

Landscapes of care
the emergence of landscapes of care in unstable territories



SOPHIA
SCOPIO EDITIONS

volume 7, issue 1 | publication year: 2022
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
doi 10.24840/2183-8976_2022-0007_0001_6
homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

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VISUAL ESSAYS

Songs of the Dead

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Abstract

Songs of the Dead is a photographic exploration of the aftermath of a devastating fire that impacted the community of Fort McMurray in Alberta Canada on the 3rd of May 2016. Six months after the fire, stimulated by media coverage and reflecting on the discourse surrounding dispossession and the environment, the project commenced at ground level with support of a Royal Photographic Society Environmental Awareness Bursary in a region inhabited by Anishinaabe¹ located within Treaty 8 Territory, the traditional lands of the Cree, Dene and unceded territory of the Métis.

The visual essay presented here is centred in the wake of a major fire event, however, it is also about human law and ecosystems. By traversing discussions on ethics within documentary photography and briefly exploring the history Aftermath of this medium, we argue how photography can better address socio-ecological issues within climate change through poetics. We offer a way of resisting the norms of documentary photography, resulting from subject and process-driven methods.

Key-words: Fire; Geography; Ethics; Photography; Ecology

1. Fiola, Chantal, and Rick Monture. 2015. *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality*. N.p.: University of Manitoba Press. P1

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Alan McFetridge is a photographer from Aotearoa. His field studies of Landscape Fire include regions within Canadian boreal, Australia and Greece. He receives invitations to visit Indigenous land, founded the Centre of Ecological Philosophy, been a panelist at the Association for Art History Annual Conference in 2021 and lectured at the John Hopkins Museum of Archaeology.

Antoinette Johnson is a researcher with an undergraduate degree in English and Drama from Queen Mary University of London. Prior to joining the Centre for Ecological Philosophy, their research has been primarily interested in the relationship between 19th Century western scientific developments and literature, theatre, art, photography and the every-day performance of the self or persona. Antoinette intends to continue developing their work at Oxford University by completing a Masters in Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology.

Emma Mcloughin is a visual anthropologist exploring the intersection of the arts and sciences within ecology and climate change. She is interested in understanding how photography, and visual culture more broadly, can be involved in critiquing and challenging systems of power within the Anthropocene through political-ecological imagining and collective world-making. Emma holds an MA in Visual and Material Culture from University College London and a BA in Natural Sciences from Cambridge University.

Dan Devitt is a Senior Public Health Strategist. His initial academic experiences were humanities-based (BA Hons English Lit & Lang (Kings College London 1995) MA in Text & Performance Studies King College & RADA 1996). Since 2004 he has worked in Public Health, focussing on Children and Young People, Child Death Review and Suicide Prevention, and was an NHS Olympic Torchbearer in 2012 in recognition of his work on Health Inequalities in London. He has contributed to national guidance and specialist academic publications associated with Child Death. He is an Executive Member of the Association of Child Death Review Professionals.

