

## Experiences of Opportunity in the Northern Resource Frontier

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**Abstract:** Resource booms, including those currently occurring in northern Canada, are anchored in narratives of economic opportunity. As a consequence, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut are currently seeing an increase in immigration from some non-traditional source countries of the global South. Those who arrive in Yellowknife and Whitehorse have different expectations of experiences of the North. Relatively little literature has explored the ways in which place is being constructed by such new Canadians. Where do these notions of place and place identity in northern communities fit within broader and dichotomous discourses of the North as "hinterland or homeland"? This article examines how transnational labour migrants position their life experiences in relation to dominant discourses of neoliberalism and resource frontier values—historically sites of economic opportunity that have valorized characteristics such as masculinity and individualism that have come to ideologically define resource-based communities. Data for this article is drawn from thirty-five narrative interviews with new Canadians who had resided in Whitehorse or Yellowknife for between three and six years on average. The results suggest that transnational newcomers into the North negotiate multiple socio-economic challenges as they engage in place making within a rapidly changing northern economy.

### Introduction

The Circumpolar North is undergoing significant socio-economic, cultural and environmental change as a result of globalization (Southcott 2005: 115). Global investment in large-scale oil, gas, and mineral industries is driving economic, social, and cultural changes at scales and speeds never before experienced (Heininen 2005; Young 2008). Such trends in globalization are visible in many parts of the Circumpolar North (Huskey 2005; Southcott

2005). There is an uneven understanding of who is benefiting and how from the wave of development currently visible in the Yukon and Northwest Territories (NWT). The perspectives of those newly arrived to the urban centres are among those not clearly understood. Guided by research in other regions going through rapid resource development (see e.g., Ryser and Halseth 2010; Dorow and Dogu 2011; Hayter and Barnes 2011; Yoshida and Ramos 2012), this article explores the expectations, experiences, and identities of a diverse group of immigrants, temporary workers, and refugees, referred henceforth as global citizens, currently living in Whitehorse, Yukon and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. By sharing their voices, the article seeks to build a greater understanding of the urban North as a place of dynamic social relations, processes, experiences, and identities of global meaning and significance (Massey 1994: 66). Second, the article aims to catalyze discussion and contribute to policy on the benefits and disadvantages of resource development in the Arctic. Specifically, we highlight the opportunities and challenges of northern livelihoods and well-being through the voices and stories of global citizens interviewed in the Yukon and Northwest Territories in 2012-13.

### **Context: Resource Development in the Arctic**

With a history of non-renewable resource development, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon have been referred to as a “land of opportunity” by the Conference Board of Canada’s Centre for the North (The Centre for the North 2011). The federal and territorial governments are promoting this identity to further encourage the development of a stable labour market to support growth in the resource sector as well as the derivative service sectors, i.e., retail, trade, tourism, fishing, construction, and manufacturing (Northwest Territories Industry, Tourism and Investment, 2011-12). When introducing the economic plan for the 2011-2012 fiscal year, for example, the Northwest Territories’ Minister for Industry, Tourism, and Investment made direct reference to this hope by explaining:

The Northwest Territories is embarking on an era of opportunity and growth. Global economies are changing, new markets are growing, and international focus is shifting north—and we are poised to take full advantage of this incredible opportunity. Our vast natural resource base continues to provide the backbone to our territorial economy and provide opportunities to our residents. The NWT exports approximately \$3 billion in diamonds and oil annually. However, significant potential remains. (Northwest Territories Industry, Tourism and Investment 2011-12: i)

In 2011, the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut led the country in economic activity, producing both the highest and lowest growth rates in real gross domestic product (GDP). Nunavut and the Yukon led the country with first and second GDP growth percentages respectively, while the Northwest Territories reported a negative real GDP growth of -5.5% (Statistics Canada 2012.). This is a reflection of high economic activity—both the peak and trough—symbolic of the economic volatility that characterizes the region because of its dependence on the resource industry.

In the future, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and Nunavut are projected to experience economic growth that will drive population growth. This growth is anticipated from increases in investment in the resource sector as well as in other sectors—i.e., tourism, film, construction, research—which are currently being encouraged in efforts to diversify the northern economy (Northwest Territories Industry, Tourism, and Investment 2011). Such growth is expected to create more employment opportunities (Northwest Territories Industry, Tourism, and Investment 2011-12). Migration from within and outside Canada into the region is thus projected to rise (City of Yellowknife, 2009). If built, the proposed Mackenzie Gas Pipeline alone is anticipated to bring in over 200,000 direct and indirect jobs to the territories. It is also anticipated to stimulate economic growth for twenty to thirty years in the future (Buell 2006; CBC News 2012; GNWT Health and Social Services 2005).

Along with other nations, the Canadian government is engaged in a \$100 million hydrography project to map out its Arctic territory in order to extend and secure the underwater area claimable by Canada under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Smith 2011). This urgency to delineate territorial boundaries is driven, in part, by the discovery of valuable mineral and energy resources in the Arctic territories of Russia (Parente, Shiklomanov, and Streletskiy 2012).

