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“Our connection makes us stronger”: Inuit youth’s strategies to feel comfortable in Ottawa

« Notre connexion nous rend plus fort » : les stratégies de jeunes adultes Inuit pour être à l’aise à Ottawa

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Article abstract

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“Our connection makes us stronger”: Inuit youth’s strategies to feel comfortable in Ottawa

Stéphanie Vaudry*

RÉSUMÉ

«Notre connexion nous rend plus fort»: les stratégies de jeunes adultes Inuit pour être à l’aise à Ottawa

Cet article aborde les défis quotidiens auxquels de jeunes adultes Inuit sont confrontés à Ottawa et les stratégies mises de l’avant pour les dépasser. Être «connecté» au monde qui les entoure a des incidences importantes sur les façons dont les participants à cette recherche se sentent et s’orientent en ville. Cette idée de «connexion» se traduit, pour eux, par des relations de proximité significatives avec des gens, leurs ancêtres, les générations futures, les objets, les animaux et la nature, des éléments qui composent l’univers de sens inuit et, plus largement, autochtone. Leur aisance en ville tient au maintien de relations harmonieuses avec ces différents agents. Comme nous le verrons, les milieux urbains, comme Ottawa, appartiennent à un univers de sens duquel les jeunes Inuit ne sont pas toujours familiers. Par leur force de caractère, les participants à ma recherche élaborent des stratégies afin de nouer des relations au sein de la ville et de s’accoutumer au monde urbain et à ses citadins. Puisqu’Ottawa accueille une grande communauté inuit, les défis auxquels ces jeunes sont confrontés peuvent s’amenuiser compte tenu des possibilités de participer aux mondes inuit à même la ville.

ABSTRACT

“Our connection makes us stronger”: Inuit youth’s strategies to feel comfortable in Ottawa

This paper focuses on challenges young Inuit adults face in everyday life in the city and the coping strategies they have developed. For research participants, being “connected” with the world(s) surrounding them appears to be central to how they feel and orientate themselves in the city. Connectedness, for these young Inuit, translates into close and significant relationships with people, ancestors, future generations, objects, animals, and nature, which are elements of the Inuit universe of meanings and, more broadly, belong to Indigenous universes. Therefore, being comfortable is linked to the maintenance of harmonious relationships with these different agents. As we will see, urban milieus, like Ottawa, belong to a universe of meanings to which Inuit youth are not always accustomed. Nevertheless, through their agency, they develop strategies to

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establish relationships within the city, enabling themselves to become acquainted with the urban world and its inhabitants. As Ottawa hosts a large Inuit community, the urban challenges that they face can be mitigated as they participate in Inuit worlds.

Introduction

In 2006, more than 54% of Indigenous[1] and 20% of Inuit[2] people indicated that they live in a Canadian city (Statistics Canada 2009).[3] Historically, this reality has received scant attention in research about Indigenous peoples, and the few articles that focus on their urban experiences are often centred on the difficulties they encounter. Social scientists have frequently associated these experiences with "cultural and language loss," "cultural fragmentation," "dislocation," "disorganization," "dysfunction," or "assimilation" as Indigenous peoples establish themselves in urban milieus (e.g., Gerber 1984; Kishigami 1999a, 1999b; Norris and Jantsen 2003; Steigerwald 2004; Straus and Valentino 2002; Trovato et al. 1994). For almost 20 years, this trend has been in steady decline with the rise of new research exploring the diverse and complex realities of Indigenous peoples living in cities (e.g., Gagné 2009, 2013; Howard and Proulx 2011; Kermoal and Lévesque 2010; Newhouse and Peters 2000; Patrick 2008; Peters 2011; Peters and Andersen 2013; Tomiak and Patrick 2010). Nevertheless, Indigenous scholars (e.g., Battiste 2008; Deloria 1988; Simpson 2014) have criticized social scientists' tendency to make negative and generalized analyses about Indigenous peoples. Such criticisms led me, for my Master's research, to look into the varied experiences of Inuit youth with special focus on how they feel in and engage with the city, in particular Ottawa (Vaudry-Gauthier 2013).

