

War and the politics of truth-making in Canada

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Rigoberta Menchú has become an icon for the struggles of oppressed peoples for justice and self-determination. For many academics and activists around the world, the accusations of lying made against Ms. Menchú by David Stoll brought into sharp focus the politics of “truth-making” and the absolutist categories of fact and fiction. In this attempt to discredit Ms. Menchú, and through her, the Mayan experience of genocide by the Guatemalan military and its U.S. sponsors, important questions have been raised about how and when Third World women can speak, the conditions under which they will be heard, and the strategies used to silence them. In this paper, the author draws upon some of the lessons of the Rigoberta Menchú case to examine the politics of truth making in Canada in a recent controversy regarding a speech she made criticizing American foreign policy and urging the women’s movement to mobilize against America’s War on Terrorism. The highly personalized nature of the attacks on the author by political and media elites sought to accomplish a closing down of public space for informed debate about the realities of U.S. foreign policy and to silence dissent. Repeatedly emphasizing her status as an immigrant outsider, this controversy also contributed to the (ongoing) racialization of people of color as a treacherous “enemy” within the nation’s geographical borders, against whom “Canadians” had to be mobilized.

Introduction

The politics of knowledge production and truth claims have become a major concern of the social sciences in the face of challenges from antiracist, feminist and postcolonial studies. Contesting notions of objective “truths,” theorists from these various traditions have directed our attention to their socially constructed nature, pointing out that power relations are deeply imbricated in respective processes of truth “making” about the nature of the social world. Contrary to the claims of colonizers bringing “civilization” to the colonized world, Frantz Fanon, for instance, argued that colonial relations were predicated upon the violent enslavement of black peoples and on the racialized dehumanization of both colonizer and the colonized (1963, 1986). In a different vein, the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith has pointed out that sociology’s use of abstract categories to uncover “objective” forms of knowledge removes knowledge producers from the particularities of their “everyday/every night” localized experiences and reflects a dominant male standpoint (1987, 1990). Gayatri Spivak has argued for the critical necessity of interrogating elitist knowledge production by recognizing the experiences of the subaltern subject positions that such elitism seeks to silence (1996).

Challenging the truth claims of dominant elites has long been a major part of the struggles of oppressed peoples for self-determination. In the recent case of the Menchú “controversy” we have witnessed some of the consequences women face for daring to disrupt the truth claims of the dominant and powerful by articulating the experiences of the dominated. Ms. Menchú has been assailed with charges of lying, charges stemming from selective Western cultural assumptions and standards which are being used to discredit her personally, and her compelling testimony of the collective experience of oppression of the Mayan peoples in Guatemala (Scheurich & Foley, 2000). The case has raised important questions about how and when Third World women can speak to dominant groups, how they are heard, and the strategies used to discredit them.

The politics of contesting elite truth claims has been highlighted recently in a controversy generated by political and media elites in Canada following a speech I made to a women’s movement conference.¹ In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush administration launched America’s “War on Terrorism.” Rejecting a significant role for the United Nations in formulating a response to the attacks, as well as the need to abide by international law, the Administration initiated the forming of an international coalition to justify its unilateral military action against Afghanistan. One of its early partners was the Canadian government, committing its unequivocal support for whatever forms of assistance the United States might request. Challenging the claim that military aggression was the only reasonable and understandable response to the September 11 attacks, I spoke at the *Critical Resistance* conference² in a bid to mobilize the women’s movement against supporting this “new war.”

Situating the current political crisis within the context of the ongoing North/South relations rooted in colonialism and the increasingly unilateral expansive claims of sovereignty by the U.S. wherever it decides its interests are being challenged, the speech criticized American foreign policy and President Bush’s racialized construction of the American nation in mobilizing it for war. I argued that women’s groups should oppose the Canadian government’s support for military action and call on it to withdraw support for U.S. foreign policy. I argued instead for building solidarity with Afghan women’s organizations.

In this paper, I draw upon materialist, antiracist and postcolonial feminist³ theories to examine the racialized and gendered politics of knowledge production and “truth making” in contemporary Canada through an analysis of the public controversy following the speech. Beginning with a brief discussion of the contents of the speech, the paper will examine the public responses to it. I will make the case that in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, people across the United States were consumed with the question of why the attacks had occurred, giving rise to an unprecedented opportunity for a public discussion of the consequences of U.S. foreign policy, and to map out alternatives. Instead, the Bush Administration, and in the case of Canada, the Liberal government, usurped the moment to force through a right-wing restructuring of their respective societies and to attempt to reassert American dominance at the global level. Situating the very public attacks on the speech in this context, I will argue that the media coverage worked to dehistoricize the attacks of September 11, to close off public space for debate by refusing to engage in a substantive discussion of the effects of U.S. foreign policy, and to thus enable claims of American innocence to be publicly upheld.

