

## Lessons from the Bakken Oil Patch

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### Abstract

This article summarizes the recent work of the North Dakota Man Camp Project to understand the largely undocumented migrants arriving in the Bakken Oil Patch for work. It argues that efforts to document short-term labor in the Bakken exposes particular challenges facing the archaeology of the modern world ranging from the ephemerality of short-term settlements to the hyper-abundance of modern objects. The use of photography, video, interviews, and descriptions produced an abundant archive of archaeological ephemera that in some ways parallels the modern character of temporary workforce housing. The final section of this article offers some perspectives on how work in the Bakken oil patch can inform policy, our understanding of material culture in the modern world, and the role of the discipline in forming a shared narrative.

### <1> Introduction

The archaeology of temporary labor in the Bakken oil patch might appear to occupy a separate historical and even moral category from those undocumented migrants who have fled catastrophic military or political events. At the same time, the influx of temporary labor into the Bakken in the aftermath of the “Great Recession” of 2007-2009 reflects global trends that Saskia Sassen has summarized as expulsions (2014). Displaced from their homes on account of the mortgage crisis, untethered from the historical fixity of middle-class life, and buffeted by the increased speed of an industrial boom-bust cycle, the migrant Bakken worker is another manifestation of the

detrterritorialized politics and economy of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. While the majority of the Bakken workforce are U.S. citizens and retained the social and legal rights that transnational refugees have lost, the material culture of temporary labor in the Bakken nevertheless reflects the expulsions that shape a disrupted world and the tense emergence of new forms of settlement designed to accommodate and normalize the experience of the migrant, the refugee, and the modern worker. Our research speaks to several issues that resonate across the archaeology of the contemporary world: the accelerating pace of capital; the increasing fluidity of populations, labor, and places; the challenges of abundance and ephemerality in the contemporary world; and the potential for the practice of archaeology to amplify the experience of displaced groups.

The North Dakota Man Camp Project has used both interviews and archaeological techniques to document the wide range of short-term workforce housing in the Bakken Oil Patch in western North Dakota (Caraher 2016; Weber 2016; Caraher and Weber forthcoming; Caraher et al., forthcoming) (Fig. 1). Improvements in both drilling and fracking technology in the early 21st century and high oil prices re-opened the Bakken and Three Forks formations to large-scale exploitation. The global economic crisis begun in 2008 accelerated the arrival of workers from around the United States. Multinational corporations like Halliburton or Schlumberger imported some of the workers to the region and housed them in temporary “crew camps” provided by global logistics companies like Target Logistics. In contrast, our work focuses more on those who moved to the region seeking employment and housing. The small and historically remote communities of western North Dakota were unprepared for the influx of both kinds of workers and this led to many new arrivals squatting in public parks, living in Recreational Vehicles (RVs) in the Walmart parking lot, and paying exorbitant prices to park their RVs or campers, rent beds, or to stay in local hotels. The very fluidity of the Bakken workforce, the ambiguous state of its temporary lodging, and the inability of communities or the state to track the ebb and flow of housing and workers, framed our

qualitative approach to the people and materiality of life in the Bakken as a lens through which to understand the experience of the 21st century.

### <1> Situations

If the relative dearth of projects for the politically and ethically productive engagement with forced and undocumented migrants has hindered new archaeologies of this phenomenon, it is worth exploring analogues like those provided by the experiences of temporary denizens of the Bakken. As Sassens' *Expulsions* (2014) argued, the development of “advanced capitalism” has transformed both economic and social relationships on a global scale. As Arrendt (1943) and Agamben (1994) recognized, the displacement of people is more than just the movement of individuals from one situation to another, but the displacement of an individual's rights from the guarantees derived from status as citizens of a particular state to a new status dependent on a new set of political realities, definitions, and relationships. This situation does not deprive the refugee of all agency, of course, and Agamben has argued that the refugee has the potential to disrupt the political order of the nation-state by creating space for a kind of “pure human” to emerge in the gap between the individual as human and the individual as citizen.

