Reading mine closure through Tłı̨chǫ self-determination

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Abstract

In Northern Canada, the Tłı̨chǫ have experienced a long history of settler-imposed mining. The history of the mines is written into Tłı̨chǫ place names that hold the knowledge of ecological harm and repair, the community re-purposing of mining equipment and refuse. This history and the broader context of past and present colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples has shaped the contemporary engagement of Tłı̨chǫ with diamond mines, the largest extractive operations in the region; the Northwest Territories of Canada. The northern diamond industry is contracting, and all territorial diamond mines will likely cease production by 2035. In this article, John B. Zoe, knowledge holder and Chair of Dedats'eetsaa: Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute, shares the Tłı̨chǫ experience with the diamond mines, and, as the diamond industry contracts, community experiences with and concerns surrounding forthcoming closure. Writing with collaborators and settler scholars, Rebecca Hall and Tee Wern Lim, Zoe contextualizes the community-industry agreements shaping the diamond mine closures in the long history of settler-Indigenous treaty making. While tracing the substantive gains the Tłı̨chǫ have made in their influence over mining operations on their territory, the article points to the problems that persist, as Tłı̨chǫ continue to struggle for self-determination over their lands, and extractive operations on these lands. Indeed, greater community employment and contracting with the diamond mines means that their closure will bring with it an economic rupture not experienced with past mine closure. Ultimately, Zoe asks, what is Tłı̨chǫ closure? What is an Indigenous-led approach to closure, and how might this approach make way for a future grounded in Indigenous relations to land? In response, he argues that the activities of mine closure, and subsequent economic development, must be grounded in Tłı̨chǫ land, language, culture and way of life.

Keywords: Resource extraction, settler colonialism, mine closure, Indigenous self-determination

Résumé

Dans le nord du Canada, les Tłı̨chǫ ont connu une longue histoire d'exploitation minière imposée par les colons. L'histoire des mines est inscrite dans les noms de lieux des Tłı̨chǫ qui détiennent la connaissance des dommages écologiques et des réparations, de la réutilisation par la communauté de l'équipement et des déchets miniers. Cette histoire et le contexte plus large de la dépossession coloniale passée et présente des peuples autochtones ont façonné l'engagement contemporain des Tłı̨chǫ avec les mines de diamants, les plus grandes opérations

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[1] Contact: Rebecca Hall, rh116@queensu.ca. This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant. Through the collaboration on this Special Section initiative (2025), we also received funding from the Knowledge Network on Mining Encounters and Indigenous Sustainable Livelihoods (MinErAL) and funding from of a five year initiative on community consultation and consent supported by the BHP Foundation and implemented by Landesa in partnership with RESOLVE, Conservation International and the University of Queensland. In Sarah Holcombe, Arn Keeling & Rebecca Hall (eds.). 2025. Special Section on "Self-determination in mine closure and mine site transition across nations." *Journal of Political Ecology*, 32.

d'extraction dans la région des Territoires du Nord-Ouest du Canada. L'industrie diamantaire nordique se contracte et toutes les mines de diamants territoriales cesseront probablement leur production d'ici 2035. Dans cet article, John B. Zoe, détenteur du savoir et président de Dedats'eetsaa : Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute, partage l'expérience des Tłı̨chǫ avec les mines de diamants et, à mesure que l'industrie du diamant se contracte, les expériences et les préoccupations de la communauté concernant la fermeture prochaine. En collaboration avec Rebecca Hall et Tee Wern Lim, spécialistes des colons, Zoe situe les accords entre la communauté et l'industrie, qui déterminent la fermeture des mines de diamants, dans la longue histoire des traités conclus entre colons et indigènes. L'article retrace les progrès substantiels réalisés par les Tłı̨chǫ dans leur influence sur les opérations minières sur leur territoire, mais il montre aussi les problèmes qui persistent, car les Tłı̨chǫ continuent de lutter pour l'autodétermination de leurs terres et des opérations d'extraction qui s'y déroulent. En effet, l'augmentation du nombre d'emplois communautaires et de contrats avec les mines de diamants signifie que leur fermeture entraînera une rupture économique que l'on n'avait pas connue lors des fermetures de mines précédentes. En fin de compte, Zoe pose la question: qu'est-ce qu'une fermeture Tłı̨chǫ? Qu'est-ce qu'une approche autochtone de la fermeture et comment pourrait-elle faire place à un avenir fondé sur les relations autochtones à la terre? En réponse, il soutient que les activités de fermeture des mines et le développement économique qui s'ensuit doivent être ancrés dans la terre, la langue, la culture et le mode de vie des Tłı̨chǫ.

Mots-clés: Extraction des ressources, colonialisme de peuplement, fermeture des mines, autodétermination autochtone

Resumen

En el norte de Canadá, los Tłı̨chǫ han vivido una larga historia de minería impuesta por los colonos. La historia de las minas está inscrita en los topónimos de los Tłı̨chǫ, que guardan el conocimiento de los daños ecológicos y su reparación, la reutilización comunitaria de los equipos y residuos mineros. Esta historia y el contexto más amplio de la desposesión colonial pasada y presente de los pueblos indígenas han conformado el compromiso contemporáneo de los tłı̨chǫ con las minas de diamantes, las mayores operaciones extractivas de la región de los Territorios del Noroeste de Canadá. La industria del diamante del norte se está contrayendo, y es probable que todas las minas de diamantes territoriales cesen su producción en 2035. En este artículo, John B. Zoe, poseedor de conocimientos y Presidente de Dedats'eetsaa: Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute, comparte la experiencia de los Tłı̨chǫ con las minas de diamantes y, a medida que la industria del diamante se contrae, las experiencias de la comunidad con el próximo cierre y sus preocupaciones al respecto. Junto con Rebecca Hall y Tee Wern Lim, colaboradoras y estudiosas de los colonos, Zoe contextualiza los acuerdos entre la comunidad y la industria que dan forma al cierre de las minas de diamantes en la larga historia de la elaboración de tratados entre colonos e indígenas. El artículo hace un seguimiento de los avances sustanciales que los tłı̨chǫ han logrado en su influencia sobre las operaciones mineras en su territorio, pero muestra los problemas que persisten, ya que los tłı̨chǫ siguen luchando por la autodeterminación sobre sus tierras, y las operaciones extractivas en ellas. De hecho, el aumento del empleo comunitario y la contratación con las minas de diamantes significa que su cierre traerá consigo una ruptura económica no experimentada con el cierre de minas en el pasado. En última instancia, se pregunta Zoe, ¿qué es el cierre Tłı̨chǫ? Qué es un enfoque del cierre dirigido por los indígenas y cómo podría dar paso a un futuro basado en las relaciones indígenas con la tierra? En respuesta, argumenta que las actividades de cierre de minas, y el subsiguiente desarrollo económico, deben basarse en la tierra, la lengua, la cultura y el modo de vida Tłı̨chǫ.

