

**RACISM, "GIRL VIOLENCE" AND THE MURDER OF REENA VIRK**

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of Arts  
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Master of Arts Degree, 2000

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### **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk, a young South Asian woman who was killed on November 14, 1997 in Saanich, B.C. Academics, policy makers and journalists have asserted that the most alarming aspect of this crime is that young women participated in it. They argue that this is evidence of a rising trend of "girl violence." In this thesis I argue that the narrative of girl violence obscures other investigations and explanations surrounding this murder. In the mainstream media interlocking systems of oppression including racism, have not been addressed. I argue that the circumstances of Reena Virk's life and the media coverage of her murder are structured by interlocking systems of oppression.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I argue that the narrative of girl violence is linked to notions of hegemonic femininity—a construct supported by patriarchy, white supremacy, hetero-sexism, ableism, capitalism as well as gender-centric feminist theory.

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<sup>1</sup> An interlocking analysis of oppression keeps in view the multiple forms of violence and oppression that work interdependently to support elite hegemony: "Interlocking systems need one another, and in tracing the complex ways in which they help to secure one another, we learn how women are produced into positions that exist symbiotically but hierarchically." Razack, Sherene Looking White People in the Eye, Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998:13.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to Nimki Batacharya-Mishibinijima, Isa Benn, Jwoel Benn, Ashanti Messais, Raha Nyakio Mahmoudi, "Cheeky," Olive Walters, Shantel Spencer, Sophie Walsh, and Cadine Rothbowham. Thank-you for all you have taught me and for the ways you continue to inform my participation in projects to stop racist violence against children and youth.

# Racism, “Girl Violence” and the Murder of Reena Virk

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## **Introduction**

On November 14, 1997, Reena Virk, a young South Asian woman aged 14, was attacked by seven young women and one young man in a planned assault under a bridge in Saanich, a suburb of Victoria, British Columbia. After the initial attack that involved all eight youths and a mob of 20-50 onlookers, a second assault was committed by 16 year old Warren Glowatski and Kelly Ellard aged 15, both of whom were also involved in the first attack. This second attack was fatal. Reena Virk's naked body was found nine days later in a river, the Gorge Waterway. Her corpse was bruised and cut, and the autopsy report found extensive "internal injuries to her back and abdomen that were consistent with being kicked and stomped."<sup>1</sup> Drowning was stated as the official cause of death.

When I read about the murder of Reena Virk and spoke to women in Toronto, many did not know that Reena was South Asian. If I had not recognized her surname, I too would have only learned that Reena was South Asian when the papers began to publish her photograph and information about her life and family. Although Reena was later identified as "East Indian" in the media, racism as a contributing factor to her murder, or as a site of analysis, has been absent from most mainstream media reports. In one such article racism is actually "ruled out": "Police have ruled out racism as a motive, noting that some of the accused are also nonwhite."<sup>2</sup> In this statement, any consideration of racism as systemic and, thus, how people of colour can be implicated in racist violence

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<sup>1</sup> "Gray estimated Virk suffered 18 kicks to the head. She had marks on the back of her head that appeared to be tread marks from sneaker type footwear. Her liver, pancreas and lower abdomen were deeply bruised and her small bowel was separated from its muscle wall. Stomps and kicks caused those internal injuries.

against one another is overlooked. This is one of the many explanations presented in the mainstream media that served to “erase race”<sup>3</sup> from the murder of Reena Virk.

Although racism is ruled out, Reena Virk’s racial difference and class disadvantage are acknowledged. Both serve to mark her; however, as only “a troubled teen who tried desperately to fit in.”<sup>4</sup>

Reena Virk, like many 14-year-old girls, had a hard time fitting in where she grew up, in her case the middle-class suburb of Saanich on the outskirts of Victoria, B.C. It didn’t help that she was slightly overweight and the dark-skinned child of immigrants who were not well-to-do. Her home life was troubled. She had shuttled between three foster homes and her own family residence; at one point she attempted suicide. She had accused her father of sexual abuse, though he denied it and the charges were later withdrawn.<sup>5</sup>

This positioning of Reena as just another “troubled teen” draws attention away from how socially constructed difference such as being “overweight, dark skinned, not well-to-do” is linked to systemic relations of power. Although this article describes Reena as “like many 14 year old girls,” what follows is information that conveys how she was not like other fourteen year old girls. She was not thin, white and middle class which is by and large the popular image of what it means to be a “girl” in western culture. In the media reports she remains just a “girl” who, along with her attackers, are the victims and perpetrators of “girl violence.”

The narrative of girl violence obscures race as it simultaneously depends on it for the construction of the “girl” in “girl violence.” It is evident throughout the media reports that the category “girl” is based on a generic construction of girlhood which refers to a

Gray said.” Meissner, Dirk. “Pathologist tells grim details of Reena Virk’s beating injuries.” Toronto Star, Wednesday April 21, 1999: A6.

<sup>2</sup> Purvis, Andrew. “Fury of her peers” Time Magazine, December 8, 1997, Vol.150, No.24.

<sup>3</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. “The murder of Reena Virk, the erasure of race.” Kinesis, December/January 1998:3.

<sup>4</sup> Jimenez, Marina. “Slain teen misfit remembered.” Vancouver Sun, Nov.25/97:A1&4.

<sup>5</sup> Purvis, Andrew. “Fury of her peers” Time Magazine, December 8, 1997, Vol.150, No.24.



white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual identity. Thus, Reena is repeatedly portrayed as a “girl” who could be any girl who “chose the wrong people to love.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Reena must remain just a “girl,” not a racialized girl, for the narrative of girl violence to remain rooted and secure.

In order to understand how and why racism has been obscured in the media coverage, it is necessary to interrogate the construction of white femininity in both hegemonic and feminist discourses. The media frenzy surrounding girl violence reveals a public concern with the erosion of normative heterosexual, middle class gender roles. Feminist arguments on the other hand have centred on violent girls as victims of patriarchy who, lacking other options, use violence in response to gender oppression. Both of these perspectives hinge on the notion that girls are, by nature, non-aggressive and non-violent.

In the media coverage, the supposed rising trend of girl violence is explained as resulting from the work of feminists who in the struggle for equality have now made girls more like boys and led them astray from their pre ordained roles as mother, wife, daughter. The mainstream feminist rebuttal to this argument charges patriarchy with driving young women to violence – behavior that is nonetheless seen as out of character for the gentler sex. What is absent from both of these explanations is a theorization of how girls and young women can perform themselves as dominant. In other words, how racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism, place girls in dominant and subordinate relationships to one another and how these relations of power are maintained through violence at the same time they shape the violence committed by young women.

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<sup>6</sup> CBC-TV The National November 28, 1997. Reena Virk was eulogized at her funeral as “a giving person who chose the wrong people to love.”

The central concern here is how the construction of white femininity as passive and non-aggressive informs the discourse of girl violence and how this discourse preempted discussions about race, class, gender, ability and sexuality in the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk. I begin with an investigation of the construction of hegemonic femininity drawing from scholarship that addresses colonialism and imperialism. In section one titled "Interlocking Systems of Oppression and Hegemonic Femininity," I argue that the violence of white women is un-nameable in both hegemonic and feminist discourses because of constructions of white femininity that position them as having no agency or only demonstrating agency as resistance. My aim is to interrogate the dichotomy whereby white women are seen as property/objects (no agency) or as victims/resisters (having agency) – both of which exclude the role of white women as agents of domination.

An analysis of interlocking oppression is central to my project. I argue that the only way to understand the murder of Reena Virk, and the media coverage surrounding it, is to question how racism, sexism, classism, ableism and heterosexism have functioned symbiotically to create the context for, and dominant explanations of, this crime. By examining hegemonic femininity using an interlocking framework, we also see how hegemonic and gender-centric feminist discourses function collaboratively. In my critique of feminist scholarship, I call into question work that maintains notions of innocence or research that fails to keep in view multiple and interdependent systems of violence and oppression. I am especially critical of work that erases the violence of white women or dismisses it as not as severe as men's violence. I argue that the desire to see

women as the gentler sex cements patriarchy, white supremacy, and classism, which interlock with all other systems of domination.

In part two, "Girl Violence and the Murder of Reena Virk," I detail how and why race is obscured in the media coverage of this crime. By critiquing mainstream media and feminist texts on girl violence, I argue that race is obscured in order to secure the narrative of girl violence. There can be no girls of colour in the narrative of girl violence as it is used to explain the murder of Reena Virk. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that if the notion of girlhood (which is dependent on constructions of white femininity) is disrupted, all other interlocking systems of oppression can be more readily exposed and resisted. For precisely this reason, understanding the murder of Reena Virk and the media coverage of her murder is crucial to challenging white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism, sexism, ableism and all other systems of interlocking oppressions.

In the final section "Counter Hegemonic Frameworks: The Murder of Reena Virk Re-Framed," I attempt to re-write hegemonic and mainstream feminist narratives surrounding this crime. My aim in this last section is two-fold. First, I draw from scholarship, which uses an interlocking approach, to illustrate the some of the ways in which the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk is flawed. To illustrate the pervasiveness of violence against young South Asian women I specifically refer to the work of scholars and activists engaged in anti-violence activism and scholarship. I argue that this work has been overlooked or dismissed through the processes of hegemonic and gender-centric/exclusive feminist knowledge production thereby obscuring racism and other systems of domination in the investigation and explanations of this crime.

Second, I wish to challenge the “experts” and those engaged in education and social services who, by not addressing interlocking systems of oppression support narratives such as girl violence, thereby also demonstrating complicity with white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism, and all other systems of oppression. The most important message that I want to convey in this article is that the narrative of girl violence will not help to stop violence against young women any more than it will prevent violence committed by young women. As an explanation of the murder of Reena Virk, the narrative of girl violence supports hegemony which in turn gives rise to the many forms of violence and domination educators and community workers aim to eradicate. In this article, I raise questions about how to address violence and what kinds of understandings and tools we bring to the project of ending its many forms.

### **Part One: Interlocking Systems of Oppression and Hegemonic Femininity**

Historically white women have been positioned as the weaker/fairer/gentler sex in need of protection. This hegemonic construction of femininity is central to patriarchy and justifies gender oppression by positioning white women as objects, dependents, and property. Within this construction white women are denied agency as social actors and subjects.<sup>7</sup> Feminists have countered hegemonic constructions of femininity by citing women’s agency in resistance to patriarchal oppression but have been reluctant to acknowledge white women’s agency in oppression. This uncomplicated picture of women’s oppression has sometimes enabled white women to rely on white supremacy in order to advance their claims for equality. For example, American suffragists in the

nineteenth century argued that granting white women the vote was not only fair and just but would also help to maintain a white nation and thus secure notions of white citizenship. Suffragists profiled claims for justice for women using a single axis analysis that required that the violence of racism be minimized if not rendered invisible altogether.<sup>8</sup>

While gender-centric feminist discourse has often served the interests of white supremacy, anti-colonial nationalist movements have often relied on patriarchy to mobilize against colonial domination:

Anti-colonial nationalism's has always mobilized women's labor in order to help consolidate popular nationalism, without which state nationalism would never have been able to solidify itself. It is not accidental, therefore, that feminism often emerged within anti-colonial movements. But the state mobilization of the feminine is contradictorily inflected. While as Heng has argued, "women, the feminine, and figures of gender have traditionally anchored the nationalist imaginary," certain women, prostitutes and lesbians are now being disciplined and written out of the nation's script: they have been invested with the power to corrupt otherwise loyal heterosexual citizens, positioned as hostile to the procreative imperative of nation-building, and, therefore invested with the ability and desire to destroy it. It is not only around questions of sexuality and gender that nation-states have structured their exclusions, however, but also in relationship to race and class hierarchies. It is these exclusions, as well as the state's ambivalent and conflictual relationship to sovereignty, that help to explain the failures of anticolonial nationalism...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Middle class respectability has depended on white women as guardians of morality who do not participate as social actors in the public sphere." Razack, Sherene. "Race, Space and Prostitution: The making of the Bourgeois Subject." Canadian Journal of Women and the Law, 1998, Vol.10: 346.

<sup>8</sup> The Suffrage movement in the United States relied on notions of white femininity and motherhood to secure voting rights for white women. Notions of white femininity and motherhood are constructed in opposition to black sexuality. White women claimed moral superiority to Black people based on race and argued that the vote would assist them in their maternal role as custodians and transmitters of morality (controlled sexuality) and family values (bourgeois culture). Note that during this period in time violence against Black men, women and children was rampant. Davis, Angela. Women, Race and Class, New York: Vintage Books, 1986:118-121. Hammonds, Evelyn M. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," eds. Alexander & Mohanty. Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, New York: Routledge, 1997:173.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, Jacqui M. & Mohanty, Chandra Talpade eds. Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures. New York: Routledge, 1997:xxiv.

Both the examples of women's suffrage in the U.S. and anti-colonial nationalism illustrate that there are occasions when political struggles support hegemonic systems because of the exclusions they allow, encourage, and depend on.<sup>10</sup>

Complicating feminist and anti-colonial theory and activism to include an analysis of how all systems of oppression operate simultaneously is risky. If white women acknowledge their role as oppressors, it weakens their claims for justice, as Razack and Fellows point out in their article "The Race to Innocence." Women, they write, must race to a position of innocence or risk being dismissed.<sup>11</sup> In their article titled, "Exploring Discursive Constructions of Lesbian Abuse: Looking Inside and Out," Cindy Holmes and Janice Ristock write of how this operates whenever women's violence is acknowledged:

Backlash texts are certainly not new in the history of feminism, but they do seem to be getting more specific in their attacks, focusing on the topic of female perpetrators of violence as an Achilles' heel of feminism.<sup>12</sup>

Holmes and Ristock identify the ways in which women's violence is taken up in dominant discourses and argue that hegemonic narratives regarding violent women, or women who are categorized as deviant, are central to backlash strategies that maintain systems of oppression:

So what patterns emerge when examining the discourse of these texts? What is their strategic purpose? In our view they seem to be intent on creating a seamless discourse that shows women as bad or just as bad as men rather than really asking new questions of offering an analysis that moves beyond a psychological view.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Anti-colonial nationalisms also adhere to notions of hegemonic femininity. Amita Handa interrogates this in her thesis Caught Between Omissions: Exploring 'Culture Conflict' Among Second Generation South Asian Women in Canada, OISE, University of Toronto 1997:338. She writes that keeping women "innocent" is a means of resolving fears associated with modernity and is used to promote anti-colonial nationalism and self-rule. A hegemonic femininity therefore becomes an axis on which anti-colonialism and hetero-patriarchy revolve.

<sup>11</sup> Fellows, Mary Louise & Razack, Sherene. "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations Among Women," Iowa Law Review, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Holmes, Cindy & Ristock, Janice. "Exploring Discursive Constructions of Lesbian Abuse: Looking Inside and Out" Unpublished Draft, 1998: 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid: 26.

Backlash writers are not interested in widening the analysis from gender to include race, class or sexuality in any way. Yet their criticisms of feminist discourse allow for a reflexive moment for us to ask, do our current discourses let us speak about women who abuse their children or their elderly? or lesbians who have experienced abuse within their relationships?...or the ways in which women use racist, classist, ableist violence against other women?<sup>14</sup>

Holmes and Ristock identify the risks of addressing women's violence, arguing that challenging women's violence can be taken up by hegemonic narratives to support constructions of women as deviant. However, what we risk by not addressing women's violence, is that violence against women that cannot be "explained by sexism" is rendered invisible.<sup>15</sup>

Violence against women of colour is rendered invisible in hegemonic discourses except when men of colour perpetrate the violence. Then the violence is attributed to culture rather than to patriarchy, capitalism or heterosexism. When women of colour are violent, it is attributed to racial inferiority rather than traced through systems of oppression: women of colour are expected to be violent.<sup>16</sup> Either way, violence against women of colour, or violence demonstrated by women of colour, is explained through racist discourses that mark her as culturally inferior. When white women are violent, the violence is un-nameable. It is the unspeakable violence of white women that makes addressing oppression and agency difficult in mainstream feminist movements.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 26.

<sup>15</sup> Kadi, Joanna. Thinking Class, Sketches from a Cultural Worker. Boston: South End Press, 1996:74.

<sup>16</sup> Karleen Faith writes:

Poverty and racist discrimination are frequently demonstrated by researchers to be significant factors in criminalization processes. However, since most poor people and most "people of colour" do not engage in crime, neither poverty nor racial designation, alone or in combination, can account for criminal behavior. Those who are held accountable for criminal behaviors are often those who are already under the eye of the law and who have little voice. Faith, Karleen. Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1993:107.

Understanding violence using a single axis approach (such as a gender centric/exclusive approach) does not go deep enough to allow for a complex interrogation of how systems of oppression are interlocked. To understand interlocking systems of oppression we must address the hierarchical relations of power among women and the violence that maintains those relations. There are several narratives and methodologies that emerge in studies that address violence against women that offer alternatives to the single axis approach. I will focus on work that uses an interlocking analysis of oppression to demonstrate how racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism are interdependent and mutually sustaining.<sup>17</sup> By addressing narratives of violence against women in “historically specific ways,”<sup>18</sup> I will present the way in which the violence white women commit is obscured in both hegemonic and feminist discourses. For the purpose of my project – understanding girl violence and the murder of Reena Virk – it is necessary to find ways of discussing the participation of white women in racist, classist, heterosexist and ableist violence. Scholarship that addresses hierarchical relations of power among women and violence committed by white women is examined here.

In her article “Sheroes and Villians: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa.” Amina Mama discusses the links between violence against women in Europe and violence against women in Africa. She cites the witch hunts of the middle ages in which seven million women were mutilated and executed, as well as the industrial revolution during which time “European working classes,

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<sup>17</sup> Razack, 1998:13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 12.



particularly women and children, were exploited in evil ways that would subsequently be perfected on African slaves and forced laborers in the colonies."<sup>19</sup> Mama writes:

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, class, race, and sexual inequalities acted in concert with one another, generating a repressive imperial ideology that was to be reflected in all aspects of colonial, legal, and administrative treatment of the subject peoples. This was to have particular implications for gender relations, rendering African women more vulnerable to the violence emanating from both European and African sources.<sup>20</sup>

Mama goes on to state that it is inadequate to explain violence against African women, which included forced labor, slavery, prostitution and concubinage, rape, and domestication (a form of racist, heterosexist exploitation and control)<sup>21</sup> as only about male violence against women. "To simplify the nature of colonization and the violence that it deployed as just another instance of 'male violence' is to obscure the full character of imperialism and the internal contradictions it has so successfully exploited."<sup>22</sup>

In Mama's discussion of African women, she cites specific legal, administrative, military history and policies that structured the development of white femininity. She argues that African women were, and still are, "counterpoised" to constructions of white femininity:

At the dawn of imperialism, Europe was also giving shape to and developing its racist ideologies and practices. As far back as the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth, the "Virgin Queen" who stood for purity, virtue, and whiteness, made several attempts to have black people removed from the kingdom...In later centuries, the pedestalization of upper-class white womanhood was counterpoised to an inferiorized construction of blackness. Black people were cast as hypersexual, corrupt, and pathogenic. Black women attracted sexual fascination, and by the

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<sup>19</sup> Mama, Amina. "Sheroes and Villians: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa." Alexander, Jacqui & Mohanty, Chandra Talpade eds. Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures. New York: Routledge, 1997:48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 49.

<sup>21</sup> Mama. 1997:46-53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 51.

nineteenth century, had come to feature in the white male psyche as a metaphor for Africa, the dark and unknown continent, waiting to be penetrated, conquered and despoiled.<sup>23</sup>

Colonialism and imperialism organized and produced violence against African women as simultaneously racist, sexist, heterosexist and capitalist. By using an interlocking analysis Mama demonstrates constructions of white femininity and black sexuality are inseparable from colonialism, imperialism, violence against women and the criminalization of Black women.

Laura Ann Stoler also uses an interlocking approach to research the construction of white bourgeois subjectivity in Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and The Colonial Order of Things. Her theorization of whiteness complicates notions of race to include not only the processes of racialization for people of colour but also how whiteness is socially constructed. While this is an important area of theorization, I argue that by focusing on white subjectivity, there is the risk that the violence against people of colour is obscured through discourses of pluralism and anti-essentialism. Stoler investigates white bourgeois identity and subjectivity formation as a means of critiquing imperialism, bourgeois culture and whiteness. This project is shared by many feminist colonial scholars who also argue that a straightforward dichotomy between white femininity and black sexuality is simplistic and that there were many subject positions and identities produced in colonial settings. Stoler writes:

...colonialism has long served as a metaphor for a wide range of dominations, collapsing the specific hierarchies of time and place into a seamless whole. In this scenario, "to colonize" is an evocative and active verb accounting for a range of inequities and exclusions—that may have little to do with colonialism at all. As a morality tale of the present the metaphor of colonialism has enormous force but it can also eclipse how varied the subjects are created by different colonialisms... Whether emphasis is on the continuity between these moments or on the abrupt

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid: 49.

rupture that decolonization presents. nothing is gained by flattening colonial history into a neat story of colonizers pitted against the colonized.<sup>24</sup>

Stoler's statement demonstrates a concern with homogenizing and essentialist approaches to colonial studies.<sup>25</sup> While I agree with Stoler that "nothing is to be gained by flattening colonial history into a neat story of colonizers pitted against the colonized." Stoler's critique of colonial and anti-colonial discourse seems to imply that there are a "range of inequities and exclusions—that may have little to do with colonialism at all." Using an interlocking analysis of oppression. I would argue that any "range inequities and exclusions" are always linked to colonialism as well as other systems of oppression. The task is to trace how they are linked as a prerequisite to determining how best to disrupt them. In other words, by using an interlocking approach, we can address the varied histories of colonialism as well as the integrity of colonialism that is comprised of patterns of similarity *and* contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

Meyda Yegenoglu addresses the risks of pluralism and anti-essentialism and suggests methods of keeping in view the complexity and violence of interlocking systems of oppression. She writes that first we must acknowledge:

...the sterility of the framework that posits multiplicity as a solution to homogenization, essentialism or unity. [and] ...the impasse we hit when we imagine that we can challenge essentialism when we simply reverse it and privilege multiplicity and plurality instead.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stoler, Laura Ann. Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things, London: Duke University Press, 1995:199.

<sup>25</sup> In her research addressing colonial studies Meyda Yegenoglu writes:

It has been suggested that the prevalent perception of colonialism and of colonial discourse is characterized in unitary and essentialized terms. By evoking colonialism as a transhistorical and global phenomenon, such terms not only imply a homogenizing vision of colonialism but also suggest that colonialism was a coherent imposition, implying that it was all pervasively efficacious in dominating and assimilating the colonized.

Yegenoglu, Meyda. Colonial Fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998:30.

<sup>26</sup> Yegenoglu 1998:35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid: 33.

Yegenoglu then suggests:

What we need is a theoretical framework, one that is no less generalized than those already in existence, that will enable us to show how colonial discourse can never be identical with itself, how it is inevitably fractured within itself and never repeats itself identically as it constitutes its unity: how it changes while it retains its hegemony and adapts to different circumstances. In other words, the point is to show the sameness within the difference of colonial discourse.<sup>28</sup>

Yegenoglu suggests that we should remain fixed on the realities of colonial domination at the same time that we acknowledge the discontinuities and fractures that comprise hegemony. This is particularly important when addressing white women's violence because it allows for a complex interrogation of the systems of oppression that situate them as both dominant and subordinate. In other words, it allows us to ask "what kind of racialized gendered selves get produced at the conjuncture of the transnational and the postcolonial?"<sup>29</sup>

In order to understand "what kind of racialized gendered selves get produced" through colonialism we must address issues of subject formation and agency in terms of the violence required to secure categories of subordination and domination.<sup>30</sup> For

Yegenoglu this means acknowledging how:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 36.

<sup>29</sup> In introduction to Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty write:  
Postmodernist discourse attempts to move beyond essentialism by pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic utility of the categories of race, class, gender and sexuality. This strategy often forecloses any valid recuperation of the se categories or the social relations through which they are constituted. If we dissolve the category of race, for instance, it becomes difficult to claim the experience of racism.... Understanding the various constructions of self and identity during late capitalism... is a complicated enterprise that cannot be simply invoked by claiming fluid or fractured identities. What kind of racialized gendered selves get produced at the conjuncture of the transnational and the postcolonial?  
Alexander & Mohanty, 1997: xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Sherene Razack writes:

For their part, European women, as Sara Suleri has written of Anglo-Indian women and Reina Lewis of English women painters of the nineteenth century, often viewed Other women through the lens of their own subordination, with historically specific and varying results. For example, Lewis writes of how the white women artists she studies understood

It is in the east that Western woman was able to become a full individual, which was the goal desired and promoted by the emerging modernist ideology. Hence, for western women it was possible to achieve the desired subject status against a devalued cultural difference. Rosemary M. George, in examining the impact of imperialism on women's attainment of an authoritative selfhood, notes that the "modern individual woman was first and foremost an imperialist."<sup>31</sup>

Feminist scholarship that places emphasis on the subordination aspect of subjectivity formation for white women in the colonial settings risks overlooking the violence that they participated in amidst the multiple identities they negotiated. This move re-centres whiteness and obscures imperial violence committed by white women. I agree with Yegenoglu who argues that a feature of Orientalism is precisely the reinvention of the Orientalist topos in differing and even contradictory forms. She argues that it is not enough to seek out contradictions and plurality as evidence of resistance or disruption to hegemony:

Thus the supposed triumph of the totalizing notion of colonialism cannot be remedied by a straight reversal which celebrates historical particularity and specificity. Such criticisms are made in the name of avoiding the essentializing and totalizing gesture of colonial discourse theory. But what such critiques ignore is that essentialism inheres precisely in binary opposition. In this sense, a forthright reversal of the binary is far from interrupting the economy that underpins it.<sup>32</sup>

Documenting the multivariate and contradictory positions that white women have held in imperialism does not automatically challenge systems of domination. And for the purposes of my project, it does not in itself assist in understanding how imperial violence was and is committed by white women.

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themselves as simultaneously being beneficiaries of imperialism and inferior (owing to gender) in the world of European art. This dual consciousness, which Lewis reminds us cannot be separated from the actual material relations that enabled white women to displace gendered exploitation onto the colonial Other, resulted both in white women gaining their autonomy as cultural producers at the expense of the colonized Other and, contradictorily, in their uneven attachment to imperialism. Razack, 1998:13.

<sup>31</sup> Yegenoglu, 1998:107

<sup>32</sup> Ibid: 37.

Yegenoglu suggests that looking for the “different” voice of women is not a counter hegemonic approach to imperialism and Orientalism.

Following Said (and perhaps even taking his suggestion further than he does). I suggest that it is misleading to assume that the contradictions and splits within Orientalist discourse as expressed by different authors, or sometimes even in the same text by an author, constitute a challenge to its unity and hegemony. When we come across texts that question another text’s loyalty of the truth of the Orient, it is quite problematical to claim that they constitute an intervention against the symbolic universe of Orientalism. In other words, we should not simply look for the re-statement of the Orientalist topos in the act of simple repetition of earlier ideas and images, but also in displacements, divergences, and even in the dissemination of dissenting ideas. Thus the heterogeneous and multivariate character of the texts on the Orient cannot be regarded as a refutation of either the hegemonic power or unity of the Orientalist tradition.<sup>33</sup>

The move to look for “dissenting ideas” when addressing the role of white women in histories of imperialism and colonialism does not automatically challenge the operation of imperialism and colonialism. Furthermore, feminist scholarship that embraces pluralism and anti-essentialism without attending to violence and systems of domination and subordination dismisses white women’s role in the violence of imperialism. For the purposes of my project, I argue that we must acknowledge that subordination based on gender does not preclude dominance based on race, class, sexuality, ability and/or age for white women.

I raise these theoretical concerns in order to illustrate the challenges of using an interlocking analysis of oppression. There can be the tendency to buckle in the face of complexity opting for relative or “humanist” approach to ending violence rather than being attentive to the “material and ideological arrangements of patriarchy, class

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid: 71.

exploitation. and white supremacy...<sup>34</sup> Razack calls for a feminist theory that uses a postmodernism to critique subjectivity while at the same time “keeping a modernist eye on domination.”<sup>35</sup> She writes:

Along with bell hooks. I am suspicious of those who warn of the dangers of identity politics. race essentialism. or ethnic particularism without paying attention to the specific relations of domination and subordination in any one context. and without contextualizing the responses subordinate groups make to domination. thus distinguishing acts of resistance from acts of domination.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly. I am critical of work that focuses on white subjectivity formation without attending to the violence against people of colour that accompanied the production of such subjects. By centering whiteness in our scholarship. colonial violence can disappear amidst discussions of multiple locations and complex subjectivities. Racist violence becomes part of the backdrop of imperialism and the focus shifts to how imperialism works solely from the perspective of the white imperialist. I am concerned with this trend in scholarship not because that I believe colonialism is homogeneous. or that white women all hold a secure place of privilege. Rather. my hesitation compels me to ask what do these analyses contribute to our understandings of violence and do these analyses contribute to the difficulty of naming white women’s violence? Naming white women as captives and beneficiaries of imperialism is not the same as identifying their imperial violence against people of colour. In order to understand the narrative of girl violence and the murder of Reena Virk we must address woman as sustainers. producers and agents of violence.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Razack. 1998:158.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid: 161.

<sup>36</sup> Razack. 1998:169.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid:159.

Vincent Rafael's work on colonial rule in the Philippines offers one example of scholarship that uses an interlocking analysis while keeping in view relations of domination and subordination. In his discussion of the deployment of domesticity as gendered form of imperial violence in "Colonial Domesticity: White Women and United States Rule in the Philippines," he argues that "by making a home away from home"<sup>38</sup> white women were in direct contact with servants<sup>39</sup> whose labour is necessary to create an ordered home and leisure time for imperial women and men:

Good servants make possible the emergence of the ideal domestic sphere, here understood as the unobstructed recognition of authority and the flawless enactment of social hierarchy. Unobtrusive and barely palpable, the ideal "boy" is one who labors at serving and at rendering his labor inaudible and invisible.<sup>40</sup>

As managers of domesticity in the Philippines, white women engaged in acts of violence as a means of controlling "their" servants and producing the imperial home:

In American women's accounts, the complexity of the ethnic, gender, generation, and class composition of domestic workers, while occasionally glimpsed at, tends to be elided in favor of classifying them as "bad" or "good" servants. I want to argue that the restructuring of differences among servants into a binary works to position white women as guarantors rather than merely effects of the domestic order – an order whose appearance is produced through the systematic erasure of the traces of domestic labor itself.<sup>41</sup>

Rafael identifies that simultaneously exploiting and obscuring the servant's labor requires a range of actions that include racist objectification,<sup>42</sup> condescension and mimicry,<sup>43</sup> and physical violence:

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<sup>38</sup> Rafael, Vincent L. "Colonial Domesticity: White Women and United States Rule in the Philippines." *American Literature*, Dec. 1995, v.67, n.4:643.

<sup>39</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ¼ of live in servants in the Philippines were men. Ibid: 656.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid: 659.

<sup>41</sup> Rafael, 1995: 656.

<sup>42</sup> Servants were often referred to as animals to be domesticated or children who needed to be properly socialized to fulfil their role as a servant. Ibid: 657,659.



The limits of domestic order are thus dependent on the workings of a communicative order without which sympathetic exchange and mutual recognition of one another's proper place in the household are impossible ...the communication of the failure to communicate results in "bad boys" provoking the white mistress to take violent measures under the guise of disciplining the erring servant, occasionally hitting or firing him.<sup>43</sup>

The violence performed by white women in colonial Philippines included economic exploitation and physical violence against their male servants. This violence was mediated by imperialism and capitalism and should not be reduced to their response to gender oppression. "As both captive and empowered by the structures of empire, American women in the Philippines invariably participated in the simultaneous enactment and disavowal of the everyday violence of colonial rule."<sup>45</sup>

Toni Morrison also addresses colonial violence committed by white women in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination. Morrison examines the racialization of Black women by addressing the racist heterosexist violence committed by a white woman in the novel Sapphira and the Slave Girl by Willa Cather. Morrison argues that the subjectivity of Sapphira, the white slave mistress is constructed through "the reckless, unabated power of a white woman gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others."<sup>46</sup> In this story Sapphira is a disabled woman who, convinced of her husband's "aching to have a liaison with Nancy, the pubescent daughter of her most devoted slave," plans to orchestrate Nancy's rape as a means of reclaiming the "full attentions of her husband."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 658.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid: 657.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 641.

<sup>46</sup> Morrison, Toni. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992:25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 19.

Morrison's work illustrates several key points relevant to the construction of white femininity. Heterosexism and racism interlock to produce constructions of Black women as a threat to white female control over "their" men. Within this construction, Black women simultaneously threaten their role as "wife" and their stake as partners in imperialism and white supremacy. At the same time, Black women are positioned as threats they are also the "other" through which white women construct their identity.

Morrison writes:

This novel is not a story of a mean, vindictive mistress; it is the story of a desperate one. It concerns a troubled, disappointed woman confined to the prison of her defeated flesh, whose social pedestal rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation: whose privileged gender has nothing that elevates it except color, and whose moral posture collapses without a whimper before the greater necessity of self-esteem, even though the source of that esteem is a delusion. For Sapphira too is a fugitive in this novel, committed to escape: from the possibility of developing her own adult personality and her own sensibilities; from her femaleness, from motherhood, from the community of women; from her body.<sup>48</sup>

Morrison's critique of Sapphira and the Slave Girl illustrates how Sapphira's violence against Nancy is contextualized by racism, patriarchy, and slavery. The construction of the character of Sapphira as a disabled woman is not addressed by Morrison; however, I argue that ableist discourses allow Cather to attribute Sapphira's violence to her disability rather than to her whiteness. Addressing the association of deviance with disability would have made Morrison's critique fuller by further illustrating the ways in which white women's violence is perpetually attributed to their subordination or deviance when they are constructed as not white by discourses of class, disability and sexuality.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 26.