If Agamben recognizes the transformative potential of the refugee as a “disquieting element” in the political order of the nation-state, the spaces of the western North Dakota Bakken Oil patch represent a different expression of the deterritorialization of the individual. The movement of individuals into the Bakken followed the global flow of capital ignoring national boundaries, demographics, or culture (Harvey 1989). Transnational companies contract with global logistics firms to fill prefabricated crew camps which accommodate the largely male workforce involved in extractive industries. These “man camps” are set up to optimize access to work sites, to leverage

local infrastructure, and to allow for the rapid deployment of personnel to remote locations. Their modular design enables them to be adapted to a range of conditions: generators, water treatment plants, cafeterias, laundries, security systems, and leisure spaces allow these camps to exist in self-contained and nearly self-sustaining ways (Rothaus 2013) (Fig. 2). The dehumanized space of the prefabricated crew camp seeks to standardize the experience of temporary residence and to maximize the labor extracted from each individual. The space of the crew camp is a “non place” with no political or social community, and no distinguishing features to complicate or disrupt the seamless deployment of flexible, on-demand labor (Augé 1995; Caraher 2016).

The distinct character of the camp as an architectural form led Charles Hailey to describe them as the quintessential 21<sup>st</sup>-century space (2009). The formal and industrial crew camps are the latest version of the mobile home deployed as a version of the mining camp, the work camp, and the company town. Our work focused particular attention on the RV parks where a sizable portion of the Bakken workforce lived from 2008-20013, at the height of the Bakken oil boom (Fig. 3 [Video]). RVs are built to be mobile, to be lived in for little more than a week or two at a time, and are intended for recreation. In the Bakken, RV parks contort to man camps with residents modifying their RVs to adapt to year-round occupation, to expand the useable space of individual units, and to define outdoor activity areas (Fig. 4). These changes were both ubiquitous and as temporary and individualized as the residents who moved through these places.

## <1> Methods

The modern landscape changes at a remarkable rate owing in part to the rapid movement of people both within and across boundaries. The emergence of generic non-places - like airports, hotels, mobile crew camps, and refugee camps - eradicate the differences between places that slow

the movement of people. As a result, the archaeological record for late modernity and the physical manifestations of late capitalism can be exceedingly elusive. Traditional archaeological methods are relatively unsuitable for documenting the movement of individuals through spaces intentionally designed to obscure the accumulation of the material traces that would make these places distinct. In the Bakken settlements, housing for highly mobile populations tend to be short-lived, occupy marginal spaces in the landscape, and utilize ephemeral, portable, or ubiquitous materials.

The North Dakota Man Camp Project (2012-) identified 50 workforce housing sites in the Bakken region of North Dakota for systematic investigation, and our methods fit within the broadly defined terms of archaeological ethnography as it brings together conventional archaeological approaches with methods grounded in a range of disciplines from social work to history (Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009). Our research sites were visited regularly over a four-year period and documented through video, photography, text descriptions, and interviews. Systematic video and photography, in particular, offered an efficient way to document the changing situations within the RV parks that made up a significant share of workforce housing in the Bakken. To date, we have well over 10,000 photographs and hours of georeferenced videos synced to time-stamped GPS coordinates.

In contrast to the ephemeral character of short-term settlement and the potential for archaeological invisibility, our documentation practice produced an abundance of largely digital objects that paralleled the abundance of objects in the modern world, and the speed and efficiency of video and photographic recording accommodated the speed of change in the Bakken. Our efforts to analyze our growing photographic archive, however, made clear that our method of documentation reproduced, to some extent, the chaotic dynamism of mobile populations and suggested the utter futility of both grasping the scale of human individuality and movement. Aerial photographs from satellites, airplanes, and kites allow for a sense of scale. Detailed photographs on

the ground complemented with textual descriptions provide a sense of intimate immediacy, but, like our video archive do little to dispel the feeling that parts of the Bakken continue to slip out of frame unnoticed. Our interviews reinforce the elusive sense by demonstrating the disjunction between conversations and the objects present in these informal settlements.