Further, I will argue that by repeatedly reconstructing my status as a non-White, immigrant woman, the media reiterated – in a highly intensified manner – the historically racialized discourse of who “belongs” to the Canadian nation, and hence has a right to “speak” to it. This racialized discourse constructed me as an outsider to the nation, part of the “enemy” within its territorial boundaries, against which the ideological borders of the nation had to be defended. Repeated calls for me to be fired from my teaching position, and to have me “go back to where I come from” (and in a good number of cases for me to “go back” to Afghanistan!) reconstituted – in a moment of crisis – the vulnerable and constantly “under surveillance” status of Third World immigrants in Canada. While a small number of columnists did attempt a more balanced coverage of my speech, the overwhelming media response was to resort to vicious personal attacks, casting me in the role of a hostile and irresponsible immigrant woman. This intensely racialized/gendered discourse played no insignificant role in recuperating the colonial stereotype of the irrational native, albeit in its current gendered version, that of the *angry woman of color*. Through these rhetorical strategies, a critique of U.S. foreign policy, informed by well-documented and perfectly respectable sources, was turned into the ranting and raving of a “nutty” professor.⁴ The attacks on me also sent a very direct and clear message to others about the costs of challenging elite “truth” claims and of the dangers of voicing dissent in present-day Canada.

On speaking out

Given that the Canadian government had pledged its support for America’s new war, my speech urged women’s groups to examine the record of U.S. foreign policy, arguing that this record is alarming. For instance, in Chile the CIA-backed coup against the democratically elected Allende government led to the deaths of over 30,000 people. In El Salvador, the U.S. backed regime used death squads to kill about 75,000 people.⁵ In Nicaragua, the U.S.-sponsored terrorist contra war led to the deaths of over 30,000 people. The initial bombing of Iraq left over 200,000 dead, and the bombings have continued for the last 10 years. UNICEF estimates that over one million Iraqis have died, and that 5,000 more die every month as a result of the U.N.-imposed sanctions, enforced in their harshest form by U.S. power. In order to support its economic interests, the U.S. pattern of foreign intervention has been to overthrow leftist governments and to impose right-wing regimes which, in turn, support U.S. interests, even if this requires the training and use of death squads and the assassinating of progressive leftist politicians and activists (Chomsky, 1985; Landau, 1993; Johnson, 2000).⁶ To this end, it has a record of treating civilians as entirely expendable. Indeed, some commentators have argued that the U.S. has a policy of deliberately targeting civilians in order to terrorize them into withdrawing support for progressive movements. The United States is therefore the largest and most dangerous global force, unleashing horrific levels of violence around the world, and U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood.

Further, I pointed out that in order to legitimize the military aggression being undertaken by the United States against Afghanistan, President Bush was invoking an American “nation” and its “enemy” in clearly racialized civilizational terms. It has become de rigueur in the social sciences to acknowledge that the notion of a “nation” or a “people” is socially constructed,⁷ and the American nation is no exception.

In examining how this nation was being mobilized for the war, I asked the conference to consider the language used by President Bush, other senior U.S. Administration officials, their Western allies such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, as well as major figures in the media. If we do this, we encounter the following language: launching a “crusade” to “defend freedom at any cost;”⁸ the need to summon among Americans “hatred” and “rage” and the need for a “policy of focused brutality;”⁹ operation “infinite justice;”¹⁰ fighting the “barbarians;” a commitment to “hunt down” and “smoke [terrorists] out of their holes;”¹¹ warnings that the Taliban “face[d] the full wrath of the United States of America;”¹² constant references to “evil-doers”¹³ and “a monumental struggle of good versus evil;”¹⁴ warnings to “terrorists” that “We will rid the world of the stench of your existence;”¹⁵ calling on America to “shed a tear, and then get on with the business of killing our enemies as quickly as we can, and as ruthlessly as we must;”¹⁶ defining an “enemy” which “hides in the shadows and has no regard for human life;”¹⁷ defining the foe as “hydra-headed;”¹⁸ calls to drain the swamps of the Middle East, etc., etc.

The language used in the construction of the “enemy” is very familiar to peoples who have been colonized by Europe. It echoes colonial constructs of the native as barbaric and dangerous, whose colonization was not only justifiable but also welcome, in the cause of bringing them into civilization and democracy. The use of this highly charged colonial discourse at that particular moment of crisis revealed the nature of the absolutist racialized Western ideology being mobilized to rally the troops, and to build a national and international consensus in defense of the “West” and its civilization. It suggested implicitly that anyone who hesitated to join the war was likewise “evil” and “uncivilized.” President Bush made explicit this suggestion by repeatedly stating there were only two choices facing the international community: “you” are either with “us” or with the “terrorists.” The bombing of Afghanistan was to be only the first phase of the war. Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Somalia were named as potential targets for subsequent phases. All other nations would have to decide if they sided with the American administration or if they were “murderers and outlaws themselves.” This carving up of the world into a configuration of “us” versus “them” is not only vastly simplistic, but also extremely dangerous. It is a crude Manichean remapping of the colonial divide in the current age of Empire, articulated once again through the discourse of the civilized West and the barbaric Islamic world.

I also pointed out that the institutionalization of racial profiling in the wake of September 11, and the targeting of immigrants and refugees within Canada and the United States as a threat to the nation’s security, especially of those who “look” like Muslims, inevitably followed from this logic. The women’s movement had to disrupt this racialized discourse and challenge the notion that the War on Terrorism was a reasonable, just, or righteous response, and instead insist upon naming it the imperialist venture that it was. Finally, I addressed how the treatment of women by the Taliban regime was being used to further legitimize the war. The military attack on Afghanistan was being represented as necessary and welcome in bringing about the liberation of Afghan women. While there could be little disagreement about defining the Taliban regime as misogynist, I argued there would certainly be no emancipation for women anywhere until Western domination of the planet is ended.

