

# From Forced Relocation to Secure Belonging: Women Making Native Space in Quebec's Urban Areas

**Caroline Desbiens**

*Department of Geography  
Université Laval*

**Carole Lévesque**

*Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique  
Centre Urbanisation Culture Société*

**ABSTRACT:** In the 1970s, urban areas in Quebec (Canada) welcomed several indigenous organizations, notably the Quebec Native Women's Association (QNWA), which was created in 1974 and based in Montreal. As with the Native Women's Association of Canada created a year earlier, the QNWA was founded by First Nations women who lost their status due to the discriminatory clauses in the Indian Act (1876): until the 1985 reform, women who married non-indigenous men were stripped of their status and, in most cases, forced to leave and then kept away from their land and communities of origin. Forced to relocate on the basis of gender, many of these women moved to towns and cities where they became key architects of what David Newhouse has called "the invisible infrastructure" of urban indigenous communities. Originally, this infrastructure included the kitchens, living rooms, cafés, parks or other informal spaces that supported these communities. Over the years, the infrastructure has become increasingly visible, in large part due to the creation and development of Native Friendship Centres (NFC), which provide support and services for indigenous people in urban settings in areas such as health, social services, education, employment, housing, etc. In Québec there are ten NFC and it is a notable fact that each of them is presently headed by a woman. In this paper, we draw on the work of feminist geographers to examine how, from an experience of forced migration, First Nations women in Quebec established new indigenous territories in urban locations. What began as informal networks of solidarity has become a built environment that is contributing both to the visibility and viability of urban indigenous communities. Using feminist historical geography as an analytical framework, our chief objective is to detail the unfolding of this gendered geography during the last fifty years, and assess its importance for contemporary configurations of indigenous identities, cultures and politics.

## **Introduction**

**I**n Val-d'Or, a town of about 30,000 people in Quebec's middle north, the native friendship center is situated a few blocks off the main drag but it is undoubtedly a central place. Regionally, it serves as a community anchor for Cree, Inuit, Algonquian and other Indigenous people who are long-time residents of Val-d'Or, looking to settle in the region, or temporarily passing through. At the scale of the province, it is known as a leader of the native friendship centers movement, thanks to its dynamism and innovation in supporting the urban Indigenous population province-wide. Federally, the Val d'Or Native Friendship Centre (VDNFC) is also on

the radar: as government institutions try to develop policies better suited to urban Indigenous people, Val-d'Or offers a model for understanding what their needs are and what strategies can be adopted to close the health, education, and employment gaps that are the legacy of colonial dispossession.<sup>1</sup>

Of the ten centers that exist in Quebec today, nine of them have a female director. As for the *Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec* (RCAAQ), the umbrella organization that supports native friendship centers across the province, nine of the people who sit on the board of directors are women.<sup>2</sup> It would be accurate to say that the native friendship network is gendered in the same way that the nursing or teaching professions are. But there are also geo-historical factors that explain this reality: they can be traced to the sexism of the Indian Act, particularly its view of marriage and property.<sup>3</sup> When it became law in 1876, the Indian Act reflected the Victorian norms of Canadian society regarding marriage whereby "children and women, in parentage and marriage, took the identity of the dominant, determining male."<sup>4</sup> This meant that Indian women who were "marrying out" lost their status by taking on that of their "white" husband; as well, the children of these unions had no access to Indian status. In effect, "male blood, red and white, was meant to divide the Aboriginal from the non-Aboriginal population."<sup>5</sup> This legal principle reveals a spatial imperative that is key to understanding the presence of First Nations women in Quebec (and Canadian) cities until the 1980s, when the Indian Act was amended. Indian Status was originally defined as a right of access to reserve land which, in turn, was actualized by the right to reside on the reserve. Loss of status then translated into a requirement to leave the reserve since a non-Indian was considered an intruder.<sup>6</sup> Such was the case for numerous women who lost their status after a mixed marriage. Many of them settled in towns near their reserve or in larger urban areas like Quebec City or Montreal.

In losing their status, Indigenous women also lost their homes, but many took part in creating hybrid spaces that continue to defy the racial and patriarchal geographies that had no place for them. While the foundation of each of Quebec's native friendship centers cannot be solely attributed to women who lost their status, the growth of the infrastructure and movement that supports them is underscored by a vision of identity and community that women, and their allies, put forward in order to push against colonial society and its bureaucratic reductions. In this paper we examine how, from an experience of forced migration, Indigenous women actively created new spaces of secure belonging in urban locations across Quebec: for Indigenous women have historically faced uncertainty—a recurring "status of insecurity"—regarding their Indian status and right of residency in their own communities. Indeed, for over a century (1876-1985), the gender discrimination of the Indian Act meant that women faced the constant threat of being "externalized" from their reserves due to their marriage choice.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, status-blind, secure belonging is a key value of the programming and services available in Native friendship centers. In addition, Native friendship centers materialize an "ethics of culture and relationship" by pursuing the ideals of cultural safety and pan-Indigenous solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Our analysis is based on historical and academic sources, media analysis, participatory observation and on the co-production of knowledge with research partners within the framework of the *Odena* Research Alliance, which is part of a larger research infrastructure bringing together the RCAAQ and DIALOG - *Aboriginal Peoples research and Knowledge Network*.<sup>9</sup> Before we discuss how an ethics of culture and relationship is embedded in the structure and governance of Native friendship centers in Quebec, we begin with an analysis of the Indian Act—and its regulation of Indian Status—as they relate to the construction and gendering of colonial space in Canada.