Meanwhile, more transnational capital is being invested in the exploration of minerals, oil, and gas. Among other investments, the federal government is banking on exploration investments alone, justifying the \$100 million geo-mapping program expenditure with an expected reimbursement of about \$500 million to be obtained from private companies intending to do exploration work in the Arctic (CBC News 2008). To date, territorial governments have experienced steady growth in mineral exploration investments. The mineral exploration expenditure for 2012 was \$600 million for the Yukon (Yukon Economic Development 2012); \$432.6 million for Nunavut in 2010 (Nunavut Economic Forum 2010); and over \$500 million for the 2011-2012 year for the Northwest Territories (Northwest Territories

Industry, Tourism, and Investment 2011-12). In summary, the Canadian North is considered “open for business” (GNWT 2013: 17) as defined by the premier of the Northwest Territories.

*Labour Shortages and Resource Development – Global Migration to the Arctic*  
Yellowknife

With large investments in mineral exploration as outlined above, demand for labour has risen, leading to an influx of workers to the North, particularly to Yellowknife and Whitehorse. But it is important to note that the immigrant population in the northern territories, at 13.2%, is still much below the current (i.e., 2011 Census) national average of 21.7% (City of Yellowknife 2014).

As gold mines in Yellowknife closed in the early 2000s, threatening economic decline typical of a resource bust, the city resolved to proactively use remaining natural resources to diversify the economy in order to reduce dependence on resource development to the extent possible. Taking stock of its assets and risks to investment and growth, the city acknowledged its limited pool of surplus labour, the relatively small size of its domestic market compared to other Canadian centres, and the high cost of labour among the issues that hindered its investment potential (City of Yellowknife 2006; NWT Industry, Tourism, and Investment 2011-2012). Since this self-evaluation, Yellowknife has renewed its efforts to attract in-migration, tourism, scientific research, and other activities to enhance a diverse economy and advance a favourable view of the quality of life, career opportunities, and cultural and natural uniqueness of the city to the rest of Canada and the world (City of Yellowknife 2006).

Over the past ten years, Yellowknife has acquired a number of transnational skilled workers and entrepreneurs through the Northwest Territories Nominee Program. In 2006, almost twice as many new immigrants in Yellowknife were women (64%) compared to men (36%) (NTNUPHA 2010). The increase in immigration since 2001 has been attributed to the demand for workers in the local service and retail sectors (e.g., nursing, dental, social work, childcare), and the demand for workers in secondary diamond sorting and polishing businesses (NTNUPHA 2010). In 2006, the City of Yellowknife had a total of 2,080 immigrants, comprising 76% of all immigrants residing in the territories (Statistics Canada Census 2006). This represented a ten-year increase of 17% from 1996. Therefore, the city’s immigrant population comprised 11.6%. The ethnic composition of these immigrants is diverse, including 36% from the Philippines, 18% from Ghana, 9% from Vietnam, 7% from the United States, and 5% from China, among other countries. According to the recently released Economic

Development Plan based on Census 2011, the immigrant population in the City of Yellowknife in 2014 was 13.9%, representing an increase from the 2006 Census (City of Yellowknife, 2014: 27).

#### Whitehorse

Just like Yellowknife, economic development in the Yukon has also involved a small migrant labour pool over the past three decades. This largely comprises seasonal resident workers, fly-in fly-out workers from southern Canada, and immigrant workers, even though these are fewer compared to Yellowknife (NWT Industry, Tourism, and Investment 2011-2012; Southcott 2010). The total number of immigrants in the Yukon in 2006 was 3,005, accounting for 10% of Yukon's population. A total of 75% of all immigrants in the Yukon lived in Whitehorse. Currently, Europe (57%), the United States (20%), Asia and the Middle East (17%), and Africa (2%) contribute immigrants to Whitehorse (Yukon Bureau of Statistics 2006).

#### *Future Supply of Skilled Labour*

To further meet anticipated labour demands across rural and northern Canada, the federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration initiated an ideological shift in immigration policy in 2012 to align more directly with current skill shortages (Krugel 2012). Under the revised Federal Skilled Worker Program rolled out in May 2013, the government has prioritized immigrant entry for trade skills such as pipefitters, electricians, welders, and other skills specifically useful for the resource sector and the construction and service sectors that derive from it. The government is thus actively modifying the immigration system to maximize resource development and its benefit to the nation. Like its counterpart immigration program in Yellowknife, the Yukon acquires transnational skilled workers and entrepreneurs through the Yukon Nominee Program.

#### **Frontier and Homeland**

The circumstances of migration to the Canadian North are complex. Those who come to Yellowknife and Whitehorse are caught in-between the discourse of the North as a frontier, a land of opportunity, and the need for a potential new "home." However, their capacity to make a home is complicated by the many circumstances that led to their leaving home countries (i.e., push factors) and those that drew them to the North for new opportunities (i.e., pull factors). It is therefore useful to consider these push-pull factors in a global-local context. Specifically, we consider these trends in the frontier socio-political context of global neoliberalism as experienced

through northern resource development and, second, in the context of homeland politics.