Palabras clave: Extracción de recursos, colonialismo de colonos, cierre de minas, autodeterminación indígena

1. Introduction

The Tłı̨chǫ First Nation has a long history with deep relations to the land that extend far beyond mining: our whole story is about land, language, culture and way of life. Our nation is made up of four communities in what is now the Northwest Territories of Canada (see Figure 1 & 2). Behchoko, our largest community, is connected by road to the territorial capital, Yellowknife. Our three other communities, Gamèti, Wek weètì and Whatì, are smaller and more isolated. While we continue to live with a strong connection to the land, the Tłı̨chǫ have a long history of settler-imposed mining. Both our pre-settler history and the history of the mines is written into Tłı̨chǫ place names. These place names hold knowledge that tells the story of both ecological harm and repair; from these names, we can learn of the ways in which our lands have been reshaped by the mines, and,

in turn, of the ways in which our communities have reshaped mine landscapes, repurposing abandoned mining equipment and refuse. But the story of mining and mine closure cannot be told in isolation. We need to widen our gaze to the lands that we are living in, and the many things we do on the land. In this article, we share Tłı̨chǫ experiences with mining and mine closure through the long history of settler-Indigenous relations, and through our much longer relations with our land and our language and culture. It is through these relations that we chart an Indigenous-led approach to mine closure.

Canada, a settler colonial state, was built through processes of resource extraction. While in the first few centuries of European development of Canada, resource extraction was almost exclusively conducted through the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the region (Keeling & Sandlos 2015), today Canada is a global mining giant with Canadian companies engaged in extractive projects around the world (Gordon, 2010). While Indigenous communities face extractive development throughout Canada, the focus of this article is the Northwest Territories, a territory nearly twice the size of Texas and currently home to just over 40,000 people, approximately half of whom are Indigenous (GNWT, 2018). The Northwest Territories is a 'mixed economy,' characterized by settler and Indigenous governance and economic structures, and ways of life, and exhibiting social relations of both land-based subsistence and capitalist or market production (Coulthard, 2014; Hall, 2022; Natcher, 2009; Abele, 2009; Usher et al., 2003; Asch, 1977). This means that our lands, plants and animals – including lands dug up for mines – are also our livelihoods; as we will discuss, for example, the Tłı̨chǫ have a strong relationship with the caribou (Rangifer tarandus), using it for food and household materials, and have witnessed the detrimental impacts of mines on the caribou herds (Parlee, Sandlos & Natcher 2018, Hall & Ascough, 2023). Like other mining-affected communities (see, for example, in this Section, Tu Łidlini Dena Elders, Tufts & Beckett 2025; Dowell & Holcombe 2025, Holcombe, Keeling & Hall 2025), we experience the political ecology of both mine operations and mine closure through the social and ecological relations of the mixed economy.

The Tłı̨chǫ, living in what is now known as the Northwest Territories, have a long history with the booms and busts of mines. Over the course of writing this article, Tłı̨chǫ communities were primarily impacted by the territory's diamond industry, but they were simultaneously negotiating remediation plans for Rayrock, a mid-twentieth century uranium mine on their land. For its part, the diamond boom hit in the wake of an abrupt and, indeed, violent closure of two major gold mines in the Yellowknife region. Today, like many communities in northern Canada, the Tłı̨chǫ are preparing for the closure of the diamond mines, the largest extractive operations in the region, accounting for between 30-50% of territorial GDP throughout the industry's operations (GNWT 2019). In the Northwest Territories, the first diamond mine opened in 1998; since then, three more have opened. Of the four diamond mines, Snap Lake ceased production unexpectedly in 2015, and Diavik, one of the two larger and longest-standing diamond mines, has opted for a planned closure in 2025, with major layoffs beginning in 2023. The two remaining mines, Ekati and Gahcho Kué, are pursuing expansions with the hope of extending their mine life, but even the most optimistic projections suggest these mines will close by 2035.

While the Tłı̨chǫ face the closure of the diamond mines with the knowledge they have gained through historical mine closures, our relations to these diamond mines are distinct from mines in our past. As a result of Dene struggles for recognition and self-determination and the *Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement (Tłı̨chǫ Agreement)* signed in 2003, the Tłı̨chǫ have been more involved in the modern diamond mining industry that developed in the late 1990s, including via Tłı̨cho employment and Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs).[2] In fact, the diamond mines are the primary industrial economies that the Tłı̨chǫ have been substantively engaged in for the past twenty years (MacDonald, Zoe & Satterfield, 2014).

[2] IBAs are bilateral agreements between resource extraction companies and affected Indigenous communities, a fairly new regulatory arrangement that has become standard practice in Canada. These agreements set out obligations for both parties, and often include, for example, company hiring and procurement commitments. The first IBA signed by the Tłı̨chǫ was with BHP Billiton (Ekati diamond mine) in 1999, the second with Rio Tinto (Diavik diamond mine) in 2000, and the third with De Beers (Snap Lake diamond mine) in 2006. For more on the Tłı̨chǫ experience of IBAs, see, for example, MacDonald, Zoe & Satterfield (2014) and for more context on the political ecology of northern IBAs, see Cameron and Levitan (2014) and Caine and Krogman (2011).

Figure 1: Canada with the Northwest Territories highlighted. Source: Statistics Canada. Standard Geographical Classification 2017

Our relationships with the diamond mines are, however, far from a fairy tale. Increased Indigenous engagement (via consultation, employment and procurement) has been shaped by ongoing colonial constraints, on both the part of the state and corporations. For that reason, in what follows, we approach mine closure through the broader struggle for self-determination over our lands and over extractive operations on these lands. The struggle for Tłı̨chǫ self-determination includes both the negotiation with mining companies and the Canadian and territorial governments, and the everyday ways in which we live with the land and share our way of life with future generations. Ultimately, we ask: what is a Tłı̨chǫ-led approach to closure? What does mine closure mean for Tłı̨chǫ? How might our approach make way for a future grounded in Indigenous relations to land?

In responding to these questions, we distinguish between two types of closure. There is physical closure, as the land needs to be remediated, rehabilitated, repaired and put to rest, so that it can be supported to heal and regenerate. And for the community, there are the social aspects of closure (Bainton & Holcombe 2018), which includes emotional closure (Pini, Mayes & McDonald 2010). We cannot solely focus on the process that the exploiters put in place, ticking the boxes to do with reclamation: the ways in which mine closure has been 'rendered technical' in settler approaches to mine closure (Beckett & Keeling, 2019; Ureta, 2016). In closure, we need to listen to our people in the language of the land and in communities (see Tsosie 2015). For that reason, we close this piece advocating for an approach to mine closure, and subsequent economic development on our lands, that is grounded in Tłı̨chǫ land, language, culture and way of life.

