

Stereotypes and Silence: Coerced Indigenous Sterilization and the Canadian Media

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Sophie McCall's ENGL 359 course, *Studies in the Literature of British Columbia*. The assignment asked students to relate a current news item to readings they have done for the course, specifically by using the item as a framework for interpreting at least two of these readings. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In 2017, sixty Indigenous women in Saskatchewan launched a class-action lawsuit against the Saskatoon Health Region to seek justice for being pressured into sterilization by care workers in the medical system (Kirkup). This particular lawsuit is part of a wider, historical and ongoing practice of coerced and forced tubal ligation of First Nations women in Canada by medical professionals (Collier 1080). In the 1970s alone, approximately twelve hundred Indigenous women were sterilized without their consent in federally-operated medical centers, a practice purposely used to reduce the size of Indigenous communities, comprising what the World Health Organization deems a "violation of fundamental human rights" and amounting to nothing less than an act of genocide (Collier 1081). In this essay I use Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* to contextualize and situate the issue of coerced sterilization in Canada, then examine and deconstruct several current news articles on the issue using Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* as a framework for understanding media's role in perpetuating racism and discrimination. Robinson's text engages with the history of assimilation and exposes harmful stereotypical narratives about Indigenous women, while Kogawa demonstrates the role of State and media silence in the marginalization and discrimination of racialized groups in Canada: both texts taken together afford a perspective by which to understand both the continued practice of forced tubal ligation on Indigenous women, and the way in which it is reported upon by Canadian media.

While many Canadians may misunderstand colonization as a historical practice used during a short period of time as an inevitable transition from pre-modern to modern societies, Robinson demonstrates that colonization is both harmful and ongoing in Canada through the intergenerational effects of residential schools and the erasure of Indigenous points of view from history. In *Monkey Beach*, Uncle Mick condemns practices used by the Canadian Government and Catholic Church to convert “heathen” Indigenous children to Christianity to “make them white,” practices which effectively endeavoured to erase Indigenous peoples and culture from Canadian society (110). Likewise, Lisamarie’s elementary school teacher forces her to read aloud from a history book that portrays Indigenous peoples as primitive cannibals, a stereotypical narrative that justifies government assimilation of Indigenous peoples into “civilized” society (69). Uncle Mick’s ongoing post-traumatic stress from residential school demonstrates the continuing negative effects of colonization, while the erasure of Indigenous narratives from Lisamarie’s history book demonstrates how colonization is perpetuated in the common-sense of Canadian society through education and literature. The core premise of both forced admittance to residential schools and portraying Indigenous peoples as cannibals in history books is that Indigenous peoples and perspectives are a detriment to Canadian society, and must be erased from the future national community. Thus, viewing the issue of forced sterilization through the framework of *Monkey Beach* illustrates how tubal ligation is not merely an isolated incident or a historical practice, but simply another form of ongoing, systemic genocide that erases Indigenous peoples and narratives from the fabric of Canada.

Another underlying premise of forced sterilization—in addition to the assumption that Indigenous peoples are harmful to Canadian society—is that Indigenous women are inherently fecund, sexually promiscuous and must be stopped from “breeding.” *Monkey Beach* engages with this stereotype when a young white man in a car sexually harasses Erica, saying “he’d teach her how to fuck a white man,” that she was “begging for it,” and inviting her into his vehicle (250). When Lisamarie retaliates against Erica’s harasser in anger, Aunt Trudy warns her of the consequences of such an action:

“Those guys would have killed you.”

“It was broad daylight,” [Lisamarie] said. “There were tons of witnesses. They wouldn’t have done anything.”

“Honey,” [Aunt Trudy] said, “if you were some little white girl, that would be true. But you’re a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we’re born sluts. Those guys would have said you were asking for it and got off scot-free.” (255)

Elizabeth Archuleta (professor of Ethnic Studies at Utah University) corroborates Aunt Trudy's claim, explaining how Indigenous women are dehumanized and portrayed as sexually promiscuous in media, and that this stereotype becomes a justification for treating them as disposable sexual objects rather than autonomous human beings (105). The way the white man treats Erica is indicative of this common understanding of Indigenous women in Canadian society, and understanding that also underlies forced sterilization. When Indigenous women are seen as essentially sexually promiscuous and fecund, and Indigenous people are viewed as a detriment to Canadian society, forced tubal ligation is a logically following method of controlling Indigenous populations. Furthermore, when Indigenous women are viewed as objects rather than autonomous human beings, they are not recognized by medical professionals as capable or deserving of giving informed consent to medical procedures such as tubal ligation.

