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# Mining and communities in Northern Canada : history, politics, and memory

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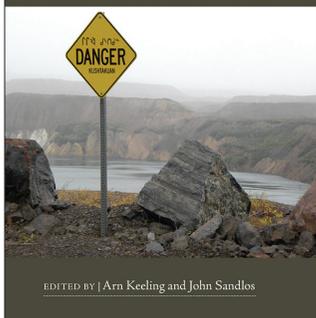
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Mining and  
Communities in  
Northern Canada

History, Politics, and Memory



EDITED BY | Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

**MINING AND COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN  
CANADA: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND MEMORY**  
Edited by Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

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# Narratives Unearthed, or, How an Abandoned Mine Doesn't Really Abandon You

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*Sarah M. Gordon*

In Denendeh, the traditional territory of the Dene Nation, there are two places called S̓q̓bak'e, "the money place." One is Yellowknife, capital of the Northwest Territories and administrative hub for most industry of the region, which centred on gold mining beginning in 1935 and diamond mining beginning in 1998.<sup>1</sup> The other is on the eastern shore of Great Bear Lake, where the Port Radium mine, and its associated village, used to stand. Arguably the most striking cultural collision between the Dene of the Sahtú (Great Bear Lake) and the forces of urban Canada took place at Port Radium. For sixty years, the only settlements on the lake were the Dene town of Dél̓j̓neᑦ (formerly Fort Franklin) on the western shore, the Port Radium mining town on the eastern shore, and a small Dene settlement at Sawmill Bay near Port Radium. Dél̓j̓neᑦ is the only one remaining. In the 1940s and 1950s, companies associated with the Port Radium mine hired Dene workers to load and transport uranium ore

across the lake and downriver and to supply wood for fuel and construction at the mine site. The long-term impacts of the mine have been devastating and controversial to the Sahtúot'ı̄ne, or Great Bear Lake Dene. The story of Port Radium has become, in Délı̄ne, a cautionary tale about what happens when trust is given to the wrong people, local interests are not given equal weight to outside interests, and when outside influence is allowed to progress unchecked by local knowledge on Dene land.

Port Radium has been the subject of numerous histories that have foregrounded different perspectives on its impacts and importance: the community of Délı̄ne itself has published a book of personal histories;<sup>2</sup> historians and academics have produced texts that have sought to give the mine broader historical context;<sup>3</sup> it has been the subject of at least two documentary films;<sup>4</sup> and countless pages in magazines, newspapers, and other periodicals have been devoted to its story.<sup>5</sup> Collectively, these texts tell conflicting stories about the origin of the mine and its relationship with the Aboriginal people who lived and worked there. This chapter does not seek to evaluate any of those narratives, nor does it seek to add yet another voice to the cacophony. Rather, its goal is to assess some of these conflicting narratives *as narratives*. These are stories that people tell and that they believe, and as such they reflect larger epistemic paradigms at work in the context of their circulation. In the words of Julie Cruikshank: “More interesting than the question of which versions more accurately account for ‘what really happened’ is what differing versions tell us about the values they commemorate.”<sup>6</sup> A story never exists in isolation. In all cases, there are people who tell the story, people who listen, and people who remember; all of these people do the work of contextualizing that story within the framework of the relationships surrounding it, the history that precedes it, and the future that flows forward from it. J. L. Austin introduced to linguistic circles the idea that not all statements can be said to be true or false, but rather, some utterances exist to *do something*;<sup>7</sup> Searle pushed this a step further by arguing that, truly, *all* utterances do something.<sup>8</sup> Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday argues that questions of truth and fiction are subsumed beneath the life and actions of the story itself:

Stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition. To the extent that the human condition involves moral considerations, stories have moral implications. Beyond that, stories are true in that they are established squarely upon belief. In the oral tradition stories are told not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed. They are true.<sup>9</sup>

The mainstream and Dene narratives about the discovery of the Port Radium mine reflect sharply contrasting attitudes about the relationship between people (both Dene and non-Dene) and the landscape; these are the attitudes that have shaped, and continue to shape, northern colonialism. At the same time, the metonymic relationship between the mine and the broader experience of colonialism imbues Port Radium with a homeopathic power: to heal Port Radium properly, with due attention given to the values and personhood of the Sahtúot'ínę and the Sahtú landscape, is to take a great leap toward healing the damage of colonialism more broadly.

Intimate and multifaceted relationships between mining, colonialism, and indigenous cultures exist throughout the Americas. Dél'ínę's story finds its closest cognate in the story of the Navajo, whose ancestral land became home to a thousand uranium mines in the early twentieth century, and who lost countless elders to the effects of radiation exposure. Among the Navajo, uranium is a monster, *Leetso*, born from the ground and delivered by the Navajo miners.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, tin mines in Bolivia, which began to appear almost immediately following colonization of the region, are homes to a syncretic Devil whose growth in power corresponds to growth in labour alienation.<sup>11</sup> June Nash has discussed how Bolivian tin miners' insistence on foregrounding local cosmology as a framework within which to understand both the mines' internal functions and their ongoing social impacts has empowered miners to resist imposed models of modernization.<sup>12</sup> In Dél'ínę, neither the mine nor its ore has the agency attributed to monsters or devils, as they do in the Navajo homeland and in Bolivia. Rather, the land itself has a kind of

personhood; the natural, social, and cultural worlds often disaggregated in urban societies and in analyses of indigenous societies<sup>13</sup> remain unified here, so the relationship between people and the land is governed by guidelines of interpersonal ethical conduct. Julie Cruikshank has discussed how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal narratives about the Klondike gold rush construct the categories of “individual” and “society” in starkly contrasting ways that index radically different understandings of what qualifies as good, valued, or justified behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Like Cruikshank, I seek to describe how different narratives about Port Radium reflect values of the teller that relate to conceptions of personhood and the relationship between people and the environment. Like Nash and Taussig, I seek to uncover the ways in which these narrative differences create opportunities for local Aboriginal empowerment in the face of colonial pressure to continue to assimilate to mainstream Canadian norms.

