

**Government Policy on Racial Genocide Through Eugenics Exposed:**

**Joseph Bruchac's *Hidden Roots***

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**Bio:**

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**Abstract:**

Between 1880 and 1981, thirty-one states, with the backing of the U.S. Government, legalized programs designed to decrease or eradicate the Native American population. The state of Vermont was the twenty-seventh state to ratify such legislation, designed to keep the state “racially pure” and to remove the existence of the Abenaki Tribe and any impure (mixed race) bloodlines. This is a history that the United States government would like to keep hidden and out of conversation. Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac’s young-adult book *Hidden Roots* brings this taboo subject to light, much like Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* explored the topic of World War II Japanese Internment Camps. The current study, as well, seeks to inspire full exposure of a subject that many Americans would rather keep hidden.

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## Introduction

The practice of racial genocide through eugenics or forced sterilization began in the United States in the 1800's and continued until the early 1980's, even after the courts established in the 1970's the illegality of non-consensual sterilization. During this time, more than forty percent of Native American women in the U.S. may have been sterilized (Carpio 40). In 1931, the state of Vermont was the twenty-seventh state to pass a bill legalizing the use of eugenics as population control. The targets of this bill were those who were considered mentally unsound, as well as the Gypsies roaming the Vermont area. The Abenaki people were a main target of the Better Vermonters Eugenics Program because of their migratory habit to follow seasonal hunting and fishing routes; they were thus declared "Gypsies" by Vermont law. Many people, primarily women, were dragged from their homes and forced into institutions until they agreed to be sterilized. These actions by the state of Vermont forced the Abenaki People either to flee to Canada or to hide their Native American heritage. Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac is one of the many who did not find out about his ethnic heritage until he was in his teens because his family had hidden its roots for fear of being taken forcibly from their homes and institutionalized until they consented to sterilization (Bruchac 134). His book *Hidden Roots* (2004) tells the story of a young boy who discovers that his family is Abenaki and brings to light government-sponsored racial genocide.

## Eugenics

The term "eugenics" is derived from the Greek word *eugenēs* ("well born"). In 1891, the term took on such connotations as "The quality of breeding well or freely; the production of young by the union of individuals of different species or stocks" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). For the U.S. Government and the thirty-one States that approved a eugenics program, the

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meaning of the word was translated into “racial genocide,” an attempt to remove the Native American from existence. According to the United Nations Resolution 96, “Genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual human beings” (United Nations).

The Eugenics Programs that were approved by the thirty-one States, starting with Indiana in 1907, was to remove those people who were deemed too poor, ignorant, feeble-minded, and insane to be able to have children. They specifically targeted poor minority and immigrant groups and the Indigenous Peoples of the U.S. It was through these programs, as well as by removing children from their homes and adopting them to white families, that the Federal and Local governments attempted to remove the Native American and confiscate their remaining lands and resources (DeFine).

Eugenics programs in the United States, even after the UN Resolution against genocide in 1946, continued through the 1970s. In an article published in *Ethics & Medicine*, Gregory W. Rutecki investigates the continuing use of eugenics as a form of racial genocide. His report tells details how eugenics programs targeting Native American women continued because “‘contract’ physicians were not required to comply with federal regulations (including informed consent) in the context of the surgical procedures.” Those included coerced or uninformed forced sterilization (Rutecki). The result of this continued use of eugenics against Native American women was a vast decrease in the ability of Native American people to procreate. According to Rutecki, “Independent research demonstrated that as many as 25-50% of the Native American women were sterilized between 1970 and 1976” (33).

A 2014 report to the American Public Health Association finds that “numerous reports concerning coercive sterilization of minority and poor women began to emerge, and a public

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outrage ensued alleging racist and classist applications of the federal family planning programs” (Borrero). These articles support a statement by Bruchac that, in Vermont, a “1940’s survey claims that 212 people were sterilized, but the actual number is probably far higher.” That is so because the investigated numbers of Native American women throughout the U.S. were close to half of the population of indigenous people, well through the twentieth century (Bruchac 133).

### **Effect on the Abenaki People**

To escape the ravages of forced sterilization and racial genocide, the Abenaki people either exiled themselves to French Canada or began to hide their heritage, first from outsiders, and then from their children. The fear of being discovered to be Abenaki is not exaggerated in Bruchac’s story. According to Mary J. Couzelis, “readers become aware that passing for Native Americans during eugenics was not only about avoiding stigma, it was also an attempt to prevent cultural genocide. Many Abenaki hid their cultural markers from dominant society, yet practiced them in private” (159). This comment shows that, contrary to what the Better Vermonter Eugenics Program attempted to say, the Abenaki knew what was happening to them and did what they had to do to survive as a people. This survival came in the form of hiding their Abenaki heritage or leaving their homes in Vermont permanently so as not to be forcibly sterilized. Because of the portrayal of the effects of the Eugenics Movement in *Hidden Roots*, Couzelis states that Bruchac “becomes a critical witness to the eugenics movement.” Couzelis further contends that “Bruchac’s narrative stands as testimony to past events and the ongoing impact the eugenics movement has on Abenaki and other communities” (159). Couzelis here implies that Bruchac is willing to address an unpopular topic and that his work has become a voice not just for the Abenaki people but for all Native American people who were victims of eugenics.

