From Keswick to Kugluktuk
Marking the (Neo)Colonial

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Cet article raconte l'expédition d'une canadienne, membre d'une agence de développement au Canada qui quitta à reculons son domicile de Keswick en Ontario, pour Kugkuktuk, une petite communauté Innuit dans la région subarctique canadienne, un territoire dont on parle comme « le pays du diamant » L'auteure conteste cette appellation qui a fait que des relations néo-colonialistes de la mondialisation économique ont désorganisé les différents mondes quotidiens des femmes et même au-delà.

"A Diamond is Forever"

The fact that there will be *two* weddings in my family this year has been cause for much celebration over the past 18 months. On an unseasonably warm day last December, family members gathered for an afternoon of reunion and merry-making. At the rented hall, family organizers positioned the betrothed couples front-and-centre and urged the brides-to-be to display their newly diamond-bedecked ring fingers. For the remainder of the afternoon, the two promised women sat with wrists extended, their gems positioned for easy viewing. Between greeting well-wishers and taking turns at a nearby table overflowing with sweets, the two women chatted easily between themselves about the pros and cons of taking their soon-to-be-husbands' surnames.

I, on the other hand, sat close by, rooted to my chair, my tongue and throat parched dry. I listened to the brides' conversation and wondered at how the uncomplicated gender divide is still so central to mainstream feminist thinking, while the global North/South chasm does not even register on the proverbial Richter Scale. I felt glum despite the frivolity swirling around me. Then I heard one of the mothers-in-law-to-be drop the phrase "a diamond is forever," the trademark of De Beers, the South African diamond colossus, and I held my breath, feeling momentarily hopeful. But no one in the room, including me, picked up the thread. I wanted desperately for someone else—just this once—to say something ... anything! I wanted someone else to be the naysayer, to burst the collective balloon, to rain on the crowd's parade. "Oh, come now," I chastised myself, "a family celebration isn't the time or place to launch a critique of economic globalization and the transnational diamond industry." But I didn't feel reassured. I knew I was taking the easy way out—performing to role expectation while compromising my feminist beliefs. My feelings of self-admonishment were only heightened a few days later when I came across a more explicit statement of the role of the diamond in the patriarchal mating game: a full-page De Beers ad advising (male) suitors (with a wink and a nudge), "Of course there's a return on your investment. We just can't print it here."

> **Kolmanskop and Oranjemund, like hundreds of other mining towns in the farthest reaches of the (neo)colonial grasp, were built on the backs of slaves and low-waged migrant workers who lived and died in anonymity.**

De Beers is just one player—albeit a powerful one—in an intricately-layered, worldwide diamond network controlled by intensely competitive, highly secretive multi-national conglomerates with head offices in the West. This network functions like a well-oiled industrial machine fed by the sweat labour of workers on the underside of societies the world over. The avalanche of stones that circulates through the diamond network moves along an artery known as "the pipeline." In a journey that takes somewhere between one and two years, rough stones pass up the pipeline from the bleeding fingers of diggers and excavators in the "un-developed" or "under-developed" hinterlands of Russia, Botswana, Namibia, and the Canadian North, through the diamond trading centres of Antwerp, London, New York, and Tel Aviv, bound for the cracked and callused hands of master cutters and polishers in India and Thailand. Gem-quality stones then move on to eager dealers, jewelers, and other (mostly male) buyers in the major diamond markets of the U.S. and Japan, finally arriving on the delicate ring-fingers of promised women.

There are many inlets to the diamond pipeline: drained lakes in the Canadian sub-Arctic, open pits in the Kalahari Desert, underground

and Back
Trail through "Diamond Country"

tunnels in South Africa, even floating mines in the South Atlantic. The goings-on at each of these inlets provides a jolting reality check to the romantic images nurtured by an industry organized to transform rough slabs of crystalized carbon into highly prized, perfectly sculpted gem-stones. A field of human bones was recently uncovered near the abandoned mining town of Kolmanskop, 500 kilometres southwest of Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. Over 1,000 kilograms of diamonds were extracted from the mine at Kolmanskop prior to World War I. Then an even bigger cache was unearthed south of there at Oranjemund, and Kolmanskop became just another diamond rush ghost town. Kolmanskop and Oranjemund, like hundreds of other mining towns in the farthest reaches of the (neo)colonial grasp, were built on the backs of slaves and low-waged migrant workers who lived and died in anonymity.