I spent a total of thirteen months in Délı̨ne between June 2009 and August 2011, researching the way the community negotiates the pressure to assimilate to Euro-Canadian norms while retaining a sense of local Sahtúot’ı̨ne identity. To that end, I interviewed various community members of different ages; I travelled on the land around the lake on trips geared toward trapping, hunting, fishing, and community education; and I participated in diverse community gatherings and activities. When I discussed culture change and community adaptation with friends in Délı̨ne, Port Radium came up as a recurrent theme in conversation. The ongoing impact of the mine comes not only from its material footprint on the landscape of the Sahtú: it comes also from the knowledge spread about the mine and its history through the narratives that circulate about it in different spheres. The varied stories about the mine—with its deceptive beginning, controversial existence, and devastating outcome—stand as both icons of and cautionary tales about the broader experience of colonialism.

## PORT RADIUM: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Port Radium mine was built to excavate a vein of pitchblende ore that was staked by Gilbert Labine in 1930. Various conflicting narratives account for how he came to discover the ore; those will be discussed below. Following the discovery, Labine's Eldorado Gold Mines Ltd. built a camp in a protected cove called Cameron Bay. Other companies set up small ventures nearby, at Contact Lake and on the Camsell River. The goal of most of these ventures was to unearth and sell silver, copper, iron, and especially radium, which was being used in everything from phosphorescent wristwatches to newly developed cancer treatments. Uranium, which was considered virtually worthless at the time, was dumped with other tailings into the lake water. Prior to Labine's discovery, Belgium had held a monopoly over the global radium supply, extracting the element—which was valued at \$75,000 per gram in 1930—from its colony in the Belgian Congo.<sup>15</sup> In the mid-1930s, the Canadian government established a post office and RCMP outpost at the Cameron Bay site to serve all the workers in the area. By the late 1930s, the global radium market had become saturated, and Eldorado found itself in a pricing war with the Belgian Union Minière; facing expensive extraction processes, the northern Canadian companies found themselves priced out of the market. To avoid shutting down, Eldorado negotiated with the Union Minière to delineate the geographical boundaries of their respective markets. But when World War II broke out in 1939, all participating countries imposed powerful trade restrictions; when Canada joined the Allies in September of that year, Eldorado lost its market in Germany. In 1940, the mine closed temporarily.<sup>16</sup> The government closed its offices there, and all non-Aboriginal residents returned to their homes farther south. In 1941, the American atomic bomb project began seeking sources of uranium oxide, a mineral found in high concentrations in pitchblende. The Nazi naval military and its U-boats held the North Atlantic in a stranglehold. The transportation of uranium across the Atlantic from Belgian-controlled mines in Africa became prohibitively dangerous. In 1942, the American government asked to purchase sixty tons of Canadian uranium oxide for use in the Manhattan Project, its secret task force working to develop a new, extremely powerful bomb.<sup>17</sup> The order was enough to inspire the Canadian

government to purchase a controlling share of Labine's Eldorado Gold Mines Ltd., rechristening it Eldorado Mining and Refining Ltd. and reopening the Port Radium site as a Crown corporation.<sup>18</sup> Most of the uranium used in the Manhattan Project came from previously purchased stock imported from Belgian-controlled Congo and stored in Staten Island, New York; demands beyond that were met with uranium from Port Radium. The Eldorado Mine at Port Radium continued to produce uranium ore until 1960, when it closed down again. In 1964, it reopened as a silver mine. The mine shut down for the final time in 1982, and most of its associated buildings and structures were dismantled.

While Eldorado's archival records are largely closed to the public, all available evidence suggests that before 1977, the Aboriginal people were not hired to work underground in the mine.<sup>19</sup> Aboriginal people were hired informally to provide other services around the Port Radium site: many Délįnę residents describe gathering wood for use as fuel and building material. Aboriginal people were also directly employed by the Northern Transportation Company Ltd. (NTCL) to work as ore carriers and barge pilots along the uranium transport route that moved the ore from its extraction site to refineries farther south. But even those workers with jobs that did not involve handling ore report noticing the effects of the radioactive dust that coated everything, and the fuel and oil that would find its way into the water from the boats and machinery. To get water, people would have to break the oily sheen that clung to the lake's surface. Ducks and fish, cut open, smelled like fuel, and sometimes they grew tumors.<sup>20</sup>