The notion of relationality or relational ontology, posited among others by Wilson (2008) and Poirier (2008, 2009), has proven useful to analysis of Indigenous experiences. When I talked with Inuit youth during my research, they mostly spoke of their urban experiences in terms of "connection" with the surrounding worlds. Wilson (2008: 80) recognizes that "[r]ather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationship that we hold and are part of" (emphasis in original). In other words,

> The social environment should not be conceived of as an empty framework within which beings and things can be linked, or simply juxtaposed. It is

1. In Canada, "Indigenous" is associated with people who self-identify as First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit. It is also used as an adjective. The "I" is capitalized to underline the political dimension of this term.
2. In Canada, "Inuit" corresponds to people whose ancestral territory is situated in the Inuit Nunangat, which includes Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador coast), Nunavik (northern Quebec), Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit region (Northwest Territories) (Statistics Canada 2013).
3. The 2011 Census does not offer any compiled data on members of Indigenous peoples living in cities.

> inseparable from the things which people it. Together they constitute a field of gravitation in which the weights and distances form a co-ordinated whole, and in which a change in any element produces a change in the total equilibrium of the system (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 483).

In this sense, for McGrath (2011: 243-244), the central values guiding Inuit as they work to assure the survival of their community are responsibility, respect, sharing, mutual assistance, reciprocity, and "affection-proximity." According to McGrath, Inuit see themselves as "interconnected" with their family, ancestors, future generations, the animals, the land, and so forth. This relationality engages Inuit in their everyday lives in the form of "ceremonies to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between our cosmos and us" (ibid.: 137). Inuit agency could therefore be characterized as an interagency (see Poirier 2008, 2009). Following Ortner's (2006: 139) definition of agency as the pursuit of projects and/or the exercise of or against power, and despite the inequalities and power relations that Inuit youth are exposed to and resist, my research will demonstrate that their intentions and capacity to act on their surroundings are intertwined with the relationships in which they partake.

Although these authors can be criticized for generalizing about Indigeneity, their statements indeed echo what most Inuit youth have shared with me and what I have observed in Inuit urban spaces. For example, when I asked what being Inuit meant, Aisakie,[4] a young Inuk male journalist explained: "I think the biggest thing is to understand that I am only one part of a bigger world or bigger environment, that I am not above or below anything else, that we are all interconnected. I think it is the biggest thing for me. Whatever I do will affect another person or something else in one way or another, whether big or small." Nonetheless, Pita, a young Inuk father, was skeptical as to whether or not this is true for all Inuit because, according to him, some Inuit men are "abusive" and "not motivated to work or strive towards anything." Pita further identified such behaviour as negative traits common to many Inuit men in his neighbourhood whom he avoids for his family's well-being.

As I will further elaborate, participants' sense of comfort is mostly linked to this notion of relationality, which influences their agency within the city in various ways. Discomfort, as articulated by Rybczynski (1989), Radice (2000), and Gagné (2013), is linked to a variety of interconnected elements that influence one's feelings of (un)ease during interactions, in specific situations, or under particular conditions. It is connected to physical, emotional, and intellectual sensations, both conscious and unconscious, in relation to external (one's environment, history, and context) and internal factors (Rybczynski 1989: 231). Discomfort is also unstable and sensitive to the agent's ever-changing context and perspective, and thus written "(dis)comfort" by Gagné (2004, 2013). Her research has shown that

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4. Research participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

among Māori who live in Auckland, (dis)comfort is "[a] measure of support, assistance, consolation, [a] measure of satisfaction, tolerability, [an] emotional state, sense of security, feelings, [a] measure of cultural and social convergence/divergence" and related to natural, spiritual, and supernatural worlds (Gagné 2004: 265). (Dis)comfort can influence and motivate how one engages in interactions; the Māori "negotiate their (dis)comfort by creating or organizing comforting places or zones/spaces of comfort for themselves, by relating to each other in particular ways, and by dealing with (un)comfortable conditions, situations or interactions with others" (ibid.: 253). In this paper, I will explain how the Inuit youth that I interviewed in Ottawa expressed their search for "connections"—to experience and engage in meaningful relationships that unfold in multiple ways—in order to feel comfortable.

This article will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly review the literature on Indigenous youth living in cities. After laying out the methodology I employed, I will go over the history of the Inuit community in Ottawa and the resources available to youth. Next, I will describe the major aspects of discomfort that Inuit youth experience in the city and the different ways they manage to cope as they establish themselves.