Even more chilling are the atrocities committed against unarmed civilians in the world's most ruthless killing fields, where the illegal trade in stones wrenched from the earth's sub-surface fuels violent conflict. The brutalizing activities of groups like UNITA in Angola and the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone have prompted the labels "conflict diamond" and "blood diamond." These are unsavory terms to industry insiders safely tucked inside their Western strongholds who would prefer that the origins of diamonds remain shrouded in mystery. A De Beers spokesperson put it this way: "Diamonds have to be ethically correct.... They are about love and emotion, soft issues" (Peterson qtd in Cockburn 28). If the environment assessment process for its first-ever Canadian mine goes according to DeBeers' plan, DeBeers will break ground for a massive open pit mine near Attawapiskat in northern Ontario as early as fall 2004.

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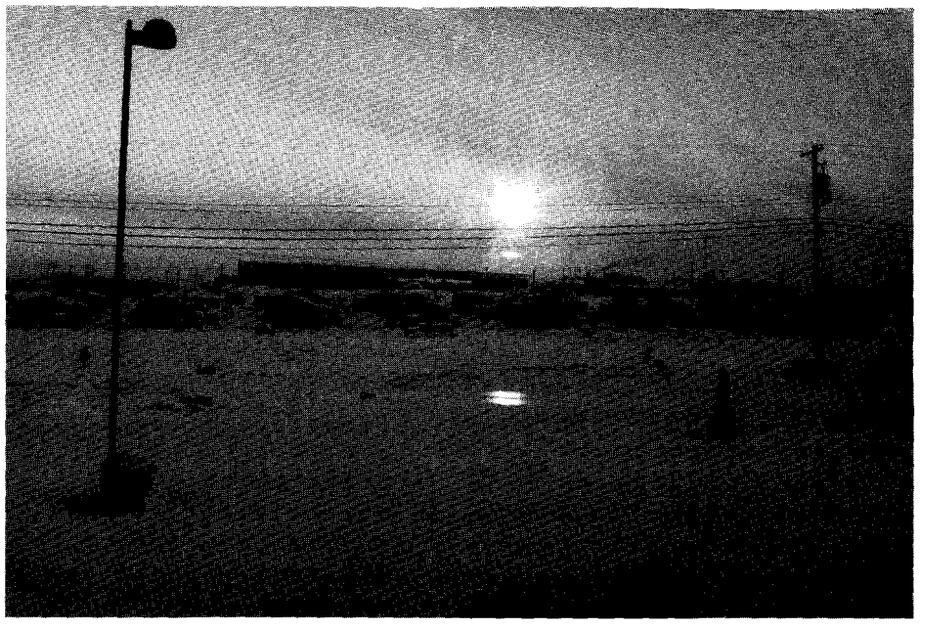
"Diamond Country": "The Last Great Canadian Frontier"

In mid-February, six weeks after my family's festivities in Kitchener, I was enroute to the community of Kugluktuk on the shores of the Coronation Gulf, some two thousand kilometres west and north of my Keswick home. I arrived at the departure terminal of Toronto's Pearson International Airport weighted down by my usual baggage of trepidation and misgiving as a "Volunteer Advisor" with the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), a Canadian international and Aboriginal Development agency. "What about your harsh critiques of the (large "D") Development[1] industry?," I harangued myself. "What about that favourite weapon in your anti-Development arsenal—that the Development institution is, in reality, a mechanism for privileging the interests of commodity capitalism over subsistence living?" On my return from previous CESO expeditions, I had been promptly contacted by the head of CESO's Business Development Unit and asked to identify opportunities for Canadian companies to put down moorings in the "undeveloped" world. My mind raced back to the day in the summer of 1996 when I had happened upon a Microsoft Corporation outlet, with windows heavily barred, on the border between the banking district and the city slums of Guayaquil, the commercial capital of Ecuador. The storefront operation had been the brainchild of another Canadian Development worker. I remembered, too, how nurses at Cliniça Guayaquil had told me about patients dying after routine cardiac catheterization. The hospital had purchased cardiac catheters from the Hewlett-Packard Company on the recommendation of another Development worker. Unfortunately, the hospital owner refused to keep buying new catheters and instructed nurses to re-sterilize them instead. This practice weakened the walls of the catheters, with dire consequences. "What *am* I doing here?," I whined to myself as I inched closer to the Air Canada check-in counter, "There's still time to back out!"