<sup>49</sup> In the quotation taken from Morrison's work it is unclear whether or not she intends to disrupt ableist discourse that construct people with disabilities as deviant. While Morrison is critiquing Cather's work for its racism her use of language to describe Sapphira (i.e. "defeated," "collapsed posture," and "whimpering") can be seen to maintain ableist narratives which construct people with disabilities as weak, passive, and victims without agency. I argue that while Morrison identifies the construction of white

In the Canadian context, Adel Perry addresses the role of white women in early twentieth century British Columbia. In her article titled "Fair Ones of a Purer Caste: White Women and Colonialism in Nineteenth Century B.C." Perry writes, "Indeed, white women's role as agents of white supremacy was a matter for celebration, not a problematic issue for reflection."<sup>50</sup> Seen as moral guardians necessary for warding off the vices of men such as drinking, gambling and marrying Native women, white women were seen as the catalyst for establishing a white, hetero-normative, settler culture in nineteenth century British Columbia:

That white women were the needed antidote to the problem of British Columbia's large population of footloose white men was a notion generated out of a prolonged and disjointed debate as to how to transform a rough, gold-mining and fur-trading colony into an ordered agricultural and industrial society....For these colonial promoters, the only feasible way to reconstruct male behavior and subjectivity was to invoke the presence of those vaunted representatives of civilization and the social—white women.<sup>51</sup>

Along with Morrison, Perry illustrates how relations of power between white women and native women are structured by racial conflict and sexual competition that frequently contextualizes white women's violence against women of colour.<sup>52</sup>

Perry identifies connections between the colonial role of white women and violence against First Nations women particularly in relation to the delegitimization of consensual relationships between white men and Native women. Perry investigates how as white women took their place as moral custodians, violence against Native women escalated through processes of marginalization, disenfranchisement and criminalization. "Unlike First Nations women, who were usually represented as instruments of white

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femininity operating in Cather's work she does not interrogate how ableism is used to construct Sapphira as simultaneously innocent (white) and deviant (disabled).

<sup>50</sup> Perry, Adele. "Fair ones of a purer caste: white women and colonialism in nineteenth-century British Columbia" in *Feminist Studies*, v.23, n.3, Fall 1997: 508.

men's degradation, white women were almost always constructed as agents of male uplift."<sup>53</sup>

First Nations women were constructed as criminal which facilitated physical, sexual, and economic violence against them.

If First Nations women resisted efforts to delegitimize consensual relationships, they also forced the reluctant police forces and courts to intervene when white men abused and coerced them, sexually or otherwise. White men's violence against First Nations women was rampant... But aboriginal women's resistance to this violence and the legal system that sometimes enabled it was, perhaps, equally notable.<sup>54</sup>

Perry's work also illustrates how violence was mobilized by white women.

In constructing a definition of white women in contrast to primitivist understandings of First Nations women, these representations reinforced, rather than disrupted, the colonial discourse that positioned white women at the center of the effort to enforce normative standards of whiteness and masculinity. Rather than rejecting the inherent racism and bounded definitions of womanhood explicit in this discourse, they celebrated it in a bid to enlarge white female power.<sup>55</sup>

As Perry mentions elsewhere, this bid to enlarge white female power was not a unified cohesive strategy employed by all white women in the colony, nor did it benefit white women who failed to meet the requirements of white femininity based on bourgeois hetero-normativity.<sup>56</sup> However, for the purposes of my project I am concerned with how discourses of race afforded white women colonial agency in their role as perpetrators of imperial violence whether the violence was systemic, physical, economic or based on hierarchies of sexuality, ability and age.

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<sup>51</sup> Perry, 1997: 504.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid: 508.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid: 511.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid: 514.

<sup>55</sup> Perry, 1997: 519.

<sup>56</sup> Perry, 1997: 517.

## **Violence Against Women and Feminist Anti-Violence Theory and Activism**

The previous section outlines what using an interlocking analysis of oppression involves, some of the risks and challenges in using it, and gives some examples of research that manages to keep both the complexity of dominant and subordinate subject locations in focus. By reviewing some of the feminist scholarship produced on violent women, I will now discuss the legacy imperialism has left to feminist theory and activism as well as cite examples of feminist work that counters notions of hegemonic femininity.

In Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation, Helen Birch addresses the sensationalism in the news media and in film of crimes committed by women. Birch's work takes up several important issues regarding how (white) women who commit violent acts are tried by courts and how femme fatale movie images create sensational images of violent women that have everything to do with producing normative gender roles. Her gender-centric analysis is focused on patriarchal violence against women leading her to ask "are women simply victims of patriarchal culture, or can their crimes be seen as an outrage against it?" This quotation, taken from the back cover of the book, is elaborated on in the introduction where Birch writes:

Yet women do not often kill. In England and Wales, only about 14 per cent of suspects in homicides recorded between 1983 and 1990 were women. Of these, the vast majority were domestic homicides, in which a woman kills her husband or lover, followed not far behind by the killing of children. Nor do the numbers appear to be increasing. So why this sudden interest? [P]recisely because she is relatively rare, the woman killer presents a far more dramatic spectacle than her male counterpart. Male violence is, after all, old news.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Birch, Helen. Moving Targets, Women, Murder and Representation. London: Virago Press, 1993: 1-2.

Birch claims that the “rarity” of the white woman killer results in a sensational treatment of violent women in the media.<sup>58</sup> While it may be true that violent white women are treated sensationally in the media, Birch maintains that violent women *are* rare rather than asking whether or not there is a systemic feature of women’s violence especially when it is performed as an act of domination. In this, she asserts that women’s violence is different than men’s, failing to consider women’s violence as possibly an act of dominance:

While it is true that when women kill, they usually just want the victim out of the way and do not resort to the kind of frenzied attack typical of the male sexual murder, the idea that women are capable of extreme violence is an anathema to most of us. Meanwhile, in courtrooms and newspapers throughout the western world, women who kill are divided into two camps: bad – wicked or inhuman; or mad – not like ‘ordinary’ women. The extreme defines the norm.<sup>59</sup>

By focusing only on patriarchy, Birch misses the fact that while the ordinary woman is a gendered construct, it is also a racialized one. In her conclusion that women are divided into two camps she fails to highlight the fact that the “bad – wicked or inhuman” woman is certainly a racialized woman. She fails to recognize that while women of colour may not make the front page but they certainly are more likely go to prison and for similar or lesser offenses than white women.

Birch constructs her arguments as rebuttal to conservative charges that women are becoming more violent because of the women’s liberation

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<sup>58</sup> It is disturbing that Birch equates killing an abusive male partner with infanticide despite the very different power relations involved. If the focus remains on the act of murder to the exclusion of the relations of power surrounding it, it would seem that child murder occurs as a pathological phenomena rather than as connected to systemic abuse of children.

<sup>59</sup> Birch, 1993:5.

movement.<sup>60</sup> When Freida Adler published Sisters in Crime, the book was seized by mainstream media as evidence that women's supposed higher status was making them more masculine and therefore more susceptible to male vices and deviance. Although Adler commented that it was never her belief that the women's liberation movement was responsible for rising crime rates among women, her work sparked a debate between conservatives and feminists that revolved around notions of essential womanhood based on white middle class femininity.<sup>61</sup> This discussion persists in the present day articulations of 'girl violence.'

Conversely, Patricia Pearson argues in When She Was Bad that women are in fact not the weaker sex incapable of violent crime. Although I consider her work a backlash text, I have chosen to examine Pearson's work because she makes some important critiques that I agree with and because I found few texts that address white women's violence with the amount of detail Pearson presents. As a trade book that cashed in on the public interest in the trials of Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, When She Was Bad is an example of mainstream understandings of violent women and demonstrates key aspects of hegemonic femininity. Pearson criticizes the feminist movement for excusing women's violence and argues that women are in fact as "bad" as men. I discuss Pearson's work as a backlash text because of the ways it fails to address how interlocking systems of oppression construct notions of white femininity while at the same time maintaining violence against women.

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<sup>60</sup> "In the 1970's, some theorists contended that we were witnessing an historical upsurge in crime by women and pointed to the contemporary women's movement as the root cause." Adelberg, Elen & Currie, Claudia, eds. In Conflict with the Law. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1993: 97.

<sup>61</sup> Faith, 1993:67-8.

Pearson argues that notions of women as the gentler sex obscures women's responsibility for violent acts. She fails, however, to discuss how this notion of innocence is not available to all women. In other words Pearson fails to interrogate how notions of hegemonic femininity require constructions of deviant women—Black, Native, lesbian, poor, and prostitute women:

If women in myriad cultures are capable of direct physical aggression, both expressively and instrumentally, why are Western women perceived, collectively, as angels in their houses, capable only of caring, nurturance, and submission? Are they constructed of a different fiber? Softer and more pliant than other women on the planet? Or might it be that they dwell in a culture that has traditionally shaped their aggression in an entirely different way than men's? Shaped differently and named differently, not as violence, with all the force, intentionality and power implied in that term, but something else?<sup>62</sup>

Pearson fails to consider racism as a possible answer to the question she poses above and in doing so maintains a gender-centric analysis. Even though she refers to women of colour and lesbians in her work, she nonetheless writes about them as "women" sharing the privileges of being white, middle class, and heterosexual. She fails to examine how some women (women of colour, lesbians, prostitutes etc.) are expected to be violent and are always under the watchful eye of the law.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Pearson discusses feminist theory and activism as homogenous based on mainstream feminist white and middle class experience. She does not research or cite the work of women of colour, disabled women, and lesbians who have challenged universal and essentialist notions of womanhood by challenging racism, ableism and hetero-normativity.

In her discussion of Karla Homolka, Pearson addresses agency and white femininity:

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<sup>62</sup> Pearson, Christine. When She Was Bad: violent women and the myth of innocence, Toronto: Random House, 1998:16

<sup>63</sup> Faith, 1993:107.



Once again, the point here is not to suggest that women never act in self-defense—of course they do. The point is that criminologists contemplate no other factors. Whereas they once described violent women as lesbian man-eaters and perverts, we have simply sailed to the other extreme, from whore to Madonna. The old fabric of misogyny blends seamlessly with new treads of feminist essentialism to preserve the myth that women are more susceptible than men to being helpless, crazy, and biddable. The effect, in the case of Karla Homolka, was startlingly clear in the courtroom. Encouraged to attribute every move, every want, every look on her fiercely intelligent face to the machinations of Paul Bernardo, Homolka renounced her claim to be an adult. She infantilized herself, relinquishing spirit, will, passion, pride, resourcefulness, and rage. Her wheat blonde hair fell across her wan face like a curtain as she sat on the stand for three weeks, as she divested herself of a soul.<sup>64</sup>

Pearson implies that notions of violent women as deviant is a thing of the past. She argues that the feminist movement has created hegemonic femininity without attending to how feminist discourse is informed by colonialism and imperialism and other interlocked systems of oppression.

By assuming feminism to be an autonomous political development, Pearson misses a crucial point in understanding notions of agency and “entitlement.” She writes:

The overwhelming majority of serial killers, both male and female, are white...Is it possible that a sense of entitlement to social esteem is, somehow, a critical ingredient in the crime? Whatever the answer, the fact that a white woman is more likely to commit a serial murder than a black, Asian or Hispanic man by a factor of one hundred to one should end the feminist conversation on this crime as a specifically masculine power trip.<sup>65</sup>

Pearson misses the point that the sense of entitlement that white female serial killers demonstrate could stem from their position of racial dominance. When she concludes that feminists have been wrong to identify serial murder as a “masculine power trip,” she overlooks the possibility that serial murder can also be a white supremacy power trip. When we consider genocide, slavery, and imperialism as grand scale serial murder, the connection between murder and racial dominance should be obvious. White women who

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<sup>64</sup> Pearson, 1998:56.

<sup>65</sup> Pearson, 1998:163.

commit serial murder can then be seen as demonstrating their dominance within the system of white supremacy even though their subordinate gender position would deny them access to the “masculine power trip” Pearson implies they access along with men. White women can engage in murder as a means of accessing hegemonic power to secure a place of privilege within interlocking systems of domination.

Pearson seems to argue that women who kill are doing so as either a way of accessing or defying the “temple” of male power rather than as a means of asserting their dominance as white, able-bodied, adult, heterosexual, economically privileged women. Pearson’s work is interesting is because she comes so close to making this argument but never does. She writes, “[w]hat we never see are the real victims of female serial killers: the very young, the very old, the disabled, and the lonely.”<sup>66</sup> If Pearson had included an analysis of interlocking oppression with her critique of white femininity and essentialist feminism, perhaps she would have avoided her simplistic conclusion that women are in fact as “bad” as men. Instead she could have complicated her analysis by acknowledging that gender is a construct that operates in tandem with discourses and structures of race, ability, class and sexuality. Furthermore, she may also have identified that violent white women such as Karla Homolka are invested in systems of patriarchy precisely because patriarchy depends on white supremacy and all other systems of domination. When Pearson writes about Homolka as an accomplice to Bernardo she identifies an obsession with grandeur, supremacy and dominance:

The second most common delusion in folie a deux is of grandeur, the shared belief that the couple is better, more powerful and glamorous, more entitled than those around them. Grandiosity, it would seem is the shared conceit of some of our most extreme offenders.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Pearson. 1998:155.

<sup>67</sup> Pearson. 1998:185.

This quotation demonstrates the conflation of hetero-sexism/normativity with white supremacy and illustrates the colonial investments of white women in colonialism that I mentioned earlier. As keepers of moral order (hetero-normative white supremacy) white women did and do commit acts of violence in order to maintain their position of dominance. Pearson quotes Homolka who, conspiring with Bernardo to rape and murder young women, says: "You can take their virginity. They'll be our children." Analyzing this statement Pearson writes, "She will co-opt future rivals and remain the Princess, while the rivals are assigned the unthreatening status of 'children.' It is an effort at both ownership and objectification." This is a striking example of how a white woman, invested in hegemonic femininity and white supremacy, engages in competitive heterosexuality that targets young women for violence. Heterosexist violence, which is interlocked with racism, needs to be addressed when it is perpetuated by white men *and* women.<sup>68</sup>

In her research Pearson, does not interrogate the power relations between Homolka and the young women she killed and helped to kill. She instead focuses on the individual pathological behavior of Homolka. This is consistent with how male perpetrators are viewed in the courts and by the media. Killing, then, becomes an individual behavior that supports Pearson's conclusion that we must understand murder as about human behavior rather than male behavior:

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<sup>68</sup> "Women who commit violent crimes tend to be more conservative than non-offending women." Adelberg & Currie 1993:244. This can be seen in descriptions of Karla Homolka by Pearson and the white girls interviewed in Syble Artz's book, Sex, Power and the Violent School Girl, who endeavor to conform to hegemonic feminine heterosexist identities. As such they are also invested in white supremacy and the nation state further demonstrating that "...no nationalism could survive without heterosexuality – criminal, perverse, temporarily imprisoned, incestuous, abusive as it might be, nationalism needs it." Alexander & Mohanty, 1997:83.

Under the circumstances, which suggest a widening diversity in women's aggressive behavior, it is increasingly urgent that our culture acknowledge violence as a *human*, rather than a gendered phenomenon.<sup>69</sup> [emphasis mine]

This move to humanism is consistent with her claims that patriarchy is not at the core of violence against women because women commit crime too. Ironically, Pearson does not realize that her theorization of gender as an all encompassing and universal notion, is a parallel concept to humanism – a discourse that she argues will help to end violence.

Part of the resistance to addressing women's violence stems from how violence is conceptualized. Dominant discourses have insisted that violent men are pathological individuals not in any way produced by patriarchy. Feminist anti-violence work has targeted this explanation and theorized links between individual acts of violence and the social context that supports and generates male violence against women and children. However, the absence of work that identifies and addresses violence committed by women is in large part because we do not want to look at how we are implicated in, or agents of, violence.<sup>70</sup> Sherene Razack writes:

The analytical move in Western feminism that ultimately produced the concept of gender persecution utilizes a universal woman, and a similar erasure of histories of genocide and exploitation has sometimes ensued. For the most part, erasure has been accomplished by the narrative of violence against women. When Western feminists speak about prostitution, pornography, mass rapes, domestic violence, dowry burnings, and genital mutilation, they have often done so using the universal 'we.' In doing so, differences between women of the North and South have almost entirely disappeared. The multiple sources of sexualized violence remain uninterrogated as do the many ways in which women are complicitous in oppressing other women.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Pearson, 1998:232.

<sup>70</sup> Razack, 1998: 20.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid: 94.

When women resist acknowledging our complicity in the oppression of other women, it stands to reason that this also impairs our ability to identify and address violence committed by women in a manner that brings systems of domination into view. By refusing to address the various positions of dominance that women hold, as well as by ascribing to notions of women as the "gentler sex," we impair our ability to address the ways and methods in which we perform violence.