Literature on Indigenous and Inuit youth in cities

Studies on Inuit experiences in big cities are fairly new. They describe interactions between Inuit in community centres, which are regarded as beneficial because of the resources they provide and the possibilities they offer to keep in touch with the Inuit world (Kishigami 2008; Patrick et al. 2011; Tomiak and Patrick 2010). Aodla (2015[1978]) and Grondin (1990) are the only authors who highlight the importance of being comfortable as Inuit arrive in the city. Few have explored this question since, especially regarding migration trajectories. We do not know how Inuit deal with the different worlds in their presence, nor do we know the impacts of these worlds on their urban experiences. Moreover, beyond Inuit organizations, few have explored the different spaces where Inuit interact with other Inuit and non-Inuit. We know about the literacy practices of those who participate in community programs (Patrick and Tomiak 2008; Patrick et al. 2011; Tomiak and Patrick 2010) and the trajectories of the homeless (Kishigami 2004, 2008). Yet other experiences, such as those of young adults, have not received any research attention.

While research is scanty on Indigenous youth experiences in cities, there are notable ethnographic studies that show Indigenous youth as agents in a variety of urban engagements. Briones (2007) underlined the complex identity construction of young *mapurbes* (urban-based Mapuches) through their different political orientations, the roles held within their families and community, and their participation in non-Mapuche worlds in Bariloche (Argentina). Gagné (2009, 2013) highlighted how Māori students in Auckland (New Zealand) participate in their university *marae* (ceremonial house), Māori dance groups, and their

families. Morgan (2013) looked at the different ways that young Indigenous men in Australia confront employment challenges in Redfern-Waterloo. In Canada, the few studies on this topic tend to focus on negative experiences, making little mention of youth agency or well-being. Some studies tackle the phenomena of juvenile delinquency (Brown et al. 2005), street gangs (Buddle 2011), and precarious living conditions (Côté 2005), yet they do not explore youth participation in urban life. There are notable exceptions, of course, such as Pitawanakwat's (2008) own urban experiences as an Ojibwe student, Alfred's (2009) exploration of Indigenous warrior societies in Vancouver, and Ignace's (2011) work on how Indigenous youth use Hip Hop to affirm their identities. Yet studies tackling the realities of Inuit youth remain scarce. More than a decade after Condon (1988), Hanson's (2003) study is an isolated case illustrating how Nunavut Sivuniksavut helped to strengthen Inuit students' sense of pride and belonging in Inuit social struggles.

Thus, although Indigenous and Inuit youth are a growing population in Canada, their urban experiences have remained mostly unexplored by scholars (Statistics Canada 2011). According to Statistics Canada (2013), the Inuit population increased by 18.1% between 2006 and 2011, in comparison to a 22.9% increase for First Nations and a 5.2% increase for non-Indigenous people. In the 2011 Census, more than half of all Inuit (54%) were under 24 years of age, while only one out of three non-Indigenous persons (29.5%) belonged to this age group (Statistics Canada 2011). The Inuit median age (23) is even lower than that of First Nations (26). These statistics reaffirm the importance of understanding Inuit youth experiences, not only in the North but also in southern cities, as they occupy increasingly important roles within their families and communities (see Gagné and Jérôme 2009).

This paper will try to fill the abovementioned gaps in the literature by describing the everyday experiences of young Inuit adults in Ottawa and highlighting unexplored trajectories, while at the same time describing their specific features. This paper will also explain how a relational ontology can significantly affect young Inuit adults' sense of (dis)comfort and engagement within urban spaces and interactions.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper stem from six months of ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out between 2012 and 2013 with members of the Inuit community in Ottawa. I worked with Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS), Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI), the Centre for Aboriginal Culture and Education (CACE) at Carleton University, and the Aboriginal Resource Centre (ARC) at the University of Ottawa. I also took Inuktitut classes at the Ontario Inuit Children's Centre (OICC) and at Carleton University, which greatly helped me understand the meanings of Inuit ways and participate with more ease in Inuit urban spaces. I participated in gatherings at people's homes and other cultural, social, and political events at

Indigenous centres and public spaces in Ottawa, which enabled me to contextualize and go beyond the data from the interviews.

Nineteen research participants were recruited from different urban spaces, as well as through a Facebook event that I created. Life-course interviews (Bertaux 2010) were carried out once participants and I had started to feel more comfortable with each other; we took the time to nurture a relationship based on trust, respect, and mutual support. Interviews lasted between an hour and a half and three hours. We reflected on their migration trajectory starting from when they lived up North and discussed their decision to move to Ottawa and how they viewed the process of arriving and getting settled. We discussed their everyday lives in the city, focusing on their interactions with people and places, how they felt in various circumstances, and their motivations for participating in specific interactions. To make sure my analyses were accurate, I reformulated their thoughts during interviews and, later, sent them a copy of both the transcription of the interview and the analysis I wrote based on our conversation, which we later discussed.