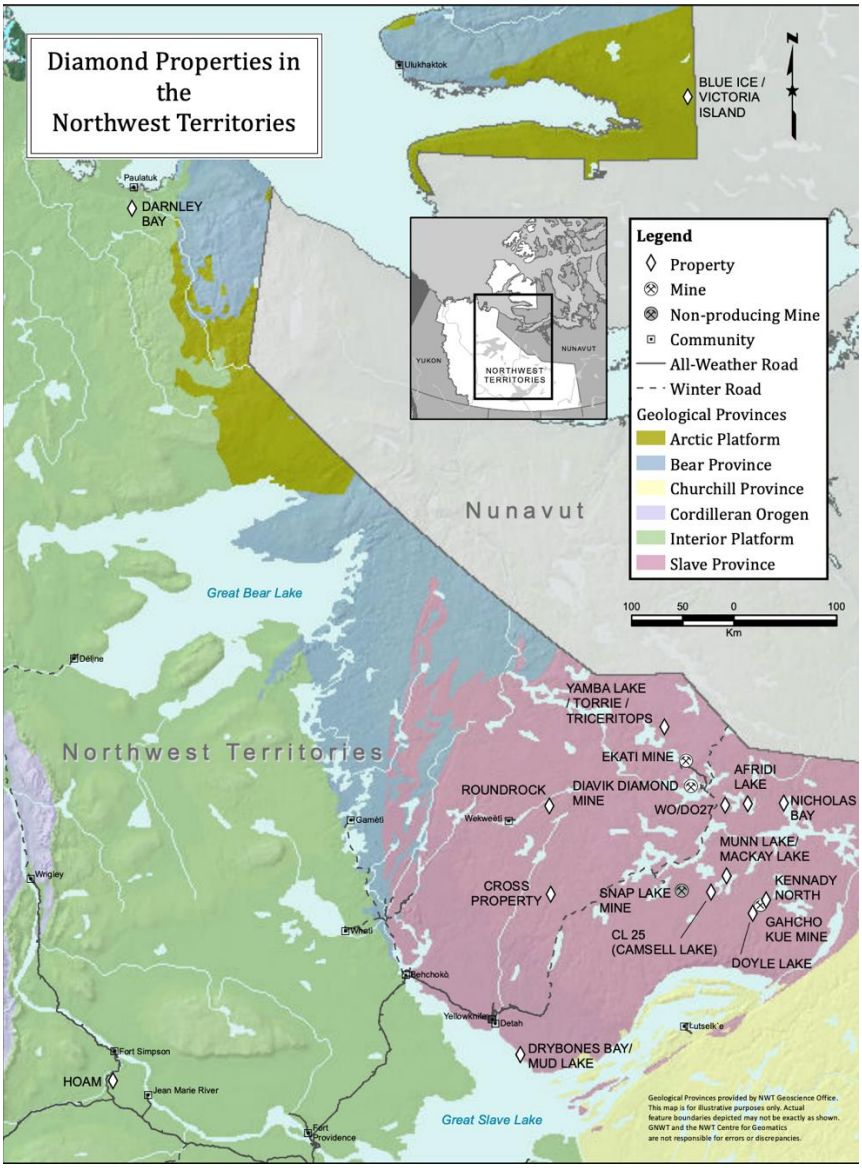

Figure 2: Diamond properties in the Northwest Territories, Canada. Source: GNWT 2016: 137

Our methods and impetus to share

In this article, John B. Zoe, knowledge holder and Chair of Dedats'etsaa: Tłı̨chǫ Research and Training Institute, shares the Tłı̨chǫ experience with the diamond mines, and, as the diamond industry is contracting, community experiences with and concerns surrounding forthcoming closures. Zoe is joined in writing by settler scholars and research collaborators Rebecca Hall and Tee Wern Lim, both members of the Tłı̨chǫ-led community-university research network, *We Will Not Be Banned From Our Land*. This article emerged from a series of discussions held between 2021 and 2023 surrounding the *Indigenous Exchange Forum: Transitions in mine closure*, hosted virtually at the University of Queensland by Sarah Holcombe and Vanessa Elliot, with Canadian coordinator Arn Keeling. As outlined elsewhere in this Special Section, this forum was shaped by a

year of discussions within and between communities, and has been followed by ongoing knowledge sharing activities. It is these discussions, combined with interviews and archival research, which inform the article. In authorship, we follow collaborative methods taken up, for example, by Joan Scottie, Warren Bernauer, and Jack Hicks (2022), and by John B. Zoe with Jessica Dunkin (2021), and John B. Zoe with Jessica Simpson and Hayden King (2019), in that the primary conceptual and historical contributions of the article come from Zoe. We write with a shared voice led by Zoe, aiming to make visible that the article ultimately comes from his perspective, and that the insights come from conversations and made possible by our reciprocal and dialogical approach to collaboration. For Zoe, the impetus for this article was knowledge sharing, in recognition that Indigenous communities around the world are facing similar experiences in mine site transitions and mine closure – sometimes even with the same mining companies.

2. Looking back to look forward

For the Tłı̨chǫ, like many Indigenous Peoples, this is not just a story of resource extraction, of mine openings and closures. It is a story of colonialism and dispossession: disturbance of the people and their landscape. So we begin with history, because when you think about mine closure from within its greater context of dispossession, it becomes clear that mine operators must not simply walk away when the mine has closed. The government and operators must consider: what have they done to restore what has been disturbed? They must look to the people, their landscape, and their stories. We have centuries of stories of disturbances. Since 1492, when Columbus came to the so-called "New World," our people have taken a lot of losses. Those losses didn't just begin with modern mining. Today, when we look at the impacts of the diamond mines on our community, we cannot begin at the time of the first Impact Benefit Agreement with a diamond company. Instead, the measurement of losses must begin with first contact. We must begin there and go all the way to treaties signed with governments, and then to the agreements with mining companies made today. Because of the way settler systems were designed, we have lost so much. These losses do not mean that Indigenous Peoples no longer know their identity or culture; rather, that we have not regained it all yet. Today, as we will discuss below, the Tłı̨chǫ are working on a return to *On The Land* education and activities. The more we invest into the traditional economy, the more we will grow strong. In considering how to strengthen ourselves through mine closure, we must first return to the knowledge of our relations and our history that is held in Tłı̨chǫ place names.

Tłı̨chǫ place names as touchstones for closure

Tłı̨chǫ dè goı̨zì (place names) are not static: they have changed throughout time and reflect different relations. Because of this, through place names, we can learn about our history with mining and mine closure, and build knowledge about Tłı̨chǫ ways of life. This knowledge can serve as a touchstone through closure, a bar for reclamation that is set not by mining companies or by governments, but by our own knowledge of our land. In turning to the knowledge held in place names, we refuse the notion that "we don't have any Elders left", so we don't have knowledge of the past. The voices of living Elders and past generations can be found in our present: in Tłı̨chǫ community archives, in the records of regulatory hearings, for example,[3] and in these place names. As noted by Tłı̨chǫ Government archivist, Renee Saucier,[4] elders have been intentionally recording their voices for decades to 'carry knowledge across time and space.' For example, in 1991, elder Harry Simpson said the following "Our oral tradition, once written, will last as long as this land, and if they retain this information in memory, they will gain from it. That is why we are working on the land" (in Saucier 2024). Today, the voices of living Elders and past generations can be heard in the recordings made during decades of work to document

[3] For example, Dene First Nations organized collaboratively against a proposed gas pipeline in the 1970s, the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. The records of their organizing and advocacy work, hearings and meetings provide a wealth of knowledge on northern Indigenous relationships to and knowledge of the land (see, for example, Watkins 1977; Bielawski 2003; Dokis 2015; Stoller 2019).

[4] Personal communication with Renee Saucier (2024).