### **Making native space": The spatial dynamis of gender and status**

Historical geographers have demonstrated the force of colonialism as an agent of landscape transformation; a multi-layered apparatus, colonialism unfolded differently across the whole of

Canadian space depending on the historical and geographical context of each region.<sup>10</sup> While this complexity cannot be fully detailed here, it is important to underline that, unlike in Canada's maritime and central provinces and territories, no treaties were signed in Quebec and British Columbia (except in small areas of Vancouver Island). On the other hand, an Indian reservation system was set up in both provinces, as elsewhere in Canada.<sup>11</sup> In reference to British Columbia, Cole Harris has described the creation of reserves as a colonial process of "making native space" that unfolded through dispossession, repossession and resistance for a period of approximately a hundred years (1850-1938); this "native space" became the locus of the colonial administration and did not reflect Indigenous people's own production of space and landscape.<sup>12</sup> In addition to limiting spatial mobility, reserves enacted a process of political reduction by controlling access to citizenship, participation in the mainstream economy and even the terms of Indigenous identity via Indian "registration," which led to the assignation of "Indian status."<sup>13</sup> In addition to tracing the historical establishment of reserves, Harris also sought to analyse the strategies and mechanisms supporting colonialism's "power to dispossess" via this spatial system. Focusing on the historical geography of settler colonialism in Canada—specifically the creation of the proprietary colony of Vancouver Island and the crown colony of British Columbia—he identifies a key shift in the relationship between newcomers and Indigenous peoples: "A relationship based on trade was replaced by one based on land."<sup>14</sup> As Harris notes, physical violence, the imperial state, colonial culture, and the self-interest of settlers all lay beneath the process of Indigenous dispossession and resettlement of British Columbia.<sup>15</sup> As settler society consolidated its power, dispossession had to be "managed" and, to that extent, "disciplinary strategies associated with the management of people, nature and space, came to the fore."<sup>16</sup> Using a Foucauldian approach, Harris identifies maps, numbers, common law and the new geographies of settler colonialism as part of a greater apparatus of "governmentality" that framed the territorial dispossession of one set of people and the establishment of another.<sup>17</sup>

Building on the analytical purview of Harris's account of colonialism in Canada, feminist historical geography, and feminist studies more broadly, have much to add to this picture: gender is undeniably an element of the resettlement of Indigenous people's land base and, as feminist perspectives on the Indian Act show, is indeed central to the management of dispossession, and its end goal of assimilating Indigenous peoples into the mainstream. Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack examine what they refer to as the "collusions between colonialism and patriarchy," stating that: "For Indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence."<sup>18</sup> Referring to treaty making in the United States, Rebecca Tsosie rightly points out that: "The historical policy of the European nations, and then of the United States, was to recognize male political leaders only."<sup>19</sup> In her book, *A Recognition of Being*, Kim Anderson explores the impact of this phenomenon on Indigenous women's leadership, taking a historical perspective on what she views as colonialism's dismantling of gender equity within First Nation societies.<sup>20</sup> She is careful, however, to foreground that sexism was not necessarily absent from Indigenous cultures, citing the words of an Ojibway woman: "I don't believe that sexism was thoroughly unknown before the Europeans came here. I have to figure that we had the same capacity for the 'isms' in our original societies that we have today. What was available, however, were systems by which to balance that."<sup>21</sup>

These balancing elements were compounded by the sense, widely present in Indigenous societies, of a woman's power and position within the community.<sup>22</sup> Given the authority that women held in native societies, their exclusion by the settler state in all things pertaining to the transfer and transformation of Indigenous people's lands can only be regarded as strategic. As noted by Kathleen Jamieson, early treaties and Indian legislation were developed in Canada

between the English and the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. In the latter, female-led clans held the collective land base for the various nations of the confederacy: "Removing women then, was the key to privatizing the land base. For all these reasons, a central aspect of the colonization process in Canada would be to break the power of Indigenous women within their nations."<sup>23</sup> For Bonita Lawrence, the dismantling of women's power was effected through the "gendering of Indianness in the colonial encounter" and the regulation of Native identity by gender.<sup>24</sup> That process was enacted via the legal mechanism of the Indian Act and, more pointedly, the policing of authenticity through the category of Indian Status.