#### *Frontier Socio-Political Context*

Canada's immigration policies over the last three decades have been structured so as to stimulate economic development in many parts of the country including the North (Sharma 2001; Preibisch and Binford 2007). The creation of an affordable, flexible, and readily available surplus labour pool has been particularly important in boom regions such as northern Alberta (Sharma 2001, 2004; McLaughlin 2010). But studies show that the creation of categories of workers and individuals via programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Farm Worker Program and the Live-in Caregiver Program, to name a few, have advertently or inadvertently gone beyond governing non-citizen worker selection to actually shaping the identities, career paths, and ultimately the lives of new Canadians (McLaughlin 2010).

#### *Hope and Home*

Within this socio-political background, many individuals arrive in Yellowknife and Whitehorse with the hope of building a better life and making a home. Despite existing discourse emanating from resource "frontier culture" and governance policies, hope plays a significant role in how new immigrants conceptualize their new life in Canada (Walkerdine 2003; Hage 2003; Dorow and Dogu 2011). Hage (2003: 25) defined hope as "an enduring state of being where one holds the capacity to confront uncertainties, experience a sense of agency and mastery over life, and has life pursuits and a belief in the future." Walkerdine (2003) asserted that it is faith in the promise of upward mobility and transcendence of class divisions that sustains the economy. Hope is only hope because it is sustained in the face of contingency, over that which threatens the possible (Steinbock 2007).

According to Hage's (2003: 13) analytical framework, the [neoliberal] state distributes hope through various mechanisms, including the mechanism of national citizenship and belonging. The state holds the ability to sustain and regulate the experiences and possibilities of upward mobility through its systems of distribution of national resources. This includes the ability to accord citizenship status. In efforts to forge a sense of belonging and identity, and to establish and build a new lives and homes, hope can serve as a well of dignity and meaning in a life full of market uncertainties (Dorow and Dogu 2011). Such is the hope that forms the basis for building a new home. The rich and highly contingent nature of "hopefulness" attached to Yellowknife and Whitehorse challenged us to consider how Hage's (2003)

framework was important to those new Canadians building a new home in Whitehorse and Yellowknife.

### **Methods: Mapping Opportunity and Engagement with Hope**

Our study of the lives of new Canadians in the North began by inquiring why and how immigrants made decisions to relocate from far countries to position themselves, strategically or otherwise, in Yellowknife or Whitehorse. This gave a contextual entry point into participants' lives that allowed them to reflect on how their "local consciousness" (Massey 1994) of Yellowknife and Whitehorse was created and modified, if at all, in the course of their lives in the region. This framing directed participants and their families to reflect on "My Yellowknife" or "My Whitehorse." Therefore, the study prompted participants to not only consider the North as they found it, but also to delve deeper into their engagement with the northern region, its lifestyle, landscape, and the people and the meanings of such engagement to them.

Among other experiences, we inquired about individual, family, and household challenges and opportunities encountered since settlement in the North. We examined these experiences for points of convergence and contradiction with the neoliberal discourse of opportunity for employment, higher wages, personal economic growth and therefore more consumer power, and ultimately better lifestyles, that underpins the principles of economic expansion today (Hage 2003). To fully explore points of contradiction and convergence between participants' lives and discourse on frontier opportunity and culture, we adopted a social embeddedness perspective drawn from Reed (2000) and Tigges, Ziebarth, and Farnham (1998), in which analytical emphasis is placed on how extra-local processes such as economic restructuring and resource booms are locally manifested and interpreted in social relations, practices, and discourse and therefore experienced in place-specific ways (see other examples in Naples 1994, 2007). We combined this concept of embeddedness with Massey's (1994) and Hage's (2003) conceptualizations aforementioned. We applied these conceptualizations of hope, social relationships, and economic development collectively as one, using it as the theoretical basis for studying social relationships in this context of rapid northern economic liberalization. By focusing on the lived experiences of recently settled immigrants, the framework allowed us to consider the pathways of the dissemination of hope and its implications in everyday living. Both Massey's body of work and Hage's work are complementary with the embeddedness perspective since they emphasize relationships in their temporal and spatial characteristics.

This collective framework was useful in contextualizing Yellowknife and Whitehorse and exploring participants' relationships to these two localities.

The analysis was based on a combination of thirty-five narrative texts (interviews) and visual images (i.e., the sketch maps we asked participants to draw of "My Yellowknife" or "My Whitehorse" using pens of different colours and a large 12" by 18" paper). Participants were recruited via purposive referral sampling and were selected specifically to maximize diversity with respect to age, gender, ethnicity and nationality, language, marital status, and economic status. Purposive referral sampling is a two-step sampling process involving purposive sampling and referral sampling. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions about who best would contribute data are made, in large part, by the researcher based upon a variety of criteria that may include specialist knowledge of subject, willingness to participate in research, among others (Jupp 2006). It is useful in accessing hard-to-reach populations, in this case (im)migrants in the North, and in conducting sensitive research such as this where questions posed about citizenship status and sense of belonging are personal and confidential, and where responses might even be viewed as controversial (Jupp 2006).

