

Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse

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Abstract: While current mainstream media stories oscillate between Canadian troops in Afghanistan attempting to restore safety and democracy and the imminent threat of a war on terror on domestic soil, a sorely neglected story concerns the continued war on women in Canada. In this paper, we look at one site of this war—the case of missing and murdered women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Employing a frame analysis, we analyze 128 articles from *The Vancouver Sun* published between 2001 and 2006. We argue that prevailing and historically entrenched stereotypes about women, Aboriginality, and sex-trade work continue to demarcate the boundaries of ‘respectability’ and degeneracy, interlocking in ways that situate these women’s lives, even after death, in the margins.

Résumé : Les reportages qui font la une présentent soit les troupes canadiennes postées en Afghanistan tentant de rétablir la sécurité et la démocratie, soit la menace imminente d’une guerre contre la terreur en sol domestique. Il est pourtant une histoire délibérément occultée : la guerre sans fin que subissent les femmes au Canada. Cet article explore une facette de cette guerre—celle des femmes disparues et assassinées du Downtown Eastside de Vancouver. Conduite à partir d’une méthodologie analytique, cette étude compile 128 articles tirés du *Vancouver Sun* entre 2001 et 2006. Notre enquête révèle que les stéréotypes historiquement ancrés prévalant aux sujets des femmes, Autochtones et travailleuses du sexe ne cessent de démarquer les limites entre « respectabilité » et dépravation, de manière telle que même décédées la vie de ces femmes se situe en marge.

Keywords: Violence against women; News discourse; Aboriginality; Race; Racialized and sexualized violence; Missing women; Marginality; Sex-trade work; Media representations

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When the terrain is sexual violence, racism and sexism interlock in particularly nasty ways. These two systems operate through each other so that sexual violence, as well as women's narratives of resistance to sexual violence, cannot be understood outside of colonialism and today's ongoing racism and genocide. When women from marginalized communities speak out about sexual violence, we are naming something infinitely broader than what men do to women within our communities, an interlocking analysis that has most often been articulated by Aboriginal women.

—Sherene Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye* (1998a, p. 59)

A recent news article in *The Vancouver Sun* announced that one of Vancouver's "missing" women had been found (Culbert, 2006). That brought the count down to 67 women who have disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Over the past 30 years, approximately 100 women in British Columbia alone have gone missing. In the Hazelton-Houston-Burns Lake corridor—or the "Highway of Tears," as the Aboriginal women of the region have called it—police say nine young women and girls have disappeared, while a citizens' report suggests that the number may be as high as 30 (Hume, 2006). If we count women missing across the country, the numbers skyrocket. Yet, in comparison with the events "out there" dominating the international scene and their links here in the homeland, little attention has been paid to the phenomenon of missing women in the mainstream media.

Our location informing this paper draws from our position as feminist researchers investigating the terrain of racialized and sexualized violence and its mediations. Our point of departure is that violence against women constitutes a gendered war that remains peripheral to the public sphere constructed by the mass media. In using the war metaphor, we borrow from anti-violence activists as well as existing feminist scholarship (e.g., The Cultural Memory Group, 2006; Howe, 1997; Lakeman, 2005), with the intent of underscoring the links between wars fought in the private realm of domesticity in the home and the nation and those fought in the public theatre of international relations. We posit that if 100 Canadian soldiers were killed in Afghanistan, there would be a national outcry that would in turn result in major policy changes. Existing statistics reflect the gendered nature of this war, showing that more women than men are killed in spousal homicides (67 women, compared with 16 men, in 2002); that women experience a higher rate of criminal harassment, and that teenaged girls are at a greater risk of sexual violence (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2004). Clearly, some groups of women are more vulnerable than others. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) estimates that in the last 20 years, more than 500 Aboriginal women have gone missing, many of them as victims of sexual violence (Amnesty International, 2004).

In this paper, we focus on five years (2001-2006) of print media coverage of the missing women case, which has become the largest-known serial-murder case in Canada. We highlight the various patterns that characterize the existing coverage. Our focus is on the frames utilized by the mainstream media in covering the issue, particularly how hegemonic discourses about Aboriginality and prostitution play out within the larger framework of reporting on violence against women. Our

intent is not only to uncover the discursive practices used by news media in marginalizing Aboriginal women specifically and violence against women in general, but also to foreground how these cases get reduced to the actions of single men who are constructed as monsters (Lakeman, 2005) and to particular women's naturalized susceptibility to violence.

Background on the missing women

In 1998 and 1999, *Vancouver Sun* reporter Lindsay Kines wrote the first extensive series of articles on women who had started to go missing since 1978 in the city's Downtown Eastside, more commonly known as the "poorest postal code" in the country. The stories regarding the missing women highlighted individual cases of women who had seemingly "disappeared" (Kines, 1999; McDonald, 2003). This early coverage pointed to a recurring pattern—that the number of missing women was increasing. Subsequent stories suggested that the disappearances might be linked to a serial killer, despite the fact that the Vancouver Police Department consistently refused to acknowledge that possibility explicitly. For example, in a news story that ran at the time, Kines cited Constable Anne Drennan, the Vancouver Police Department's media liaison officer: "Drennan said there is no indication that a serial killer is preying on the women. Detectives also have to investigate the possibility of a suicide or drug overdose that has gone undiscovered, or that the women were killed in a dispute over drugs" (Kines, 1998, A1).

In her analysis of this period of coverage, Pitman (2002) argues that three outcomes dominated early press accounts. First, police inefficiency was highlighted by the journalists and supported by the missing women's family and friends. Second, a legitimacy crisis erupted, causing the mayor to embrace a law-and-order approach that culminated in the offering of a \$100,000 reward for information. Third, coverage ensued as a result of the telecast of the story on an episode of *America's Most Wanted* in 1999. The episode re-inserted traditional explanations cohering around the presence of a serial killer, bad neighbourhoods, and particular women's increased vulnerability to violence.