The regulation of that category, that is, the surveillance and control of who could or could not lay claim to it, was accomplished via the Indian Register. Historically, the emergence and consolidation of the Indian Register corresponds to the gradual development of a legal and political apparatus designed to make Indigenous peoples more ordered and therefore more governable.<sup>25</sup> While the reach of that governmentality was deleterious to the whole of Indigenous society, women's autonomy, mobility and social status were negatively affected to a much greater extent. With settlement pushing West and treaty signing proceeding apace in the second part of the nineteenth century, the colonial government of British North America started to keep records identifying registered Indians and the bands to which they belonged. These records were formalized in the early 1950s with the creation of the Indian Register, which became the chief demographic tool used by the federal government to define and enact Indian policy.<sup>26</sup> The impacts of this tool and its attendant categorizations are wide-ranging but, historically, the mechanisms for determining status have not been straightforward, especially when taking gender into account: while the Indian Act dictated that status be revoked when a woman married a non-Indigenous man, non-Indian women who married into an Indian band would, conversely, "gain" status through their husband. This is a strong indication that a patriarchal view of lineage was the chief determinant of status rules, independently of the cultural background and identity of the individuals this status was unilaterally assigned to. Concretely this meant that women and children who were "biological Indians" could be denied status, whereas non-biological Indians (women of other cultures as well as their descendants) could gain access to it.<sup>27</sup> For women who were subjected to these seesawing categories, status was more like a game played by a fickle State whose only constant was unpredictability.

### **Status of insecurity: Enfranchisement and Bill C-31**

If the Indian Act seems to defy logic, it makes sense when understood in relation to its primary objective, which was to assimilate Indigenous people to the rest of the Euro-Canadian population. According to this objective, the removal of women's status through marriage was framed by the colonial state not as a loss but as a gain, according to the underlying value-system of "enfranchisement." As in other British colonies during the period of high imperialism, enfranchisement was presented in Canada as a privilege extended to colonial subjects: in abandoning their languages, cultures and communities, Indigenous peoples were thought to be "evolving" toward better forms of being and social organization.<sup>28</sup> The specific use of the term in Canada must also be understood historically through the evolving framework of Indian policy: enfranchisement was the legal process terminating a person's Indian status and conferring full Canadian citizenship.<sup>29</sup> Yet only men could seek enfranchisement: they had to be over twenty-one years old, free of debt, able to read and write in English or French and show good moral character. Very few people sought enfranchisement of their own will; Pierre Lepage notes that, in a period of two decades (1955 to 1975), only 2666 Indians across Canada gave up their status.<sup>30</sup> Involuntarily enfranchisement, however, was widespread: an Indigenous man acquiring a university degree or living abroad could see his status revoked by decision of an Indian Affairs representative. For Indigenous women, involuntary enfranchisement could also result from their husband's (willing or unwilling) loss of status, as spouses and children of an Indian who became "free" would be

automatically enfranchised.

Whether due to loss of status because of marriage, enfranchisement, or other forms of gender discrimination in the Indian Act, the “bleeding off” of Native women and their children from their home communities reached staggering proportions before the Indian Act was amended with the adoption of Bill C-31 in 1985: “Some sources have estimated that by far the majority of the twenty-five thousand Indians who lost status and were externalized from their communities between 1876 and 1985 (Holmes 1987: 8) did so because of ongoing gender discrimination in the Indian Act.”<sup>31</sup> Beyond simply reflecting the Victorian values of the time that subsumed women to their husband’s identity and property, this is another example of how the Indian Act used gender strategically in order to carry out its assimilation policy. Even a cursory look reveals that the law was eminently attuned to gender, using it, among other strategies, to trim down the list of registered Indians. As the dearth of voluntary enfranchisement suggests, the assimilationist mechanisms of the bill were met with resistance. Gender further complicates this picture; whereas, collectively, Indigenous people resisted cultural and political assimilation by the Canadian state, many individual women who lost their status as a result of marriage to a non-Indian man would face opposition by their own communities in their efforts to regain that status. When they mobilized to seek gender equity, women were not only faced with colonial gender discrimination, they had to struggle against the myriad ways in which sexism, essentialism and ideas of authenticity and racial purity were taken up by the (overwhelmingly male) leadership of their own band councils.

Such was the situation encountered by Mary Two-Axe Earley (1911-1996) whose struggle began following the death of her non-native husband in 1966. A Mohawk from Kahnawake, Two-Axe Earley wished to return to her community but was denied residency by the band council, which was applying the rules of the Indian Act. When her situation became public, other women who had experienced the same discrimination came forward. In 1971, Jeanette Corbiere Lavell (from Wikwemikong reserve in Ontario) and Yvonne Bedard (Six Nations reserve in Ontario), who had both lost their status after marriage, challenged the differential treatment of men and women by the Indian Act arguing that it violated the equality guarantee against racial discrimination contained in the Canadian Bill of Rights. Lavell challenged the deletion of her name from her band’s list whereas, in a separate case, Bedard contested her eviction, and that of her children, by decision of her band council from the house that her mother had willed to her, this even after she had separated from her husband. Both women lost their case at the federal court level but, after managing to win an appeal, their cases were heard together by the Supreme Court. The court rendered its decision in 1973, ruling against them in a judgement that reflects the tight imbrication of racism, sexism and colonialism that prevailed in Canada: “[T]he decision noted that since not all Indians were discriminated against, only Indian women who married non-Indians, then racial discrimination could not be said to exist; and since enfranchised Indian women gained the citizenship rights that made them equal (in law) to white women, then gender discrimination could not be said to exist.”<sup>32</sup>

