

Society for Urban, National and Transnational/Global Anthropology

By Susan Falls, Contributing Editor

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In Search of Hope: Mobility and Citizenships on the Canadian Frontier

By Lindsay Bell

In 2007, Canada was the third largest producer of diamonds by value in the world. Most of these gems come from three remote mines in the Northwest Territories (NWT). In regions marked indigenous like the diamond basin, there is an overwhelming concern over “impacts” and “benefits” of mining for local populations; and rightly so. The region has a dense history of resource extraction and projects have left behind social unrest, uneven employment and degraded environments. While basic indicators of social well-being lag far behind national averages, an expectation persists that free-market, primary sector growth will bring socio-economic equality by providing jobs for locals. Emphasis on “the local” as an object—usually in the name of “the traditional” or “the indigenous”—obscures more than it reveals. Treating locality as a social-relation-in-motion, I offer an account of life in the basin that underscores two key components of global resource extraction: labor migration and differentiated citizenships.

The primary sector, a foundation of Canada's political economy, produces several scales of labor mobility which structure social difference and inequality. Market highs and lows move labor into, out of and around the country. Concomitantly, resource extraction, via the state, has attempted to “fix” populations in place. To secure land, the state arranges rights and property ownership by reconfiguring Aboriginal collectivities in ways that are institutionally recognizable. The contradiction, however, is that resource development and its accordant labour migration undermine the political-economic basis on which Aboriginality was based. In addition, non-Indigenous workers frequently allege local authenticity (“Northerner”) to claim privileged access to work. Such differentiated citizenships attempt to mediate the mobility/fixity contradiction.

Mobility/fixity contradictions are clarified in peri-urban centers of circumpolar North America. Regional, national and international surplus populations arrive in search of hope. Folks of various ethnic affiliations navigate both institutional and informal networks in search of livelihoods. Consider Ruth Harding, who I met in a state-industry funded mine-training program in the NWT. Just shy of 50, she was determined to get one of rumored \$100,000/year jobs. Born on an Eastern Canadian reservation, Ruth spent her adolescence in Boston. Her father, originally from a Quebec reservation, moved her family there for work as a mechanic. “We spent our lives working hard so no one would call us Indians. Now that I am here, if I don’t call myself an Indian, I won’t get a job.”

Ruth’s “Indian status” provided access to the subsidized course. However, when the financial crisis hit, industry retracted funding. Their instability was downloaded onto Ruth and other “non-band” students (those unregistered with the communities originally formed around the fur trade). Asked to cover her own expenses, she took on a high-interest loan. Dreams of job offers were built on empty promises: upon graduation, a representative congratulated the group, and said the hiring freeze was a “good opportunity to practice patience and flexibility.”

Ruth is neither an anomaly, nor a new phenomenon, but a historical migrant-Aboriginal figure whose story reveals how race, locality, and political-economy articulate in complicated ways across time and space. The changes situating Ruth and others within and against categories of Indigeneity show how states reproduce locality to maintain sovereignty and make resources available to capital. Meanwhile, in harvesting resources and reproducing locality and labor at a cost attractive to state and capital, populations are circulated to and from extraction zones. Changes situating my informants within and against categories of indigeneity clarify how locality is a dynamic social relation.

Thus, differentiated citizenships (band Indian, Northerner, status Indian) are partial products of labor migration, and should be viewed as a cornerstone of Canadian political economy. In light of the history of resource extraction and community (re)formation in the region, state and industry-sponsored assessments of “impacts and benefits” of resources on local communities reveals little about relations of inequality such projects both depend upon and produce.

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