

Erasing Race The Story of Reena Virk

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L'auteure examine le rôle des médias lors du meurtre de Reena Virk et veut attirer l'attention sur le manque de couverture dans la presse et sur l'absence d'une analyse critique du racisme qui sont une forme de violence traduite par l'exclusion, l'utilisation du bouc émissaire, le ciblage des "autres," le tout porté par l'infériorisation de la différence vue comme une déviance.

On November 14, 1997, 14-year-old Reena Virk, a girl of South Asian origin, was brutally murdered in a suburb of Victoria, British Columbia. Reena was first beaten by a group of seven girls

and one boy between the ages of 14 and 16. She was accused of stealing one of the girl's boyfriends and spreading rumours. Her beating was framed as retaliation to these alleged actions. According to journalistic accounts, the attack began when one of the girls attempted to stub out a cigarette on her forehead. As she tried to flee, the group swarmed her, kicked her in the head and body numerous times, attempted to set her hair on fire, and brutalized her to the point where she was severely injured and bruised. During the beating, Reena reportedly cried out "I'm sorry" (*The Vancouver Sun* A10). Battered, Reena staggered across a bridge trying to flee her abusers, but was followed by two of them—Warren Glowatski and Kelly Ellard. The two then continued to beat her, smashing her head against a tree, and kicking her to the point where she became unconscious. They then allegedly dragged her body into the water and forcibly drowned her. Reena's body was subsequently found eight days later on November 22, 1997, with very little clothing on it. The pathologist who conducted the autopsy noted that Virk had been kicked 18 times in the head and her internal injuries were so severe as to result in tissues being crushed between the abdomen and backbone. She also noted that the injuries were similar to those that would result from a car being driven over a body. The pathologist concluded that Reena would likely have died even if she had not drowned.¹

This chilling murder of a 14-year-old girl was singled

out by the news media and heavily reported in the local, national, and international press. The media's initial framing of the murder focused largely on "girl-on-girl" violence. The issue of racism, sexism, pressures of assimilation, and the social construction of Reena Virk as an outcast were rarely addressed. When they were addressed, it was always in the language of appearance—that she weighed 200 pounds and was five feet, eight inches tall. According to media accounts, her heaviness and height precluded her from being accepted. The assumptions regarding the validity of normative standards of beauty and appearance were significantly absent in all accounts of the story. Rather, as with dominant frameworks of meaning that are utilized to cover stories of racialized immigrant and refugees communities—Reena's difference was underscored and inferiorized.

This article focuses on the framing of the Reena Virk murder in media accounts. The aim is to draw attention to the lack of coverage and critical analysis of racism as a form of violence communicated by exclusion, scapegoating, and targetting of "others," and underpinned by the inferiorization of difference as well as its framing as deviance. Additionally, this article argues that the absence of any discussion of racism as a motivating factor in the murder is symbolic of the denial of racism as a systemic phenomenon in Canada. The absence of any mention of racism in the judicial decision concerning the murder is echoed in the news coverage of the decision, thereby privileging a particular interpretation of the case as one involving physical gang violence. Finally, the erasure of race in the discourse of the news media is made evident by the complete denial of the Virk's appearance and racialized identity and its significance in terms of her vulnerability to violence. By not referencing "race" in this context, the media were able to negate and omit any substantive discussion of racism, and at the same time, to reinforce hegemonic notions of racism—as behaviour which is simply confined to hate groups.

Racialized girls and their vulnerability to violence

A recent study conducted by the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence underscores the vulnerability of girls and young women to male violence. It has been found, for instance, that girls comprise 84 per cent of the reported victims of sexual abuse, 60 per cent of the

physical child abuse cases, and 52 per cent of cases of reported neglect (Department of Justice). Girls are also victims in 80 per cent of the cases of sexual assaults reported to police (Fitzgerald). Many flee abusive homes and end up on the streets where they are subjected to further abuse (Alliance). The situation is compounded for marginalized girls who have to deal with the interlocking effects of racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and sexism (Jiwani 1998b; Razack).

The Working Groups on Girls (WGG) noted in its report that immigrant and refugee girls experience higher rates of violence because of dislocation, racism, and sexism from both within their own communities and the external society (Friedman). Caught between two cultures, where their own is devalued and constructed as inferior, and where cultural scripts in both worlds encode patriarchal values, these girls face a tremendous struggle in trying to “fit.” When they don’t, they suffer intense backlash. In effect, what these girls experience is a double dose of patriarchy—the patriarchal values encoded in the dominant society which resonates with the patriarchal values encoded in their own cultural backgrounds.