Having exhausted the means of Canadian courts, Indigenous women turned to international organizations. Sandra Lovelace, a Maliseet from New Brunswick, brought her case to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), with the support of women from her community of Tobique. Recognizing that, having been deprived of her status and therefore of access to housing, education and healthcare (for herself and her children) in her reserve, Sandra Lovelace had been denied her right to enjoy her culture in community with members of her own group, the UNHRC declared in 1981 that article 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act, which removed status of any woman who married a non-Indian, discriminated against women.<sup>33</sup> The international attention given to the case forced Canada to review its policy. The adoption of Bill C-31 in 1985 amended the Indian Act but, unfortunately, did not fully eliminate gender discrimination. Section

6, "Persons Entitled to be Registered," introduced two classes of Indians: 6(1), those who can pass Indian status to their children and 6(2), those who have Indian status, but cannot pass it to the children unless the other parent also has status. Class 6(2) is known as the "second generation cutoff":

Prior to 1985, Status Indian men could pass their status to their wives, and as a result of the 1985 Indian Act, their children are considered 6(1). However, if women had 'married out,' their children are considered 6(2)s and cannot pass on their status, creating a 'second-generation cutoff.' These revisions have been critiqued for only deferring the termination of Indian status by a generation, rather than adequately addressing the legal issues with the ways that legal status is determined and conferred.<sup>34</sup>

Roughly 127,000 people reintegrated their Indian status as a result of the amendment but, due the differential status it introduced down the generational line, Bill C-31 did not remove insecurity for women. Cheryl Suzack has analysed how one woman, Yvelaine Moses (Lower Nicola Indian band), brought this issue to the courts by contesting her reinstatement under the 6(2) category while her brother had been reinstated as a 6(1). For Suzack, the mind-boggling technicalities of her case demonstrate "a number of distorting circumstances that have transformed Indigenous women's attachments to identity, kingship, culture and community into contestations over legal meanings."<sup>35</sup> As an Indigenous woman, Moses exposed the vulnerability of her position in front of the law, "by insisting on her feelings of insecurity in light of the registrar's authority to challenge her status, and by expressing her concern that future amendments could challenge or revoke her identity as a Status Indian."<sup>36</sup> Using emotive terms, "[Moses] tried to appeal, through affective language, to the court's empathy and value system to register her experiences of disenfranchisement and reinstatement as forms of discrimination that are not only unconstitutional but also gendered, evaluative and, ultimately, a consequence of how Aboriginal women are understood to matter in society."<sup>37</sup> Like that of several others, Yvelaine Moses's case illustrates how the gender discrimination of the Canadian State has pushed Indigenous women to make "their private emotional selves public in order to retain their Aboriginal identity and inheritances."<sup>38</sup> Even if, paradoxically, they fight for a status that is a pure product of Canada's patriarchal and colonial rule,<sup>39</sup> women who choose the figure of "Aboriginal-woman-as feeling-subject" present us with "new forms of social understanding."<sup>40</sup> Native friendship centers are actively engaged in materializing these new forms of social understandings in the urban environment by way of their commitment to relationality, belonging, cultural recognition and emotional security.

To sum up, whether status was given, revoked, or partially reinstated, it was done without Indigenous women's consent and without equity. State colonialism was compounded by sexism and both forms of discrimination had spatial implications for women: assigned to the reserve on the basis of their indigeneity, they were also forcibly exiled from it when they transgressed the conditions of their Indian status. This amounted to another form of spatial assignation, this time to towns and cities. Women resisted this spatial control by creating new spaces of indigeneity in the city. We explore that process through some examples drawn from the Native friendship centers movement in Quebec.

### **From forced migration to active belonging**

Native friendship centers are not-for-profit community spaces that provide a range of services—from health, education, job and employment counselling to healing circles, legal advocacy, cultural programming, or family and youth support—tailored to the collective needs, customs and values of Indigenous people in cities and towns. Comparable models are present in Latin American countries, as well as in the United States, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>41</sup> In

Canada, native friendship centers have existed for more than sixty-five years and can be found in all provinces and territories. While they originally functioned as independent entities, the growth of native friendship centers in the 1960s led to the incorporation, in 1972, of a national body—known as the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC)—meant to serve as a link between them. Today, the NAFC represents 118 friendship centers and seven provincial and territorial associations; it is Canada's most significant off-reserve infrastructure for providing services and networking to the country's Indigenous population, from coast to coast to coast and across the age spectrum.<sup>42</sup> The bulk of its funding comes from the federal government's Urban Aboriginal Strategy, which was launched in 1998 to better address the socio-economic needs of Indigenous people living off-reserve.<sup>43</sup>

