

Straining the Media: The CBC's "Voices of the Vulnerable"

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Cet article porte sur le discours stéréotypé et médical dans lequel les médias se sont enfermés quand ils ont couvert la tempête de verglas de 1998. Critiquant des reporters qui ont perpétué une image des personnes âgées démunies, particulièrement des femmes âgées, Chivers explore la manière dont les récits qui mettent en scène des boucs émissaires en présentant la « situation critique » des personnes âgées et démunies rassure les auditeurs qui ont besoin de maîtriser et de tenir à distance leur propre vulnérabilité. Des femmes qui ont refusé de quitter leur maison sont ridiculisées par des journalistes et d'autres victimes de la tempête. Comme Chivers le souligne, leur comportement n'est incompréhensible qu'à partir du moment où l'attention de l'auditeur est orientée vers leurs corps vieillissants et ayant besoin de soins. Cette division entre ceux à qui on s'adresse et ceux dont on parle est cruciale pour un discours qui décrit les personnes âgées comme destituées et toutes identiques. « Nous » comprenons ce dont les femmes âgées ont réellement besoin, malgré, ou parce que nous ne sommes pas nous-mêmes âgés supposent ces récits. Le récit qui maintient l'auditeur du côté sûr du continuum de l'âge est un récit qui projette nécessairement des représentations de fragilité sur des corps auxquels les auditeurs craignent de s'identifier lorsqu'ils pensent à leur propre avenir.

This short analysis of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's difficulties in accepting the possible strengths and contributions of the elderly, and especially old women, comes from a larger study of the possibility for narrative forms, and especially fiction, to offer constructive depictions of late life that defy typical cultural understandings.

When the reputed "ice storm of the century" swept Québec, Eastern Ontario, and the NorthEastern United States at the beginning of 1998, the CBC leapt to help the millions of potential listeners who could only hope to receive information via battery-powered radio. In the CBC's indispensable coverage, paradoxes prevailed: although most people dependent on

the broadcast had no electric power in their homes, officials advised them not to venture outside, where sheets of falling ice posed a mortal threat to public welfare, but rather to stay home and watch movies. The same powerless listeners were sternly admonished not to drink the water without boiling it first (an impossibility for those with electric stoves) but, above all, to remain well-hydrated to avoid hypothermia. Such contradictions reveal that announcers and expert guests found it impossible to adjust certain assumptions about their broadcast audience. One reception assumption did become gradually and abundantly clear.

As subzero temperatures persisted, listeners heard that, although children and the elderly do not shiver when they are cold, shivering signals a healthy reaction and indicates the body's efforts to maintain heat. If *you* are shivering, listeners were told, *you* are likely not yet suffering from hypothermia. This *you* oddly excluded the one segment of the population about which the CBC, in concert with local authorities, expressed the most concern: the so-called elderly. *You*, the listener, meant somebody roughly between the ages of teenager and sixty (that is, not children nor the elderly). Well-intentioned public announcements constantly urged those listeners capable of shivering to check on elderly neighbours. All listeners heard human-interest stories of elderly people who did not want to leave their homes. For example, listeners heard about an eighty-something forgetful woman who, finally giving in to offers of help, left her home without turning off her stove and caused a fire.¹ Not once, however, did a CBC broadcaster say, "If *you* are over seventy, *you* may find that your body does not react the same to extreme cold as it used to." Never did broadcasters appeal directly to the segment of the population about which they exhibited such supposed social concern.

The CBC emergency broadcasts are not exceptional in discourse that scapegoats the elderly, but the emergency situation provides a particularly good context for revealing common, late-life stereotypes. What seemed, momentarily, an exciting opportunity for the media spotlight to illuminate numerous positive and negative facets of old age, instead predictably manifested countless popular misconceptions. Despite age-old connections between experience and wisdom, the CBC did not consult one octogenarian for advice on how to function without electricity – a presumed area of expertise for someone who necessarily has lived through at least one world war and the advent of numerous electrical devices now presumed essential. Of particular note, despite their supposed fragility, not

one person over the age of sixty was reported to have attempted to heat a home with propane or a Hibachi, whereas a number of people considerably younger died as the result of uninformed decisions about how to heat their homes. One elderly couple in Notre Dame de Grace (an area particularly hard hit by the storm) dug up their old cast iron cooking implements and, with the help of their gas stove, created radiators to maintain heat in a home that otherwise would have been without heat for seven days (Westphal May 14). Despite such available anecdotes, radio announcers constantly referred to old people's "fear" of leaving home. CBC broadcasters attributed this fear to a belief that the same authorities forcing them from their homes would shunt the elderly off to nursing homes, and they would never see their homes again. Although likely a legitimate concern, the fear of infectious diseases (considerably more dire for those elderly people with deteriorating immune systems) superseded that of lost homes, and indeed an influenza epidemic did sweep shelters. Somewhat familiar with managing without electricity, what seventy-year-old woman or man would voluntarily leave his or her home to spend any number of nights in dormitory-style accommodation with young children and countless infectious diseases circulating day and night?