Definitions of women as the "gentler sex" secure notions of racialized, sexualized and classed notions of femininity. Karleen Faith writes:

As I discuss in various sections of the text where I critique essentialist tendencies in feminist theory, it is a mistake to generalize women as innocent victims of inevitable male violence.<sup>72</sup>

In search of an answer to the question "Why do people commit crime?", social psychologists look to the defining external as well as internal characteristics and predisposition's of the individual, and their relations with intimate others, but they commonly bypass systemic power imbalances. Critical sociologists, by contrast, look to the defining characteristics of the social world that constructs the individual within structured networks of power relations.<sup>73</sup>

Feminist criminologists who address interlocking systems of oppression and acknowledge women's agency in both subordinate and dominant positions provide us with a framework to link histories of colonialism and white femininity with present day discourses on feminism and violence.

In Real Knockouts, The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defence, Martha McCaughey interrogates notions of aggression vis-a-vis notions of white femininity. She writes that aggression "is a primary axis around which prescriptive femininity, racism,

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<sup>72</sup> Faith, 1993:7.

<sup>73</sup> Faith, 1993:99.

compulsory heterosexuality and male violence revolve.<sup>74</sup> McCaughey argues that women do not consider violence as an act of resistance because “cultural feminism”<sup>75</sup> upholds the idea that men are violent and women are non-violent. In her argument, she interrogates agency as a means of resistance; however, unlike gender-centric or backlash writers such as Pearson, McCaughey also acknowledges agency as integral to resistance as well as domination:

Thus, even if self-defense training feels particularly subversive for white women whose race privilege and gender subordination have historically been based on their status as sexually pure and weak, self-defense politics might be more accountable to women of colour than cultural feminism’s anti-violence.<sup>76</sup>

Embracing women’s lack of innocence might make white women take more responsibility for the ways in which they oppress women and men of colour, and make heterosexual women of any race take more responsibility for the ways in which the perpetuate discrimination against gays and lesbians.<sup>77</sup>

McCaughey identifies agency as central to investigations of both resistance and domination. Her work raises important challenges to feminist anti-violence theory and activism particularly with regard to systemic violence:

Cabreros-Sud states that the form of feminism that we might call “innocence feminism” implies “that one’s own collaboration with mass-approved violence— i.e., institutional racism, First World nationalism and apathetic complacency— doesn’t count.” Thus, the disposition of feminine purity cultivated among white women, and the concomitant political stance of pacifism, might be dismantled for a better, more strongly anti-racist feminism that doesn’t let white women off the hook for the atrocities they’ve supported.<sup>78</sup>

Helen Lenskyj writes that McCaughey “is quick to acknowledge that self-defense is by no means a complete answer to the problem of women’s sexual, racial, and homophobic

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<sup>74</sup> McCaughey 1998:58.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid:145.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid:151.

<sup>77</sup> McCaughey 1998:151.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid:152.

oppression...<sup>79</sup> For a self-defense politics to be more accountable to people of colour McCaughey notes that a self-defense politics for women of colour must also address the criminalization of women of colour. Furthermore, she also argues that a self-defense politic must not rely on racist notions of criminals as black and poor and their targets as white, female and middle class.<sup>80</sup>

Thus far, I have argued that violence committed by white women has been obscured by both patriarchal constructions of white femininity and by gender-centric/exclusive feminist discourse. In the interests of upholding notions of hegemonic femininity, dominant discourses work to pathologize violent women rather than highlight the positions of dominance that women can hold. Similarly, feminist anti-violence discourse has been slow to identify systems of domination in the acts of violence committed by women. Instead, gender-centric feminist analysis maintains essentialized notions of women as the fairer sex based on constructions of white femininity in order to make morally based charges against the injustice of male violence and domination. The problem with this strategy is that when it comes to violent women, rather than paying attention to relations of power, explanations end up reinforcing racist, classist, heterosexist notions of womanhood and femaleness. What is needed is anti-violence theory that identifies dominant and subordinate roles and who holds systemic and material power in acts of violence. This task is not easy. However, the question is still worth asking: How and what forms of systemic and material power do violent women access when they commit violence against people in subordinate positions?

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<sup>79</sup> Lenskyj, Helen. International Review for the Sociology of Sport Vol.34, No.3, 1999:318.

<sup>80</sup> McCaughey 1998:175.

I have focused on violence committed by white women in order to make the point that imperialism has left a legacy that has made addressing women's violence difficult and politically challenging. The fact remains that white women have and do mobilize and commit acts of violence against people of colour. In Women, Race and Class, Angela Davis details the ways in which women's suffrage depended on white supremacy and the myth of the Black rapist for political leverage at a time when atrocities were being carried out by white men and women against Black men, women and children in the United States.<sup>81</sup> In a critique of Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape, Davis argues that Susan Brownmiller utilizes the myth of the Black rapist in her analysis of rape as a means highlighting the injustice of violence against women and rape. In addressing a section of Brownmiller's book where she discusses the Scottsborough Nine, a case in which nine young Black men were charged and convicted of rape on the perjured testimony of two white women. Davis writes:

No one can deny that the women were manipulated by Alabama racists. However, it is wrong to portray the women as innocent pawns, absolved of the responsibility of having collaborated with the forces of racism.<sup>82</sup>

Whether it is collaboration on the witness stand, exploitation and abuse of domestic servants, or murder and genocide, white women do engage in violence as perpetrators. Reluctance to name this violence maintains white supremacy and capitalism and gender-centric feminist projects and discourses. This again demonstrates that "in the context of feminist politics, the white female gaze often sustains rather than disrupts white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Davis, Angela Y. Women, Race and Class. New York: Vintage Books, 1983:118-121.

<sup>82</sup> Davis. 1983: 98.



## **Part Two: “Girl Violence” and the murder of Reena Virk.**

When Reena Virk was murdered on November 17, 1997, and her body discovered one week later in the Gorge Waterway in Saanich, B.C., journalists, academics and policy makers marveled at the fact that young women were involved in her assault and murder. The papers and television accounts of this crime focused on what they asserted is a rising trend of “girl violence.”<sup>84</sup> Consistent with other moral panics in this century,<sup>85</sup> the narrative of girl violence explains the murder of Reena Virk as a result of a tear in the moral fabric of society that has occurred because of the erosion of normative gender roles. The narrative of girl violence reveals public anxieties that, I argue, are also linked to racial, class and sexual categories and hierarchies.

Hegemonic discourses assert the girl violence narrative as evidence that girls are just as bad as boys and to deny the pervasiveness of systemic male violence against women. In response to these claims, feminists such as Sibylle Artz have argued that the violence committed by girls is a result of the violence they have been subjected to.<sup>86</sup> While I acknowledge experiencing violence should be addressed as a factor in perpetrating violence, I am critical of stopping at explanations that attribute violence committed by girls to the cycle of violence,<sup>87</sup> or that explain violence among girls as

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<sup>83</sup> Razack, 1998:15.

<sup>84</sup> The cover of Macleans magazine December 8, 1997 carried the headline “Bad Girls, A Parents’ Nightmare: missing the danger signs. The brutal murder of Reena Virk, 14, sounds an alarm about rising violence among teenage girls.”

<sup>85</sup> Amita Handa details moral panics of the early twentieth century and how immigration and an increase in the youth population contributed to moral panics over white citizenship and regulated bourgeois sexuality. Handa argues that the moral panics are central to the Canadian nationalism. Handa, Amita. Caught Between Omissions: Exploring ‘Culture Conflict’ Among Second Generation South Asian Women in Canada, OISE, University of Toronto 1997:40

<sup>86</sup> Artz, Sibylle. Sex, Power and the Violent School Girl. Toronto: Trifolium Books Inc., 1998.

<sup>87</sup> I have seen the term “the cycle of violence” (Rafiq 1991) used to describe a pattern of abuse as well as a way of describing how violence is learned through experiencing violence. In the girl violence narrative the cycle of violence is taken up as an explanation of why young women commit acts of violence – i.e. because they have been targeted for violence they turn to violence as a means of resistance or out of a lack of

examples of horizontal violence -- a notion that assumes all girls are horizontally positioned to each other despite differences in power between them. These explanations remain focused on gender oppression as the cause of violence perpetrated by girls and ignore how race, gender identity, sexuality, body size, skin colour, age, ability, and class factor in violence perpetrated by girls and young women.

In the media coverage of the trial of Warren Glowatski his troubled childhood is frequently referred to.<sup>88</sup> While the abuse and neglect he experienced growing up is important to address, it is presented as an explanation for his participation in the murder of Reena Virk. This explanation obscures how racism and sexism contextualized his actions. Feminists have struggled to address the systemic features of male violence and challenge individualistic explanations that focus only on individual pathological behavior and histories of abuse rather than the context of patriarchy and misogyny.<sup>89</sup> It would make sense then, that when addressing the violence of girls and women, a systemic approach also be adopted to interrogate the power relations that contextualize their acts of violence. Karleen Faith writes:

Certainly much crime stems from victimization of every kind, but victimization cannot be named as "the" cause of the crime. That is, although most abusers were abused, most victims of childhood sexual abuse do not become abusers. Most victims of racism do not similarly victimize other people. Most poor people do not steal. Most battered women do not kill their abusive mates....The continuum, then, does not follow deterministically from victimization to criminalization....The victim characterization conflicts with demands for equality, because if someone de facto needs special protections they can't be equal.<sup>90</sup>

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options. This explanation does not address how young women who commit acts of violence could be demonstrating or vying for dominance and power over their subordinates.

<sup>88</sup> "Accused's father in tears at trial," *Toronto Star*, April 24, 1999:A16.

<sup>89</sup> Feminist writing and activism regarding the Montreal Massacre illustrates the efforts of feminists who argued that the murder of fourteen women in Montreal by Marc Lepine was not an isolated act of violence committed by a "mad man," but rather consistent with systemic misogyny and patriarchy. Malette, Louise & Chalouh, Marie eds. *The Montreal Massacre*, PEI: Gynergy Books, 1991.

<sup>90</sup> Faith, 1993:108.

Victimization must be addressed as a factor in the actions of violent offenders: however, a systemic approach to understanding violence is also necessary. By using an interlocking approach, we can avoid individualistic explanations of violence that refer to victimization as the cause of violent behavior. In order to address the violence of white women, it is necessary to also address systemic features of the violence they participate in.

With respect to the murder of Reena Virk, the discourse of girl violence has been used in a particular manner that has obscured the interlocking of racism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism by relying on a universal girlhood based on white, middle class, able bodied norms. In this section, I discuss how interlocking oppressions configure violence against girls as well as why violence committed by white girls is rarely discussed in terms of hierarchical relations of power. The question of whether or not violence committed by girls is on the rise, in my view, misses the point. "If we get stuck in arguing for or against increases in violence involving women as perpetrators we will not ask how and under what circumstances this violence is enacted."<sup>91</sup> I am concerned with the many forms of violence against young women and girls as well as what we risk in maintaining the belief that girls are, or used to be, less violent than boys. In other words, I interrogate belief in the "gentler sex" and examine how this belief shapes hegemonic and feminist understandings of violence. Why is violence committed by white girls seen as a new phenomenon? Why does identifying white girls as perpetrators of violence threaten the dominant culture and spark moral panics over gender roles? How does this violence get explained so as to maintain hegemonic discourses? Where are girls of colour in the girl violence narrative? With these questions in mind I have selected feminist scholarship that addresses both violence against girls and violent

girls in order to discuss some of the underlying themes in the narrative of girl violence. I then discuss how this narrative operates in the media coverage of the life and murder of Reena Virk.

### **Ageism and Interlocking Oppressions**

“Girl violence” is described in the media as an epidemic phenomenon. This moral panic discourse generates and reflects public anxieties regarding the role of young women in society. Amita Handa writes that:

The concept of moral panic can be used to understand the anxieties around both youth and immigration at the turn of the century. I argue that the panic over non-white immigration was also about change -- changes brought about by a modernizing capitalist social order which resulted in the need for imported labor power. These changes threatened to dismantle white middle class centrality within the Canadian social, economic and political hierarchy.<sup>92</sup>

Consistent with the concept of moral panic explained by Handa, the narrative of girl violence can also be read as part of a backlash against gains made by women’s movements. For example, the media articulations of girl violence often mention that recent research that shows girls are achieving in areas where traditionally they have been excluded.<sup>93</sup> The sensationalizing narrative of girl violence suggests that these gains are causing girls to behave violently as it simultaneously obscures racism, violence against women, ageism, size/appearance and ability oppression, heterosexism, religious discrimination and classism.

By reviewing dominant discourses it is clear that “girl violence,” like “youth violence,” is understood as a result of the decline in moral values and the erosion of normative gender roles:

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<sup>91</sup> Adelberg & Currie, 1993: 111.

<sup>92</sup> Handa, 1997:115.

A recent forum in Surrey sponsored by the Ottawa-based Centre for Renewal in Public Policy shone considerable light on this deeply disturbing trend [youth violence]....The forum was the centre's response to a general consensus amongst a wide variety of educators and bureaucrats that current educational programs are doing a poor job of preparing young people to assume their adult roles as husband, wife, parent, and citizen.<sup>94</sup>

The societal anxiety regarding the roles of young women and men in this article is expressed through discourses of heterosexism and citizenship. Another article titled "Girls will be ...boys – and it's not a pretty sight, young females step out of traditional roles," further illustrates the centrality of normative gender roles in discourses of youth and girl violence. Statistics on education achievements by girls is contrasted with research that indicates more girls are using drugs and getting in trouble with the law to create the perception that girls have been given too much freedom and education.

Girls have virtually caught up with boys in math performance and have closed the gap considerably in science. But they are now smoking, drinking and using drugs as often as boys their age. And though they're not nearly as violent as boys, girls are increasingly more likely to find their way into trouble with the law.<sup>95</sup>

Both of these articles convey a connection between delinquency and failure to adhere to gender roles. Expressed more directly in the first article quoted above is the belief that non-conformity to gender roles threatens society at large.

The "adult roles" of husband, wife, parent and citizen mentioned above are dependent on rhetoric of exclusion and dichotomy. A husband can only exist in relation to his subordinate: the wife. Citizenship only has meaning in relation to

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<sup>93</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. "The Erasure of Race." *Kinesis*, December/January 1998:3.

<sup>94</sup> Field, J.Fraser. "Character: It's life's crucial lesson." *The Vancouver Sun* November 27, 1997: A:21.

<sup>95</sup> Vobejda, Barbara and Linda Perlstein. "Girls will be ...boys – and it's not a pretty picture, young females step out of traditional roles." *Toronto Star* June 18, 1998: A1, A36.

those who do not have citizenship. The role of adult is also a construction that depends on categories of youth:

James has also focused on the liminal positioning of youth, pointing out that the only boundaries which define the teenage years are boundaries of exclusion which define what young people are not, cannot do or cannot be. She cites a number of legal classifications, for example the age at which young people can drink alcohol, earn money, join the armed forces, or consent to sexual intercourse, to demonstrate how variable, context-specific and gendered these definitions of where childhood ends and adulthood begins are (not to mention the fact that many of these boundaries are of course also highly contested and resisted by young people).<sup>96</sup>

Constructions of youth function in a similar manner to constructions of gender, race, class and sexuality in that it is used to secure power for those in dominant positions. And like gender, race, class and sexuality, the meaning and power of age is constructed through interlocking systems of oppression.<sup>97</sup>

Anti-colonial and feminist scholars have researched the myriad ways that dominant groups justify oppression with paternalism. From the colonial paternalism of Orientalism<sup>98</sup> to patriarchal infantilization of women, the discourse of father/adult dominance and child/youth subordination has been used to naturalize and justify oppression in various contexts. Age is used in racist, sexist, and classist ideologies as a natural category and needs to be included in anti-oppression and "anti-subordination"<sup>99</sup> discourses.

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<sup>96</sup> Skelton, Tracey, Gill Valentine. Cool Places, Geographies of Youth Cultures. New York: Routledge, 1998: 5.

<sup>97</sup> Amita Handa interrogates constructions of youth and argues that the totalizing concept of "youth" stands in opposition to "adulthood" as an individualized western construct. 1997:130. In her research Handa theorizes the category of youth as it is constructed through discourses of modernism, industrialism, and was expressed as a public panic over immigration, sexual behavior, delinquency at the turn of the century. 1997:39.

<sup>98</sup> For a detailed investigation of Orientalism see Said, Edward. Orientalism, New York: Vintage Books, 1979 and Yegenoglu, Meyda. Oriental Fantasies, towards a feminist reading of Orientalism, Cambridge University Press 1998.

<sup>99</sup> Sherene Razack describes anti-subordination politics and theory as one that disturbs the relations of domination by considering our position in social hierarchies and moving towards responsibility and

## The Girl Problem

Historical constructions of girlhood, like womanhood, rely on the hegemonic notions of femininity discussed in part one of this thesis. The category of “girl” is one reserved for white, bourgeois, able-bodied female children and is characterized by innocence, dependence, and obedience.<sup>100</sup> Girls who do not fall into this category – or those whose behavior contradicts this characterization of girlhood—are labeled as “bad girls.” The “bad girl” is a construction that functions in concert with discourses of deviance based on hetero-normative white supremacy. The “bad girl” is how we can tell what a good girl is.<sup>101</sup> However, the bad girl is not really a “girl” at all. Rather, she is constructed as having an adult sexuality – a deviant adult sexuality -- that is directly linked to discourses of prostitution and criminality.