The rise in cancer cases among Sahtúot'įnę became noticeable after the mine closed in the 1980s. The community pressured the Canadian government to undertake studies of the history, epidemiology, and environmental impact of Port Radium. Délįnę secured an agreement after initial resistance to conduct joint research with the federal government in these areas. In 2000, the two governments formed the Canada-Délįnę Uranium Table (CDUT), a committee that aimed "to address concerns about the human health and environmental impacts of Port Radium."<sup>21</sup> The CDUT's final report, issued in 2005, stated that "according to risk modelling based on the [radiation] dose reconstruction, 1.6 excess cancers (more than baseline) are theoretically predicted in a group of 35

individuals with ages and radioactive doses the same as the ore transport workers,”<sup>22</sup> but they found no conclusive evidence that uranium transport workers experienced any direct health impacts from radiation exposure. Many community members and some independent researchers dispute this claim.<sup>23</sup> The CDUT’s research did, however, identify long-lasting tears in the community’s political, cultural, and psychological fabric that are directly traceable to the community’s connection with Port Radium. Their final report outlined twenty-six recommendations for action toward remediating the mine’s lingering impacts. The recommendations included mandates for traditional knowledge research and the establishment of a traditional knowledge centre in the community, local job training and capacity building, the protection of Sahtúot’íne interests in all future research in the community, staffing the community health centre with health-care workers sensitive to Sahtúot’íne culture and to the mine’s health impacts, and remediating the environment and landscape as quickly as possible.<sup>24</sup>

The CDUT process was controversial throughout its execution. Most people, in my experience, were pleased with the list of twenty-six recommendations that emerged from the process, but have been displeased with what they perceive to be insufficient follow-through on the part of the federal government. The remediation of the landscape has been underway for several years, but the components of cultural and psychological healing have received comparatively little attention. Local efforts to do this work have proven difficult to fund; traditional knowledge research has largely come about on the impetus of independent researchers visiting from universities and non-governmental organizations who can draw on scholarly and arts-based funding. Furthermore, the environmental cleanup, upon which great progress has been made in recent years, is fraught with tension: many community elders dislike that barrels of waste are being buried on-site, rather than transported elsewhere for disposal. Many people still desire compensation for the cancer deaths that they attribute to radiation exposure on the land. The mine may have been closed for more than three decades, its openings sealed over and most of its buildings dismantled, but its story, in Dəl’íne, is far from over.

## CONFLICTING DISCOVERY NARRATIVES: GILBERT LABINE

The Port Radium mine has two distinct and radically different origin stories: one told in Délı̄ne, and another told in publications and formal documents throughout the rest of Canada. These narratives are mutually exclusive: if one is wholly true, the other cannot be. That said, even if one narrative is true and the other is false, the secret of the discovery of the pitchblende vein at Port Radium remains with the people who were present at the time, none of whom are alive anymore. For people today, these discovery narratives reflect strongly contrasting perspectives on Aboriginal disenfranchisement and the fair use of northern land.

The commonly known narrative about the origin of the Port Radium mine originates with Gilbert Labine, the prospector who identified the site and whose company, Eldorado Gold Mines Ltd., established the mine there. This “mainstream” story has been reproduced in several major Canadian publications.<sup>25</sup> According to that story, Gilbert Labine took a prospecting trip to the Northwest Territories, possibly inspired by a 1900 report by J. Macintosh Bell, a geologist for the Geological Survey of Canada, which referred to a sighting of cobalt bloom at the site where Port Radium was later established.<sup>26</sup> In a 1934 speech on the history of the subject, Labine describes having used maps of the Northwest Territories secured from the Department of the Interior and having received guidance from the 1900 Bell report.<sup>27</sup> In 1960, however, Labine published a contradictory history of his expedition. In an early publication about the history of the mine, Labine denied having seen the Bell report:

There is one fact I would like to point out: I had no geological maps and any of my early mapping of the structures was made by my own reconnaissance and not by the Geological Survey. It has been stated that the Bell Report of 1900 [. . .] was responsible for my going to Great Bear Lake. I would like to state here that this is absolutely false, as I did not read the Bell Report until the following year when I obtained a copy from the archives in Ottawa, after I had already been in that country. Further, I had travelled with Bell. As a matter-of-fact I was his first assistant in Canada

when he returned from New Zealand and in all of our discussions never once did he mention to me that he had seen anything of interest in the Great Bear Lake field.<sup>28</sup>

At least one rendition of the narrative indicates that Labine made a first prospecting trip to the Northwest Territories in 1929 without having read the Bell report and spotted the cobalt bloom during his return flight south. This inspired him to seek out the Bell report on his return home and then to head back to the region the following year, for further prospecting.<sup>29</sup>

Labine travelled with a partner, Charles St. Paul, and for a long time found nothing. One morning, shortly before they were about to give up, St. Paul was struck with snow blindness—a temporary, painful affliction of the eyes caused by overexposure to ultraviolet light without the use of eye protection, commonly triggered by sunlight reflecting off vast expanses of snow—and had to spend a few days recovering in the dark. Labine went for a walk on his own, where he stumbled across an ore vein that may have been pitchblende or may have been silver showing indications of pitchblende, depending on the version of the narrative. Labine found a plum-sized sample of the black rock, which he brought back to St. Paul in their tent. He nursed St. Paul's eyes back to health until St. Paul could confirm Labine's suspicions: the surface of the rock—which appeared black, shiny, and bubbly, like it had solidified while boiling—looked like pitchblende.