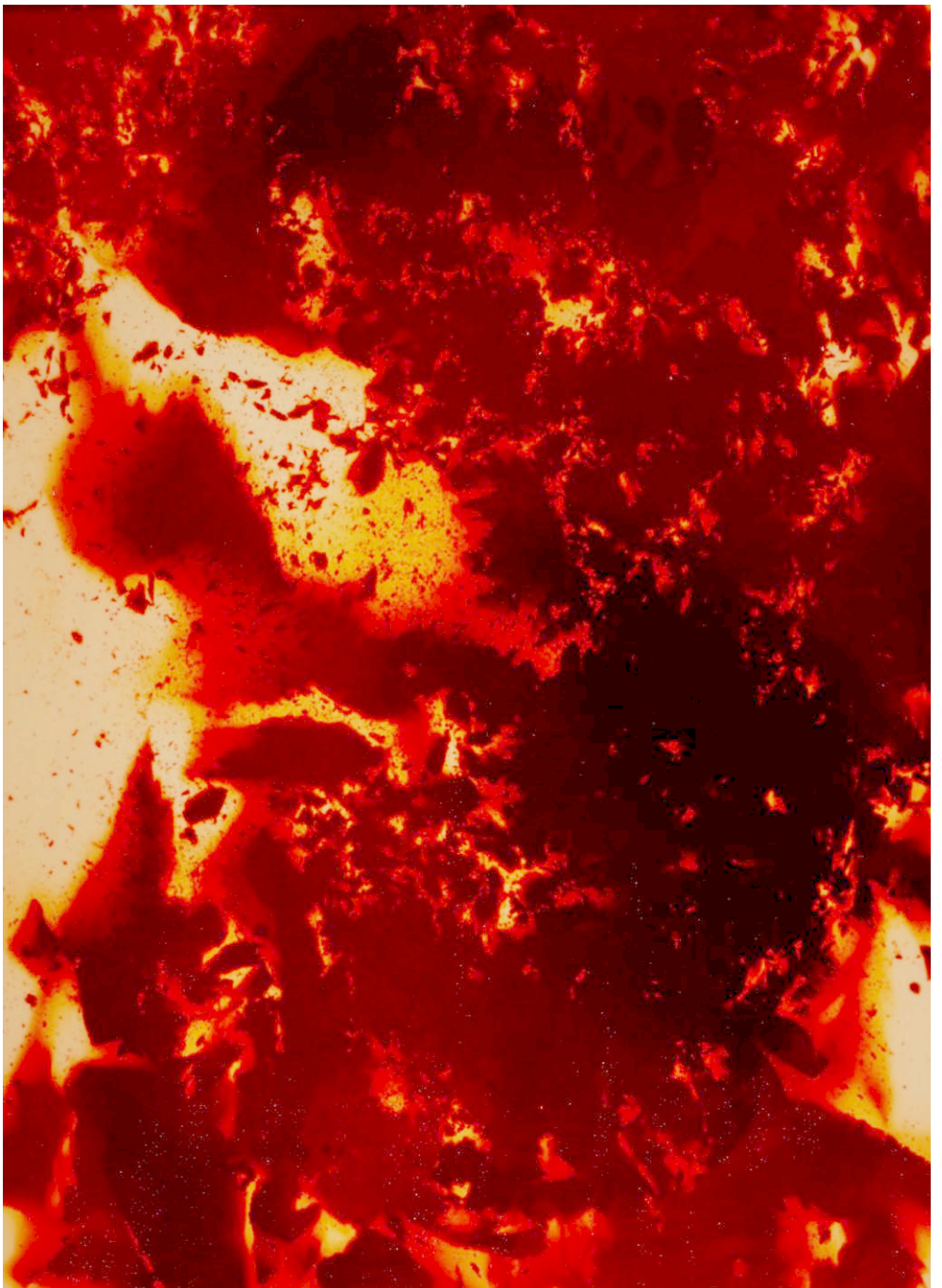
Songs of the Dead

Cold wind circles columns of falling tears
Blows a heartless war cry of deadmen down
by money river

At noonday their boats come ashore
full of goodbyes for the young

The old trapper told me where their hearts
are kept
Hidden in a bag under the bed of the eldest
he said.

A.M.