Aunt Trudy's claim that, "even if those white men had injured or killed Erica and Lisamarie, they still would have got off scot free" (255) is also relevant to conceptualizing the issue of forced sterilization. Archuleta substantiates this claim of injustice, telling the story of Betty Osborne, a nineteen-year-old Indigenous woman who was sexually assaulted and murdered by four white men in Manitoba in 1971 (105). Archuleta explains that the men seemed to be under the impression that "Aboriginal women were promiscuous and open to enticement through alcohol or violence ... [that they were] objects with no human value beyond sexual gratification" (105). It was sixteen years before the perpetrators of the crime were brought to trial, and only one of them ever served time in prison (105). Just as Aunt Trudy warns Lisamarie, crimes against Indigenous women are often not brought to justice, and Canadian health care workers who coerce Indigenous women into tubal ligations are part of this unjust system. When the common sense of a society perpetuates the idea that crimes against Indigenous women go unnoticed and unpunished, this fosters an environment in which forced tubal ligations can occur, unnoticed and unpunished, for decades. Just as the estimated five hundred to one thousand missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada have been forgotten by "white Canada," and those who advocate on their behalves are often silenced (106), Indigenous women who have undergone forced sterilization have also been forgotten and silenced for many years by media and government.

With a better understanding of the social and systemic factors caused by colonization that underlie coerced sterilization of Indigenous women, I will now turn my analysis, aided by Kogawa's text, to the current news reporting of the ongoing class action lawsuit of sixty Indigenous women against the healthcare system of Saskatoon. Specifically, I will analyze the part that *passive voice*, as a form of silence, plays in perpetuating this injustice through media. In the page that precedes the first chapter of *Obasan*, Kogawa engages with the idea of silence:

There is silence that cannot speak. There is silence that will not speak . . . To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone. I admit it. I hate the stillness, I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space . . . If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply. (2)

Although the speaker in this passage “attends” to the “hidden voice,” she is confronted with its “absence,” the questions she asks get “no reply,” and she searches in vain for the “freeing word” (2). Throughout *Obasan*, Naomi struggles with mainstream media and government’s silence regarding Japanese Canadian internment, referencing articles about internment that portray Japanese Canadians working on beet farms, for example, as “grinning and happy,” but are silent regarding the hardships they faced (176). One article referenced begins thus: “nearly 20,000 Canadian citizens will be deprived for another year of the fundamental rights of citizenship” (177), while another article writes that “six hundred and seventy solemn-faced Japanese . . . sailed out of Vancouver Friday night . . . [and] watched silently as their possessions were hoisted aboard” (165). The commonality between both statements is the use of *passive voice* to obscure the “doer” of the injustice (the Canadian government). Neither sentence acknowledges the *subject* of the action, thereby distancing the government from responsibility or blame for their discriminatory actions. Furthermore, while one sentence uses the phrase “Canadian citizens” and the other “Japanese,” both words obscure the identities of the oppressed group: one sentence obscures their Japanese cultural origins, while the other obscures their Canadian citizenship. Kogawa writes, “I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply” (2); similarly, a reader of a sentence written in passive voice might ask the question, “by who?” but receive no reply. Obscuring the Japanese Canadians’ collective identity and using passive voice are both “absences of speech” (2): forms of silence used to perpetuate injustice through media.

Mainstream media’s account of forced tubal ligation reveals the role passive voice plays in distancing the Canadian medical system and government from the act of forced sterilization of Indigenous women. Furthermore, there are cases in which articles entirely omit key information, such as Indigenous victims’ identities. In 1999, for example, the Alberta Government made a formal apology to victims of forced sterilization. The CBC news headline of this event reads “Alberta apologizes for forced sterilization,” a headline which names neither victim nor

perpetrator, and goes on to report that “Premier Ralph Klein said it was unfortunate that the operations happened, but he didn't call them criminal, because they were legal at the time. The sterilizations happened between 1928 and 1970 and were designed to prevent mentally and physically disabled people from reproducing.” Not only does the government, in this case, not take responsibility for forcibly sterilizing Canadians, but they also fail to acknowledge or apologize to the many Indigenous women who were also sterilized by the federal government during this time, only addressing the injustices against physically and mentally disabled Canadians.