Using census data, we first established a target population of newly settled (im)migrants from the global South living and/or working in the North, using variables of immigration status and language spoken at home. We then purposively selected an initial handful of those who had resided in the North for three to six years, from those who responded to the research flyers we had distributed locally, and from those who responded through the local radio programs and/or announcements. Upon establishing a rapport with this initial group, we were then referred to subsequent respondents who we either contacted first, or who reached out to us voluntarily after learning of the study from their friends, neighbours, and/or relatives in that initial group of respondents.

For data analysis, the combination of narrative and visual social self-mapping provided rich life stories about identity, belonging, and place (Massey 1994). Narrative interviewing is a subset of the *life story* method of data collection and analysis in the social sciences. It is widely used because it allows respondents to share not only important events in their lives but also how they make meaning of those events. Among other life events such as death, birth of child or sibling, or terminal illness for example, (im)migration, especially from the global South to the North, is considered a major life event (Zontini 2010). As humans, we continuously construct narratives around major circumstances in our lives (Riessman 2008). Conventional methods



of research such as the in-depth interview in sociology, for example, are limited in that they tend to suppress the stories people use to make meaning of their lives (Chase 2003). Narrative methods in social science are becoming salient because of their ability to facilitate more accurate interpretative social research (Chase 2003).

Originally used in human geography, social mapping is a participatory practice of cartography widely embraced in the social sciences because it opens up traditional cartographic representation to multiple perspectives. It helps in constructing more representative and more accurate representations of social and cultural phenomena (Paulston 1996). As used in a precedent study in Fort McMurray (Dorow & Dogu 2011), social mapping here encompassed participants' visual schematics of their lives; their sense of self; sense of well-being and belonging; and their relationships to the landscape, the people, and the other social relationships pertinent to their lives in the North and beyond. These visual representations complemented the narrative interviews by laying out the symbolic significance of otherwise taken-for-granted routines, physical features, landscape, and the subtle but strong connections of the of northern life across the globe as mediated by the everyday lives of participants.

The interview questions focused on how participants from various regions in the global South, specifically Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean Islands, and South America, made their way to Whitehorse and Yellowknife; how they perceived opportunities and challenges of settling, working in, and making the North their "home." The questions also inquired into northern life experience and its effect, if any, on participants' identities and sense of self—whether based on gender, race, immigration status, or job positions—and how these interacted with any perceived or actual social identities assigned to them externally within their communities in the North, for example, "outsider," "southerner," "immigrant," as opposed to "native," "long-time resident," "people of colour," among others. We considered how these interactions affected, if at all, the fulfillment of hope that participants had attached to the North.

During analysis, specific attention was paid to contradictions emerging in participants' everyday lives in the North as well as within their subjective accounts about their lives and the region. As discussed earlier, this analytical strategy views contradictions as gateways for understanding the engagement between larger discursive and social forces coordinating participants' lives, including those influences that may not be readily apparent or articulated—see other applications in Smith (1999) and O'Shaughnessy and Krogman (2011). To further supplement the narrative interview data in its analysis, the

article also draws on accounts of the private sector, government, and non-governmental agencies—including Statistics Canada, immigration program representatives, local corporate employers, and social workers who were directly or indirectly involved with immigrants in the North either through their work in federal or non-profit immigrant programs and initiatives.

## **Results**

### *Moving to Canada: Translating Opportunity Across Borders*

While still in their home countries contemplating moving to Canada, all participants had a strong image of Canada as a place of hope and opportunity. Therefore, moving to Canada signified engagement with this hope, a realization of opportunity and a chance to fulfill long-held dreams. The geographical change from homes in the global South to Canada signified a move closer to avenues for upward mobility and the resulting change in status, especially economic status. However, for each respondent, opportunity at this early stage of migration to Canada held different meanings from what it would signify later on after settlement in Yellowknife or Whitehorse. Nonetheless, common notions of opportunity and hopefulness attached to the move to Canada in general, and to the North in particular, enabled participants to overcome the anxieties of leaving familiar homes for this unfamiliar destination. Examples of shared hopefulness attached to the North as expressed in the interviews included the belief in availability of better jobs, higher wages, better opportunities for higher education, political freedom (i.e., freedom of speech and association), security, and freedom from lawlessness and corruption, among others.

After landing, and brief periods of work and residence in southern provinces, all participants' original motives for moving to Yellowknife or Whitehorse were to access better employment opportunities or income. While six of the participants moved from their home countries directly to Yellowknife or Whitehorse, most arrived in one of the cities after briefly residing and/or working in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, or Quebec. Participants learned about the northern territories from the public discourse that circulated within informal, day-to-day conversations about the availability of jobs in the region. Their initial knowledge of the region's cold temperatures and its geographic, social, cultural, and economic uniqueness compared to the rest of Canada were also obtained from informal, everyday conversations and local newspaper briefs. Thomas, who is now a well-known entrepreneur in the North, shared a common experience about initial arrival expressed by most participants:

I stayed about seven months without [being able to find] work. After that, I found a job at the Edmonton Airport. I worked hard, and I'm lucky because I like talking to people. So I talked with many people and started hearing about Yellowknife, Inuvik, and Iqaluit. I heard about them through people from everywhere, Calgary, Manitoba, etc. I started to hear about the jobs that people talk about in those cities. It was extremely tough to find a job in Edmonton and Montreal, but in Yellowknife, they said, there were jobs everywhere. At that time I had a car. I had no spare tire. One day I started my car and set out for Yellowknife. I had the last 200 bucks on me when I started. I drove about 250 km on gravel, therefore if I had a flat tire, that was the end. For those 250 km there were no people, no animals, nothing, only space. I said to myself 'God has been with me all through, he will not fail me here.' I made it. The first night I arrived in Yellowknife I slept in my car in the parking lot behind this building [pointing to the back of building]. It was cold! The first snow was falling. I still go to that spot today to remind myself how I started. The following morning I started thinking, preparing myself, and asking myself 'what can I do'? People had talked about the mines, but I realized the mines were quite far, I needed to earn money right from the first day ... so I used my car as a taxi and applied for the permit. Until today I still drive my car as a taxi once a while. (B. Thomas, personal communication, February 26, 2013)

Participants initially associated the move to Yellowknife and Whitehorse as a big step, in a global set of options, for positioning oneself more directly on the path of opportunity and/or upward economic mobility. However, as shall be illustrated in the sections to follow, most of their conceptualizations of opportunity and motivations to continue residence in Yellowknife and Whitehorse evolved as they engaged more intimately with the region.

#### *Individualism: Opportunity or Sacrifice?*

Apart from economic opportunities, another salient feature of neoliberalism's discourses of opportunity is individualism and the minimal or lack of value for symbolic forms of capital accumulated through collective association at the household, family, community, or national levels (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007; Dorow and Dogu 2011). The devaluing of social forms of capital is in fact considered an inherent feature of neoliberalization (Gill 1995; Brenner and Theodore 2002). Rural community scholarship suggests that different social groups engage or disengage with the push towards focusing on individualistic over the collective pursuit of upward mobility

in varied ways. For example, Hodgkin (2008, 2009) and Healey, Haynes, and Hampshire (2007) indicated that men in rural Australia embraced and thrived in the individualist “culture” that is associated with rural work, managing to accumulate and organize social capital among themselves into leadership, political, and other formal avenues, whereas women were constrained by stereotypes of the “rural idyll” and gendered expectations that placed family responsibility unevenly upon them. In contrast, on a community level, Larsen’s (2004) study illustrated that residents (both men and women) of three rural towns in northern British Columbia collectively politicized their local spaces and resources (i.e., their homes, their property, their organizations and businesses) by infusing them with a collective identity and belonging to stave off corporate resource development interests from their towns. More recently, Ferguson’s (2012) ethnographic study on mobile workers commuting between Atlantic Canada (Cape Breton, Nova Scotia) and northern Alberta (Athabasca) shows yet another variation in how male resource-sector workers engaged with the individuality that arose from the shift work located far from workers’ homes and relatives. Within this mobile worker migration corridor, workers, mostly male, relied on friendship networks for accommodation, food, and overall material and emotional support in the face of strenuous work rotations, high divorce rates, and strained relationships with children that followed their long and unpredictable absences from home.

New Canadians in the North experience and engage with individualism in a different way. A combination of family circumstances (e.g., marital status, immigration status of different family members), economic status, Canada’s immigration policies, home-country visa procedures, and diplomatic relationships between home country and Canada shaped how participants experienced and engaged with the individualism embedded in their opportunities in Canada. The expenses involved in moving to Canada coupled with burdensome immigration regulations that discourage family migration exacerbated the individualistic manner in which this Canadian opportunity was experienced. Many participants explained this as being the most difficult decision to have to make: leaving all immediate family members for an unfamiliar destination for an unknown period of time. However, consistent with several labour migration models (see e.g., Petrov 2007), a shortage of opportunities for upward mobility in home countries attributed to financial hardship, insecurity, political instability, inadequate educational opportunities, to name a few, pushed most to take the chance at upward mobility associated with moving to Canada.

*Living in Yellowknife and Whitehorse: Livelihood, Homemaking, and Identity*

The textual and visual representations of participants' everyday lives indicated two main tasks around which participants coordinated their activities in Yellowknife or Whitehorse: securing and sustaining a living on a material level, and subjective adaptation to the region, its landscape, and the socio-cultural setting. Therefore, the praxis of neoliberal opportunity, i.e., the belief and expectation that one was located in a place known for achieving what were, at times, long-held personal goals, coordinated the day-to-day lives of participants and their households as they attempted to make real the promise of upward mobility associated with the North.

*Opportunity to Work*

For most participants, work (in the form of employment or jobs) did not feature prominently in narratives about life in the territories. This was true both for participants whose annual incomes were average (\$50,000–\$75,000) and those whose incomes were above average (i.e., \$120,000 and above). On a discursive level, this was somewhat unexpected, especially in a resource frontier setting in which the processes of extraction and production, commodification of skills and labour, and incomes permeate nearly every aspect of life (Harvey 2007). Discussions about work, job skills, or the valuation or devaluation of those skills did not feature dominantly in these narratives of "My Yellowknife" or "My Whitehorse." This is also in contrast to the recent study by Dorow and Dogu (2011) on workers in Fort McMurray whose narratives of "My Fort McMurray" featured respondents' jobs more frequently and centrally in the identities and long-term strategies of workers and their families. In this particular study in the North, experiences of and perspectives on work had to be probed more emphatically. Even so, respondents' discussions about their work were brief compared to other topics about life in the North.

