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Burying the Hatchet: Addressing Disproportionate Media Representations of Indigenous Missing and Murdered Peoples

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Abstract: Television and newspapers possess a strong influence not only on the public perception of Indigenous marginalization, but also on the bi-directional relationship that the government possesses regarding policies that address the causes of inequity, racism, and the stereotyping of Indigenous groups in Canada. The foundations of oppressive action are established via the creation of social hierarchies that seek to label marginalized populations such as Indigenous peoples as “others.” The othering of Indigenous groups in Canada has been shown to lead to the perpetuation of structuralized racism and discrimination as an extension of underlying settler-colonialist ideologies. The concept of media framing is used in this article to interpret representations of Indigenous peoples on the national stage. Here, we explore the media’s justification when it makes decisions about the content of its news stories, and how Indigenous peoples involved in these reports have been presented to the public. These constructions have negatively skewed the perception of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples as they ignore or minimize Indigenous male victimization. This has led to their devaluation within mainstream media discourses. As members of families, men and boys play a pivotal role in the maintenance of family structures, and thus, investigating the causes for missing and murdered Indigenous men and boys (MMIMB) will offer greater insight into not only the framing of Indigenous issues in mainstream media but also into the ever-increasing incidence of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG).

Keywords: MMIWG, MMIMB, framing, representation, Indigenous.

Media attention toward Canada’s national crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples continues to be lacking on the national stage despite being deemed a critical socio-structural issue. Increasingly, there has been an emphasis on the inequitable conditions in which many Indigenous peoples live, which has highlighted that Indigenous communities have not been afforded the same healthy standard of living as their non-Indigenous counterparts. Synonymous with the experiences of developing nations, many Indigenous communities in Canada are continually evidenced to be living in what would be deemed third-world conditions. This includes conditions such as substandard

housing, few opportunities for meaningful employment, and access to necessary resources such as clean water, food, and health and social services (De Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron 2010). The foundations of oppressive action are established via the creation of social hierarchies that seek to label marginalized populations such as Indigenous peoples as “others.” This practice is enforced throughout various channels due to the relative lack of understanding and acceptance of Indigenous viewpoints, cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences of life in Canada. Thus, the othering of Indigenous groups has been evidenced to lead to the perpetuation of structuralized racism and discrimination as an extension of underlying settler-colonialist ideology (Reading and de Leeuw 2014). It is an accepted scholarly notion that Indigenous peoples in Canada and abroad are highly diverse. However, Indigenous peoples globally often share similar challenges when related to their representations in the media. These representations have been skewed to present Indigenous peoples from a one-sided “us versus them” perspective which emphasizes helplessness and conflict, and ties directly into lopsided power dynamics favoring the suppression of self-representative images (Nagy and Gillespie 2015).¹

Though steps have been taken to promote equality for and reconciliation with Indigenous groups in Canada, media representations of Indigenous peoples usually remain limited to issues related to systemic racism, stereotypes, assumptions, disorder, and emphasis on non-normative behaviors (Leavitt et al. 2015). These include involvement in the sex trade, criminal activities, interpersonal violence, poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse. As such, this article seeks to explore how mainstream media representations of Indigenous peoples are built upon profound constructions of colonialist undertones through the concept of media framing. It also explores how these constructions have negatively skewed the perception of Indigenous peoples who have gone missing or been murdered, specifically focusing on the lack of representation given to male Indigenous victims and their absence in mainstream media discourses.

Media Representations

Representations through mass media such as television and newspapers have a strong influence on not only the public perceptions of Indigenous marginalization but also the shaping of governmental policies to address reconciliation, inequity, racism, and stereotyping of Indigenous groups. It is important to consider that colonialist dialogues and ideologies continue to overshadow the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous peoples as a whole. These ideologies and perspectives perpetuate structural and social discrimination toward Indigenous victims who have gone missing or been murdered, which devalues their lives (Innes 2015).

It is well known that there exists a plethora of harmful stereotypes that are consistently associated with images and narratives involving Indigenous peoples. These stereotypes stretch across assumptions of Indigenous peoples being drunks, drug addicts, unemployed, unable to govern themselves, and violent. While these may exist in Indigenous communities, their overrepresentation in the media plays a key role in the shaping of external perceptions of Indigenous peoples and the normalizing of stigmatization. Though the national narrative has become more inclusive in recent times, the view of Indigenous peoples continues to be tarnished by misrepresentations, lack of social and historical context, and inherent tokenism instead of truly paying heed to the unique socio-structural barriers and challenges Indigenous groups face in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Reading and de Leeuw 2014).

