

The “Kingston Mills Murder” and the Construction of “Honour Killings” in Canadian News Media

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Abstract

In this article, I examine print media coverage of the 2009 “Kingston Mills Murder” case and how this enactment of patriarchal violence was interpreted through a cultural lens as “honour killings.” I also focus on how feminist and gender “experts,” in statements to the news media, interpreted the murders as the consequence of a “clash of civilizations.” Drawing on the work of Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), I argue that it is essential that Western feminisms decolonize discursive constructions of the “Other” in order to create and sustain “communities of resistance” to patriarchal violence. By investigating this case, I also seek to provide a road map for imagining an alternative feminist response to “honour killings” based on Sherene Razack’s (1998) interlocking analysis.

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Résumé

Dans cet article, j’examine la couverture dans la presse écrite du cas des meurtres de « Kingston Mills » en 2009, et la façon dont cet acte de violence patriarcale a été interprété d’un point de vue culturel comme un « crime d’honneur ». Je mets aussi l’accent sur la façon dont les « experts » en matière de féminisme et de genre, dans leurs entrevues avec les médias, ont interprété les meurtres comme étant des conséquences du « choc

des civilisations ». Misant sur le travail de Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), je fais valoir qu’il est essentiel pour les féministes occidentaux de décoloniser les constructions discursives de « l’autre » afin de créer et de maintenir des « communautés de résistance » à la violence patriarcale. En faisant enquête sur ce cas, je cherche également à fournir une carte routière permettant d’imaginer une intervention féministe différente par rapport aux « crimes d’honneur », basée sur l’analyse intersectionnelle de Sherene Razack (1998).

On 30 June 2009, four women were discovered inside a car submerged in a Rideau Canal lock near Kingston, Ontario, Canada. The incident was confusing to the public and police alike. With no witnesses to the tragedy, investigators suspected that the women were involved in a driving accident. Around the same time as the car was discovered, an Afghan family in Quebec reported missing family members to the Kingston Police (Tripp and Woods 2009). According to the family, they had driven in two separate cars back from a vacation in Niagara Falls. After stopping to stay overnight in a small motel in the area, they awoke to find the car and sisters Zainab (19), Sahar (17), and Geeti (13) Shafia along with their father's first wife Rona Amir Mohammed (39) gone. They suspected that the four women had driven home without them and had headed back to Quebec (Tripp and Woods 2009). After the father, his second wife, and their oldest brother were arrested and charged with murder in July 2009, the incident was widely described as an "honour killing" in the Canadian media.

According to transnational feminist scholar Indrapal Grewal (2013), much has been written on the violence of "honour killings" and yet there is little research on the production, maintenance, and structures of meaning associated with the concept. Claiming that patriarchy has been "outsourced" to "Other" spaces, Grewal suggests that more feminist attention needs to be paid to the ways in which concepts, such as "honour killings," work in the mainstream media to mark and secure boundaries between modern nations/communities and those assumed to be anachronistic zones. Answering this call, this article examines the utilization, repetition, and circulation of discursive devices and representations of what is now ubiquitously referred to as "the Kingston Mills Murder" in order to uncover the ways in which assumed knowledge about "honour killings" creates racial logics and sets of 'knowledge' about a supposed misogynist Muslim/Arab culture in Canada. In particular, this article is concerned with the way in which a cultural explanation was used to explain the "Kingston Mills Murder." The use of the term "honour killing" allows for colonial representations and essentialisms of the "Other" to be produced, circulated, and consumed in a "post-9/11" context.¹ Through a feminist media analysis of two daily Canadian newspapers—*The Montreal Gazette* and the *Kingston Whig-Standard*—

between the months of July and August 2009, I examine how the murders were covered in the press and the ways in which feminist and gender "experts" relied on cultural explanations of the "honour killings." I argue that it is necessary for Western feminisms to decolonize discursive constructions of the "Other" in order to create and sustain "communities of resistance" to patriarchal violence.² By investigating this case, I also provide a road map for imagining an alternative feminist response to "honour killings" in Canada based on an interlocking analysis.

Methodology

In considering how the "Kingston Mills Murder" case was represented in the Canadian media, I focused on two daily newspapers: *The Montreal Gazette* and the *Kingston Whig-Standard*. Since moving to Canada, the Shafia³ family had resided in a neighbourhood called Saint Leonard in Montreal, Quebec. Thus, the *Montreal Gazette* published a significant number of articles on the incident. Since the murder took place in Kingston, Ontario, the local daily newspaper covered the story quite extensively. I chose to concentrate my analysis on the initial two months of media coverage after the bodies of the four women at the Kingston Mills lock were discovered on 30 June 2009. Rather than map discursive changes over an extended period of time, my interest was to examine what I consider to be knee-jerk or "reactionary" responses produced in the media. Such "reactionary" responses, I argue, reflect what Yasmin Jiwani (2006) refers to as "common sense stock of knowledge" about the "Other" in Canada in a post-9/11 context. In building my analysis, I first explore the media's explanation of the violent incident as an "honour killing." I then focus specifically on news articles that centered the perspectives of those who emerged as experts on "honour killings" in order to demonstrate how those who were heard by the news media used "common sense stock of knowledge" to describe the crime (Jiwani 2006, 4).