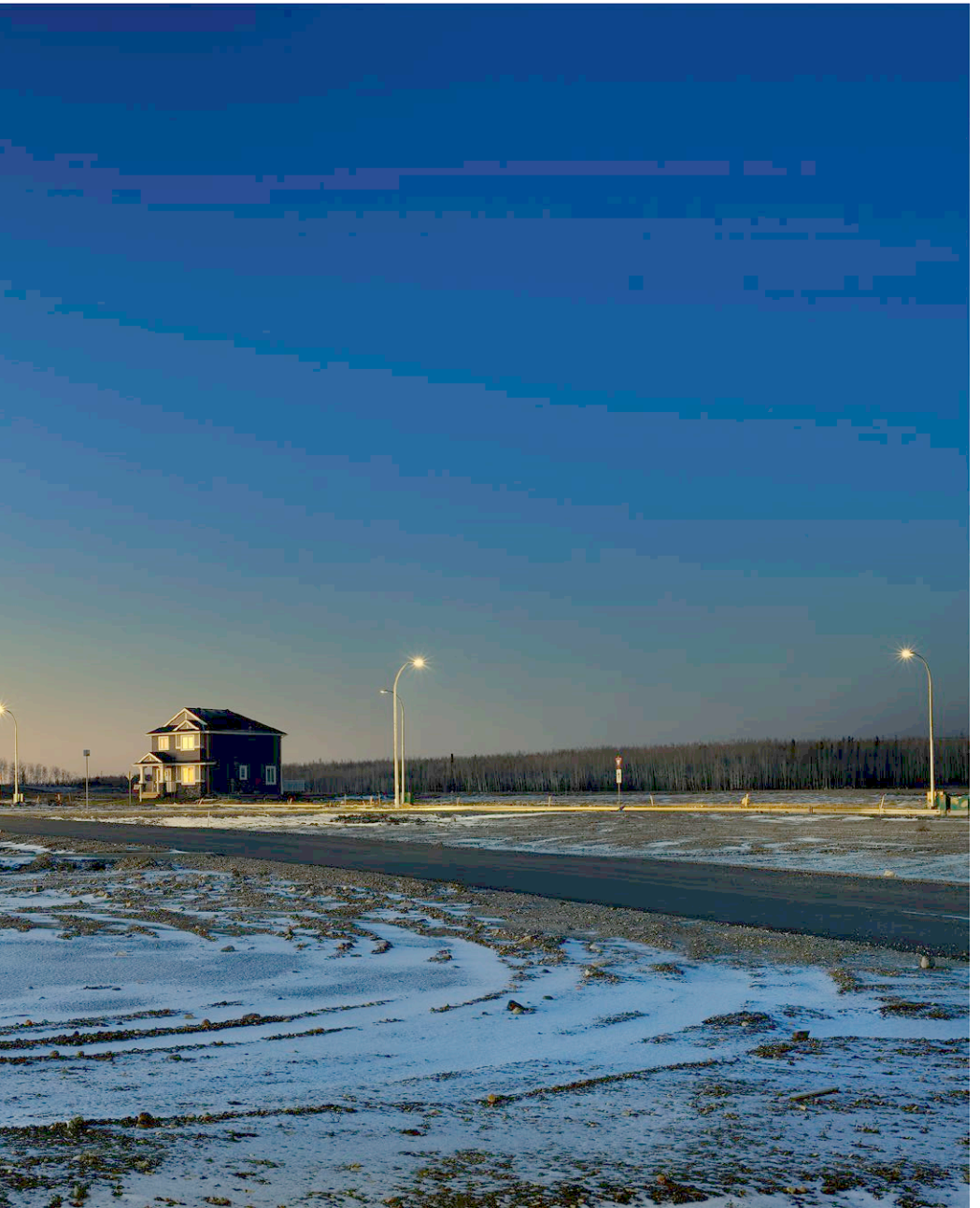


My Blood is Related to Them.



Make Wealth and Become Poor.





They Always Go too Far.



The Last Man.



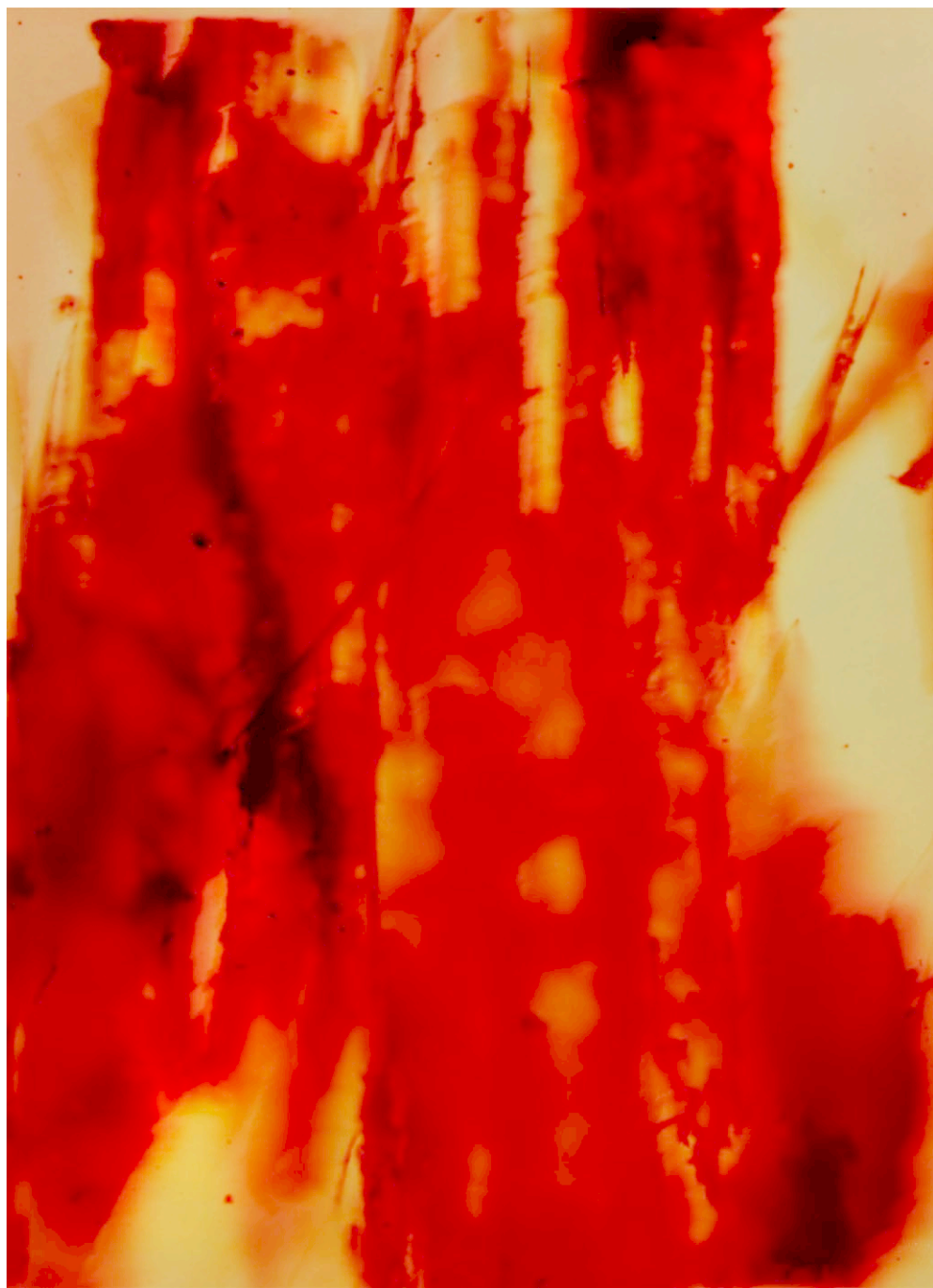
The Heart of Earth is Gold.



