

Hello,

My name is Ashley Johnston and I am Cree/Métis from Manitoba, however, I have primarily grown up in British Columbia's North West Coast. I have a degree in sociology from Vancouver Island University and have a keen interest in studying and writing about feminist epistemology and post-colonial discourse. Please consider my submission for your upcoming magazine issue.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best Regards,
Ashley Johnston

Native Peoples Don't Want the Title 'Canadian'?

In a recent conversation I had with friend regarding Native nationhood and Canadian identity, I was told that “Native peoples don't want the title ‘Canadian’.” This statement took me aback because it was a bold and sweeping statement to come from a non-Native person regarding Native peoples. I began to wonder what would give her the impression that we do not want the title ‘Canadian’ and, moreover, what gives her the authority to express that impression?

Although I am not denying by any means that this woman's statement is unfounded, I will argue that not all Native people in Canada envision themselves as outside of the national identity of Canada and that, as a group, not all of us deny our ‘Canadian’ title. In my experience, many Native people in Canada - members of my family included - consider themselves to be Canadian, or even think of being Canadian as their primary cultural identity. However, that being said, many Native peoples in Canada do identify with their Indigenous cultures primarily, if not exclusively (Neil McLeod, 1998).

I believe that this distancing from the title of ‘Canadian’ by Native peoples is largely a result of three major factors: first, that as marginalized peoples we are not fully recognized as “full” citizens in the eyes of the nation and are rather seen as a burden to the state and therefore cannot envision ourselves as first-class citizens; second, that Trudeau's attempt to assimilate us by insisting we “all are Canadian” (White paper 1969) - which underemphasizes Native rights and nationhood as a form of post-colonial colonialism while simultaneously posing as a way to expand Canadian identity - created

a backlash from our communities; lastly, that we exist, and continue to exist, as separate nations with our own spaces, histories, education systems, institutions, norms, values, laws, languages, and members. All of these factors have lead many Native peoples in Canada to reject the title 'Canadian', or to at least keep the cultural identity of 'Canadian' at bay.

However, it is hard to deny that we, as Native peoples, have been culturally changed by the last five-hundred years of colonization. We have all gone through various Canadian institutions and have come out far from unchanged. After all, part of the Canadian identity is in response to our existence, and that response continues to shape our realities within these borders. In this regard, we have a vested interest in Canadian identity, if not interested in claiming it.

So, Native national identity choices may not be as simple as saying we all don't want to call ourselves 'Canadian'. As it is in any identity, Native nationhood is a complex subject that continues to divide us as Native peoples and as a country. Although we are often referred to as the original Canadians, the truth is that, until recently, we have rarely seen the benefits of Canadian citizenship and often have been treated as foreigners on our own land. In terms of claiming Canadian identity: to say we simply "don't want it" may not be as accurate as to say we simply "never had it".