, “Williston used to be a great place.” ...you used to be able to make good money in Williston, but

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<sup>13</sup> e.g. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/magazine/north-dakota-went-boom.html?hp&\\_r=1&pagewanted=all&mtrref=undefined](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/magazine/north-dakota-went-boom.html?hp&_r=1&pagewanted=all&mtrref=undefined). In another example, Gallup rated North Dakota number one in its “good jobs rate” even as oil development collapsed and the job-related mortality rate there was highest in the nation in 2015 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/188921/north-dakota-highest-gallup-good-jobs-rate.aspx?version=print>). For a detailed analysis of this discourse in traditional and non-traditional media, see Hough (2015).

he's still hopeful: he has an [job] interview scheduled for next week.  
(Williston TLC: 7/23)

These workers' awareness of the increasingly adverse conditions in the Bakken labor market was balanced by a determined belief that, as the Californian put it, "as long as I keep my feet" the "\$10,000 a month job" will come (Williston TLC: 7/23). His "ambition to arise" kept him at the TLC, making ends meet in rural North Dakota, even as he struggled to find the job that would make his "plans" a reality (Williston TLC: 7/23).

Importantly, these plans did not usually include working in the Bakken permanently. Rather, for many, long-term plans involved accumulating money through (overtime) wages, then investing it in some venture. Fred, an Iraq war veteran in his early 30s, was the most ambitious, cerebral, and hard-working temp worker I met, and exemplified the hope many temp workers put in the oil boom. While his plans were unusual in their audacity, they were typical in their general shape: find a job in oil, learn industrial skills (including the art of contracting), and invest a critical mass of earned wages in something meaningful. While Fred literally looked to the sky for his meaning, others sought a sense of security on earth.

After being laid off from an oil field contractor specializing in fuel lines in January of 2015, Fred managed to find a semblance of continuity as a long-term temporary worker for a single construction contractor. As we worked together over the course of a few days, Fred recalled he had been a "night-owl" since he first looked through a telescope at nine years old. After serving in the Marines, he went to a community college near his hometown in north Florida, working construction jobs on the side. He planned to specialize in aerospace engineering after getting his associate's degree. He was four credits away from finishing his degree when an unsecured scaffold moved out from under him. The fall shattered his left

forearm and cracked several vertebrae. Workmen's comp covered the medical expenses and dispersed 66.3% of his pay, but it was not enough to prevent him from dropping out of school. As he explained:

He was in so much pain during his convalescence that he depressed the Patient Controlled Analgesia button like he was on "Jeopardy!" (his simile) and felt no relief. After being released from the hospital, his girlfriend "took [him] in." The Workmen's Comp benefits were not enough to pay rent, and his recovery was a long process. (Williston: 7/26)

His relationship did not survive his recovery. After breaking up with his girlfriend, he went to the west coast to get his "head on straight." While hiking through the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, he decided to go to Williston. Once there, he planned on pursuing his fascination with space from another angle:

He said that now, he plans on developing a private launch pad for satellites, "like SpaceX," and that his ultimate goal is to start a business on the moon: "any business. I don't care if it's a KFC or a whorehouse." He said he may not have the engineering chops to do it, but he would organize and plan a business and employ engineers to do it: "I don't care if I'm 70 years old. I just want to do it." (Williston: 7/26)

He would do this, he went on to explain, by finding another job in oil, diligently saving his wages, then making a series of increasingly profitable investments.

Perhaps more so than any of the other workers I met, Fred was a believer in the benevolence of the invisible hand of the market. Inspired by Ron Paul's 2008 presidential race, he had explored the "Austrian school" of economic thought, eventually settling on an economic philosophy he described as "anarcho-capitalism." He carefully studied markets, Federal interest rates, and technological developments with plans to leverage some economic trend to pursue his dreams. He believed that, given the removal of government intervention, a democracy, expressed through the medium of capital, would arise. The declining job market in the Bakken would continue, since the Federal government insists it

must "print[ ] money" instead of using the gold standard (Williston: 7/24). For Fred, the Bakken approximated the free market imagined by his economic philosophy and the TLC was a valuable "service" (his term).