from "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"

My Blood is Related to Them.
Make Wealth and Become Poor.
They Always Go too Far.
The Last Man.
The Heart of Earth is Gold.

Pyrogram



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The initial purpose had been to capture the immediate impact on landscape and response to the fire. The photographer viewed dramatic news media of a sudden mass evacuation as it was unfolding. The iconography of wildfires in the media included highways jammed to a standstill, residents attempting to flee, a spectacle and tragedy played out for prime time, the gaze of the camera highlighting the scale of the tragedy.^{2,3}

The fire began near the Tar Sands of Alberta⁴ oil extraction operation and the urban service centre of Fort McMurray, a home to industry workers from the 1960s.⁵ With attributes of a natural resource boomtown.⁶ The scale of displacement and the population's isolated position was a direct result of complex global interests, and (unwitting) consumer demand for oil.⁷

Preliminary interviews with Professor Mike Flannigan (University of Alberta) revealed an escalation of Boreal Forest burning occurring in the context of the climate crisis. As the project unfurled communal traumatisation became evident, altering the context for delivery and the reflective consideration of its artistic and academic context.

From a starting point of representation the project was informed by discourses of environmental and human trauma, refocusing it to seek to achieve more than simple voyeurism.

The evolution of the project shifted its focus towards what has been termed 'late photography' in the context of the climate crisis. David Company outlines the long social history of the 'late photograph': how photography's overshadowing by video and moving image has perhaps left photography at the "aftermath of contemporary culture", similarly leaving photography to capture the subject of the aftermath.⁸ No longer about capturing the event as it happens, epitomised by images like Robert Capa's "falling soldier", photography has attempted to coordinate around a position beyond the event itself.

2. Pyne, Stephen J. 2016. The Fort McMurray fire, climate change, and our fossil-fuel-powered society. <https://slate.com/technology/2016/05/the-fort-mcmurray-fire-climate-change-and-our-fossil-fuel-powered-society.html>.

3. Cotter, John. 2016. "Alberta declares state of emergency as firefighters struggle to save Fort McMurray." The Toronto Star, May 4, 2016. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/05/04/hot-dry-winds-threaten-to-worsen-hellish-fort-mcmurray-wildfire-today.html>.

Pyne, Stephen. 2022. "Stephen J. Pyne presents "Between Three Fires."" YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISjOpLRUktY.44:44>"

4. Canadian Government. 2020. "What are the oil sands." What are the oil sands? <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/our-natural-resources/energy-sources-distribution/fossil-fuels/crude-oil/what-are-oil-sands/18089>.

