

Diamond Mining in Denendeh: Colonial Natural Resource Extraction and Indigenous Peoples in Canada's Northwest Territories

By Julia Werkman

*Diamond mining is a rapidly developing industry, with an immensely large presence in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT) with two currently functioning mines. Since the opening of the first mine in NWT in 1998, the Canadian federal government has viewed diamond production as 'essential' to both the territorial and national economies, frequently highlighting the benefits of diamond production. Entrenched in colonial language, the very existence of diamond mines in operation within NWT violate teachings, values, and the time honoured reciprocal relationships with the land held by Indigenous peoples across the territory. In problematizing this relationship, this paper employs the theories of Glen Coulthard's work *For the Land: The Dene Nation's Struggle for Self-Determination*, and examines the ways in which the operation of diamond mines exist as strongholds of settler-colonialism while simultaneously seeking to 'modernise' Canada's North. This is achieved through an exploration of Indigenous land relationships, the false beneficiary nature of diamond mine corporations, and finally the homeland vs. colonial frontier dichotomy.*

Introduction and Thesis

Natural resource extraction has been frequently cited as essential to Canada's economy, particularly with regards to activities in Canada's Northern regions. Such activities have incredible influence in Canada's North, specifically regarding an influx in settler population, as well as inciting the negotiations for both Treaties 8 and 11.¹ Natural resource extraction in the North is an incredibly varied trade, with resources ranging from mining, diamond extraction, and the pursuit for pipeline development (as well as development in general) for oil and gas industries. Similar to other regions with a heavy resource based economy, the North is littered with contention with regards to such industries. Critics of the impact on the environment and sustainability are extremely present. Furthermore, due to the larger population of Indigenous peoples, the impact on Indigenous cultures and ways of being are extremely high, achieved by successfully altering a

¹ Colleen Davison and Penelope Hawe. "All That Glitters: Diamond Mining and Tâîchô Youth in Behchokö, Northwest Territories." *Arctic* 65, no. 2. (June 2012): 215.

homeland into a “frontier”.² In this paper, I will illustrate the extent to which natural resource extraction in the North, specifically the Northwest Territories (NWT), has impacted Indigenous peoples, with particular regard given to diamond mining. This will be explored through a synthesis of the theory presented in Glenn Coulthard’s *For the Land: The Dene Nations’s Struggle for Self-Determination*, as well as using case studies on the Diavik, Ekati, and Snap Lake diamond mines. This will be illustrated through an examination of the environmental harms created by ignoring reciprocal relationships to the land, how diamond mines offer false benefits for Indigenous communities, and finally how this form of natural resource extraction operates as a colonial extension of the government to implement ‘modernity’ in the North.

Pillaging the Earth: Environmental Harms of Diamond Mining on Indigenous Communities

Connection to the land is inherent to Indigenous ways of life, particularly with regards to hunting, trapping and fishing, or, in the North, the gathering of a sustainable “country food” diet (cite). Food is not the only end goal of hunting and trapping for Indigenous peoples: these activities facilitate a connection to the land that is reflected in self-sustainable practices, as well as for facilitating self-respect and ensuring the longevity of cultural traditions amongst Dene peoples.³ As Coulthard presents, indigeneity is deeply informed by the land through a reciprocal relationship and what he calls “grounded normativity”: the land has the power to teach through exchanges with peoples, framed in a non-exploitive, respectful manner.⁴ Arguably, the antithesis of this is mineral extraction and mining practices: actions that behave in an unsustainable manner as well as completely alter the fundamentality of land they are based on. Inspired by the negative results extraction businesses received following the findings of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Berger Inquiry, environmental assessments took place prior to any endeavours involving mineral extraction began.⁵ When conducting environmental assessment hearings on the opening of the Ekati mine, locals reported a sense of wariness. They were not against the idea of mineral extraction, as long as there was little disruption with regards to the animals, land, and environment, evident that they were fearful of harming the basis of grounded normativity highlighted by Coulthard.⁶ However, in the context of diamond mining, animal migration patterns and this relationship have been deeply affected.