"Now, wait a minute," I silently countered. "The members of the Kugluktuk Women's Group invited



The community of Kugluktuk with the new hockey arena in the background. The arena was built with funds from the "Impact and Benefits Agreement" that BHP Billiton negotiated with the Kitikmeot Inuit Association. Photo: Patricia Simpson

me to come. This is their idea! These women are not naive pawns in the game of capitalist boosters." It was true—the Kugluktuk Women's Group had *asked* me to visit their community. The women wanted my advice on the preparation of funding proposals; they wanted to discuss ways of ensuring their shelter's survival. They also wanted to talk about how to stop violence against women, and how to relieve its terrible effects on children and families. As a front-line community development worker of long-standing, I was CESO's Volunteer Advisor of choice.

By the time I boarded the plane, I had begun to reconcile the conflicting voices in my head. As the plane reached its cruising altitude, I was actually feeling quite hopeful. On the verge of optimism, I settled back to consume the tragedies of other people's lives spread out invitingly in the evening edition of a Toronto newspaper. "Everything will work out fine," I tried to reassure myself, but my throat burned with acid reflux as my stomach struggled to digest my in-flight meal. It was not until I was winging my way north from Edmonton, Alberta, on a connecting flight to Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories that I began to look forward to forming a relationship with the Kugluktuk women—to sharing experiences with them and learning more about the particularities of violence against women in our respective communities. "There *is* such a thing as *critical* Development work," I chastised my internal naysayer whom I had almost lulled to sleep.

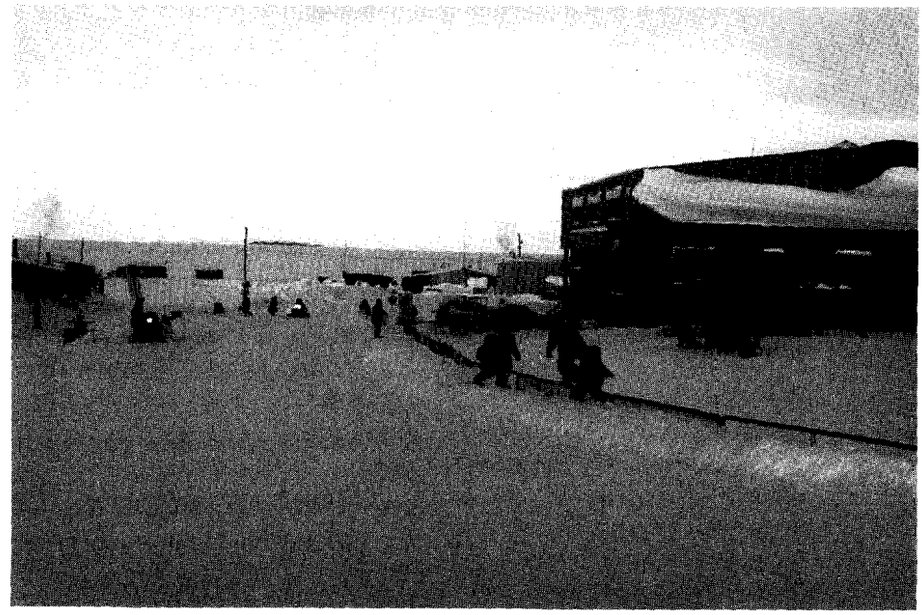
It was minus 65 degrees celsius with wind chill when the small First Air plane touched down in Kugluktuk, some 26 hours following my departure from Toronto. I had a room reserved at the Coppermine Inn, a short five-minute taxi ride from the airport. On arrival at the inn, I slipped into a corner table in the dining room and gratefully accepted a hot lunch held in reserve for me by the innkeeper. While I ate, I observed a small group of weather-worn workers who lingered near the fireplace over cups of coffee, their grease- and snow-covered outer gear draped over the backs of chairs. At dinner that evening, the men were identified to me by the owner of a local construction company who subsequently managed to station himself across from me at my little table in the dining room every evening, no matter what plan I devised for avoiding him. "Those guys," he puffed at me as he nodded in their direction, "I'd call them *real* men.... They're the men of diamond country."