In *Discourses of Denial: Mediations of Race, Gender and Violence*, Jiwani (2006) draws on cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall to theorize representational practices. She argues that institutional practices, routinized behaviours, and normative values work in collaboration to shape the way in which media institutions interpret and tell stories (30). Jiwani further maintains that the

media constitutes a central site to investigate representations and discursive devices that are used to communicate a “common sense stock of knowledge” (31). In other words, the news media often borrows from a historical inventory of storytelling practices. In defining the issues, framing debates, and providing readers with categories of language, news stories generally adhere to, rather than disrupt, dominant modes of knowing (37). Significantly, news media helps to produce a symbolic image of the nation. Groups that are underrepresented, or represented in stereotypical ways, in the media shape conceptions of who belongs and who does not. Those who do not fit normative ideals of white, heterosexual, and/or able-bodied citizenship are “Othered” in dominant representational practices. Jiwani concludes that investigating mainstream and powerful media sources is essential to understanding representational discourses of race and racism.

Building on Jiwani’s work, I would suggest that “race thinking,”⁴ which is masked in discourses of culture, perpetuates hierarchies of power by producing “common sense stock of knowledge” of difference (Razack 2008). My analysis seeks to explore the ways in which “common sense stock of knowledge” of Muslim “Otherness,” or cultural difference, was used to explain the “Kingston Mills Murder.” It is not my intention to engage in popular and academic debates about whether this case was or was not an “honour killing.” Rather, I aim to uncover the way in which “common sense stock of knowledge” about “Others” was used to explain this heinous crime.

“Honour Killing” in the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and *Montreal Gazette*

In the first two months after the murders, both the *Kingston-Whig Standard* and the *Montreal Gazette* published twenty news articles and columns regarding the incident. Although this number may not seem significant, the *Kingston Whig-Standard* did not report on the case between 10 and 23 July, and the *Montreal Gazette* did not do so between 4 and 23 July. During this period, the Kingston police were in the midst of their investigation and did not actively speak to media sources. It was not until the arrests of the father Mohammad Shafia, second wife Tooba Mohammad Yahya, and oldest son Hamed Shafia for the murder of the four women that the media received new information to cover. Thus,

in a short period of time, a significant number of articles were printed about the “Kingston Mills Murder.” Immediately after the arrests, both media outlets sparked a debate about “honour killings.” After 23 July, the term “honour killing” appeared in ten *Kingston Whig-Standard* articles and in thirteen *Montreal Gazette* articles. This language thus framed more than 50 per cent of the discourse on the case in both Canadian daily newspapers and over 70 per cent after the Shafia family members were arrested. The term “honour killing” circulated pervasively, often without a definition or description, and rarely with an explanation of its immediate use to describe the murders in news media coverage.

Honour and Shame

“Honour killings” in the West are popularly defined as a crime perpetrated against women in order to restore “appropriate” gender behaviours and sexual norms (Coomarawamy 2005, x). Radhika Coomaraswamy (2005) argues that ideals of masculinity in some cultures are underpinned by the notion of “honour” and are fundamentally connected to the regulation of women’s bodies. When women transgress these strict boundaries, “shame” is brought upon individual men, families, and communities. Violence against women, in this case, is seen as regulating women’s transgressions, which might include extramarital affairs, choosing partners against family wishes, or seeking divorce (xi). The term “honour killings” is a highly contested one among feminists; some see no “honour” in such crimes, while others believe the term is too often utilized to describe “Other” violence.⁵

The discourse of “honour and shame” emerged in the news media articles on the Kingston Mills “honour killing” specifically because it constituted “common sense stock of knowledge.” The popularity of this descriptor in explaining the case was contingent on the fact that the phrase “honour and shame” was not new and was already circulating in the media. In fact, “honour and shame” is too often invoked in the media to describe a supposedly homogenous Muslim culture that spans the Middle East regardless of nation or context. Narratives of “honour” and “shame” as inherent to certain racialized masculinities have circulated widely since the events of 11 September 2001 or 9/11. For example, at Abu Ghraib, U.S. guards forced Iraqi prisoners to stage homosexual sex. Many activist groups decried

such acts of torture, based on the idea that, for a Muslim man, this was the worst type of suffering, given that being naked and (homo)sexualized in this manner was a violation of Muslim masculinity (Puar 2007). Jasbir Puar (2007) claims that “honour and shame” was, to the point of nausea, “the most cited sound-bite in the media spectacle” (138).

With the torture at Abu Ghraib a less than distant memory, I argue that the concepts of “honour” and “shame” have particular currency in the existing stock of knowledge about Muslim men and masculinity in the Canadian social imaginary. Paying little attention to the particularities of individual Muslim men and women’s identities, the use of the “honour” and “shame” explanation in the “Kingston Mills Murder” case perpetuated the image of Muslim culture as hyper-patriarchal and zealously religious in stark contrast to Western secularity and equality. While it may be the case that women’s cultural transgressions are a source of shame for families, such assumptions reproduce the notion that Muslim men and women are preoccupied with honour and shame.

In 2012, the CBC announced that Mohammad Shafia, his wife Tooba Yahya, and their son Hamed were convicted of first-degree murder. The judge called the murders “despicable,” “heinous,” and motivated by “a completely twisted concept of honour” (Dalton 2012). Like the reports of the torture at Abu Ghraib, the terms “shame” and “honour” predominated in the media coverage. While little was written about the second wife’s or the eldest son’s involvement in the murder, Mr. Shafia was described in both the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and the *Montreal Gazette* as particularly evil. The news media speculated that Mohammad Shafia, in particular, had orchestrated the four women’s murders. In the case of this supposed “honour killing,” “shame” was said to have been brought on by the four women’s transgressions and he took it upon himself to reinstate his family’s “honour” (Proudfoot 2009).

Polygamy and Immigration

As the story unfolded, it was revealed that Mr. Shafia had tried to conceal his relationship with his first wife by telling both the police and neighbours that she was his cousin and the aunt of his children (Tripp and Woods 2009; Cherry 2009a). According to family members living in Europe who contacted the Kingston

police, Mr. Shafia had made death threats against his first wife for shaming the family in Canada. One family member, identified as Masoomi, wrote an email to the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, which stated:

My sister told me that she heard Shafi, her husband, say to second wife and his oldest son Hamed, that he was going to travel to Afghanistan and Dubai to sell some land and goods and then he would kill Zainab, and his second wife added: ‘and the other?’ So my sister understood that they were talking about her. (Tripp 2009b, A1)

These accusations of prior death threats prompted a strong response from media outlets. The *Kingston Whig-Standard*, among many other news sources, printed a large picture of Mohammad Shafia and Rona Amir Mohammed’s wedding thirty years prior to the murder. It was assumed that Mr. Shafia had taken a second wife when his first did not give birth to children. He then had seven children with his second wife, while his first stayed with the family and helped to take care of them. The *Kingston Whig-Standard* further reported that Mr. Shafia no longer wanted Rona Amir Mohammed in Canada because of her Westernized values and close relationship with Mr. Shafia’s rebellious daughters (Tripp and Woods 2009, A1).

The initial confusion over Rona Amir Mohammed’s status in the family as either an aunt or a cousin sparked a debate about polygamy in Canada. In articles published in both newspapers, polygamy was normalized as part of Afghani culture and contrasted to Canadian hetero-nuclear families. In constructing Shafia as an abusive patriarch who dominated two wives, the importance of cultural difference became very evident in the telling of the story. In the *Montreal Gazette*, Linda Gyulai (2009) argued that, because polygamy was a criminal offence in Canada, Mr. Shafia should be tried for that crime in addition to first-degree murder.

Allegations about the Shafia family’s recent immigration to Canada and their lack of assimilation became integral to the media spectacle. Rather than constructing the murder as connected to the prevalence of violence committed against women in Canada, it was the Shafia’s cultural background that became the basis of the analysis. In twelve articles featured in the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and eight published in the *Montreal Gazette*, Canadian readers were reminded of the

family's recent immigration to Canada. Although the family spent fifteen years in Dubai before immigrating to Canada, it was their Afghan heritage together with "common sense stock of knowledge" about the prevalence of honour killings in the Middle East that became central to the explanation of the murders. One *Montreal Gazette* columnist, Leonard Stern (2009) went so far as to conflate "honour killings" with Afghan Islamic terrorism. Borrowing from the "common sense stock of knowledge" about Arabs and Muslims being terrorists, or at least members of suspicious nations, he argued that Canadians should not ignore the cultural and religious factors that played into the perpetration of "honour killings." He defended the legitimacy of the term "Islamic terrorism," given that Al-Qa'ida terrorists were all Muslim and saw themselves as holy warriors. When it came to other crimes, however, it was trickier to explore the relevance of culture, race, religion, and national origin. He maintained that it was essential that all criminals' cultural backgrounds be explicitly named, since "a young Muslim in Mississauga is more likely to encounter images of militant Islam than his Italian Canada counterpart living around Dufferin Street." While Toronto, Canada is known for being the multicultural capital of Canada, Stern pointed to the Mississauga suburbs as a specifically Islamic or Arab neighbourhood, and thus more fanatical in comparison to the cultural mosaic of the downtown core. He concluded that it was "politically convenient for multiculturalists to de-Islamicize *honour killings*, but it sure won't do much toward actually stopping them" (A11, emphasis original). Such examples of "race-thinking," which emphasized Arab and Muslim Canadians' potential for criminality and terrorism, promotes intensified surveillance and stigmatization of Arab and Muslim Canadians on the basis of their skin and dress and entrenches their positioning in opposition to white Canadians as ideal citizens.

Western Freedoms, Eastern Oppressions

Exploring the gendered constructions of the four women, in particular the three daughters, slain in the "Kingston Mills Murder," is crucial for understanding how the media represented the incident as an "honour killing." Reporters used statements from the Shafias' neighbours who described the women as polite, reserved, and shy (Tripp 2009a, A3). One neighbour was

quoted as saying: "They were angels those girls. They were so sweet. To end their lives like that [is awful]" (Schliesmann 2009a, A6). Although described as submissive and modest, the women were also characterized as rebellious against their father's conservatism and traditional religiosity. Zainab, the eldest daughter, had apparently run away from home a few months before the incident because her father did not approve of her relationship with a Pakistani man (Cherry 2009b, A4). It was further noted that, "Contrary to cultural tradition to show obedience," Zainab married the young man in May 2009 (Tripp 2009b, A1). Paul Cherry (2009b) of the *Montreal Gazette* also reported that Mr. Shafia strongly disapproved of Zainab's desire to work or pursue an education, even though the *Kingston Whig-Standard* quoted him as saying: "We came here for the children...because in Afghanistan it had become dangerous. I wanted them to be able to go to school and work" (Turbide 2009, A8). It was also reported that Mr. Shafia became furious with his daughters for not wearing veils in public, wearing pants (instead of skirts) and short sleeve tops, and taking pictures of themselves and laughing (Tripp 2009b, A1).