The two men returned to the south, where their hunch was validated at a lab. Armed with this new knowledge, Labine staked his claim at the site of the vein, and then set about the arduous task of securing venture capital to fund his goal of building a mine a thousand miles from the nearest railroad, which was in Edmonton. Through perseverance, backed by the extremely high price of radium at the time, he succeeded, and the mine was built on the site of that vein of pitchblende.

While my purpose in this analysis is not to evaluate the validity of this narrative, it contains inconsistencies that bear mentioning. As others have pointed out,<sup>30</sup> it is extremely unlikely that a prospector as experienced as St. Paul would have made the kinds of basic errors that would have led to snow blindness. Labine and St. Paul spent an entire

season prospecting together, and yet Labine's discovery happened almost immediately following the onset of St. Paul's affliction (snow blindness typically heals in less than seventy-two hours). As well, pitchblende is not a common ore in Canada, making it questionable that the two men would have been able to identify the rock so readily. Different sources have told different stories about how Labine had previously been able to see a sample of the ore.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Labine intentionally lied in one version of this narrative. More likely, the narrative evolved over the twenty-five years between these tellings, curated according to the demands of different audiences and how Labine wished to understand his own story. A reader can hardly help but notice how Labine's personal narrative has Horatio Alger qualities, embracing every trope of the American myth of the self-made man, who typically comes from poverty and, through hard work, perseverance, and strategic risk taking, achieves great financial success.<sup>32</sup> Lest this individualistic formula seem too American to have been the unconscious result of a narrator's interaction with more collectively minded Canadian audiences, it bears noting that shortly after the pitchblende strike, the Eldorado mining company enlisted the support of a New York City-based PR firm in shaping its corporate image,<sup>33</sup> and that the trope of the self-made man has also been pervasive in Canada, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>34</sup> and especially with reference to prospectors. Julie Cruikshank has referred to Horatio Alger as the Yukon prospector's "prototype."<sup>35</sup> By actively excluding the Bell report from later versions of the narrative, Labine frees himself of any obligation to share credit for the mine's discovery. Even the assistant he paid to accompany him plays only a supporting role in the narrative: St. Paul's snow-blindness not only sets up the conditions for Labine's discovery, but also illustrates his weakness and lesser competence as contrasted with Labine's robust success (after all, the two men were traveling together in the same conditions, but only one went snow-blind). Key tropes of Canadian literature find their way into the story, as well. Sherrill Grace describes a "northern narrative," in which a white, male hero is thrown into a northern landscape and must struggle to survive until he finds salvation "through endurance in this harsh yet potentially transforming landscape."<sup>36</sup> In lieu of the wolves and bears that most frequently

symbolize northern danger, Labine's narrative has snow blindness; in lieu of explicit spiritual salvation, Labine finds financial salvation. Labine has ventured into that wilderness and not only survived but vanquished it (which, in turn, calls to mind Margaret Atwood's rhetoric of "survival" as connected to Canada's fascination with, and terror of, the north).<sup>37</sup>

At the same time that Labine's narrative positions him as a survivor of the North's many challenges, it also feeds into the rhetoric of opportunism surrounding northern expansion that was popular in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> The turn of the century saw expanding foreign and domestic markets for Canadian natural resources and a federal government, under Sir Wilfrid Laurier, that was keen to enable national industry to capitalize on these opportunities.<sup>39</sup> This attitude grew even more powerful in the 1940s, when Lester B. Pearson—then ambassador to the United States—published an article in *Foreign Affairs* celebrating the opportunity offered by the "great wealth in the Land of the Midnight Sun," saying that "a whole new region has been brought out of the blurred and shadowy realm of northern folklore and shown to be an important and accessible part of our modern world."<sup>40</sup> Labine's story combines the thrill of risk with the promise of opportunity, elevating his own stature while promoting broader Canadian motives to further colonize the North.

## DISCOVERY NARRATIVES: ʔƏHTSÉO BEYONNIE

Unsurprisingly, the origin of the Port Radium mine is understood very differently in Délı̨ne than in the rest of Canada, and the Délı̨ne version includes Aboriginal people as prominent players in the mine's discovery and establishment. Like Labine's version, the Sahtúot'ı̨ne narrative comes in several versions that waver, slightly, around a common narrative centre. I quote it here from the version published in "*If Only We Had Known*": *The History of Port Radium as Told by The Sahtúot'ı̨ne*:

Prior to 1930, a Dene man, Victor Beyonnie’s dad was traveling to Caribou Point and camped at Port Radium. He noticed an unusual looking rock, which he showed a non-Dene prospector.