Frustrated by the lack of attention or follow-up regarding the missing women, Kines, along with reporters Kim Bolan and Lori Culbert, launched a four-month investigation into the missing women case. In 2001, *The Vancouver Sun* published an 11-part series of articles detailing the results of their investigation (see www.missingpeople.net). Despite the sympathetic coverage and tone of public accountability that this early coverage sought to impart, the stories underscored stereotypical portrayals of the Downtown Eastside as an area of "mean streets" and the women working in those streets as drug-addicted sex workers.¹ It was often noted that "many" of the women were Aboriginal. These stereotypical representations were commonplace, as is evident, for example, in the coverage devoted to the murder of April Roech, wherein Roech was constructed as "every" missing woman: "She had much in common with the women on that list. She was battling a drug problem as were others. She was known to work as a prostitute, as were they" (Kines, 2001). Police reaction and response to the investigation dominated most of this coverage, and their arguments re-inscribed the prevailing stereotypical view of these women as itinerant workers—always on the move and hence culpable in their murders or disappearances. According to detective Garry

Vath, “There’s no body. There’s no DNA. There’s no fingerprints. There’s no evidence left by the suspect because you don’t know where it happened. Now, where do you start with that? It’s very difficult obviously” (Kines, 2001). A poster circulated by the police and press at the time featured mug shots of the missing women—although photos of some of the women were not available and were therefore left blank. Nonetheless, these close-cropped shots not only reinforced the women’s association with criminality (England, 2004), but also highlighted the Aboriginal heritage of many of the missing women.

Their Aboriginal status further entrenched the view that many of these missing women were located beyond the pale of civilized society—peripatetic wanderers forever in search of the latest fix and with no sense of responsibility. Indeed, Geraldine Pratt argues that “[t]here has been a long history in Canada of assuming that aboriginals and cities are mutually exclusive. It is often assumed that aboriginals in the cities are merely transient, en route to their legislated ‘camp’, which is the Indian reserve” (2005, p. 1059). Pratt notes that 39 of the 67 missing women are Aboriginal. Yet Aboriginality remained a persistent, though undercurrent, theme throughout the coverage.

By February 2002, Robert William Pickton had been identified by the police as the person responsible for the murders of 15 of the missing women. By 2006, he was charged with the murders of 26 of the missing women.

On representations

Publicly mediated accounts of women who are murdered or missing, of Aboriginal women, and of sex-trade workers intersect in this coverage. For this reason, it is appropriate that we examine some of the relevant literature that identifies the threads that interlock and intersect to privilege common-sense interpretations of the story.

In her influential paper on the murder of Pamela George, a Salteaux woman in Regina, Sherene Razack makes the argument that sexualized violence against racialized others and, more particularly, against Aboriginal women is a hallmark of White settler societies such as Canada. Citing historical accounts, Razack notes, “Newspaper records of the nineteenth century indicate that there was a conflation of Aboriginal woman and prostitute and an accompanying belief that when they encountered violence, Aboriginal women simply got what they deserved. Police seldom intervened, even when the victims’ cries could be clearly heard” (2002, p. 130). This conflation can be traced to the stereotypical views of Aboriginal status. Indeed, as Robert Harding (2006) notes in a recent article, the tendency of the news media has been to consistently portray Aboriginal peoples as childlike, requiring the benevolence of the state and other Canadians to push them toward progress. When demonstrating agency, as in land claims issues, or forwarding an alternative interpretation, Aboriginal representations tend to be circumscribed within a “militant” frame—as signifying an overdemanding, unreasonable, and highly emotional people. This of course is in stark contrast to how members of the dominant society are portrayed—as reasonable, law-abiding, rational, and above all, benevolent. Harding suggests that “associating Aboriginal people with violence and criminality is an argumentative ploy that has been used historically to discredit Aboriginal people and causes in news discourse” (2006, p. 221).

However, unlike the case of Aboriginal men, Aboriginal women's representations tend to be marked by what Debbie Wise Harris has called "strategic silences" (1991, p. 16). The women fail to appear as active agents or are silenced as victims. Conditions influencing their lives or their movement from reserves to urban neighbourhoods are scarcely recounted in a manner that is reflective of Canada's colonial past and its neo-colonization of Aboriginal peoples. Such a history is well documented (see, for example, Amnesty International, 2004; Lawrence, 2002; McIvor, 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Stevenson, 1999). These strategic silences contribute to representations of Aboriginal women who are sex workers as deserving of violence, as evident in the case of Pamela George. One could argue, as has Jennifer England (2004), that representations of Aboriginal women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside oscillate between invisibility and hypervisibility: invisible as victims of violence and hypervisible as deviant bodies. This space of criminality is described by the producer of a true-crime documentary as an "untamed frontier: a place of good guys, cowboy cops and outlaw addicts"—a place, England argues, in which Aboriginal women are both marked and unmarked (2004, p. 301). Their visibility stems from their race, class, and gender, which become the signifiers of their deviance. Police surveillance underpinned by racist stereotypes results in the ceaseless interrogation and criminalization of these women. Yet, as Jennifer England reasons, Aboriginal women are also rendered invisible, which is most apparent in the inaction and lack of attention paid to their concerns by the police or other state authorities and in the erasure of their histories as colonized others.

Gail Mason's (2002) work on violence as "spectacle" is also relevant in this interpretation, insofar as the constant police surveillance of poor areas such as Vancouver's Downtown Eastside constitutes a panopticon of power, defining which women are visible and which remain invisible or "back-lit" within the penumbra of the panopticon. This definition is predicated on regimes of difference that designate the women's subject positions as poor, Aboriginal sex-trade workers, and drug addicts. Violence then becomes a way of knowing and gazing at these women. As Mason argues,

This is not so much because violence is something we observe, but, more, because violence is a mechanism through which we distinguish and observe other things. In other words, violence is more than a practice that acts upon individual subjects to inflict harm and injury. It is, metaphorically speaking, also a way of looking at these subjects. (2002, p. 11)

Razack's work on the conflation of Aboriginal women and sex workers also supports an understanding of Aboriginal bodies, and bodies of sex workers in particular, as marginalized and contained in "zones of degeneracy." Such zones, Razack argues, serve a strategic function. They enable hegemonic masculinities to remain intact, if not revitalized, after a sojourn into degenerate zones. More importantly, such zones allow zones of respectability to exist in tandem. It is these anomalous zones of prostitution that allow men to temporarily abandon societal norms, but according to Razack, once they "leave the space of degeneracy, having survived it unscathed, they return to respectability. In this way, prostitution reaffirms not only the hierarchies of gender but also of class, race, and sexual orientation" (1998b, p. 357).

Clearly, not only are areas such as the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver created as degenerate zones that can be frequented with impunity by men, but such zones are also designed to demarcate degenerate bodies—those that society deems as being unwanted, unmissed, and ultimately disposable (Lowman, 2000).² More importantly, though, these zones permit others to be defined as respectable. A key discursive feature by which the two are kept separate yet interdependent is the association of prostitution with contagion and contamination (Razack, 1998b). The Downtown Eastside, as Pitman (2002) observes, fits the conception of a “sin city,” which she argues forms “the counterpart of the ‘sim city’ (or sustainable urban region) vision that governed planning and development discourse in Vancouver” (p. 175).

Lisa McLaughlin’s (1991) research on discourses of prostitution in media narratives offers another way in which respectability is delineated, in this case through a binary between the prostitute and the good, “virtuous” woman. While McLaughlin’s analysis deals primarily with popular television programming, her description of the traditional narrative arc of these shows highlights a relevant central motif demarcating bodies that can or should be saved from those that are considered beyond redemption. Mothers, wives, and daughters—or traditionally “virtuous” women—are worth saving. Sex workers, however, are set up in opposition to these women within the television narratives, constituting an ambivalent sign, being both good and bad. As runaways and throwaways of society, these women are not worth saving, or they are only worth saving if the benevolent social forces deem it is in society’s interest to rescue those “good” parts inherent in these “bad” women.

Noteworthy at this point are the gendered dichotomies represented in mediated discourses. Not only do sex workers signify the underside of respectability, but their location symbolizes the expression of a sanctioned sexuality—outside the normative boundaries of heterosexual marriage. If, as Razack points out, bourgeois notions of masculinity depend on sojourns into zones of degeneracy, then the bodies located in such zones become the legitimized vehicles for reproduction of hegemonic heterosexuality. That such bodies are racialized and othered is indicative of how race, class, and sexuality intersect and interlock to sustain hegemonic power.

Mediations of racialized and gendered violence

A “hierarchy of crime” operates within most newsrooms with respect to news norms and practices surrounding violence (Meyers, 1994; 1997). Homicide tops this hierarchy; a story is more newsworthy if the crimes are committed by one person (Marsh, 1991; Mott, 1999; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). In other words, serial killers, or the possibility of a serial killer out there, demand more attention than the single case of domestic violence that results in the murder of a woman and her children (Mott, 1999). Naturally, other criteria such as locality, relevance, timeliness, and immediacy also prevail in determining what gets counted as news worth telling (Bennett, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Nevertheless, cases involving violence against women, such as incidents of domestic violence, tend to receive a one-dimensional kind of coverage (Carter,

1998; Meyers, 1994; Wykes, 1998). The coverage, when it does exist, tends to focus on the male perpetrators as aberrant examples of masculinity, offering a psychological and individualized portrayal of their crimes (see also Jiwani, 2006).

This is not to suggest that all women are treated in the same way by the news media. Violent crimes committed against women of colour are, as the literature suggests, reported somewhat differently. As Scott Wortley (2002) has demonstrated, when Black women are victims of crime, their stories rarely make it to the front page; they are confined to the back pages or omitted from mention altogether. Yet when Black men are perpetrators of crime, their stories splash the front pages of the news. Some bodies, Wortley suggests, are seen to have an inherent proclivity to crime; a predisposition that is directly tied to race. In other cases, the victim and the story are “de-raced.” For example, in an analysis of the murder of Reena Virk, a 14-year-old South Asian girl, Yasmin Jiwani makes the argument that when racialized bodies are featured as victims of crime, the issue of racism as a factor influencing the crime is often erased in news discourse. Virk’s status as a racialized other was erased. Instead, the media focused on her gender and framed her murder as a case of “girl-on-girl” violence; a frame that reinforced a backlash against women (Jiwani, 1999).

While some bodies are erased in news accounts, others, as Meyers (2004) suggests, are seen to be inherently blameworthy. In a discourse analysis of television news coverage of the rape of African-American women during the popular Freaknik annual event in Atlanta, Meyers demonstrates how normative and stereotypical constructions of African-American women texture these news accounts. Dominant stereotypes of African-American women as jezebels, welfare cheats, and matriarchs were invoked in the coverage, in effect “blaming the victim” and minimizing the violence these women experienced (2004, p. 113). This “blaming the victim” approach is also evident in news coverage of racialized women in Canada. Razack (1998a) discusses how violence perpetrated against women of colour is “culturalized,” such that its presence is explained away as resulting from traditions particular to the ethnic culture within which women are located.

If, as the studies cited above indicate, violence against women tends to be treated as atypical instances symptomatic of women who “ask for it,” then violence against sex workers, who are generally regarded as society’s “others,” tends to cast them as even more blameworthy—blaming them for being in the wrong place and doing the wrong kind of work. Coverage of women who are racialized others also conforms to these societal constructions—invoking and re-inscribing popular stereotypes of these women as being hypersexual, thereby minimizing the reality of the violence done to their bodies (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1982). Ideologically, such stereotypes reinforce middle-class notions of propriety and hegemonic femininity. As Pitman (2002) demonstrates, even in the early coverage of the missing women case, which tended to be generally sympathetic to the women, the final frame re-inserted the template of “Jack the Ripper” as the perpetrator of such violence. She argues that invoking this template re-inscribed “a long-standing morality tale” (p. 179) warning young White women to stay out of “bad neighbourhoods (p. 179).” Pitman bases her conclusions on a media analysis of the six-minute segment on the missing women that aired on *America’s Most*

Wanted. The telecast erased the racialized character of the missing women, inserting a White woman to replace missing Aboriginal women, reminding us once again of the invisibility of Aboriginal women.