Tłı̨chǫ dè goı̨zì. Thousands of audio recordings, maps, and written transcripts are maintained in the Tłı̨chǫ Cultural Commons Digital Archives and incorporated in the Tłı̨chǫ Government's GIS Database.[5]

These historical records and place names hold our traditional knowledge of and relationship to the land: as such, they are the tools for guiding mining operations and closure that we have developed since the signing of our *Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement* (Tłı̨chǫ Agreement) in 2005, which we discuss below. These tools are necessary because the settler system of decision-making in mine closure and the ways in which we measure closure will not change unless we highlight both the things that are seen and not seen. The measurement we must use is the knowledge we have through pre-contact place names. This is how we start.

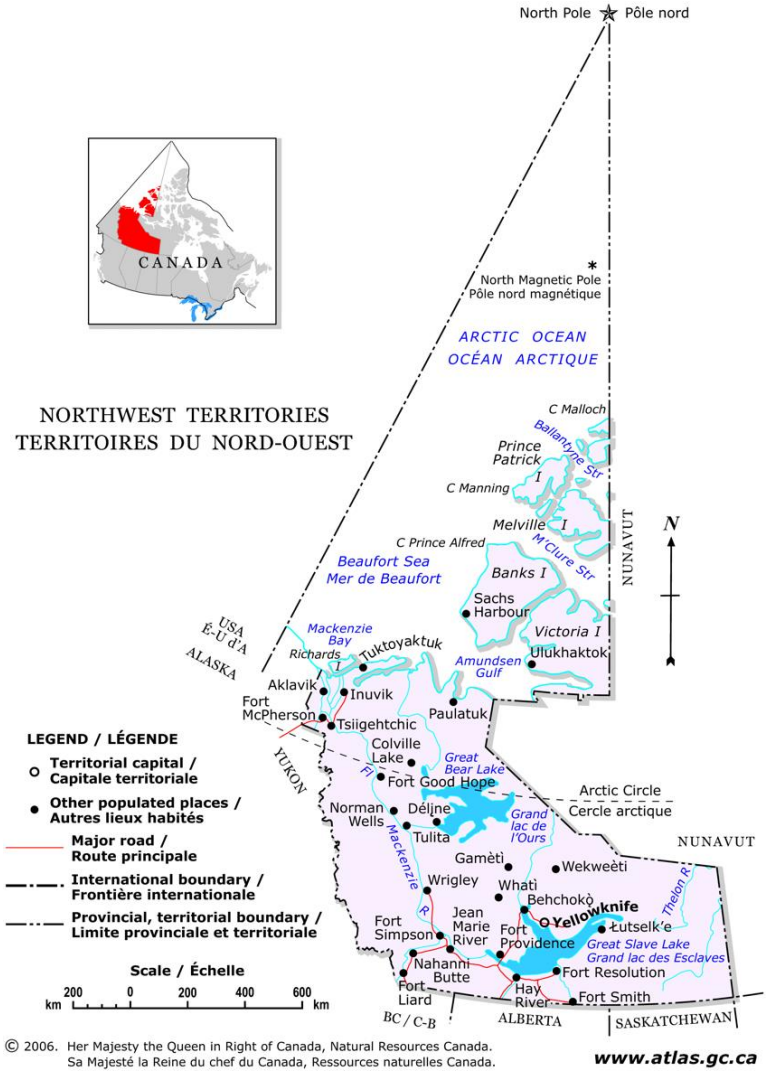

Figure 3: The Northwest Territories Communities. Source: Natural Resources Canada

[5] Personal communication with Renee Saucier, 2024.

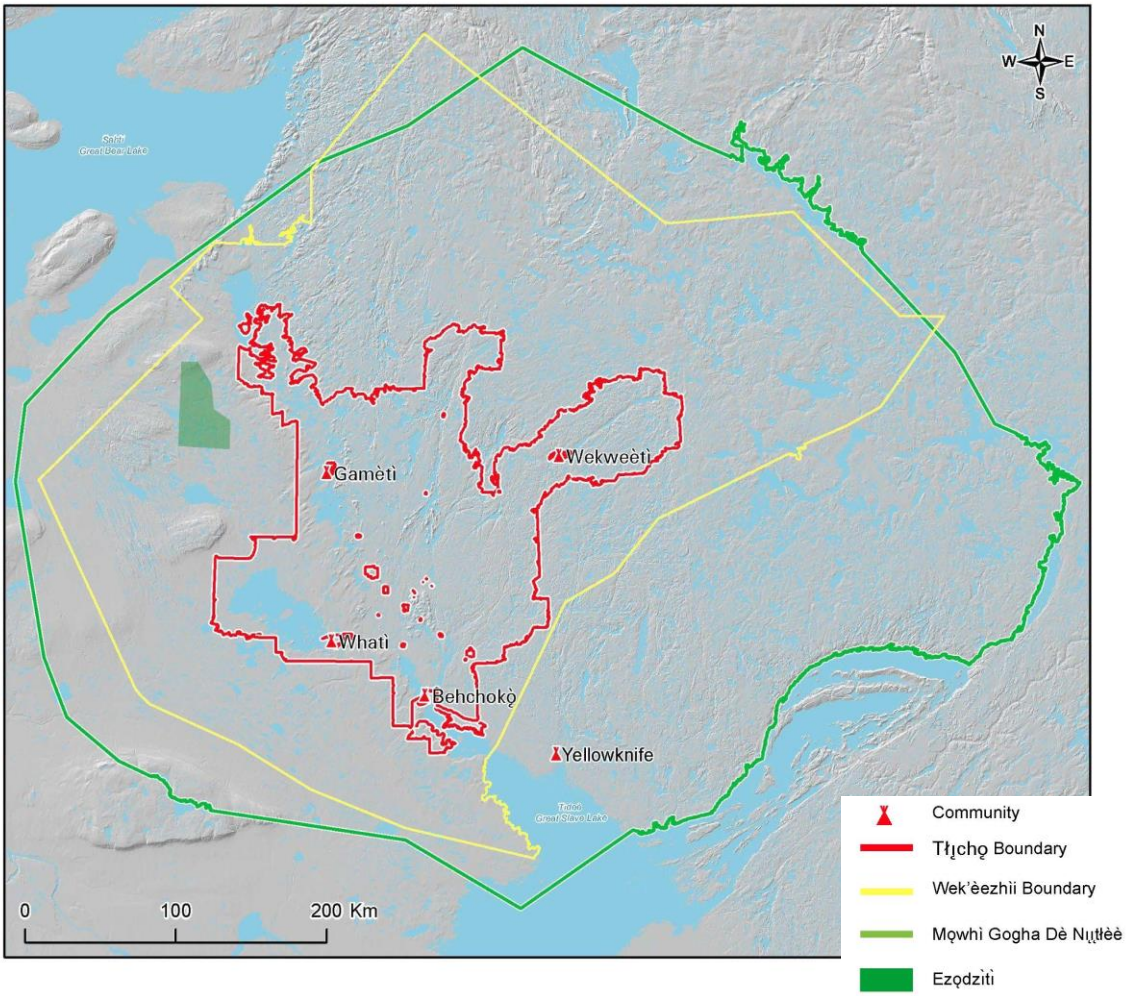

Figure 4: Tłı̨chǫ Agreement boundaries[6]