I would soon learn that Coppermine Inn is within a few kilometres of the off-shore drilling operations of BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc. The BHP Billiton Group is the world's largest diversified resource extraction conglomerate. The inn's thriving business today is due, in large part, to the hordes of surveyors, truck drivers, heavy machine operators, and other assorted mine workers who flood in and out of the area. In 1991, two Canadian geologists, following the time-worn tracks of the Dene, Inuit and Metis peoples who for centuries criss-crossed the Slave Geological Province—a region that stretches from Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories to the Coronation Gulf in Nunavut—brought attention to geophysical features known as "kimberlite pipes" in the West Kitikmeot/Slave area. This simple action began what is now described as "[o]ne of the largest staking rushes in the history of the world" (West Kitikmeot/Slave Study Society 3). By 1995, almost the entire Slave Geological Province was subject to the mineral claims of resource extraction conglomerates, such as BHP Limited, Aber Resources, and Diavik Diamonds. Today, the two geologists are minority owners of BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc. and undisputed multi-millionaires. And Kugluktuk, a community of 1,362 mostly Inuit people, is developing at pace with the burgeoning material needs of BHP Billiton Diamonds and Diavik Diamonds operations in the area. The BHP Diamonds project is now in its third year of production and the Diavik mine, worth $1.25 billion and the first diamond mine in the neophite territory of Nunavut, is slated to open soon.

The Ekati diamond mine, the hub of BHP Billiton operations in

Canada, is located some 150 kilometres south of Kugluktuk in the Lac de Gras region of the Northwest Territories, in the heart of Dogrib country. The Ekati mine is a city-kingdom accessible only by air for most of the year. The complex is replete with 525 dormatory rooms, a full-size gymnasium, three squash and racquetball courts, an exercise equipment room, a weight room, a floor exercise room, a games room, plus television lounges, his/her separate saunas, two golf-simulators, an indoor putting green, and a simulated golf driving range. The complex also includes a separate security building where workers are subjected to radiographic scanning on departure from the site lest they feel inclined to pocket a stone or two. Since its opening in October 1998, following almost a decade of lobbying, planning, construction, and commissioning, Ekati has been celebrated as the latest diamond in the BHP crown. Company officials boast that the regulatory requirements for the mine's start-up (permits, leases, licences, authorizations and so on) were the most stringent ever known to that date (BHP 2002). So, too, they say, was the environmental assessment required by the federal government ((BHP 2002). As Jane Stewart, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), hailed at Ekati's opening, the BHP operation is seen to be a shining example of sustainable development in a "land as pure as the driven snow" (qtd. in BHP 1998: 1).

Aside from the mine workers, there is another type of worker now patronizing the Coppermine Inn in greater and greater numbers. This type of worker is one who is generally less rugged than "the men of diamond country," but, like the mine workers, they arrive from centres to the south. These are workers, like me, who arrive loaded down with books and papers and audiotape equipment, with laptop computers in tow. Included in this lot are teachers, researchers, government bureaucrats, lawyers and judges, international and community Development workers, and others who arrive in the "fly-in/fly-out" community to ply our trade in text. They stay for a while—maybe a few days, a couple of weeks, or even a year or two—and then they are gone. Like the "men of diamond country," they come to mine a "natural resource"—the Inuit. The Director of Sustainable Development described the organization of working relations in the community to me a few days after my arrival. In a manner reminiscent of the colonial discourse of past centuries, he explained, "These people here ... they need the expertise of people like us from the South.... You have to realize the North is the last great Canadian frontier." A congealed, monolithic "South" is held out as superior to all that is "North" thereby justifying the kind of bureaucratic intervention that is pervasive in Kugluktuk and other communities throughout the Arctic region. The Director also told me that he was being flown back and forth between his home in southern Ontario and Kugluktuk as often as biweekly at a cost of about $1,700 per trip to the public coffers. Reflecting on this situation, a supervisor in the same department advised: "You have to realize there's no one here with the kind of know-how he has." Oddly enough, I suspected the supervisor was right, and I shuddered to think of the consequences.



The Jimmy Hikok Elementary School in Kugluktuk was built with funds from the "Impact and Benefits Agreement" that BHP Billiton negotiated with the Kitikmeot Inuit Association. Photo: Patricia Simpson

To understand the kind of "know-how" the supervisor was talking about, it is necessary to comprehend the purpose and scope of the contemporary Development project as it is unfolding in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. My prime contact in Kugluktuk was a man I will call Andrew. Andrew had initiated the submission of the Kugluktuk Women's Group's official request to CESO. But this request represented only a small part of my assignment, the main purpose of which was to counsel Andrew in ways of becoming more proficient and compliant with governmental bureaucratic procedures. Andrew was seen to be a particularly troublesome community member and worker in the Kugluktuk office of the Nunavut Department of Health and Social Services. Andrew was strongly committed to the involvement of community members, especially youth and elders, in ongoing processes of

change in his community. He insisted that Inuit people be consulted in meaningful, culturally-appropriate ways, and had become a strident critic of those who found it expeditious to ignore or lend their own interpretation to the principles and obligations contained in the Bathurst Mandate. "When we talk about 'building community capacity,' whose need and what capacity are we talking about?" he mused at the end of one particularly long day together.

Andrew was seen by departmental and other officials as a hindrance to the advancement of the interests of the diamond mining corporations. He had spoken out on behalf of many Inuit elders against the terms and conditions of the "Impact and Benefits Agreement" negotiated between BHP Billiton and the Kitikmeot Inuit Association. Although the terms and conditions of the agreement are deemed confidential, it is rumoured to be worth $300,000 annually to the Inuit of Kugluktuk, an amount that many Inuit elders believe is too low. As one man told me,

> *No one really knows the results, all the damage of the diamond mines. They say we should be happy about the jobs at the mine and a new arena, but we don't know all that could happen.... We don't know what will be here in years ahead ... [what] will happen to our people. These things will not be understood for many generations to come.*

Throughout our many days together, Andrew and I shared our respective concerns about Development and some of our personal stories. I began to better understand his vision for a new political reality based on independence of mind from the dominant structures and culture of the Canadian federation. He described this vision as "Inuit Quajimajatuqangit." And I began to more fully comprehend some of the forces that compelled him to act. Andrew told me that, unlike his ancestors who had followed the animal herds across the sandy plains and through the deep canyons of the Coppermine River until as recently as the 1980s, he had been taken from his home by local clergy when he was just a toddler and raised in a church-run residential school near Edmonton. In the hands of church teachers, he suffered the kind of inhumane treatment and personal violations that now provide a well-documented corrective to the conventional version of Canadian history with its celebration of British imperialism. Andrew explained that he had moved back to the Kitikmeot region only two decades before, around the time the Inuit were settling into villages with names like Coppermine (now Kugluktuk) and Pelly Bay (now Kugaaruk). These villages served as conduits for the more efficient delivery of church and government services, and outposts for Hudson's Bay and Northern store operations. It is a testament to the Inuit people's capacity for adaptation that in the matter of just a few decades "scattered Inuit villages have been able to create a political movement and a sense of community resulting in a new and unconventional political entity: Nunavut" (Dahl et al. 2000: 12).

"They say we should be happy about the jobs at the mine and a new arena, but we don't know all that could happen.... We don't know what will be here in years ahead ... [what] will happen to our people."

"Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend"

At my first meeting with the members of the Kugluktuk Women's Group in the cold, cramped building that houses the local shelter for women and children victims of violence, they spoke about the changes to their community over the past twenty-plus years. These changes, they told me, are tied to the exploitation of non-renewable resources in the region, including oil, gold, and diamonds. They told me how, beginning in the mid-1970s, their men were hired by Esso to work as waged labourers on the Beaufort Sea oil projects. This change in the local economy was both product and producer of changes in the traditional Inuit family organized by a more settled way of life. The role of men as hunters and trappers shifted as the men started leaving their homes for several weeks and even months at a time to work out at sea. Just as the Beaufort oil projects were shutting down in the early 1980s, Echo Bay started hiring workers for the Lupin gold mine on Contwoyto Lake. Workers were flown in and out of the mine site on a two-week-in/two-week-out rotation. Then, as production began dropping at the aging Lupin mine in the late 1990s, BHP Billiton began to hire workers for its Ekati mine site. In August 2003, Kinross Gold Corporation of Toronto announced that the Lupin mine will be closed for good soon because of high operating costs and a declining return on owners' investment. This decision will put 235 fly-in/fly-out workers, and 70 contract workers out of a job.

Growing dependence on waged labour has ushered in social upheaval. Families have become increasingly reliant on purchased foods brought into the community from centres to the south as people have less time and skill for traditional hunting and trapping out on the land. Consequently, obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure have become the Inuit people's

new reality. As cash has flowed out of the community, consumer goods—televisions, satelite dishes, videocassette recorders, compact disc players, refrigerators, freezers, and stoves—have flooded in. So, too, have alcohol and drugs. Substance abuse has contributed to widespread family breakdown, a meteoric rise in school non-attendance, a questioning of traditional Inuit values by young people, youth suicides, and a skyrocketing in the incidence of violence against women and children. Assaults in the community now outnumber property crimes by almost two to one. Some of the women remarked to me that the men in their families are a lot more controlling of women than they used to be, and they asked me if I and other women in my community were experiencing this same phenomenon. This question became the starting point for a number of lengthy discussions between us. We talked about the differentially harsh effects of economic globalization in the lives and livelihoods of women. We shared personal stories and strategies for coping with this reality over pots of tea and plates of cookies on two consecutive afternoons.

Following our discussions, we sat down together to craft a proposal for funds to be submitted to the Kitikmeot Inuit Association (KIA). The women wanted to apply for funds from the "Impact and Benefits Agreement" negotiated between the KIA and BHP Billiton. They wanted to use these funds to finance a visit to the shelter for women and children at Cambridge Bay. They wanted to find out how the Cambridge Bay shelter operated, and to learn about its counseling programs for women and children victims of violence. I remember that we shared a laugh over the fact that the visit—and maybe even the shelters themselves—may not be necessary if it wasn't for the exploits of resource extraction conglomerates like BHP Billiton.

A few short weeks following my arrival in Kugluktuk, I found myself reflecting on all I had learned and shared with Andrew and the women at the shelter as I loaded my luggage onto the little counter at the Kugluktuk airport. "Um, I thought. Next stop, Ekati—land of the diamond kings!" I determined to pay a visit to the mine site in the months ahead. But for now, I was happy to be heading home. Once on board the First Air flight south to Yellowknife, I settled back to day-dream about the happy reunion with my daughter that was just a few hours away, absent-mindedly twirling a gold band around my ring finger. The ring was a favoured gift from a loved one received a few years before. Just then, the low rays of the sun that hung on the horizon on the other side of the plane's frosted window caught a point of prominence on the ring. I was dazzled by the sudden glittering white light cast around the airplane cabin. "Ah yes," I whispered to myself as I raised my finger for a closer look, "...diamond chips set in gold."

Author's note: I wish to thank the women of the Kugluktuk Women's Group for giving so generously to me during my visists to their community. I am indebted in my writing and analysis to their insights and ideas. I take seriously their pledge to me: "We will tell others your story; you tell them ours."

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[1]My use of a capital letter "D" on the word "Development" is used to specify the "Development regime." I draw this term from the work of sociologist and feminist thinker Adele Mueller who describes the Development regime as "the network comprising state and international agencies, state regulated 'non-governmental organizations,' universities and technical fields, independent consulting enterprises, and the work practices of professionals, scholars, bureaucrats, technicians, and experts of all kinds" (97). Where I use a small letter "d" on the word "development" I reference the common understanding of development as "improvement" or "progress."

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