The development of the idea of the nation has historically required the fixing of a population in both time and space. One of the key ways of accomplishing this goal has been to construct groups by creating boundaries for their languages and their cultures (as well, as, frequently, their biological characteristics), that is, by fixing language and culture in space and in a particular set of bodies. A second, and related, method has been to construct a narrative of temporal continuity. This frame, of course, simultaneously produces temporal and spatial variability as problems to be regulated – problems which lie at the heart of sociolinguistics as a discipline. In the contemporary era, our discipline has increasingly argued for seeing such variability as normal, and, possibly, as a hallmark of our era.

In this talk I seek to challenge these views, insofar as they retain the concept of variability as something to be described and explained, whether it is understood to be increasing or not. Using the example of the construction of the idea of the nation on the basis of « Frenchness » in Canada (or more broadly, North America) as a cultural form, I argue that while it might be more difficult now to ignore the temporal changes and spatial mobilities which are obstacles to the fixing of national populations, it is not clear how new these processes really are. Instead, we might more fruitfully ask under what conditions we find people seeking to fix populations (and therefore working to erase variability and mobility), and under what conditions it is the fixing that requires investigation and explanation – or to push the boundaries a little further, when we might ask other, broader, questions altogether, such as what forms of social categorization serve to organize what kinds of relations of power.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted with colleagues on francophone labour mobility in Canada, and its challenges to the production and reproduction of the French Canadian (Québécois, Acadian, Franco-Ontarian, etc.) « nation » past and present, I will argue that we can make such a shift by following the trajectories of spaces, discourses and actors, with their differential positioning in political economic conditions, rather than focussing on fixed sites of encounter or even of discursive production. In order to understand ideas like « nation » (or categories like « French »), and the possibilities for or challenges to their production and reproduction, we need to discover how « mobility » gets constructed as a contrast to « mooring », in the interests of what kinds of social organization. In the case of francophone Canada, it is social mobility and the particular requirements for flexibility of contemporary global capital which challenge the idea of the francophone nation, even as that idea (still) organizes labour and produces commodified forms of identity valued on the global market.

Keywords: