



## **Organizing Against *Projet Gentrification*: Housing activism in a white supremacist landscape in Montreal**

Pierce Nettling

### **Series: Progressive Mayors and Urban Social Movements**

*Housing activists in Montreal and Quebec have successfully sought to secure tenant rights and social housing for over 50 years at neighborhood, city and provincial level. Here, Pierce Nettling discusses how the continued reliance of left-wing parties on a white francophone political base mirrors the long-standing and systemic problems of racism in the province.*

Montreal's left-based housing movements are rather unique in North America. While the rest of the continent seems still to be in an embryonic situation in forming city, state, and even national tenant movements to confront landlords, fight for rent control, and demand social housing, housing activism in Montreal and Quebec more generally has had a real impact on housing conditions within the [\[city and province->https://rclalq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/RCLALQ-40ans\\_Web.pdf\]](https://rclalq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/RCLALQ-40ans_Web.pdf). Organized through neighborhood, city, and provincial housing committees growing out of organized labor-backed citizens' and tenants' associations dating to the late 1960s and 1970s, these groups have successfully organized renters, defended tenant rights, and secured social housing.

As in other places, however, their ability to successfully demand more social housing has steadily decreased over the past 20 years. Confronted with decades of slow-drip cuts to social housing and diminishing quotas for the construction of units, local and provincial housing activists in Quebec have largely relied on a united-front political strategy to confront the housing crisis. Shut out from negotiating with power at the municipal and provincial levels of government, activists have instead resorted to—and increasingly relied on—popularizing street marches and protests.

In proceeding with this with strategy, Montreal activists have largely followed the directives of the Front d'Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain (FRAPRU), the Quebec-based social-housing, tenants'-rights, and anti-poverty advocacy group. Similarly formed out of the tenants' movements in the late 1970s, FRAPRU focuses on compiling housing data and organizing numerous local and provincial protests with the aim of demanding action on protecting social rights and demanding social housing.

While impressive in its ability to organize public demonstrations, both locally and Canada-wide, FRAPRU's efforts, largely framed on class concerns, have placed citywide housing activism at a historical crossroads this city has not seen since the 1980s. With the election of the center-left municipal party *Projet Montréal* (PM) in 2017 and *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ), a neoliberal right-wing, anti-immigrant party at the provincial level, in October of 2018, issues of race, immigration, and employment are now explicitly intertwined with housing concerns. The twin election victories of PM, which for a housing strategy of more "inclusive" housing development projects, and the CAQ, whose views neofascists in Quebec called an "[[inspiration->www.journaldequebec.com/2018/09/13/la-meute-dit-sinspirer-de-la-caq-1](https://www.journaldequebec.com/2018/09/13/la-meute-dit-sinspirer-de-la-caq-1)]" during the provincial campaign, have put historic pressures on the right to housing and organizations supporting tenants.

The potential fracturing of the local housing movement also stems from the persistence of white francophone identity politics that have long undergirded the left in Quebec. Before the election of CAQ leader François Legault as Quebec premier in 2018, Montreal's housing activists supported Valérie Plante, the PM mayoral candidate in 2017, hoping that an alliance with PM could lead to more affordable- and social-housing construction. However, PM ran both as a "small-business party," despite its ties to the left-wing Québec Solidaire provincial party, and as an advocate of existing "social inclusion" housing bylaws that mandated that developers reserve 40% of newly built units [[for affordable and social housing->https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/projet-montreal-pledges-40-per-cent-affordable-housing-in-new-developments](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/projet-montreal-pledges-40-per-cent-affordable-housing-in-new-developments)]. Elected with an overall majority on the city council—including majority control of multiple (non-white) boroughs within the city—the victory of Plante and her all-white political slate that made City Hall's political composition whiter, also renewed debates over [[representation, systemic racism, and power in Montreal->https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/projet-montreal-candidate-accuses-parties-of-systemic-racism-threatens-legal-action](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/projet-montreal-candidate-accuses-parties-of-systemic-racism-threatens-legal-action)].

The ensuing debate also highlighted the long-standing and historical way in which race and power within the city and the municipal and provincial left has affected citywide housing politics and tenant movements. For the municipal electoral left, issues regarding race, housing, and power date from the rise of the Montreal Citizens' Movement (MCM) in the 1980s. Formed out of the social activism of the 1960s and 1970s, the MCM openly adopted the policy positions of the right and former mayor Jean Drapeau by the mid-1980s (Ruddick 1992). The 1980s also saw the state in Quebec attack workers' rights, raise tuition on students, and begin to attack basic tenets of the social welfare state. In this context, the MCM demonstrated that it would, in the last instance, support low-income white francophone communities over the concerns of racialized and ethnic communities of color. This was explicitly demonstrated in 1985, when the MCM unanimously sided with Drapeau over a racist and exclusionary bylaw aimed at restricting the expansion of Chinatown. Justifying both the policy and the failure to consult local residents, the MCM claimed to be protecting the white francophone-dominated tenants' movement at *Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, the local public-housing project (Nettling 2017). Over 30 years later, with a center-left municipal party in

Montreal facing looming pressures from a revanchist and racist provincial CAQ government, a similar trajectory appears to be forming over housing concerns within the city.