The prospector took the rock to Edmonton and showed it to a prospector named Gilbert Labine. Being a geologist, Mr. Labine noticed that the rock possibly contained pitchblende. In 1930, Gilbert Labine began staking claims at Echo Bay on the eastern shore of Great Bear Lake. During 1931 he and his crew shipped ten tons of handpicked ore to Ottawa for further analysis.<sup>41</sup>

When the story is told in Délı̨ne, sometimes people say that Old Beyonnie met a prospector who gave the rock to Gilbert Labine, and sometimes people say that Old Beyonnie met Labine himself during his expedition to the Arctic. Everyone agrees that the prospector gave Old Beyonnie something tokenistic in exchange for the rock—coffee, rifle shells, a bag of flour—saying that the rock probably had no value. The ore proved to be pitchblende, of course, and its discovery not only saved Labine’s company from the brink of bankruptcy, but made Labine himself very wealthy. As in stories of ox-hide purchases common in colonial North America, an agreement is made to exchange small items, but the colonizing party, with duplicitous intent, claimed far more than the spirit of the agreement allowed.<sup>42</sup>

The Délı̨ne narrative is widely known and commonly told in the community. It comes up as a metaphor or analogy in the context of other political conversations: an implicit cautionary tale. On the occasion that this narrative came up in one of my interviews, its structure and content were fragmented across three speakers (elder Andrew John “AJ” Kenny, his son Dennis who worked with me as an interpreter, and myself) and two languages (the Sahtúot’ı̨ne language and English):

Sarah Gordon (SG): What do you think is the most important lesson for young people and future generations to learn from the Port Radium story?

Andrew John “AJ” Kenny (AJK): [responds in Sahtúot’ı̨ne language].

Dennis Kenny (DK), interpreting: He said the government treated our elders really badly. Really badly. The way they treated them, there was no compensation, nothing. He said, look at my mom's grandfather. He's the one who found the . . . that stuff at Port Radium.

SG: The pitchblende?

DK: Yeah. He was the one who found it. And he never, her dad never even got compensated. He got a 25 pound flour. And they're talking about this guy who discovered it. Now he's rich, he's a millionaire, and there's a book about him. And no nothing about my mom's dad. My grandfather. He's the one who discovered. . .

AJK (in English): Victor. Victor Beyonnie's dad. Victor's brother is my wife's father.

DK: Yeah. Their dad. He's the one who found that.

SG: What was his name? It was Beyonnie, but. . .

DK: ʔəhtséo Beyonnie.<sup>43</sup>

AJK: Beyonnie.

DK: They just call him Beyonnie. He [AJ] said that story is, you know, it's important for people to learn it, how the government treated us. So badly. Not just that, but the explorers too. Like that guy who discovered that stuff.

SG: Labine?

DK: Labine, yeah. Some people said all the older people . . . should, you know, gather young people together and tell them exactly what happened and what they did for them and what happened to them. Now my Dad's talking about all this, how his brother's gone by cancer, my grandpa died by cancer, my grandpa was a really hard-working man . . . he was good hard-working

man and he helped a lot of people just with, you know, giving them advice and stuff like that.<sup>44</sup>

Virtually any time Port Radium is discussed in Délı̨ne, the narrative is tied to some concept of death. The Kennys' version of the origin narrative closes with a discussion of the cancer: the mine began with the unjust treatment of a Dene man, and it continues, now, with the unjust suffering of Dene people who lived or worked at or near the mine or the uranium transport route. But another narrative—less commonly told, but just as widely known in Délı̨ne—speaks to prior Dene knowledge of the mine site and of the lives it would take. Its focus, however, is not on the Dene lives lost, but the Japanese. The narrative, paraphrased based on my field notes, goes like this:

The place where Port Radium is now, long ago, people knew it was a bad place. They said they should never sleep there or go near it. But long ago, some hunters were travelling and they stayed there one night. One of them was a prophet, and that night, he had a dream. He saw a large hole in the ground with white men walking into it. Then, he saw a large flying bird carrying a black stick. The bird carried the stick to a land far away and then dropped it; it made a giant, burning hole in the ground. Out of the hole, the spirits of thousands of people escaped, rising to the sky. The spirits looked like Dene people, but they were not Dene.

The versions of this narrative that I heard attributed the vision to an unnamed prophet who lived long, long ago, though they often cite Prophet Ayah (or Ayha)<sup>45</sup>—an extremely important Dene prophet who passed away in Délı̨ne in 1920—as a teller of the tale. Most notable of these is the version recorded by Sahtúot'ı̨ne elder George Blondin in his book *When the World Was New*.<sup>46</sup> Other versions of the story, recorded by journalists and previous ethnographers, attribute the vision itself to Ayha, when he was a young man, before he had been instructed to share his visions with the world. One version, published in *News/North*—a regional newspaper that circulates throughout the Canadian territories—cites Leroy Andre and Joe Blondin, both Sahtúot'ı̨ne, as its sources:

Long before the Europeans came or any mines opened on the shores of Great Bear Lake, the Dene people learned Port Radium was deadly and many of them stayed away.

Déłıne didn't exist yet and the people still lived on the land, often travelling in groups of families to hunt and fish.

One day a group of Dene was passing through the area and they decided to camp near what would eventually become known as Port Radium. Among them was a powerful medicine man, the Prophet Ayha.

During the night, the others awoke to the prophet singing. He did not wake himself, but sang for most of the night in his sleep.

In the morning the people asked him why he was singing in his sleep, so he told them of his vision. He said he saw boats and many houses with smoke coming out of them. There were people with white skin going into a great hole in the ground and coming back out with rocks.

These people were carrying the rocks away and he decided to see where they were going. So in his dream state he followed them across Great Bear Lake and down along the river network to Fort McMurray and beyond there into the U.S. There the people made a long stick and put the rocks in it. They then loaded the big stick into a giant bird, which then took flight so he followed it as it flew over wide-open water.