Media Framing Lenses

The concept of framing can be used to interpret representations of Indigenous peoples on the national stage, as it helps to explore the media's justification of the selection of content that is incorporated in a potential news story, and how individuals involved in the story are presented to the public. The long-term socio-structural and interpersonal effects of residential schools and assimilation act as key facets contributing to the victimization of and violence toward Indigenous peoples and have more recently been brought into the limelight by several Canadian media agencies,

including CBC, CTV, and Global News. A broad-scale systematic analysis of print news media representations of residential schools suggests that though some Canadian media outlets and their consumers might be prepared to admit that residential schools acted as sites of cultural genocide and oppression, overall, mainstream news outlets have not done great justice to link this view of reconciliation to the overall reformation of Canadian society and historical presentations (Nagy and Gillespie 2015).

To emphasize this disparity, two predominant methods of analyzing media representations – focusing on the expansive and reductionist lenses, respectively – are described in relation to the framing of Indigenous issues. On the one hand, the use of the expansive lens by the media allows residential schools and missing and murdered Indigenous peoples (MMIP) to be represented in ways that acknowledge the effect of settler colonial mandates as a form of wide-scale cultural oppression. It is not simply an aspect of the past, but rather, a part of our collective future. The expansive lens seeks to align the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples with the presence of socio-structural inequities – including disproportionate rates of incarceration, poverty, and homelessness – as being intertwined with deeply engrained colonialist ideologies. An example of such a use of expansionist media frames in Canada is the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), without which Indigenous presence on Canadian media networks would be “virtually non-existent” (Clark 2014, 3). In 1983, the Northern Native Broadcast Access program was created to allow Indigenous communities to broadcast “their own programming, in their own language, following their own format, on any topic they deemed important” (David 2019, 5). Following the success of the program, the APTN was launched in 1999. This brought a solution to the problem of mainstream media channels only airing news relating to Indigenous peoples when it directly affected the lives of non-Indigenous Canadians (David 2019).

Since its inception, APTN has consistently produced media stories that promote a more Indigenous-focused experience to combat existing colonialist stereotyping and discrimination by providing a more holistic approach to Indigenous healing and reconciliation, and attention to

pertinent social issues within Indigenous communities. Despite the success of APTN in stimulating discussion on Indigenous perspectives, a recent study comparing mainstream and APTN news reporting of Indigenous content over a two-month period indicated that mainstream media attention is still lacking (Clark 2014; see Appendix A, Figure 1). This analysis revealed that while APTN included nightly coverage of Indigenous issues, mainstream media sources such as CTV, CBC, and Global News aired only a small number of Indigenous-based news stories. Furthermore, when comparing the framing of Indigenous issues, mainstream media sources were more inclined to utilize stereotypical and authoritative frames while APTN framed stories within an Indigenous context. Finally, mainstream media sources were more inclined to frame Indigenous peoples as either “passive” or “problematic.” They suggested that Indigenous peoples were passive victims not willing to help themselves and over-relying on government assistance or they were problematic and connected to drugs, crime, and violence, or they were vocally opposed to government intervention and resource development such as oil extraction and the building of pipelines (Clark 2014; see Appendix A, Table 1).

On the other hand, by using a reductionist lens the media framed the effects of residential schools and MMIP primarily around violence and abuse. Though the reductionist lens makes mention of intergenerational harm and cultural oppression, it nonetheless reduces these effects to poorly made decisions and mistakes situated in the past. The reductionist lens seeks to pathologize survivors of abuse and suggests that the effects of residential schools on the Indigenous population are not a socio-structural issue but, rather, a condition that is distinctly an “Indigenous problem.” In this perspective, these problems can be cured through closure and making amends because Indigenous peoples are seen as emotionally weak and passive recipients of these injustices (Nagy and Gillespie 2015). Brad Clark’s analysis of the coverage of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) by Global News, CBC, and CTV from September 1 to October 31, 2011 explored the use of reductionist lenses in mainstream media. It was found that depictions of MMIW emphasized the notion that these women placed themselves in situations that led to their victimization due to