What needs to be emphasized is the interlocking nature of these representations. Just as the “good” woman is contrasted with the “bad” woman, so the racialized body is contrasted with the dominant, White body, wherein one occupies the spotlight of crime, whereas the other is seen as inhabiting the law-abiding shadow of the dominant society. And just as the figure of the sex worker constitutes the other half of the representation of the virgin or pure woman, so are victims of crime posited as either deserving or undeserving of blame (see also Best, 1990) and thereby rendered visible or invisible.

What we wish to underscore here is the way in which a moral and racialized economy of representations works to privilege dominant societal norms (Jiwani, 2006). Within this economy, racialized status, such as Aboriginality, interlocks with prostitution to position these women in the lower echelon of the moral order. In the realm of representations, prostitution and Aboriginality mark these women as missing, but as naturally so—the stereotypical attributes ascribed to both these positions feed into and reproduce common-sense notions of itinerant and irresponsible behaviour, which is then seen as naturally inviting victimization. And of course, being located in zones of degeneracy makes these women all the more vulnerable to violence—a violence that is naturalized and divested of its structural underpinnings.

Based on this theoretical trajectory, our intent was to examine the kinds of dominant and counterframes that emerged in the news coverage that made this issue intelligible to audiences.

Framing, according to Entman, “entails *selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution*” (2003, p. 417). Entman further argues that “[t]hose frames that employ more culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence. They use words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say *noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged*” (p. 417).

Using the terms “missing women,” “Pickton,” and “*The Vancouver Sun*,” a search of the Factiva database yielded a total of 145 stories that had appeared in *The Vancouver Sun* from 2002 to 2006. These included letters to the editor and articles that only briefly mentioned Pickton, as well as duplicates of stories. A Google search of websites referencing missing women netted the earlier 2001 investigative series covered in *The Vancouver Sun*. In total, 128 articles were examined. We excluded letters to the editor and stories that only mentioned the missing women in passing.

Drawing from Entman (2003) and Gitlin’s (1979; 1980) previous work on news frames, we analyzed our corpus of news coverage according to the frames and counterframes that were dominant. A frame that recurs throughout the coverage is that of the missing women being mostly Aboriginal, drug-addicted sex-trade workers. The counterframes that emerged from the corpus of accounts varied according to evolving events over the course of the story, but were also embedded in, as Pratt (2005)

suggests, prevailing representations that re-enacted gendered, racialized, and class-based understandings of the missing women case. These counterframes were identified on the basis of how they redefined the problem and the different interpretations of the events they offered. Thus, for example, although a key counterframe that emerged during the coverage challenged traditional and stereotypical depictions of the missing women as sex-trade workers and as Aboriginal women, this counterframe still succumbed to a dominant hegemonic frame that made these women more intelligible, and hence acceptable, through their positioning in “respectable” societal roles—as mothers, daughters, and sisters.

Framing missing women

The investigative series conducted by *Vancouver Sun* reporters Lindsay Kines, Kim Bolan, and Lori Culbert in 2001 heightened public attention to women missing from the Downtown Eastside. What is most interesting about this coverage is that it tended to focus, albeit mildly, on ineffective police action in responding to the growing number of missing women. For example, in a story that ran on September 22 as part of this investigative series, the lead opens with, “The original Vancouver city police investigation of missing women on the Downtown Eastside was assigned to inexperienced and overworked officers without the time or resources to do a thorough job, the *Vancouver Sun* has learned” (Kines, Bolan, & Culbert, 2001). This is similar to media coverage of the 1993 murder of two young women in Ontario by Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, in which ineffective police and criminal justice system action became one of the main frames almost at the outset of the girls’ disappearances (McGillivray, 1998), only giving way to other frames, such as gender treason and Homolka as the ultimate betrayer of hegemonic femininity, when the horrors of the crime were revealed (Faith & Jiwani, 2002).

Returning to the missing women case, according to the Missing People website, it was the persistence of journalists Kines, Bolan, and Culbert in 2001 that resulted in the identification of 45 missing women, as opposed to the official police list, which had named only 27 women. The reporters not only uncovered the names of other missing women, but also reported families’ concerns about how the police refused to record their daughters, sisters, and mothers as missing. Indeed, in early coverage of the case, the reporters were able to investigate a story that clearly deals with a marginalized and traditionally gendered population, which is unusual as crime-news norms are considered the most “masculinist” example of media practices (van Zoonen, 1998; Young, 2005). The resulting coverage is critical of the police and tends to utilize the accessed voices of families and friends of the women who are missing. Thus, throughout this early coverage, while most of the stories mention the women as sex-trade workers who worked in the Downtown Eastside to support their lifestyles, this is communicated in more sympathetic ways. The women are restored a sense of humanity and are defined as individuals from caring families. Witness, for example, this statement quoted by an advocate from the Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education society (PACE): “Whose daughter, whose sister, whose mother has to get abducted before this becomes a priority?” (Culbert, Kines, & Bolan, 2001). Yet, although the accessed voice is critical, it nonetheless positions these women in distinctly

defined gendered terms. The headline of the story also squarely places these women within the dominant frame: "Investigation Turns up Startling New Numbers. Police to Announce Expanded Probe. Women Have History of Drugs, Prostitution and Links to Downtown Eastside" (Culbert, Kines, & Bolan, 2001).

Pitman's (2002) analysis suggests that the prior coverage in 1998 and 1999 may be a contributing factor to this sympathetic coverage. She notes that during the formative period of the coverage, a community had developed between activists, family members of the missing women, and journalists covering the case. Further, the involvement of a White middle-class family from the west side of the city, whose daughter Sarah de Vries was also among the missing women (de Vries, 2003), clearly helped bridge the divide between the Downtown Eastside and the rest of the city.