At the core of the diversity of experiences that shape the lives and realities of girls from marginalized groups is the intensity of rejection and exclusion mediated by the mainstream of society. Faced by racism, and the double dose of sexism, girls from racialized immigrant and refugee communities have few avenues of recourse available to them.² The obverse side of this rejection is the overwhelming pressure to conform and assimilate into the dominant normative framework and thereby strive for at least conditional acceptance. However, the internalization of the dominant culture often leads to an inferiorization, negation, and hatred of the self and their communities.

Cultural identity and conflict

Rather than focusing on girls’ experiences of racism and sexism, many studies have tended to concentrate on issues of cultural and intergenerational conflict within racialized immigrant communities. To some extent, these studies have emerged in response to prevailing occupations in the area of ethnicity and identity retention cohering around the debate of whether such identity is primordially rooted (Geertz; Isaacs) or situationally constructed (Keyes; Lyman

and Douglass). Further, the prevalence of these identity-oriented studies suggests a greater degree of comfort in looking at “cultural” issues of co-existence, conflict, and exchange, or assimilation and acculturation (Drury; Jabbra; Kim; Rosenthal *et al.*), although more recently, this trend has shifted (see, for example, Matthews).

Despite the use of culture as the focal point of inquiry, many of these studies reveal that girls within racialized immigrant cultures experience a greater degree of dissatisfaction and strain with the normative values imposed by their own culture (Hutnik; Miller; Onder; Rosenthal *et al.*). The contextual factors influencing and shaping this dissatisfaction tend not to be examined in structural terms, i.e., as emanating from the subordinate position of the cultural group in relation to the dominant society, and the construction of racialized immigrant communities as deviant Others (Bannerji 1993; Thobani; Tsolidas as cited in Turnbull 163). Nor has the complex interaction of sexism and racism shaping the lives and choices of young women been examined in great detail in Canadian studies (see Bourne *et al.*; Vertinsky *et al.*). Thus, rather than focusing on how racialized girls are inferiorized and how they internalize dominant values which embody a rejection of the self and their cultural communities, many of the existing studies tend to frame these “Other” communities as being problematic insofar as clinging to traditional, non-liberatory, and patriarchal cultures (Alicea).

Within the context of the violence of racism, girls from marginalized communities are often faced with systemic barriers around which they must negotiate their survival. They may choose to try to conform and assimilate, although this choice is often not available to them due to the exclusionary impact of racism and/or homophobia. On the other hand, the deviant characterization of their communities by the mainstream often forces them into silence as they are afraid to report experiences of violence for the fear of betraying their own communities (Burns; Razack). As Burns notes,

**Faced by racism,
and the
double dose
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of recourse.**

Our abuse has been hidden in our communities' refusal to acknowledge the pervasiveness of violence in our lives. This refusal is not maliciousness but a protective measure born of the legitimate fear that such information would be used as a weapon by the dominant culture. Our abuse has been hidden behind bravado and denials. The result is the creation of a climate of tolerance. (4)

A central issue here is the subtlety with which racism is communicated, and how it intersects with sexism to influence the lived reality of racialized girls.

Yet, it is critical to form a space whereby the specific kinds of violence that racialized girls experience can be discussed and analyzed. It is not enough to universalize their experiences within the category of "girls" or "women" (Tipper; Russell), or alternatively "youth" and "children." At the same time, focusing on culture fails to capture the structural forces of oppression that shape the lives of racialized and marginalized girls. A central issue here is the subtlety with which racism is communicated and naturalized, and how it intersects with sexism to influence the lived reality and strategies of survival of

racialized girls. As Kimberle Crenshaw notes, "Race and gender are two of the primary sites for the particular distribution of social resources that ends up with observable class differences" (97).

An analysis of how racism interlocks with other systems of domination to influence the life chances and reality of racialized girls requires acknowledging racism as a form of violence that is endemic and pervasive. Nevertheless, while it has become increasingly common to accept the structured inequality produced and reproduced by sexism, the same does not hold true for racism. Thus, rather than accepting racism as a structure of domination, similar to sexism, and as arising from a legacy of colonialism, the reality of racism has to be "proven" continually (Bannerji 1987; 1993). In part, this denial of racism is formed and informed by the dominant mediated discourses on race and racism which are powerfully communicated through the mass media.