Of the 19 young Inuit adults I interviewed, six had been living in Ottawa for less than a year, six for less than five years, and seven for a longer period. They were all first-generation migrants in the city. They were between 18 and 35 years old, with an average age of 26. Indigenous organizations, like Tungasuvvingat Inuit and the National Aboriginal Health Organization, identify "youth" as individuals who fall within this age bracket, which corresponds to emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). Eleven of them were women and eight were men. Fourteen of them distanced (or aimed to distance) themselves, not without substantial efforts, from alcoholic milieus that are, according to them, common among Inuit. Seventeen defined themselves as role models for their families and their communities. Eleven of them were students and six had graduated from post-secondary programs, a level of education above the Inuit average.[5] Students had an average income of $15,000 and were enrolled in either social sciences or law. Professionals usually earned more than $30,000 a year and were all working for an Inuit or Indigenous organization.

The research methodology was qualitative and exploratory. Research participants were a small group of particularly resilient young Inuit adults who sustained urban-based Inuit organizations through their efforts. By focusing on this small group, I could thus understand exemplary, yet unexplored Indigenous urban trajectories that have the potential to highlight ways of coping with the "South." I also learned that there are a "wide variety of individual, community and cultural experiences that make up life in cities for many [Indigenous] peoples" (Howard and Proulx 2011: 2).

5. In the Inuit Nunangat in 2011, 12.4% of Inuit had a pre-university diploma and 1.9% had a university degree; outside this region, 22.4% had a pre-university diploma and 13% a university degree (Statistics Canada 2013).

The Inuit community in Ottawa

As the capital of Canada, Ottawa is a cosmopolitan city that hosts people from multicultural backgrounds and is a transit centre. Situated on unsurrendered Algonquin territory, the metropolitan area of Ottawa hosts an Indigenous population of around 92,630 individuals, approximately 7.6% of its 1,215,735 inhabitants (Statistics Canada 2013).[6] The area hosts one of the biggest Inuit communities outside the Inuit Nunangat, with approximately 2,310 Inuit inhabitants (ibid.).[7]

There is a lack of research on the history of Inuit individuals and families in Ottawa.[8] From 1976 to 1983, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) administered an Inuit House to help Inuit who were struggling with urban life (Webster 1993: 70-71). In 1985, Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS) was created by the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut "to train land-claim fieldworkers who could act as liaisons with the [Inuit] communities"; this was later turned into an Inuit studies post-secondary program designed to produce Inuit leaders (Hanson 2003: 74). In 1987, Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI) was established as a community centre thanks to the commitment of Inuit House staff and to new funding from DIAND (Webster 1993: 71-72). According to Kishigami (2004), the Inuit population of Ottawa only started to rise in the late 1990s, when, in 1998, the Baffin Regional Health and Social Services Board decided to send Inuit patients to Ottawa instead of Montreal. Meanwhile, flights departing from and leaving for Iqaluit changed their destinations from Montreal to Ottawa. This further coincided with the creation of the territory of Nunavut in 1999, which intensified the relations of this area with Ottawa. According to Inuit oral accounts I have gathered, Ottawa gradually attracted more Inuit looking for education, employment opportunities, and, in general, better living conditions. Other motivating factors included the desire or need to escape abuse and peer pressure, to follow one's family, to offer one's children better education, or simply the curiosity that comes with moving to the city.

As the Inuit population increased in Ottawa, several Inuit organizations gradually emerged.[9] It is important to note that such organizations have provided urban-based Inuit with a wide range of opportunities to study, to work, and to

6. This number includes people who self-identify as either "Indigenous" or of "Indigenous ancestry."

7. This number includes people who reported that they had a "single Inuit identity" or were of "Inuit ancestry." In 2005, Tungasuvvingat Inuit estimated the Inuit population in Ottawa at 5,000 (Patrick and Tomiak 2008: 57).