### **The power of geography: housing activism in Côte-des-Neiges and Saint-Henri**

In 2018, Montreal’s low-income, majority non-white immigrant neighborhoods face the greatest threat to their housing security. Since the early 1960s, the district of Côte-des-Neiges, on the city’s west side, has been largely imagined as a “neighborhood of immigrants”—even if those “immigrants” have lived in the area for decades.<sup>1</sup> With a population composed of low-income residents, temporary foreign workers, refugees, recently landed immigrants with a Canadian residency status, and a historically and politically active Black English Canadian community with roots in the internationalist Caribbean Left (Austin 2013), Côte-des-Neiges has been stigmatized since its development in the early 1950s. The neighborhood where C. L. R. James lived in the 1960s continues to have the worst housing conditions in Montreal. Popularly imagined in the media as a neighborhood of “[slumlords-><https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/after-fire-reveals-unregistered-rooming-house-cdn-ndg-mayor-vows-action-against-slumlord>],” 80% of Côte-des-Neiges residents are renters. Of those tenants, 21% are paying over 50% of their income to rent and 12% of the population are paying over 80%, making Côte-des-Neiges—a neighborhood with above-average rents in the city—the “[capital of misery-><https://genese.qc.ca/montreal-gazette-hard-times-renters-cote-des-neiges>]” for tenants (FRAPRU 2018, p. 1). Within this capital of misery, over 2,500 people are currently on the social-housing waiting list and over 20% of tenants are living in [overcrowded conditions->[www.centraide-mtl.org/documents/36933/upload/documents/Portrait-Cote-des-Neiges-2014\\_1.pdf](http://www.centraide-mtl.org/documents/36933/upload/documents/Portrait-Cote-des-Neiges-2014_1.pdf)]. Routinely identified as a district of insoluble housing conditions, hundreds of tenants in Côte-des-Neiges live [with rats, bedbug and cockroach infestations-><https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreals-n-d-g-borough-cracks-down-on-neglectful-landlords>], mold, lack of hot water, or in housing that requires major repair (MultiCaf 2016, p. 26).

Understandably, the neighborhood has consistently pushed for social-housing construction for decades. The demand for rent-subsidized apartments and the politics of what constitutes “affordability” within Côte-des-Neiges were highlighted with “The Triangle,” a transit-oriented development project initiated by the former center-right borough administration in 2008 that built 3,000 condo units in the Mountain Sights neighborhood of the district. Before the project was announced in the early 2000s, Mountain Sights was a majority low-income neighborhood; about 57% of all households in the area were living under the [federal low-income cutoff->[www.150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/entv.action?pid=1110024101](http://www.150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/entv.action?pid=1110024101)] (Committee 2017, p. 5). To clearly address issues of affordability in the neighborhood, the borough council pursued an “inclusion strategy” of socially mixing the development with rent-subsidized housing and a provision for affordable housing.

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<sup>1</sup>The use of the term “immigrants,” or what the media in Quebec refers to as its “cultural communities,” has also become the term used to describe racialized populations in Quebec.

**Figure 1. The Triangle project in Côte-des-Neiges**



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The Triangle, of course, did not turn out the way it was pitched to local residents. Negating the borough's own public consultation practices, The Triangle met the goal of 209 "affordable" units by placing only 22 of those on the actual site. The rest were built in another neighborhood within the borough (Committee 2017, p. 17). Aimed explicitly at condo buyers, where average condo unit rentals for a two-bedroom were priced at \$1,260 a month (Committee 2017, p. 13), The Triangle has put displacement pressures on the remaining neighborhood residents. Since the 2006 Canadian Census, when 98% of residents were identified as tenants—with 42% of those tenants paying 30% or more of their income in rent (Committee 2017, p. 9)—property values increased 144% between 2009 and 2017. Further, during the same time period, Projet Genèses (PG), the local housing committee, conducted 142 "interventions" whereby landlords were brought before the rental board over rent increases. According to PG, the committee had only conducted nine such interventions in Mountain Sights between 2002 and 2009 (Committee 2017, p. 23).