As noted earlier, the dominant filter in these early stories involves Aboriginality and deviant sexuality, along with police inadequacy and inefficiency. One could argue that these early stories represent a case of frame parity—the dominant frame of the police dismissing these women on the basis of their lifestyle and Aboriginality, versus the frame imposed by the journalists regarding the inefficacy of the police response and treatment. An editorial during this period clearly communicates this counterframe, emphasizing a humanistic interpretation of societal responsibility: "Virtually all our social and political institutions are guilty of marginalizing 'junkies' and 'whores.' And all our institutions—the police most particularly, where these disappeared women are concerned—must never forget that every human life really matters" ("The lesson is: every human life really matters," 2001).

From an ideological perspective, frame parity in this instance still fulfills the ideological labour of reinforcing hegemonic values. The description of the missing women as mothers, daughters, and sisters serves a twofold function. On the one hand, it makes these women more like "us." It rescues them from a place of degeneracy to a zone of normality. On the other hand, it conforms to the dominant hegemonic values, in that the only women who can be rescued or are worth saving are mothers, daughters, and sisters—women like us. Making them like "us" is a discursive move designed to privilege their deservedness both in terms of police intervention and societal recognition. In these stories, we hear about women who read the newspapers, are aware of what is going on, have a community of support, and regularly maintain their connections with their homes and families. However, we hear little about these women's lives in the Downtown Eastside—how they survive, the lack of facilities that characterize the area, and the dangers to which they are daily subjected, both from the police and from the men who frequent the area. Not only are their materialities often unacknowledged, but their histories and the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism are erased in ways similar to those described by England (2004) in her analysis of a documentary on drug addiction and policing in the Downtown Eastside. Yet when this content does appear, it is clearly subordinated to the headlines of the stories, as identified above—headlines which, as van Dijk (1993) points out, act as cognitive organizers re-entrenching the dominant frame.

Nevertheless, this early coverage was successful in both mounting and repre-

senting growing public criticism of the inefficiency and lack of police action. For example, despite the fact that local police forces created an investigative team to review the files of what were then 31 missing women in 1998, it took until the 2001 series in *The Vancouver Sun* to prod police into acknowledging the existence of more names on the growing list of missing women (Young & Pritchard, in press).

By early 2002, Robert William Pickton was identified as the perpetrator of many of the missing women's murders. And as befits most coverage of crime stories involving violence against women, the media's focus shifted to Pickton, his family, and his property. DNA had been found on his farm, and as a result, the sensationalist coverage of the crime drama began in earnest.

There are several aspects of the coverage that deserve mention here. Robert Pickton helped run a family farm that included a number of different animals together with pigs. He and his brother also operated a non-profit organization, based at the farm, which was called the Piggy Palace Good Times Society. The conflation between the society's name, the farm itself, and Pickton's sale of roasted pigs to friends and family resulted in the media's dubbing of the farm as the "pig farm"—despite the fact that it was not a commercial hog-farming operation—and of Pickton as a pig farmer. For example, a headline that ran in early 2002 stated, "Search of pig farm yields missing women's ID: Robert Pickton a person of interest since 1998" (Kines & Bolan, 2002). The term "pig" evokes a lexical history and/or imagery that referred to sex workers from the medieval period to early 20th century Canada and would likely resonate with audiences on an implicit level—once again re-inscribing these women as others (Pearson, 2004; Roberts & Groenendijk, 2004). Indeed, it is the description "pig farmer" and a photograph of Pickton with wild, stringy hair and a blank stare that has emerged as the dominant representation signifying him as the quintessential "chauvinist pig." Such a representation suggests an aberrant masculinity more in line with a rural or "hillbilly" culture, which is slowly being eradicated as urban sprawl subsumes former agricultural lands in the Greater Vancouver area. This positioning of Pickton calls on audiences to make a number of conceptual leaps that reinforce masculine hegemony, in that only deviant males commit such heinous sexual acts (Consalvo, 2003). Taken together, these representations appear to mitigate his responsibility for his actions (and ignore the involvement of others) by focusing on aspects of his mental health or by ignoring the particular combination of socio-economic and political factors that helped lead to these crimes. Such representations also invoke deeply embedded cultural tropes, creating a discursive package that makes sense of the unthinkable and allows audiences to attribute responsibility accordingly. It also justifies collective societal inaction, with "action" understood in an Arendtian manner as the possibility to "act in concert" to effect change (Arendt, 1998).

Coupled with personal details about Pickton, family, and friends, the bulk of the coverage in 2002 focused on the police's activities, this time concentrating on the work of a joint task force involving the Vancouver Police Department and the RCMP's Division "E." This coverage included reports of the weekly or, in some cases, biweekly police news conferences, the enumeration of police personnel and

forensic investigators on Pickton's farm, and the collection of mounting evidence accompanied by aerial shots of the farm.

Beginning in 2002, *The Vancouver Sun* released a number of stories about Pickton having been charged with an assault in 1997. Even here, the victim's status was ideologically sealed, as is evident in the description included in the story:

The alleged stabbing of a downtown Eastside drug user in 1997 was one of the key incidents that led police to consider Robert Pickton as a person of interest in the disappearance of sex-trade workers. But for reasons that have yet to be explained, the charges—including attempted murder and aggravated assault—against Pickton were dropped less than a year after the incident took place. What police, medical experts and crown prosecutors know is that Wendy Lyn Eistetter, a drug user, who like many addicts supports her habit by working in the sex trade, came close to dying on the night of April 8, 1997. (Lee, 2002, p. A3)

Once again, we see a soft critique of police inefficiency segueing into a laden description of the victim.