Quebec's first native friendship center—the Chibougamau Eenu Friendship Centre—was established in Chibougamau in 1969, in the heart of Eeyou/Eenou (Cree) territory. The construction of a road between Chibougamau and the Mistissini reserve had increased frequentation of the town by members of that community, but they were not welcome: "They wait for hours for transportation, sitting outside of the Hudson Bay store, emblem of the exploitation of First Nations via the fur trade."<sup>44</sup> In addition, housing was not accessible to them due to the lack of available units, which was compounded by racism.<sup>45</sup> In an effort to remedy this situation, the Doré Lake Chief and different local actors joined their efforts to create the center. They called on Anne-Marie Awashish, a member of the Mistassini band, to carry the project and, from one grant application to another, the center moved from a small rented space into its own building in 1975. Once the center was up and running, Awashish went on to help develop others, notably La Tuque, Val d'Or, Montreal and Senneterre.<sup>46</sup>

During that period, Montreal became a pivotal place for a number of organizations working to affirm Indigenous rights, including women's. In 1974, the city would see the creation of its native friendship center along with that of the Quebec Native Women's Association (QNWA), which chose Montreal as its base. Two years later, the native friendship centers of Montreal, Chibougamau, La Tuque and Val-d'Or came together to form the *Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec* (RCAAQ); originally based in Chibougamau, the RCAAQ quickly relocated in the Montreal native friendship center. Working both together and separately, these various organizations were the early nodes of what is today an extensive network providing services to the urban Indigenous population of Quebec, whose roots can be traced to what David Newhouse has termed an "invisible infrastructure."<sup>47</sup> The progression of that infrastructure from invisibility into a clearly marked cultural landscape of indigeneity has been largely determined by the types of spaces occupied, and produced, by Indigenous people in the city. Several native friendship centers began in what would commonly be referred to as "domestic" spaces, that is, the kitchens and living rooms of the individuals who got these projects off the ground. Such was the case in Senneterre where the center grew from an informal service provided by Annie Moore, "a peaceful, devoted woman who would welcome anyone who knocked on her door."<sup>48</sup> Opening its doors in 1978, the center's first formal point of service was a rented house situated in a residential area, but it quickly faced the opposition of neighbouring residents. The center received an eviction notice in 1979 on the grounds that it was providing "institutional" services in a residential zone.<sup>49</sup> This opposition between institutional and domestic spaces, however, was not as sharp from the perspective of native friendship centers governance: as their governance evolved according to the specific needs, priorities and values of urban Indigenous peoples, it became clear that it was not the separation, but indeed the conjunction of these two falsely opposed spaces that was at the root of the centers' strength and contribution to the community.

Other centers experienced similar tensions either at the time of their foundation or at various key moments of their expansion. While the full extent of these conflicts cannot be addressed here, two key points can be underlined that relate to women's agency, and distinct

vision, in creating Indigenous space in the city. First, the progression from an invisible to a visible infrastructure providing services to urban Indigenous people had led to a certain degree of institutionalization. This, however, has not translated into a depersonalization of services. Instead, native friendship centers have strengthened themselves by orienting their growth first and foremost as spaces of cultural safety.<sup>50</sup> Blurring the division between public and private, residential and commercial, centers have placed values such as nurturing, respect, cooperation, solidarity – all in all “friendship” – at the core of their programs and services, whether in the area of health, education or job training. They embody these values both in their material (i.e., separate native friendship centers) and organizational (the RCAAQ as a movement) infrastructure, this against the spatial closures and assignments of colonial patriarchy. This leads to a second point about Indigenous women’s urban activism, which is that, as expressed through the programs and services of Native friendship centers, it is status-blind. With or without status, Indigenous women were able to use these spaces to rebuild home and community and transmit their culture, but this is true of any Indigenous person who comes through a center’s door. As the RCAAQ program indicates, the centers offer “integrated and culturally-relevant services for a diversified and extensive clientele, regardless of the place of residence, the community of origin or the culture of its users.”<sup>51</sup>

As Édith Cloutier puts it reflecting on the 35 years of existence of the Val-d’Or Native Friendship Center: “I believe that what we managed to accomplish in 35 years sets the path for the next 35 years, and this is to continue to develop a community space, a democratic space where people can voice their desires as First Nation members.”<sup>52</sup> By revoking status to women who married outside of their community, the Indian Act narrowed even more the spatial extent of cultural recognition. Against this extreme form of gender-based “reduction,” women have recreated material spaces where cultural identity is sustained and affirmed as “a feeling of being wanted, comfortable and belonging to something greater than yourself.”<sup>53</sup> In this new urban landscape, the spatial imperatives imposed on the basis of gender and status no longer hold. This approach has made a significant difference in terms of life outcomes for a large number of women who were estranged from their community due to the Indian Act: being away from their physical community, they could still find a community of “mind and spirit.”<sup>54</sup>