I (Zoe) have identified four phases of place names. The first stage is pre-contact. The original Tłı̨chǫ place names before contact were about life experiences and an inventory of what the land has to offer. This inventory is complementary to our knowledge of navigation, and the stories and the legends that go with it. In this way, we can say that the original place names are about figuring out what the land holds, and the method of harvesting, and the location. For example, the area now known as the location of the Rayrock mine was called *Kwetı̨ı̨ʔaà*, "where rock projects outward and into the water that flows by." These rocks are part of an ore body that extends from Great Bear Lake all the way to Rayrock. Elders tell me that it is the same ore body that goes underground and surfaces, goes underground again and surfaces. Mines have developed along the line of this rock; Rayrock was developed as a uranium mine that operated throughout the 1950s and is now undergoing a new phase of settler government-led remediation. This means that our community is negotiating and working with multiple overlapping processes of mine closure. The knowledge held in this first place name is a reminder

[6] Map provided courtesy of the Department of Culture and Lands Protection, Tłı̨chǫ Government. **Mǫwhì Gogha Dè Nı̨ıtłèè:** Traditional area of the Tłı̨chǫ, described by Chief described by Chief Mǫwhì during the signing of Treaty 11. **Wek'èezhìi:** The area where the Wek'èezhìı Renewable Resources and the Wek'èezhìı Land and Water Board manage resources. **Tłı̨chǫ Lands:** Lands owned by each Tłı̨chǫ community government. **Ezǫ̀dzìtì:** A heritage resource that is protected from exploration and development.

that Indigenous people have relationships with the land, rocks and minerals that long predate their "discovery" by prospectors. Tłı̨chǫ people have been mining for thousands of years, using the same places and nurturing a spiritual relationship with the land: before they take a rock, they talk to the rock. You must go to the quarry site to talk to it, and the quarry site will talk back to you and can only be interpreted by an Elder. The land will question your needs of the rock, your ability to survive, and your behavior on the landscape. And in that way, our relationship with the land is interdependent: we depend upon each other, and we can't think individually about taking rocks or minerals from the land.

The second phase of place names is from 1800 up until 1921: these place names relate to the exploitation of natural resources and the new settler ways of doing things. For example, beginning in this second phase, we called the early explorers - both explorers for the fur trade and the church – *móla*. This refers to fence pickets, because they surrounded themselves with fences, like a fort. That is how they contain everything. And the third phase was from 1921 to 2005, marked by the signing of a treaty between our people and the Canadian Government, one of a series of historical treaties signed between Indigenous nations and the Canadian government (Fumoleau 2004).[7] These treaties were negotiated as a result of the Canadian state's assertion of sovereignty over our land: no longer simply interested in our resources, they now claimed our lands. In 1867, the Canadian state gained authority to act on behalf of the Crown, so Canada began negotiating treaties at that time up until 1921. Our Treaty – Treaty 11 – was the last of the Numbered Treaties. After several days of negotiations Chief Mǫwhì, representing all Tłı̨chǫ, signed Treaty 11 with the Canadian state on August 22, 1921. Treaty 11 was made in the best interests of the state, so that they could have access to the natural and non-renewable resources of the North, with oil, gas and mineral interests arising throughout the Mackenzie Valley. Chiefs including Mǫwhì signed what they perceived to be a peace and friendship agreement, with assurances that Tłı̨chǫ would not lose their right to hunt, fish and trap. At the time of signing, Mǫwhì pronounced that "as long as the sun rises, the river flows, and the land does not move, we will not be restricted from our way of life."[8] These words have been kept alive, and helped to guide the eventual negotiation of the *Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement*.

However, in this third period, our rights were made subordinate to the resource interests of the Canadian state and extractive operations, most of which were established without Indigenous consent or consultation. At that time, our name for settlers changed to *Kwetı̨*. *Kwe* means rock and *tı̨ı̨* means people: they are people of the rock. They were nomadic, secretive and not too friendly. Because they were secretive, we also called them *Kitengi*, meaning that we did not know what their intentions were. And people would say, when they were trying to discipline kids out in the bush, "the *Kitengi* are going to get you" as a way of scaring them. In this third phase, many of our Tłı̨chǫ place names do not reflect the values of Tłı̨chǫ ways of life, such as traditional harvesting and navigation. Instead, these place names of ours hold the observations of colonization by its Tłı̨chǫ survivors. We had no say anyway, at that time. There are no Tłı̨chǫ legends or traditional values attached to it. These are more intrusive, exploitative place names. So what we did was record what we saw, as a means of logging the impacts of outsiders, and their values. In the second and third phase, we learn about cat trains[9], winter roads, all the things tied to treaty making and resource exploitation: names for technology and industrial processes make their way into our language.[10]

In tracing these stages of place names, we build a timeline that can inform our approach to and our measurement of mine closure: these place names are layered upon one another, showing that neither has our traditional knowledge disappeared, nor are we finished with the impacts of past phases of colonization. Pre-contact place names hold an inventory of the wildlife and the pristine land that we had and that we can continue

[7] The numbered treaties, signed between Indigenous Nations and Canada between 1871 and 1921. As Gina Starblanket (2019) writes, they are often invoked as agreements of land cession. However, Indigenous scholars and communities have long critiqued this interpretation. Starblanket writes, instead, of the numbered treaties as "relationship agreements that have been selectively and strategically invoked by Canada to continually produce its own claims to sovereignty in response to shifting socio-political climates" (p. 444).

[8] See https://tlichohistory.ca/en/stories/monfwi-signs-treaty-11

[9] Cat train: Caterpillar tractors that pulled large sleighs or skids laden with freight over frozen lakes and snow in winter.

[10] For further discussion, see Zoe (2024).

to have. Currently, we are in the fourth stage of place names. Today, the Canadian state says that it recognizes the numbered treaties from the early colonial periods, though there is little – and, certainly, inconsistent – tangible evidence of this (Starblanket, 2019). However, we have also negotiated a modern treaty, the *Tłı̨chǫ Land Claims and Self-Government Agreement*, with the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) and Canada. As the first comprehensive land claim and self-government agreement in the NWT, the *Tłı̨chǫ Agreement* came into effect August 4, 2005. The *Tłı̨chǫ Agreement* provides for and defines certain rights relating to lands, resources and self-government, including the creation of the Tłı̨chǫ Government, and ownership of 39,000 km^2 of land located between Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake, including surface and subsurface rights to these lands adjacent to or surrounding the four Tłı̨chǫ communities (shown by the red Tłı̨chǫ Boundary in Figure 2). Notably, this does not include subsurface rights in the area of the diamond mines. The agreement also provides for the establishment of co-management authorities, the Wek'éezhíi Land and Water Board and the Wek'éezhíi Renewable Resources Board, and for mineral royalties from operations in the Mackenzie Valley.

Through this land claim, we have renegotiated our relationship with Canada. We are not outside of colonial processes, but we have greater authority over our lives and lands. That is where the Tłı̨chǫ government currently sits: we are still feeling the effects of the phases of colonization, but we are increasingly in a dynamic state of resurgence. Our world comprises intersecting governance structures established by colonization, including the regional government of the Northwest Territories, which has delegated authority from the federal government of Canada. We have new recognition of our land through our land claims and are working to preserve our traditional knowledge and share it with future generations, but we also have ongoing challenges. These shifts, living in this fourth stage of place names, mean we have new relationships with mining operations and mine closure. In the next section, we review ongoing colonial constraints and our own work at self-determination in the context of the contemporary diamond mining industry in the NWT, and diamond mine closure.