At TLC, workers did not vie for relatively low-paid, low-prestige labor in ancillary industries (such as construction) because they thought it would lead directly to a job in the oil industry. For workers like Fred, one of the qualifications for actualizing their plans was to survive in Williston. Rather than applying for steady jobs through the temp agency (though many took them when offered), they were maintaining themselves—"keeping their feet"—for the return of demand for labor in the oil industry.

The oil-boom ideology was the core justification for a set of expectations, values and practices that "subordinate[d] the substance of society itself to the laws of the market" for temporary workers in the Bakken region (Polanyi [1944] 2001:75). What was at stake here was not just agreeing to certain features of the work process (e.g. work speed), but agreeing to be treated as an official product of the TLC and a commodity on the Bakken labor market in general. Working conditions, wages, and the values inherent to the work process, then, were effectively removed from negotiations between workers and their employers. Instead, workers made a case for the quality of their labor-power (i.e. convincing employers to hire them over others).

Everyone I met during my time in Williston was drawn to the area by the promise of the boom. And when workers could not find permanent jobs, they laid blame on the bust. The oil boom ideology phrased the choices of a range of economic and political actors in the passive voice. Thus, TLC workers discussed the future surplus or deficit of labor like hopeful farmers on the lifting of a drought. Vague prognostications were made based on the

price of gas per gallon or hearsay, rumors of job openings in the oil industry were passed from one temp worker to another nearly every morning, and no one considered TLC to be their last employer in Williston. In short, as a rural western variation on the American Dream mythos, the oil boom ideology minimized or obscured worker consciousness of exploitation by, and dependency on, TLC (to borrow June Nash's (1979) terms).

Yet ideology alone seems insufficient to explain why these workers were still in Williston, facing housing instability, isolation, and the precariousness of temporary labor. Especially considering that most of them were banking on the increasingly poor chance they would get a job in one of the most dangerous industries in the United States (AFL-CIO 2015:1). Here, I turn from worker ideology to worker behavior on jobsites and at the TLC. Following de Certeau (1984), Datta et al. (2007) and others, I refer to the behaviors workers use to "get by" in the Bakken labor market as tactics. Like all tactics, temp workers' tactics were a response to the social and material conditions they faced as they attempted to enact their long-term plans<sup>14</sup>. In turn, the oil-boom ideology provided the narrative that explained and justified workers' tactics. My analysis of these data suggests that temp worker tactics were both seeded and supported by oil-boom ideology. While additional, and different, data are necessary to fully understand this relationship, I argue the interplay between tactics and ideology largely explains their consent to treatment as a commodity by TLC and its clients.

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<sup>14</sup> The myopic temporal scope of temp worker tactics was critical to sustaining consent to precarity. As I discussed earlier, workers' alienation from the history of the production process prevented the emergence of "games" that could have given them substantive control over the labor process.

### Tactics on the jobsite

Temp workers used numerous tactics on jobsites to maximize their wage-earning hours with a single TLC client. On the jobsite, workers attempted to work days as long as possible and/or convince jobsite supervisors they deserved a “return ticket.” In both cases, worker tactics involved performance and manipulation, rather than explicit bargaining. It was imperative to work as slowly as possible without appearing to do so<sup>15</sup>.

Hunter, a laid-off oil worker from near Anaheim, California, demonstrated a few of the tactics workers used to maximize the number of hours they spent on a single jobsite, as well as the role of oil boom ideology in these tactics. I documented other workers behaving similarly, and a few men I worked with described observing these tactics in other workers. As I describe below, a minority of temp workers—Fred, for example—took an opposite approach, genuinely working hard and hoping to be noticed by TLC clients.