With the collapse of oil prices in 2014, our work in the Bakken has come to focus increasingly on various forms of abandonment, as the number of temporary workers in the Bakken declined concurrently with the oil-rig count. Numerous coffee makers in an abandoned RV revealed signs of methamphetamine use, trashed trailers smeared with human feces showed frustration and anger, and squatters' occupying empty rooms at defunct crew camps reflect a shifting reality (Fig. 5). In contrast to the anonymity and hectic hospitality of the boom era, access to workforce housing sites has become more complex. Communities that had previously embraced temporary housing now litigate with cagey owners who position themselves politically for continued financial gain. Communities now face the difficult reality of previously heralded development transforms into hotel vacancies. Many of the RV parks and larger crew camps reflect million dollar investments: some were highly profitable, others resulted in only disappointing returns. Rational calculations led workers to abandon their temporary homes rather than towing the long-stationary RVs to the next worksite. As a result, the fate of many of the abandoned crew camps remains unresolved even as the growing number of abandoned RVs fill the margins of RV parks and salvage yards (Fig. 6). The foreman at a local salvage yard remarked "people just leave 'em where they're at ... [because] the landfill don't want 'em no more." The salvage yard had previously accepted RVs and then sold the parts, but now "we have to charge because we can't get rid of 'em," and sometimes burned the abandoned RV on rainy days.

Our methods used to document the material culture created by the Bakken boom reveal various disjunctures. Any clarity regarding boom and busts exists only in hindsight. To illustrate, expressions

of caution during the rise of the boom gave way to the desperate optimism that many clung to during the early stages of the bust. Accordingly, our photographic archive and interviews do not align precisely with the historical experience. The changing complexion of the Bakken and the shifting fortunes of migrant labor in the region destabilized our methods at the very moment when the material culture of the region was becoming archaeological through the process of abandonment. We see our work at the intersection of what Buell has described as “the marriage of catastrophe and exuberance.” By focusing on material culture, we seek to escape the historicizing narratives that align experiences with an inevitable boom and bust cycle (2014). During the months leading to the height of the boom, interviews occasionally included warnings about the inescapable bust. These were soon to be juxtaposed with claims during the early stages of the bust that this was only a correction, and an ideal time to invest and move forward in preparation for the next phase of a boom destined to last for decades. During the summer of 2015 when the bust was, in retrospect, clearly underway, Jose Garcia admitted that prices were way down, and that “work is affected a lot.” In fact, he had been laid off from his job as a welder. Nonetheless, his buoyant confidence comes through in his explanation that the large companies were creating this slow down “to filter out all the workers who are not useful. That’s what this whole thing is about. Everything is going to go back up.” (Garcia 2015) Indeed, during the interview he was installing a new deck on his trailer for which he had just paid \$10,000, and Man Camp 77 was already exhibiting litter from abandoned trailers (Fig. 7). Our data set inevitably echoes, in a discordant way, those inconsistencies. Despite these limitations, our archive provides a foundation for interrogating the complex strategies that highly mobile populations adopt across a range of scales from the regional to the personal.

<1> Archaeology

From a strictly archaeological standpoint, the mechanical and financial efficiencies that have shaped these placeless crew camps threaten to obscure any persistent archaeological signature. The communities near where these camps were established generally sought requirements that the land be returned to its previous condition. At best, this impulse stems from a custodial attitude toward the land and environment. In most cases, however, local attitudes toward workforce housing are more complex. Prominent among them is a preference for “permanent housing,” families, and the demographic and economic stability that allows for predictable growth, tax income, and government expenditures. There are also persistent class-based fears in relation to the presence of large numbers of temporarily unattached male laborers, pressures from developers eager to profit from high housing prices, and general apprehension from conservative communities, deeply averse to change. These factors combine to encourage temporary workforce housing to be particularly ephemeral, invisible, and low impact.

Many arrivals in the Bakken traveled at their own expense towing RVs of various sizes and descriptions and set up camp in hastily constructed RV parks. The RV parks projected a rigid ordering of space with lots arranged in neat rows designed to provide efficient access to water, septic, and electricity (Fig. 8). Beneath this order, however, some parks lacked water, others had flawed infrastructures that let water pipes freeze in the winter or overtaxed septic systems. For individual residents, the challenges associated with living in an RV year-around in the brutal climate of western North Dakota are not insignificant, but residents show a significant degree of ingenuity in adapting their moveable homes to new locales. Residents communicate through various social networks present in these temporary settlements the techniques necessary to make a narrow, light-weight box streamlined to travel through the air into a long-term home secure from relentless elements. Some of the modifications are practical. For example, residents built wood frames around the base of the RVs to insulate the unit from cold winter and pounding winds of North Dakota (Fig.