5. Huberman, Irwin. 2001. The Place We Call Home : a History of Fort McMurray, as Its People Remember, 1778 - 1980. N.p.: Historical Book Society of Fort McMurray.

6. Keough, Beth. 2015. "Planning for growth in a natural resource boomtown: challenges for urban planners in Fort McMurray, Alberta." Urban Geography 36 (8): 1169 -1196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2015.1049482>.

7. Wieszkalnys, G. 2016. "A doubtful hope: resource affect in a future oil economy." Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 36 (39): 127-146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12397>.

8. Company, David. 2003. "Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the problems of 'Late Photography.'" David Company. <https://davidcompany.com/safety-in-numbness/>.

From conflicts, the aftermath of the Gulf War⁹, Afghanistan¹⁰ or Ground Zero after 9/11¹¹, these seemingly superior images have become a convincing style of static, slow detail and memory in a changing environment. Allan Sekula observes that whilst the documentary has witnesses and records "mountains of evidence ... the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world".

The photographer was informed by the lived experience engaging with the subjects and landscapes. In interactions with the subjects of the project, observations were manifested in personal conflicts. In retrospect the photographer questioned the project's intentions and now actively questions the delivery of "late photography".

Martha Rosler¹² criticises photojournalism's failure in positively caring for its subjects, instead exposing and exploiting the troubled in a problematic aestheticised response. As Company warns, late photography's "banal matter-of-factness" can lead to a sense of the sublime, encouraging an "indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as a concern". This is something that can be handled by leaving the images behind, assuaging "any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position".

It is apparent in the photographs that there is a disconnection between the starkness of the observed impact of the fire, and the encounters and ensuing relationships that the photographer developed with the inhabitants of Fort McMurray. There is an obvious representation of the impact of the fire and resulting clean up. The traumatising of the landscape is evident and by their absence in the images, but through the sharing of their narratives, the photographer sought to highlight the trauma and experience of the Fort McMurray inhabitants in a way that avoided exploitation.

The project quested to understand and address the structures, drivers and needs of the community and landscape and eschewed direct personal focus to avoid the pornography of voyeuristic pseudo representation, sensationalising or cheapening the trauma of human beings seeking to exist and carry on their lives which are not usually figuratively represented. It attempted to create a genuine response to collective human action and indigenous existence that is appropriate for addressing contemporary land abuse and cultural injustices, as Sekula notes attempts to "frame the crime, the trial, the system of justice and its official myths"¹³.

9. Selgado, S. 2021. "Gulf War aftermath." Legion Magazine. <https://legionmagazine.com/en/gulf-war-aftermath/>.

10. Innes, Randy. "'The Day Nobody Died', War Photography, and the Violence of the Image." RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review 39, no. 2 (2014): 88–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43202470>.

11. Meyerowitz, Joel. 2011. *Aftermath* – 2011 Edition. N.p.: Phaidon Press.

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13. Sekula, Allan. 1978. "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)." *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (1978): 859–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088914>.

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The problem with many of the perspectives on the landscape in photography is the weighting of Western views and prioritisation of their privilege and exclusivity of their vision. It has been noted that a fairly typical White-European approach is likely to have scant regard for the land's health and stewardship because of an obsession with money (Neidjie, B. 1989). Irwin Huberman for example is unable to access the worldview that surrounds him. He commits just 5 paragraphs of a 283-page history book on Fort McMurray, "The Place We call Home" to 'ancient communities' suggesting that 1719 was the beginning of time for the place today and no mention of the historic conservative totemic knowledge systems, violent history of assimilation and brutal actions that provided the space for his eventual settlement.

In Conclusion

As Dostoyevsky notes – "the impression made by the reality is always stronger than the description" – The House of the Dead.¹⁴ This is a theme from the photographer who methodically captured crepuscular images over 49 days in two Mid October to Mid November 2016 and Mid January to Mid February 2017.

As the ecological catastrophes we face become commonplace and our collective horror at the images we see becomes over time muted with a familiarity and distancing from the "impression" of the images that become a wallpaper – unseen, eventually unremarkable, the project highlights the need to seek perspectives that are rare to learn about how best to give care to the lands of our beginnings.

As these events flash across our news feeds more frequently, it is essential to widen the subjective context of these aftermath landscapes to take the time to consider the forces at play. Rather than leaving these images behind, we must be sensitive to the lived aftermaths that continue after the visible catastrophic events.

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