Reports of the women's demeanour as both submissive, yet desiring "Western freedoms," borrow from, reproduce, and circulate "common sense stock of knowledge" about Muslim women. Despite being rooted in vastly different political, economic, and historical contexts, Muslim women are imagined, particularly in the West, as a homogenous group. With Canadian troops in Afghanistan partaking in the "war on terror," I would argue that many Canadians imagine Afghan women, and Muslim women more generally, as oppressed by kinship structures and religious ideologies (Mohanty 2003, 28-29). The "common sense stock of knowledge" among Canadians in particular is riddled with visions of Muslim women throwing off their burqas as troops storm Afghanistan and infiltrate the Taliban's regime. Many of the same Muslim women rescue narratives were reproduced in the news coverage of the "Kingston Mills Murder."

While informant interviews with neighbours, family, and friends helped to paint a picture of the "Kingston Mills Murder" as an "honour killing," white Western feminists emerged as experts on culture-based violence against women and strongly shaped the discourse.

Theorizing Feminist Responses to Honour Killings

In the case of “honour killings,” Western information retrieval is filtered and edited through meta-narratives of Canadian superiority in human rights practices, especially with regard to violence against women, and through strident Islamophobia that is both constructed and circulated by “war on terror” discourses. In *Cast-ing Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, Sherene Razack (2008) examines the culturalization of racism in contemporary Western society. She first examined the concept of culturalized racism in her work, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (1998), in which she argued that previous notions of “Others” as biologically inferior had been replaced with ideas that “Others” are culturally inferior and overly patriarchal. Post-9/11, Razack (2008) noticed that the discourses of culturalized racism disproportionately targeted Muslims based on the notion that this group posed a fundamental threat to the West (174). This concept is useful for analyzing how white Western feminists talked about the “Kingston Mills Murder” in the Canadian media. In taking either a “colonial stance” (Narayan 1997) or using a “cultural difference” approach (Razack 2008), many feminists invoked ideas consistent with the “clash of civilizations” discourse, which has gained currency in “common sense stock of knowledge” since the events of 9/11 (Jiwani 2006). Many of the statements made by feminists or gender experts that appeared in both the *Montreal Gazette* and *Kingston Whig-Standard* relied on “race-thinking” by suggesting Muslim cultural inferiority (Razack 2008, 175).⁶

I have chosen to center the media statements of feminists and gender experts because they emerged as voices of “authority” on the murders. While not all of the journalists and researchers I discuss were self-identified feminists and many of them were not gender experts, these voices came to stand in for specialists in the field of violence against women. In other cases, self-identified feminists were used in the media coverage to legitimize certain voices over others. While many feminist and gender experts were quoted liberally in both Canadian dailies, I have chosen to analyse the statements made by individuals that focused on culturalist explanations of the murders that were already circulating in the news media. My aim is not to criticize these individuals, but rather to examine the ways in which they came to be

the definitive voices on both “honour killings” and other patriarchal violences in Canada. As Razack (2008) has argued, when feminists invoke ideas about cultural difference when discussing violence against “Other” women, “contemporary political conditions ensure that their words will not be taken lightly” (85).

Honour Killings and Canadian Patriarchal Violence: Distinguishing Cultural Difference

On 24 July 2009, Shannon Proudfoot wrote an article called “Western freedoms a source of family conflict” for the *Montreal Gazette*. She reported that as many as 5,000 women around the world lose their lives at the hands of their family members in “honour killings” every year. She further claimed that, in the last decade, twelve women in Canada had been murdered in “honour killings.” In the midst of the debate over whether the murders should be defined as an “honour killing” or as “domestic violence,” Dr. Amin Muhammed from Memorial University was quoted as saying that those who believed the term “honour killing” should not be used to describe the “Kingston Mills Murder” had bought into a myth propagated by the Western media about political correctness and tolerance, and had fallen into the cultural sensitivity trap (as cited by Proudfoot 2009, A3). In contrast, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women warned (on multiple days and in both newspapers) that the use of the term “honour killing” obscured other forms of patriarchal violence in Canada by exoticizing the practice, and would add to widespread Islamophobia across the nation. However, both Canadian dailies continued to report that “honour killings” were a distinct form of violence that was brought into Canada by immigrants. Journalist Marian Scott (2009) reported in the *Montreal Gazette* that, although many people in Pakistan and Afghanistan did not agree with the cultural practice, immigration officials should be trained to “screen out immigrants whose attitudes toward women put them at risk of committing honour killings” (A4).

In this political climate, the “war on terror” is being fought abroad and at home. As Razack (2008) has argued, to be considered “Canadian,” even if not possessing “Canadian skin,” one must hold Canadian values (3). Immigrants are constructed as guests who must remain under tight surveillance since their race alone presents a threat to the Canadian social imaginary.