The supportive role played by native friendship centers as places of relationality, belonging and security was exemplified recently in Val-d’Or where, after years of silence, some women were able to voice a systematic pattern of sexual abuse by members of the city’s police force. In addition to loss of status, forced relocation and the many other forms of discrimination historically experienced by Indigenous women in Canada, the violence that too many of them continue to face shows the contemporary impact of colonialism in their lives.<sup>55</sup> While they make up only 3 percent of the population, Indigenous women and girls represent 10 percent of all female homicides in the country.<sup>56</sup> There has been much debate on this issue in Canada as well as repeated calls for a national inquiry.<sup>57</sup> In the spring of 2015, in an effort to personalize this issue, a team of journalists from the public broadcaster Radio-Canada came to Val-d’Or to do a documentary on the disappearance of one of these women, Cindy Ruperthouse.<sup>58</sup> As they conducted a group discussion within the walls of the Val-d’Or Native Friendship Centre (VDNFC) with friends and acquaintances of Cindy, they were shocked to hear the women tell about the behavior of members of the Val-d’Or police (Sûreté du Québec) who, while in uniform, sexually abused the women they had a responsibility to protect. The emotional tone of these testimonies indicates the difficulty of coming forward with such information, which some women had kept secret for decades. One can say that, like Yvelaine Moses in relation to her Indian Status, they were pushed to make “their private emotional selves public” in order to make an appeal to justice. From the point of view of the victims, there was simply no place to bring these allegations to: they could not come to the police to denounce abuse performed by that same institution. This is yet another manifestation of



colonialism's closures as it pertains to Indigenous women in Canada: if they were pushed out of their homes and communities through the unjust removal of their status, this relocation has had a legal parallel in that they have historically been pushed outside the spaces of law and citizenship as legitimate subjects. When asked by one of the Radio-Canada journalists "In your view, how are indigenous women treated [by society]?" one of the victims replied, "As though we were erased. As if we don't exist."<sup>59</sup>

The fact that, against these closures and erasures, the VDNFC can provide a safe place where Indigenous women's dignity, belonging and citizenship is recognized and supported may seem like a small step when looking at the range of institutional changes that are needed in order to reform the colonial state. And yet, following women's voicing of police abuse in Val-d'Or, a police investigation is presently underway in Quebec to address this abuse and devaluation. This investigation is but a small part of a larger, and urgent, need to shed light on systemic violence and discrimination against Indigenous women in Canada: a direct legacy of colonialism that will hopefully be made clear by the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls that was launched (in August 2016) by the newly elected government of Justin Trudeau, who honoured his campaign promise.<sup>60</sup> The history of native friendship centers as spaces of safety, security, and inclusion supporting women for whom colonialism was compounded by gender discrimination offers many avenues for decolonising Canadian space by making "new" native spaces. The presence of more than a hundred native friendship centers across Canada is a small but strong mechanism for expanding a postcolonial geography in the country, one that is premised on relationality, inclusion and gender equity.

## Conclusion

The colonial resettlement of the Americas, like that of Australia and New Zealand, brought about the forced relocation of much of its first inhabitants and the representation of cities as non-Indigenous spaces.<sup>61</sup> In Canada, the multigenerational trauma of relocation was relived for First Nations women who married outside their ethnic background: whereas, in the past, their ancestors had been uprooted on the basis of their cultural identity, discrimination was re-enacted in the present, and in their individual lives, on the basis of gender. Furthermore, the sexism of the Indian Act was in many cases carried out by members of their own community who enforced the Act's discriminatory provisions pertaining to the right of residency.

Loss of status is not the only factor explaining Indigenous women's decision to settle in Quebec's urban areas. It is, however, a significant part of a constellation of discriminatory practices that have alienated women from land and residency rights first as Indigenous subjects in relation to the colonial state, second as gendered subjects in relation to patriarchal regulations. The city, even though it posed the challenges of race, class and other types of discrimination – some leading to extreme forms of physical and sexual violence as the allegations of police abuse in Val-d'Or attest – offered new ground for sustaining Indigenous identities, and perhaps healing from the trauma of colonization. The Canadian state's Victorian ideas about where Indigenous women belonged – which was apparently nowhere, as expressed by the denial of their rights to residency and citizenship – no longer held in these new environments which lay outside the legislative space of the Indian Act. Against the hope of the colonial state, loss of status did not necessarily translate into loss of identity for these women. Their agency in "making native space" – in the form of urban native friendship centers – is proof that they retained their cultural identity and that they created the means to sustain and transfer it to their descendants. Here we believe that the use of Cole Harris' expression is appropriate as the spaces these women actively produced are undeniably part of Canada's colonial and historical geography. Native friendship centers are social mooring places providing a new, and more secure, sense of territoriality and belonging

to Indigenous people—male, female, young and old—whether they live in cities, reserved lands or other locales. If native space was made through colonial policy, it can also be unmade. Or, in the case of Indigenous women in the city, it can be redirected with a new agency to support the decolonization of Canada's geography and, most importantly, do so in and through the pursuit of gender equity.

### Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Odena Research Alliance ([www.odena.ca](http://www.odena.ca)) and DIALOG - Aboriginal Peoples research and Knowledge Network ([www.reseaudialog.ca](http://www.reseaudialog.ca)). We sincerely thank the members of these networks for their input, ideas and critical insight.