Hunter and I were dispatched from the TLC one morning to clear out sheetrock from the interior of a building in downtown Williston. Hunter was interested in making as much time pass “on the clock” as possible (with minimal effort):

"I'm not trying to work my ass off for jobs like this<sup>16</sup>," [Hunter] said... He pointed out that taking it slow was job security for us. If the task wasn't finished by tomorrow, we would likely have to come back to finish ... which meant more hours. (Williston: 7/15)

To quote only a few of his time-extending practices:

Hunter had a few ways to accomplish this: he would "take a walk" back and forth down the hallway a few times, maybe carrying a piece of sheetrock ... he would light up a cigarette and let me know that he was going to stop for a little while ... he avoided using tools such as a sheetrock cart ... (Williston: 7/15)

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<sup>15</sup> Bartley and Roberts (2006) demonstrate the substantial quantitative (more wages) and qualitative (reduced uncertainty) advantages of return tickets for temp workers.

<sup>16</sup> i.e. unskilled, arduous, relatively low-paid, and temporary.



While Hunter used these tactics to save himself some strain and perhaps get a return ticket, ironically, he was also maximizing his value as a commodity for the TLC, which charges its clients by the hour. In terms of enabling the temp agency to accumulate profit through surplus labor, Hunter's attitude toward our work—that it was a means of survival while he waited to get back into oil—made him an ideal temp worker. The tactics he used to modulate his work speed were, in part, an expression of that attitude—one rooted in the ideology of the boom.

Before getting laid off, Hunter had discovered a sense of agency in oil work. Being part of the process that made what he called “ancient microorganisms” available to fuel society filled him with purpose and a sense of mastery (Williston: 7/15). He spoke with pride about the technical skills his work required, about its dangers, and about the physical strength and long hours it entailed. He emphasized the quantifiable, technical aspects of his work in the oil fields (his wage, his expertise with technical systems, the number of hours he worked in a week) and the qualitative impacts it had on the landscape. He described looking out over a valley punctuated by the metronome nodding of pump jacks he had helped install, and waxed poetic about the light of natural gas flares. Hunter invested his identity in work that used up all of his waking hours, paid well, and gave him a sense of historical significance. It was this pride that motivated him to “keep his feet” by stretching wage-earning hours as a temp worker to survive the time between oil jobs.

Hunter's explicit use of these tactics is a good illustration of the dynamics of the temporary labor process as I observed them. It is worth noting, however, that many workers would not outwardly endorse these behaviors. An interaction on another jobsite between me, Julius (another laid-off oil worker) and two other temp workers (Matt and

James) illustrates the ambiguous attitude many temp workers had about the wage-maximizing tactics Hunter used. We had just spent 10 hours unpeeling plastic wrap from modular sections of an apartment building being assembled in Watford City (about 45 miles south of Williston). In a typical jobsite conversation among temp workers, we were trying to calculate how many days we might spend on this jobsite:

After I estimated that uncovering all the modules would take about 45 hours, Matt stated that he could see us finishing the work in four 10-hour days. Julius replied: "Or, we could take our time, you know what I mean?" No one explicitly disagreed with him--but his attitude wasn't taken up by anyone else. (Watford City: 7/8)

On another jobsite in Alexander (27 miles south of Williston), Jon, the itinerant stone mason who travelled to the Bakken seasonally, implied that Hunter's tactics were the norm among the temporary workers he labored with, but felt ambivalent about the practice himself:

I remarked that we were making good time, and that wasn't necessarily in our best interest. Jon said, "I wasn't going to say anything," to me, since usually it's the "other guy" who is telling him to slow down. (Alexander: 7/17)

The tactics temporary workers employed, then, were subject to ongoing negotiations among themselves, jobsite supervisors, and agency dispatchers.

Negotiation over tactics could lead to conflicts among workers. The conflict Hunter described between himself and another TLC worker was, at least in part<sup>17</sup>, a difference in opinion about jobsite tactics. As I described above, Hunter's insistence on installing appliances, rather than moving them, led to both violence and expulsion from the jobsite.

The other worker wanted Hunter to perform his assigned task, rather than avoid the hard

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<sup>17</sup> Race was an important factor in this instance as well. Hunter referred to this co-worker as "one of them African niggers," and explained that, since he was "fresh from the village," he did not appreciate the differences between the appliances they were installing.

labor of handling heavy appliances. For Hunter, installing the appliances both extended the duration of their task and demonstrated his competence to the jobsite supervisor.

Some jobsite supervisors seemed to be aware of these tactics and had developed counter-measures of their own. Some supervisors, for example, strictly limited the amount of time workers spent on the jobsite. On one job, I was instructed to clean the grounds around a new apartment complex just north of Williston, which mostly entailed picking cigarette butts out of the gravel yards on the ground floor. I was nearly done with my task when the jobsite supervisor abruptly dismissed me:

I knelt to begin picking butts again when [the jobsite supervisor] drove up in his truck, parked, and walked toward me. "Hey bud," he said, "You got here around 10:30, right?" "Sounds right," I said. "You're done then. Go home--you're only supposed to be here four hours," he said. "OK?" I said, deflated. "Good job," he said consolingly, then answered his cell phone and walked back toward his truck. (Williston: 7/20)

This happened at the jobsite Hunter and I worked on as well, where one senior supervisor seemed to suspect Hunter's tactics (despite our other supervisors' obliviousness). The supervisor dismissed us at the end of the day, even though several hours' labor worth of sheetrock still waited to be moved to the dumpster:

Hunter stood by awkwardly as [the jobsite supervisor] filled out our ticket. "Will there be work tomorrow?" Hunter asked. [The jobsite supervisor] glanced at Hunter and said they wouldn't need our help tomorrow. He tore the ticket on its perforations, pocketing the copy meant for clients and handing the other half to me. "You got an Exceeded, though," he said. (Williston: 7/15)

Without a return ticket, Hunter and I were officially unemployed as we left the jobsite that day. The jobsite supervisor had effectively countered Hunter's tactics by suspending our relationship—thereby moving us from negotiations over the work process back to the TLC the next morning.

### Tactics at the TLC

At TLC, workers sought favorable positions within the obscure hierarchy of job allocation discussed above. Temporary workers either accomplished this overtly by attempting to develop relationships with dispatchers as they allocated jobs, or less overtly by portraying themselves as “hard workers.” Additionally, workers with access to certain tools (such as fire-resistant clothing or a vehicle) were much more likely to be selected by dispatchers for jobs. While workers mostly gained a reputation for being “hard workers” by means of jobsite tactics (e.g. those described above), they developed relationships with dispatchers by direct manipulation at the front counter of the TLC.

Often, I witnessed front counter tactics being used by workers with less prestige at TLC than most other workers—they were or appeared to be less able-bodied, were women, did not speak American English, were unable to maintain a hygienic appearance, or had a criminal record. I arrived at TLC late in the morning one Monday and observed a paradigmatic example of these tactics. The scene was as follows:

A white man near 30, about 5' 8", walked in from the front porch, used the bathroom, then strode up to the front counter, rolling his shoulders. His clothing was a mixture of military patterns: boots and a t-shirt in Desert Storm tan and a cap and cloth cargo pants in Vietnam greens. His shirt stretched smoothly from his collar, over his belly, and into his pants. His belt held two black cloth-and-Velcro pouches under his swinging arms. His pants had a long tear over the right thigh and calf that flashed pale skin when he walked. He had hay-yellow hair that stuck out from under his cap. He bantered with the people behind the desk, revealing missing teeth when he laughed at Ken's jokes. (Williston TLC: 7/20)

This man not only appeared to not have stable housing (he carried all of his belongings in a backpack), he also had to compensate for being on probation. He apologized about not being able to take a job Ken had offered him earlier in the morning:

He explained to Ken that "if I didn't have that stupid GPS tracker on me then I woulda taken that job, but" he had to stay in the state. (Williston TLC: 7/20)

He leaned against the counter, watching the dispatchers take calls, listening intently to the details of the jobs dispatchers wrote down, and continuing to chat with them. Soon, he had an opportunity to demonstrate to Ken that he understood one of TLC's cardinal rules:

A black man, about 5'8", walked in, went straight to the bathroom. He left the door open as he urinated. He exited the bathroom and walked straight to the front counter. He had a dark blue sweatshirt on that had a "JC Evans Construction" logo printed over an outline of Texas. He asked Ken in an African accent if he could return to a jobsite where he had worked previously. Ken explained that he had been "replaced for the day." The man left, walking quickly out the door. The man in camo shrugged, commenting, "You don't touch base, you're out." (Williston TLC: 7/20)

The man in camo was repeating the TLC policy that temp workers must call in every morning before 7AM if they were going back to a jobsite on a return ticket. If workers did not call in or show up at TLC, TLC dispatchers would assume they were unavailable and dispatch someone else. The man in camo's tactics paid off when a road construction job came up about ten minutes later:

The man in camo volunteered for a job "near the roundabout." Ken accepted and asked if he had Personal Protective Equipment, the man said he had his own hardhat... (Williston TLC:7/20)

It is worth noting that these tactics did not always result in jobs. A few days after I saw the man in camo's success, I watched a few other men use these tactics with no results:

Two men, the man in the red hat that Jim talked to and another white man about the same age, stood at the counter waiting expectantly. "What's the situation?" red hat asked. "This job isn't until tomorrow," Vana explained. They spoke to her inaudibly for a moment longer, then left, seeming satisfied. (Williston TLC:7/23)

Temp workers used these front counter tactics to curry favor from and advertise their presence to dispatchers.

By virtue of the triangular employment relationship, tactics that sustained temporary workers by extending working hours also sustained the TLC. Similarly, workers using front counter tactics demonstrated their competence in official TLC norms and signaled their intention to reproduce them. Cumulatively, these tactics had the effect of reproducing and strengthening the moral economy of temporary labor in the region. As the oil-boom ideology gave way to the new narrative of the bust, however, the basis for consent began to erode. However, this shift in narrative came slowly to the region, and especially to temporary workers, who preferred to believe their tactics would eventually lead to the fulfillment of their plans.

## DISCUSSION

For the first decade and a half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Williston, North Dakota was a rural place defined by urban problems—including managing the circulation of a reserve army of unskilled workers from urban areas. After years of shrinkage, small-town institutions<sup>18</sup> were suddenly needed to mediate global economic pressures, and geographic and political scales took on hybrid forms. In this thesis, I demonstrated how the growth of one of these hybrids—the TLC—helped organize and manage a problematic commodity—labor. I also demonstrated how the people who labored managed to live while being treated as a commodity.

If the mobility (in both the geographic and economic sense) of TLC workers demonstrates the “interscalar connectivity” (Peck 2002: 334) characteristic of contemporary social life, then the TLC might be considered a “mechanism[] of scale

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<sup>18</sup> TLC was part of a temporary labor chain that has sites around the U.S. Empirically, though, it was a small-town institution—run by locals and defined by the particular moral economy that developed there.

transformation” (ibid.)—a site where the extra-local is managed, organized, and rendered proximal. Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate, workers are not passive subjects of such a mechanism. It was their participation in this transformation—through manipulation, resistance, and, finally, consent—that helped (temporarily) transform Williston into “boomtown USA.”

Temporary work in rapid industrial change offers one vantage point to survey these transformations, but this perspective raised more questions than answers. More work should be done to trace the pathways of mobile workers to and from regions like the Bakken: where else have they lived and worked, and how do they use mobility (in both work arrangements and across space), along with other livelihoods practices, to survive flexible accumulation? The political ramifications of a mobile, precarious underclass are important to understand as the economy becomes more dependent on flexible accumulation<sup>19</sup>: do people living in RV Parks and other mobile housing arrangements participate in the political process? Do mobile workers who live in their vehicles have a right to privacy? Does geographic and vocational detachment threaten these workers’ de facto citizenship? These workers shared radical political and economic ideologies with me. Fleshing out the details of these beliefs could offer meaningful insights into American market fundamentalism: why do these workers resort to Fordist nostalgia instead of revolution? What accounts for their belief in the benevolence of market forces and the inherent corruption of government?