9). They also added “mud rooms” constructed from plywood and other scraps abundant in these RV parks (Fig. 4). Other modifications adapted the space around the RVs to create elevated social areas, define boundaries, and create pathways. As a camp manager of a larger camp in the Bakken noted in 2012:

“... this is not an RV park. This is going to be a community. We're going to know our neighbors, we're going to be friends, we're going to help each other ... We had a thing where we put flower boxes and then there were folks that said, those are cute, I can do that! And pretty soon it spread. Now you get one person who does something like that over there and the little fence [around their unit] and then they come ask, can I do that? I say sure. Once they see people starting, then they want to do it...”

The use of shipping pallets, scrap wood, cable spools, blue-tarp and recycled material locate the Bakken RV park in a global tradition of informal architecture. The presence of discarded plywood, PVC pipe, extruded polystyrene, and other potentially useful material stacked at the edge of the camp reflects a global tradition of functional and opportunistic vernacular architecture that is only now being documented thoroughly (Fig. 10).

Managed RV parks and modular workforce housing sites represent more formal settlements designed to accommodate the highly mobile workforce employed across the oil patch. The lack of sufficient, affordable housing, the extreme mobility of certain segments of the Bakken workforce, and the global economic downturn created a situation where people came to the area without resources or plans for accommodations. Groups set up small squatter camps first in city parks and the Walmart parking lot, and then in tree-lined wind breaks around farms and in secluded corners of the oil patch. The North Dakota Man Camp Project documented one such camp where a group of construction workers from Idaho lived with a few unemployed economic migrants who had come to the Bakken looking for work. The camp consisted of a loose cluster of four RVs and a tent around

an open space (Fig. 11). The RVs lacked water and took electricity from a nearby construction site. The central area included a space where the group prepared food and a fire pit around which they socialized. This spatial arrangement contrasted with the neatly arranged rows of RVs and the rows of rooms projecting from long hallways in the large-scale crew camps imported to the region. The individuals living in this squatters' camp worked together, at least for a time, to share resources and a common space. "We're like brothers, like a family, brothers and sisters out here, like a family. We're close, tight-knit family... I own a construction company called Crystal Construction so we were working, we were all contracted in Idaho but a bunch of just got together" (Crystal 2012). A return visit to the camp two months after our initial visit in the summer of 2013 noted that the site was abandoned, seemingly removed by authorities, leaving behind a thin scatter of trash.

#### <1> Perspectives

As humans scramble to catch up with the speed of 21<sup>st</sup>-century capital, our traces in the landscape, and even our histories, become increasingly ephemeral. The speed and efficiency possible in documenting mobile populations has produced media - photographs, videos, descriptions - that are every bit as abundant and dynamic as objects and people in the modern world. This hyper-abundance of objects is characteristic of the modern world and complements the technologies that we can use to document them. At the same time, we will continue to struggle with this abundance of objects and media, which, nevertheless represent a useful archive to an event that contemporary societies are only too eager to erase from the landscape. The desire to house undocumented migrants in temporary places in the Bakken reflects both longstanding moral attitudes toward the value of permanent housing as well as short-term concerns for property values, tax revenues, and infrastructure. In short, our urgency to document the experiences of undocumented migrants comes

from social pressures to erase the lives of these workers from the landscape, the speed of capital and labor in the 21st century which that is always ready to depart for the next opportunity, and our own disciplinary predilections to study abandonment rather than development.

Our efforts to document and to understand the social and material life in temporary workforce housing in the Bakken has produced several traditional articles, but our project has also explored several less conventional approaches. Weber, who conducted many of the interviews for the project, has published on social policy drawing upon his work with our project, and has integrated his findings with focus groups for social service providers. His work brings together his interviews in the camps with concrete policy recommendations for communities in North Dakota. Caraher has documented his experiences the Bakken through the genre of the tourist guide. He argues that the modern experience of tourism marks the significance of fossil fuels for the creation of the modern world, and follows Dean McCannell's work in seeing tourism as central to the formation of the middle, or "leisure class" (McCannell 1976). At the same time, the rise of tourism anticipated the kind of mobility and provided the critical RVs that have come to define both labor and capital in extraction zones of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, Rothaus, has seen fieldwork in the Bakken as part of an "archaeology of care," which regards the archaeological process as an expression of concern from the archaeological community. In our experience in the Bakken, the archaeological research in the daily life of oil patch workers found a receptive audience in the residents of workforce housing who shared our view that something remarkable was occurring. The common ground between researcher and participant demonstrates that the practice of archaeology, despite its range of disciplinary baggage, can participate in a mutually significant dialogue with undocumented migrants.