For a region known for attracting workers seeking to maximize incomes through its resource industry, the minimal attention given to work in participants' accounts of their lives in the North at first seemed surprising. But more interviews with participants and local government officials provided a more complete picture of the perceived place of work in these people's lives, indicating that the high cost of living coupled with the hardships of living in the North made it such that higher incomes alone were not sufficient in ensuring a satisfactory, meaningful life in the region. Some of these hardships included the realization, contrary to popular informal discourse about the North, of the shortage of diverse career fields. This made most of their prior education and work experience irrelevant in the

short-term. There was also a shortage of opportunities to advance to upper managerial positions within the narrow fields of work available. By living in the region, participants were trying to fashion their lives and sense of identity to signify a successful engagement with opportunity while at the same time negotiating these contradicting realities as well as other known hardships of living in Yellowknife or Whitehorse—cold and dark winters, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and fewer transport options, among others (Christensen 2012).

Under these circumstances, participants forged and maintained extensive social networks across cultural, national, and ethnic boundaries that significantly facilitated and sustained their lives on a day-to-day basis as well as in the long-term. Apart from informal hometown associations such as the Filipino Association in Yellowknife, the Afro-Caribbean Association in Yellowknife, to name a few, other support networks included prayer circles, grieving circles, food-sharing networks, cooking-rotation circles, child caring networks, transport-to-school sharing networks, and house sharing networks. These were among the most discussed and credited for having made life possible in the North. As such, as much as participants appreciated their relatively higher wages compared to former jobs held in their home countries, in Toronto, or elsewhere in southern Canada, their emphasis, values, and aspirations were oriented more towards the quality of their lives in the North. Salient within this emphasis on quality was a deliberate effort to go out of one's way to forge social connectedness to the landscape, the cultures, and the cultural diversity of Yellowknife and Whitehorse as we continue to illustrate in the sections proceeding.

In Whitehorse, for example, John, Peter, Mark, Omar, and Kofi, a group of friends from Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Fiji, and Ethiopia who met for the first time in Whitehorse, had created a strong bond from which they created a food sharing network and a prayer circle. Having found neither ethno-cultural nor religiously prepared (i.e., halal) food in Whitehorse, this group created a food network by seeking out immigrant Muslim families and/or individuals who had previously resided in Whitehorse and now lived in Toronto or other cities more geographically transnational, and who visited home countries more frequently. The group learned how the former Whitehorse residents had accessed halal food and how they had modified locally available foods to meet their religious criteria. Through this network, they had a means to access non-perishable ethnic and religious foods. Additionally, by aligning with sharing networks that exist in larger cities like Vancouver, for example, where international travel to home countries is more frequent, participants in the North had a means to regularly send money to their home countries to

support immediate and extended kin. All network members contributed an amount towards each person's family overseas on a rotating monthly basis, simultaneously reinforcing their commitment to family and the friendship networks, as explained by Omar and Kofi:

For us, family is the backbone of life. So we communicate with them via phone and Internet. That is the communication side. There is also the financial side: we send them money. We have to keep in touch at all times. (Omar, E., personal communication, February 21, 2013)

Yes, family is a big issue since we are far. So sharing resources is important, be it over the Internet, talking, communicating. When talking about resources there are also financial resources: money. Sending money is one thing, but I also take time off to go back and visit them. That is the way I share my resources with my family, emotionally and financially. (Kofi, S., personal communication, February 21, 2013)

Other networks shared by participants in Whitehorse and Yellowknife were formed and dissolved as situations arose. These included transportation sharing circles, cargo/parcel shipment circles to home countries, and job search networks.

Even though participants' perspectives on work featured only minimally in their accounts of life in Yellowknife and Whitehorse, they all mentioned the higher incomes earned compared to their previous wages in employment positions in southern Canada or in their home countries. However, as discussed above, hardships of living in the North, including the high cost of living, minimal social amenities, minimal transportation options, and the overrepresentation of minorities in lower-level job positions, caused participants to reconsider the actual value they placed on their wages. Indeed, this devaluation of real incomes vis-à-vis the set of circumstances of living in the North is consistent with a key tenet of the Harris-Todaro framework for modelling labour migration from the North (Petrov 2007). However, unlike the resource frontier studies that have found work and issues arising from work-based identities as the most significant factor affecting the health and well-being of resource workers and their communities (see e.g., Angell & Parkins 2011; Dorow and Dogu 2011), here, the importance of work was fully acknowledged, yet an equally strong emphasis was placed on life outside of work.