When it came back over the land, the bird dropped the stick and it burst into a giant ball of fire and many people who lived there were burnt.

“Those people looked a lot like us,” said Prophet Ayha. “I was singing for them.”

He then told the people that all of this would happen after they died.

Many years later, in September of 1940, the Prophet Ayha passed away.

On Aug. 6, 1945, the U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later another fell on Nagasaki.<sup>47</sup>

Another print version of this story adds that long before colonization, the Dene knew that this place was dangerous; loud noises came from the rocks there, and it was “bad medicine” to pass nearby.<sup>48</sup>

## CONTRASTING NARRATIVES

The mainstream Canadian narrative of the origin of Port Radium contrasts sharply with the Délı̨ne narrative with respect to where they situate power and agency. The mainstream story situates power with Labine: plucky, resourceful, down-on-his-luck prospector who challenges the frigid Canadian Arctic and survives, rewarded for his rigour and persistence by the discovery of an ore containing a wildly valuable element, radium. The Aboriginal residents of the area are, at best, background characters, part of the landscape; more often they are invisible. The Dene narrative, however, complicates these power dynamics. Because the rock is discovered by ʔəhtséó Beyonnie, a Dene man, the glory of its discovery (and associated power) should, according to the Sahtúot’ı̨ne, reside with him, but the prospector purchases the rock for a token sum so that he may assume its power for himself, accruing great wealth and prestige in the process. The Aboriginal version of the story focuses on the good faith with which the First Nations people generally greeted and supported the arriving Europeans, and on the unjust and inhumane treatment they received in response.

The differences in the roles played by Aboriginal people in the mine’s discovery mirror the roles they play in narratives of northern colonialism more broadly: the mainstream narratives of Arctic colonialism erase Aboriginal sovereignty and personhood, especially in the face of industrial and governmental desires for land and resources on Aboriginal land.<sup>49</sup> The Crown recognized Aboriginal title to any land that had not been ceded through treaty, but as the land held value to the government

and the Aboriginal people did not, the latter were conceptualized mostly as obstacles to overcome in order to secure the former.<sup>50</sup>

One constant remains through the different versions of Labine's story, in keeping with the colonial mentality: Aboriginal people do not appear. This noticeable absence is in keeping with subsequent descriptions of Port Radium. At Library and Archives Canada, I searched dozens of boxes of material related to the Eldorado, scanning for references to Aboriginal people at the mine sites. Boxes contained correspondence between the company's management staff, employment records, and file after file of media clippings—but little if any mention of Dene, as employees, traders, or even merely local residents. Julie Cruikshank has argued that "facts get established by enacting silences . . . there are things to be said and ways of saying them."<sup>51</sup> Whenever a narrative is shared, be it orally or in print, decisions of inclusion and exclusion are made based on culturally ingrained assumptions of what is or is not considered relevant. When southern, urban Canada hears stories of the founding of a new and successful mine, it expects Horatio Alger: independence and plucky self-reliance. When it hears of the country's movement to further colonize the North, it expects stories of challenge meeting opportunity. It does not expect stories about the local people of the area whose lives are integral to and affected (sometimes negatively) by the success of the story's lead character.

The picture of Aboriginal life at Port Radium emerged in the negative spaces of my archival scavenging. The archival material about Port Radium and the Eldorado corporation made no reference to the Aboriginal employees who lived at the mine and worked there casually, or who worked along the uranium transport route.<sup>52</sup> An unpublished essay called "Radium in Canada," by radiation expert Marcel Pochon, who was a high-level director at Eldorado for many years, says that "Great Bear Lake had had, in the past, very few visitors," going on to enumerate prospectors and missionaries who had travelled in the region, but giving no mention to the Dene and Tłı̄chq people who had travelled there for centuries; it goes on to describe the land as "uninhabited."<sup>53</sup>

A 1937 article in *Collier's Weekly* includes limited references to Aboriginal residents of the Port Radium area, but its inclusions and exclusions are telling. "Radium City," the topic of the article, has, in the

author's description, only a single female resident—the wife of the mine manager—but nonetheless manages to have a “little gang of half-breed kids.”<sup>54</sup> The author goes on to describe the warming effect of the smiles of young women he sees from afar, who, implicitly, are not the lone woman resident of Radium City.<sup>55</sup> Aboriginal people are present in the gaps of the story, in the spaces between and around its actual characters, who are, of course, white.

The background appearances of Aboriginal people in so many Port Radium stories raise the question that they may have appeared in the background of Labine's mine discovery narrative, as well, even if he never mentioned them or implied that they were there. Fred J. “Tiny” Peet, an electrician and miner who had worked at Port Radium, stated in an oral history interview that Labine mentioned having hired an “Indian” guide in his early expeditions to the area.<sup>56</sup> “Punch” Dickins, renowned bush pilot who flew in and out of Port Radium, said that Peet's story certainly would have made sense, because many Aboriginal people hunted in the area and would have been of great help with equipment and dog teams.<sup>57</sup> He also offered that, according to his understanding, prospectors' interest in the region had originally stemmed from the fact that the Dene and Dogrib people who lived there had copper arrowheads—a perspective that contrasts sharply with Pochon's assertion that the landscape of the Sahtú was devoid of human life. Just as northern colonization cannot escape the presence of Aboriginal people, no matter its attempts to work around them, neither can any discovery narrative about Port Radium completely and convincingly erase the presence and influence of Aboriginal people.