Political Ecology provided the analytical structure I used to go about this study, but I was unable to pay adequate attention to the “ecology” of temporary work on the Bakken

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<sup>19</sup> Katz and Krueger (2016) recently identified most of the employment growth of the last decade was in “alternative work arrangements,” i.e. temporary, contract, and contingent labor.

shale. While I was able to explore how these workers' visions of landscape are tied to their sense of the significance of oil work, more research, using more diverse methods, should be done to explore how these images influence the way they treat the land they work on and in. Does their sense of permanence or transience change how they perceive the oil-boom landscape? How do these ways of perceiving landscape—and defining resources—relate to long-term residents' perceptions? Finally, how does this sense of landscape relate to their perceptions of global environmental and political issues, such as climate change, terrorism, and migration?

While I believe the relationship between tactics and ideology is an important one, with these data I could only demonstrate some of the ways they reinforce each other. My aim, in part, was to show that the Habermasian notion of labor as a purely technical exercise is too simplistic. Labor, like any other human activity, is a dialogical process. Temp workers, for example, imagine their labor in ideological terms but deploy it tactically. In my fieldwork, I discovered that labor is subject to large-scale ideological structures, communicates ideas and values, is a way of relating to others, and can be a way to modify institutional practices.

## CONCLUSION

The structure of temporary labor, and the moral economy that results, leaves workers open to define their approach to the labor process in terms of an ideology found outside the employment relationship. In this case, an oil boom ideology promising wealth and a significant role in the global political economy brought workers to the Bakken region. Workers without direct connections to the oil industry or the system of contractors



supporting it often resorted to the TLC to “keep their feet” until they could find better work in oil. Workers who, like Hunter, minimized effort on jobsites in an attempt to secure return tickets and maintain “flexibility” in case they had an opportunity to secure a “\$10,000 a month job” effectively worked to increase surplus value for TLC. As oil prices declined throughout 2015, the temp workers that remained in Williston operated under the belief that oil jobs would return, though the temporary labor market was both shrinking and redistributing to infrastructure development (housing, roads, etc.).

Rather than helping these workers gain access to oil work, their participation in temporary labor usually resulted in an extension of their tenure as temporary workers or redistribution to less-temporary jobs outside the oil industry. The oil boom ideology obscured any “important information on the changing work demands in the labor market” (Benner 2003: 625) that the TLC inadvertently provided workers. Even laid-off oil workers worked for TLC for extended periods, ensuring their availability as commodities in the Bakken labor market despite increasingly adverse socioeconomic conditions.

### *School of Hard Knocks*

A large picture hung over the front desk at TLC. The picture showed, in faded colors, a white man in a hardhat leaning over a blueprint, a toolbelt hanging jauntily on his hips. A (uncited) John Dewey quote hung in the air above the man’s hardhat: “To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to success [sic].” The man stared pensively into the middle ground of the room he stood in, apparently contemplating the space he constructed with satisfaction.

Without speculating on the intentions of the person who changed “happiness” in the original to “success” for the purposes of the TLC, the change in emphasis is appropriate. Temp workers at TLC willingly displaced “happiness” for “success” every day they signed in to be dispatched for work. In this revision of *Democracy and Education*, TLC highlighted its ideological function in these men’s lives<sup>20</sup>.

TLC (and its dispatchers) saw itself as these workers’ wise teacher, shepherding them from urban exclusion (e.g. imprisonment, or, nearly as ignominious, un- or under-employment) to the pastures of neoliberal economic development. This is what rehabilitation consists of in a post-welfare state, where democracy means economic participation and education means learning what it takes to get by.

“A right occupation,” Dewey goes on, “means simply that the aptitudes of a person are in adequate play, working with the minimum of friction and the maximum of satisfaction.” In fact, striving for happiness in Dewey’s sense of the term would have been laughable for temp workers. Neither occupations nor aptitudes were part of the arrangement at TLC. Instead, temp workers strove for access to work that paid well, seemed proud, and lasted longer than twelve hours. In the process, TLC secured their consent to precarity.

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<sup>20</sup> While temp workers were more subject to the “external ideology” of the oil boom, perhaps dispatchers, whose working relationships were sheltered within the TLC—were more prone to absorb TLC-specific ideology.

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