

De-Islamizing Sikhaphobia: Deconstructing structural racism in Wisconsin gurdwara shooting 10/12

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Abstract

On Sunday, 5 August 2012, at approximately 10:00 a.m., an armed Wade Michael Page walked into the Oak Creek, Wisconsin Sikh gurdwara, a place of worship. Page killed six worshippers and injured four others. Although the murderer had links to several white supremacist organizations, authorities would not speculate on the motive of this incident. In fact, the word race was rarely mentioned in relation to this case. The lack of a sustained examination of racism as a motivating factor in this crime was very troubling within the media's portrayal of this incident. Through a critical analysis of structural racism, this article highlights how the silences of racism, racialized identities, and the connections of racist acts such as the Wisconsin gurdwara murders to hate crimes perpetuates racialized and colonized violence on brown bodies. This structural racism absolves many Americans (and we would add many Canadians) of their deeply rooted racist beliefs and ideologies. By providing a counter-hegemonic narrative, this article discusses how the homogenization of brown bodies, such as Sikhs and Muslims, has very real material consequences in a North American context. Finally, this article discusses the problematic framing of this incident as 'Domestic Terrorism' and the importance of de-Islamizing Sikhaphobia in the post-9-11-2001 context.

Keywords

brown bodies, domestic terrorism, Islamaphobia, Sikhaphobia, structural racism, Wisconsin gurdwara shooting

Introduction

Please, Don't Let It Be a Brown Guy!

When the tragedy of the Wisconsin Sikh gurdwara shooting was first reported in the media, a common reaction from each of this article's authors who are educators and activists was, 'Please, don't let it be a brown guy!' The implications of this statement reveal the constituted nature of our subjectivities in relation to the internalization of structural racism and the legacy of colonialism. The irony of brown bodies being fixated on the race of the shooter, instead of on the victims in this

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tragedy is not lost on us. This form of internalized racism puts racialized bodies on the defensive, by feeling forced to 'explain' the violence perpetrated on their communities. Implicit in this position is an expectation from these communities to explain to the wider—white—society what this violence stands for. This imposition of otherness highlights how certain bodies are always relationally constructed through whiteness. By being forced to speak and teach about the ignorance of hegemonic discourses and the heterogeneity of our communities we may disrupt the silences that perpetuate the essentialization of racialized groups. Unfortunately, at the same time, we are also forced to participate in perpetuating that violence by disregarding (at least momentarily) the horrific experiences imposed on these bodies. This is a very problematic and troubling tension that we, as authors and members of the Sikh diaspora, live with daily and which, in part, has motivated the writing of this article. The more so, that recognizing the under-representation of South Asian scholars in academia we felt a responsibility to provide what we hope will be a counter-hegemonic narrative to the mainstream media's reporting of the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting. In doing so, we seek to demystify discourses of racialized religious 'others' in Canadian and US societies.

It bears noting that we do not claim to provide some sort of 'insider' truth to this incident. This work is rather a questioning and problematizing of how brown bodies are constructed and othered within the media. Despite the fact that we discuss brown bodies as a homogenous identity throughout this text, we acknowledge that this term bears diverse experienced realities, ideologies, and perspectives, particularly when it comes to this incident (this is also true as far as the present authors are concerned). Despite thorough research and conversations on these issues, our analysis is but a snapshot. It only begins to unearth the multitude of layers and complexity of this case, as a case in point of the larger universe of structural racism. Beyond explaining and challenging discourses about the Sikh community, this project is also about the United States as Sikhs speaking to each other and trying to understand the complex ways we come to know ourselves, and how we and our communities are constructed by others.

Background

Discourses around Sikhs and Muslims in Canada raise important questions about the racialization of marginalized bodies. A *Maclean's Magazine* (Geddes, 2009) survey about religious groups in Canada finds that these two cultural or religious groups are the ones singled out the most for negative perceptions by fellow Canadians. In a country where official multiculturalism is praised as a pillar of civil society, 'fewer than one in three Canadians can find it in their hearts to view Islam or Sikhism in a favorable light' (Geddes, 2009: 1). Ongoing media accounts highlight the cultural differences between eastern and western religious communities. These have been cited to perpetuate orientalist discourses. Both Sikhs and Muslims are constructed as being tied to primitive cultures that seem to be inherently violent and in doing so continue to pressure accommodation principles woven throughout the Canadian Multicultural Act (Armstrong, 2012).