Many prominent intellectuals, journalists, and activists alike have pointed out that the West's domination of the planet's resources is rooted in the history of colonialism and rests on the expansive globalization of the North/South divide, and that this domination will continue to provoke violence and resistance across the planet (Bello, 1994; Fanon, 1963). In the current climate of escalating militarism, it can be anticipated there will be precious little emancipation for women, in the countries of either the North or the global South. These insights were being ignored in the aftermath of September 11, and instead, women were being urged to support the war as a liberatory project for their Afghan "sisters." I argued the escalating militarization would serve neither the interests of women in Afghanistan, nor those of women in North America.

On being heard

For articulating the position outlined above, I was immediately attacked in the media, by the Canadian Prime Minister in the House of Commons,¹⁹ by the leaders of all the major opposition parties,²⁰ and by the Premier of British Columbia.²¹ This was followed by similar attacks from other politicians, editorialists, and media columnists across the country in the days following the initial reports of the speech. I began to receive hate mail, harassing phone calls, and death threats. Numerous calls were made for me to be fired from my teaching position at the University of British Columbia, both publicly and privately, in phone calls and letters. In this climate, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) chose to make public, through an announcement in the media, that I was the subject of a "hate-crime" investigation, an offence under the criminal code. A complaint had apparently been made to them alleging that my speech amounted to a "hate crime" against Americans. The investigation of this complaint was subsequently dropped. However, the chilling impact of such a highly unusual step by the RCMP – of making a public announcement about the subject of a criminal investigation – cannot be dismissed or trivialized. Neither should the considerable financial and other costs of fending off such a serious allegation be underestimated.

Many of the comments made in the speech are hardly original for anybody who has engaged with serious critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Nor are they controversial in the South, or among prominent public intellectuals. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, prominent critics and activists, including Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Robert Fiske, and Arundhati Roy, all made similar comments regarding the effects of American foreign policy on peoples around the world. Rigoberta Menchú publicly opposed the attacks on Afghanistan, calling in an open letter to President Bush to refrain from military retaliation and demonstrate instead "a different world leadership . . . in which there will be no need for new crusades" (2002, p. 277). In the United States, many academics and critics came under fire for making similar criticisms about U.S. foreign policy at campus teach-ins, in their classrooms and at public fora. One hundred of them were named in a report published by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni as being "un-American" because they did not demonstrate "anger, patriotism, and support of military intervention."²² Faculty members at the City University of New York, the University of Texas, Columbia University, the University of North Carolina, and MIT, among others, were also attacked.²³ What is interesting about

these incidents in the United States is that the attacks on these critics seem to have remained largely localized, damaging, and painful as they undoubtedly must have been. The incidents do not appear to have been whipped up by political and media elites into a public spectacle at a national level, as was the case with my speech in Canada. The attacks on my speech were led by political leaders and by key figures in the mainstream media, who turned these into a public spectacle played out on the front pages of newspapers and on prime-time television and radio programs.²⁴ This turning of the speech into a major news event was an interesting phenomenon. After all, it could very easily have been marginalized by the media simply choosing not to cover it as a major news story.²⁵ The turning of the speech into a major news controversy by media and political elites, I would argue, sought to map out the limits of what was to be publicly tolerated regarding discussions of U.S. foreign policy, to build a “national” consensus in support of the war, and to attack dissent in a highly visible manner. While public expressions of national mourning for the tragic deaths were being actively encouraged and promoted, dissent was to be vilified and dissenters demonized.

The critical importance of the mass media (electronic and other forms) in giving concrete shape to particular forms of representations through which shared meanings and values are constructed and exchanged has been pointed out by Stuart Hall (1997). Meanings are constructed through the “frameworks of interpretation” brought to bear upon events: the stories that are told, the language which is used, the visual images that are presented, all contribute to give specific kinds of meanings to particular events and to certain identities. Benedict Anderson has argued that the development of print media historically enabled elites to shape the “imagined” community called the nation, and to define and articulate its “national” interest (1996). If anything, the role of the media has become even more critical to processes of nation-building in the second half of the twentieth century, and most especially during times of war. Elite ideas are widely disseminated and popularized through the media, and during times of war, being able to hold onto the allegiances of populations can be crucial to the success of the global ambitions of national elites. The controversy regarding the speech became one such instance of elites seeking to forge a “national” consensus in support of the war.

The fury generated by the media reporting of my comments has been instructive and reveals several interesting patterns. Accusations were immediately made that I was an academic impostor, morally bankrupt and was engaging in hate-mongering. My comments, informed by well-documented and numerous sources whose accuracy cannot be faulted, were categorized simplistically as “hateful.” The media reports can largely be characterized as follows. First, a number of phrases, such as the one describing the U.S. as being the “most dangerous global force unleashing horrific levels of violence” and the one arguing that U.S. foreign policy was “soaked in blood” were taken out of the context of the entire speech and were sensationally repeated. The airing of these comments, in isolation from the analysis informing them, inevitably gave rise to misrepresentations about their full meaning.²⁶ The words “horrific violence” and “blood-stained” were singled out as particularly offensive. Second, and predictably enough, the media reports – and the public criticisms they generated and subsequently reported upon extensively – did not address the veracity of the speech’s assessment of the U.S. historical record. Third, instead of engaging with the substance of my comments, most commentators directed public attention to my tone of voice and choice of words (i.e., shrill,