**Figure 2. Gravel of hope? The Blue Bonnets site**

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The failure of The Triangle to address community concerns has only intensified the long-standing pressure to build social housing within the borough. Focusing on the old Hippodrome horse track, commonly known as Blue Bonnets, which the city of Montreal has owned since 1991, local activists sought to redevelop the land to incorporate social housing. Their unique vision was formed on September 20, 2014, when 175 residents and community workers participated in a public forum called “Blue Bonnets: From Vision to Reality” which centered on securing 2,500 social housing units. The plan focused explicitly on the residents’ “right to Côte-des-Neiges.” Envisioning a “high-density urban village” that concentrated on the social reproduction of everyday life, the proposal fundamentally addressed how the racial and class demographics of Côte-des-Neiges would be altered if any new development did not provide adequate social housing (CDC de CDN 2016, p. 8).

Three years later, backers of the Blue Bonnets project demanded that the PM borough candidates support it during the municipal election. In contrast to concerns elsewhere in the city, the central political question within Côte-des-Neiges and the neighboring city of Côte-Saint-Luc was centered on housing and the Blue Bonnets site. In part to differentiate itself from the right, PM unveiled a plan to turn Blue Bonnets into a 20-20-60 mix of social housing, affordable housing, and market-rate condos while increasing the size of the project to [8,000 units-><https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1059879/valerie-plante-projet-montreal-quartier-certification-familiale-ancien-hippodrome-blue-bonnets>].

As an election strategy, the PM's housing plan gained support from local activists. Elected with a majority on the borough council, including the mayoral seat, PM has since appeared to put the Blue Bonnets project on hold and has repeatedly isolated activists connected to the project by providing little to no information or updates on its progress. This silence and lack of dialogue with the housing community is rather politically significant. Magda Popeanu, the official responsible for city housing policy and the local PM borough councillor for Côte-des-Neiges, seems to be mirroring MCM's treatment of Chinatown in the 1980s. Since being elected in 2017, neither Popeanu nor Mayor Plante has met with the housing activists or addressed the project beyond the stated municipal election campaign promise. Tired of being ignored, housing activists have engaged in escalating tactics through [\[demonstrations at city hall->https://globalnews.ca/news/4135895/residents-community-groups-call-for-inclusive-blue-bonnets-project\]](#), organizing public forums and petitions, and taking their concerns to the [\[street in an effort to be heard->https://globalnews.ca/news/4633208/social-housing-cotes-des-neiges-blue-bonnets\]](#).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Côte-des-Neiges, a different story is unfolding in the southwest Montreal neighborhood of Saint-Henri. Historically identified as a white working-class to low-income “slum” in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Saint-Henri has deep cultural, social, and political connections for French-speaking Quebecers and Montrealers through the literature of Gabrielle Roy. Roy's novel *Bonheur d'occasion*, which was set in neighborhood in the 1940s, is considered one of the sociocultural catalysts for the [\[Quiet Revolution in the 1960s->https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quiet\\_Revolution\]](#). Within this socially significant backdrop, Saint-Henri has undergone extensive gentrification since the late 1990s with the condo conversion of former factories along the Lachine Canal. To confront displacement in a neighborhood where 34.3% of the population was considered low-income in the [\[2011 Canadian Census->www.centraide-mtl.org/en/communities-served/saint-henri\]](#), residents connected to Solidarité Saint-Henri, a housing committee in the Sud-Ouest borough, are focused on securing 100% social-housing units for the [\[abandoned Canada Malting factory->https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada\\_Malting\\_Silos,\\_Montreal\]](#), one of the last remaining abandoned factory sites on the Lachine Canal, the birthplace of industrial Canada.

Unlike Côte-des-Neiges, Saint-Henri has been subject to highly publicized press accounts—both locally and internationally—of [\[anti-gentrification resistance->www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/01/montreal-gentrification-st-henri-looting-vandalism\]](#) involving the burning of cars and the breaking of storefront windows. Whether or not this focus is warranted—as neighboring Little Burgundy, the central neighborhood for English-speaking [\[Black Montrealers before the 1960s->https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little\\_Burgundy\]](#), is seldom included within this discourse—Saint-Henri has nonetheless been identified as the main focus of the discussion of gentrification within the city. With this prominence has also come a particular form of political capital for local housing activists. In the weeks leading up the provincial election

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<sup>2</sup>During the editing phase of this article, Popeanu, one year into her mandate, finally met with housing activists within her council district over Blue Bonnets and social housing in Côte-des-Neiges.

in October of 2018, PM announced that it had rewarded Solidarité Saint-Henri with a \$10,000 grant to [\[study social housing->https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/st-henri-group-receives-1000-to-study-social-housing-in-former-canada-malting-site\]](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/st-henri-group-receives-1000-to-study-social-housing-in-former-canada-malting-site).