Neither is violence against Sikhs in Canada a new phenomenon. Various incidents involving physical assaults, temple desecration, and other acts of criminality are unfortunate realities. For example, as recently as 2011, a Sikh elementary school in Toronto, a parade in Vancouver, and a gurdwara in Montreal have all faced racist threats in the guise of vandalism (Bhasin, 2012). The beating of a Hoshiar Singh Bajwa in October 2012 by three white males in Coquitlam and the murder of 83-year-old Mewa Singh in 2005 in a public restroom in Surrey, British Columbia, are individual reminders of a problem which needs to move us beyond blaming individual pathologies of the perpetrators of such extreme violence. The ignorance around Sikhs and Muslims and the ensuing moral panic implies 'a systemically supported, socially induced pattern of (mis)understanding the world that is connected to and works to sustain systemic oppression and privilege' (Applebaum, 2010: 37).

Similarly, the Sikh population of the United States has been particularly vulnerable as collateral victims in the rising tide of anti-Islamic sentiments since the 9-11-2001 attacks in New York and Washington, DC. Living in the current United States with heightened signifiers (Hopkins, 2008: 170), including skin color, cultural or religious symbols such as turbans, unshaven beards, and kirpans, has made life precarious for Sikhs. The Sikh Coalition, a New York-based advocacy group, has documented over 700 incidences of Sikhs being targets of racial aggression ranging from vandalism and robbery to murder (CBC News, 2012). The majority of the perpetrators of these hate crimes are white males attacking Sikhs under the mistaken assumption that the latter are Muslims. Even if one of the perpetrators knows the difference between Sikhs and Muslims, they still require a target for 'heightened racist nativism' (Verma, 2006: 94) in a naïve attempt at redemption for 9-11-2011.

On Sunday, 5 August 2012, at approximately 10:00 a.m., an armed Wade Michael Page walked into the Oak Creek, Wisconsin Sikh gurdwara. Page killed six worshippers and injured four others. He also injured a responding police officer in a conflict outside the temple as well as fatally shooting himself in the head. Although the gunman had links to several white supremacist organizations, law enforcement authorities would not speculate on the motive of this incident. In fact, the word race was never mentioned in relation to the actions of the gunman in this case. The complete absence of racism and racelessness was very troubling within the media's portrayal of this incident. Through a critical analysis of how the media operates to perpetuate structural racism (Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 1998; Said, 2003; Thobani, 2007), this article highlights how silences in the media perpetuate racist acts such as the Wisconsin gurdwara murders and other types of colonized violence on brown bodies.

Whereas individual acts of racism denote malice, judgment, harm or thwarting of opportunities between persons, structural racism is the entrenchment of negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes within societal institutions (Henry & Tator, 2006). The negative effects of racialization within institutions such as the justice system, education and media results in the exclusion, erasure or misrepresentation of various non-dominant cultural communities (Kusnetz, 2014). Sikhs and Muslims, amongst other marginalized groups have seen the effects of systemic racism in a variety of ways. Most notably in this case through the news media's essentialized representation, negative portrayal and/or the confusion of identities, thus shaping public perception of Sikhs and Muslims. As a result, structural racism "must be understood in terms of injustice rather than disrespect" (Pierce, 2014, p. 23) and the ramifications which follow.

Below we argue how this structural racism absolves many Americans (and we would add Canadians) of their deeply rooted racist beliefs and ideologies. By providing a counter-hegemonic narrative of the Wisconsin gurdwara tragedy, this article discusses how the homogenization of brown bodies has very real material consequences for many North Americans. Finally, this article discusses the problematic framing of this incident as 'Domestic Terrorism' and the importance of de-Islamizing Sikhophobia in the post-9-11-2001 context.