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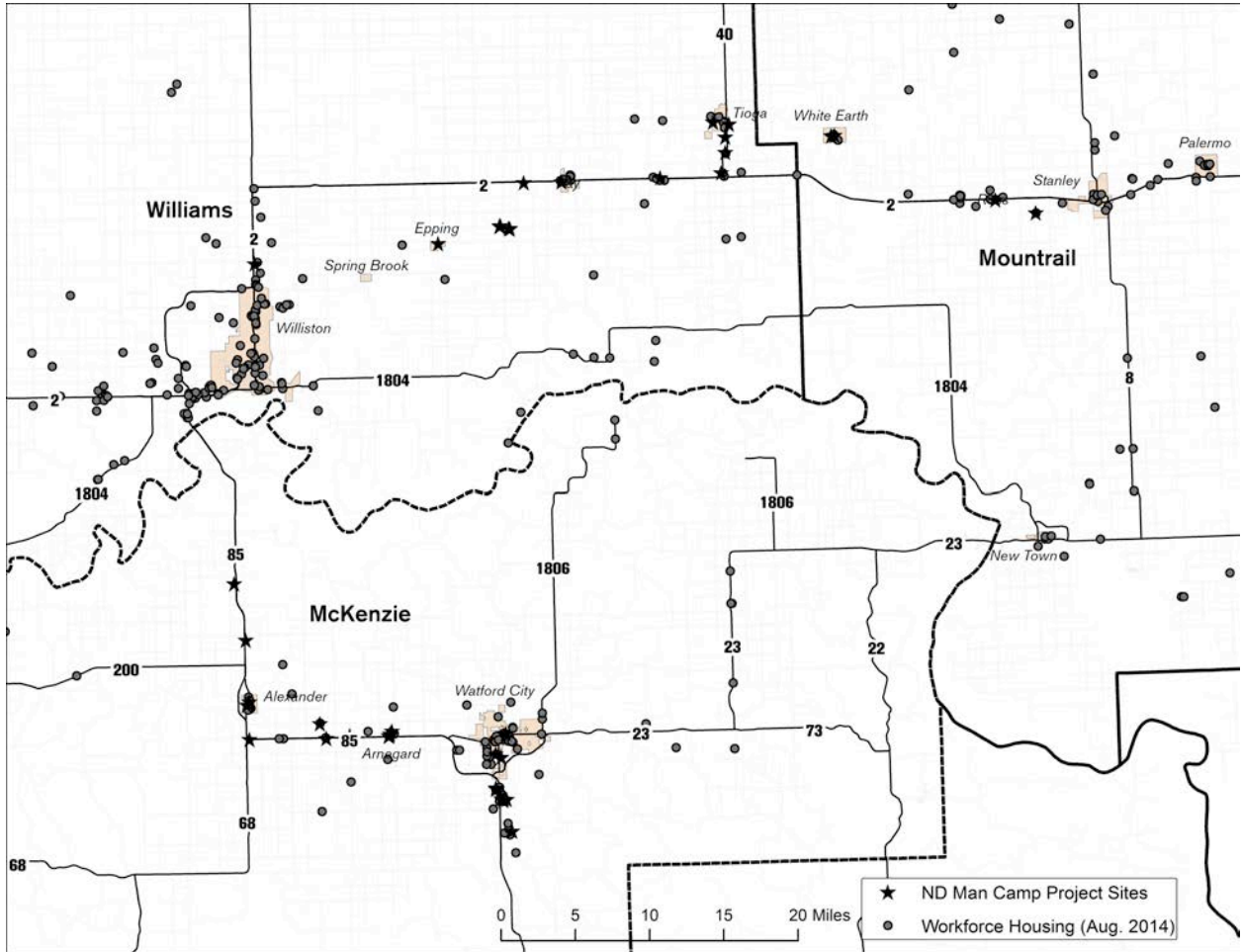


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7





Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11