In the latter part of 2002, the families and friends of the missing and murdered women were mentioned and nearly always quoted toward the end of news stories. Here, their voices remained subordinate to the overarching frame of the time—that the police-RCMP joint task force was achieving some success in its investigation. But even in these instances, there were stories about healing circles being held near the Pickton farm, signifying the Aboriginality of many of the victims. Occasionally, a human-interest story would be foregrounded. For example, one story begins with a description of Serena Abbotsway's excitement about her 30th birthday party: "Every day she would call her 'mom'—Anna Draayers, the woman who raised her from the time she was four until the age of 17" (Bolan & Fong, 2002, p. A1). Yet even these stories fixed the identities of these women as troubled, abused runaways. For instance, in the same story, Bolan & Fong quote Anna Draayers as saying: "Unfortunately, Serena was already abused before she came to our home. That's why she was in care. . . she was abused every imaginable way and so that really set her future. And this is what she had to deal with every day of her life—the mistrust and everything else" (2002, p. A1). Serena Abbotsway was an Aboriginal woman, but the circumstances influencing her life, the reasons behind her adoption, were never explored in a way that linked them to the devastating legacy of colonialism and residential schools.

If the victim did not fit the pattern, then she was described differently, as in this headline: "'Fabulous girl' didn't fit in Downtown Eastside" (Bolan, 2002a: A1). The story begins with a description of Jacqueline McDonnell that clearly identifies her as someone who did not "belong" in the Downtown Eastside: "'She was so bright and so articulate. She could have been a university student,' said Elaine Allan, a former coordinator of the Downtown Eastside drop-in centre for sex trade workers" (Bolan, 2002a, p. A1). Obviously, those who "belong" are not university students or bright and articulate.

By late 2002, Pickton's lawyer sought a publication ban on the preliminary hearings. As a result, the media's attention turned to legal issues—the ban itself and negotiations between Pickton's lawyer and the government with regard to the

provision of funding. Sprinkled throughout this phase of coverage were individual stories about the initiatives that many of the women's families and friends were launching in a bid to raise money and awareness about the missing women. However, these stories did not contest the dominant frame in any substantive manner except to reinforce a kind of benevolence. Nonetheless, the Aboriginal theme remained intact. Even within the context of a legal wrangle, a comment from Grand Chief Ed Jones is inserted into the coverage to the following effect: "The First Nations Summit is deeply concerned that the families of the victims will be denied access to the preliminary hearing due to the application by Mr. Pickton's defence counsel," Grand Chief Ed John said. "They are anxious and concerned that their chance to hear the evidence of what may have happened to their loved ones could be jeopardized." The reporter concludes: "Many of the missing women are aboriginal" (Bolan, 2002a, p. A1).

By 2003, the issue of funding Pickton's lawyer had been resolved and the case took a new turn with the joint task force's investigation of another piece of land, also owned by the Pickton family—the Mission Marsh. By September, with the investigation still underway, *The Vancouver Sun* published an editorial advocating a revision of prostitution laws. Progressive in tone, the editorial argued for a harm-reduction approach, stating,

More than 60 women have gone missing from the Downtown Eastside, and pig farmer Robert Pickton, charged with the murder of 15 of them, is currently awaiting trial. That so many prostitutes have gone missing suggests the system is broken. And what's more, it's flawed from top to bottom: From laws governing prostitution, to social services available for prostitutes, to our attitude toward people who work or live on the street. ("Now it's time to deal with the prostitution problem," 2003, p. A10)

This call from the editors of the paper reflects a growing awareness of the kinds of dangers that women in the Downtown Eastside experience on a daily basis. What it fails to mention is the gendered and racialized nature of the violence that sex-trade workers face—somehow the culpability of men, the police, the courts, and the state are all subsumed under a blanket failure of the "system."

Economic logic also dominated the coverage during this year, with stories about the property-tax increases levied on the Pickton properties. This theme continued into 2004, with a story titled "Despite its notoriety, Pickton farm's value soars," which leads with the sentence, "The assessed value of the Pickton family farm in Port Coquitlam—the recent focus of the largest serial murder investigation in Canada—has increased by \$1.75 million" (MacKenzie, 2004, p. A2). This preoccupation with economic issues can be traced back to 2002, when an increased number of stories about the value of the farm land, the liens imposed on it, and the resulting financial chaos for the Pickton family were covered in *The Vancouver Sun*. Again, what is interesting about the coverage concerning the farm lands is the aerial shot accompanying the stories. Here, we see the contrast between the zone of respectability and the implicit, though visually absent, portrayal of the Downtown Eastside as a zone of degeneracy. It is, as outlined above, a contrast between "sin city" and "sim city" (Pitman, 2002) or, as Pratt (2005) puts it, between order and disorder—the visible and the invisible.

The theme of violence re-surfaced in 2004 with a break in the coverage marked by the arrest of Donald Michel Bakker, a predator who had been accused of assaulting 50 sex-trade workers in the Downtown Eastside and nine children. Yet the story began with the lead that “Sex-trade workers did a brisk business Friday afternoon, unphased by revelations police had caught yet another suspected high-profile, violent predator on the Downtown Eastside” (Pynn, 2004, p. A4), suggesting that despite the dangers, the women working on the streets continued their trade. The ending of the story seems to fit with prevailing representations of sex-trade workers as deserving of violence. The reporter, Larry Pynn, concludes with the following quote from “Margaret,” one of the sex-trade workers he interviewed: “‘They knew,’ said Margaret. ‘He paid to hurt them. They were desperate for the money and it got out of hand. They didn’t know how severe it would be. They were scared to say anything. That’s why it went on for so long.’” (p. A4). Bakker was arrested not only for assaulting women in the Downtown Eastside, but also, as the images seized at his home revealed, for assaulting and having sex with young girls in Southeast Asia. Violence is degendered in these accounts (see Berns, 2001), and it is also erased of its racial connotations, as is evident in the lack of interrogation of the transnational and ideological links between the Downtown Eastside and Southeast Asia as two zones of degeneracy that exist in tandem.

While the media focus on Robert Pickton and Donald Michel Bakker seemed to make them the ultimate predators, this discursive move strategically undermines the presence and threat of the many predators that roam the Downtown Eastside and other such zones. It also deflects attention from the endemic nature of violence against women. The fact that the predators are men who sexually exploit and assault girls and women that society devalues and, further, that such predators feel they can commit violence with impunity in specific areas is never interrogated. The moral geography of such sites as zones of degeneracy is never challenged. Instead, the reality that these zones are inhabited by those whom society considers expendable is simply taken for granted.