being frequently seen as prostitutes, addicted to drugs, and impoverished (Clark 2014). This negative framing was further highlighted by Gilchrist (2010) who sought to compare the representations of three Indigenous and three non-Indigenous missing and murdered women who were deemed non-deviant and, what would be termed, good women. Her analysis illustrates that news reports of missing and murdered non-Indigenous women were placed more frequently in favorable positions, such as on the front page (37% of the time compared to 25% of the time for Indigenous women), of newspapers, and non-Indigenous women were on average six times more likely to be featured. In addition, the stories of non-Indigenous victims were more likely to offer vivid and detailed descriptions of the women's lives, which were portrayed more intimately and compassionately (Gilchrist 2010).

The overwhelming focus of news reports on the social and economic challenges faced by Indigenous peoples has led to public ignorance about discrimination and undue harm (Reading and de Leeuw 2014). Often, many of these news reports have implicitly promoted the idea that if an Indigenous person engages in what is determined to be a socially unacceptable behavior, such as prostitution or drug and alcohol use, then they are to be blamed for their victimization. This draws attention away from the socio-structural problems in their environment, which have led to their victimization in the first place. Intimately entwined in these narratives is the notion that due to the continued stigmatization, discrimination, and stereotyping of Indigenous peoples in the media, these groups will undoubtedly continue to experience greater discrimination in other socio-structural areas including the legal, health, and social systems (Bourassa et al. 2005). This leads to Indigenous voices being effectively silenced in the social justice system (Nagy and Gillespie 2015). It is this perpetuation of oppression that contributes to socio-structural inequities in Indigenous communities that further exacerbate the current crisis of MMIP.

Efforts of Indigenous Advocates to Combat Misrepresentation in the Media

Advocates and members of Indigenous communities have sought to utilize media outlets to increase public knowledge of the endurance of colonizing rule as perpetuated by the (in)actions of the

Canadian government and media. An article featured on APTN detailed the lack of attention the mainstream Canadian media has paid to the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls (MMIWG) inquiry report as issued by independent commissioners Marian Buller, Michèle Audette, Qajaq Robinson, Marilyn Poitras, and Brian Eyolfson, which they conducted from May 2017 to December 2018 (McDougall 2020). Numerous media outlets such as *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, CBC, and the *National Post* have defied the notion that the crisis of MMIWG is a form of cultural genocide. This was noted in such excerpts from Michael Enright of CBC who questioned the notion of genocide stating that “The problem with the term is complex and goes beyond mere pedantry. Its utterance has now become the most telling element in the fabric of the report. It has become a *distraction*. We might not be able to cite three recommendations of the report, but we have come to recognize that what happened to these women was *supposedly* genocide” (McDougall 2020, para. 5, italics added). Even more callously, the editorial board at the *Globe and Mail* stated that the notion of MMIWG being declared a genocide was “absurd” and “simply does not bear scrutiny” further reinforcing the disconnection that mainstream media has when approaching Indigenous reconciliation and victimization (McDougall 2020, para 4).

There have been efforts by Indigenous and non-Indigenous advocates to open a discussion on how to combat the effects of colonialism within media discourses. The Indigenous 150+ training program has developed from a film and conversation series of the same name and was initiated in order to react to the TRC’s established calls to action (Lisk 2020b, para. 2). The initiative was created to increase attention to and education of Indigenous perspectives to inform current and future journalists of how to engage in cross-cultural interviewing while maintaining respect and reducing stereotypes. The program does not focus exclusively on Indigenous youth, but rather it seeks to establish meaningful connections among people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The goal of the program is to identify stereotypes in mainstream media, decolonize the notion of Indigenous sexuality and intergenerational trauma, and bring light to the long-standing effects of systematic racism and discrimination faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada (Lisk 2020b). A TVO interview

with Indigenous journalist Kelly Boutsalis has also brought to light the feelings of voicelessness within mainstream media discourses and how as an Indigenous journalist she has sought to establish a greater voice and attention to Indigenous issues using a culturally appropriate lens (Lisk 2020a). Detailing one of her first experiences with Indigeneity, Boutsalis reminisced watching a news report mentioning “people versus the Natives” suggesting that as an Indigenous female she was “not a person.” (Lisk 2020a) She mentioned that this experience highlighted the inherent disproportionality of whiteness which is imbued in most news outlets, and led to her career mission to increase the presence of Indigenous stories and individuals. Perspectives such as these are key to effectively combating colonialist undertones in mainstream media by encouraging Indigenous individuals to engage and join the ranks of what is currently a predominantly Eurocentric approach to media presentations (Lisk 2020a).