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### *Hidden Roots*

At the outset of Bruchac's book we meet Howard Camp, called Sonny, an eleven-year-old boy who lives on a farm in upstate New York in 1954 with his mother, Martha, and father, Jake. Sonny has grown up being taught to be aware of his surroundings at all times, to sleep light and to be afraid of "being crept up on" (Bruchac 8). What Bruchac is portraying in the fear of "being crept up on" that Sonny's mother instills into him is the fear that the Abenaki people lived with during the years of the Better Vermonter Eugenics Program. This fear hardly dissipated with the retirement of the program; in fact, Bruchac remarks, in the Author's Note to *Hidden Roots* (when he speaks of a friend's aunt, Abenaki's fear of being found out): "Even during the last decades of the twentieth century, the fear still existed that being known as an Abenaki Indian might have dire consequences. One of the reasons for this was the Vermont Eugenics Program" (132). Such fear is something with which Sonny's mother is all too familiar because of what has happened in her family. She and Sonny's father, Jake, constantly live with such dread. They have, however, not shared their apprehension with Sonny: he knows neither what nor who will creep up on him, and his mother would not tell him. He surmises for himself that it could possibly be Indians, because he has seen them sneak up on people in movies; but that answer does not satisfy him. While the idea that it may be Indians who threaten him does not seem warranted, Bruchac here has Sonny evoke the pervasive stereotype of Indians as the enemies of good, hardworking white people.

From the beginning, we are shown that there are secrets kept from Sonny by his parents, secrets that they say he is too young to know, but that he intimates over time. Though he would like to ask and occasionally finds the will to do so, his curiosity is usually kept at bay through fear of his father's anger, which Sonny is not able to understand. This anger often expresses itself

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through abusive of both Sonny and his mother, but his mother refuses to walk away. When Sonny asks her why she is not like other mothers, she tells him that “other mothers have not lived through the no-matter-what like I have” (Bruchac 8). Though Sonny does not understand what his mother is saying, she offers more than just a reflection of her relationship with Jake. This is a statement of survival against the racial genocide that was directed at anyone of Abenaki heritage by the State of Vermont. The “no-matter-what” in Martha’s case is survival by giving up and hiding her Abenaki identity and heritage, including her mother’s death as a result of forced sterilization, being adopted into a white family for protection, and living with the shame of not being allowed to acknowledge the relationship to the man known as Uncle Louis. Living through the “no-matter-what” is a statement of survival at all costs and being able to have children when so many of the Abenaki people, including her own parents, succumbed to the Vermont Eugenics Program.

The biggest mystery in Sonny’s life is Uncle Louis. Throughout his young life, Uncle Louis teaches Sonny things such as how to walk silently in the woods, how to observe and listen quietly, how to hide in plain sight, how to interact peacefully with deer, and how to offer tobacco and pray as the sun rises over the mountains. After going to watch the sun rise, Sonny asks Uncle Louis, “Is it alright, us acting like Indians that way?” to which Uncle Louis replies, “Long as no one sees us” (Bruchac 66). That simple response from Uncle Louis tells us that Sonny has been raised without knowledge of his Abenaki heritage, much like Bruchac himself, because the only reference to Indians that Sonny has is from the movies he sees at the cinema. His parents have kept Sonny’s heritage from him to protect him from being taken away from them to be adopted by a white family. However, Uncle Louis is teaching him Abenaki ways, and he is doing so in secret so that his heritage remains unknown, in accord with the wishes of Jake, who wants to



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protect Sonny and hopes that he'll be treated better by not being known as Abenaki (Bruchac 116). This reflects the statement by Couzelis that the Abenaki people hid their heritage in public, but continued to practice their traditions in private (Couzelis 159).

Throughout the story, as Sonny continues to realize that there are secrets being kept from him—secrets that both scare and anger his father and keep his mother from being as social as other mothers in his school—he becomes aware that there are others who seem to know and understand what his father is doing. Sonny's school librarian, Miss Rosen, is a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, whose parents sent her to England to escape the Nazi Regime. This is significant because the United States Eugenics Programs were the inspiration for Hitler's attempted eradication of the Jews (Rutecki 33). Miss Rosen's explanation to Sonny about the difficult choices that parents sometimes have to make allows Bruchac to transition into cognizance that Uncle Louis is actually Martha's father, Sonny's grandfather. The reason that their relationship has not been revealed until now, Sonny is told, is because originally he was too young to understand, and Jake did not want him to know for his own protection. "Protect me from what?" Sonny asks Louis when it is revealed that Jake did not want Sonny to know that Louis is Indian (Bruchac 116). Louis responds with an answer that encapsulates the fear of being known as Abenaki and what that could mean for self-preservation, as well as for preservation of family from "People who might even feel they had a right to do things to you, like they done to us in Vermont. That was why we left, you understand" (Bruchac 116). This statement from Louis reveals the reason why Sonny has lived surrounded by secrets all of his life, as well as why his mother admonishes him about being "crept up on"—not to mention his father's fear of Sonny's finding out his Abenaki heritage.