Horror of horrors

The 2004 coverage also evidences the insertion of a new frame—this time one of horror. The frame was introduced in a series of stories that dealt with contaminated meat from the Pickton farm that was made available for sale and consumption (Fong & O’Brian, 2004). Drawing on the voice of the province’s chief medical officer, the news stories warned that there was a possibility of contamination: namely, that the pork sold on the Pickton farm and delivered by Pickton to a meat-rendering plant in Vancouver may have been from pigs that had consumed the remains of the missing women whose DNA had been found on the farm. The connection with the pigs cast a lens of horror, with the realization that people (meaning anybody) might have eaten the pork and thereby consumed the remains of the women:

Residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside bear daily doses of grief from the loss of friends and family, but the revelation that pork from the farm of accused murder Robert Pickton may have been contaminated with human remains brought fresh horror Thursday. . . . “How could someone do this to another human being?” asked Anita Kennedy, who

volunteers at the Downtown Eastside Women's centre. "How could there be such atrocity?" (Skelton & Fong, 2004, p. A1)

The horror with which the consumption of human remains via the meat taken from the Pickton farm suggests that this act was considered more horrible than the actual murders of the women themselves. That they were murdered was probable and logical given what the paper described subsequently as their "high risk" lifestyles. But that their remains might be consumed by innocent others—notably the public—was considered more horrific.

This taxonomy of horror is reminiscent of Haltunnen's (1998) examination of sensational homicides from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Haltunnen suggests that understandings of "sensationalism" are historically and culturally specific, with contemporary definitions of the "sensational" rooted in "gothic" horror and a legalistic understanding of deviance. With respect to the missing women, we would suggest that there has been a displacement of emotion, with the media coverage constructing "horror" as the possibility that a few people might have ingested tainted meat, as opposed to almost 100 women disappearing in British Columbia alone, many of them victims of violent sexual homicide. In such a symbolic system, it becomes appropriate for public officials such as the health officer to "act" and issue a public warning, but not for other officials to "act" and issue a warning about police ineffectiveness or issues affecting the safety of women on the Downtown Eastside and elsewhere.

Yet there is slippage in the framing of this horror, such that the media described the meat as possibly containing "human remains"—not explicitly the remains of some of the 67 missing women found on the Pickton farm (Fong & O'Brian, 2004). In her discussion of America's post-9/11 treatment of Iraqi prisoners, Judith Butler (2004) discusses how the lives of these prisoners have been made not "grievable" because of a normative framework that imposes "limits of the sayable," thereby defining who is indeed worthy of public mourning. In the case of the missing women, the use of language is layered, because the way their bodies were treated in death became at once not-grievable and too horrible to contemplate. But as Butler argues, "without the capacity to mourn, we lose the keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence" (Butler, 2004, p. xviii). At the same time, and in keeping with Mason's (2002) research on the "spectacle" of violence, these women only became visible when their "bodies" were found dead or constituted "bare life," as Pratt (2005) suggests.

Shortly after the meat-contamination issue emerged, an altercation with the ad campaign of a non-profit animal-rights organization erupted. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) had launched a billboard campaign that portrayed a young woman and a pig. The caption read: "neither one of us is meat" ("PETA changes billboard campaign," 2004, p. B2). Women's groups, along with the families and friends of missing women, protested against PETA's message. In response to the press coverage, the organization subsequently launched a different billboard campaign. The outrage against PETA's original campaign reflects the pervasiveness of sympathetic feelings about the missing women. Clearly, the horror of potentially consuming women's remains spilled into and galvanized this sense of public outrage.

Following this brief shift, the dominant frame involving legal and criminal-justice logic re-surfaced. Ericson, Baranek, & Chan (1991) suggest that media and legal logics tend to work jointly in the constitution of particular hegemonic meanings and political causes surrounding crime, justice, and social order. By 2005, Pickton had been charged with 15 counts of murder, with another seven pending. That brought the count to a total of 22 based on the DNA of women found on the farm. Media pre-occupation at this point turned to the trial itself—the publication ban and the ensuing length of the *voir dire*—the portion of a pre-trial in which the judge and defence determine the admissibility of the evidence to be presented to the jury.

At the time of this writing, the *voir dire* is still in effect and the trial has yet to begin, though speculation indicates that this should occur by January 2007. Until March of 2006, the media focus was on the impending trial, the cost of the investigation (assessed at \$70 million), and the impact of the wait on the families and friends of the missing and murdered women. The only counterframes to emerge during the last year stemmed from the coverage of the voices of the family and friends of the missing women. We suggest that this was largely due to attempts by journalists to re-frame the coverage and fill the dearth of “news” since 2002, when Pickton was first charged.

The “news hole:” Slipping in Aboriginality

The publication ban on the court proceedings thus far has created a “news hole.” What is the media to report on when the sensationalistic bits and pieces revealed in the courtroom cannot be communicated at large, or when the results of the investigation are shrouded in secrecy or—more to the point—controlled through periodic press conferences? We argue that this news hole provided an opportunity for added and more critical coverage of public policy related to the murdered and missing women, stereotypes, the criminal justice system, and “Aboriginality.”

Indeed, from an ideological point of view, what is most remarkable about these stories is the persistent signification of Aboriginality. In many of the more recent stories, for instance, the person most quoted is Ernie Crey, the brother of one of the murdered women. Crey, whose sister Dawn Crey disappeared in December 2000, is described as the past president of the United Native Nations, an urban Native organization. The constant inclusion of Crey’s voice served the function of fixing Aboriginality as a sign of the missing and murdered women. In another story, signs of Aboriginality were conveyed through the use of such signifiers as “healing ceremonies” and “smudging rituals.” Given that Aboriginality itself evokes a range of negative connotations (see Culhane, 2003; Harding, 2006), the persistent appearance of these signifiers suggests that this was one discursive way in which these women’s identities could be fixed ideologically. And as fixed entities, the reasons underlying their migration to the urban core of the Downtown Eastside remained unexplored and taken for granted. There was no mention of the different First Nations that these women came from or that the territory constituting the Downtown Eastside historically belonged to the Coast Salish peoples. Opportunities for re-inscribing Aboriginality and relating these women’s experiences of alienation and abuse to systemic issues such as intergenerational trauma and residential schools or re-framing them in more positive ways were unaccessed and the historical antecedents rendered invisible.