CBC's misguided, yet somehow philanthropic, attempts are atypical only in that, during the storm (people in Montréal lost electrical power on average from two to seven days), battery-powered radio provided the only communication link for most people. Otherwise, the crown corporation participated in a general media tendency to discuss old age only as human interest and as a phenomenon only loosely related to the target audience, instead of within every member's either present or conceivable future experience. The emergency situation simply helped stereotypes take over the broadcasts because of a social need to contain and distance the vulnerability felt by most Montréalers.

The inability to project one's own future onto a reading of an old body, or perhaps more properly the inevitability of doing so, results in continued cultural readings of old age as primarily physical, and necessarily physically limited. News coverage such as that of the ice storm concentrates on images and language of vulnerability. Further, wrinkles, and other signs of aging, often signify that vulnerability culturally. As a result, although they fulfilled a crucial community function, members of the Canadian media reinforced a detrimental image of aging. The all-too-common but wrongheaded association of physical deterioration with mental

deterioration results in an accompanying refusal to value the necessary experience which accompanies old age. Somehow, a body presaging one's own potential physical decline is read as no longer housing the knowledge and background gained while physically more able.

Old women suffer from this association and overvaluation of the physical to an even greater extent than do old men, probably because of social yearnings to associate the female with the body and the male with the mind. Women outlive and so outnumber men in late life and, of course, female fragility continually whets the cultural appetite. In the CBC News Magazine of January 13, 1998, entitled "Voices of the Vulnerable," elderly women stand in for the incapacity of the elderly generally, and are deprived of voices which might instead express capability. The feature deals with the suffering of the elderly during the ice storm. It fixates on one particular community in Montréal, without specifying this narrow research base. As a result, the report fails to acknowledge the historical specificity of its subjects who live in a Jewish area of Montréal, chosen because of their visual match to cultural notions of the elderly. The shared cultural factor, beyond age, suggests at least one logical reason – fear of persecution – for the reluctance of these people to leave their homes and be herded into shelters. Such a connection to community extends beyond the supposed stubbornness and lack of understanding attributed them and suggests communal belonging.

The feature begins with an image of an elderly woman whom well-intentioned citizens have decided to "rescue": the transcript reads, "I got one down here. I'm sure, potentially, we'll have a problem getting her out. Madame Lacote? Madame Lacote?" Although the rescuers do not bother to specify the problem, they willingly offer the impression that Madame Lacote's physical infirmity adds to her mental stubbornness, rendering her a perfect case for an exposé about humanitarian efforts to aid the misguided. The next "Unidentified Elderly Montréaler" on the feature visually matches images of an old woman demonstrating confusion, which a voice-over implies results from the storm-induced trauma. The visual clearly demonstrates that in fact she cannot hear the directions she has been given – to get her bags and go into a community room. Authorities make no attempt to find a better, more effective way to communicate with her, possibly because all such efforts have already been directed towards accommodating media crews.

Dr. Howard Bergman, from the Jewish General Hospital, evokes a third

image of an old woman as representative of the feeble, baffled elderly:

Let me just give you one example of a lovely 94-year-old lady who's living in an apartment by herself with her cat, getting a lot of help in normal times from her niece, who would come and help with the shopping etcetera. She didn't want to leave because she didn't want to leave her cats [sic]; she didn't want to leave her home or possessions. I think the first stress of many of the elderly, besides living through the cold and the uncertainty, was the stress of having to leave their own homes and having to leave sometimes possessions, including a cat.