### *Homemaking, Belonging, and Identity*

In contrast to the cosmopolitan oil industry workers in Fort McMurray (Dorow and Dogu 2011) or mobile domestic workers from the South who move to and from the North to maximize incomes (Southcott 2010), most participants in this study were invested in creating, sustaining, and valorizing symbolic forms of capital in Whitehorse and Yellowknife by connecting with the people and the landscape. Therefore, participants stayed and purposed to continue to live in the territories even when economic rationale had waned for them. Our data suggested three main categories along which participants constructed rootedness and belonging in Whitehorse and Yellowknife: the “five-year planners,” the “non-planners,” and the “ex-planners.” A fourth group, the “non-participants” comprised a small but important group of participants who at first consented to the study, but later either declined or used the interview as a forum to dissociate from the Canadian immigrant experience and identity.

#### The Five-Year Planners

This group included men and women from various countries of the global South (Philippines, Namibia, Ethiopia, among others) who had resided in Whitehorse or Yellowknife for less than five years and who operated on well-defined personal or family strategic plans about their time in the territories. It included workers in the local service industries and was made up of accountants; restaurant workers (waiters, supervisors); retail store workers (e.g., cashiers, stockers); and nursing/healthcare assistants and dental assistants among others. These participants had moved directly into job positions in the North from their home countries or from the southern provinces, and were forthright in articulating the motivations and long-term plans about their residence in and beyond Whitehorse and Yellowknife. Most of them had either two full-time jobs or one full-time and a part-time job, and had clear personal goals tied to each job. For example, Imelda, a thirty-year-old accountant from the Philippines who had resided in Yellowknife for nine months at the time of data collection, explained that she planned on being in Yellowknife for five years, after which she and her siblings would likely move to Edmonton. Imelda had a full-time job as an accountant and worked part-time in a retail store. At the time of the interview, she was looking for even more hours of work. She explained what made her organize her life in the North this way:



I am here because my brother has been hospitalized in the Philippines for quite some time. He is scheduled for surgery next Monday. I am working hard here because I have to send all, technically all, my money back home. That is why I chose this place (Yellowknife). Our plan (i.e., Imelda and two older sisters who reside in BC) is to send money to make everything stable for my brother's medical condition, and then move to Edmonton. Our father passed away; it's been seven years now, so we have to support ourselves. My life therefore is so slow ... I only go to work, church, and my house. (Imelda, P., personal communication, February 24, 213)

For those new Canadians exemplified by this case, circumspect hope attached to the unpredictable economic opportunity of the region informed decisions, actions, and ultimately determined the depth of personal connectedness, sense of belonging, and identity with the region.

#### The Non-Planners

The non-planners formed the largest category. Like their counterparts above, they were participants from various countries who had resided in Yellowknife or Whitehorse for three to six years. This group was comprised of middle-age (27–45 years) professionals who had worked in various occupations in their home countries, but who had to transfer their skills to fit the career fields available in northern Canada. They therefore worked in diverse capacities such as trained teachers working as family counsellors; trained engineers running a taxi enterprise; trained business administrators running a café, driving taxi, or doing clerical work at the local radio station; trained nurses working as counsellors; and trained lawyers working as diamond polishers.

Within this group there was no strategic or contingent planning like the five-year planners. They “just knew” that this move to the North was to serve as their best effort to search for opportunity for upward economic mobility. Therefore, their daily lives were firmly rooted in an unconditional acceptance of the opportunities and challenges the territories offered. Because of this acceptance of the North as it was, the non-planners had developed a sense of belonging, and identified themselves with the region based on factors that had little or nothing to do with upward socio-economic mobility or the resource industry directly. In fact, most developed a sense of belonging in the North that ran contrary to the conventional ideologies of a resource frontier, especially the superiority of a masculine, ragged adventurous personality and the preoccupation with economic advancement through

individual enterprise free from family or other collective obligations (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007; Scott 2007). Instead, the non-planners, both male and female, shared a commitment to developing and sustaining interpersonal networks and relationships forged in the course of their lives in the region. Their sense of belonging to and identity with the North was grounded in two main elements: the social networks and the northern landscape. Respondents shared a deep connection to and appreciation of the similarities between the First Nations' and participants' own cultural values. The cross-cultural intersectionality most emphasized was how these values ran contrary to neoliberal ideals in their appreciation of non-monetary forms of capital and an emphasis on social capital. Respondents also had a deep connection to the northern landscape and its physical features. They particularly connected to the small size of the two cities and the proximity of nature (i.e., streams, hills, parks) to the cities. Respondents related this landscape to the landscapes of their respective countrysides in their home countries, viewing it as a symbol of balance, rather than excess, between modernization and nature found in big cities like Toronto or Vancouver. Several among this group of new Canadians echoed the account below by a business administrator from the Middle East who was working as a clerk:

My experience is that it's a small city, and I like it. It reminds me of home in that it's a small community. The only thing I find difficult is the cold, but it's livable. There is not very much to do, but if you are not a fussy person, a party person and all that, you can live here well. Open-mindedness is needed to live here. A lot of people, including my sister, used to live here but moved to Calgary. I lived in Calgary briefly. It was beautiful. But at the same time you have to look at the pros and cons, the reality of the economy, your job, your family and everything else. So I made the decision and moved back to Yellowknife. Because it's a city based on mining, everything is so expensive, but at the same time, because of the numbers of foreigners settling in my country, everything is equally expensive, living there is very expensive too. I have learned to accept, whether here or there, and I made a choice this is where I'm going to make my home. (Nila, P., personal communication, February 27, 2013)

