

**Making Home And Making Welcome: An Oral History Of The New  
Canadians Centre And Immigration To Peterborough, Ontario  
from 1979 to 1997**

Community Report  
by  
**Maddy Macnab**

Host Organization: New Canadians Centre

Faculty Supervisor: May Chazan and Joan Sangster, Trent University

Trent Community Research Centre Project Coordinator: John Marris

Department: Canadian Studies Master's Program, Trent University

Date of Submission: April 2018

Project ID: 4567

**Trent Community Research Centre**

[www.trentcentre.ca](http://www.trentcentre.ca)

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### *Making home and making welcome: An oral history of the New Canadians Centre and immigration to Peterborough, Ontario from 1979 to 1997*

Prepared by Maddy Macnab, MA Student, Trent University. For research participants. November 2017.

*This short document offers key findings and conclusions from research I carried out from 2015 to 2017 as part of my Master’s degree at Trent University in Canadian and Indigenous Studies. The purpose of the research was to document an oral history of the New Canadians Centre and immigration to Peterborough, focusing on the period from 1979 to 1997. I have prepared this document as a summary of the full Master’s thesis for research participants. In sharing this document, I invite participants to share their feedback on the research. I will incorporate participants’ feedback as I prepare the final version of the thesis, to be submitted to Trent University in January 2018. For more information or to share your feedback, you can reach me at: [madelinemacnab@trentu.ca](mailto:madelinemacnab@trentu.ca).*

#### In this document:

Introduction.....	1
Historical Background: What’s the story? .....	2
Purpose: Why do this research? .....	2
Methods .....	3
Introducing research participants.....	3
Key Findings.....	4
Conclusions: So what? .....	6
Next steps.....	7
Acknowledgements.....	8

#### Introduction

The cover of a recent brochure for the New Canadians Centre (NCC), the first and only immigrant-serving organization in Peterborough, Ontario, reads: “Everyone welcome. Est. 1979.” The year 1979 refers to the moment that the NCC has assigned as their origin: the year that local residents mobilized to support Indochinese refugees. This community effort led to the formalization of immigrant settlement services locally. My research project investigates the more complicated story behind this slogan, documenting an oral history of the New Canadians Centre and immigration to Peterborough between 1979 and 1997. The story of the NCC and the development of settlement services in Peterborough is an important part of the story of immigrant home-making and migrant solidarity in Peterborough since the 1970s. Through conversations with participants in this research project, I have learned that in the New Canadians Centre’s work, “everyone welcome” has served as an important declaration and a genuine intention, in 1979 and still today. I have also learned, however, as immigrant and racialized communities in Peterborough and their allies have been well aware, that making “everyone” feel welcome locally has been more complicated than making declarations or intentions. Indeed, my findings demonstrate that feeling at home and fostering welcome has been ongoing, imperfect, passionate, and contradictory work for new immigrants in Peterborough and those organizing to support them. While this research project started as a collaboration with the NCC, I have also come to rely on other key collaborators: 17 women and men who lived this history, and who generously agreed to be interviewed. Their recollections and insights are central to this study. This document summarizes my research findings and invites their feedback.

## Historical Background: What's the story?

Since the 1970s, Peterborough has become home to an increasingly multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multicultural community (though the city has a large white, Anglo-Saxon, and Canadian-born population compared to major urban centres like Toronto). Shaped by changing immigration policies as well as the emergence of Trent University and Fleming College, more new immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean, as well as from Eastern and Southern Europe have arrived in Peterborough since this time. They have built full lives here, and contributed to city life in diverse ways. Also since the 1970s, established local residents have mobilized in different ways to welcome new immigrants to Peterborough. The development of the New Canadians Centre has been part of this: in 1979, residents who were sponsoring or otherwise supporting refugees arriving from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos began organizing to secure funding for immigrant settlement services in Peterborough. By 1986, these organizers had opened the downtown office New Canadians Centre. The NCC evolved through the 1980s and 1990s, and after a brief closure in 1997, their work continues to this day. My research considers the NCC's development from 1979 until their closure and restructuring in 1997.