8. The only glimpse of that history is encountered in Aodla (2015[1978]).

9. Among these organizations are Inuit Art Foundation, Arctic Children and Youth Foundation, Inuit Non-Profit Housing Corporation, Inuit Student Association of Carleton University, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK; formerly Inuit Tapisarat of Canada, ITC), Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC), Pauktuutit (Inuit Women of Canada), and Tungasuvvingat Inuit, which sponsors the Inuit Family Resource Centre and Mamisarvik Healing Centre.

receive housing subsidies and culturally-sensitive healthcare, to send their children to Inuit daycare, to assert their rights, to learn their language, culture, and history, to play group sports, to exhibit and sell their art, and to gather with other Inuit or Indigenous people (see Patrick et al. 2011; Tomiak and Patrick 2010). Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC), an Inuit organization founded in 2005, along with eight other urban Indigenous organizations, like the Odawa Native Friendship Centre and the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, is involved with the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition (OAC), which lobbies the municipal, provincial, and federal governments to increase and stabilize funding for Indigenous and Inuit services (OAC 2011). Inuit also partake in municipal decision-making through the City of Ottawa Aboriginal Working Committee (Abele et al. 2011).

Inuit who reside in Ottawa generally seem to live near these organizations, which are usually located in the Vanier district (Figure 1)—commonly referred to as "The Res" among Indigenous people (Carpenter 1993: 64)—since they provide important resources that facilitate urban life.[10] Vanier hosts at least three generations of Inuit families. Centertown and Westboro—which host Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Tungasuvvingat Inuit's headquarters, and Larga Baffin (Nunavut's medical boarding home)—also seem to host significant Inuit populations. I will examine the roles of these different neighbourhoods further below.

FIGURE 1. Map of the city of Ottawa indicating neighbourhoods where Inuit mainly live. Source: City of Ottawa (2015).

10. An unknown number of Inuit also live in the suburbs.

Ottawa is consequently a stopover for Inuit coming from all over northern Canada. It offers opportunities to expand one's universe (see Vaudry 2015). Because it offers the possibility to navigate through and engage with the different worlds unfolding and coexisting in the city, Ottawa has proven to be an interesting place to explore how Inuit experience urban life.

A limited relationality in Ottawa

Upon their arrival in the city, participants remembered feeling very excited, as they were seeing things they had previously watched on television or had only imagined, like trees, skyscrapers, big shopping malls, and other sights (e.g., Simoneau 2011). Part of the excitement also resided in the sense of freedom they would experience, as some were on their own for the first time. Yet, whether or not they had previously travelled beyond northern Canada, Inuit youth also reported feeling overwhelmed shortly after arrival. According to Tomiak and Patrick (2010), Inuit experiences in Ottawa could be compared, in many ways, to the experiences of "transnational migrants," and thus to a diaspora, because they live far from their homeland, the Inuit Nunangat, which can be reached only by plane on a long and expensive flight.[11] Their analysis is confirmed by my data: research participants revealed that at the beginning of their journey everything seemed new and that they were experiencing foreign sensations and interactions, from the air they breathed to the people they met. Joanasie, a female college student, explained that:

> The people here, they don't smile at you. It was so hard. It's extremely overwhelming. There's so much people, so much noise, and it's sad to see so much construction, so much stuff done to the land, to the Earth. It's hard to see it, and to see all the polluting, to feel it down here. [...] Everything about the North and the South is completely different. It affects Inuit from small communities in so many ways possible, in every big and small detail.

Inuit youth spoke of the discomfort and unease they experienced while in the city, partly because they were unfamiliar with their new environment. This was reflected, for instance, in the insecurities or fears they felt upon interacting with non-Indigenous city dwellers as they integrated into a new group whose social norms were unfamiliar. They frequently felt the need to change or even

11. These youths' urban experiences highly resonate with how Kinslow (2013), a Choctaw-Cherokee-Maoli-African American scholar, explains the term "diaspora." She writes that it comes from "the etymology of the Greek word *diaspeirein* which means to disperse from *dia*: across, and *spora:* sowing, seed, and *speirein*: to sow" (Kinslow 2013: 88)—"seeds" refer to preciously nurtured, lived, and transmitted teachings (see Battiste 1998; Simpson 2011). Being part of a diaspora, then, means that one's heritage takes root wherever one goes.

hide who they were to avoid discrimination. Their apprehensions were reinforced by the level of crime and violence they encountered in neighbourhoods such as Vanier, as well as through various disturbing comments and looks received from non-Indigenous city dwellers.

Inuutiq, a female university student, shared with me a story that reveals the social pressures youth experience in Ottawa, and how they avoid them, for example, by making their Inuit origins invisible:

> Sometimes I use my white side. Some people are really racist, so you do not want them to know you are Inuk. I do not look completely Inuk, 'cause I am half, so some people mistake me for Asian [laughs]. Today, I was talking to this group of people at a booth. They asked me where I was from, and I said "Nunavut." They said "Oh! So you get everything for free." And I was like "no" and then I got into this conversation and then some people just get so [...]. Sometimes, I just do not want to be in a conversation like that. I am just sick of talking about it all the time.

