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Producing liminal space: gender, age and class in northern Ontario's tree planting industry

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Drawing upon qualitative data, this article examines how tree planters in northern Ontario, Canada engage with liminality in terms of gender, class, age and space. In doing so, it provides insight into concepts of gender liminality and the variegated experiences of males and females in liminal space. The article focuses on four aspects of the liminal engagement. First, the spaces of tree planting are liminal as they are marked by homelife and worklife, but dominated by neither. Second, gender performances are liminal, as males perform masculinities seldom necessary or appropriate – yet often valorized – in their permanent communities, while females (who make up nearly half of the workforce) are offered opportunities to work and succeed in a traditionally male industry. However, success often requires that they adopt certain masculine traits. Third, most tree planters are in the interstitial age of 'youth', somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. Finally, tree planters are generally members of affluent urban middle-classes, yet the work they perform is more readily associated with rural or peripheral working-classes.

Keywords: liminal space; gender liminality; tree planting; spaces of production

Introduction

Tree planting is a critical component of North America's forest products industry. Although tree planting programmes grew in earnest throughout the post-war period, social scientists have only recently paid significant attention to the industry's structure, social practices and power relationships (Bodner 1998; Brown 2000; Ekers 2009; Casanova and McDaniel 2005; Mann 2001; Moseley and Reyes 2007; Prudham 2005; Sarathy 2007; Sweeney 2009; Sweeney and Holmes 2008). A common theme throughout this body of research is how tree planting as an occupation is consistent with the growing preponderance of non-standard work. Another is the recognition that tree planters are rarely permanent residents of the regions in which they work. Needless to say, both have implications on the organization, public perception and occupational culture of the industry. This article contributes to this body of work by drawing upon the concept of liminality to examine gender, class and age among workers in northern Ontario, Canada's tree planting industry. In doing so, it provides insight into the manner in which males and females engage with liminality in the workplace and how gender, class and age intersect to shape these engagements. It also extends the spatial scope of liminality into places of production.

Northern Ontario's tree planting workforce is comprised primarily of affluent, middle-class, post-secondary students who reside permanently in the province's southern, urban

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