Arguably, the construction of immigrants as threats to the nation is dependent on imagining Canada as white. Such a meta-narrative necessarily ignores Canada's colonial past and present. Racialized immigrants who flee their "backwards" countries and manipulate Canada's multiculturalist policies are said to bring the worst aspects of their culture with them. It is their "cultural difference" and our racism that links culture to a chain of other associations about "Others" (the veil, terrorism, and criminality, for example), which ultimately threatens the cohesion of the nation (Razack 2008, 84). Such a meta-narrative of the nation, as being infiltrated by undeserving "Others," disallows a connection to be made between the war in both Afghanistan and Iraq and the increasing emigration of people from those countries due to decreasing standards of living. Finally, imagining the Canadian nation in this way relies on narratives that claim that Canada has had success in the "war on terror," by saving Afghan women from their men and the men from their "primitive culture."

In the same *Montreal Gazette* article, Dr. Amin Muhammad argued that "honour killings" were rooted in patriarchal values, while domestic violence generally was not the symptom of an overarching misogynist culture (Scott 2009, A4). In claiming that the "Kingston Mills Murder" had no connection to systemic patriarchy in Canada, "honour killings" were exoticized, culturalized, and deemed "Other." Dr. Amir Muhammad further suggested that patriarchal violence in Canada was not systemic, but committed by individual men for various reasons. While the singular story of "honour killings" as culturally systemic in Muslim communities was readily accepted in the Canadian news media, violence against women in Canada required a more nuanced, albeit individualized or "bad apples," analysis (Razack 2004, 6).

Quick Facts and Crossing Borders

In *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*, Uma Narayan (1997) argues against "ahistorical and apolitical Western feminist understandings of 'Third World traditions'" (43). She suggests that Western feminism has framed patriarchal violence that occurs in the Third World in ways that foreclose nuanced and contextual analysis. Although it is dangerous to conflate her analysis of sati and dowry-murders with "honour killings," Narayan's critique of

cultural essentialisms is useful for understanding how the West has come to conceptualize "Other" patriarchal violence as distinctly different and unconnected to what is commonly understood to be Western domestic violence. She argues that the discourse on sati, dowry-murders, and American domestic violence has not only been shaped by the American and Indian women's movements and their respective conceptualization of these issues, but also by the way that information travels across borders. In North America, second wave feminists worked tirelessly to make patriarchal violence visible, to destabilize the notion that women were victims without agency, and to foreground and support women and children survivors of abuse; as a result, feminists were less likely to conceptualize violence against women in the West as having fatal consequences. In India, the women's movement focused on various forms of patriarchal violence, but dowry-murders often received the most media attention because of the public's relative unfamiliarity with the practice combined with its predominant occurrence in middle-class families. While mobilizing for women's shelters was feasible in the West, given the economic circumstances in India, Indian women's groups took to the streets and publicly protested dowry-murders. What Narayan (1997) calls the "asymmetries" of feminist issues in different national contexts is erased in Western conceptions of "Other" violence against women (95). Similarly, in the case of "honour killings," the complex historical, economic, and political context of this practice and importantly, the resistance to it by groups such as the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan, is decontextualized and the practice becomes highly exoticized. In Western conceptions of "honour killings," it is the brutal fatality of the practice and its connection to Islam and Middle Eastern culture that distinguishes it from our "common sense stock of knowledge" of what is considered to be North American domestic violence.

Narayan (1997) also argues that Westerners retrieve information about "Others" across borders by picking out quick facts—a practice that has created an easy digestible category of "dowry-murders." When one "world-travels" in this way, information is edited and filtered often adhering to, rather than disrupting, assumed knowledge about the "Other" (85). The "Indianness" of dowry-murders, with the fires, burning, and rituals, is often assumed to have something to do with

“Indian culture” (101-02). With regard to Western consumption of knowledge on dowry-murders, Narayan wrote:

The presence of references to Indian culture can provide for a swift and convenient ‘explanation’ for what they do not understand. The reference to ‘culture’ in these reports can combine with more ‘free floating’ ideas about ‘Third World backwardness’ and the tendency to think of the Third World as realms of ‘Very Other Cultures’ to make ‘foreign phenomenon’ seem comfortably intelligible while preserving their ‘foreignness.’ (104)

Similarly, the Canadian news media used quick facts and easily retrievable information that foreclosed the possibility of a more nuanced representation of the practice of “honour killings.” Like sati and dowry-murders, quick facts about the practice made “honour killings” a palatable category. References to the “Muslimness” of “honour killings,” in combination with more free floating ideas about Arab “backwardness” and “barbarism,” widespread human rights atrocities perpetrated against women in the Middle East, and discourses of primitive masculinity based on “honour” and “shame,” made the practice intelligible because such associations are part of Canadians’ “common sense stock of knowledge.” Importantly, quick facts about “honour killings” and its association with popular representations of Muslim/Arabs reinforced the idea that this practice was distinct from Canadian patriarchal violence.