Half of the youth reportedly experienced racism from non-Indigenous city dwellers, while most found it hard to interact with them. Other youth said they made sure they would "look good," "act properly," or keep specific information about their *Inuitness* (e.g., living with their parents, eating raw meat, etc.) to themselves when with non-Inuit, to avoid judgmental comments. These strategies are similar to those of other Indigenous youth in cities. Briones (2007: 113), for instance, highlighted that in their everyday interactions young Mapuches prefer to identify as "punks" or "heavies" rather than affirming their *Mapucheness*. Some Inuit youth reported they had directly confronted, deconstructed, or simply ignored judgmental comments. However, most also affirmed their *Inuitness* in the city, for example, by displaying symbols like inuksuit tattoos, Nunavut flag bumper stickers, or sealskin clothing, or by throat singing at a café. Nonetheless, engaging in daily activities, such as taking the bus, walking around the neighbourhood alone, shopping or going to the gym, could be stressful in the aforementioned situations.

More than half mentioned another source of discomfort: feeling disconnected from or having trouble relating to the natural environment. Many criticized how nature is controlled, transformed, and covered in urban architecture, including the different "natural" paths along the Ottawa and Rideau rivers. Most reported sensory overload in the city and found it difficult to breathe or express their emotions because of the surrounding crowd and because of buildings and trees blocking their view. The urban environment was in stark contrast with the openness of their native land and its associated values. These conditions made Inuutiq—who had been living for more than 10 years in Ottawa—"feel unsettled inside to know that there are people that live in the city all their lives who aren't exposed to the things that were naturally there," making her think that she was

"going crazy" as a result of staying in the city too long. All the same, this feeling was not widespread. Flora, another university student—who had also lived in Ottawa since her early childhood—said she got "bored" when staying up North too long or in the country because she missed the "busyness" and the technologies she could access in the city. Nevertheless, these different circumstances may result in limiting Inuit youth's audacity when exploring the city because they have to leave their habitual "comfort zone"—that is, interactions, situations, and places that resonate with them in affective and meaningful terms (Gagné 2013: 85 Radice 2000: 79).

The Inuit are adaptable, and this adaptability is a recurrent theme in the literature on Inuit contemporaneities (see Poirier 2009) and is described as a part of Inuit languages and ways of being (Kishigami 2008; Berkes and Armitage 2010; McGrath 2011). Indeed, during my interviews, two participants saw this adaptability as a strength they could mobilize to overcome their different challenges. Mearns (2014), however, has criticized this positive understanding of Inuit adaptability, as it reduces opportunities to critically engage with and reject the changes to which Inuit were and are forced to adapt because of colonization. I discussed this idea with an Inuk male college student during previous research in 2007 in Ottawa, and he was skeptical of the need for Inuit to integrate into urban life. He wondered, "How far do you have to adapt to a dominant society, until you realize that you've lost your culture?" As Aodla (2015[1978]) reveals in her autoethnography about her stay in Ottawa in the 1950s, it was as important for Inuit to have the courage to leave their habitual comfort zone as it was for them to participate in Inuit interactions and spaces in order to be comfortable during their time in the city. In this sense, Inuutiq reported, "I feel I am almost like a warrior down here, fighting for our culture," but "I feel content because [Ottawa] is one of the cities outside of Nunavut with the highest number of Inuit."

Connected in Ottawa

One of the first things the research participants reported having done in Ottawa was to get to know their neighbourhood and the places around their school or work. They did so by walking around with a friend, creating routine paths, and/or exploring specific places. As Grondin (1990) realized while working with Inuit patients in Montreal, these small strategies enable youth to get acquainted with parts of the city and build a sense of mastery of their milieu.

Since recurrent loneliness can become a strong source of discomfort, making friends with other Inuit, and sometimes with other Indigenous people and/or non-Indigenous city dwellers, is undoubtedly a major step towards greater comfort in the city. Many said they deeply missed their families. This was not true for all participants, as some avoided part of their Inuit family or community due to past exposure to violence or alcohol abuse. Nonetheless, most of them

coalesced mainly around places where they could avoid being alone, such as their Indigenous student lounge, their workplace, and homes of friends or extended family, or, if they did not yet have their own social networks in the city, Inuit community centres and bars. Some of them preferred to stay or sleep at a friend's apartment when their own apartment was empty of people.

Friendships were an important dimension of Inuit youths' sense of comfort in the city. Gathering with other Inuit, with whom they shared experiences and life choices, increased their comfort as they felt they could be themselves and more easily communicate and share similar values, as previously highlighted in reference to McGrath (2011). For these reasons, Inuutiq said "I don't have to put on a façade," and Mailani, a hair stylist, voiced her feeling that "our connection makes us stronger," and this encouraged her to interact mostly with other Inuit. It is important to specify that being among Inuit was not sufficient: they all stressed that they needed to be with like-minded Inuit. For instance, a group of young Inuit leaders I met shared a lifestyle of not consuming drugs or alcohol. Inuutiq expressed being "a little bit disconnected in that way, 'cause I want to socialize with them (other Inuit youth), but I do not want to drink too. […] I feel a little left out. [I met at the university] other Inuit leaders and youth who are trying to change stuff. That is really good and there are many Inuit like that in Ottawa. It is just hard to find and to get in there." As previously mentioned, significant friendships were not limited to Inuit people; they included Indigenous youth and sometimes non-indigenous city dwellers with whom they had something in common. Aisakie gathered with members of the gay community and with people "from all walks of life" and from different ethnic groups and sexual orientations. Inuutiq also enjoyed spending time with students (Indigenous or not) from her Indigenous studies program and with other artists.

These friendships were central as they provided a kind of "symbolic family" to which Inuit youth belonged and were indebted, similar to what Gagné (2009: 110) observed among Māori students in Auckland. This situation helped to mitigate their homesickness, since most were far from their home community and family. Having Inuit friends also provided them with a greater sense of security, as the bond between them led to trust, reciprocity, and mutual assistance. Inuutiq explained "it's comforting to know that there's people in the town that actually have a connection to you and are sympathetic to you. Anything that happens, say if I'm locked out of my house or something for the night, I know there's some people that can help me." Different Inuit or Indigenous spaces in the city, like the Indigenous subsidized apartments in the Vanier neighbourhood, allow this dynamic of mutual assistance to unfold and provide a safety net. The same is true in Inuit workplaces and community centres where Inuit youth can exchange goods, services, and meals and benefit from mutual support. Yet, according to some youth I interviewed, living in a Southern community was not always ideal, as some people would take advantage of their generosity, thus preventing truly reciprocal sharing. Some, like Harry, were more

selective in terms of what they shared and with whom, and most interviewees were apprehensive about disclosing their home address to other Inuit.

These friends, and sometimes family members, enabled Inuit youth to create what I call "mobile comfort zones," defined as groups of people with whom they felt comfortable, while discovering different urban sites and engaging in different urban activities, because these groups offered them a frame of familiarity as they interacted in new environments. This explains why Bahia, a mother and a university student, said that, "as long as I'm with my friends, it's fine, I like going out." Mobile comfort zones were created in Ottawa not only for "typical" non-Indigenous occasions (like attending yoga classes, joining jogging groups, or going out to eat), but also for new Inuit and Indigenous encounters at homes, workplaces, community activities, electric pow wows, Indigenous student lounges, and other cultural, political, and social activities bringing together Indigenous peoples.

The aforementioned spaces of Indigenous or Inuit convergence were important sites for sociability that increased the Inuit youths' chances of feeling at ease, thus making the city more liveable for them. In these places, Inuit youth are plunged into an Inuit or Indigenous universe of meanings— which led Oleena, an intern at a law firm, to call them "mini Inuit universes." It allowed the Inuit I interviewed to experience a sensation of "being at home," as they felt connections similar to those in the Inuit Nunangat. Flora explained, "I feel connected, because we have the same culture and I know many people at TI or even OICC. When I went there I felt like I was at home. I cannot explain it, but whenever I am up North, whenever I go to community events, like if it is Nunavut Day or something, I feel connected again." This contrasts with the youths' descriptions of other urban spaces as "cold," "individualized," and "money-minded." They explained that relationships are affectively intense in Inuit spaces and hierarchies blurred. Of course this is not always the case, as some people recounted that they avoided one particular community centre because its staff and activities were becoming too formal. Yet, as Bahia stated, being in such places "reminds me of who I am whenever I go, because without that I wouldn't really have much to remind me." Despite the aforementioned exception, these different spaces of Inuit convergence tend to offer youth a possibility to validate their identity and revive their sense of belonging—an outcome also observed by Tomiak and Patrick (2010: 136) and by Briones (2007: 113) among young *mapurbes* who saw their "identity, that was punk, enlarge quite a bit."

As in other Indigenous spaces and encounters, kinship links, whether real or fictitious, often characterize social relationships within Indigenous worlds and enable people to determine the nature of relationships with newcomers (Wilson 2008: 84). Such dynamics take place in Ottawa. In Indigenous and Inuit spaces I visited, people would relate to each other by asking, "Where are you from?" in order to make relational connections. Kianu, a community organizer, reported, for example, that "a lot of Inuit will treat me better when they know who my

mom is, also when they find out where I am from." On the contrary, Mailani highlighted that "sometimes it takes a while for some people to warm up to me, because I'm not from Baffin Island." Still, there are many opportunities for Inuit to get together all in one space. Through "relational tools" (e.g., playing Inuit games, sharing country food, or assisting each other in workshops) people were also able to create a "shared story" and, as Patrick (2008: 102) suggests, reterritorialize their links to Inuit worlds within Ottawa.

Youth were not only able to connect directly with Inuit worlds, but also indirectly through places, ideas, things, and sensations linked to their experiences with their ancestral land and families. Kinslow (2013: 87) draws parallels between such "diasporic" experiences and nomadic (epiphytic) plants. "Like Tillandsias that nourish themselves directly from the sun, so can we think of our relationship with our ancestors, our communities and our land as having not only a physical connection but also a spiritual one, symbolized by the invisible and almost ethereal relationship the Tillandsia has with the sun and the world around it" (ibid.: 88). In this vein, half of the participants described feeling as if they were transported back up North when sharing and eating country food with friends and family members in Ottawa. Inuutiq reported, "Eating country food brings me back up North. It is unexpected. You think you are just going to eat it, but when you start to eat it and smell it, it reminds you of when you first had it or when you would use to eat it a lot. You get a bit homesick but it is comforting because it is physically a piece of home." Similarly, Joanasie said that she feels as though she were transported alongside the lake where she used to swim whenever she walks near the Rideau River. She also stated, "When I am in certain subjects like history or something that is very touchy and really close to how it affected my family, I kind of feel that hole and that longing. Maybe that is what my namesake went through […] I don't know but there is that pull towards it and it hits hard." Through special occasions, these youth's sense of connectivity, mostly anchored in the North, just as Patrick and Tomiak (2008: 101) argue, can thus be spiritually re-activated. During a concert at the Canadian Museum of Civilizations in 2012, Elisapie Isaac, an Inuk singer, stressed the need for this feeling: "Even if I'm not up North, sometimes I close my eyes and imagine I'm back. This way I'm able to get back my sense of balance that we don't have here in the city" (my translation).

Conclusion

This paper explores how 19 young Inuit adults experienced urban life. The focus is principally on the challenges they faced in trying to feel comfortable in Ottawa, and on the strategies they developed to meet them. Their sense of "connectedness"— experiencing close and significant relationships—appeared as an indicator of their (dis)comfort in the city. With this in mind, I show that upon arrival their challenges consisted mainly of trouble relating to their new

surroundings because they were, much like other transnational migrants, unfamiliar with their new urban geographic markers and codes of interaction; they felt alone and, most of the time, shied away from new interactions and places. Furthermore, half of the youth had experienced racism from non-Indigenous city dwellers, while most found it hard to interact with them. Daring to familiarize themselves with their new milieu gave youth more courage to overcome some of their fears, to explore parts of the city with greater ease, and to find places and people they liked to be with. Building friendships with other Inuit and Indigenous youth provided them with a "symbolic family" to cope with feelings of loneliness and allowed them to explore their surroundings while remaining in their "mobile comfort zones," where they felt a deeper sense of belonging, rootedness, and mutual trust. Inuit and Indigenous urban spaces were important resources in this endeavour, as they offered opportunities to relate to other Inuit and Indigenous persons, enabling them to build their networks, as well as validate and assume their identities.

My research thus helps to explain how, in order to feel comfortable, as well as to resist assimilation and survive as Inuit in the city, a group of young Inuit adults engaged in their community were driven to find, create, and participate interactively with situations and spaces that corresponded to and respected their relational sense of being in the world. This paper therefore shows that it is possible to be Inuit in the city. My research demonstrates that Indigeneity and big cities are not necessarily antitheses because their mingling has history (Kermoal and Lévesque 2010) and offers a path towards decolonization. Further research should investigate such possibilities for Inuit and Indigenous youth to find innovative and creative ways to make cities more liveable in order to affirm their identities.

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