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The Vermont Eugenics Program stated that sterilization would be reserved only for the mentally unsound, who were unfit to have children, “As part of the agenda of social progressivism, social services were expanded to assist, support, and help educate the disabled, ill, and poor, but this social-scientific approach to social problems also included support for restricting the reproduction of those considered ‘unfit’” (Kaelber).

This policy of the Vermont Eugenics Program is referenced when Louis explains that when Sonny’s mother was ten years old, Louis and his wife, Sophie, had gone to a free clinic that had been set up for their people to assure they were healthy enough to have children. As Louis and Sophie had lost a baby recently, they were happy that there was such a clinic. While there, both Louis and Sophie were forcibly sterilized. Louis shows Sonny the form that was filled out by the doctors about Sophie, explaining that she was feeble-minded and incapable of understanding that she could not be allowed to have more children. Sonny asks Louis if Sophie had, in fact, been feeble-minded, to which Louis replies that she had always been sharp as a tack (Bruchac 111). The issue was not intelligence; it was ethnicity.

*Hidden Roots* dramatizes how many Abenaki families, including the author’s, evaded sterilization and having existing children taken away and adopted. Sonny asks Louis why he had not been told until now and Louis responds that it was for Sonny’s protection, because his father, Jake, would do anything to protect him even if that meant giving up his Abenaki heritage so that others treated him better (Bruchac 116). This protection also includes Martha’s apprehension of “being crept up on,” Sonny’s fear of being taken away from her and Jake if they were discovered to be Indian. As Louis explains, “They would just come and take away whole families and put the grown-ups into institutions because they said they was feeble-minded and give the children out for adoption to families where you would never see them again” (Bruchac 126). The

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confusion and stunned disbelief that Sonny displays, his repeat of “why, why, why, why did...” likely mirrors Bruchac’s own reaction to discovering the atrocities that had been forced upon the Abenaki people and his family in particular; hence, his search for answers (22).

When Sonny’s father chances to hear the explanation that Louis offers Sonny, Jake becomes apprehensive about the consequences of such knowledge. It is here that we find out the cause behind Jake’s constant anger and fear: he was raised in an Abenaki family that was also hiding from the Eugenics Program and had grown up being looked down on as “poor White Indian trash” (Bruchac 122). Jake’s family had emerged from both French and Indian lineage, a combination deemed impure by the Vermont Eugenics Program and conducive of feeble-minded offspring (Kaelber). They were also looked down upon because, although they were “passing” as a white family, they were not wealthy. However, now that their lineage is no longer a secret, a weight seems to be lifted from the entire family. After Martha learns that Louis is her father, the family unites in the security of a common bond. While things may not be perfect, the family will at least be able to face the future together.

Bruchac narrative suggests that protecting the family, the tribe, and the survival of their heritage is what is most important to the Abenaki, or as Louis explains to Sonny, “And roots is what helps a tree stand up against the wind. Your family is always your family” (Bruchac 118). Again, this is reflected in Couzelis’ statement about hidden Abenaki practices (Couzelis 159). Bruchac also uses the characters’ final scene, the uniting in a common bond, to promote the concept of Tribal unity and acceptance of their heritage. Bruchac thereby addresses the past and future of the Abenaki people, including himself, in response to the Better Vermonter Eugenics Program. He brings these characters to life through the eyes of a young boy who has grown up

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fearful and watchful, but unaware of why he must be that way. He simply knows that there are secrets to which his is not privy and about which he should not inquire.

### **Conclusion**

Michelle Pagni Stewart expresses how Native American authors are learning to find ways of expressing themselves and their heritage through writing. Focusing on *Hidden Roots*, she comments on how the subject of Native American eugenics is ignored in American history classes and how the eugenics movement caused so many Native Americans to deny their heritage to avoid government-sponsored racial purification: “the hidden roots of Bruchac's novel—the legacy of racism involved in the eugenics movement—must be uncovered so that the Abenaki culture may weather the storm of prejudice it faced and stand strong, like the ash tree, for centuries to come” (144). Stewart argues for exposing the truth of the eugenics movement to show the world how the government sanctioned the genocide of the Native American, an episode that stands in sad relation to the herding of U.S. citizens into WWII Japanese Internment Camps. She believes that *Hidden Roots* is a good start in that direction and should be required middle-school reading, encouraging open discussion about matters that the United States government would prefer to keep hidden.

Whether exposing the atrocities of the Eugenics Programs inspired *Hidden Roots*, Bruchac, the powerful narrative uncovers a taboo topic. His story invites young minds to ask questions and to engage in dialogue. By approaching a difficult topic through the consciousness of a young adult, Bruchac raises the consciousness of all readers, to help assure that history will never again so criminally repeat itself.

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