One of the prime examples of the effect of diamond mining on animal populations is found in the Bathurst caribou, particularly when herds come into contact with open diamond mines following their annual movements into the mainland areas of the Northwest Territories.⁷ This species of caribou is considered to hold substantial cultural significance to Indigenous peoples.⁸ In the cases of the Ekati and

² Karim-Aly S. Kassim, *North of 60: Homeland or Frontier?* (Calgary: Nelson Thomson Learning, 2001), 433.

³ National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO). *Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada*. (Ottawa: NAHO/ONSA, 2008). 3.

⁴ Glen Coulthard, “For the Land: The Dene Nation’s Struggle for Self-Determination,” in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 60.

⁵ Susan Wismer. “The Nasty Game: How Environmental Assessment is Failing Aboriginal Communities in Canada’s North.” *Alternatives Journal* 22, no.4 (1996): 10.

⁶ Susan Wismer. “The Nasty Game.” *Alternatives Journal* 22, no.4 (1996): 10.

⁷ John Boulanger et al. *Assessment of the Bathurst Caribou Movements and Distribution in the Slave Geological Province*. (Yellowknife, NWT: Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, 2004.), 1.

⁸ John Boulanger et al. *Assessment of the Bathurst Caribou Movements*. (Yellowknife, NWT: Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, 2004.), 1.

Diavik mines (to a lesser extent with Snap Lake), trends suggest that Bathurst caribou are beginning to move away from the mine sites and make alterations to their traditional routes of migration and calving, therefore causing harm to traditional hunting activities and the continual survival of the herd itself.⁹ While it is currently impossible to determine the ultimate effects diamond mining will have on local caribou populations because of the industry's relative immaturity (the first mine opened in the NWT in 1998¹⁰), it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the Bathurst caribou herds are being negatively affected.

The mining process has further negative effects on a sustainable Indigenous lifestyle, which relies on the effectiveness and longevity of the surrounding ecosystem. Another example of said effects of diamond mining are found amongst Grey wolf populations. A similar phenomenon found in the Bathurst caribou is reflected in the wolves, as the migration of the caribou species directly affect the wolves' ability to hunt a food source. The impact of the construction of roads for transportation as well as demands for better diamond mine access has significantly disturbed the denning sites of said wolves.¹¹ In a study funded by the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, the shift in winter denning locations of wolves was directly impacted by the shift in calving sites made by the Bathurst caribou.¹² Furthermore, alteration of caribou movements coupled with the disturbance of denning sites has the possibility of causing a large decrease in the reproductive capabilities of the Grey wolf.¹³ If this continues, industrial developments will have detrimental results on the local and regional ecosystems.¹⁴ The alteration of both the Bathurst caribou and the Grey wolves migratory paths have the potential for changing the placement of traditional hunting sites that are crucial to Innu, Métis and Dene culture.

Centuries spent living on the land in the same manner has created a viable and strong relationship to the earth. Fundamental to the Indigenous Northern identity is relationship to the land, framed by traditional spirituality, knowledge, and language.¹⁵ Despite the completion of environmental impact assessments, designed to facilitate understanding of Indigenous concerns as well as take into consideration traditional knowledge,¹⁶ negative environmental effects directly resulting from the diamond mining process are evident in the NWT. It is important to note that diamond mines have proven to be less environmentally destructive when compared to the many other forms of industry that exist in the North, and traditional ecological knowledge has been implemented by corporations to some extent. While this is a turn towards more positive outcomes, it is undeniable that the unsustainable practice of mining the land is incompatible with Indigenous understandings of place, especially from the understandings of Coulthard. He presents the argument of obligation humans hold with the land, through which we hold obligations to "animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way we hold obligations to other people".¹⁷ It is clear that the message put forth by Coulthard in the context of grounded normativity and obligation that this is not being met with the

⁹ Ibid. 4.