Unlike Fort McMurray's oil industry workers (Dorow and Dogu 2011), who expressed a suspension of time and place while they were [working] in Fort McMurray, i.e., feeling that time had stopped, and that they experienced a positive and complete sense of self only when outside Fort McMurray during holidays or vacation, the non-planners here were

working to fully live their lives *now*, in spite of fleeting and unclear economic opportunities for advancement. They thus coordinated their lives to reflect engagement with hope and fulfillment of opportunity from the edges of the resource boom, being situated only peripherally from the core opportunities of resource extraction. They illustrated an unconditional acceptance of the contradictions in a frontier economy, a deep connection to the landscape and the people, and the significance of this connectedness and engagement in having a meaningful life despite economic status, unlike other groups of mobile workers in the North (Petrov 2007).

#### The Ex-Planners

Operating in contrast to the five-year planners and the non-planners was a group of new Canadians who settled in the North with the internalized notions of opportunity and with the same hopefulness of accessing avenues of upward mobility uniquely available there, but who eventually dropped their goals and attachments to the region that were informed by that discourse of opportunity. Their narratives showed disappointment through a mix of emotional affects: passivity, disengagement with time, a relative lack of attachment to the region and with their own identities, and the withdrawal of hope in life altogether.

Unlike the non-planners, who arrived in the North and adjusted to its realities and challenges by working to enhance the non-career aspects of their lives to achieve a sense of fulfillment, this group of participants was still internally wrestling and attempting to make sense of the discord between their initial perceptions and beliefs about the region and the actual circumstances they faced. Unsure whether or not to accept or resist this contradicting reality, participants within this group suspended their personal attachments to the northern landscape and the hopefulness for upward mobility they had initially attached to the North. Therefore, they lived on a day-by-day basis, devoid of strategic plans related to personal or career aspirations.

For example, Mijailovic, originally from Armenia and who was in Yellowknife as a contracted diamond polisher, was earning a living by driving a taxi at the time of this study due to the closure of some diamond polishing plants in Yellowknife. When reflecting on his sense of identity, his sense of belonging across two countries, and his future plans in light of these circumstances, he explained, "I guess I can identify with Canada, but I am not sure if I will be here in the future. Life has no way to show us where the future will take us, whether here, where back home, whether to China" (personal communication, February 24, 2013). Like him, the new Canadians

in this group withheld from fully rooting their sense of belonging to the North. Instead, they maintained within themselves a sense of readiness-to-move depending on local and global economic changes. However, unlike workers in Fort McMurray, they did not resign to a feeling like time did not move, and that life was at a standstill until they left the region for a vacation or holiday (Dorow & Dogu 2011). Instead, this group of respondents was living on cultivated hope and a cultivated sense of identity and belonging to the region—on the one hand being present in their lives in the North, but on the other keeping themselves open to new places and the new identities that those places will necessitate depending on how they organize their lives in line with global economic changes.

### **Conclusions**

Global investment in large-scale oil, gas, and mineral industries is increasingly visible in many parts of the Circumpolar North (Husky 2005; Southcott 2005). The economic opportunity has led to new forms of social change including the immigration of a growing number of individuals and families to the Canadian North in search of jobs and a new life. The perspectives of these have rarely been voiced in the literature to date. The expectations, experiences, and identities of immigrants, temporary workers, and refugees offered in this article tell a story about the opportunities and challenges of building a new life in Whitehorse and Yellowknife. The kinds of issues identified by refugees, temporary workers, and landed immigrants are relatively distinct from those in southern Canada. Arguably, the experiences of those new to the North are amplified by virtue of the small size of Whitehorse and Yellowknife and the relative remoteness of these centres from other regions of Canada and the world. The article has elucidated how the global citizens have been adaptive to the circumstances of their new places: although their dreams and expectations of a new life in Canada were not always met, there were many stories of hope and personal transformation associated with this region.

The Arctic is a compelling resource frontier, the northern home for new Canadians serves as a strategic home within the global economic field where personal and career ambitions are either aggressively pursued, revised, created, and/or terminated depending on the repertoire of experiences within one's immediate environment. As regions popularly known for the abundance of opportunity for upward mobility, Yellowknife and Whitehorse serve as a place from which long-held beliefs about one's dreams, career ambitions, and potential are brought to directly engage with everyday circumstances and continuously adapted to a dynamic socio-economic

reality. Such adaptation is consistent with the literature on the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of migration in other resource frontiers (Salih 2002; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Dorow and Dogu 2011; Ferguson 2012). However, contrary to the adaptation strategies typical of a neoliberal frontier economy, immigrants, refugees, and temporary workers in Whitehorse and Yellowknife emphasized the significance and value of family and community networks including support and the sharing of resources for childcare, elder care, education, housing, knowledge, and capacity for finding employment. These are key, and constitute a set of somewhat invisible process of community building in the North taking place in the background of economic strategic planning for resource development.

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