In researching immigration and welcome in Peterborough, I have also tried to consider what it means to immigrate and to welcome on the traditional and living territory of the First Peoples of this territory, the Michi Saagig Anishinaabeg (Mississauga Anishinaabe people). At the same time as some have been working to welcome immigrants to this community, for example, the Michi Saagig Anishinaabeg continue to have their own sense of welcome compromised as treaties are violently disrespected and land continues to be forcefully occupied. Colonialism is an ongoing and unequal power structure in Peterborough and Canada, privileging non-Indigenous people (settlers) and marginalizing and erasing Indigenous peoples. Imposed European systems of power have also created racial hierarchies that privilege white European settlers, and disadvantage differently-racialized settlers. To account for this history and ongoing power structure in my thesis, I refer to white, Canadian-born people (including myself) as white settlers. I describe Canada as a white settler society. I also sometimes refer to non-Indigenous people in general as settlers.

## Purpose: Why do this research?

The history of new immigrants' everyday lives and the history of local efforts to welcome them to Peterborough are important and under-researched aspects of local history. The stories of new immigrants and the people who helped them make home in this community offer invaluable insights about survival, about building community, about challenging racism, colonialism, and xenophobia, and about the work of welcome in Peterborough. Through this research, I aim to lift up some of these important local stories, to bring them into dialogue with each other and share them with a wider audience. I also hope this history can inform ongoing efforts to make Peterborough a more welcoming community, not only for new immigrants but also for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities. My thesis also contributes to scholarly literature on immigrant settlement work in Canada by providing a unique case study that looks at local, lived experiences rather than wider structural factors. My focus on a small city will also be a valuable contribution, as existing literature tends to focus on major urban centres.

Through this research, I set out to answer the following questions:

- What were the social, political, and economic circumstances under which the New Canadians Centre emerged and evolved?
- How did different local residents work to make Peterborough a more welcoming place for new immigrants, and to what effect?
- How did new immigrants build lives and work to feel at home in Peterborough, and to what effect?
  - Related to this question, in their recollections of getting settled in Peterborough, did immigrant participants encounter the work of the New Canadians Centre and other local efforts to welcome new immigrants? If so, what were their impressions? If not, why not?

## Methods

I carried out this research primarily as an oral history: I focused on people's lived experiences of this history, conducting and recording in-depth interviews (one to two hours long) with 17 people. I asked a series of open-ended questions to guide our conversations, but tried to take participants' leads on topics of discussion. In addition to interviews, I reviewed existing literature on the topic of immigration and settlement work, conducted local archival research, and reviewed relevant internal NCC records.

## Introducing research participants

My thesis centres on in-depth interviews with 17 people (14 women and three men). Ten participants (eight women and two men) immigrated to Peterborough themselves between 1979 and 1997 from Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, El Salvador, Kosovo, Greece, and Poland respectively. Some of these participants have also been involved in the work of the New Canadians Centre or related work since then, professionally or on a volunteer basis. Seven participants (six women and one man) were already established local residents when they got involved with the work of the New Canadians Centre or related work.

In order to keep my analysis clear, in the thesis I analyze and present these interviews according to categories of "immigrant" and "host," while recognizing that these categories are simplistic and can be problematic. I refer to "immigrant" participants as those who, because they immigrated to Peterborough mostly from the Global South, have often been represented in mainstream culture as "immigrant," and/or who identify as "immigrant." I refer to "host" participants as those who, as white, as Anglophone, and as Canadian-born (or as some combination of these characteristics), have often been represented in mainstream culture as the assumed "hosts" for newcomers to Canada and Peterborough. Because the unique and complex perspective of each participant cannot be contained by these labels, I challenge these labels throughout by showing how the categories overlap, and how participants themselves raised questions about these categories (e.g. pointing out that Indigenous nations are the true "hosts" to settlers on this land).

## Key Findings

Here, I present a list of the key findings of my research, organized according to my research questions:

### 1. What were the social, political, and economic circumstances under which the New Canadians Centre emerged and evolved?

- **Changes in migration policy and patterns:** From the 1970s to the 1990s, Peterborough's small new immigrant communities shifted and grew, with more people migrating from the Global South and living, working, studying, and organizing in Peterborough.
- **Effects of policy in everyday life:** Though immigration policy shifts opened doors for many, racism and sexism in policy and everyday life meant that many new immigrants faced barriers to full participation in local life. They negotiated and challenged in these barriers in diverse and creative ways.
- **Responding to a need for services:** The New Canadians Centre's work came out of an intention to make Peterborough feel more like home for new immigrants. At first, established local residents led the organization (mostly white settlers). Through their organizing, services became available that were not available before. Resources for language learning, training, advocacy, and social orientation were useful to many new immigrants over the years, particularly to refugees and to some immigrant women.
- **Using privilege to amplify new immigrant needs:** NCC organizers used their local influence (as Anglophone, as settlers, as white, and as established residents) to amplify new immigrants' needs, to challenge barriers they were facing, and to champion new immigrants' contributions to the community.
- **Transferring power to new immigrants?** At first, the organization's distribution of power favoured the influence and expertise of established residents (mostly white and Canadian-born) over the expertise of racialized new immigrants themselves. This sometimes reinforced a hierarchy of power between "hosts" and "immigrants" in their work. Through the 1990s, the NCC made some efforts to change this distribution of power. By 1997 when the NCC briefly closed, however, the organization had not yet significantly transformed their leadership to centre the perspectives of new immigrants.
- **Sector-wide funding crisis:** In the mid-1990s, funding and political buy-in for the settlement sector across Ontario and Canada declined drastically. This led to a funding crisis for the NCC and many other immigrant-serving organizations. This was a major reason why the NCC shut down briefly in 1997 and restructured, letting go four staff members, and replacing them with, at first, only one staff member.

### 2. How did different local residents work to make Peterborough a more welcoming place for new immigrants, and to what effect?

- **Everyone "makes home" (not just new immigrants):** For host participants, thinking about how to welcome new immigrants encouraged them to reflect on their *own* understandings of Peterborough as home and their own local home-making practices.

- **Strategies for challenging a racist local culture:** Host participants characterized Peterborough as a local home with a racist culture that needed to be challenged. They sometimes placed themselves and/or the NCC outside of that racist culture. Other times, they accounted for the influence of structural racism in their work and their relationships, and in the work of the NCC, even as they worked to fight racism.
- **Providing support, affirmation, and advocacy:** Host participants described their role as providers of support, affirmation, and advocacy for new immigrants as they navigated an intolerant, white Anglo-Saxon dominant local culture, and also navigated other structural barriers.
- **Grappling with assumptions and uneven power dynamics:** Though they understood their new immigrant friends and clients to be resilient and capable people, host participants sometimes described immigrants in ways that portrayed them as helpless, as victims, or as culturally inferior. Participants did not do this intentionally: rather, it demonstrates the power of generalizations and assumptions about “immigrants” that circulate in mainstream Canadian society, and their harmful effect on immigrant lives.
- **Challenging the hierarchy between “immigrant” and “host”:** Participants also reflected critically on such generalizations and stereotypes about immigrants. They reflected critically on moments when they observed uneven power dynamics between them as “hosts” and the new immigrants they sought to support (i.e. How can I share some of my cultural norms without implying that they are superior? How can I lessen the pressure this person feels to be “grateful” to me?). They described how they tried to practice welcome in a way that challenged power hierarchies between them (local residents in positions of relative privilege) and new immigrants (local residents often with less access to power and privilege). Some also raised questions about the validity of their position as hosts in the context of colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty in ways that challenged the hierarchy of power between immigrant and host.

### 3. How did new immigrants build lives and work to feel at home in Peterborough, and to what effect?

- **Emphasizing resilience and success:** Reflecting on twenty or more years of building lives in Peterborough, immigrant participants generally emphasized the ways in which they *did* find welcoming people, places and relationships, and the ways in which they have since built a sense of home locally.
- **Acknowledging barriers, acknowledging racism:** Most also reflected on barriers they had encountered to feeling welcome in Peterborough. Participants described barriers to their well-being and community participation related to immigration status, education and English language ability, gender, race, and work opportunities in a faltering local economy. Most also accounted for racism and xenophobia in their experiences. Some described their strategies for negotiating or challenging the status quo in Peterborough, explaining how the status quo favoured the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon culture.
- **The importance of paid work:** Immigrant participants emphasized the central importance of paid work in their experiences of life in Peterborough to a degree that most host participants did not.
- **Building community:** It was important to participants to build supportive and diverse social networks. Some described complex power dynamics within small local immigrant or ethnic communities.

- **Supports beyond the New Canadians Centre:** Most people’s stories of settling in did not overlap much with the work of the NCC. Participants were more likely to focus on the many informal supports from friends, family, neighbours, employers, and other diverse local allies that helped them feel welcome locally, not to mention their own informal efforts to make Peterborough feel like home.
- **Support (or lack thereof) at the New Canadians Centre:** For those who did make use of the NCC’s language training or settlement services, some described these services as useful, and even as crucial to their initial processes of settling in. Others were either neutral, unsure, or explicitly disappointed with the gap between their particular needs, desires, and aspirations in Peterborough, and the support the NCC was able to provide. Support around employment was a key factor in whether or not participants found settlement services helpful.
- **Involvement in immigrant settlement work (“immigrant” becomes “host”):** A significant number of immigrant narrators (all women) became involved in work welcoming new immigrants to Peterborough (formally and informally). Two in particular have built careers in immigrant settlement work. This is consistent with activist scholarship that argues that immigrant settlement work has come to serve as an important social and political platform for immigrant women.
- **A vision of welcome that challenges the status quo:** More than host participants, immigrant participants involved in immigrant settlement work readily identified the harmful effects of generalizations and stereotypes about immigrants, or representations of immigrants as helpless, within immigrant settlement work. Like many host participants, they envisioned a welcome that would challenge harmful mainstream representations of immigrants, and challenge local power structures that favoured the dominant, white Anglo-Saxon culture. One participant in particular also emphasized the importance of challenging colonialism, and connecting new immigrants with Indigenous peoples.

### Conclusions: So what?

- **New immigrants have worked hard to feel at home in Peterborough:** The majority of participants who immigrated to Peterborough since the 1970s have found ways to feel at home and feel welcomed in Peterborough. However, this has not necessarily been easy. It has been work. People have experienced exclusion as well as inclusion, and had to negotiate barriers related to immigration status, education and English language ability, gender, race, and more.
- **The New Canadians Centre made important contributions to community life between 1979 and 1997:** Organizers with the NCC have worked to make services and other resources available for new immigrants in the community that were not available before. The existence of language training, social orientation, employment support, and other services made concrete, positive differences in the lives of many newcomers to Peterborough between 1979 and 1997, particularly refugees and immigrant women.
- **Fostering welcome in Peterborough goes beyond the walls of the New Canadians Centre:** The existence of an organization like the New Canadians Centre represents a good and important intention to welcome immigrants to Peterborough. As all participants were well aware, however, the simple existence of such an organization after 1979 did not guarantee welcome for all in Peterborough. Rather,

it has been through ongoing and specific practices of welcome in the context of immigrant-serving organizations, intimate social relationships, neighbourhoods, communities, and city institutions that the messy work is done to support diverse individuals' full and equal participation in life in Peterborough.