In “Spirited Youth Or Fiends Incarnate: The Samarcand Arson Case and Female Adolescence in the American South,” Susan Cahn discusses the trials of sixteen young women who were charged with arson of two residential cottages at Samarcand Manor, the North Carolina state training school for delinquent girls, in order to analyze the regulation of working class and poor young white women in the early twentieth century. Cahn identifies links between unstable class, gender, sexuality categories and the moral panics of the 1930’s Depression regarding youth and, in particular, female sexuality. Cahn writes:

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accountability: “Accountability begins with tracing relations of privilege and penalty. It cannot proceed unless we examine our complicity.” Razack, 1998:170.

<sup>100</sup> “Girls were expected to be passive, obedient, and chaste, and when they weren’t, the police and courts were quick to classify them as abnormal or disturbed.” Adelberg & Currie, 1993: 105.

Progressive reformers who worried not only that freer sexual expression placed the “modern” girl in danger of prostitution, abandonment, or abuse, but that her assertive sexuality endangered the society as a whole, lowering moral standards and creating a potentially large number of unwed mothers and so-called “illegitimate” children.<sup>102</sup>

Cahn’s research traces a tradition of pathologizing young women and girls based on sexual, age, racial, and class hierarchies. In opposition to the “Southern Lady,” the epitome of “pristine virtue,”<sup>103</sup> young working class and poor women were looked upon as childlike, needing rehabilitation, protection and discipline.

Institutions such as the Samarcand Manor were established to address the “girl problem”<sup>104</sup> through methods of incarceration, rehabilitation, and proper character development. Training schools received support from people who believed that young working class and poor women needed guidance to become respectable citizens as well as those who felt the “girl problem” should be addressed through incarceration and discipline. When the inmates of Samarcand set fire to it on March 12, 1931, public opinion followed two main streams. The young women were either looked upon as “salvageable good girls” or “degenerate, low-class women.”<sup>105</sup> The dilemma regarding the “girl problem” in southern United States at the turn of the century is described by Cahn in the following passage:

How could white citizens of the New South maintain solidarity and social cohesion when confronted by working-class urban problems and sexual behavior that so reviled middle-class modernists? And how would southerners deal with sexual modernity in girls who violated every tenet of both bourgeois

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<sup>101</sup> “If we did not have a whore, we could not have a virgin, since those categories only have meaning in relations. Thus, in maintaining these categories where they are, a few of us can claim innocence and others are irrevocably confined to guilt....” Razack 1998: 134.

<sup>102</sup> Cahn, Susan. “Spirited youth or fiends incarnate: the Samarcand arson case and female adolescence in the American South” *Journal of Women’s History*, v.9, n.4, Wntr 1998:154.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid:154.

<sup>104</sup> Cahn 1998:155.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid:152.



respectability and a still powerful racial code of white female purity? Were these girls to be embraced as southern daughters or rejected as racial degenerates?<sup>106</sup>

In this passage, Cahn identifies the interlocking of class, race, and sexuality by noting that the dilemma for white citizens centered on whether to recuperate these young women into white girlhood or reject them as racially defective women. Thus, class and sexuality are used in the racial evaluation of the young women at Samarcand. By not holding middle class status or by failing to conform to hegemonic femininity and sexuality their membership in the dominant racial category of whiteness was called into question.

The good girls/bad women dichotomy is linked to hegemonic notions of agency. Earlier I mentioned that hegemonic constructions of femininity deny women agency as social actors. For young women and girls agency is further denied because of constructions of age that position children and youth as incapable of having agency. As objects, not subjects, the young women at Samarcand were targeted for violence through discourses of age, gender, race and class that were central to the public debates surrounding the trials of these young women. In her analysis of the court proceedings,

Cahn writes:

The voyeuristic, almost pornographic discussion of corporal punishment at Samarcand provides additional evidence of the uncertainty with which both state officials and the public viewed delinquent girls....Reporters and investigators regularly inquired about the number and nature of the beatings, then offered the public graphic descriptions of mature and already sexualized female bodies force to the ground, stripped, whipped repeatedly with sticks or straps....[s]uch images reflect a public ambivalence about – or a fascinated discomfort with – adolescent bodies. Were they to be protected or punished; who had the right to control and derive pleasure from them; and were these the bodies of children – thus subject to corporal punishment – or adults, for whom such punishments had been outlawed?<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid: 173.

<sup>107</sup> Cahn, 1998:161.

The voyeurism, ambivalence and fascination over the bodies of the young women at Samarcand indicate how “bad girls” cease to be “girls.” Their bodies become property for the pleasure of adults. Ironically, corporal punishment is seen as acceptable for “salvageable good girls” who are also looked upon as not aware of what they do, whereas it is supposedly “outlawed” to subject “bad women” to corporal punishment by virtue of their adulthood and entitlement to rights. The quotation above indicates societal acceptance and justification of violence against young women and girls as a means of upholding notions of salvageable white feminine innocence. It should be noted that although it may have been outlawed to subject young working class and poor “women” to corporal punishment this does not mean that they escaped violence. Rather, they were characterized as racially inferior, moronic and targeted through the eugenics movement - sterilization in the name of purifying the white race.<sup>108</sup> The specific forms of violence enacted against girls, young women and adult women may have differed but race, class, sexuality and ability underlie these varied positionings and maintain the interlocked systems of domination that contextualize this violence.

The “girl problem” and the solution of training schools discussed in Cahn’s research on the Samracand arson trials illustrate the central role of white femininity in the maintenance of white supremacy, ageism and middle class bourgeois culture. Similarly, the recent discourse of girl violence has sounded the alarm that white femininity, and by extension hetero-normative white supremacy, is under attack. If girlhood is a construction that refers to white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied girls, the question in my mind is what does the narrative

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid:162.

of girl violence mean for girls of colour? Are they unsalvageable as Cahn documents in her research?

Efforts by African-American leaders in North Carolina to obtain state funding for a "Training School for Negro Girls" met continued opposition from whites, who according to the Charlotte Observer, believed "that such a large proportion of the Negro girls might fall within the scope of such a correctional institution that the state would simply be overrun with inmates." By implication, sexual misbehavior among black girls was so common it did not constitute delinquent behavior, while among white girls it was an exceptional and correctable condition.<sup>109</sup>

The "girl problem" in the 1930`s and its present day articulation: "girl violence," requires the racialized "other girl" in order to maintain the split between salvageable daughter and racial delinquent.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Cahn, 1998:156.

<sup>110</sup> Handa argues that moral panics and youth discourse is a racialized discourse inextricable from narratives of delinquency. Girl violence is framed as a narrative that seeks to protect young women from vice through punishment and policing. 1997:115.

## Girl Gangs and Girls of Colour

In an article titled "Teenage girls terrorize Toulon's rich," Catherine Simon details attacks on primarily elderly women by Algerian girls in France. She writes: "Many of the girls, who are aged between 10 and 17 and are mostly of North African origin, had already been charged with common theft or robbery with violence."<sup>111</sup> This article describes the "gang" activities of Algerian girls along several trajectories. First, the muggings are described as a gang activity engaged in because the girls are poor and come from broken homes. Second, Simon writes that acting as a gang is a recent development among the girls, however, she also quotes a teacher who states: "Gangs of girls who use extortion or raid shopping centres have been around for a long time. What was new in this case was the extreme physical violence used, which is reminiscent of what you find in the United States."<sup>112</sup> Why the United States is used as a violence indicator is not elaborated on. Based on the fact that white girls are rarely, if ever, described as involved in "gangs," I am assume that a parallel is being made between the Algerian girls in Toulon and the supposedly prevalent "black urban girl gangs" in the U.S.<sup>113</sup>

The violence committed by the Algerian-French girls is described as a nationalist form of retaliation resulting from their resistance to relinquishing their Algerian identity:

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<sup>111</sup> Simon, Catherine. "Teenage girls terrorise Toulon's rich." *Le Monde* October 4, 1998:16.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Karleen Faith writes:

Meda Chesney-Lind draws attention to the more recent media-created "female crime wave," in the 1990s, with a focus on "girl gangs."... [She] demonstrates the demonization and criminalization of girls based in part on U.S. media presentations, in which "it is clear that 'gang' has become a code word for race." Images of young African-heritage and Hispanic women banding together "can create a political climate where the victims of racism and sexism can be somehow blamed for their own problems." (Chesney-Lind, 1992:29,31). Faith, 1993:63.

“The girls have French nationality, but they see their identity as Algerian or Tunisian, says Noria, who is herself North African. They are racist in their own way.”<sup>114</sup> By holding on to their Tunisian identity the young women are described as racist; however, the violence and muggings are also described as a resistance to Arab culture:

“To start with the girls just ape the violence behavior of boys.” Aziza says. “But there’s also a form of revolt. By acting in that way, they’re getting their revenge for the thousands of years of submission imposed on their mothers. It’s their way of saying: ‘You’ve spent your whole life cooking couscous, old girl; that’s not the kind of life we want.’”<sup>115</sup>

The layering of colonialism, imperialism, sexism, and ageism in this news paper article is characteristic of French Orientalism that is fixated on North African Arab women as icons of patriarchal oppression.<sup>116</sup> What is interesting in this passage is the pairing of behaving like boys and resisting gender norms of Arab culture. What this implies is that because the young Algerian women do not fit racist stereotypes of the submissive Arab woman, they are labeled as deviant while at the same time Arab culture is blamed for the deviant behavior of the girls. The girls are both deviant because they identify as Tunisians as well as because they do not act like the racist stereotype of Arab women.

Nowhere in this newspaper article is a discussion about the age relationship between the young women and the senior women they assaulted. Elderly people are routinely abused by adults and youth; however, this is not factored into the analysis of these crimes. These crimes are described as racist or “reverse” racist rather than elder abuse. The muggings are reported in a manner that reinforces racist/nationalist ideologies regarding racial delinquency rather than through an analysis of interlocking oppression that would allow an acknowledgement of racism, sexism, class and ageism. In this case

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Simon, 1998: 16.

ageism affects both the young women and elderly women in very specific ways. The young women are seen as criminal because of their race, gender and membership in the age category of “youth.” The elderly women are either seen as, or are in fact, vulnerable to violence because of their membership in the category of “aged” or because of their perceived or actual inability to ward off violence.

The contradictions in the article mentioned above are part of a familiar discourse on girls of colour that involves racist othering. Girls of colour are frequently described as gang members whereas their white counterparts are more likely to be described as in need of character development and guidance. The difference race makes in the construction of specific types of girlhood is linked to narratives of gang culture, race war panics, and deviant female sexuality. I have selected this article for critique precisely because the only time girls of colour appear in the media is when they have committed acts of violence, or, when they are targeted for violence by men and women of colour. In the coverage of the murder of Reena Virk it is no surprise that race has been obscured. Reena is the victim not the perpetrator of violence and her murder was committed by white youth. This does not fit the established narratives that the public is accustomed to when girls of colour appear in the media.

Researchers, journalists and scholars miss the connection between age, gender, ability, class, sexuality and race when notions of white femininity and gender-centric analyses are used to explain violence committed by young women and girls. The fact that research on friendship has focused on white girls and

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<sup>116</sup> Yegenoglu. , 1998:53.

research on violence has focused on girls of colour.<sup>117</sup> tells much about how each are positioned through interlocking systems of oppression. With the recent moral panic about girl violence this has shifted, however, the discourses of white supremacy and patriarchy remain central to both dominant and feminist explanations about the so called recent increase of white girls' aggression and violence.

### **White Girl Violence**

White girlhood is a construct based on hegemonic femininity. Thus, their acts of violence have also been un-nameable as acts of oppression and similar to gender-centric feminists accounts of women's violence, white girls are seen as having agency as resisters but not as oppressors. The surprise that white girls can be violent speaks to the fact that historically it has been inconceivable that they could be. This has everything to do with the construction of white girlhood as opposed to a supposed rising trend of girl violence.

Sibylle Artz, the much quoted author of Sex, Power and the Violent School Girl maintains a gender-centric analysis of violence committed by the white school girls she interviews and, in so doing, she explains violence committed by girls as a result of the patriarchal violence they have experienced.<sup>118</sup> Artz offers an analysis of violence against women that refutes the dominant articulation of girl violence in which girls are blamed for failing to conform to patriarchal gender roles. She argues that patriarchy has subjected girls and young women to oppression and violence causing them to resist in ways that

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<sup>117</sup> Ross Leadbeater, Bonnie J. & Niobe Way eds. Urban Girls, resisting stereotypes, creating identities. New York: New York University Press, 1996:173.

include violent behavior. Because she does not use an analysis of interlocking oppressions in understanding violence against women, Artz suggests that the only reason why girls commit acts of violence is because they are caught in a cycle which compels them to commit violence. What is missing from Artz work is attention to the ways in which girls “perform themselves as dominant.”<sup>119</sup>

Artz writes in the introduction to her book:

Little research has been done with respect to violent females because, for the most part violence and delinquency are seen to be almost exclusively a male problem. As well, the handful of studies that do exist focus on Afro-American or Hispanic-American girls who are marginalized because of color or ethnicity, live in ghettos, and are either members of known youth gangs or heavily involved with the juvenile justice system. The violent, non-gang, white girl and the violent school girl who is not in juvenile detention has been ignored. It is as if such girls do not exist--but in fact they do; and they are very much in the forefront of the rise in violence in schools, both as victims and as perpetrators.<sup>120</sup>

Artz does not ask why the focus has been on African American and Hispanic girls to the exclusion of white girls. She also fails to recognize that more than two youth of colour gathered are called a gang, where as white youth would just be seen as a clique or hanging out. Guy Lawson writes that on the night Reena Virk was murdered “[t]he kids were on the street in full view, and the kids were invisible – just another pack of juvenile delinquents out drinking.”<sup>121</sup> The youth involved in Reena’s murder were described as imitating “gang” culture.<sup>122</sup> If these young people were Black, Latin American, or Asian I

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<sup>118</sup> Artz, Sibylle. *Sex, Power and the Violent School Girl*. Toronto: Trifolium Books Inc., 1998:200 & 203.

<sup>119</sup> Razack, 1998:159.

<sup>120</sup> Artz, 1998: vi.

<sup>121</sup> Lawson, Guy. “When No One is Watching.” *GQ*, USA, February 1999:166.

<sup>122</sup> “The type of violence has become uglier, among girls and boys....they are *imitating* what they see in movies and the suggestions they hear in rap music.” Steffenhagen, Janet. “Girls Killing a Sign of Angry Empty Lives” *Vancouver Sun*, November 25, 1997:A8.

“That last, nightmarish night of Reena, a pudgy East Indian girl trying desperately to fit into a teen subculture where girls *pretending* to be members of L.A. street gangs fight each other, has been elevated into a national tragedy.” “Reena Virk’s Short life and lonely death” in *Globe & Mail* Thursday, November 27/97, p. A-12.



believe they would be labeled as a gang rather than merely imitating one. They would not have been an invisible group of “juvenile delinquents” concealed through whiteness.

Artz does not identify racism as a reason why white girls’ violence has not been addressed. She explains violence among girls as caused by the cycle of violence or traumatic reenactment. While concepts can be useful, they often do not fully explore how race, ability, appearance, class, age, sexuality, gender, and other systems of oppression are key factors in violence against girls and women – and the violence they participate in. Artz writes that girls police each other and that conformity to a thin perfect super model image is described as the code of femininity that must be followed<sup>123</sup> but fails to discuss how this model of femininity is based on a white model of femininity. While she does identify this image as sexist, her failure to note the whiteness of “supermodel” femininity obscures the fact that while white girls do experience gender oppression, they also have access to racial dominance.

In a section of her book titled “The Rules of Violence” Artz writes:

...violence is not chiefly a matter of lashing out in the heat of the moment. Instead, it is a rule-bound and purposeful activity engaged in to redress the intolerable imbalances they [girls] perceive in their largely hierarchical social world. An imbalance usually arises when the rules, which form a kind of code of conduct, have been broken.<sup>124</sup>

Artz finds that sexual behavior is closely monitored, to be labeled as a slut or easy is another justification for assault. Fidelity, chastity, and respectability are all notions that carry racial connotations given that women of colour are the “other” that the respectable, heterosexual, white woman identity is constructed against. Artz argues that competition

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<sup>123</sup> Artz, 1998:175.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid: 183.

for boys' attention is seen as the cause for girl violence.<sup>125</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality, and patriarchy and the roles that these forms of oppression force on young women and men are central to the concept of girl violence and figure prominently in violence against women. By not addressing racism and heterosexim in her work, Artz takes heterosexuality as a natural category rather than an identity constructed through discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality.