Spotlighting Missing and Murdered Indigenous Men and Boys

Since the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the publication of such documents as the MMIWG Inquiry, there has been increased attention to the disproportionate number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, in large part due to their vulnerable position in society. Although this is indeed an important step toward reconciliation with Indigenous groups, there still exists a startling lack of media representation of missing and murdered Indigenous men and boys (MMIMB). As members of families, men and boys play a pivotal role in the maintenance of family structures. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that investigating the causes for MMIMB will offer greater insights into not only the framing of Indigenous issues in mainstream media but also the ever-increasing incidence of cases of MMIWG. Investigations of the victimization of Indigenous men and boys will offer an avenue for discussion as to why stories of Indigenous male victimization are largely left out of virtually all media discourses.

It can be theorized that the socio-structural elements contributing to interpersonal and self-inflicted violence among Indigenous peoples of any gender likely root from similar causes. It would

be unwise to exclude Indigenous men and boys from public inquiries as they too are an important part of the Indigenous population who have been overlooked even more so than Indigenous women and girls (Hansen and Dim 2019). Data obtained from Statistics Canada suggests that of the 2,500 reported murders of Indigenous peoples in Canada within the last 30 years, more than 70% were male, which is two times the number of Indigenous females murdered and speaks directly to the problematic issue of excluding men and boys from inquiries into Indigenous victimization (National Post 2015, para. 5). Further, recent data from Statistics Canada indicates that Indigenous men are murdered nearly three times as often as Indigenous females, and six times more often than non-Indigenous males (Statistics Canada 2020; See Appendix B, Fig. 2 and 3).

There has been little evidence to suggest that the public call for an inquiry into the incidence of MMIMB has been in the primary interest of the media, government, and the police. Seemingly, the only basis for the inclusion of men and boys in these inquiries has been to examine male victimization of Indigenous women and girls and not the victimization of Indigenous men by other men. The police often view Indigenous males as criminals and deviants and see them as the main perpetrators of violence in Indigenous communities (Innes 2015). Though interpersonal violence within Indigenous communities is a fathomable truth, stereotyping of Indigenous males as violent criminals may well explain why, when of violence against Indigenous men and boys is represented, their victimization obtains a minute amount of media exposure or investigation by the authorities (VanEvery 2019). Despite the fact that the majority of violence against Indigenous women is perpetrated by Indigenous males, we tend to see them only as victimizers, which obscures the understanding that men and boys can be equally vulnerable to becoming victims of violence from other men. Even though the trauma suffered by Indigenous women and girls may well be experienced and perpetrated in different ways, the origins of these acts of violence are comparable to the causes of violence towards Indigenous men and boys (Menzies 2009).

More recently, impassioned grassroots movements calling for inquiries into missing and murdered Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous men and boys, have begun to spring up across

Canada. Families of MMIBM have mirrored movements focused on hanging red dresses and red ribbons to symbolize the loss of MMIWG by hanging red ties to symbolize increased awareness for MMIMB. Causes such as these emphasize the need for equity by increasing pressure on government authorities to officially include men and boys in inquiries into Indigenous victimization and, at the same time, the necessity to provide families of MMIMB with the same level of attention that has been offered to families of MMIWG. The necktie campaign was envisioned by Lydia Daniels, whose son Colten went missing from downtown Winnipeg in November of 2014, and began in Manitoba in response to the Red Cloth Ribbons Memorial for MMIW. The goal of the movement is to raise awareness of MMIMB, and Daniels has emphasized that the symbolic ties “signify our hope and faith” in never giving up their search for justice (Flett 2016, para. 4; CTVNews 2016). Following up on the necktie campaign, the Canadian Association for Equality (CAFE) has expanded the initiative across most major cities in Canada and has invited Canadians to not only hang symbolic neckties, but to also reach out to local, provincial, and federal members of parliament to officially request an expansion of the scope of inquiry into MMIW to include Indigenous men and boys (Canadian Association for Equality 2016).