The mass media, "race," and racism

The media play a critical role in communicating notions of "race" and racism. In effect, they help define these terms and locate them within the public imagination (Hall 1990; van Dijk, 1993). In the production and reproduction of social knowledge, the mainstream mass media are crucial vehicles in reinforcing hegemonic interpretations and interests (Cottle). Thus, how they frame

race and racism is both derived from and informed by social life, and reproduced in everyday talk and thought (Smitherman-Donaldson and van Dijk; van Dijk 1987).

Previous research has documented the ways in which Canadian mainstream media communicate notions of "race" and forward particular definitions of racism (Bannerji, 1986; Indra; Jiwani, 1993; Scanlon). These definitions explain racism as arising from ignorance, increasing immigration, and economic downturns (Jiwani 1993; see also van Dijk 1993). Such explanations are privileged through various discursive means so that they appear to be meaningful and resonate with everyday social reality. "Racists" are then defined as ignorant, uneducated, and usually rural-based individuals who at times are organized into hate groups (Jiwani, 1993). At the same time, "race" is represented by allusions to cultural differences and phenotypic differences where these can be readily observed (i.e., through film footage and pictures), and through Manichean oppositions which underscore these differences within the footage itself or in the presentation of the story (see also JanMohamed; Jiwani, 1998). It has been argued that the Canadian news media communicate race and racism by "omission and commission"—at times in a deliberate manner, and at other times, through strategic absence (Jiwani 1993).

Media frames—the erasure of race/racism

As the events leading to Virk's murder unfolded in the daily papers and television newscasts, the horror of what "girls do to other girls" was highlighted and quickly overshadowed the issue of male violence. In contrast to the numerous deaths of women by their spouses and ex-spouses, Reena's death was held up as symbol of how girls are not immune to committing acts of violence. Story after story in the daily papers covered the issue of teen girl violence, quoting research to support the main contention that girls are just as dangerous as boys.³ Even though existing research clearly links the issue of teen girl violence to the *internalization* of a dominant, patriarchal culture which values sex and power, this connection was trivialized if not side-stepped altogether (Artz; Joe and Chesney Lind). Additionally, counter evidence which demonstrates that only 3.83 per cent of violent crimes are committed by girls (Schramm) failed to hit the headlines in the same manner or intensity.

Headlines from *The Vancouver Sun* during this early period (November, 1997) framed the story in the following way: "Teenage girls and violence: The B.C. reality"; "Girls fighting marked by insults, rumours, gangs"; "Bulies: Dealing with threats in a child's life"; "Girls killing girls a sign of angry, empty lives." This last headline suggests that had girls followed a traditional (gender-based) lifestyle, their lives would not be so empty and frustrating. Throughout the coverage, the media dwell with puzzlement on the increasing violence of teenage

girls at a time when they were supposedly enjoying greater equality. Statistics indicating the growing number of girls graduating with honours, as compared to boys, were used to demonstrate this perplexing contradiction. Implicit throughout the news coverage was the sense that girls do not deserve to be violent because of the privileges they are now enjoying, and further, that girls are not used to the demands inherent in these privileges and therefore, can not cope, a disturbing echo of late nineteenth-century ideology.

At no time did the media provide any in-depth analysis of the violent nature of the dominant culture, or examine ways in which violent behaviour is internalized as a function of coping with a violent society. Nor did the media report on the kinds of violence to which girls are generally subjected to, or the differential impact of violence on girls and boys from different backgrounds. In fact, this kind of coverage only surfaced with the school murders in Littleton, U.S.A., and the subsequent copy-cat murder in Taber, Alberta (see for instance, *The Vancouver Sun* Special Issue on Teen Violence), where suddenly, boys who were considered marginalized became the objects of public sympathy and reporting.

While the dominant filter became one of girl-on-girl violence, this subsequently shifted, albeit slightly, towards a sustained coverage of schoolyard bullies, sprinkled with some sympathetic coverage of children who are marginalized in school because they do not fit peer-group normative standards. Aside from opinion pieces written by individuals, mostly South Asian, none of the news articles discussed the issue of racialization as it impacts on girls who are physically different by virtue of their skin colour, or the pressures of assimilation that racialized girls experience in attempting to fit within their peer group culture. Interestingly, in contrast to previous patterns of coverage observed in the news accounts of the stories of young racialized women, accounts which tended to focus on issues of cultural and intergenerational conflict (Jiwani 1992), the coverage of the Reena Virk murder did neither. Instead, the coverage continued to focus on girl-on-girl violence in the immediate aftermath of the murder.