Artz's lack of race analysis prevents her from understanding girl violence as part of an imperial project that includes racist female to female violence. In her exclamation that violent white girls do exist,<sup>126</sup> Artz reveals her ignorance of the histories of slavery, indentureship, domestic service and colonialism that position white women as partners in imperialism and as agents in the domination, punishment, and violence against people of colour. As I mentioned in the first section of this paper, violence against women of colour is shaped by heterosexism and racism that constructs women of colour as a threat to the alliance between imperial women and "their" men.

According to the quote above from Artz book, violence is justified when territories are trespassed, when subordinates challenge superiors and when rules governing social orders are broken. If, as Artz suggests, violence among girls is used to reprimand and correct insubordination within the social group, the fact that Reena was South Asian should been seen as a key factor in her murder. No amount of correction could make her into the white girl that society said she should be. Furthermore, for women of colour deviant, code breaking behavior is assumed based on how racist ideologies position us.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid: 175-76.

Pearson, Patricia. "You're so cute when you're mad." Globe & Mail, November 29, 1997:D3.

Women of colour are constructed as exotic, libidinous, sexually dangerous, and a threat to white women's ability to control their men. Women of colour are inscribed with behavior that Artz says is heavily policed by girls. As a young South Asian woman Reena Virk would be subject to racist stereotypes and automatically in violation of the codes of conduct detailed in Artz's book. The young women who lured Reena to the park and who initiated the assault against her told the police and courts that they did so because Reena had tried to steal one of the girl's boyfriend and had stolen another girl's phone book to phone boys. How the young women came to this conclusion is not elaborated on; however, I argue that because Reena was South Asian, this kind of accusation must be read using an analysis that addresses the interlocking of racism and heterosexism.

Artz uses a gender-centric analysis of violence against women in interpreting the interviews with the young women in her research. She shows that sexual abuse and harassment play a large role in "horizontal violence" between girls.<sup>127</sup> She insists that violence, sex and gender must be studied, understood, and dealt with together but fails to see that any meaningful attempt to do this is futile without an understanding of how racism, heterosexism and other systems of oppression support and maintain patriarchy. By not problematizing the identities of white girls she remains within a heterosexist, patriarchal, racist framework that posits gender as a universal, neutral category.

The "largely hierarchical world" that Artz observes is one that is primarily, if not exclusively, structured by gender oppression. Implied in Artz's work is that the white girls she interviews engage in violence as a result of the violence that they have experienced rather than also as a result of their ability to

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<sup>126</sup> Artz, 1998: vi.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid:200.

access power through the positions of dominance they hold. Furthermore, by explaining the violent behavior of girls as a result of violence against women, Artz seems to suggest that girls are naturally caring and non-violent. She cites the work of Carol Gilligan<sup>128</sup> to argue that girls are more caring and that it is only because of the relentless violence in their lives that they have recently turned to violence.

In the “largely hierarchical world” of Maple Grove Public School, the school in Oakville, Ontario I attended as a child, I can recall many acts of violence directed at myself and other children of colour, children with disabilities, poor and working class children, and pretty much anyone who could be labeled a “fag” or a “lezzie.” Violence committed by white girls is not a new phenomenon as is suggested by the girl violence narrative. Furthermore, children are not a homogenous group that are equal by virtue of their child status. I did not feel “horizontally” located in relation to the girls or boys who spat racist insults at me nor did I feel equally positioned to the children who I saw racially abused while I held my breath beneath my light skin. We were all considered children but never equally positioned.

Like Artz, Lyn Mikel Brown discusses white girls’ anger in terms of resistance to patriarchy and fails to address unequal power relations among girls. In Raising Their Voices, The Politics of Girl’s Anger, Brown argues that when white girls express anger they are resisting patriarchal notions of femininity. My concern with Brown’s research is

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<sup>128</sup> Gilligan, Carol. In a different voice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

that there is no distinction made between anger used with accuracy<sup>129</sup> as a tool for resistance,<sup>130</sup> and anger used as a means of domination. Brown writes:

I contend that girls' increased anger and assertiveness at eleven and twelve reflects their emerging comprehension of the culture they are about to enter and their place as young women in it....Early adolescence, in other words, disposes girls to see the cultural framework, and girls' and women's subordinate place in it, for the first time.<sup>131</sup>

Brown suggests that anger and aggression are a result of patriarchy; however, assuming that girls realize gender subordination at the time of early adolescence "for the first time," should we therefore also assume that it is only their subordination that is realized? Children can recognize social inequality from very young ages and in so doing are able to locate themselves in terms of "privilege and penalty."<sup>132</sup> Awareness of subordination does not necessarily ensure that the only responses to domination are acts of resistance.

Both Artz and Brown are looking for the "different voice"<sup>133</sup> of girls who use anger to resist patriarchy without looking at how aggression can also be used to dominate. Although Brown, more so than Artz, critiques constructions of white femininity, she is preoccupied with showing differences in whiteness across class lines as a means of arguing that young white women's anger is primarily an act of resistance. By focusing on the variations of white girls' anger and aggression across class differences, Brown assumes that varied articulations of oppression

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<sup>129</sup> Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider. CA: Crossing Press, 1984:131.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid: 124.

<sup>131</sup> Brown, Lyn, Mikel. Raising Their Voices, The Politics of Girls Anger. London: Harvard University Press, 1998: 15.

<sup>132</sup> Razack, 1998:170.

<sup>133</sup> Gilligan, 1982.

are evidence of resistance to hegemony.<sup>134</sup> By keeping the focus on how young white women are oppressed by patriarchy and class Brown and Artz ignore the ways in which violence and aggression performed by young white women are consistent with, and draw on, racist, ableist, heterosexist and classist hierarchies. This methodology is consistent with gender-centric feminist scholarship and fails to address the role of white women as agents of domination in interlocking systems of oppression.

The investment in addressing young white girl's violence as solely a result of gender oppression is tied to notions of "innocence"<sup>135</sup> and the belief that girls and women are indeed the fairer sex. When children and youth are involved in assaults on one another their "youth" status is seen as a binding common denominator that positions them equally. Only by moving away from the impulse to hold onto notions of innocence so deeply connected to racialized constructions of femininity, can violence committed by girls be addressed in a manner that identifies interlocking oppressions and thus allow for anti-violence strategies grounded in "anti-subordination."<sup>136</sup>

In a recent report conducted by the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence entitled "Violence Prevention and the Girl Child: Literature Reviews of Select Areas," Yasmin Jiwani discusses the interlocking of oppressions in the lives of marginalized girls:

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<sup>134</sup> Yegnoglu, 1998: 37.

<sup>135</sup> Razack, 1998:14.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 170.

For the purposes of this review, marginalized girls refers to girls with Aboriginal ancestry, disabilities, lesbian or bisexual orientation, racialized backgrounds, and girls from working-class backgrounds. Each of these groups is constructed differently and shares the experience of exclusion, both historically and contemporarily. Yet for each, and within each group, the experiences of gender, race, class, sexual orientation and disability reflect interlocking oppressions which render them highly specific. Hence, not only are the oppressions experienced differently, but no one category is monolithic.<sup>137</sup>

Jiwani's work identifies the different forms of violence girls face, making clear that the group "girls" is by no means homogeneous. In my own research on violence against young women, I too have found very little work that addresses the interlocking of oppressions in the lives of girls.<sup>138</sup> Jiwani's important research demonstrates the varied positions girls and women hold in relation to one another. Not only are experiences of violence "highly specific," but girls and women engage in and mobilize violence against those over whom they hold dominant positions. This violence can range from "complicity"<sup>139</sup> with systems of oppression to performing acts of violence that support, and are supported by, interlocking systems of oppression.

Hegemonic literature on girl violence has focused on white girls and argues that girls must be properly socialized to normative white gender roles. Feminist research suggests that these roles must be resisted and patriarchy must be abolished. While I support the goal of dismantling patriarchy I argue that gender-centric approaches obscures the privilege and power allocated to white girls and women through white supremacy. Concepts such as the cycle of violence and horizontal violence position girls

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<sup>137</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. "Violence Against Marginalized Girls." Forthcoming: Violence Prevention and the Girl Child: Literature Reviews of Select Areas, The Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, Vancouver: FREDA Centre, November 1998: 3.

<sup>138</sup> Jiwani states that in her review of the Canadian literature on girls from marginalized groups did not yield significant information. Ibid. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Razack, 1998:10.

and women only in relation to oppression and does not account for their violence perpetrated as an acts of domination.

When a white girl assaults a girl of colour it is an act of racist, not “girl.” violence. Similarly, when a boy assaults a girl it is an act of sexist, not “youth.” violence. Narratives of girl violence or youth violence serve two specific aims. First, violence against girls and youth is obscured. Children and youth are constructed as not having agency and therefore lacking judgement, or, they are pathologized as biologically and racially defective. This serves to justify their discipline and punishment or to blame them for the violence they are subjected to by adults. Second, “girl violence” and “youth violence” obscure interlocking oppressions by positing a universal girlhood or youth identity based on white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexist norms. When violent acts committed by girls and young people are attributed to their age (or in the case of girl violence to their gender and age), the various positions of dominance and subordination children and young people hold in relation to each other are overlooked. Until violent acts committed by youth and children are addressed from an analysis of interlocking oppressions, ageism, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, heterosexism and classism will continue to provide ample opportunity for the perpetuation of both violence against girls and violence committed by girls.

### **The Media Coverage of the Murder of Reena Virk**

The narrative of girl violence operates on many levels in the media coverage of Reena Virk’s murder. First, and most obviously, the lack of race analysis denies the



existence of racism in Canadian society and supports the myth of multicultural harmony and tolerance. Secondly, the only way girl violence makes sense within mainstream society is through a racist construction of girl identity, one that assumes white, middle class, able-bodied, and heterosexual to be the norm. Even though racism as a systemic form of oppression is obscured in the media reports of this crime, racism is blatantly evident in the articulations of what constitutes girl violence and what is required for one to be a "girl" within Canadian society.

The fear and alarm generated by the narrative of girl violence posits that male violence against women is no longer of concern. In the case of the murder of Reena Virk, Warren Glowatski, 16 at the time of the crime, has been convicted of second-degree murder. Unlike the reports that dismiss racism because two of the young women who attacked Reena were not white, this crime is nevertheless described as girl violence despite the fact that a young man was involved in both the assault and murder of Reena Virk. It is also notable that although there have been numerous violent crimes reported recently involving young men and boys nowhere have these crimes been reported as "boy violence" or described as part of an epidemic of male violence.<sup>140</sup> Rather individuals are pathologized or the violence is attributed to the fact that they are youth, which is in turn seen as a pathological condition.

In order for the narrative of girl violence to be applied to the murder of Reena Virk she must be represented as only a "girl." She must be the same as her attackers for

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<sup>140</sup> On April 20, 1999 at Columbine Highschool, Littleton, Colorado, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold bomb and open fire at their highschool targeting people of colour and athletes. The fact that this attack took place on Adolf Hitler's birthday has been loosely connected to the white supremacist beliefs of Harris and Klebold in the media coverage. *People Weekly*, May 3, 1999:98. On March 24, 1998 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Mitchel Johnson, 14, and Andrew Golden, 12, fatally shot four girls and a teacher. Johnson and Golden were aiming for girls in their assault. *People Weekly*, May 3, 1999:99.

this crime to be understood as between girls rather than racist and heterosexist violence against young South Asian women and girls. Reena's family have also been represented in a manner that emphasizes their similarity to the families of the youth who attacked and murdered Reena Virk. Despite the historical focus of mainstream media on South Asian culture and religion when South Asian people are involved in violent crimes, the focus on the Virk family is not on the fact that they are South Asian, rather more attention is paid to the fact that they are Jehovah Witnesses. As Yasmin Jiwani asks "Could this be due to the fact that she [Reena] was not killed by one of her own?"<sup>141</sup> The repeated mention of the fact that the Virks are Christian serves to "whiten" the Virk family as a means of emphasizing "sameness" between the Virks and the families of Reena's attackers. In other words, Christianity is used to confer respectability on the Virk's, even though Jehovah Witnesses are seen as deviant within the spectrum of Christianity. I argue that the dichotomy of Christian superiority vs. Hindu/Muslim/Sikh inferiority provides the context in which the Jehovah Witnesses church is used as a racial marker in the media coverage of Reena's murder. This is one example of how the media maneuvers around race in a manner that minimizes racial difference so as not to call attention to racism. Christianity serves to secure the raceless discourse of "girl violence" in by de-racing the Virk family also.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. "The murder of Reena Virk, the erasure of race." *Kinesis*, December/January 1998, p.3.

<sup>142</sup> As Yegenoglu argues, Orientalism is articulated differently in each instance (1998:72) so to has racism been articulated in contradictory and complex ways in the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk. Although I argue that the media constructed the Virks as the same as the families of Reena's attackers, the media reports also focus the strictness in the Virk home and within the Jehovah Witness religion. This echoes the hegemonic representation of South Asian people as resistant to assimilation and young South Asian woman as running away from "cultural backwardness." Handa 1997:105. In other words, I argue that even though the Virks are de-raced, racist stereotypes about South Asian people are evoked in the media coverage of this crime even if only implicitly.

The masking of racial difference in favor of asserting differences such as being “overweight” or “awkward,” which are mentioned as benign prejudices and taunts instead of systemic discrimination towards large women,<sup>143</sup> can be found in the media clippings and television accounts that are simultaneously riddled with examples of racist and sexist violence directed at Reena Virk. For example, on the night Reena was murdered the first attack was initiated by one girl extinguishing a cigarette on her forehead. This information appeared in the same article that described a photograph of Reena in “fancy East Indian clothing....Reena, her sister and mother have the traditional blue dot on their foreheads, between their eyes.”<sup>144</sup> However, no connections were made about whether extinguishing a cigarette on Reena’s forehead was an act of racist violence.

The media quotes Reena’s peers who testify that she had endured years of harassment and name calling.<sup>145</sup> The name calling documented in the media indicate that she was taunted because she was “pudgy” and “overweight.”<sup>146</sup> and that she was often called a “beast” or the “bearded lady.”<sup>147</sup> What other names were Reena called? I doubt that the youth that beat and murdered Reena Virk, perhaps even the same youth that had tormented her for years would have inhibitions about calling her a “paki” or any other name that would identify her as racially different and inferior.

Reena Virk’s “difference” is described as having no historical or political context. It is almost that her difference (i.e. having “dark skin,” being “overweight”, “hairy” and

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<sup>143</sup> The term “large women” is problematic in that it implies that the average size for women is what we see in the media (i.e. thin, white, & able-bodied). Since most women do not fit this body type, it is important to acknowledge that the average size for women is precisely what our fat-phobic culture considers as “large.”

<sup>144</sup> “Reena Virk’s Short life and lonely death” in *Globe and Mail*, November 27, 1997, p.A12.

<sup>145</sup> Mackinnon, Leslie. “Bullied to Death.” *The National Magazine*: Summary, December 2, 1997.

<sup>146</sup> “Reena Virk’s Short Life and Lonely Death,” *Globe & Mail*, November 27, 1997:A1&A12.

<sup>147</sup> Mackinnon, Leslie. “Bullied to Death.” *The National Magazine*: Summary, December 2, 1997.

“awkward”) is described as though anyone may have been similarly different. Yasmin Jiwani writes:

Reena Virk could not “fit in” because she had nothing to fit in to. She was brown in a predominantly white society. She was supposedly overweight in a society which values slimness to the point of anorexia, and she was different in a society their values “sameness” and uniformity. And she was killed by those who considered her difference as affront to their sense of uniformity. Their power and dominance, legitimized by and rooted in the sexism and racism of the dominant white culture and its attendant sense of superiority, was used to force her into submission – a submission that amounted to her death and erasure from society.<sup>148</sup>

As Jiwani points out, Reena’s difference is constructed through relations of power and oppression. However, in the media coverage the construction of difference is elided and instead we are presented with descriptions and code words that stand in for racial difference to obscure the racist othering of Reena Virk.

In order to discuss Reena Virk’s life and death, a clear strategy is required in order to address sexism and violence against women while simultaneously resisting racist ideologies that attribute violence against women in the South Asian community to South Asian culture. In this case, the sexual abuse charges Reena made against her father must be discussed through an understanding of patriarchy and sexism, not as a pathological behavior inherent in South Asian cultures. It is equally important to also object to patriarchal readings of her murder as the outcome of her rebellion against her parents or her supposed “bad girl” behavior.

As Sherene Razack writes in “What Is to Be Gained by Looking White People in the Eye? Culture, Race, and Gender in Cases of Sexual Violence”:

...racialized women who bring sexual violence to the attention of white society risk exacerbating the racism directed at both men and women in their communities; we risk, in other words, deracializing our gender and being viewed

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<sup>148</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. “Reena Virk: the erasure of race.” <http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/articles/virk.htm> October 27, 1998:2.

as traitors, women without community. These risks are particularly acute when, as so often happens, it is the dominant group who controls the interpretations of what it means to take culture into account<sup>149</sup>

Through the narrative of girl violence, the charges of sexual abuse Reena made against her father de-racialize Reena within mainstream media. She has been portrayed as raceless throughout the media coverage and the impact of sexism and sexual violence against her has been minimized if not dismissed all together. Again the narrative girl violence conceals how both racism and violence against women contributed to the life circumstances and murder of Reena Virk. Those “who control the interpretations of what it means to take culture into account” have omitted race from explanations about this crime. Perhaps this omission is because racism and violence against women are so clearly interlocked in the murder of Reena Virk.

In January of 1997, Reena Virk charged her father, Manjit Virk, with two counts of sexual assault and one count of threatening to cause death or bodily harm. One would expect that the media would report this in a manner that pathologizes South Asian families as inherently misogynist as a result of “backwardness, tradition, and religious beliefs.”<sup>150</sup> The history of representation of violence against women within South Asian communities is documented by Yasmin Jiwani who states that the dominant society constructs South Asian men, particularly Muslim and Sikh men as:

...the major perpetrators of crimes within Canadian society, the South Asian community at large, and in the global arena: [they] refuse to respect human rights in relation to South Asian women; they refuse to respect civil rights in terms of membership of non-South Asians; and they refuse to respect government regulations<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Razack, Sherene. “What Is to Be Gained By Looking White People in the Eye? Culture, Race, and Gender in Cases of Sexual Violence.” *Signs* Vol.19, Summer 1994:896.

<sup>150</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. “To be and not to be: South Asians as Victims and Oppressors in the Vancouver Sun, Canadian Media & Racism.” *Sanvad*, Mississauga, ON: August Vol.5, No.45, 1992:15.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*:14.

The reason why the charges of sexual abuse have been minimized in the media is because it would risk the racialization of Reena's father. In other words, girl violence which requires equivalence between the Virk family and the families of Reena's attackers, works to also dismiss the charge of incest against her father.

To acknowledge and address the impact of incest while maintaining sameness between the Virk family and white Canadians would be to acknowledge the existence of incest as a violence present in the dominant group also. Thus, the only two options that fit in to hegemonic narratives regarding the sexual abuse of Reena are to either exonerate Reena's father to ensure his respectability and sameness with the dominant group, or to racially pathologize her father and attribute the incest to South Asian culture. In the media reports, it is apparent that in the interests of racelessness required for the discourse of girl violence, the charges of sexual abuse and the impact of incest in Reena Virk's life are minimized if not dismissed all together.

The silence around the incest again avoids issues of violence against women that are central to her murder. Her suicide attempts, lack of support or safety within the social service system are mentioned in the media but never discussed as contributing to her vulnerability. Instead she is portrayed as a rebellious youth who smoked, experimented with drugs and did everything she could to escape parental control.<sup>152</sup> The incest she experienced must be understood as violence against women not "cultural" violence. This was compounded by the racism she experienced at school and within the foster care system. Reena Virk was not a young women facing "culture conflict" a concept Amita Handa argues blames South Asian culture rather than racism, sexism and other systems of

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<sup>152</sup> "Slain Teen Remembered" Vancouver Sun, November 25, 1997:A4.

oppression for the violence and pressures young SA women face.<sup>153</sup> and she was not a bad girl bent on rebellion. She was a young South Asian woman living with sexual and racist violence in a society structured by interlocking systems of oppression. She made choices and resisted within a scope of options limited by the impacts of sexist/sexual, heterosexist, ableist, classist and racist violence.

Violence occurs among girls along lines of systemic relations of power -- race, class, nationality, language, body size and appearance, skin colour, and disability. For example, a young woman with spina bifida who attended Shoreline Public School, where Reena's attackers also attended school, left due to harassment.<sup>154</sup> She was targeted as a disabled person by those who saw her "difference as inferiority."<sup>155</sup> The difference of disability is constructed through systemic inequality and violence directed at people with disabilities. However, this was not addressed in the media coverage any more than racism, violence against women, classism or ageism.

### **Part Three: Counter Hegemonic Frameworks – The Murder of Reena Virk Re-Framed**

Rather than trying to answer the question "Who Was Reena Virk?,"<sup>156</sup> I ask, how can we understand her murder in ways that counter hegemony? In this section I do not attempt to tell the story of what "really" happened. It is not my project to give another

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<sup>153</sup> "Culture conflict," as discussed by Amita Handa, constructs young South Asian women as caught between "traditional" South Asian culture and a "modern" Canadian culture. These mutually exclusive, internally homogenous categories are constructed through colonial, nationalist, modernist, patriarchal discourses. Similar and connected to the concept of "moral panic", the discourse of "culture conflict" obscures relations of power and domination by attributing racist and sexist violence against young South Asian women to their lack of success in assimilating to the dominant culture and/or the supposed backward "traditional" cultural beliefs and practices of South Asian people. Handa, 1997:4.

<sup>154</sup> "Reena Virk's Short life and lonely death" in Globe & Mail Thursday, November 27/97:A-12.

<sup>155</sup> Razack 1998:60.

authoritative reading to stand in line with explanations given by experts on girl violence or the representations of the life of Reena Virk presented by journalists. The counter-hegemonic reading I offer here is one that takes up the media reports through an interlocking analysis informed by the work of researchers and scholars producing work on violence against South Asian women and girls. I mention this to indicate both the potential uses and limitations of this thesis. I do not know what “really” happened any more than I know who Reena Virk “really” was. The aim of my research is to address the media representation of her life and murder and the narrative of girl violence that, I argue, has been used in manner that constructs who Reena was, or was not, without attending to the systems of oppression that contextualize this crime.

My counter-hegemonic re-framing of the murder of Reena Virk is not a narrative of her life. Rather it is a weaving together of the details of this crime gleaned from the media coverage and research on violence against young South Asian women. My re-framing of this crime is not a chronological tracing but rather, an attempt to approach the murder of Reena Virk from a multitude of perspectives and trajectories with the very specific project of challenging hegemony.

The central task I undertake in re-framing the murder of Reena Virk is to keep all of the systemic sources and effects of violence in view. In other words to make sure none of the violences get erased by hegemonic discourses or subsumed in to a single issue perspective such as gender-centric/exclusive feminist theory and activism. Understanding how sexism, racism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, economic status and heterosexism interlock is crucial in developing a counter hegemonic framework for understanding the murder of Reena Virk.

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<sup>156</sup> Tafler, 1998.



In developing a counter hegemonic reading of the murder of Reena Virk it is important to keep in mind that hegemonic constructions of femininity have made it difficult to name white female violence. Because of the un-nameable violence of white women and girls, the narrative of girl violence has been constructed around the idea that violent white girls are a new phenomenon. This “new” trend is explained as either a result of eroding gender roles or due to violence against women that causes otherwise non-violent white girls to be violent. Lost in this discussion is consideration of how young white women and girls are performing themselves as dominant and acting as agents of oppression.

Hegemonic discourses deny young women agency at the same time the violence they are subjected to is rendered invisible. The narrative of girl violence is used to assert that girls are now as bad as boys and that all girls are the same despite differences of power in terms of age, race, sexuality, religion, class and ability. The counter hegemonic reading I argue for in this section is one that resists the “erasure of race”<sup>157</sup> and the narrative of “girl violence.” The murder of Reena Virk was an act of racist, heterosexist, classist, ableist violence – not an example of what has been erroneously termed “girl violence.”

Since the initial media coverage of this crime six young women have been tried and convicted for assault (April-May 1998). Warren Glowatski has been tried and convicted for second degree murder (April-June 1999) and Kelly Ellard will stand trial for second degree murder in February 2000. In this section I will address some of the more recent media coverage of this crime as well as the work of activists and scholars

committed to anti-violence work from an interlocking perspective. My goal in re-framing this crime is to contribute to the work of activists and educators who are committed to decoding narratives such as “youth” or “girl violence.” narratives that have done little to address or end violence against young people.

The trial of Warren Glowatski rekindled the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk although, because it was a young man on trial, the narrative of girl violence was temporarily relegated to the sidelines. After the initial flurry of media coverage that began with the discovery of Reena’s body on November 22, 1997 to the time that six young women were tried and sentenced in April and May 1998, very little information was presented to the public regarding the findings of the police. With the trial of Warren Glowatski and the written interviews with some of the youth involved, new information was revealed surrounding the events of the night that Reena was murdered.

One of the articles recently published is “When No One Is Watching” by Guy Lawson.<sup>158</sup> This article was not printed in the Canadian version of *GQ* magazine because of publication restrictions associated with the Young Offenders Act. Although this article is sensational, I have taken up some of what is mentioned in this article as further details surrounding this crime and public understandings of it. The Canadian media coverage about this case has been similarly sensational but the information in Lawson’s piece gives more detail and provides opportunity for further critique.

From the accounts of Lawson and other sources, we know that Reena was lured to Shoreline Park by two young women, one of whom is Kelly Ellard, the young woman

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<sup>157</sup> Jiwani, 1998.

who is charged with second degree murder. Of the thirty or more witnesses that were interviewed we also learned that Ellard and another young woman intended to teach Reena a lesson for calling boys using phone numbers acquired from Ellard's phone book.

Lawson writes:

Reena didn't know, couldn't know that Amber and Cherelle [pseudonyms] were going to fuck her up. But they were. It was part wild fury at Reena for trying to claim the attention of boys Amber and Cherelle liked, and it was partly because Reena had dark skin and a loud mouth and she was plain and she was always telling stories about herself. Like how she was going out with some cute guy.<sup>159</sup>

In this passage and in other writing about this murder, we learn that the young women who orchestrated the attack on Reena did so out of a sense of outrage that Reena dare to consider having sexual or other relations with boys in their social group. Based on the historical research presented in part one of this thesis, I read the motives of the two women who organized the attack on Reena as an example of competitive heterosexuality that frames white women's violence against women of colour. The accusation that Reena called the boys in Ellard's phone book was enough to be considered a violation of the code of conduct outlined in Syble Artz research. In this case, the violation was not just about trying to steal someone else's boyfriend, which is seen as the highest crime according to the rules of conduct in Artz's book, but also about a young South Asian woman daring to express the desire to have a boyfriend at all.

In "Who Fancies Pakis? Pamela Bordes and the Problems of Exoticism in Multiracial Britain," Gargi Bhattacharyya writes:

At various points, from the late 1980's onwards, I have suspected that some changes have been occurring in popular conceptions of Asian women. Having grown up in a largely white area of a notably 'multiracial' city in the Midlands, it

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<sup>158</sup> "When No One Is Watching" by Guy Lawson that was printed in *GQ* magazine, February 1999, U.S. version only.

<sup>159</sup> Lawson, 1999:162.

seemed to me that in the 1970s at least, the conception of Asian women in this country was largely that of a trampled passivity. Newspapers and schools showed obvious concern about young Asian women only as victims of the apparent barbarism of the arranged marriage....Although there was some acknowledgement of the interrelation of race and sexuality in the lives of Asian women in Britian, here minority ethnicity was seen primarily as a sexual handicap. An accommodation of the identity 'Asian' was seen as an acceptance of a pre-sexual identity for women, with Westernization offering escape into the freedom of romance and sexual activity. In this scenario 'Asianness' figures as a kind of pathological virginity for women – attractive only in its gauchness. When I was growing up, although ethnic identity was clearly sexualized in some manner, you were not supposed to fancy pakis. Asian was not a sexy identity.<sup>160</sup>

Bhattacharyya writes this to contextualize the media treatment of Pamela Bordes, who was the focus of a tabloid scandal in the summer of 1989. Bordes was profiled as "a young and good-looking House of Commons researcher, and the allegation [was] that she had been sexually involved with a number of eminent men – perhaps for money, and perhaps endangering state security."<sup>161</sup> Similar to the murder of Reena Virk, Bordes ethnicity was erased in the media because of the incompatibility of sexual agency and hegemonic definitions of "Asianness":

At the time of Bordes' fame, most people I spoke to were surprised to find out that she was Asian. Although this quickly became apparent through the references to the 'Indian-born beauty' and 'former Miss India', this seemed incongruous material for a British sex scandal. Both white and black people I knew found this unexpected. Before we slide into the familiar explanation of a colonized or racialized Other who assumes an increased sexual potency in relation to their material disappropriation, so that the exotic becomes the move through which we come to fancy those we simultaneously dispossess and fear, this surprise is worth noting. As far as I can tell, Asian women have not been associated with the category 'whore' recently in Britain. If they are fetishised, it is in their status as 'virgin' – this signaling not only sexual inexperience but also a wider awkwardness, and inability to enjoy the pleasures of Western civilization without help.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Bhattacharyya, Gargi. "Who Fancies Pakis? Pamela Bordes and the Problems of Exoticism in Multiracial Britian," in *Political Gender Texts and Contexts*, ed. Sally Ledger, Josephine McDonagh and Jane Spencer, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1994:87.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid: 89

<sup>162</sup> Ibid: 92.

Bhattacharyya raises some important points in her reading of the Pamela Bordes scandal that are relevant to a counter hegemonic reading of the murder of Reena Virk. Virk was simultaneously portrayed as a 'bad girl' who demonstrated sexual agency as well as an unwanted, rejected, unattractive, not-sexy young South Asian woman.<sup>163</sup> Both of these narratives co-existed and were activated in contradictory ways that nonetheless supported the narrative of 'girl violence.' It is not enough to say that the young women who lured Reena to Shoreline park to teach her a lesson did so only because of her transgression – to pursue boys who were forbidden to her – or that she was seen only as a threat to the girls' ownership over the boys they had claimed; she was also to be punished because, as a young South Asian woman, she had no right to be sexual at all.

As we address narratives such as girl violence using an interlocking analysis, it is important to be able to recognize how seemingly contradictory claims can be made to support hegemonic narratives. The media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk is replete with such inconsistencies, yet the narrative of girl violence survives and anchors the interlocked systems of oppression on which it simultaneously depends. If telephoning boys is seen as a transgression to the code of conduct upheld by the youth who attacked and murdered Reena Virk, what also needs to be addressed is the fact that for this trespass she was punished with death. Even if one believes that the youth who committed this crime just got "carried away," at the very least, we must recognize the violence inherent to heterosexism and the resulting precarious place women of colour hold in relation to white men and women within the context of white supremacy. I argue that

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<sup>163</sup> The British and Canadian context are similar with respect to constructions of South Asian female sexuality. In her interviews with Canadian young South Asian women Handa also identifies the desexualization of young South Asian who are seen as "undesireable," "asexual," and "passive" 1997:285.

Reena was murdered because she was a South Asian woman *and* because she did not fit the hegemonic definitions of female “Asianness.” She was constructed as deviant because of who she was, and who she would not be for those around her. The fact that Reena was South Asian was a key factor in the brutality of the punishment she received for transgressing heterosexist, racist and sexist boundaries.

The media reports tell us that Reena endured years of harassment because she was “overweight, hairy and awkward.” How racial harassment escapes analysis in the media coverage is not surprising but it is outrageous considering the research of anti-racist scholars and activists that address the pervasive racist violence in the lives of South Asian women. We have only to turn to the work of Sherene Razack 1998; Yasmin Jiwani 1998; Amita Handa 1997; Ananya Bhattacharjee 1997; Pratibha Parmar 1995; and, Himani Bannerji 1986 & 1993 to name only a very few of the activists and academics who have addressed violence against South Asian women in their work.<sup>164</sup> Anti-racist research about violence against young South Asian women is available. Those who have written about this crime asserting the narrative of girl violence have been negligent in their craft and dismissive of a broad range of research and resources that address violence against young South Asian women.

Many of the articles and editorials written about this crime describe racist acts but then “dismiss” racism as a site of analysis in this crime:

East Indian kids in Victoria usually face a few racial taunts, quickly dismissed as the grunts of the ignorant. But Reena’s size and physical maturity made her different. Tall and heavy, she towered over other girls her age....She was targeted by bullies, humiliated by her peers.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Other scholars include: Ananya Bhattacharjee 1997; Sarita Sahay & Niva Piram 1997; Tanya Das-Gupta 1994; Bowes & Domokos 1993; Punam Khosla 1991; Usha Thakur 1992; Usha George 1992; and Enakshi Dua 1992. See bibliography for complete references.

<sup>165</sup> Tafler, Sid. “Who was Reena Virk?” Saturday Night, April 1998:16.

Racism is mentioned as an aside but not a central part of the investigation of this crime. Instead, it is Reena's "difference" of size and physical maturity that sets her apart from other girls her age. Size oppression was a key factor in the brutality of the harassment and violence Reena was targeted for; however, size oppression is interlocked with racism. Size and physical maturity take on specific meaning when racialized bodies are targeted for violence. Women of colour are subjected to racism through scientific discourses that are concerned with the shape, size, texture, and colour of our bodies.<sup>166</sup> Size oppression is directly linked to discourses of race that dehumanize, scrutinize, inspect and pathologize women of colour. This can be described as a desire on the part of the dominant group to rip apart the Other.<sup>167</sup> Although the media coverage asserts that Reena's difference revolved around her body size and maturity these constructions are in no way separate from racial discourses. The definition of difference presented in the media is meant to distract from racial difference and maintain that what happened to Reena could have happened to anyone who was considered too "big" and too "mature." Using an interlocking approach I argue that this strategy upon closer inspection, again demonstrates the interdependence of race with other hegemonic discourses such as size oppression.

Even though Reena's social location as a young South Asian woman is not explicitly discussed in the media coverage, she is described in ways that allude to hegemonic constructions of South Asian femininity. For example, Reena is described as trying to escape her strict home environment by running away and lying about sexual abuse charges as a means of attaining freedom from parental control. Although I have

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<sup>166</sup> Stoler, 1995:184.

argued that the Virk family was described repeatedly in the papers as Jehovah Witnesses as a way of de-racializing them. I also argue that the media played on South Asian stereotypes and narratives of cultural inferiority that have permeated representations of South Asian people particularly in British Columbia regarding South Asian women and culture.<sup>168</sup>

Hegemonic narratives construct Young South Asian women as caught between cultures or experiencing bi-cultural stress as they are pulled between “traditional” South Asian culture and “modern” western culture. Amita Handa argues that the notion of “culture conflict” obscures the systemic sources of violence against young South Asian women.<sup>169</sup> She argues that racism, sexism, heterosexism and ageism configure various violences directed toward young South Asian women and that while it is important to acknowledge the specific cultural experiences of young South Asian women, culture is not a static essential phenomenon that “naturally” produces conflict.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, Sherene Razack writes:

Culture talk is clearly a double-edged sword. It packages difference as inferiority and obscures gender-based domination within communities, yet cultural considerations are important for contextualizing oppressed groups’ claims for justice, for improving their access to services, and for requiring dominant groups to examine the invisible cultural advantages they enjoy.<sup>171</sup>

When young South Asian women are described as caught between cultures,

multiculturalism, liberalism, and the discourse of “difference” work to maintain Canadian

<sup>167</sup> Yegenoglu 1998:111.

<sup>168</sup> Jiwani, 1992.

<sup>169</sup> “Culture conflict” as discussed by Amita Handa, constructs young South Asian women as caught between “traditional” South Asian culture and a “modern” Canadian culture. These mutually exclusive, internally homogenous categories are constructed through colonial, nationalist, modernist, patriarchal discourses. Similar and connected to the concept of “moral panic”, the discourse of “culture conflict” obscures relations of power and domination by attributing racist and sexist violence against young South Asian women to their lack of success in assimilating to the dominant culture and/or the supposed backward “traditional” cultural beliefs and practices of South Asian people. Handa, 1997:4. (Also see Chapter Five: Colonial Discourses: Nation, Tradition, Culture and Women, pp.157-185).

<sup>170</sup> Handa, 1997:28, 34.

<sup>171</sup> Razack, 1994:896.



nationalism and obscure systems of oppression that are present in both South Asian communities and in the dominant society. Thus, young South Asian women are used as symbols of South Asian community integrity and respectability within the South Asian Patriarchy and as symbols of South Asian depravity and backwardness within the dominant Canadian culture.

Reena is described in the media coverage as being shuttled back and forth between her family and social services or running away in her attempt “to find a comfortable place for herself.”<sup>172</sup> Handa documents the displacement of young South Asian women who struggle to negotiate between hegemonic and minority oppositional narratives.<sup>173</sup> She mentions that young South Asian women are perceived as needing to be rescued from their backward families and communities.<sup>174</sup> This discourse operates in the media coverage to construct Reena as both a captive of the home environment and a run away who seeks to partake in the “freedom” of western culture. There has been no acknowledgement in media of how interlocking oppressions shaped the circumstances of Reena’s life in such a way that she would face violence and oppression in various contexts. For example, at school and in the foster care system she faced racism, sexism, ageism, size oppression, and heterosexism and within her home she struggled to address sexual abuse. The media coverage conveys the sense that Reena needed to be rescued from her family situation without attending to the fact that she faced violence in the foster care system. There was no one there to rescue Reena the night she was killed. Perhaps abandoning rescuing as a strategy and instead adopting “anti-

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<sup>172</sup> Tafler 1998: 15.

<sup>173</sup> Handa 1997:342.

<sup>174</sup> Handa 1997:6.

subordination<sup>175</sup> and anti-oppression tactics would have been a more effective way of addressing Reena Virk's situation.

Handa discusses the experiences of young South Asian women and the violence and oppression they live with as well as the many acts of resistance they demonstrate. Her work is significant in that it further documents the existence of sexual abuse, assault, racism, sexism and heterosexism in the lives of young South Asian women as well as their agency in negotiating their life circumstances. What becomes clear in Handa's work is that while the negotiations demonstrated by the young South Asian women she interviews both support and disrupt hegemony, it is the manoeuvring through interlocking systems of oppression that takes a toll on the young women she interviews. Handa argues that young South Asian women move between identities and that this shifting subjectivity can be both a resistance to racist stereotypes and patriarchal roles as well as an ambivalent acceptance of certain status quos in both South Asian and mainstream contexts.<sup>176</sup> Handa goes further to state that while shifting subjectivity provide a context for self and cultural-esteem it also causes fragmentation and a constant "hiding of selves."<sup>177</sup> The risks for young South Asian women in this act of concealment means that they can be more vulnerable to racist and sexist violence of the dominant culture, peers and community.

In the South Asian and mainstream community/environment, young South Asian women face a "double jeopardy"<sup>178</sup> or as Amita Handa writes, they are "doubly displaced by hegemonic and minority oppositional narratives."<sup>179</sup> When young South Asian women experience physical, emotional and sexual violence they are discouraged from accessing

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<sup>175</sup> Razack 1998:170.

<sup>176</sup> Handa, 1997:325.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid: 354.

<sup>178</sup> Jiwani, Yasmin. "The murder of Reena Virk, the erasure of race." *Kinesis*, December/January 1998:3.

help by sexism within the South Asian community and racism within the mainstream. For example, a young South Asian woman who is assaulted may face victim-blaming from both her family/community as well as from mainstream social services where racist (and sexist) stereotypes about South Asian women and culture are pervasive. There are few, if any, places where young South Asian women can get support regarding both the racism and sexism they experience. This seems to also have been the case for Reena Virk who entered the foster care system at the age of 13. From the often vague and sensational media coverage, there is much evidence that illustrates the difficult negotiations Reena made between mainstream social services, the education system and her family. For a young woman such as Reena, entering the foster care system may have been a way of responding to incest; however, it was also another site of abuse particularly with regard to racism. Racism in the medical and social service systems deter young South Asian women from seeking help. Young women who do seek help are often further violated by racism in social service organizations.<sup>180</sup>

Shaktee Kee Awaaz: An anthology of young South Asian and Indo-Caribbean women writers and artists is one of very few (if not the only) publications that specifically address experiences of violence among young diasporic South Asian women. Shaktee Kee Awaaz, or in English "Voices of Strength," contains essays, poetry, prose, photography, paintings, and plays. What was initially planned to be a resource manual for social workers developed into a medium for young South Asian women to express their experiences of

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<sup>179</sup> Handa, 1997:342.

<sup>180</sup> The Youth Access Project, found that young South Asian women rarely access services when they are in crisis situations. The reasons for this are identified as: "Systemic racism, disenfranchisement, alienation from larger community, [and] the duality of cultures." These issues were identified through a process of outreach and collective discussion. In response to the situation, the youth group at the South Asian Women's Centre (SAWC) contacted social service agencies serving youth and South Asian people. SAWC

violence, resistance and healing. This anthology serves the purpose of educating social workers as well as reflecting back common realities and struggles to young South Asian women. This anthology clearly demonstrates different types of violence experienced by young women and is an example of the creative strategies used by young South Asian women who are committed to resistance and self-recovery:

An anthology of literature and art would allow young women to identify and define the issues affecting them. A "how-to" manual we felt would be patronising to the reader and would simplify and essentialize their experiences and identities. After much discussion, we felt far more comfortable about having young women speak for themselves. And so they do - they write of love, sexuality, family, identity, grief, eating disorders, abuse, empowerment, racism, joy, the immigration experience, - and much more!<sup>181</sup>

Shakti Kee Awaaz is a much needed resource for young South Asian women; however, more of these initiatives need to receive support. We need to ensure that young South Asian women can access these kinds of resources.

The media portrayed Reena as both a sad lonely victim and a messed up "bad girl." To deny that Reena struggled to negotiate the various forms of violence again denies the agency that she demonstrated. She most likely faced racist, sexist, heterosexist violence from a very young age. The charges she laid against her father for sexual abuse, moving in with a foster care family, vying for the attention and affection of friends, asking for help from her family and social workers must be viewed as attempts to survive. When she screamed for her attackers to stop their assault and tried to escape the mob of youth that confined and beat her, she was trying to survive. By leaving the scene of the first assault and heading for home, she was trying to survive. To deny her will to

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observed, "There are gaps or barriers within these services which do not meet the needs [of many South Asian youth]. As a result South Asian young women do not access services."

<sup>181</sup> Shakti Kee Awaaz, an anthology by emerging young South Asian and Indo-Caribbean women writers and artists. Shakti Kee Chatree: Ontario Women's Directorate Copyright 1997:5.

survive is to also deny the fact that Warren Glowatski and Kelly Ellard followed her from the scene of the first attack, beat her unconscious, drowned her of their own volition. The actions of Glowatski and Ellard were acts of violence that can never be separate from the interlocking systems of oppression that allowed them to perform this violence and think that what they did made sense within the context of their social code and that in the end they would get away with murder even as they boasted to numerous strangers, acquaintances and close friends that they killed Reena Virk.<sup>182</sup>

The violence committed against Reena Virk for transgressing heterosexist and racist codes and boundaries was enacted as murder because as a young South Asian woman, Reena was racialized and, therefore, dehumanized. She could not be recuperated into the racial and gendered identity of girlhood. No amount of correction would make Reena into a white girl. This was a punishment with the aim of annihilation. The youth who attacked and killed Reena Virk carried out what they perceived as a logical expression of their outrage against a young South Asian woman who wanted to survive, make decisions, have friends, and express herself emotionally and sexually to those around her.

Girl violence is an empty concept. It is an attempt to make simple something that is not simple. It will not help us to stop violence against young women any more than it will stop the racist, heterosexist, ableist, classist acts of violence committed by youth or adults. Because the narrative of girl violence relies on good girl/bad girl dichotomy,

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<sup>182</sup> Witnesses testified that Ellard bragged about murdering Virk. Glowatski also was said to boast about his participation in Virk's murder, however, he also told a friend that he killed a "native guy" when he was asked about the blood on his pants. Lawson 1999:192. The fact that Glowatski claimed he murdered a native man, as perhaps a cover story, indicates that on some level he thought that violence against a native person would not only be acceptable, but that it also demonstrate his prowess. I do not believe that

violence against girls is made invisible: those labeled as “bad girls” are seen as intrinsically debased rather than trying to negotiate survival within a context of violence and oppression. About “bad girls” Joanna Kadi writes:

Suzanne and me, two halfbreed girls. Native and white. Arab and white. working class. brains but no escape plans. They offered us a few choices that overall didn't amount to much but we made the most of them: I tried to hide in baggy green sweatpants and North Star running shoes. while Suzanne showed up at the other end of the continuum in a short, tight red skirt, tight red-checked polyester blouse, and flat red pumps. I still see working class girls these days who look like Suzanne – thick makeup, short skirts, buttons undone to show whatever cleavage that might or might not be there. “Bad girls.” according to middle and upper class norms, but all I see are survivors with brains working furiously and sweetness struggling to keep itself intact against the worlds hard edges. And I remember Suzanne, just before she dropped off the face of the earth at the ripe old age of fourteen.<sup>183</sup>

Reena Virk was not a “bad girl.” It is crucial to acknowledge her agency as she tried to negotiate between family, friends, teachers and social workers in effort to cope with the violence to which she was subjected. She was never only a victim and never only an agent<sup>184</sup> but a young South Asian woman “caught between omissions”<sup>185</sup> trying to maneuver between the systems of oppression and the violence that was, and is, simultaneously virulent and invisible. The construction of “bad girls” and the narrative of girl violence serve hegemony by making violence and systems of oppression invisible.

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Glowatski's choice of lie is separate from racism and the act of racist violence he actually did commit when he beat and drowned Reena Virk.

<sup>183</sup> Kadi, 1996:64.

<sup>184</sup> Handa argues in her analysis of the interviews she conducted with young South Asian women that they can never only be victims or agents by rather negotiate, resist and contest their complex identities and contexts arising from interlocking systems of oppression. 1997:78, 331.

<sup>185</sup> Handa 1997:50.

## Conclusion

By “erasing race”<sup>186</sup> from the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk hegemonic systems remain intact. By bringing race to our interrogation of this crime I have argued that we must also insist that all other systems of oppression be afforded saliency and attention in our inquiry and discussions. Failure to do this maintains systems of domination. This has been most clearly demonstrated by gender-centric/exclusive research and theory that misses the ways in which racism is supported by notions of hegemonic femininity as well as how gender oppression is maintained through racism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism. As educators and activists working to end all forms of violence and oppression we must choose carefully the tools we use in this endeavor. Sherene Razack writes:

In short, we cannot disturb the structure of dominance in a piecemeal fashion: in the case of white women, by refusing to be the good girls inhabiting the bad girl space or declaring that bad girls don't exist) and in the case of racialized and poor women, by trying to climb out of the bad girl space into respectability. Either strategy, and they can look the same in practice, keeps in place the good girl/bad girl dichotomy and renders invisible the specificity of the women whose bodies are used in prostitution. More importantly, neither subversion disturbs the making of the bourgeois subject.<sup>187</sup>

Similarly to hegemonic discourses of prostitution, the narrative of girl violence spans hegemonic definitions of female delinquency and feminist articulations of resistance to patriarchal oppression; however, it does not disrupt the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. It merely perpetuates the process of symbiosis between the systems of oppression needed to maintain hegemonic femininity.

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<sup>186</sup> Jiwani 1998:3

<sup>187</sup> Razack, 1998:346.

Since none of us are “innocent,”<sup>188</sup> we must acknowledge our own agency that can take both the form of resistance and oppression. How we choose to understand the murder of Reena Virk involves choosing between supporting systems of domination or countering them. An uncritical acceptance of the narrative of girl violence and how it has been used to obscure systems of domination surrounding the media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk is in effect to be complicit with hegemony, and as Razack writes, “[o]ur complicity is our freedom from the violence.” As educators, activists, lawyers, social workers or those in positions of dominance it is our responsibility to address all forms of violence.

As we endeavor to undo white supremacist discourses such as girl violence, we must also attend to strategies for resistance and healing. The circumstances of the life and murder of Reena Virk can be traced using an interlocking analysis of oppression and in doing so, strategies must be developed to assist young South Asian women like Reena who experience multiple forms of violence. As we work to provide support for young women and adult women facing violence it is not enough to adopt a paternal approach that seeks to rescue them. Rather, we must rigorously interrogate the very notions that anti-violence theory and activism are based on. Our resistance strategies will ultimately fail until we can fully incorporate an anti-racist/colonial perspective into all facets of anti-violence work. The murder of Reena Virk calls our attention to the inadequacies of social service agencies when it comes to providing support to young women of colour. It also makes salient the danger of gender focused/exclusive theory that fails to identify the insidious presence of white supremacy in the form of hegemonic femininity that can be found in some feminist theorizing and activism. Feminists committed to abolishing

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<sup>188</sup> Razack 1998:14.



violence against women must utilize an interlocking approach as opposed to an additive one.<sup>189</sup> This will require realizing that the fight to end violence and oppression cannot be won without acknowledging how white supremacy, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, classism and sexism are interdependent. As we address specific gender forms of oppression we must also interrogate our strategies to ensure that we are not supporting other systems of oppression.

Finally, in order to explain violence that cannot be “explained by sexism”<sup>190</sup> we must address racist, classist, heterosexist, ableist, and ageist violence committed by women against those in subordinate positions. As we acknowledge women’s capacity to resist, we must also acknowledge our capacity for violence and domination. The legacy of imperialism and colonialism has made acknowledging white women’s agency a complicated task, one that has all too often upheld a dichotomy between victim of patriarchy or a resister to oppression. Feminist anti-violence theory and activism must disrupt notions of essential womanhood based on constructions of white femininity. Our anti-subordination<sup>191</sup> work must address interlocking systems of oppression because failure to do so cements elite hegemony.

The murder of Reena Virk occurred within the workings of interlocking oppressions. The media coverage of her murder was framed by racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism and ageism. To deny that these systems of domination created the context for this crime prevents effective interventions and problem solving aimed at ending violence against young people, women, people of colour, older people, people with disabilities and anyone positioned as subordinate through hegemonic systems.

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid:20.

<sup>190</sup> Kadi 1996:74.

Failure to address interlocking systems of oppression also maintains the processes of subject formation of those who can hold positions of dominance, such as young white women. This means that as long as hegemonic femininity and the systems of oppression that sustain it are unchallenged, there will be no end to violence against women and the violence women commit against those to whom they are superior. The concept of girl violence secures hegemonic femininity and systems of oppression and will not help to end violence against girls or the violence girls perform.

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<sup>191</sup> Razack 1998:170.

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