Insights toward Mainstream Media Representations of Indigenous Peoples

Colonial constructions expressed in the news media reinforce an imagined Indigenous inferiority that contributes greatly to the marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada. That such imagery continues to this day clearly indicates that our country remains far from a cultural mosaic where all ethnicities and cultures coexist (De Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron 2010). Research has shown that the Canadian media not only present issues from a predominately Eurocentric lens, but that the majority of reporters and journalists are largely Caucasian regardless of the fact that Canada’s Indigenous population continues to grow (Taneja 2020). Though media coverage may present issues pertinent to these populations, they do not necessarily represent the communities that they purport to serve. Thus, it is critical to incorporate a deeper context to Indigenous media stories which moves beyond an initial flashpoint and stimulates ongoing coverage, conversations, and discussions within

affected communities. Action-oriented perspectives toward media stories empower readers and presenters to take action by informing the populace that they have the power to tackle systemic issues. Thus, there is a defined need for Indigenous people to be properly represented in Canadian media discourses “so that they can tell their own stories and have their own voices” (Taneja 2020).

Conclusion

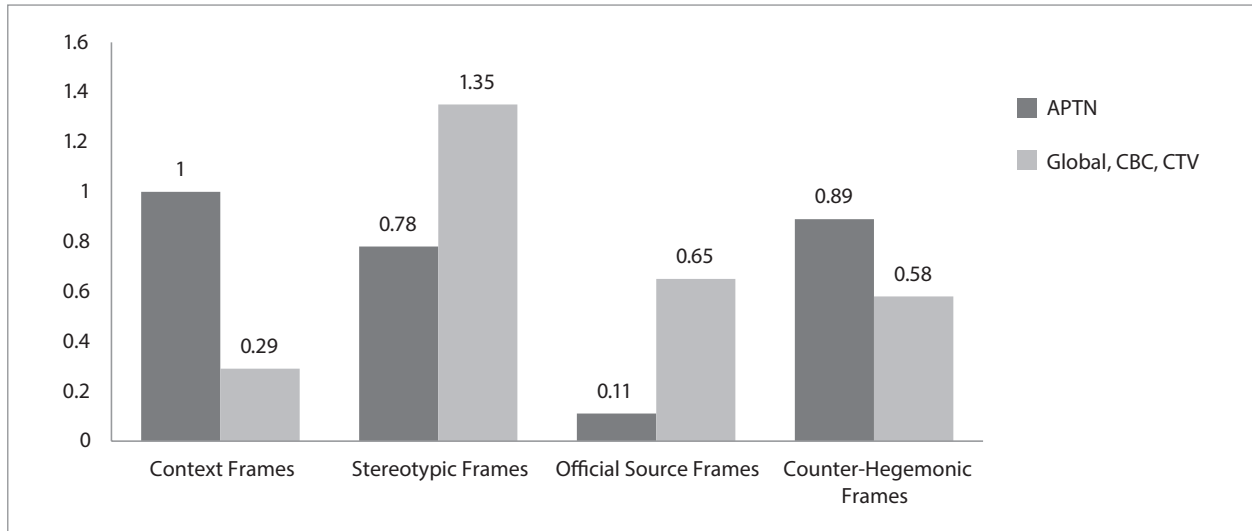
To address effectively the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples and the inequities which are continually perpetrated against them, we must seek to establish our understanding of these issues through an anti-colonialist lens (Jones 2015). It is this colonialist discourse that inherently tailors the presentation of particular ideas, the perceptions of people, and the actions and inactions of institutions especially in relation to the victimization of Indigenous men and boys. It is the summative effect of these intersections that continues to reproduce inequalities that, in turn, foster the conditions for media representations to ineffectively address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples. It is only through the understanding and dissemination of these conversations that we may be able to establish connections between ideological biases and the unique struggles of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Therefore, the media and government must take on the responsibility to ensure that media narratives and representations are led by Indigenous voices to promote accurate and culturally relevant discourses as an important tool for disseminating the complexity of factors that affect Indigenous people’s health, wellbeing, and safety.