In both the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, American feminist Phyllis Chesler emerged as an expert on “honour killings” and she was quoted as making a clear distinction between “honour killings” and North American domestic violence. Citing an article Phyllis Chesler published in the Spring 2009 issue of the *Middle Eastern Quarterly*, Marian Scott (2009) of the *Montreal Gazette* reported that, unlike patriarchal violence understood to be “Canadian,” “honour killings” were “committed by Muslims against Muslim women and children; are committed mainly by fathers against young women in their 20s; are carefully planned; can be perpetrated by multiple family members; and are committed because the victim has dishonoured her family” (A4). Similarly, a *Kingston Whig-Standard* column written by Mindelle Jacobs (2009), entitled “Culture Clashes sometimes

prove deadly,” quoted Chesler at length in order to distinguish “honour killings” from other forms of patriarchal violence. According to Chesler, in instances of “ordinary domestic violence,” it is rare for brothers to kill sisters, for male cousins to kill female cousins, and for fathers to kill teenage daughters. In *extraordinary* “honour killings,” women are killed for showing their hair or acting independently. Jacobs concluded that Canadians must educate immigrants that there is “no justifiable homicide” (A4).

As suggested by these news articles, cultural essentialisms replaced more in depth analyses, and Western information gatherers, such as feminist researchers and journalists, rarely considered the ways in which narratives “cross borders” and take on new meaning. “Quick facts” about “honour killings,” as represented in the news coverage on the “Kingston Mills Murder,” consistently relied on a culturalist approach, produced a particular understanding of Canadian domestic violence as individualized acts, and ultimately communicated to readers who and what was and was not Canadian.

Culture Clashes

Another example of a colonial stance taken by feminists was a statement made by Joanne Young, the Executive Director of the Kingston Interval House. As the only explicitly feminist women’s shelter in the area, the Interval House director was often contacted by the news media to comment on the “Kingston Mills Murder” case. She was quoted in the *Kingston Whig-Standard* as saying that, as an expert in the anti-violence field, she was immediately suspicious when she heard about the murders. Although Young emphasized that “all violence against women was criminal,” she nonetheless suggested that these murders were motivated by a clash between “Eastern culture” and “Western freedoms.” Young stated:

This is a family that is very new to Western culture. In my experience over the years working in shelters, culture sometimes does precipitate violence. Women come here and see freedom. They speak out. At times it just causes frustration within the family, as in, ‘We’re losing our cultural identity.’ (cited in Schliesmann 2009b, A7)

Razack (2008) argues that, in a post-9/11 context, Muslim women’s bodies have become a yardstick

with which to measure a society's place inside or outside modernity (96). In contrast to the Muslim women as the "Other" (read pre-modern, tribal, and non-democratic), Western women are conceptualized as the "Self" (read modern, civil, and democratic) (84). She further maintains that Western women's subjectivity is premised on the imperialist insistence that they are "the same as, but culturally different from, Muslim women" (104). In particular, Western women lay claim to such superior liberal freedoms as autonomy from family, tradition, and community, which their "sisters" are denied. Razack goes on to assert that, in the current political climate, feminist responses to the "Other" are harnessed for the project of empire. The "clash of civilizations" argument as an explanation for the murders, as presented by feminists and gender experts in both the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and the *Montreal Gazette*, was quickly translated into expert statements on gender equality and the universality of liberal human rights. Such comments, regardless of intention, served to shore up justifications for the war in Afghanistan and surveillance of Muslims within Canadian borders.

There were, of course, feminists who presented an alternative analysis of the "Kingston Mills Murder." In a radio interview on *CBC Radio: The Current*, Razack (2009) argued against the use of the term "honour killing" since, like "dowry-murders" or "sati," it had become a palatable explanatory category in its border crossing and, through "race-thinking," had become associated with various "Muslim" characteristics. Pulling from the historical inventory of "common sense stock of knowledge" of Muslim/Arabs, the term "honour killing," as it circulated in the Canadian social imaginary, pointed to Muslim "backwardness," the hyper-misogynist traditions of the Arab world, so-called dangerous Muslim men, and imperilled Muslim women (Razack 2008). In response to the use of the term "honour killing" to describe the murder at Kingston Mills lock, Razack (2009) asserted:

At this historical moment there is a quite a highly organized and extensive response to Muslims and Arabs and so this is part of what is a media spectacle...really about marking a particular group as unusually patriarchal, deeply violent so on...and once you have this kind of thing in full swing—which you do every day, and not just about violence—then that is why we have jumped so quickly onto

this bandwagon...it gives Canadians who are not Muslim a warm fuzzy feeling of being superior.

Despite Razack's intervention, her interview did not disrupt dominant interpretations of the murders.

At a press conference on 12 July 2009, the Kingston police held a moment of silence for the four women killed in the "Kingston Mills Murder." The Kingston Police Chief Stephen Tanner also mentioned the newly unveiled monument that was meant to memorialize the women and children affected by patriarchal violence in the Kingston community. With reference to the former murder victims, he stated:

The four victims in this case, three of which were young teenage girls, *all shared the rights within our great country to live without fear, to enjoy safety and security, and the exercise freedom of choice and expression, and yet had their lives cut short by their own family.* (Cherry 2009a, A1)

This moment demonstrates the media spectacle that Razack (2009) so aptly points to in her interview quoted above. Chief Tanner's reference to this new monument at a press conference about the "Kingston Mills Murder" framed the murders as a product of "Muslim familial culture" and "backwardness," which had been brought into the country by "Others." The fact that this monument was meant to memorialize women and girls who had been killed precisely *because* they did not live in a city that ensured their safety and security was obscured by pin-pointing the "Kingston Mills Murder" as an exceptional example of "Other" kinds of violence.

The journalists writing for both the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and the *Montreal Gazette* sought to tell a story about the "Kingston Mills Murder" that the Canadian public could "hear" (Razack 1998). Even though various women, including representatives of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, attempted to challenge the culturalist analysis of the "Kingston Mills Murder," the Canadian news media continued to describe the murders as "possible honour killings." Voices that supported this interpretation emerged as experts on violence against women, while those who rejected it were excluded or ignored. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Back*, bell hooks (1989) argues that the workings of white supremacy in American academic institutions has served to position white feminists as

the “authoritative” voice on experiences of “Others,” has excluded or marginalized women of colour, and silenced their experiences and knowledge (45). In the case of the “Kingston Mills Murder,” the news media, as a white-dominated institution, did take cultural differences into account in its analysis of the murders, but did not address racism. By beginning with culture and not racism and with difference and not dominance, the “class of civilizations” argument became the story that the media told about the murders and the one that was heard by Canadians (Razack 2004, 136). As Razack (2004) argues, “when cultural difference [becomes] the focus of what [is] needed to be understood about the encounter, it discourages a more self-critical, historical approach and it [limits] accountability” (135).

Imagining an Alternative Feminist Responses to “Honour Killings” as Violence Against Women

As an alternative to the culturalist analysis used to explain the “Kingston Mills Murder” in the news media, I propose an interlocking analysis as a reparative framework. In *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, Razack (1998) argues for an interlocking approach to storytelling. She proposes a framework that depends on a historicized and contextualised account of oppressions. She further insists that feminists should focus on how hierarchies of power intersect and interlock to produce women’s subjectivities, rather than attempt to manage “cultural difference.” An interlocking explanatory approach to the “Kingston Mills Murder” would have revealed hierarchies and intersections of gender, race, religion, and nationality as scattered, yet interconnected, systems of power. As Razack further maintains, “interlocking systems need one another, and in tracing the complex way in which they help to secure one another, we learn how women are produced into positions that exist symbiotically but hierarchically” (13).

An interlocking analysis places both the teller and listener in a counter-stance, as proposed by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), where both subjects are the oppressor and the oppressed simultaneously. Such an approach posits multiple intersections of power relations and moves beyond binary thinking about oppression. As Razack (1998) insists, “no one is off the hook” (47). She suggests that the use of “storytelling for social change” requires a politics of accountability (70). Rec-

ognizing complicity in stories of oppression is essential to being accountable to privilege and to being able to “hear” properly. “Hearing” stories of domination and power, rather than merely listening to “Other” women’s issues, is essential to constructing “communities of resistance” against patriarchal violence (Mohanty 2003). In contrast to the culturalist analysis provided by many feminists and gender experts in the Canadian news media in response to the “Kingston Mills Murder,” an interlocking analysis would disallow Western claims of superiority and with it, rescue narratives in favour of a solidarity approach.

Ella Shohat (2002), in her article “Area Studies, Gender Studies and the Cartographies of Knowledge,” offers a roadmap for interlocking analysis. She argues that, in the post-9/11 context, a transnational or multiculturalist feminist critique of culturalist frameworks is essential. Although she focuses her critique on the production of knowledge within academia, her insights are applicable to the production of knowledge in other institutions like the news media. She maintains that to begin to speak about “Muslim women”- a fictive unity- “one has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, nations and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but rather as part of permeable interwoven relationality” (68). Instead of making essentialist claims about the cultural differences between women, Shohat insists that we must look at women’s different positioning vis-a-vis histories of power; histories that are mutually constitutive (75). In writing about transnational and multicultural feminism in relation to scholarship on women’s oppression in the “Middle East,” she focuses on “cartographies of knowledge” and “kaleidoscope frameworks” that create “relational maps of knowledge [that] would help illuminate the negotiation of gender and sexuality as understood in diverse contexts but with an emphasis on the linked historical experiences and discursive networks across borders” (Shohat 2002, 70).

For Shohat (2002), such a framework examines women’s oppressions in their local and national contexts. It opposes Western cultural superiority, challenges rescue narratives, and rejects Eurocentric feminist arguments that favour assimilation as a means to address “cultural” oppressions; it challenges women’s presumed passivity to capitalist globalization and patriarchy and makes resistance to oppression within com-

munities visible. It also examines the social practices whereby women's bodies become the symbolic site for preserving tradition in the context of worsening social conditions due to destructive globalization policies, war and IMF-generated poverty. And finally, it recognizes and subverts the ways in which Western discourses recycle colonial tropes of Third World women trapped in "backward" and brutal societies (74).

An Alternative Feminist Response

When feminists respond to "honour killings," it is essential that an interlocking analysis or "kaleidoscope" framework be used. In this way, women's contextualized experiences and interests across borders can be identified in order to create "communities of resistance" (Mohanty 2003). In identifying the asymmetrical webs of power that place all women in specific relationality to one another, political links can be made among and between struggles to resist the diverse, yet connected, manifestation of "capitalist white supremacist patriarchy" (Mohanty 2003, 46; hooks 2000). As Mohanty (2003) argues, practicing solidarity begins with decolonizing Western constructions of Third World women. It necessitates that feminists tell different stories and remain accountable to them (Razack 1998).

In 2009, at the Ottawa vigil to commemorate the women murdered at l'École Polytechnique in Montreal, Quebec, the names of the women who had been murdered were read aloud. The names Zainab, Sahar, and Geeti Shafia and Rona Amir Mohammed were also read out loud: "Zainab Shafia found dead submerged in a car near Kingston, Ontario. Her brother, father and his wife are accused of first degree murder." A member of the Native Women's Association of Canada spoke of deep structural inequality stemming from colonization and the invisible missing and murdered Aboriginal women who, unlike the "Kingston Mills Murder" victims, rarely gain the attention of the media. While the reading of the murder victims' names at the memorial was a necessary step to address the exoticization and culturalization of the murders, what was really needed was the telling of an alternative story of "honour killings."

An alternative feminist response to the "honour killing" would, as Razack (2009) has pointed out, begin with an analysis of the currency of the term "honour killing" in the current political climate. Grewal (2013) maintains that, "there is little doubt that 'honour' is

an overdetermined concept" and colonial history, racial logics, as well as anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hostilities contribute to the circulation of the concept in the media (15). Understanding the "Kingston Mills Murder" would require attention to the history of war and Western intervention in Afghanistan and Canada's role in the "war on terror," while simultaneously resisting social practices that inflict violence against women everywhere. It would refuse Western feminist claims to superiority and would reject narratives of "culturally backward Others" in need of rescue. While the Canadian state joined the "war of terror" using veiled women's bodies as a geopolitical strategy, it continued to ignore the over 500 missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. The privileged and hyper-visible narrative of Canadian culture is that it is peaceful, benevolent, and tolerant of "Others"; hence, the ways in which the nation fails in gender and racial equality is rendered invisible. Importantly, an alternative response to the construction of the "Kingston Mills Murder" as an "honour killing" would question Canada's most recent immigration guidebook, which claims that "barbaric" cultural practices such as "honour killings" will not be tolerated, as surveillance measures are tightened and take aim at racialized "Others" who threaten to infiltrate the nation (CBC 2009).

To tell an alternative story, one must make visible and analyze multiple systems of power that collide, overlap, and interlock to produce women's subjectivities. It is essential that Western feminists, when speaking to the media, take a nuanced, contextual, and historical approach that includes a politics of accountability, especially given that they are upheld as experts on a variety of gender issues at home and abroad. When the news media borrows from, re-produces, and circulates "common sense stock of knowledge," feminists must disrupt and resist what is "known" about the "Other." If feminists had chosen racism rather than cultural difference as their starting point, a very different story of the "Kingston Mills Murder" would have been told.

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Endnotes

¹ I use the term “post-9/11” here following Jasbir Puar’s (2007) discussion of event-ness to denote the way in which the pre- and post-9/11 period are discursively demarcated and imagined as separated by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the US. Using “post-9/11” troubles this imagining and calls for a contextual account of simultaneously linked and disjunctive systems of power present along a historical continuum of the pre- and post-9/11 period.

² bell hooks (2000) defines patriarchal violence as power which an individual holds over others through coercive force in the context of families or within the home. Unlike “domestic violence,” the term “patriarchal violence” points to the connection between violence in the home and systemic sexism. She argues that “domestic violence” has too often been used as a “soft” term to describe violence as less threatening and brutal than violence perpetrated in public spaces. Also, patriarchal violence extends the conception of violence within the home to include violence against children and violence in same-sex partnerships (62).

³ On 24 July 2009, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that there was much confusion regarding the spelling of Shafia. While the *Kings-ton Whig-Standard* almost consistently spelt the name Shafi, the *Gazette* noted that the family name was spelt “Shafia” on their permanent resident card and other legal documents. However, in interviews, Mohammad Shafia gave multiple spellings of his name. I have chosen to use Shafia for consistency in this paper.

⁴ Sherene Razack (2008) argues that Muslims are racialized through “race-thinking,” which “divides up the world between the deserving and the undeserving, according to descent.” Muslims are represented as Arab, bearded, veiled, and brown skinned which exacerbates their surveillance and stigmatization. She indicates that by marking Muslims as racially different and culturally inferior, they are cast out of the nation. She further suggests that the “colour line” that divides humanity is essential to Canadians’ conception of Western superiority and it justifies taking away people’s rights as citizens (6-7).

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, I use the term “honour killing” not only to denote the popular circulation of the term in the news media, but also as a term to distinguish this crime from “Canadian patriarchal violence.” In this paper, I refer to Canadian patriarchal violence as a comparative language of reference to explain the way in which “honour killings” are seen as distinctly different. Although the “Kingston Mills Murder” was perpetrated by residents of Canada, their recent immigration as well as their racialized and religious minority status all worked to push the violent act outside the boundaries of the imagined nation.

⁶ I distinguish between gender experts and feminists because not all

those who were consulted on the murder in the media were identified as feminists or self-identified as such. However, in all cases, the “experts” were scholars or activists who promoted gender equality in their work or scholarship.

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