¹⁰ Colleen Davison and Penelope Hawe. "All That Glitters." *Arctic* 65, no. 2. (June 2012): 215.

¹¹ Lyle R. Walton et al. "Movement Patterns of Barren-Ground Wolves in the Central Canadian Arctic." *Journal of Mammalogy* 82, no. 3 (2001): 874.

¹² Lyle R. Walton et al. "Movement Patterns of Barren-Ground Wolves." *Journal of Mammalogy* 82, no. 3 (2001): 874.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO). *Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada*. (Ottawa: NAHO/ONSA, 2008). 4.

¹⁶ Ibid. 5.

¹⁷ Glen Coulthard, "For the Land," in *Red Skin, White Masks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 61.

existence of diamond mining. The capitalist pursuit that underscores every aspect of mining is obvious, and works against these ideas strongly – as evidenced by Bathurst caribou and Grey wolf migration.

Here to Help: Benefits Offered by Diamond Mines for Indigenous Communities

The opening of diamond mines in areas surrounded by Indigenous communities in the late 90s reflects a period of time similar to that expressed in Coulthard, in which natural resource exploitation was first being introduced to the territory. For Coulthard, this introduction paved the way for the political struggle between the Dene people and the federal government for recognition and self-determination,¹⁸ legacies of which can be seen today. However, the companies that own the diamond mines have been able to provide prosperity for Indigenous peoples at a level that previous natural resource corporations have not, stifling the ability for Indigenous people to form political movements similar to that seen in the 1970s and 80s – representing the changes in perspective Indigenous peoples have had regarding natural resources that Coulthard discusses.¹⁹ To contextualize, the area surrounding the three major diamond mining processes in the NWT are largely made up of Indigenous peoples: within 200 kilometres of all mining and mineral extraction sites are roughly 1200 Indigenous communities; 36 percent are located within 50 kilometres.²⁰ The socio-economic potential that working in the mines offers is incredibly attractive to economically disadvantaged peoples (mining is considered to be the highest wage earning sector in Canada, with an average weekly income of \$1,130.50)²¹, and considering the locations of such mines, they are easily accessible to Indigenous populations living in remote parts of the NWT. From a historical standpoint, large scale resource developments in or around Indigenous lands typically produce very few beneficial results – and while it is obvious that not all Indigenous groups living around the mine sites are homogenous, these detriments affect them all in similar ways.²² Overall, it is undeniable that the social, economic, and political understandings that were and are present in Indigenous communities affected by the mines have been altered as a result. This is demonstrated through the wide scale employment of Indigenous peoples in the mines and the effects it has on communities by using the Bechokö community as a case study.

Indigenous youth in particular are heavily employed by the diamond mines. This employment disproportionately effects Tlicho youth from Bechokö, as the communities of Rae and Edzo are surrounded by the Diavik, Snap Lake, and Ekati mines. Economic opportunities involving natural resource mines are not new in Tlicho territory: in the 32-year span between 1950 and 1982, no fewer than 20 were in operation, the ruins of which leave behind financial and environmental burdens.²³ Despite these downsides, Ekati and Diavik have large populations of Indigenous employment – as of 2012, 28% of the people employed at both of these sites were Indigenous.²⁴ While diamond mines are incredibly bountiful in offering employment opportunities for youth, particularly Indigenous youth, it is clear that this comes at a cost: while employment

¹⁸ Ibid. 56.

¹⁹ Ibid. 53.

²⁰ National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO). *Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada*. (Ottawa: NAHO/ONSA, 2008). 1.

²¹ Ginger Gibson and Jason Klink. “Canada’s Resilient North: The Impact of Mining of Aboriginal Communities.” *Pimatisiwin* 3, no.1 (2005): 116.