inflammatory, disgraceful, outrageous, insensitive, angry, excessive, inelegant, and unacademic²⁷, etc.), elevating a form they attributed to the speech above its contents. These rhetorical maneuvers served at least two purposes: first, they contributed to a dehistoricizing of the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent U.S. response, thereby enabling claims of American innocence to be upheld; and second, they directed personalized attention towards me, rather than to the substance of my speech, thereby enabling the construction of me personally (and other immigrants by association) as treacherous outsiders-to-the-nation, its “enemy” within, against whom the nation had to remain on guard. So for example, one columnist, calling me “excitable” and a “nutty professor,” reduced the substance of my analysis to “wingnut ravings,” warning readers about “sly and sick, linkage from our terrorist apologists. . . .”²⁸ Another columnist at a national newspaper weighed in by calling me “an idiot” and asking why I “seem to be so fond of the regimes of thugs, dictators and fascists.”²⁹ Yet another called my speech “hate-filled discourse” and “moronic opinion”,³⁰ and an editorial arguing my “diatribe” had to be answered called me “mean-mouthed,” and asked why my “venom [went] unchallenged”³¹ at the conference.³² In the following sections, I will discuss more fully these strategies used to discredit the speech and to silence the political critique it was informed by.

De-historicizing September 11

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers, the trauma triggered by the attacks seemed to find collective voice in the question, why? Why had the attacks taken place? This was a question echoing across the United States, becoming the most intense articulation of the trauma that people seemed to experience. Concurrently with the question why, one also heard an equally intense anger being expressed at the attacks, as well as a demand for some kind of immediate response to them. The answer to the question why was provided by the President and other “experts”: the American nation, its “freedoms” and its “way of life” were fiercely hated abroad and it was for this reason that the United States had become the target of a terrorist campaign of murderous envy. It was not the specific foreign policy of the U.S. in the Middle East or Central Asia, or in other parts of the global South, which was being attacked, but the nation’s love of freedom and democracy. This answer was to become a key plank in the mobilizing of public support for the war in the United States and at the international level, and to further fuel demands for military retaliation. The war was represented as nothing less than a fight for democracy and freedom in the world.

Opinion polls were being conducted immediately in the aftermath of the attacks, even before people in the United States could fully comprehend the enormity of the attacks, or of their exact toll. These polls were being used to repeatedly inform the public that the overwhelming majority of Americans allegedly supported strong military retaliation. The respondents apparently did not know against whom to retaliate at that point, but they purportedly supported this strategy anyway. In both the use of the language constructing the enemy and the rationale for the coming war, and in the media’s persistent conducting and reporting of opinion polls, we were witnessing what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky had earlier called the “manufacture of consent” (1988). The refusal by

political elites to engage in discussions which sought to historicize the attacks by situating them within the context of ongoing globalization and U.S. imperialist domination, as many critics attempted to do, has to be understood within this context. To begin to seriously answer the question “why” would have required some examination of the recent history of the role of U.S. at the global level, and, most especially, of its interventions in Central Asia and the Middle East. A refusal to deal with this history, to insist on beginning the narrative on September 11 with the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, became a strategy which enabled claims to American innocence, and the representation of the United States as being only a victim, not an aggressor, within the narrative. This refusal to contend with history enabled a veiling of the responsibility of successive American administrations, and the complicity of its citizenry (as well as the citizenry of its allies like Canada), for shaping the conditions that gave rise to the attacks.

As Sherene Razack has convincingly argued, demands made by oppressed groups for justice are often met by dominant groups with a denial of their responsibility for, and complicity in, the oppression of marginalized others (1998). Such denials are accompanied by claims of their own innocence, which enable members of dominant groups to instead construct themselves as the victims of those whom they are complicit in oppressing. The mainstream media’s refusal to engage with the substance of the speech sought to accomplish such a dehistoricizing of September 11, and of the U.S. state’s role in oppressing and exploiting peoples around the world, thereby enabling the construction of American innocence. Instead, the focus on my tone of voice, choice of words, speaking style, and (lack of) intelligence became the most salient point for most commentators. The form of the speech was elevated in order to override its content, undermining the “truth” of the historical record I was referring to, and in the process I became constructed as hateful and aggressive. This is reminiscent of how Ms. Menchú’s relationship to a brother has been used to attempt to discredit her account of the violence suffered by the Mayan Indians. Instead of addressing the violence she describes, irrespective of how Ms. Menchú defines her familial relations, the focus of Stoll’s attack has been to dispute Ms. Menchú’s descriptions of that violence by questioning her credibility on account of her claim to a familial relationship. Ms. Menchú’s testimonial describes, in graphic terms, the exploitation and violent suppression of Mayans. Even if one should reject the relationship she claims to another individual, this has no relevance to the collective experience she so courageously voices.

Name-calling and personalized accusations then, as well as allegations that my comments were untimely (five days *before* the bombing of Afghanistan began!), were deemed sufficient enough to suppress discussions of the historical record of U.S. foreign policy. Caricatured as angry and insensitive, the “truths” of the historical experiences I referred to were implicitly avoided, and the “truth” of U.S.-backed coups, death-squads, bombings, and mass terror were left unacknowledged and unaddressed in the public discussion. In this, the majority of media commentators, journalists, and editors alike made the perspective of the Bush administration and its supporters the only possible rational, intelligent, sane, and informed perspective. To borrow from Dorothy Smith, the perspective of ruling was being normalized through the textual practices of the reportage (1990), and a dissenting opinion was derided as simple mean-spiritedness.