Identifying the 'central site of inquiry'

This study approaches the media as a 'central site of inquiry' (Jiwani, 2006: 31). It recognizes that the media are but one aspect of a larger societal apparatus of hegemony and that 'institutional practices, routinized behaviours and normative values work in concert to structure the ways in which media institutions like other institutions in society, privilege particular interpretations' (p. 30). As such, this work investigates the problematic framing of the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting and the homogenizing representation of Sikhs and Muslims through the portrayal of this incident. By critically analyzing mainstream media reports, websites, and community responses immediately

following the shootings, we deconstruct media narratives of this event, and attempt to demonstrate how structural racism significantly impacted the colonial and Eurocentric portrayal of the shooting. In this manner, '[it] is the normative White standard that determines the categorization of racialized minorities within the social order and that ultimately influences how they are perceived and treated by others' (Jiwani, 2006: 32).

Erasing race

A major theme in this study concerns media practices that erase 'race', thus enacting a disjuncture between hate crimes and racist ideologies. Walia (2012) points out that there are links between hate crimes and the logic of racism. Yet, few dare to make the link in order to avoid the challenges that arise when exposing racism. The exposure of racism creates fear among many and as a result remains constantly under the radar when discussing this incident. In this study, we will also examine how race was presented, represented, misrepresented, or erased in the media narratives that reported on the Wisconsin shooting. Was this a 'senseless act of violence', or was it a racist act?

The discussion that follows highlights three main themes that emerged from our critical analysis: racialized representations of the brown body, erasure of race, and the construction of domestic terrorism as they relate to the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting.

Discussion

Racialized representation of brown bodies

... [T]he news racialize particular groups of people demarcating them as different from the majority and imputing qualities that emphasize their difference, and then by inferiorizing, trivializing and exoticizing these qualities, ultimately render such differences deviant. (Jiwani, 2006: 40)

Media reporting on the Wisconsin shooting places an emphasis on the identity of foreignness, as media attempted to explain who Sikhs were and how they might differ from mainstream society. As a running theme, Sikhs were represented as the accidental victims of 9-11-2001, insinuating that somehow Muslims were the justified targets of violence. Brown bodies were constructed as 'these people', those others within the 'American Melting Pot'. There were also some limited linkages to over 700 instances of hate crimes targeted toward Sikhs since 9-11-2001. While the Sikh victims were constructed through the lens of the exotic other, race was erased from these crimes, thus removing the context of racism from the bigger picture of the violence imposed on 'other' bodies.

The generalized brown body was further objectified as reporters and public officials consistently misrepresented the Sikh faith, Sikh people, and Sikh identity. News sources were left searching for a reliable 'brown body' to represent the issues at stake. For example, as the crisis unfolded, CNN (Hundal, 2012) was remiss in being able to share with their viewers what exactly a Sikh was. Initially, broadcasters speculated that Sikhs were a subset of the Hindu faith and wondered why we were calling the victims 'Sikhs' rather than 'Hindus'. Their search for an expert on Sikhs became crucial as it became apparent that separating Sikhs and Hindus was essential from Page's intended target. It has been speculated that Page's intended target was Muslims as a redemption for the 9-11-2001 bombings. This differentiation became even more crucial as these brown bodied 'others' were constructed as a monolithic category in mainstream discourses. The homogenization of brown bodies left Sikh communities with the task of distinguishing themselves from

Muslim bodies, leading to a lateral and violent game of finger pointing. This is exemplified through the medias representation of the angry rage-filled Muslim and the peace-filled Sikh community, which is strictly in contrast to the ways in which Sikhs are often portrayed in relation to the Khalistani fundamentalist Sikh communities (such as in the media portrayal of the 1985 Air India bombing).¹

Equating Sikhs with Muslims in this manner was further consequential since it forced members of the Sikh community to differentiate between themselves and Muslims in a defensive manner. This has the effect of deepening discourses of racialization and furthers the marginalization of Muslim groups. Sikhs have had to engage in pedagogical initiatives to demonstrate their peaceful disposition such as the production of informational pamphlets, displaying American flags on their lawns and gurdwaras, and placing bumper stickers on vehicles which say 'Proud to be a Sikh American' (Verma, 2006: 94–95). All these efforts are an attempt to show mainstream white Americans that Sikhs are not Muslims. Unfortunately, these defensive acts have had the effect of further perpetuating Islamophobia while leaving the importance of structural racism unchallenged.