3. Tłı̨chǫ approaches to mine closure

This is where we are today as Tłı̨chǫ, persevering in a dynamic and resurgent time, but one still shaped by the structural challenges of colonialism. In some ways, mining continues to extract Tłı̨chǫ resources for the benefit of the Canadian state (Bell, 2023; Hall, 2022), like in the past. But what is new is that we have a land claim, so we have new avenues for shaping, for example, environmental protection and how it should look (e.g. Jacobsen, 2016), including how remediation should happen.[11] Our approach to the diamond mine closure is shaped by past mine closures on our land. In the past, mine closures have had a big impact on our communities and our lands. The way mines were closed severely impacted the ability of our people to move around seasonally in these areas of mineral extraction. This is because historically, mines were often abandoned, leaving the area in a harmful and contaminated state (Keeling & Sandlos 2015). This created a big gap in our traditional systems, as Tłı̨chǫ would then avoid these areas they used to travel and harvest from. For example, Rayrock uranium mine, mentioned above, is adjacent to one our communities and traditionally a site of caribou hunting. But even though the site has not been in operation since the mid-twentieth century, full-scale remediation was stalled for over fifty years. As a result, Tłı̨chǫ citizens continue to be uneasy about the use of the land and avoid it in their subsistence activities.[12]

Until recently, the state and mining companies did not consider our relationship with the land, or the decision-making role we should have in mine operations or closure. There was also very little consideration of the role of Tłı̨chǫ in building some of these older mines in the first place, from ensuring the survival of

[11] See e.g. https://research.tlicho.ca/research/environmental-monitoring-traditional-knowledge-health-and-wellness/rayrock

[12] Indeed, Rayrock mine is subject of a federal remediation project that began in 2002, more than sixty years after the mine closed, and one of many historical abandoned mine sites in the north (Keeling & Sandlos, 2015); see https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1565968579558/1565968604553 for an overview of the Canadian government's Northern Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program. See also https://tlicho.ca/news/rayrock-story-map-overview for more details about the Rayrock story.

prospectors, through to providing labor in various roles essential to the establishment of these mines. We were just seen as migrant workers going to the mines to hold a shovel. In this way, our lands and labour were used for mines, with little consideration to either in mine operations or closure. In the diamond industry, by context, we have played a more formal role in mining operations (Bell 2023, Hall 2022). After providing some context regarding the diamond mining industry, we will outline a Tłı̨chǫ approach to closure and relate this approach to the diamond industry, as we race towards the end of production at the diamond mines and reflect on what remains.

Context: Diamond mine closure

The first diamond mine in the NWT opened in 1998. Since then, Canada has become the third largest diamond producer in the world, with the industry accounting for, on average, 35% of the territorial GDP (GNWT, 2018). However, just as quickly as they arrived, the diamond mines will leave: of the four diamond mines, Snap Lake closed unexpectedly in 2015, a move that left workers unemployed and stunned. However, at the time, the other operational diamond mines provided obvious alternative employment. Now, Diavik, one of the two larger and longest-standing diamond mines, has opted for a planned closure in 2026. The two remaining mines, Ekati and Gahcho Kué, are pursuing expansions with the hope of extending their mine life, but even the most optimistic projections suggest these mines will close by 2035. While the impacts of mine closure are many, here we focus on the impact of job loss and its intersections with our relationship to the land.

The diamond mines are distinguished from past mining operations in the territory by two characteristics: first, they were established in remote areas a considerable distance from the four Tłı̨chǫ communities, and, indeed, all settlements in the NWT. As such, they operate through the Fly-in/Fly Out model, which means that workers fly in for shifts of intense work (often two weeks) and fly home for shifts "off" (Storey 2010). Second, the diamond mines are required to meet obligations set out in bilateral agreements with Indigenous communities (IBAs), including the Tłı̨chǫ, and the territory. The content of these agreements includes socio-economic benefits, like commitments to training and employing our people, and some revenue sharing. The Tłı̨chǫ negotiated agreements with the companies operating all four of the diamond mines. While these agreements have led to significantly increased Indigenous employment in the mines, they should not be characterized as a full-scale shift in mining operations. We have not arrived at the happy ending of a fairy tale. A lot of the so-called community activities that companies commit to through these agreements are designed for the benefit of non-Indigenous Canadians. We know that they is designed for Canadians, not Tłı̨chǫ, because most of these commitments are about skill development: skill development towards the extraction of our lands, resources and energies for the development of the Canadian state. This means that, even though agreements we have signed with diamond companies include benefits for our communities, ultimately the agreements remain oriented towards the needs of the Canadian state and the extractive companies (Cameron & Levitan, 2014). These limitations exemplify the tendency in contemporary Indigenous/State relations for agreements – and indeed, relations as a whole – to be structured through the assumption of settler state sovereignty and the reproduction of the settler political economy (Coulthard, 2014).

Through these agreements, mining companies and the government have committed to building northern Indigenous Peoples' skills as relevant to the mining industry (Bell, 2023). But skills are not the same as knowledge. And what we recognize from a Tłı̨chǫ perspective is our knowledge of what we've always had, and the impact on our traditional knowledge when our people's energies and time are taken to develop extractive skill sets. That knowledge that we have – of our land, our culture, our people – has been converted to skills. And this is where the Tłı̨chǫ are today: part of the land claim that we've worked on has led to this approach to knowledge and skills, because skills are what western society recognizes. We know the state and mining companies have been investing in Indigenous skills because this is something they can measure: in the past, they shipped northern Indigenous people to residential schools; now, they can train us for the mines because this is Western knowledge that is available to them.

The commitments to Indigenous training are tied to similar state/corporate commitments to Indigenous employment. On average, throughout operation of the mines, northern Indigenous people made up approximately 25% of the workforce. Beyond workers' wages, we also access mining revenue through

contracting and through limited revenue sharing. For the past 20 years, approximately 25% of all Tłı̨chǫ Government revenue came from the mining economy (Firelight Research 2022). In the next 15 years, mining revenues are predicted to eventually account for less than 5% of TG revenues, and employment of Tłı̨chǫ citizens in the mining sector will decline significantly. Mining employment has provided long-term employment opportunities for Tłı̨chǫ workers, with more than 200 workers in the mines, 47 per cent of whom have worked for more than ten years. This is far greater engagement with mining employment than with past northern mines; as such, the Tłı̨chǫ Government anticipates new and significant socio-economic impacts due to job loss. There will be steady decline in employment for skilled and semi-skilled workers starting in 2025 and continuing from there (Firelight Research 2022), and no new projects on the horizon are expected to replace their scale of economic output in the near future (GNWT Department of Finance, 2021). For some workers, jobs in mine remediation may replace their mine operation work (not only diamond mine remediation, but the overlapping uranium and gold remediation projects in the territory, as well); others are looking south to oil and gas operations in Alberta, the Canadian province directly south of the Northwest Territories (Hall & Pryce 2023). However, these opportunities will not replace the diamond mining jobs, and, in particular, the ability for workers to access high-waged jobs while maintaining primary residence in their home communities.