The only departure from this trend was the inclusion of Maggie de Vries' voice. Her sister Sarah was one of the women whose DNA was found on the Pickton lands. The de Vries story is interesting in that Sarah was a Black child adopted by a White, middle-class family. The father was a professor at the University of British Columbia (Pitman, 2002). Sarah's attraction to and subsequent life in the Downtown Eastside are explained as emanating from a troubled childhood in which she was subjected to racial harassment (de Vries, 2003). Sarah represented the girl who could not fit into mainstream society and sought solace elsewhere.

While the de Vries case gained considerable media attention and sympathy, the parallels regarding Aboriginal women victims of violence were never explored. What made these women leave their families? What about the racism and sexism they experienced? Drug addiction remained the only plausible reason offered by the media and articulated by the families who were interviewed. But, as Dara Culhane (2003) notes, drug addiction also occurs among the rich and powerful. Addiction is private in the upper echelons of society, whereas it is rendered more visible and open to scrutiny in places like the Downtown Eastside.

Conclusion

It is clear that when Robert Pickton's trial actually begins, there will be intense national and international media attention given to the issue. It will be interesting in that regard to assess whether the frames apparent in the coverage thus far will be reactivated or whether the focus will shift to the sexualized "horror" of the crimes and the step-by-step crime-scene imagery discussed by Haltunnen and immortalized within the detective/crime-fiction genre. This was the pattern that characterized the coverage of the Bernardo and Homolka case. The media gaze became focused on sexual deviance and what happened to the young women, a curiosity fanned by a voyeuristic and morbid fascination with the visual recordings on the tapes. As is typically the case in this type of coverage, it appears that coverage of the missing and murdered women will repeat past habits at least in one respect: in representations of Pickton as the singular, pathological, or deranged individual who violated the social and normative order. Indeed, our results show that attempts to elicit empathy for these women and to reclaim their "respectability" could not "stick"—despite the fact that 67 women disappeared—because Aboriginality, geographic tropes related to the "degeneracy" of the Downtown Eastside, and hegemonic constructions of femininity/masculinity all came into play.

We surmise that the "displaced sensationalism" of the previous coverage, especially that dealing with the potential consumption of tainted pork from the Pickton farm, will repeat itself in the context of the trial. As before, instead of foregrounding the pain and horror of the loss of these women's lives, the tendency will be to displace and sensationalize this horror onto actions performed by Pickton and his potential accomplices on the bodies of these women. In this telling, the violence of their deaths becomes another metaphor of their lives—a way to see them without really seeing them—as women already "missing in action."

Notwithstanding the above, the option of counterframes emerging through the deployment of socially conscious journalists and reporters to cover the story remains a possibility. Yet the analysis we offer suggests that even counterframes,

though well-intentioned, tend to be hegemonically aligned to privilege dominant interpretations. Attempts to reclaim the missing women's "respectability" were subsumed under dominant definitions that privilege "good" women in specific ways—as mothers, daughters, and sisters—or, alternatively, that are based on rescue motifs that seek to salvage and redeem the "bad" aspects of the missing women. Such attempts, we suggest, are riven by the fault lines of previous regimes of difference—ways through which society demarcates those who deserve our attention, and thus our sympathy and intervention, and those who remain marginalized, outside the pale of the civilized, normative order.

Thus it appears that the war against women will continue until the dominant, hegemonic values change to recognize women first and foremost as human beings whose material conditions are determined by interlocking legacies of colonialism and a racialized and sexualized economy of representations that privileges some women over others. Aboriginality, in this instance, constitutes the contested battlefield of meanings that can only be won when society recognizes its complicity in reproducing neo-colonial systems of valuation that position Aboriginal women in the lowest rungs of the social order, thereby making them expendable and invisible, if not disposable. Similarly, and intersecting with Aboriginal status, sex work also needs to be recuperated from the dominant gaze that sees it simply as a degenerate trade characteristic of deviant bodies confined to the realms of disorder and criminality.

Yet our research suggests there is room for agency on the part of journalists and feminists. For example, we imagine that the shock and horror of what may be revealed in the courtroom could catalyze institutional responses that are designed to better the lives of women in the Downtown Eastside. And further, outrage generated by the evidence heard during the trial may galvanize sympathetic support for the victims' families and friends, as occurred in the Bernardo case. At least that is our hope, insofar as these actions might positively influence the immediate lived reality of the women involved.

However, a cynical view would suggest that these interpretations are likely to be subsumed under the dominant frame, and human-interest stories will simply be fodder fuelling the voyeuristic gaze of the dominant society. Thus, while there is room for agency on behalf of the journalist—and therefore feminist interventions—in the end, it is likely that representations of the missing women and the criminal case against Robert Pickton will reinforce hegemonic understandings that make missing women all too visible in some respects and invisible in others, but always in the margins.

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Notes

1. We have chosen to use the term “sex worker” or “sex-trade worker,” as opposed to “prostitute,” in order to privilege, as Barbara Sullivan argues, “the economic conditions underpinning sex work and to subvert popular and legal representations of prostitutes as diseased or sexually immoral women who needed to be subject to criminal penalties” (2003, p. 70).
2. John Lowman (2000) offers an illuminating analysis of how sex-trade workers from various other strolls in Vancouver were pushed into the Downtown Eastside, thereby increasing their vulnerability to violence and danger. He argues that a discourse of disposal facilitated the women’s confinement to the Downtown Eastside, away from the higher-end strolls where they were more likely to be protected from violence (see also Brock, 1998).

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