Similarly, after the Wisconsin shooting, Sikh elders were forced to show the world that they were not Muslims. While not directly calling for the demonization of Islamic groups, Sikhs were once again forced to represent themselves in the most palatable way possible to the American public. In their efforts, they reverted to assimilationist discourses and practices that focused on their 'Americanness' rather than their 'old world primitiveness'. In this regard, there was an insinuation that Sikhs were the 'model minority', implying that Muslims were not. For example, in the aftermath of the Wisconsin shooting, a representative of the gurdwara first publicly thanked and prayed for the white officer who was fatally wounded before addressing the Sikh gurdwara members who were murdered (Singh, 2012). Although we cannot be sure of the motives of addressing the white officer first, we can speculate that this may have been a result of internalized systemic hierarchies; referring to the white victim proffers a conciliatory political move by Sikh elders in becoming exemplars of a model minority and in doing so disassociating themselves from other brown bodies who may not represent such a model minority.

Furthermore, in a statement, when President Obama called for soul searching instead of policy change (Spetalnick, 2012), he clearly placed the responsibility for the prevention of this type of violence on Sikhs and their gurdwaras. This became yet another way that Sikhs were responsible for safeguarding and protecting their own spaces from violent racist acts as opposed to this being a responsibility of other Americans and the government. In sum, the news coverage and media discourses reporting on this incident left the responsibility on the Sikh community to identify themselves, explain who they were by being forced to distinguish themselves from other brown bodies and finally to take responsibility for the outcomes of the incident.

Erasing race

For the media to explore the issue of marginality as stemming from racism would have first involved recognition of its systemic and widespread nature.
(Jiwani, 2006: 75)

Media reports have erased race from the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting reports. This de-racializing disconnected the perpetrated violence and the racist act. Although Wade Michael Page had been linked to white supremacist hate groups on several occasions, there was little overt connection to how his ideological background might have been related to the shooting. While a known

white supremacist walks armed into a place of worship, occupied exclusively by brown bodies, and opens fire, officials remain silent on his ideological motives and instead focus on pathology. One cannot help but question who this silence is serving, leaving the public wondering, was this racism, or better still: what is racism, particularly when the act was repeatedly described by the media as a 'senseless act of violence'.

In his statement regarding the Wisconsin shooting, US President, Barak Obama spoke of the victims as a part of the greater American family (Spetalnick, 2012). What President Obama overlooked was why is it that certain members of the 'American family' suffer more violence, exclusion, and isolation than others? And how is it that this 'family' does not know who the victims are and what their belief systems entail? By not mentioning race and racism, and their linkages to this act, President Obama's statements left the question of racism entirely muted in the public debate. Moreover, that no mention was made of the fact that Page was a former military official may have also kept at bay any examination of how his military training was implicated in the dynamics that led to the shooting. Thus, Page is ultimately 'understood' as a bad apple that should have no reflection on the greater public, other white people, or the military. His separation from these entities is a clear reminder of the invisibility of white skin and how the brown skin of the victims continues to objectify and 'color' them.

It is clear then, how some of the media reports constructed the shooting using binaries such as east–west, white–brown, and American–Sikh. These binaries reproduced the foreign difference of the others, easterners, brown people, Sikh, and oriental in contrast to that of the normalized West. Yasmin Jiwani's (2010) deconstruction of the racelessness of the Canadian media is helpful in understanding this case:

In the dominant media, strategies of exnomination, naturalization, and universalization become the tools whereby dominance affirmed as the normative frame of reference and whereby explanations that privilege race thinking are proffered as having the most explanatory value. The power of exnomination consists of the 'power to not be named'. This is also the power of whiteness that forms the invisible backdrop against which stigmatized and valorized Others are profiled. (p. 60)

The construction of the other, as in the Wisconsin gurdwara murders, was done within the confines of white dominance, reflecting what Jiwani (2010) refers to as a 'doubling discourse' (p. 33). This doubling discourse is enacted through the media's power in choosing ideas and images to suit their needs when and how they work at any particular time. This is evidenced in the earlier example of Sikh representation within the media as peace loving Americans after the Wisconsin shootings instead of being portrayed as religious fundamentalists. These same images can be used differently at other times, to suit a different purpose. This is the power embedded in the dominant media representation of racialized others.

Jiwani further describes how historical representations of racialized bodies within the mainstream media serve the chosen reflection of the colonizer (Jiwani, 2010). Through the media's representation, Sikh communities within the 'American family' are used as a way to ratify and strengthen the diversity and acceptance of Americans. These images are used to reflect back to the dominant American public their openness and commitment to diversity while maintaining a 'raceless' and 'racism-free' nation.

Domestic terrorism

I think one of the issues that had bothered me in the aftermath of the Colorado incident and that has bothered ... many Muslim, Sikh, Arab and South Asian civil rights advocates is the ease with which the

terrorism label applies to some individuals and some incidents and the assumption that if you have a person who isn't from certain communities then that label isn't appropriate.

(Dawinder Sidhu in Goodwin, 2012)

Despite the overt erasure of race, we would argue that racism actually played a very significant role in the framing of this case as well as the construction of the brown other. What was most troubling for us as researchers and community members is that the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting was labeled as domestic terrorism by the police on the very same day, within 3 hours of the shooting. CBC reports, which shared this information, highlighted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was involved because 'the shootings are being treated as domestic terrorism or an attack that originates inside the U.S.' (CBC News, 2012). Teresa Carlson, special agent in charge with the FBI Milwaukee division, stated, 'While the FBI is investigating whether this matter might be an act of domestic terrorism, no motive has been determined at this time' (CBC News, 2012). Given that domestic terrorism is defined by the motives behind the act rather than the act itself (FBI Counterterrorism Division, 2002–2005: 5), should the motives not be investigated before a case is framed in a certain manner, for example, domestic terrorism in this case?

On 20 July 2012, approximately 15 days earlier in Aurora, Colorado (another location in the United States), a mass shooting took place at a Century movie theater. The gunman, James Eagan Holmes, set off tear gas grenades and shot into the audience with multiple firearms and killed 12 people and injured 58 others. Despite the larger number of deaths and injuries that took place in this shooting, and despite its greater coverage in the media compared to the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting, this massacre was consistently referred to as the Aurora Shooting or the Aurora Colorado Movie Theater Shooting in the media rather than a case of domestic terrorism. Clearly then, how a reported event is framed affects the ways in which it is recognized by the public. Gitlin (1980) points out in this regard that 'frames' are

... persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse ... (p. 7)

One might argue that the difference in the framing of these two, Wisconsin and the Aurora, shootings is due to the fact that the latter was not initiated by a former US Army member or by someone openly connected to white supremacist and Neo-Nazi groups. Without a formal investigation, which is currently underway in Colorado, one might ask: is it really possible to know this information and not label this case as an act of domestic terrorism? Similarly, since the motivation of Wade Michael Page in the gurdwara shooting is stated by the FBI agent in charge of the case and Police Chief John Edwards as 'not clearly known' (CBC News, 2012) (despite the tattoos on Page's arms and upper body linking him to white supremacist organizations), would it also not be considered premature to label this shooting as an act of domestic terrorism?

Our point in highlighting these uncertainties is not to imply that James Eagan Holmes may have been a white supremacist or a terrorist or that Wade Michael Page may not have had any links to white supremacy or terrorism. Rather, it is an example of how differential labeling and framing of these cases raises questions of politics and power that require further problematization and analyses. Should terrorism, including domestic terrorism, be defined by one's actions or one's motives, which may never be knowable. On this, Police Chief, John Edwards, stated, 'I don't know why, and I don't know that we'll ever know, because when he died, that died with him what his motive was or what he was thinking' (Quijano, 2012).

Indicatively, both the Aurora Shooting and the gurdwara shooting met three of the six criteria² required to label an act as ‘terrorism’ (US Patriot Act as cited in ACLU, 2002)—why then was only the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting labeled as ‘domestic terrorism’? The main difference that is clearly evident is that one incident involved victims who were theater going Americans, and the other involved victims who were gurdwara going Sikhs. Sikhs who cause a great deal of confusion since their identities are often mistaken for Muslims and hence connected to terrorism. Due to colonial relations, the civilizing history and the continuation of hegemonic discourses of the other’—specifically the racialized religious other—a Eurocentric approach makes connections as follows: brown, turban, Muslim, bomb, and terrorist. The truth in this case is that there were no bombs involved in the gurdwara shooting, but there were bombs in the Aurora shooting.

Even when brown bodies are involved as victims, they are racialized as violent terrorists. The media serves whiteness and its embedded history of colonization. In this manner, this is not a case of domestic terrorism; this a continuation of racist and colonial terrorism. Sikhaphobia along with Islamaphobia is embedded deep within the souls and histories of both the Canadian and American states. What might the concept of domestic terrorism mask or unmask? How might structural racism and the legacy of colonialism impact the differential framing of these two cases, for example, what othering strategies in these cases may actually be at play to racialize crime and criminalize racial groups? What is absent in the media reporting and the FBI and police statements may be more important than what is ideologically present.

Conclusion

As ‘news’, the racialized media constructions of the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting are embedded in a history of colonization and racism, as suggested by Edward Said (1997). Sikhaphobia along with Islamaphobia are embedded deep within the histories of both the Canadian and American states, drawing on structural racism and the legacy of colonialism. Over this backdrop, the historical and more recent vilification of brown bodies in the media illustrates the ongoing structural racism and the colonial and violent construction of these bodies as the different other. What is equally troubling in terms of this vilification and connected disassociation and alienation (e.g. of brown bodies from other brown bodies) in the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting is how disassociation marks mainstream and marginalized bodies differently. For example, mainstream society has the privilege of disassociating themselves from ‘the bad apple’ (Page in this case), with little threat to the unity of the ‘American family’. In fact, this strategic move creates greater cohesiveness among those who are privileged to be accepted as part of the ‘American family’. On the other hand, disassociation creates greater disunity and division among those who are not easily accepted to be part of this nation’s family. When Sikhs have to constantly explain away the ignorance and fear of the dominant society by disassociating themselves from other brown bodies in order to be more palatable, the dominant society remains absolved and ensures that potential and effective coalitions among the others are destroyed. It is in this specific sense that we argue that the colonial project continues. In the case of the Wisconsin gurdwara shooting, the racist homogenization of brown bodies, the strategic erasure of race and the hegemonic framing of this case as ‘domestic terrorism’, resulted in the forced disassociation of Sikhs from Muslims in order to remain a model minority as part of the ‘American family’. This competition of racial hegemonies re-centers whiteness and masks the structural racism around which the larger societal apparatus is organized. In this manner, de-Islamizing Sikhaphobia is not simply about coalition building. It is also about unmasking the colonial and structural racism responsible for the Islamizing of Sikhaphobia. Islamaphobia, Sikhaphobia, and desires

of racial purity on Indigenous lands have been a reality of the Canadian and American landscapes well before 9-11-2001.

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Notes

1. In the aftermath of the 1985, Air India bombings from Air India Flight 182 detonated as a result of a bomb. A total of 329 people were killed. This is known as the largest Canadian mass murder. The blame was placed on the Sikh militant group Babbar Khalsa. The media images that followed portrayed turban wearing Sikhs as militant terrorists connected to extensive Canadian and Indian terrorism. Similar to the response after the 9-11-2001 American bombings, the perpetrators were vilified based on religion and culture, which extended beyond those directly involved in the incidents.
2. The criteria to label an act as 'Domestic Terrorism' are as follows: (1) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; (2) appear to be intended (a) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, (b) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or (c) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (3) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.

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