Alongside the economic impact of mine closure, given the many Tłı̨chǫ that have worked for the diamond mines, there have been changes to the lives of workers and their families and community members. When thinking about closure, we need to think about how working at the mines has impacted Tłı̨chǫ. When the mines first opened up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was our hunters and trappers in their 30s and 40s – people with traditional and active knowledge of the land - who were targeted for employment. At the time, they had no real employment experience from mining industries. They had worked seasonal jobs here and there. This full-scale employment of hunters and trappers, alongside the energy footprint, the noise, the transportation and the pollution of the diamond mines, shut down the caribou harvest. This means that, as hunters and trappers left the land to work for the mines, the socio-ecological impact of these mines made their previous subsistence activities far more challenging, and sometimes impossible.

Now, as we prepare for mine closure, we can expect two groups to emerge from the layoffs. There are the traditional knowledge holders (hunters and trappers) who have worked at the mines since they opened. They are coming with a history of the mixed economy and will be able to transition to other work in the community when they return from the mines. The second group is the younger generation, the people who grew up with the mines that never had the opportunity to learn these traditional skills because they went straight to working at the mines at a young age. Many of these workers did not gain the opportunity to learn from their elders as they could not spend time with them on the lands practicing their traditional economy.

These two groups will have different skills and needs when the mines close. The first group were hunters and trappers coming from small communities. They have the skills for the mixed economy, but transitioning into new wage labor jobs might be hard for them: they do not have experience in wage labor beyond the mines, and alternative jobs will be difficult to find (especially for those living in small communities) and almost certainly of a lower pay grade. On the other hand, some workers from the second group will likely transition into new jobs very easily. For example, with the Tłı̨chǫ All-Season Road,[13] a major highway construction project in the region, a lot of Tłı̨chǫ transitioned to these jobs from mining jobs very easily. They are used to camp life. They can work on winter roads, in remediation, for municipal governments (like driving a water truck, or garbage truck). They have their language and skills developed. However, we need to consider where these workers live. Like many mine workers (Hall & Pryce, 2023; Perry & Rowe, 2015), a lot of these miners have left their small communities and bought homes in Yellowknife, the territorial capital, and may continue to live in Yellowknife – or further afield – once the mines close. Their children are more attuned to life in the city than life in small communities.

[13] https://www.inf.gov.nt.ca/en/TlichoHighway

Conceptualizing closure

Mine transitions are very similar to our transitions away from other colonial projects, such as residential schools. You go to residential schools[14]; once it's over, then you're going to have to go back home and readjust. It is also similar to the "Sixties Scoop"; this was a period in the mid-twentieth century, at the height of the Canadian welfare state era, where thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families by the Canadian State and put in the child welfare system (Sinclair, 2007). These young people came back and they didn't know where to fit in socially and culturally. They would wander around for a little while, and then disappear. And that was because there was no way of reintegration, no system to reclaim and reconcile those big gaping holes in their knowledge. Now, as we face diamond mine closure, we must once again consider these processes of dislocation, return and reintegration, and the impacts of the knowledge gaps that arise through years of working away from community.

Today, the Tłı̨chǫ are much more involved in overseeing mining and mine closure: via the *Tłı̨chǫ Agreement* we have institutions of public governance and co-management boards that we rely on to ensure that our voices for protection are documented in the processes that shape closure. For example, our people are now very involved in the cleanup of Rayrock Mine, a uranium mine that operated before our land claim and without our consent. Today, it is good to see pre-contact place names in reports on Rayrock (Legat, Ryan, Zoe, Rabesca & Chocolate, 1997).[15] The Elders are reinstating a lot of these place names, like *Kwetı̨ʔaà*, discussed above, around the mine site. This is an ongoing example of integrating the knowledge held within our pre-contact place names into closure and our relationship with the land as it extends beyond closure. It is part of a larger Tłı̨chǫ Government commitment to uncovering and protecting the knowledge of traditional place names and passing it on to future generations.

At the same time, we need to remember that current environmental monitoring systems and closure processes are still characterized by colonialism, both past and present. We are emerging as a self-governing Indigenous government, but there are still that legacy and present colonial constraints. So, as we think about mine closure, we need to learn from the past: not just past mine closure, but the past colonial transitions and traditional knowledge held in the second and third phases of place names. The old people were always telling legends and stories to one another, but were we really listening? We need to lay this knowledge down as our foundation. We need to consider how to build back up our old settlements into places you can go: turning to the example of Rayrock mine again, these are traditional hunting and harvesting grounds that we cannot access. We do not want this in our future, and we must consider our historical mining experiences, like these, as we approach diamond mine closure. In this, we must approach the healing of the land and the people as interconnected: for example, we need to consider on-the-land healing programs. Right now, we send a lot of Indigenous people south to heal (to state-run addictions programs, for example), but there is always a fear of how to return and reintegrate when your healing is not attached to your own home, land and community. If you want to return home, there's no real preparation for it.

This is why, as the land transitions through mine closure, our people do too. We have to be totally involved, not just in terms of providing information but also in terms of designing environmental monitoring, and clean-up. This is not just a physical closure – what about the impact to the people? Remediation can feel like being banned from the land, banned from the land that all the animals relied on.[16] That is the true loss. In our place names, we see the loss of land and relationships in places like Rayrock Mine, where contamination

[14] Boarding (residential) schools and day schools targeting Indigenous children operated in Canada between the 1830s and 1997. First administered by churches, these schools became national policy in the 1880s, operated with the explicit aim of separating Indigenous children from their families and communities and assimilating these children into Euro-Canadian culture. Following committed advocacy by Indigenous communities, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada recognized that these schools, and the government policies that supported them, were engaged in cultural genocide. See https://nctr.ca/

[15] See https://tlicho.ca/news/rayrock-story-map-overview.

[16] This language inspired the title of a Tłı̨chǫ-led community-university research network, "We Will Not Be Banned From Our Land", that investigates the wellbeing of Tłı̨chǫ people in relation to Tłı̨chǫ land. All three authors are involved in this network, convened by Zoe and Lim.

has kept us away. Through the renaming of the little lakes at Rayrock, we are recording the history of that contamination. As we look towards the closure of contemporary mines, we need to approach this in a better way.

4. Indigenous-led mine closure

So that is part of the story of the social impacts of mining and mine closure, of post-mining and transitions. These transitions are not always based on the transition to the next mine. Instead, the transition comes back to where we started from. And all the things, all of these histories that have been built up over time to construct the mining economy must be made to come alive. This is how we can structure the system of decision-making that shapes mine closure. We can draw upon the knowledge of our place names so that the activities of closure are guided by the traditional knowledge of pre-contact place names. This is the ultimate baseline for closure and remediation, an approach grounded in four pillars: in Tłı̨chǫ land, language, culture, and way of life. We need to keep coming back to these pillars all the time. They need to be built into all aspects of the closure process. This does not mean these pillars are fully defined – as Tłı̨chǫ we need to keep working to determine what kinds of Western tools can be used to include the pillars of our old way of life without destroying it. Technology and also closure standards are always changing, and we want to keep up. But, even as it changes, our approach and benchmark should always derives from Tłı̨chǫ land, language, culture and way of life.

