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The Individuality of Canadian Identity

When telling people about my family's migration to Canada, I am often asked, "why Canada?" During these interviews I try to find a way to explain that we did not exactly choose to come here. After feeling the war in Kosovo, my parents filled out applications asking to be sent to a place where English was spoken and where they could safely raise their family. To the immigration office in Albania that meant Regina, Saskatchewan. Canada was meant to be a mere temporary haven where we would stick out the war, yet it has turned out somewhat more permanent because nine years later we are still here.

My sense of Canadianness is made up of very personal fragments. Neil Bissoondath suggests that in order to build a strong national identity as Canadians we must give up our individual identities, which he claims belong "exclusively to the individual". However, Canada is made up of immigrants; many of whom have arrived due to necessity. Asking people to give up their personal identities, especially those associated with their original culture, would only foster feelings of bitterness and separation.

The "privilege of invisibility" as termed by Michael S. Kimmel in his book "The Gendered Society" is more apparent in Canada than in less multiethnic countries. As Kimmel explains, "When you are in power, you needn't draw attention to yourself, but, rather, you can pretend to be generic, the universal, the generalizable" (2004). Any individual belonging to the majority is assumed to be the prototype citizen; all opportunities and inclusions within a society apply to that person. This can often make such an individual ignorant to the problems of minorities. For instance, when discussing issues of discrimination in Canada with a Canadian friend of mine, he asked me if I feel discriminated against as an immigrant. To this I replied, "No, but I have often witnessed Canadians of Asian descent getting offended by being asked where they come from", without much forethought my friend said, "Yeah, but no one would ask you, because you look Canadian." This is not an isolated case. Why does this country give its citizens the impression that to be Canadian one must be Caucasian, especially in a multicultural society such as Canada? Ethnic differences should not be ignored or masked by political correctness; they should be highlighted, in order to truly emphasize true multiculturalism. Naomi Klein rightfully questions why it is that "a radical transformation in the populations of Canada has failed to translate into an equally radical transformation of self."

Bissoondath asserts that Canadian history is infused with guilt. The guilt is even greater if one is of Caucasian descent. In Canada, often an association is made between individuals of Caucasian descent today and the English and French colonizers of the 17th century. Perhaps instead of lingering in the past our attention should be focused on how the past reflects on First Nations today. According to Health Canada<!--[if !supportAnnotations]-->[O1]<!--[endif]-->, First Nations are faced with suicide as one of the leading causes of

death, lower education attainments as compared to the average Canadian, less adequate homes and the list goes on.

The focus should be turned away from feelings of guilt and past acts of oppression, and on to creating an education system that applies to the lives of Native Peoples of Canada, providing employment opportunities, training doctors, mental health workers, healers and other similar professionals within the Native community. Making these services available to the community as well as provide younger generations with role models. Contribution to improving health and standard of living is much more meaningful when coming from members within the community.

The Aboriginals today cannot be paid off for the atrocities inflicted upon their ancestors centuries ago. Their loss cannot be equated to an amount of dollars. Canada should be disturbed by the state of its Native People today, and should attempt to bring about change in this area. Canadian history should be used as a way of learning, but not as an excuse for guilt and large cash payoffs.

The only way of bringing about change in Canada is to ally ourselves with those whose voices are not heard, yet some care should be exercised when pointing fingers and labeling others as oppressors. It is true that the “privilege of invisibility” applies to Caucasians especially in countries where many different ethnicities coexist; however, this does not justify the association made with oppressors and all Caucasians. Clearly, Canada’s current population is quite diverse, and few can actually claim direct ties to the first settlers, most Canadians are able to trace their family history to more recent immigration.

We are a nation of immigrants, yet many qualified and experienced professionals who come to Canada as immigrants are forced to remain unemployed or work menial and custodial jobs. For example, after nine years of living in Canada and moving across the country my father is still unemployed, still attempting to attain accreditation as a physician, a profession that he practiced with talent and fervor for over ten years before it got ripped from him by the hands of war. In this multicultural, and immigrant nation, thousands of immigrants my age are forced to choose between working to support their families and pursuing a postsecondary education.

If one assumes that Canadianness is only skin deep, as Bissoondath does, then one is clearly undermining what it means to be Canadian. We live in a young country that lacks a long history of folk music and dress, but just as “Danny Boy” may move someone to feel national pride of Ireland, Neil Young’s “Heart of Gold” reminds me of all that is Canadian, even if it is only a personal association. Any “fetish of other cultures” is largely due to the interaction with members of many cultures in our daily lives, or due to family roots. One of the essences of being Canadian is that one is permitted to become immersed in other cultures without feelings of betrayal, or an attitude of us versus them. It is this type of liberty that leads Canadians to become open minded global citizens.

Having come from a country where history and extreme nationalism pull the triggers that insist on conflict and segregation, I am pleased to live in a country where such “unity” is not emphasized. It is the very sense of being Canadian that has led us to saying “no!” to wars based on fictitious purposes. I have only lived here for nine years, but I identify as Canadian more than anything else. My sense of being Canadian is largely based on personal experiences. If I were to give up these personal experiences, my identity as a Canadian would be much weaker and one based on others’ ideals.

Canadians such as Tommy Douglas, and Pierre Trudeau have placed Canada on the list of some of the best countries to live in. Canada is often compared to Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, and Norway, and Denmark; countries renowned for their egalitarianism, sufficiency in dealing with social problems, and high quality of life. In discussing current issues in Canada one must not take for granted the comforts and liberties that we as Canadians enjoy today. Yet, as Bissoondath suggests, Canadian sense of nationality should not be based in comparison to our neighbors to the South. It is obvious. We have better healthcare, a better social system, are more egalitarian, and are more liberal; but why compare ourselves to those that so many agree we have already surpassed? Canadians should strive for solutions to the problems within our own system, such as the high suicide rates among Aboriginal adolescents, the long waiting lists for medical procedures, and the high cost of postsecondary education. We should also establish new institutions to serve our citizens, such as government funded daycare and easier access to accreditation for newcomers to our country. This is only a short list, made up of issues that have touched my life personally. My sense of Canadianness is very much linked to my personal identity as an immigrant and a young person in Canada and it is clearly much more than “skin deep.”

I truly love living in Canada and I believe that it is this love that compels me to be an active part of creating change. Having come from an impoverished and war torn country, I appreciate all that Canada has to offer. However, ridding oneself of the original ethnicity, and personal history, in order to create a stronger Canadian identity, as Bissoondath suggests, is truly anathema to Canadian ways of life. In Canada it is those that are often not listened to that have the ability to bring about the much needed change. Our nation is undeniably one made up of immigrants, and each individual one of them has a personal history, and a personal identity tying them to Canada. Canadian identity resides within the individual, and will continue to do so, as long as we call ourselves a multicultural nation.