### NOTES

1. In Canada, the term "Indigenous" refer globally to the three cultural groups that are recognized in section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, namely First Nations (also known as Amerindian or Indian), Inuit and Métis people. Inuit people span the circumpolar region; in Canada, their ancestry is traced to two different cultural groups, the Dorset who were displaced by the Tunit around the 1500s. The Métis are descendants of distinct communities formed in central Canada during the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of intermarriage between fur-traders and Indigenous women. Although "First Nations" has largely replaced the term "Indians" in Canada, we sometimes use the latter when discussing colonial policy in order to remain coherent with the historical record. The term "Aboriginal" is also widely used in Canada but is gradually being replaced by "Indigenous" so as to avoid confusion with Australian Aboriginal peoples. Throughout this paper, we have opted to use the term "Indigenous" to reflect this change.
2. The board is composed of one representative from each center, plus a youth representative. The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC), of which the RCAAQ is a member, is the main coordinating body across the country. For the sake of clarity and brevity, our paper focuses solely on Quebec but it is important to note that the native friendship centers movement spans the whole of Canada. See David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters, eds., *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2003); Evelyn Peters, "Aboriginal people in Canadian cities" in Trudi Bunting, Pierre Filion and Ryan Walker, eds., *Canadian Cities in Transition: New Directions in the Twenty-First Century* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2010): 375-390.
3. In Canada, the Indian Act is the colonial federal legislation established as an administrative and legal framework governing Indians in Canada; it set up a system of tutelage that still regulates Indians' lives today. This system applies to all aspects of the lives of individuals that the government recognizes as "registered Indians" and to all areas in which Indian band councils can intervene (health, education, administrative structure, land management, etc.). Considered as minors in the eyes of the law, registered Indians are subject to the decisions of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC]). Indian bands are administered by local councils; Canada has more than 600 Indian bands distributed into 56 cultural groups. It must be noted that Inuit and Métis peoples are not governed by the Indian Act (Carole Lévesque and Marie France Labrecque, eds., *Aboriginal Women of Québec and Canada: Path Toward Equality* [Montreal: Cahiers Dialog 4, 2007]).
4. John Milloy, *Indian Act Colonialism: A Century of Dishonor, 1869-1969* (Ottawa: National Centre for First Nations Governance, 2008). Online: <http://www.fngovernance.org/publications/research> (last access June 1st 2015).

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Bonita Lawrence, *"Real" Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004): 55.
8. Rebecca Tsosie, "Indigenous feminism: theorizing the issues" in Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault and Jean Barman, eds., *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 29-42.
9. For details on this partnership, see Odena ([www.odena.ca](http://www.odena.ca)) and Dialog ([www.odena.ca](http://www.odena.ca)).
10. See, among others, Kenneth Coates, *Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territories, 1840-1973* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Daniel Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000); Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1992).
11. In the province of Quebec, the first reserve was created in the Quebec City area for the Huron-Wendat. The 1851 Act was entitled *Acte pour mettre à part certaines étendues de terre pour l'usage de certaines tribus de Sauvages dans le Bas-Canada* (Act to set aside certain areas of land for use by certain Savage tribes in Lower Canada).
12. R. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2003).
13. Jean-Jacques Simard, *La Réduction. L'Autochtone inventé et les Amérindiens d'aujourd'hui* (Québec: Éditions du Septentrion, 2003).
14. R. Cole Harris, "How did colonialism dispossess? Comments from an edge of empire," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (2004), 169.
15. Ibid., 169-174.
16. Ibid., 174. See also, Allaine Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation: Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2004).
17. Ibid., 179.
18. Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack, "Indigenous feminism: theorizing the issues" in Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault and Jean Barman, eds., *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 1.
19. Tsosie 2003: 34.
20. See Chapter 4, Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* (Toronto : Second Story Press, 2000): 57-78. See also Roland Viau, *Femmes de personne: sexes, genres et pouvoir en Iroquoisie ancienne* (Montreal: Boréal, 2000).
21. Gertie Beaucage, cited in Kim Anderson 2000: 57.
22. This is exemplified in Anderson's analysis through the words of a Cherokee Chief who, upon meeting with European officials to negotiate a treaty, asks the question: "Where are your women?" Exploring the meaning of that question, Anderson highlights the contrast between western and Indigenous political systems: "Native women were not traditionally excluded from decision making, as has been the case for women in western politics. Native women had political authority because our nations recognized the value of having input from all members of society." Ibid., 57 and 65.
23. Kathleen Jamieson, *Indian Women and the Law in Canada: Citizens Minus* (Ottawa : Canada Advisory Council on the Status of Women and Indian Rights for Indian Women, 1978) : 13. Cited in Lawrence 2004): 47.
24. Ibid., 45-63.
25. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).