Differing perspectives on northern colonization, as illustrated by these contrasting narratives about the origin of the Port Radium mine, also reflect different attitudes about the nature of fair exchange and reciprocity. In both narratives, a piece of ore found its way from the earth on the shore of Great Bear Lake into the hands of a prospector. In the Sahtúot'ine narrative, that exchange was mediated by a Dene man; in Labine's narrative, he found the rock himself. In both cases, however, Labine profited enormously from his discovery, in terms of both finance and fame. In an urban Canadian narrative context, there is no problem with this arrangement. Labine gambled carefully and invested well in his trip, he made a discovery, and succeeded—any successful business,

after all, is, at its core, about selling something for more than it cost to acquire or produce. Even if ʔəhtséo Beyonnie did find the rock and sell it to Labine for a token price, this may not inherently be unfair: when he bought it, he presumably was unaware of its value. But the nature of this exchange, and the resulting process of profiting from the gifts given freely by the land, violates fundamental moral codes in Délı̄nę.

During my time in Délı̄nę, I had two separate conversations, one in an interview and one informally, with individuals who drew parallels between the cultural prohibition against selling wild meat for money and the ethical problem with the mine. When a hunter or fisherman in Délı̄nę brings home meat, it is expected that he will share that meat with friends and relatives who ask, and that he will not request money in exchange. Morris Neyelle, a respected community leader, outlined in an interview the ethic of exchange that he inherited from his elders:

You know, in my culture, like hunting, fishing, all those kind of things that my elders, even my parents always said, what's given to you free should be given back free. Don't take anything for it, especially money. So to this day, if somebody asks for meat—caribou meat, or fish—first thing they do is, especially outsiders, they go, "Well, I'll give you money." I say, "No!" I say, "It's given to me free, why should I take money for it? I didn't make it. It's given to me free, I should give it back free to whoever asks for it."

But if you misuse it, the elders always said, if you misuse it by gaining from it, by accepting money for it, that way, everything will go, they always said. And I notice a lot of that happening in the other regions. I know there are a lot of stores where they were selling meat. I've seen that too. And it's not right. If they made it, sure. But they didn't make it, so that's why they're losing all the caribou.<sup>58</sup>

Neyelle and I often discussed the politics of selling meat, and how no person should ask for money for something like meat, which was given to them for free. In similar conversation, another elder told me, laughing, that if people were keen to give him something in exchange for meat, they

could bring him five gallons of gas for his snowmobile when they knew he was heading out on a trip—not that anybody ever did!

On one occasion, while we were discussing these politics of exchange, Neyelle drew a poignant comparison between this ethic and the ethics of mining: the problem with mining, he said, was that humans extracted from the ground a rock that they did not make, and then sold it for profit. The land did not ask payment for the ore that they extracted. And thus, just as the caribou would retreat from the hunting grounds of people who disrespected them by selling their meat, so too was the land pulling away from the people. This idea of the land withdrawing could be interpreted in many ways: the growing sense, among elders, that younger generations are disconnected from the local landscape is one possibility; the idea that the resources of the land are becoming slimmer and harder to use, and its environment changing and becoming less hospitable, is another.

Implicit in Neyelle's story is an analysis of the nature of reciprocity and exchange in Délı̄ne, and the importance of not taking personal gain at the expense of another human or non-human being. The land, a living thing, creates all of its parts: the caribou, the fish, the minerals in the earth. When we, as humans, take any of those, we are receiving the gifts given by the land. Any travelling that a person may do to find the caribou herd, or any labouring the person may do to cut a hole in the lake ice, is simply the work that must be done in order to receive those gifts: it doesn't *make* anything. And if the land did not want people to receive those gifts, it would keep those gifts away from the people who seek them. So, to charge money for something given by the land is to take something for nothing, to profit without having done anything to deserve it.<sup>59</sup> That kind of empty profit is exemplified by money. Money is an abstraction that circulates between people without any obvious empirical roots in the world. Neyelle often told me that the elders said not to worry too much about money—it was, after all, only a thing of this world, of no real value.

When an elder says that he will accept five gallons of gasoline from anyone grateful to receive his meat, he is recognizing the difference between receiving money as interest and receiving gas as both a gift and an investment. Gas is a practical thing: without it, the skidoos, trucks, and boat motors will not run, and without those tools, the elder can neither

travel to get more meat nor drive around town to deliver it to those who need it. He does not profit, *per se*, from a gift of gasoline: he cannot pocket five gallons of gas and use it to buy frivolous things for himself. Instead, he will use the gasoline—either that five-gallon can, or an equivalent five-gallon can that he buys for himself before his next trip—to do the work he must do in order to continue to provide meat to the community. And a person who gives him the gift of five gallons of gas also gives him the gift of time, saving him from having to drive to the gas station to buy those five gallons himself. All of this enables this elder to treat the land with the respect it deserves: by harvesting only the meat that the community needs at any given time, he does not have to overharvest on any given trip and risk harming the caribou herds or wasting meat.