For Tłı̨chǫ, pre-closure place names are the baseline for mine closure and transitions because they are an inventory of the land at its most pristine: what we had, and what we can continue to have. This is a much broader approach to mine closure than just looking at the footprint of the mine itself. We know that the mine company will remediate the mine to a certain standard agreed to in the environmental agreements. But there have begun to be shifts in mine closure practices that take in other considerations. So, we ask, what is protruding out beyond that footprint? What of the landscape that surrounds it? What shape is it in and how long will it take to monitor and clean up these lands and waters? What will the impacts to people be and how can we, the Tłı̨chǫ, be an active participant in rehabilitation and transition? Because up until now, monitoring decisions have been heavily weighed towards Western ways of thinking, which may not fully account for the damage that mining development has done. We hear about mitigation, but mitigation is foreign to the way we understand the land. For us, we can only look to the pristine quality of the land that was recorded through our pre-contact place names and develop means of measurement against our own history and benchmarks.

This approach we are suggesting goes back to the time of Treaty 11 (1921). At the time of signing, Mǫwhì pronounced that "as long as the sun rises, the river flows, and the land does not move" – that these new resource activities and settler approaches to land don't take over – "we will not be restricted from our way of life." Our way of life is the future, for the next generation to build upon. And so, we are trying to make Mǫwhì's words come alive, and honor the spirit and intent of Treaty 11. We can't change the narrative of the last 200 years, but we can work towards changing how laws and policies are applied now. When we remember that there were two parts to these agreements, we will not be restricted from moving forward. The next generation can continue to ensure that a lot of these elements of our way of life are pulled together, using tools we have in-hand, like the IBAs. So, the first part of mine closure is to ensure our people have knowledge: knowledge of this area, our land, and also skills so that they can be "strong like two people" (Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1991).

Many of our mine workers have these strengths: they have the skills of the Tłı̨chǫ way of life, and the skills they learned at the workplace. We can build on this. We can continue building skills, with knowledge development and supporting younger people in higher education with the greater objective of grounding these young people. So that they may know where they're from, and build upon their Tłı̨chǫ identity, rather than having to assimilate or convert to being something they are not.

What, then, is the next step? The next step is moving development from a future direction shaped by Western thinking to a future direction for our community shaped by our own Tłı̨chǫ thinking. For our youth, this doesn't mean there is anything wrong with being part of the Canadian economy and all its trappings, but it does mean that Indigenous youths' upbringing and their education – the schools where they have an introduction

into northern history, northern economy, Northern political landscapes – that this knowledge transmission must be infused with our own knowledge. Our own methods of strengthening our people.

So when we consider mining transitions, how do we transition to activities that sustain our community through our own strengths: our own knowledge, instead of participating in Western skill-building to support more extraction? *Trails of Our Ancestors* is an ongoing community initiative that exemplifies this approach. *Trails of our Ancestors* is an annual canoe journey to the Tłı̨chǫ Annual Gathering, which brings together Tłı̨chǫ people from all four communities.[17] Developed in the mid 1990s as a way to help people realize the Tłı̨chǫ ideal of being Strong like two People, the program, at its core, is meant to keep Tłı̨chǫ traditional knowledge alive by passing it on from one generation to the next. At the heart of this program is a desire to preserve, protect and pass on Tłı̨chǫ culture, language and way of life.

In the beginning of this program, we were just getting our feet wet. But now it's been about 25 years that the program has been running and there are some people who have been on over 20 trips and we see its potential, both in building our relationship to land and one another, and in economic development oriented towards Tłı̨chǫ ways of life, rather than extraction. *Trails of our Ancestors* is an initiative that builds traditional knowledge through the four pillars and also builds the skills for future economic development. As they build their traditional knowledge and relationship to land, we can simultaneously support individuals' engagement in the tourism industry by giving them a canoe to take people out on trips. And, in doing this work, they can buy their own groceries, they can buy their own radios, and they can do their own budget, and they can get their own staff. Through our government and our new rights established by the land claim agreement, we are exploring the potential for the Tłı̨chǫ Government to certify people with traditional knowledge. This would be our own certification in canoeing and other skills, which, for tourism operators, could be coupled with Western courses (for example, first aid). Our *Trails of our Ancestors* participants have earned the right to be a contractor in that field, so that they can provide their services as leaders when *Trails of Our Ancestors* is happening, they can join the annual trip to K'ıchıı̀ (Whitebeach Point), they can join other the on-the-land programs, and they can also use those same skills in building a business and developing a clientele.

In the winter, we can similarly build job opportunities out of our traditional activities. For example, we can raise sled dog teams, have people looking after those dogs, feeding the dogs, through trapping, through fishing, making stick fish. All of these are ways of creating an industry out of traditional activities and knowledge. Similarly, we can build on and develop our Indigenous storytelling as a potential activity. A lot of these things are already happening. Tłı̨chǫ people have started grooming the trails for these activities. At this point, these activities are mostly traditional, they have not yet been packaged for Westerners. But that is something that can be developed. And if we don't develop it, somebody will take those ideas and develop them. And then we'll end up working for somebody else.

That becomes very important. We need to protect and build our self-determination. Our biggest strength is our lands. These are our lands where we are working. So we must make decisions and consider how to govern them, how to use our own Tłı̨chǫ tools, as well as settler tools – including legislation – to strengthen our abilities to work in our own way on these lands. Now that we have a land claim to help us in this, how do we use this as a support to build our own knowledge systems, and to use the skills we have gained in both worlds, to support our way of life, rather than the other way around? For too long, we have been pushed into Western skill development that supports the Canadian economy – namely with the mines – and told to forget about our Tłı̨chǫ knowledge. That's where people fall into this big void of not finding comfort in being in a space where they can be themselves. It's like you're in a no man's land. And we want to ensure that, after all we've gone through and all we've fought for, that our knowledge and skills development supports *Tłı̨chǫ* wellbeing.

5. Conclusion

In outlining a Tłı̨chǫ approach to mine closure, we have integrated attention to the land, attention to the people (workers and their communities), and attention to community development. These are all informed by

[17] See government *Trails of Our Ancestors* webpage: https://tlicho.ca/government/departments/culture-lands-protection/cultural-practices/trails-our-ancestors

the traditional knowledge held in our place names, and guided by the pillars of land, language, culture and way of life. This knowledge is found in our history, both pre-contact history, which offers a bar to which we can measure our activities that heal the land and our relations, and our history of colonialism and colonial transitions, which offer lessons in moving through mine closure in a good way.

For Tłı̨chǫ, we don't want mining transitions to focus solely on moving towards more mines. But we also know that the mining companies will come calling again. And so the next time that there is a proposed development, we want to use our own information in negotiating agreements from a position of strength and self-determination, rather than be subject to agreements that were forced on us. Because that was how all this started. But the development conditions imposed upon us did not determine where we have ended up, nor need they determine our future.

What we have described is *Tłı̨chǫ closure*: this is much more than the physical closure defined by mining companies. We need our own closure, where we revitalize our own stories. In mine closure, the land needs to be put to rest so that it can one day bring itself back. That is the kind of closure story we need: not just ticking off boxes in closure reclamation processes. Instead, we, the Tłı̨chǫ, need to reclaim the land using the tools and the knowledge that we already have.

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