Subsequent coverage of the court appearances and sentencing of the six girls who were charged, focused on Virk's inability to find acceptance in her peer culture, and once again, emphasized her weight and height as the major contributing factors. Despite her physical difference—as a racialized girl—there was no mention, save one, of the possible motive being racism. Instead, the stories repeatedly stressed her lack of “fit” and her overweight appearance. The implication was that had Reena Virk fit the normative standards, she would have been acceptable. Normative standards in this society imply a body which is thin, white, (or exotic and beautiful), able-bodied, heterosexual, and which conforms to accepted notions of female teenage behaviour.⁴ In essence, the victim is held responsible for her own fate. The issue of racism as a motive is

significantly absent in early media coverage and only surfaced two years later in the coverage of the trial of one of her attackers (Hall 1999a).

A brief interlude in the construction of the story occurred with the revelation that Virk had allegedly been sexual abused by a close family member. This underlined once again, her lack of “fit”—both within her familial culture and the external, dominant culture of her peers. The allegations were immediately denied in the detailed coverage of the eulogy delivered by an elder of the Jehovah's Witness church at her funeral. The denial was underscored by her mother's comments to reporters suggesting that Reena had been a troubled child. Journalistic accounts which stressed her inability to conform to her family's ethnic values, combined with the strict beliefs of the Jehovah Witness church, reinforced her mother's statements and helped locate the issue as one of intergenerational conflict, youth rebellion, and cultural conflict (Beatty and Pemberton; Dirk). However, despite this obvious location and familiar terrain, these lines of inquiry were never investigated in subsequent stories.

The allegations were reported again in a subsequent article which focused on a friend's disclosure of Virk's sexual abuse by a family member, but were not contextualized in reference to existing statistics on child sexual abuse and the links between violence in the home and running away from home (Kinnon and Hanvey).⁵ Aside from these subdominant motifs, the framework of the story remained that of the escalating girl-on-girl violence.

Not only was Virk's racialized identity erased, but there was a significant lack of attention paid to even the possibility that her death was racially motivated. Almost two years later, at the trial of one of her alleged murderers, Warren Glowatski, the issue of racism was brought up by one witness—Syreeta Hartley, his girlfriend (Hall 1999a). However, aside from the brief reporting of her testimony in the daily coverage of the trial, the issue itself was neither investigated by the media nor considered to be of importance by Justice Macaulay in his decision (*R. v Warren Paul Glowatski*, 1999). This absence occurred despite the hate crimes legislation available to the courts; existing documentation of the activity of hate groups in schools and colleges campuses (Prutzman; Sidel); existing studies which highlight the vulnerability of racialized girls to violence; or the racial connotations imbuing the acts of brutality to which Virk was subjected, as for example, the stubbing of a cigarette on her forehead—the place usually used to put a *bindi* which is a common practice among various South Asian cultures.

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The significant absence of any discussion or investigation of racism as a motive reflects not only a minimization of the violence of racism, but also its sheer taken-for-granted character as a non-problematic and unrecognizable element. As Hall (1990) and Essed point out, everyday racism is ingrained in the daily interactions of people of colour with the dominant society—it structures common sense reality and is thereby naturalized in an insidious way. Part of its naturalization arises from its taken-for-granted nature and embeddedness. The media's denial of racism corresponds with hegemonic definitions of racism as an activity confined to extreme hate groups, rather than as a system and structure of domination inherent in the very fabric of society and its institutions. Thus, even though Syreeta Hartley's testimony was explicit in highlighting the racial motivations of the murder, its import was minimized both by the media and the judge. As one journalist stated, "Syreeta Hartley said her former boyfriend told her that his involvement was partly motivated by racism. Virk was Indo-Canadian" (Hall 1999a: A5). The media also reported that Glowatski did not know Reena Virk and had never spoken to her.

At no time did the local or national media dwell upon or investigate the fact that Warren Glowatski had first bragged about picking a fight with a Native man (Hall 1999b). The issue of why he would first select a Native man as the target for his aggression remained unexamined and yet suggests the vulnerability of marginalized groups and the hierarchy in which they are positioned. The reporting implies that it is much easier to beat a Native man and get away with it, than it is to beat up a white male. The value of difference is thus communicated by allusion and association.

The dominant framing of "Other" cultures as deviant is naturalized and taken for granted by the dominant media, and tends to be used strategically to underline the "unassimilable character" of immigrant communities (Jiwani 1992). However, in the case of Reena Virk, there was a significant absence of any kind of cultural framing. It could be argued that the dominant media have become more sensitized to issues of cultural representations. Alternatively, the media's reluctance to use a cultural frame may be derived from the possibility that some of the girls involved in the first fight were themselves of South Asian origin. This in itself does not negate the reality that many members of a racialized community internalize the normative values and behaviours of the dominant society and reject identifiers and people of their communities. In fact, the cultural frame would have allowed the media to continue a noted tradition—that of portraying racialized communities as being sites of conflict and disturbance created by their own members (Entman; Indra). It can be argued that in this particular instance, the construction of girl-on-girl violence became a dominant filter as it better served masculinist hegemonic interests within a contextual climate of backlash against women. For the media to

have focused on culture at this point would, by necessity, have involved an examination of racism as predicated on Virk's exclusion from and marginalization by her peer group, as well as the defining characteristics which resulted in her "lack of fit." Organizing and translating information within this frame would thus have resulted in a confrontation with the reality of racism and its prevalence in Canadian society, as well as the vulnerability of racialized people to racially motivated violence.

As an elite institution, the media reproduces hegemonic values, and often does so by reporting on the decisions and perspectives of other elites (van Dijk 1993). In the case of Reena Virk, the accounts which were reported on a sustained basis—each story referenced the other thereby resulting in a cumulative stock of knowledge—tended to be based on the reports or announcements of other elites. These included academics, police, and judges. Alternative interpretations based on the views of advocates were significantly absent, the exception being those cases where individuals wrote opinion pieces which were subsequently published. Thus, the complete absence of any mention of racism in Judge Macaulay's sentencing decision was echoed in the news coverage and served to secure his view of the case as the dominant and preferred interpretation—that the murder was the result of violent intent, but an intent that was unconnected to racism, sexism, or a combination thereof.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the Canadian print media continue to favour and forward interpretations of race and racism which resonate with elite definitions and which reinforce hegemonic interests. In the case of Reena Virk, the critical issues facing racialized girls were never examined by the media, nor was the issue of racism dealt with in any substantive manner. Rather, as with issues concerning child abuse, racism was relegated to the background and overshadowed by stories regarding the increasing levels of girl-on-girl violence, and the inability of Reena Virk to "fit." Thus, the issue of racism was erased from the dominant discourse, and Reena Virk's identity as a racialized young woman, has been similarly erased in terms of its significance and contribution to her vulnerability and marginality. As a young woman of colour, she was visibly different, yet her difference was only understood in terms of her weight and height and her general "inability to fit." The issue of what she needed to "fit into" was never explored, nor were the assumptions underlying normative standards of beauty and behaviour for teenage girls interrogated. Yet these issues are central to highlighting the particular ways in which racism and sexism interact in shaping the lives of racialized girls, and in contributing to their marginalization and vulnerability to violence—both as girls and as racialized others. The erasure of race and racism in this story reinforced the

accepted stock of knowledge that racism is confined to the acts of organized hate groups. Thus, the structured nature of racism as a system of domination which informs everyday life and constrains the life chances of racialized peoples remains outside the dominant discourse, relegated to the margins.

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¹This composite is derived from the accounts presented in various newspapers and magazines over a two year period (1997-1999).

²For a discussion of racism and sexism within the school system, see Bourne *et al.*

³This analysis of news coverage is based on articles on the story of Reena Virk which were published in *The Vancouver Sun* during November and December in 1997. In addition, an electronic search of all articles appearing in Canadian newspapers pertaining to the decision in the Warren Glowatski trial were also examined.

⁴In their examination of girls' critique of schooling, Bourne *et al.* note that the South Asian girls in their focus groups commented on how their appearance is exoticized suggesting that this is one of the ways in which they are considered acceptable.

⁵In their review of the literature on violence against women, Kinnon and Hanvey note that, "60 to 70 per cent of runaways and 98 per cent of child prostitutes have a history of child abuse" (7).

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