Dis-embodiment others

Examining the collective outrage expressed regarding my tone of voice and choice of words has also been instructive. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, “A choice of language transcends mere selection of words – it is inherently a political choice” (1998, p. xxi). The use of the words *horrific violence* and *soaked in blood* in the speech, singled out for particular derision, was indeed deliberate. To successive U.S. administrations and their supporters, the deaths resulting from its policies have been just so many statistics, just so much collateral damage, regrettable inevitabilities of what have been essentially just policies. This rendering invisible of the lives and humanity of the peoples targeted for attack is an old strategy used to mask the impact of colonialist and imperialist interventions. Perhaps there is no more potent a strategy of dehumanization than to proudly proclaim the accuracy and efficiency of “smart” weapons systems, and of surgical and technological precision, while rendering invisible the suffering and broken bodies of the peoples under siege, to be registered, if at all, only as disembodied statistics and mere “collateral damage.” My use of embodied language, grounded in the recognition of the actual life-blood running through these bodies, was an attempt to humanize the victims of U.S. aggression in profoundly graphic terms. These words compel both speaker and listener to recognize the sheer corporeality of the terrain upon which bombs rain and mass terror is waged. They call upon “us” to recognize that “they” bleed just like “we” do, that “they” hurt and suffer just like “we” do. It shifts our perspective from that of ruling to that of the ruled: this is what the policies look like on the ground. Bloodied and broken bodies.

A number of scholars have argued that if we were to center in our analysis of the social world the experiences of those who are oppressed and marginalized, we would have to radically redefine dominant perspectives on the nature of the social world (Collins, 1998; Devi, 1997; hooks, 1981; Morrison, 1994; Maracle, 1996; Spivak, 1996; Williams, 1991). These feminists, and others, have forcefully drawn our attention to what is actually done to women’s bodies in the course of mapping out racialized colonial/imperialist relations. Frantz Fanon, one of the foremost analysts of decolonization, studied and theorized the role of violence in colonial social organization and the psychology of oppression; but he described just as readily the bloodied, violated black bodies and the “searing bullets” and “blood-stained knives” which were the order of the day in the colonial world he was living in and studying (1963, 1986). Eduardo Galeano titled one of his books *The open veins of Latin America* (1974) and the postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe has described the “mortification of the flesh,” and the “mutilation” and “decapitation” of oppressed bodies which are the actual human costs of the exploitation of the African continent (2001). Aime Cesaire’s poetry pulses with the physicality of blood, pain, fury, and rage in his outcry against the domination of African bodies (1983). If our analysis is to center the experiences of the targets and victims of U.S. aggression and their allied local elites, as Ms. Menchú sought to accomplish in her testimonial, the impact of U.S. foreign policy has to be ascertained and redefined from the perspective of their experiences. Our analysis then expands to “see” not just sanitized, disembodied policies and cold statistics, but the murderous practices which work to maintain the role of the U.S. as the world’s hegemon. Anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements and theorists have long insisted on placing the bodies and experiences of marginalized Others at the center of our analysis of the

social world, and to fail to do so at such a critical moment would have been unconscionable.

The power of using embodied language was sharply demonstrated to me in the shocked and horrified responses to my voice and to my words, *but not to the actual horror of the events I was referring to*. It is indeed extremely unnerving to “see” blood in the place of abstract, general categories and statistics. Yet this is exactly what we need to be able to see if we are to understand the terrible human costs of Empire building. The United States was using the events of September 11 to claim unilaterally the right to intervene anywhere on the planet where it deems its interests to be under threat, despite its signing of the U.N. Charter. According to political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, such an assertion points to a radically new form of globalized sovereignty, consistent with similar economic patterns of expanding sovereignty in the activities of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, etc. (2000). I would argue that this new globalized sovereignty of the U.S. and its allies is highly racialized. The words “bloodthirsty” and “vengeful” are designations which have, with a certain degree of comfort, been attributed to “savages” and to the “uncivilized” by defenders of the West, while the West itself is self-represented as the beacon of democracy and civilization. To name the practices of the U.S. administration as “bloodthirsty” and “vengeful,” to force a recognition of the actual blood-letting which upholds Empire, is to confront the nature of the racialized ideological justification for the War on Terrorism, as well as its historical roots, unsettling and discomfiting as that might be.

Resurrecting the irrational native

Predictably enough, there was no discussion in the media about the racialized discursive practices being used by the Bush Administration and the Canadian state, which the speech sought to draw attention to. The constant referencing of Americans as living in a higher state of civilization and of the enemy as barbarians who nurse a primal rage towards the West recuperated racially coded constructs of the colonizer and the colonized. Significantly, the form in which the media response to the speech was shaped itself used similarly racialized discursive practices. The speech was seized upon as part of the forging of a national “Canadian” consensus in support of the war, in this case through the public attacks on me as an immigrant-outsider-to-the-nation and as thus allied with the “enemy.” The category “immigrant” is a racially coded one which has come to be a referent for all people of color within Canada, regardless of their citizenship or actual legal status in the country (Bannerji, 2000; Thobani, 2000). Himani Bannerji has spoken specifically about the paradox of “both belonging and non-belonging simultaneously” which shapes the lives of immigrants (2000, p. 65): living within the nation’s geographical boundaries, laboring within its economy, subject to its legal systems, immigrants are nevertheless racialized as outsiders, as not being “real” Canadians. Account after account in the media pointed to my “un-Canadian” origins, stressing that I was an immigrant, that I had been born in Tanzania,³³ and for those readers who might still miss the point, that I am “non-White.”³⁴ Many columnists asked in all seriousness why I did not “go back to where I come from.” One columnist asked, “Why does she not flee back to enlightened Tanzania . . .? Or to Afghanistan . . .?”³⁵