²² Colleen Davison and Penelope Hawe. “All That Glitters.” *Arctic* 65, no. 2. (June 2012): 215.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rebecca Hall. “Diamond Mining in Canada’s Northwest Territories: A Colonial Continuity.” *Antipode* 14, no. 2. (June 2012): n.a.

rates are high now, they rely solely on a non-renewable, unsustainable resource. It can be considered benevolent to provide employment opportunities presently, but the jobs and training provided are as unsustainable as the resource they are used for. Furthermore, the presence of the diamond mines as a quick and easy means to make money and provide for families encourages youth to stray away from education and subsequently, from more sustainable job fields. Prior to the development of diamonds in the area, the mainstream school system was considered highly valuable and important amongst youth and elders alike for the creation of viable employment opportunities²⁵ - however, with the strong presence of mines in the area, recruitment happens quickly: mining careers are featured at career days in the local school, and classroom presentations are given by the BHP mining corporation to teach students about the diamond mining process and employment opportunities.²⁶ Employment in the mines also takes away from development and education about Indigenous culture. A concern expressed by Bechokö elders was that youth were no longer exploring their traditional language courses, and the language interpretation field that was previously a large source of employment in the area was experiencing downfalls.²⁷ Collectively, these examples demonstrate the absolute, constrictive presence of the diamond mines and the corporations that own them: in order to appeal to Indigenous peoples, they begin employing them, behaving with a colonial “here to help” attitude that will only serve to damage communities in the long run when their job opportunities cease to exist. The diamond mining projects in the NWT have no lasting, sustainable outcomes on the Indigenous peoples living there, and the aftermath that will be left behind when the diamonds run out will be severe, with loss of cultural aspects as well as large incomes. In this sense, the capitalist accumulation of wealth at the expense of the earth as well as the people living on it, to which Indigenous movements of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism are active against. When researchers Colleen Davison and Penelope Hawe interviewed youth in the heavily affected Bechokö region, they asked “What do you think will happen when the mine gets shut down?”. One responded, “maybe we will be poor again”. Another said “maybe they will find gold underneath all the diamonds.”²⁸ As demonstrated by Coulthard and the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories (IB-NWT) with their movement against the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, the boom and bust cycles present in a natural resource economy are utterly unsustainable.²⁹ Furthermore, there is strong evidence that economies removed from colonialism promote “Dene self-sufficiency, [doing so] in a manner consistent with [their] cultural values and ‘way of life’.”³⁰

Diamond Mining as an Act of Colonization and Industrialization: The Frontier vs. Homeland Dichotomy

While, through the research presented, it is evident that diamond mining holds many positive outcomes for the communities impacted by it, it is also obvious that the diamond mining processes are largely incompatible with Indigenous ways. To once again incite the work of Glen Coulthard, it is

²⁵ Colleen Davison and Penelope Hawe. “All That Glitters.” *Arctic* 65, no. 2. (June 2012): 220.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 221.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Glen Coulthard, “For the Land,” in *Red Skin, White Masks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 60.

³⁰ Ibid. 68.

abundantly clear that the capitalist economic system does not line up with Indigenous values. The diamond mining industry, as well as mining as a whole, has heavily contributed to processes of primitive accumulation: a shift from the traditional economic platforms (in the NWT, reciprocal relationships with the land framed economic processes) to one of capitalism.³¹ Not only is this evidenced by the presence of the diamond mines, but it is also present with the large population of Indigenous peoples the mines employ that reap benefits from its existence. This, coupled with the increase of transient, settler populations to remote regions of the NWT in order to participate in mineral excavation, encourages internal colonization in Canada's North.