In deciding which groups on the left within the city get funding to study housing projects or organize conferences—however paltry the grant—these small actions continue to highlight the white francophone left’s enduring problem with race, both within the city and [\[provincially->https://jacobinmag.com/2018/09/quebec-solidaire-election-caq-montreal-sovereignty\]](https://jacobinmag.com/2018/09/quebec-solidaire-election-caq-montreal-sovereignty). Especially since the election of the CAQ—with its xenophobic focus on [\[banning public-sector workers->www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-quebecs-caq-weighs-limiting-religious-symbols-ban-to-new-hires\]](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-quebecs-caq-weighs-limiting-religious-symbols-ban-to-new-hires) from wearing public displays of religious symbols, [\[slashing immigration->www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2018/10/02/cutting-back-on-immigration-risks-condemning-quebec-to-stagnation.html\]](http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2018/10/02/cutting-back-on-immigration-risks-condemning-quebec-to-stagnation.html), [\[instituting values tests for immigrants->www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/28/political-party-vying-quebec-election-promises-kick-out-immigrants-who-fail-values-test/?utm\\_term=.aafdcf951612\]](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/28/political-party-vying-quebec-election-promises-kick-out-immigrants-who-fail-values-test/?utm_term=.aafdcf951612), and even [\[threatening to expel immigrants->www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/09/07/coalition-leader-promises-to-expel-immigrants-who-fail-to-learn-french.html\]](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/09/07/coalition-leader-promises-to-expel-immigrants-who-fail-to-learn-french.html) for failing to pass these tests—race and immigration status should be central to housing activism in the province. Furthermore, in a new era of municipal powers, with the passage of Bill 121 in 2017, which granted Montreal metropolis status and gave the [\[city more governance powers->https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreal-gets-metropolis-status-with-more-power-and-autonomy\]](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreal-gets-metropolis-status-with-more-power-and-autonomy), PM’s housing promises continue to provoke suspicion. With Legault and the CAQ’s history of advocating for privatizing [\[publicly owned corporations->www.lapresse.ca/actualites/elections-quebec-2018/201809/23/01-5197648-saq-legault-pourrait-maintenir-le-monopole.php\]](http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/elections-quebec-2018/201809/23/01-5197648-saq-legault-pourrait-maintenir-le-monopole.php) or their continued support for illegal private health-care practices within the [\[provincial health-care system->www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-ottawa-private-health-care-transfer-payments-1.4906507\]](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-ottawa-private-health-care-transfer-payments-1.4906507), will they soon offload the responsibility for social housing? Whether the CAQ charts a housing course similar to Ontario under Mike Harris in the 1990s by shifting responsibilities to the municipal level, PM’s [\[approval of transit-oriented development projects->www.stm.info/en/press-releases/2018/ville-de-montreal-approves-frontenac-real-estate-complex--an-stm-shdm-joint-project\]](http://www.stm.info/en/press-releases/2018/ville-de-montreal-approves-frontenac-real-estate-complex--an-stm-shdm-joint-project) in low-income neighborhoods mirrors earlier policies that resulted in The Triangle. If these projects are, as Plante says, “[[exemplary projects->https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/stm-launches-real-estate-project-at-frontenac-metro](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/stm-launches-real-estate-project-at-frontenac-metro)],” housing activists should seriously question the party’s promise to build 6,000 social and 6,000 [\[affordable housing units by 2022->https://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/10/25/logement-social-et-abordable-montreal-accelere-la-cadence\\_a\\_23571801\]](https://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/10/25/logement-social-et-abordable-montreal-accelere-la-cadence_a_23571801).

Considering these projects are also being built in low-income and largely racialized communities, housing activists clearly have to grapple with issues of racial disparity. In Quebec, however, this is no easy task in a political space where elected officials across the political spectrum deny that the province is structurally racist. Such views even pervade academia, as when Jennifer Drouin, an anglophone law professor at McGill University, turned “rebel” Parti Québécois candidate in 2018, said [\[during an election](#)

[debate->www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/daybreak-montreal/segment/15599982](http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/daybreak-montreal/segment/15599982)] that notions of Quebec being structurally racist are a political plot to import “American theories” on race. Worse still are Mayor Plante’s recent comments criticizing the rhetoric of “both sides” regarding the CAQ policy on religious symbols. “You’re either a traitor to the [Québécois] nation or you’re a racist,” said Plante. “[It’s just too loaded right now-><https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/one-on-one-with-mayor-valerie-plante-one-year-later>].” Housing activists need to fill this void in the local and provincial political class. With housing activists already connected with the [\[anti-fascist network within the city->https://montrealgazette.com/news/far-right-and-anti-fascist-groups-to-protest-at-roxham-rd-on-saturday\]](https://montrealgazette.com/news/far-right-and-anti-fascist-groups-to-protest-at-roxham-rd-on-saturday), they must recenter their politics to include strategies to ensure housing, employment, planning, and anti-gentrification policies can bolster minority and immigrant communities, not just the traditional white working-class base of the left, while also empowering existing leaders and voices from these communities. Otherwise, history appears set to repeat itself.

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