Yet another pointed out that my “homeland” is Tanzania.³⁶ In the context of the United States, Chandra Mohanty has discussed experiencing a similar, and constant, questioning of her presence in the country by the seemingly innocent query: “when are you going home?” (1993, p. 352). This everyday questioning of the presence of immigrants in North America that both Bannerji and Mohanty have discussed became highly intensified in the personal attacks and the questioning of my presence in the country – as an outsider-within – a challenge which was turned into a “national” public spectacle. Whereas the everyday forms of exclusion described by Mohanty and Bannerji seek to keep immigrants in their place at multiple sites in their everyday lives, these everyday forms became highly magnified at this moment, working as the terrain for the (re)articulation, and thus (re)assertion of the nation’s identity and of its national cohesion. The attacks assumed the perspective of a patriotic “Canadian” sensibility that had come under attack. Establishing and repeatedly stressing my outsider-to-the-nation status, these media reports and columns came to crystallize the articulation of a “Canadian” national perspective, *by* and *through* these attacks. Indeed, so un-Canadian was my speech deemed to be that the leader of the official Opposition was reported to have made the extraordinary demand of the Prime Minister that he “inform the U.S. government that Canada repudiates Thobani’s message”³⁷ and that he apologize to President Bush on behalf of all Canadians!

This racialized construction of a “national” consensus could, of course, only have been made possible within the context of a historical Othering of immigrants as racialized outsiders to the Euro-Canadian nation, their presence in Canada always suspect, which I have discussed elsewhere (2000). Thus, even as President Bush was invoking a racialized American “nation,” politicians and media elites seized upon my speech to invoke a no less racialized Canadian “nation,” building its alleged consensus in support of the war in relation to their own “enemy-within.” Here, dissent itself became constructed as “un-Canadian” and foreign, a strategy particularly effective in this instance because, as a woman of color, I could readily be (re)constructed as already suspect within the ongoing legacy of the historically racialized practices of Canadian nation-building.

The sustained focus on the tone of my voice can also be read as a resurrection of the stereotype of the irrational – to the point of lunacy – “angry” women of color. A woman with a chip on her shoulder. This is a stereotype deeply rooted in the colonial trope of the “irrational” and “angry” native, brought into History, Reason, and Civilization under the auspices of the West, yet who remains stubbornly unwilling to recognize the benefits to him/herself of this benevolence. The “angry” woman of color can be read as a contemporary gendered version of this colonial construct, and it played a key role in the shaping of this controversy. It is intriguing that in the construction of my comments as bordering on lunacy, an utter incredulity and incomprehension was expressed regarding my comments about the bombing of Afghanistan being detrimental to the interests of women in Afghanistan, and also as having a negative impact on women’s status within North America. As Razack has noted, “Oppressed Third World women, particularly the passive, downtrodden Indian woman and the veiled Muslim one, are recurring and familiar images in Canadian public discourse . . .” (1998, p. 100). These images were being circulated in full force as legitimizing devices for the attacks on Afghanistan, and the construction of me as a lunatic for daring to disrupt this familiar public discourse is a reminder of just how heavily invested Canadian elites

are in racialized/gendered discourses about Muslim, and other Third World, women. That the importance of Afghanistan to the United States lies in its strategic location near Central Asia's vast resources of oil and natural gas has been pointed out by a number of writers, including the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid (2000). Some have estimated these reserves to be the equivalent of one-third of the entire Persian Gulf's reserves (Klare, 2001). It was the American state's economic and political interests which led to its initial support for, and arming of, Gulbadin Hekmatyar's Hezb i Islami and its support for Pakistan's collaboration in, and organization of, the Taliban regime in the mid-1990s. According to Rashid (2000), the United States and Unocal conducted negotiations with the Taliban for an oil pipeline through Afghanistan for a number of years during the mid-1990s. We have witnessed the horrendous consequences this initial support for the Taliban has had for women in Afghanistan. During that period, Afghan women's groups were calling attention to the American and Pakistani support as a major factor in the Taliban regime's coming to power, but most people in North America chose not to heed them. Nor did they recognize in the aftermath of September 11 that Afghan women's groups were, and had been, in the front line of resistance to the Taliban and its Islamist predecessors, including the present militias of the Northern Alliance. Instead, they chose to see them only as "victims" of a timeless, ahistorical Islamic culture, to be pitied and "saved" by the West.

Third World feminists have pointed to the pitfalls of rendering invisible the agency and resistance of Third World women, and of the racialized reduction of women's oppression to various "backward" and timeless Third World "cultures" which are defined as irredeemably misogynist (Ahmed, 1992; Amos & Parmer, 1984; Mohanty, 1991; Razack, 1998). In the case of Afghanistan, repeated media attention was directed to the misogynist practices of the Taliban. But the truth that the U.S. bombings were displacing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Afghan women and their children, turning them into destitute refugees, was conveniently overlooked by the media. The murderous violence of the bombing sorties, the civilian casualties resulting from them, and the razing to the ground of Afghan villages and towns were all veiled from public scrutiny, and the extreme violence unleashed on Afghans, including on women and children, by the relentless U.S. bombings was erased from public discussion. In my speech I had pointed out that even before the bombings began, hundreds of thousands of Afghan women were compelled to flee their homes and communities, leaving with few belongings, to live in refugee camps. The subsequent bombings of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and other cities in the country have resulted in significant loss of life, including the lives of women and children. Humanitarian agencies reported that over three million Afghan refugees were on the move in the wake of the U.S. attacks, and to raise questions about the costs of this in human terms, to disrupt the representation of the U.S. as "saving" these women and children, as I tried to do, was considered utter blasphemy.

Even more ferocious were the attacks on me for daring to suggest that it was equally important to recognize that the globalization of Western sovereignty and militarism would not further women's liberation in the countries of the West either. The struggles of feminist movements in these countries attest to how widespread women's oppression is in these countries, ranging from the rape, sexual assault, and murder of women to their sexual objectification, their inequalities in the workplace and their growing poverty. In the specific case of the War on Terrorism,

women were being brought into line to support racist imperialist practices and goals. It is these women who will also have to live with the men who go to serve in the war, and who themselves become brutalized in its waging. Men who have killed and participated in bombing raids abroad are hardly likely to come back immune from the effects of this brutalization. Women in the U.S. and Canada were being mobilized to support this military aggression, which was then being presented to them as being in their “national” interest. These are hardly the conditions in which women’s freedoms can be furthered, either in the United States, Canada, or the countries of their European allies. Indeed, in their alleged commitment to Afghan women’s liberation, and through their claims to being more enlightened on questions of gender than their barbaric Others, the U.S. administration and its Western allied states have made the War on Terrorism a key site for the reconstitution of the supremacy of the West, and of the supremacy of individual Western men and women who have come to the “rescue” of Afghan women. So readily and completely is the supremacy of the West assumed to be in mainstream public discussions of questions of gender that any questioning of this commonsense “truth” is dismissed as utterly incomprehensible. An analysis of gender relations at the global level, which claims that women’s oppression in the Third World is deeply shaped – and greatly exacerbated – by the domination of the global South by imperialist powers, is reviled as idiotic.

Conclusion

No analysis of Western economic, political, or military power was offered in the critiques of my speech. Despite the endless rhetorical question posed by commentators, “why do they hate us?,” precious little discussion of U.S. foreign policy and the Western domination of the planet’s resources was allowed. Instead, the media offered the routine and facile critiques of Madrassa education, Muslims’ isolation from (and hostility to) modernity, or their hypocritical resentment of Western affluence. No denials were made in these various commentaries regarding the range, and extent, of Western imperialism. Instead, this was taken to be a good and admirable thing. Such representations amount to a re-dedication to Empire-building, based on the military domination by the West of the Rest. The highly personalized attacks on me, the name-calling and calls for me to go back to where I come from served to make invisible to public scrutiny the reality of the colonial and racialized ideology the Bush administration and its allies in Canada were drawing upon, and the discursive practices they were engaging in to whip up their respective “national” war frenzies.

People in Canada were being asked by political leaders and most public commentators to accept the United States military aggression against “evil-doers” as natural, understandable and even reasonable, given the September 11 attacks. My speech sought to rupture this discourse of the power elites who prefer to claim only that the American “war” is necessary, that there are no other alternatives to fighting “terrorism” than dropping bombs. My speech rejected this position, arguing that it would be just as understandable a response to reexamine U.S. foreign policy, to address the root causes of the September 11 attacks, and for the U.S. to make a commitment to abide by international law. I urged the women’s movement in Canada to disrupt the discourses naturalizing and normalizing military aggression,

and to recognize the war for what it is: vengeful retribution and an opportunity for a crude display of American military might and dominance. I likewise urged them to reject the notion that the United States can single-handedly, and based solely upon its own economic and strategic interests, claim the right to define entire countries and “nations” as being terrorists, outlaws, and murderers. Women need to ask: Who will make the decision regarding which “nations” are to be labeled as “murderers” and “outlaws”? Which notions of “justice” are to be upheld? Will the Bush administration set the standard, even as it is overtly institutionalizing racial profiling across the United States?