The activity of diamond mining in the NWT is best understood when looked at through a neo-liberal lens. The discovery of diamonds in the area triggered one of the biggest staking rushes the world has ever seen, with scholars citing it as larger than that of the California or Klondike gold rushes.³² The speed at which the staking occurred led to a multitude of discerning factors: first, it created an influx of transient settlers into the region; it rapidly changed the social, political, and economic environment of the North; and finally, it allowed for the rapid introduction of a new, neo-liberal economic system.³³ Furthermore, the capitalist interests held by the greater Canadian federal government allows for the continuation of diamond exploration projects, through which mining companies are granted third-party status or given equal footing to Indigenous groups.³⁴ Not only does this marginalize Indigenous connections to land and place, it also grants companies the opportunity to colonize land and gather benefits for profit, all in the name of capitalism. As of 2012, there were 16 open diamond exploration projects in the NWT, furthering this colonial and capitalist project.³⁵ Furthermore, Indigenous groups sign onto agreements in a similar sense they have previously signed treaties. These Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) are typically signed as a means to secure Indigenous land usage as well as support for the natural resource extraction project; in return, Indigenous groups typically receive economic benefits as well as employment opportunities.³⁶ In the case of the IBA that was signed with regards to the Ekati mine, Indigenous elders reported feeling more like business partners, rather than traditional landowners.³⁷ In addition to this, the companies who own and manage the diamond mines are granted an asymmetrical amount of power by the federal government in relation to Indigenous peoples, creating a second colonial power that functions over Indigenous peoples through which negotiations between the two operate on a colonial plane.³⁸ To continue, it is evident that the federal government is not neutral in managing its relations between business holders and Indigenous peoples.³⁹ Diamond mining, much like other pursuits involving natural resource extraction, is a fruitful field for the federal government – it offers a huge boost to the Canadian economy (in the lifespan of the three mines, the Canadian government will receive royalties of over 1.6 billion dollars)⁴⁰, it attracts settlers to Canada's northern regions and, from a colonial standpoint, offers a means to modernize the North. The irony of the diamond mining process, addressed by Rebecca Hall, is that the diamonds produced in the

³¹ Rebecca Hall. "Diamond Mining in Canada's Northwest Territories." *Antipode* 14, no. 2. (June 2012): n.a.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Susan Wismer. "The Nasty Game." *Alternatives Journal* 22, no. 4 (1996): 12.

³⁸ Rebecca Hall. "Diamond Mining in Canada's Northwest Territories." *Antipode* 14, no. 2. (June 2012): n.a.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

NWT are marketed as “conflict free” and “socially responsible”: absolutely ignoring the colonial aspects and marginalization of Indigenous peoples that went into their creation.⁴¹

Furthermore, the capitalist interests of the Canadian state are also underscored by similar themes the state pursued in the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline project, as discussed in *For The Land*. This theme is the presumed lack of modernity in the North. While Coulthard discusses this in the context of the Government refusing to accept the IB-NWT’s “Agreement in Principle”, in which they put forth non-colonial perspectives on economic development that is largely based off of reciprocity with the land. This was subsequently deemed primitive by the government.⁴² Currently, the state is pushing the process of diamond mining in the North as a means to remove the idea of the NWT existing as an Indigenous homeland, and replacing it with a viewpoint that displays it as a modern frontier: open for capitalist pursuits by non-Indigenous peoples, as well as in the words of Coulthard, demonstrating the “hegemony of non-Indigenous economic and political interests on Dene territory”.⁴³

Conclusion

In sum, Canada’s involvement in non-renewable resource extraction is what fuels our economy. The presence of such resource extraction is existent in the lives of nearly all Canadians: however, it disproportionately affects some more than others. In the case of Indigenous peoples living in Canada’s North, natural resource extraction, and diamond mining specifically, has had serious and long lasting effects on Indigenous values, ways of life, and culture. This has been represented by examining the effects on the environment, the falsity and unsustainable benefits the mines offer for Indigenous peoples, and ultimately through how the diamond mines operate on the same colonial plane as Canada. These major points have been underscored using the work displayed in Glenn Coulthard’s *For the Land: The Dene Nation’s Struggle for Self-Determination*, highlighting such theories as grounded normativity, the unsustainability of natural resource extraction, and finally through the colonial aspects present in capitalist economic systems and the effects of primitive accumulation.

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⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Glen Coulthard, “For the Land,” in *Red Skin, White Masks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). 67.

⁴³ Ibid.

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