Beverly Marsden is a fourth-year Public Health Honours student at Brock University minoring in Canadian Studies. She has a defined passion for social equity, and studies the socio-structural determinants which disadvantage marginalized populations, especially Indigenous and racialized communities. She strives to bring light to systematic injustices present in our current social system, and will soon be engaged in nursing in order to fulfill a personal, professional, and academic interest in caring for geriatric patients on the front-line as a result of a deep-set passion for increasing the current status of patient-centered care.

Appendix A. Figures and Tables Related to Indigenous News Framing

Figure 1: Framing of News Stories APTN Compared to Mainstream Media



Source: Clark, B. 2014. "Framing Canada's Aboriginal peoples: A comparative analysis of Indigenous and mainstream television news." *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 34 (2): 41-64.

Table 1: Types of Media Frames

FRAME	DESCRIPTION
Active Frame	Aboriginal people as taking action in their own interests
Passive Frame	Aboriginal people as not working to help themselves, or as passive victims; Waiting for mainstream authorities to assist with funding, housing, address criminal activity or corruption.
"Problem people" frame	Aboriginal people as connected to drugs and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, corruption, opposition to government policy and/or resource development.

Source: Clark, B. 2014. "Framing Canada's Aboriginal peoples: A comparative analysis of Indigenous and mainstream television news." *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 34(2): 41-64.

Appendix B. Statistics Related to Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Homicide, 2014-2019

Figure 2: Male Homicide Statistics

Non-Aboriginal identity	Number					
	Number of homicide victims	321	343	366	393	359
	Percent					
	Percent of homicide victims	74.31	74.40	74.39	79.88	73.87
Aboriginal identity	Rate per 100,000 population					
	Homicide rates per 100,000 population	1.90	2.01	2.13	2.25	2.04
	Number					
	Number of homicide victims	321	343	366	393	359
Aboriginal identity	Percent					
	Percent of homicide victims	74.31	74.40	74.39	79.88	73.87
	Rate per 100,000 population					
	Homicide rates per 100,000 population	1.90	2.01	2.13	2.25	2.04

Figure 3: Female Homicide Statistics

Non-Aboriginal identity	Number					
	Number of homicide victims	43	30	38	45	40
	Percent					
	Percent of homicide victims	24.16	19.35	21.97	27.11	27.78
Aboriginal identity	Rate per 100,000 population					
	Homicide rates per 100,000 population	4.87	3.29	4.04	4.64	4.01
	Number					
	Number of homicide victims	133	122	132	120	99
Aboriginal identity	Percent					
	Percent of homicide victims	74.72	78.71	76.30	72.29	68.75
	Rate per 100,000 population					
	Homicide rates per 100,000 population	0.78	0.71	0.76	0.68	0.55

Source: Statistics Canada. 2020. *Number, Percentage and Rate of Homicide Victims, by Sex and Aboriginal Identity*. Statistics Canada. October 29. Available at <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510015601&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.3&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2015&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2019&referencePeriods=20150101%2C20190101>.

Endnote

- ¹ I understand my positionality related to the topic. I do not, and cannot, speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples. Despite my grandmother hailing from the (Siksika) Blackfoot nation of Southern Alberta, I do not claim myself to have an Indigenous identity. As a non-Indigenous female, I hope to speak to socio-structural issues that have disproportionately disadvantaged many Indigenous communities in Canada, especially relating to the care for their wellbeing, safety, and representation on the national stage. In exploring of these critical issues, I am motivated to examine, increase accountability, confront, and remove hierarchies and inequities. This notion originates from the basis, whether in justice or law, that there is no excuse for the devaluation of any individual, nor is there an excuse for individuals to engage in domination and marginalization. It is this structure of inequitable and marginalizing human hierarchies that drives my intention to emphasize that these unequal power structures are unjustifiable. Furthermore, I acknowledge my privileged status as a non-Indigenous white female within the colonialist structures of this nation, and thus fully recognize the accountability I hold to the Indigenous communities I write about. Though non-Indigenous researchers and activists cannot speak on behalf of Indigenous communities, it is my hope that drawing attention to socio-structural inequity can create a dialogue to limit the influences of colonialism imbued in our society. I believe this aspiration is only possible when national stakeholders and observers are willing to examine the actions and (in)actions on behalf of government and media establishments, and are further, willing to engage in more reflexive approaches to listening and understanding when engaging with the experiences of Indigenous citizens in Canada.

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