Not only does Bergman condescend to an old woman here to provide an example of "elderly stress," but, in fact, his example is largely irrelevant because her experience resembles that of many Montréalers during the ice storm, along a continuum of age.² Elderly women, however tempting the stereotype may be, were not the only Montréalers reluctant to leave pets, companions, possessions, or homes during the ice storm. The choice to situate such a logical and common reaction in an anecdote about someone who matches prevailing cultural notions of weakness, both in terms of gender and age, demonstrates exactly what age (especially when combined with gender) signifies culturally. The media calls upon Bergman, as an expert, to explain the medical term "elderly stress." Surely, what he in fact describes simply matches the expectations of a listening audience who may not want to recognize their own habits in those of an old woman too attached to her home and cat to venture out into a meteorological disaster.

Notably, the CBC News Magazine calls on two old men to perpetuate negative depictions of old women in "Voices of the Vulnerable." Isadore Fogel, speaking of a special shelter for the elderly at the Jewish General Hospital, explains that

there's a blind woman here, maybe I shouldn't mention it, but she – she is very difficult. She yells at the top of her voice with everybody sleeping, and as soon as the people wake up, there's a big lineup of people walking to the bathroom. And occasionally they have to open up the lights, because there is [sic] so many people walking, they don't want them to trip over each other in the dark.

This embedded narrative demonstrates a member of the already supposedly vulnerable population perpetuating the very attitudes that have resulted in his own coerced removal from home. An interview with Abraham Bonder furthers this tendency when he explains that although he would not have left his home, "My wife has to go because it's too cold. Much too cold." No one actually interviews old women in the entire piece. As a result, viewers do not have the opportunity to ascertain whether the tendency to perpetuate pessimistic depictions extends to these women's self-representations. Extending the logic of CBC's title "Voices of the Vulnerable" leads a critical viewer to conclude that the vulnerable during the ice storm were members of the media and the medical community – they were vulnerable to prevailing stereotypes.

Taken in the spirit in which it was more likely intended, the title encapsulates the paradox of being female and old. Not only did the "vulnerable" have no voice in the coverage, the CBC did not address them directly as potential members of a viewing or listening audience. Because the construction of gender difference relies to a large degree on constructions of female attractiveness, the implicit question lingers of whether old women are in fact "women" at all.³ The subject position of the elderly female, then, rife with internal tension, becomes an ideal stand-in for other cultural tensions, and comes to represent what younger segments of society fear. At a time when Montréalers felt and were particularly vulnerable to the result of a devastating weather pattern, the media neatly transferred fear and weakness onto a social group that the remainder of the population could consequently comfort itself by "helping." Those included by the CBC's *you* could patronize those excluded, and younger listeners had the opportunity to construct superficial strength around a false conception of old people's inevitable dependence. The notion that old women could help not only themselves but also others would entirely threaten a population stabilized through a projected fear and undermine the feeling of superiority that such projection had allowed.

I cannot, however, entirely condemn media depictions for their problematic and cowardly depictions of old age. And certainly the CBC by no means provides the worst examples of the phenomenon of undervaluing elderly people, especially old women. My analysis of CBC ice storm coverage exposes how old age stands in for cultural vulnerability at times when a scapegoat is needed. Many studies of old age concentrate on that vulnerability to examine what is too frequently called, even by Gloria

Steinem "the plight of older women" (qtd. in Friedan 38). Indeed, when I contacted CBC to obtain transcripts of their extensive coverage, Eta Kendall spoke with me about "the plight of the elderly" and the resulting "precious moments" (October 1998). Mass media, academic studies, conventional poetry, photography, visual arts, and contemporary humour construct and respond to prior constructions of an expected fragility and a desired, but distanced, incapacity sheltered in the physical frames of recognizably old women. A general, and sometimes even a specialized, public can comfortably offer pity and even help to a group of people who signal physically what they themselves never want to become.

Notes

1. The CBC did not save recordings of its ice storm coverage, so I have not been able to obtain a transcript. Some of the radio citations are from my very vivid memories and personal transcriptions of the broadcasts. Because of the emergency circumstances (e.g. working by candlelight), I was not able to keep as accurate a record of the dates and times of the particular quotations as I would have liked. References to the "Voices of the Vulnerable" refer to the transcript.
2. I am grateful to Barbara Frey Waxman's postulation of a continuum of age to avoid a damaging young / old dichotomy (*From the Hearth* 8).
3. Because of how gender (and especially female value) is constructed around ideas of contained beauty and capacity for reproduction, old women are treated as though they not only lose utility, but also femininity. I discuss this prevalent, pernicious cultural process in another, longer study of depictions of old women.

Works Cited

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