## REMEMBERING AN ABANDONED MINE

The buildings of the original Port Radium community have long since been dismantled, but the remnants of the mine itself still remain. As a part of the CDUT agreement, the land must be remediated as much as possible.<sup>60</sup> What constitutes a thoroughly remediated site remains a topic of contention. According to the federal government, and to the local officials in charge of liaising between local and federal authorities on the topic, the remediation work on the area of the Port Radium mine itself is complete; at the time of my visit to Délı̄nę in the summers of 2009 and 2010, remediation work had moved on to Sawmill Bay, with temporary workers being hired on three-week rotations to clean up that contaminated site. But the elders, in particular, continue to insist that the remediation work at Port Radium is incomplete. Morris Neyelle, for example, is dissatisfied with any remediation plan that involves disposing of any waste on-site—especially any toxic waste. That waste was made by people from the South, he says, so they should take it back south with them. The final agreement of the Canada-Délı̄nę Uranium Table stipulates that while tailings, abandoned machinery, and scrap may be disposed of on-site, any hazardous material should be removed for safe disposal elsewhere.<sup>61</sup> Sahtúot'ı̄nę employees of the clean-up process told me that they were responsible for burying material on-site. Nobody was able to say with any

confidence whether that material was hazardous or not. Happiness that the remediation plans are moving forward, and that Sahtúot'íne workers are being employed as part of the process, is tempered by distrust in the overall process. Port Radium was built on deception and misinformation: why should any Dene believe that its deconstruction should be any more honest?

The parallel of the colonial experience and the Port Radium experience extends into the future. While the Sahtúot'íne work on remediating the mine site, they are also working on remediating themselves, not only from the damaging impacts of their experiences living and working on the uranium transport route, but also from the impacts of abusive residential schools<sup>62</sup> and tuberculosis hospitals,<sup>63</sup> of Indian agents, of living as wards of the state, of manipulative treaty processes.<sup>64</sup> The mine is both a part of this process and powerful metonymy for it: like many of those other colonial events, its development brought with it the promise of some good things (jobs for Dene people and new opportunities for trade, for example), but those good things have been outweighed by their negative consequences, which never could have been predicted by the Sahtúot'íne people. This metonymy certainly emphasizes the mine's cognitively destructive power, but it also imbues the mine, and its associated narratives and effects, with a kind of homeopathic power: to address, and heal from, the impacts of the mine is to address and heal from the impacts of colonialism more broadly. And planning to keep the problems of the mine from repeating themselves means also planning to assert control over the ongoing colonial relationship between Dél'íne and Canada.

This is not to say that the presence of Port Radium within living memory of many Sahtúot'íne somehow simplifies the decolonization process. If anything, it highlights the tensions that exist between different generations and personalities within the community regarding how the community should assert its independence and negotiate its relationship between the First Nation government and economy, and the federal government and economy. For example, many community leaders, especially of older generations, express significant reservations about the prospect of any future natural resource development on their land, citing Port Radium as an example of how projects that may seem beneficial at first can have unanticipated long-term consequences, particularly when

outsiders are the primary stakeholders. But other community leaders, particularly younger ones, recognize Port Radium as a cautionary tale for what can happen if the community is denied a seat at the decision-making table, but also argue that opening parts of the Sahtú to natural resource exploration, and potential extraction, can provide the community with much-needed cash inflow and employment opportunities. The community is concurrently working to implement self-government, geared toward asserting Sahtúot'ı̄ne sovereignty over local governance, land management, and education. Just as resource development must proceed cautiously, taking into account the perspectives and needs of various community members, so too must the self-government process.

In her work on narratives of colonial encounter in Alaska, Cruikshank reminds us that “ideas have material consequences.”<sup>65</sup> The narratives surrounding the origin, life, and afterlife of Port Radium *do things*: they situate power; they illustrate Dene and non-Dene understandings of personhood, agency, responsibility, and modernity; they assign meaning to Port Radium relative to a larger colonial context and use Port Radium as an icon for the deception inherent in colonial processes more broadly. The mainstream Canadian narrative of the mine’s origin, with its erasure of any Aboriginal presence and its foregrounding of the mine’s discovery as the achievement of a lone ambitious and resourceful person, reflects the values and interests of its largely white, urban audiences and tellers. The Dene narrative indexes concerns regarding the community’s broader colonial context and concurrently shapes the community’s recovery from the mine’s impacts and the broader impacts of colonialism.

Cruikshank has argued that “viewing encounters of ideas historically shows how indigenous peoples continue to face a double exclusion, initially by colonial processes that displace them from land and ultimately by a neocolonial discourse that hastens the transformation of sentient and social spaces to measurable commodities called ‘lands and resources.’”<sup>66</sup> In the words of Dennis Kenny, speaking on behalf of his father Andrew John Kenny: “He [Andrew John] said that [the Port Radium] story is . . . important for people to learn . . . How the government treated us. Not just [the government], but the explorers, too.”<sup>67</sup> “The explorers” are the prospectors and any other adventurers who travelled through the North desiring and seeking out means for personal gain. The story of Port

Radium is, for the people of Délı̨nę, a cautionary tale that contains moral and political implications that influence the community's strategies for self-governance and cultural preservation. Beyond its impact on the environment, Port Radium has given an accessible face to the overarching ethos of colonial mistreatment, and in that respect, it gives Délı̨nę the strength of a visible adversary against which it may chart its course, demarcated by local traditions and values, into a self-determined future.

## NOTES

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