

Report

Race and the Media: A Retrospective and Prospective Gaze

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, few Canadian studies documented representations of racial minority groups in the media (e.g., Indra, 1979, 1981; Karim & Sansom, 1991; Scanlon, 1977; Tator, 1990; Ungerliedier, 1991). Much of this work was activist-based and accessible only through journals and community media with an explicitly progressive mandate, including *Currents*, a publication of the Urban Alliance of Race Relations based in Toronto, and the various publications of the Committee for Racial Justice based in Vancouver (e.g., Ginzberg, 1986; Khaki & Prasad, 1988; Mouammar, 1986; Tator, 1983, 1984). The federal government had issued its guidelines concerning the representation of minorities in government publications, and a government task force had examined the issue and made recommendations pertaining to all Canadian media (Canada, House of Commons, 1984; Canada, Secretary of State, 1988). Since then, there has been a proliferation of studies examining issues of racial representations in the Canadian media. Minelle Mahtani's (2001) review of the literature in the area succinctly summarizes the major studies and relevant findings. Yet unlike in the 1990s, contemporary research is not as grounded in community activism nor explicitly linked to advocacy and social movements. Nevertheless, some of the issues that have been charted in contemporary media studies do tackle problems concerning racial minority representations from a political perspective—a perspective that to a certain extent is rooted in the growing concern over the media concentration that currently characterizes the Canadian media landscape and limits the exposure of subjugated and alternative discourses (Hackett, Gruneau, Gutstein, Gibson, & NewsWatch Canada, 2000; Winter, 1997, 2002).

One could argue that contemporary representations of minority groups have also shifted in keeping with the emergence of “modern” or “new” racism (Entman, 1990; Gilroy, 1991). Thus, contemporary racism has itself evolved into a more sophisticated form that can only be deciphered by referring to the inferential bases of the propositions being advanced. Stuart Hall calls this “inferential racism,” which he describes as “those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional,’ which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned

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assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which these statements are grounded” (Hall, 1990, pp. 12-13). Such inferences are most explicit when a mediated text is subjected to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1987; 1991).

Although critical discourse analysis has been a method of choice among most researchers working in this area (e.g., Harding, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2002; Karim, 2000; Steckley, 2003), what has often been lacking is a comparative approach. Since media representations circulate within an economy of representations, it makes sense from a semiotic and critical discourse perspective to contrast and compare how these representations make “sense.” In other words, the potency of a given representation achieves its semiotic power from its contrast to both the absences and the presences of other symbols around it as well as from the intertextual references that are invoked. A comparative approach, I suggest, allows one to take into consideration the hierarchies of power and legitimacy that inhere in the representational economy within media texts as well as to embrace the nuanced complexity of intersecting and interlocking relations between different groups (see, for instance, Fleras & Elliot, 1996; Razack, 1998).

In her pioneering work in this area, Doreen Indra (1979, 1981) undertook such a comparative examination, focusing on the representations of South Asians in the mainstream press in British Columbia. Her research encompassed a historical analysis of these representations, covering a period of seven decades—a major feat in itself. However, what is invaluable about her research is its analysis of the hierarchy of representations that prevailed in Vancouver’s newspapers, which positioned various groups according to their preferred-ness and favourability to the media and, by corollary, the dominant powers. The linkage between representations and the material realities of these groups with respect to those who were permitted into the nation and those groups who were “tolerated” for their cheap labour was thus made clearer and allowed researchers to appreciate the grounded nature of such representations.

However, such an approach requires, by default, a comparative analysis. And this seems to be a thorn of contention. On the one hand, some argue that a comparative analysis of how different groups are treated necessarily involves a kind of distillation of group features/characteristics and identities that veer toward essentialism. On the other hand, without the researcher taking a comparative stance, the differences and similarities between groups are not as strikingly evident and the grounds for “better” or equitable treatment cannot be made in an effective manner. More importantly, a comparative analysis affords a more dynamic perspective in that it begins with a point of departure rooted in the fluidity of subjectivities, their multiplicity, and their interpellation within structures and historical legacies of domination.

Interestingly, comparative studies of media representations do exist, but oftentimes the comparison is an absent, or implicit, White standard. Thus, in examining representations of heroines in popular television fare, I have often utilized this implicit White standard vis-à-vis the treatment or representation of female heroines of colour (e.g., Jiwani, 2005). In making this comparison more

explicit, I find that I am able to arrive at a deeper, more nuanced analysis that foregrounds the interlocking aspect within the economy of representations (as, for example, in my comparison of Reena Virk, a 15-year-old victim of murder, to one of her killers, Kelly Ellard, a White teenage girl at the time the crime took place). This type of analysis highlights how both the victim's and the perpetrator's representations cohere within a patriarchal framework that privileges particular interpretations of girls and young women (Jiwani, 2006), an organizing framework that is akin to what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) refers to as the "matrix of domination."

In my more recent work, I have been comparing representations of different groups of victims, with the aim of delineating what determines a victim's "worthiness." This research has involved a comparison of Aboriginal women's representations with those of Afghan women in the *Globe and Mail* over a seven-year period (Jiwani, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). The research was spurred by my interest in gendered narratives of war, wherein I discovered that, contrary to all other preconceptions, Afghan women were actually portrayed as heroic women, able to transcend the challenges they encountered. In contrast, Aboriginal women were stereotypically portrayed in a negative fashion; their representations tended to fit into the mould of the undeserving and culpable victims (see also Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, & Benoit, 2006; Razack, 2002). The focus on Aboriginal women victims was driven by my work on missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, which has been rooted in community advocacy initiatives (Jiwani & Young, 2006). Without such exposure to Aboriginal representations, it would not have been possible, at least for me, to arrive at an analysis of discourses of deservedness as articulated in press coverage.

My current research adopts a comparative approach. Drawing from my interests in and previous work on women victims of domestic violence, this project aims to map out how different female victims of femicide are constructed in relation to each other. In other words, how do race and gender intersect and interlock in the economy of representations circulating in the news media? And what are the regimes of truth surrounding their status as worthy/unworthy victims deserving or undeserving of their fate? In doing this research, my intent is to compare these representations within national discourses—how different national newspapers articulate and construct moral stories about violence perpetrated against different groups of women. My interest in this research is based on the prolific and sensational coverage accorded to "different" culturalized forms of femicide (e.g., honour killings) (see Narayan, 1997; Razack, 2004) and attention accorded to celebrity femicides, as opposed to the more mundane acts of everyday violence against women (Carter, 1998; Jermyn, 2001; Stabile, 2006; Wilcox, 2005). My research is also inspired by criminologist Scott Wortley's (2002) analysis of the relative neglect of Black female victims of crime compared to White female victims in Canadian press coverage. Underpinning this project is the question regarding media ethics and quality of coverage. What would constitute ethical coverage of victims of femicide? Determining the contours and texture of such coverage has practical implications in alleviating the stereotypes constraining and defining racialized groups as prone to particular kinds of crime (Jiwani, 2002).

Clearly, representations are governed by and framed within a context; hence, when the context changes, representations change. Yet it is the material implications of representations that we need to attend to if we are to map the continually evolving grammar of race (Hall, 1990). In looking back and charting a course ahead, it would seem necessary to heed community concerns if we are to mindfully address issues of representations in terms of their material and social implications. In that regard, it is well enough time to stop debating the relevance of race (especially in this climate where the current ethos is one of society as being “post-race”) and instead deal with questions of power—power that is grounded in a racialized and gendered economy and reproduced in mediated landscapes that surround us.

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