Following the same pattern as the article from 1999, recent headlines (late 2018-2019) of the story include: “NDP health critic urges RCMP to investigate allegations of forced, coerced sterilizations” (National Post), “Indigenous women coerced into sterilizations across Canada” (CBC), “End forced sterilizations of Indigenous women in Canada” (Washington Post), “Class action lawsuit proposed on coerced sterilization in Alberta” (Toronto City News). Making use of the passive voice, none of the headlines acknowledge *who* the perpetrator of the sterilizations are, and many of them do not acknowledge the victims. In contrast is a headline from The Guardian that acknowledges both victim and perpetrator: “Human rights groups call on Canada to end coerced sterilization of Indigenous women,” which demonstrates that while media outlets do have an ability to name responsible parties for their crimes, many choose silence.

In *Obasan*, Naomi says of her aunt that “The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances, over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (14), and later in the story Naomi recounts her dreams, in which “a small child sits with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull ... A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak” (218). Thus, Kogawa engages with the idea of government *silencing* of the voices of Japanese Canadians; Obasan has learned to be silent about her trauma and grief from internment, and Naomi continually dreams of herself as a child who is “forever unable to speak” about the discrimination she faces. The bodies of the aforementioned articles about coerced Indigenous sterilization also show how media silence not only obscures government from blame, but suppresses the voices of victims. An article by the National Post, for example, begins: “Don Davies is calling for the RCMP to immediately launch an investigation into all allegations of forced and coerced sterilizations in Canada. Davies urges action on the issue given ‘multiple, credible allegations of crimes ’have been made’ (“NDP health critic urges...”). The article names neither victims nor perpetrators. Furthermore, the quotations used around the phrase “multiple, credible allegations of crimes” appear to challenge the truthfulness of the statement. The contemporary

and historical reporting of coerced tubal ligation thus omits the voices of Indigenous women, often failing to even name them as the victims of the crime perpetrated by the federal government. In the mainstream news reporting I analyzed, only two of the stories included a quote from an Indigenous woman who was affected by forced tubal ligation (Kirkup, Longman), and only one of them was written by an Indigenous reporter (Longman). For the most part, however, as Kogawa's preface laments, the voices of the oppressed are "hidden voices," a part of a "silence that cannot speak" (2) in mainstream media's reporting, both historically of Japanese internment, and contemporarily of coerced sterilization. Indeed, throughout the many years in which forced tubal ligations of Native women has continued, it remains disregarded and unpunished by the Canadian government.

Both Kogawa and Robinson's texts demonstrate the importance of allowing marginalized voices to be heard through the medium of writing and literature. Uncle Mick and Lisamarie's experiences emphasize how imperative it is to combat harmful stereotypical narratives about Indigenous people, such as the narrative Lisamarie encounters in her textbook which portrays Indigenous people as cannibal savages who are harmful to Canadian society, or the wider master-narrative that portrays all Indigenous women as sexually promiscuous, disposable objects. Both of these narratives about Indigeneity serve to reproduce Indigenous oppression, as evidenced by the practice of coerced sterilization, which is based on the narrative that Indigenous people are harmful to Canadian society, and that sexually promiscuous Indigenous women must be prevented from further "breeding." Likewise, Kogawa's text demonstrates how media silence in reporting issues of discrimination, specifically through the use of passive voice and omitting victims' identities, serves to distance the Canadian government from accepting responsibility for their discriminatory actions, and further silences the voices of the oppressed. This principle is demonstrated in the mainstream news reporting of coerced Indigenous tubal ligations, which use the passive voice in headlines to distance the government from the practice of genocide, and overwhelmingly omit Indigenous voices from the conversation, leaving an absence of information which fosters a silence surrounding forced tubal ligations. Robinson and Kogawa's texts suggest that narratives surrounding Indigenous issues must be changed in the future: harmful stereotypes must be combatted, victims must be named and given a voice, and government must take responsibility for their actions rather than distancing themselves from blame through silence on issues such as forced tubal ligation. Applying this study of passive voice used in media could also reveal injustices in the reporting of other marginalized communities in Canada; thus, it is important to keep a critical mind about the literature we read and the media we consume, understanding the underlying narratives and biases that are played out through writing, in practice.

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