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Notes

1. The speech has been published in the journal *Meridians: Feminism, Race & Transnationalism*, 2(2) (2002) [Wesleyan University Press].
2. The conference was jointly organized by the Elizabeth Fry Society, which is a national organization of women who work with women prisoners and on issues of prison reform, and the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres. The conference took place in Ottawa on 1–4 October, 2001.
3. Postcolonial studies has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic field of scholarship. However, I draw upon this theoretical tradition with some caution. Aboriginal peoples in Canada continue to remain colonized, and to use the term “postcolonial” in this context without problematizing it would not only be far too premature, it would also serve to make invisible the ongoing struggles of Aboriginal peoples for self-determination.
4. Pete McMartin, “Free Speech in a pristine vacuum, University defends ‘Nutty Professor’”, *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.
5. See Adam Kufeld, “El Salvador Revisited”, *San Francisco Examiner* magazine, November 16, 1997. Also see Clifford Krauss, “U.S. Aware of killings, worked with Salvador’s rightists, papers suggest”, *New York Times*, November 9, 1993.
6. Also see the Report, “Never Again in Guatemala” by the Roman Catholic Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera. The Bishop was assassinated two days after he presented his report; Diana Jean Schemo, “New Files tie U.S. to deaths of Latin Leftists in 1970s”, *New York Times*, March 6, 2001; and the *San Jose Mercury News*, Reuters News Service, “CIA to reveal 54 coup records”, May 23, 1997.
7. See for example, the work of Benedict Anderson as well as of Etienne Balibar and I. Wallerstein.
8. President Bush, reported by Hilary Mackenzie, “Bush wants bin Laden ‘dead or alive’”, *Vancouver Sun*, Tuesday, September 18, 2001.
9. L. Morrow, “the Case for Rage and Retribution” in the special issue of *Time*, September 11, 2001.
10. John Stackhouse, “U.S. military launches “Infinite Justice” mission”, *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, September 20, 2001. The name of this mission has since been changed to mission “Enduring Freedom” after the Christian overtones of the first name were pointed out by Muslims.
11. President Bush, reported by John Ibbitson, “Prepared to Attack Taliban, U.S. says”, *Globe and Mail*, Monday, September 17, 2001.
12. Vice-President Dick Cheney, quoted by John Stackhouse, “Pakistan calls on friendly countries to help ‘manage the risks’”, *Globe and Mail*, Monday, September 17, 2001.
13. President Bush, quoted by John Stackhouse, “Pakistan calls on friendly countries to ‘manage the risks’”, *Globe and Mail*, Monday, September 17, 2001. This language has been used by the American repeatedly in numerous television interviews and in his public speeches.
14. President Bush, reported by John Stackhouse, “Bush Girds for Battle”, *Globe and Mail*, September 13, 2001.
15. Democrat Representative Shelley Berkley, reported by John Ibbitson, “U.S. expects its friend to back efforts to launch war on terrorism”, *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, September 13, 2001.

16. Republican Senator John McCain, "there Is No Substitute for Victory", *Wall Street Journal*, Friday, October 26, 2001.
17. Hilary Mackenzie et al., "U.S. says 12 hijackers have been identified", *Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, September 13, 2001.
18. R.W. Apple Jr., "Home Front: Edgy Sunday", *New York Times*, Monday, October 8, 2001.
19. Peter O'Neil, "PM condemns 'terrible' Thobani speech", *Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, October 4, 2001. The initial attack on the speech was made by the official opposition, criticizing me for making the speech and criticizing the Secretary for State for the Status of Women, the Honourable Hedy Fry, for having been present while the speech was made.
20. Jane Taber, "One Crisis, Two Responses", *National Post*, Tuesday, October 2, 2001.
21. See Craig McInnes, Yvonne Zacharias and Peter O'Neil, "Thobani speech disgraceful, premier says of U.S. bashing", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.
22. Quoted from Lewis H. Lapham, "Notebook : Mythography", *Harper's Magazine*, 304(1821), p. 6, February 2002.
23. Reported by Lee Elliot Major in the *Guardian*, November 6, 2001.
24. To examine the similarities and differences in the responses in the United States and in Canada is well beyond the scope of this present paper as it would entail a deeper study of the role of the media in the respective countries, of the very different political configurations within which national party politics are played out, and of the historical processes through which the nation's others have been racialized. Nevertheless, I do want to point out this difference before engaging in an examination of the public responses to my speech.
25. Undoubtedly my activism in the women's movement was a key factor in the media attention paid to my speech. I have served as a president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, Canada's largest feminist organization, in the past. However, I have made numerous speeches in the past, and also organized press conferences, which were completely ignored in the media.
26. The only exceptions were the *Vancouver Sun*, which published almost the entire speech, and CPAC, a public service television station which broadcast the entire speech.
27. Peter O'Neil, "Feminist's anti-US speech causes uproar," *Vancouver Sun*, Tuesday, October 2, 2001. Editorial Pages, "A spate of hate", *The Province* Wednesday, October 3, 2001. Letters, "Free Speech or Hate?", *Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, October 4, 2001. "Thobani Speech disgraceful, premier says of US bashing", *Vancouver Sun*, October 3, 2001. "MPs upset by view of leading feminist", *The Province*, Tuesday, October 2, 2001. Also see CBC and BC-CTV prime time news on October 1-3, 2001.
28. Pete MacMartin, "Free speech in a pristine vacuum, University defends 'Nutty Professor'", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.
29. Margaret Wente, "Two reasons to thank Sunera Thobani", *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, October 4, 2001.
30. Mark Tonner, "There was respite from the hate-mongers, albeit brief", *The Province*, Friday, October 5, 2001.
31. Editorial Page, "Diatribes can't go unanswered", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.
32. It should be noted that the initial media reports stated that I had received several standing ovations from the conference participants during the speech.
33. Peter O'Neil, "Feminist's anti-U.S. speech causes uproar", *Vancouver Sun*, Tuesday, October 2, 2001. Yvonne Zacharias, "Students support Thobani's comments", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001. M. Wente, "Two reasons to thank Sunera Thobani", *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, October 4, 2001. P. O'Neil, "P.M. condemns 'terrible' Thobani speech", *Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, October 4, 2001.
34. Peter O'Neil, "Feminist's anti-U.S. speech causes uproar", *Vancouver Sun*, Tuesday, October 2, 2001.
35. Pete MacMartin, "Free speech in a pristine vacuum", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.
36. M. Wente, "Two reasons to thank Sunera Thobani", *Globe and Mail*, Thursday, October 4, 2001.
37. Craig McInnes, Yvonne Zacharias, & Peter O'Neil, "Thobani speech disgraceful, premier says of U.S. bashing", *Vancouver Sun*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001. Wendy McLellan, "Anti-U.S. speech blasted", *The Province*, Wednesday, October 3, 2001.

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