- **Critical reflection on power in immigrant settlement work is important:** As those involved in immigrant settlement work and other related work know well, it is important to look critically at the categories of “immigrant” and “host.” The category of “immigrant” is sometimes accompanied by harmful stereotypes and assumptions. Being categorized as “immigrant,” both in policy and in daily life, can sometimes limit a person’s access to opportunity in Peterborough because of structural forces like racism, sexism, and xenophobia. The category of “host” sometimes reinforces the harmful idea that dominant, Anglo-Saxon “Canadian” culture is superior to other cultures, as well as the disempowering assumption that immigrants are helpless without the help of the dominant host. Recognizing the harm and limitations of these categories allows new immigrants and their allies to challenge them, and to envision a welcome that goes beyond the categories of immigrant and host. Recognizing the importance of challenging colonialism, and making connections between new immigrants and Indigenous peoples (the true “hosts” to settlers as uninvited guests on this territory) is one potentially fruitful way to do this.
- **Participants’ unique stories offer just a glimpse of the diversity of life in Peterborough:** All participants in this study have led full and complex lives. They have contributed to community life in Peterborough in diverse and important ways. The richness of their lives and their stories cannot be contained in this study, nor can they contained in the categories of “immigrant” or “host.”
- **Connecting this local story to the bigger picture:** Despite what popular narratives might imply, it is not only major urban centres in Canada that have been shaped and transformed by immigration since the 1960s. New immigrants are also arriving, building lives, and creating change in small and mid-sized cities like Peterborough across the country, and have been for many years. These smaller communities are also seeking ways to support new immigrants, to fight racism, and to foster welcome, and have been for many years. Indeed, the recent, significant community mobilization around the Syrian refugee crisis in Peterborough and other small cities indicates this. The findings that emerged from my conversations with research participants can contribute to ongoing discussions in small and mid-sized communities across Canada about how to make these places fairer and more welcoming, while attending to the unique possibilities and challenges that smaller cities offer for new immigrants and others. These findings offer insights into how we might more fully honour the diversity of the people who seek to call Peterborough and other smaller communities home, starting with First Peoples on whose territories these cities have been built, and on whose territories this work for change is being envisioned.

## Next steps

- I invite participants’ feedback on this report: comments, questions, suggestions and critiques of all kinds are welcome! I will incorporate participants’ feedback into the final version of the thesis, to be submitted to Trent University by mid-January 2018. ***If possible, please aim to provide your feedback by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017 if not sooner, so that I have time to discuss it with you and make changes to the thesis.***



- In January 2018, I will submit my research to Trent University as my Master's thesis. Soon afterward, the final thesis will be available on the Trent University Library's digital platform (<http://digitalcollections.trentu.ca/>). I will also provide a physical copy to the New Canadians Centre, and a digital copy to participants.
- After the thesis is complete, I hope to pursue other, more accessible ways of sharing parts of the research findings: for example, a local newspaper or magazine article, a local radio program, a report and/or presentation for the New Canadians Centre, and/or an academic journal article or conference presentation. *If you have ideas about how this research could be shared with the community in a different, more accessible form, I welcome your suggestions, and I am happy to collaborate with you!*

## Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to each person who participated in this research project. Thank you for taking the time to share some of your experiences and perspectives with me. I could not have done this project without you. I also thank Yvonne Lai at the New Canadians Centre for her ongoing support and kindness, as well as her help as an interpreter. Thank you also to Reem Ali, Safo Musta, Jason Stabler, and Champagne Thomson who at different points helped this project along in their capacity as NCC staff. Thank you to John Marris and the staff at the Trent Community Research Centre for facilitating my collaboration with the NCC, and providing support and guidance. Thank you to my academic supervisors May Chazan and Joan Sangster, who have also supported this research every step of the way. I thank Trent University and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program for financially supporting this research. Lastly, I am grateful to have lived, studied and carried out this research in the traditional territory of the Michi Saagig Anishinaabeg, in the area covered by the Williams Treaties.