26. The authority that oversees the register today is the AANDC (<http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca>).
27. Milloy 2008.
28. McClintock Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
29. See Karrmen Crey, *Enfranchisement*. Online : <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/enfranchisement.html> (last access January 29th 2016).
30. Lepage Pierre, *Mythes et réalités sur les peuples autochtones* (Québec: Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, 2009): 25.
31. Lawrence 2004: 55. Lawrence is citing Joan Holmes, *Bill C-31 – Equality or disparity? The Effects of the new Indian Act on Native women* (Ottawa: Canada Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1987).
32. *Ibid.*, 57. See also, D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Jeanette Corbiere, eds., *“Until our Hearts are on the Ground”: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006); Carole Lévesque et al., *Quebec Native Women: Recounting the Political, Legal and Struggle (Chronology 1968-2005)* (Montreal: Dialog Topics, 2005).
33. *Ibid.*, 3.
34. Bill c-31, *A Bill to Amend the Indian Act*, 1985. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/bill-c-31.html> (last accessed 6 November 2015). See also, Holmes 1987; Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, “Indian Act: Indian Women,” in *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 1, *Looking Forward Looking Back* (Ottawa: The Commission, 1996): 300-302.
35. Cheryl Suzack, “Emotions before the law” in Cheryl Suzack et al., eds. 2003: 127-128.
36. *Ibid.*, 128.
37. *Ibid.*, 128
38. *Ibid.*, 142.
39. Ioana Comat, *Se construire et s’affirmer par les lieux: un regard sur les présences autochtones à Montréal*. Doctoral thesis (Quebec: Université Laval and Pau: Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, 2014): 58. Also of note is the fact that, while involuntary enfranchisement came to an end for Aboriginal men in 1975, women continued to have their status revoked against their will until the late 1980s.
40. Suzack 2003, 129.
41. Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen, eds., *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Innovation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).
42. National Association of Friendship Centres, “Friendship Centres,” <http://nafc.ca/en/friendship-centres> (last access October 3rd 2016).
43. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, “Urban Aboriginal Strategy Pilot Project Evaluation” (2005) <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014373/1100100014378> (last access October 3rd 2016); National Association of Friendship Centres, “How We are Funded,” <http://nafc.ca/en/our-story/how-we-are-funded> (last access October 3rd 2016).
44. Louis Bordeleau and Pierre Mouterde, *Pashkabigoni: A History Full of Promise / Memoirs of the Native Friendship Centre Movement in Quebec (1969- 2008)* (Wendake: Regroupement des centres d’amitié autochtones du Québec, 2008): 21.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Newhouse, “Invisible infrastructure: urban Aboriginal institutions and organisations” in Newhouse and Peters, *Not Strangers in These Parts*.
48. Bordeleau et Mouterde 2008: 50.

49. Ibid., 51.
50. Health Council of Canada, *Empathy, Dignity, and Respect: Creating Cultural Safety for Aboriginal People in Urban Health Care* (Toronto : Health Council of Canada, 2012).
51. Regroupement des Centres d’Amitie Autochtones du Quebec, “The Native Friendship Centre Program,” <http://rcaaq.info/en/the-movement-and-the-native-friendship-centres-of-quebec/the-program-of-native-friendship-centres.html> (last accessed 4 June 2015).
52. *Kinawit ejinagosiek: Who we are*; CD produced by the VDNFC and Public Health Agency of Canada 2009.
53. Simard, *La Réduction* ; Mark Janet, “Services and programs for First Nations at UQAT” in Carole Lévesque and Marie-France Labrecque, eds., *Aboriginal women of Québec and Canada: path toward equality* (Montreal: Cahiers Dialog 4, 2007): 90.
54. Carole Lévesque, Philippe Apparicio and Édith Cloutier, “Favoriser la coconstruction des connaissances en contexte autochtone : enjeux et défis méthodologiques” in Carole Lévesque, Édith Cloutier and Daniel Salée, eds., *La coconstruction des connaissances en contexte autochtone: cinq études de cas* (Montreal: Cahiers Dialog 3, 2013): 47-52.
55. In 2015, the United Nations Human Rights Committee published a report on Canada where it raised its concern that “indigenous women and girls are disproportionately affected by life-threatening forms of violence, homicides and disappearances.” The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) has gathered information about 582 cases of missing and murdered women and girls, but more may have gone undocumented. See United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), *Sixth Periodic Report Submitted by Canada*, <http://ipolitics.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/UNHCR-Report-re-C51.pdf> (last accessed 1 December 2015); Native Women’s Association of Canada, “Fact Sheet: Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls,” [http://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Missing\\_and\\_Murdered\\_Aboriginal\\_Women\\_and\\_Girls.pdf](http://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Fact_Sheet_Missing_and_Murdered_Aboriginal_Women_and_Girls.pdf) (last accessed 1 December 2015).
56. Ibid.
57. See Amnesty International (Canada), “No More Stolen Sisters Campaign,” <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/campaigns/no-more-stolen-sisters> (last accessed 1 December 2015).
58. Radio-Canada, *Enquête*, “Abus de la SQ: les femmes brisent le silence”, online: <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/enquete/2015-2016/episodes/360817/femmes-autochtones-surete-du-quebec-sq?isAutoPlay=1> (last accessed 2 December 2015).
59. Commission de la santé et des services sociaux des Premières Nations du Québec et du Labrador, “Quand la police est une menace pour les femmes autochtones de Val-d’Or”, online : <http://www.cssspnql.com/nouvelles-media/unique/2015/10/22/quand-la-police-est-une-menace-pour-les-femmes-autochtones-de-val-d-or> (last accessed 2 December 2015).
60. See Government of Canada, “National inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls,” <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1448633299414/1448633350146> (last accessed 3 October 2016).
61. See Jane Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996); Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).