

**CANADIAN PUBLIC SPACE, RACIALIZED MINORITIES AND  
THE MEDIA: EXPLORING COVERAGE OF DR. SUNERA  
THOBANI'S OCTOBER 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2001 SPEECH.**

by

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### **Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay**

**Canadian Public Space, Racialized Minorities and the Media: Exploring Coverage of Dr. Sunera Thobani's October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 Speech**

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## ABSTRACT

Current literature conceptualizes public space in a static way. Processes of contraction and expansion, however, operate within public space simultaneously. “Contraction” refers to fewer accessible avenues of discourse and dissent within and around mainstream public space. In other words, contraction focuses on the ways in which public space becomes exclusionary. “Expansion” refers to the resistance to such exclusion and the efforts that are made to increase the inclusivity of public space. In particular, this thesis focuses on the media as a public space, paying particular attention to print media coverage of University of British Columbia Professor Sunera Thobani’s October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 speech at the Women’s Resistance Conference in Ottawa, Ontario. A discourse analysis was performed on articles published in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Province*, and two alternative media sources, *Rabble.ca* and *The Independent Media Center*, between September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Articles that were published between September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 are used to contextualize the coverage of Thobani’s speech. The analysis revealed several factors within mainstream print media that contribute to the contraction of public space. The most significant finding is the way in which immigrant people of colour are socially constructed within newsprint coverage. Specifically, this social construction leads to problematic conceptualizations of common concern, citizenship, and the perpetuation of the racialization of minority groups. The expansion of public space is subtler and is observed in supportive letters to the editor and editorial pieces within both mainstream and alternative media sources. Literature pertaining to theories of public space as well as post-colonialist theory is used to situate this work.

## **DEDICATION**

To Dr. Ann Travers. Thanking you is not enough. It was because of you that I made the decision to enter this Masters program, and it is because of you that I was able to successfully complete it. You have been an incredible senior supervisor and a good friend. I will miss you.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL .....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Methods.....	4
CHAPTER ONE	
MORE THAN JUST A PARK: THEORIES OF PUBLIC SPACE.....	11
Habermas' Public and its Critique .....	12
Subaltern Counterpublics .....	17
"Strong" Publics, "Weak" Publics, and People of Colour .....	21
CHAPTER TWO	
ASSIGNING BLAME: EXPLORING THE MEDIA'S POST-9/11	
COVERAGE.....	30
The War on Terrorism.....	31
Who Did This and Why? The Terrorists .....	35
Homeland Security: Immigration, Legislation, and Civil Liberties .....	40
Love Thy Neighbour? Retaliation against Muslim Canadians.....	45
The Thobani Moment.....	48
CHAPTER THREE	
PEELING THE ONION: ANALYSING THE MEDIA'S POST-9/11	
COVERAGE.....	66
Public Space: Inclusion, Exclusion and Issues of Common Concern.....	67
The Social Construction of People of Colour in Canada .....	72
Counterpublics .....	82
The Expansion and Contraction of Public Space.....	87
CONCLUSION.....	93
APPENDIX ONE: SUNERA THOBANI'S SPEECH.....	102
APPENDIX TWO: SUNERA THOBANI'S RESPONSE .....	111
On American Foreign Policy .....	112
Invoking the American Nation .....	116
The Politics of Liberating Women.....	118
Closing Words .....	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	122

## INTRODUCTION

Canadian public space is incredibly complex. The aim of this thesis is to flesh out the issues surrounding public space in order to more adequately conceptualize the operation of such spaces. Public space is defined, for the purposes of this thesis, as an “abstract space in which citizens discuss and debate public issues” (Oliver, 1999: 38). It is my contention that public space both contracts and expands and that these processes occur simultaneously. The contraction of public space refers to fewer accessible avenues of discourse and dissent within and around mainstream public space. Contraction, in other words, focuses on the ways in which public spaces become exclusionary. Expansion, then, refers to the ways in which this process is resisted and the efforts that are made to contribute to the inclusivity of public space. In particular, this thesis focuses on the media as a public space, paying particular attention to print media reactions to University of British Columbia professor Sunera Thobani’s October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 speech at the Women’s Resistance Conference in Ottawa, Ontario<sup>1</sup>.

In this speech, Dr. Thobani asserted that “no liberation of any kind for women will be successful unless it seeks to transform the fundamental divide between the north and the south, between Third World people and those in the West who are now calling themselves Americans” (Transcript, *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A6). The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> resulted, in Dr. Thobani’s view, from problematic American foreign policy. While expressing her grief for the loss of so many lives, as well as for the relatives and friends of the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Thobani asked, “[D]o we feel any pain for the victims of U.S. aggression?” further arguing, “From Chile to El

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix One for a full transcript of this speech.



Salvador, to Nicaragua to Iraq, the path of U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood” (Ibid.). As we will see, this sound bite received more attention from mainstream media in Canada than any other element of her speech, and was one of the primary means by which Thobani was denigrated within such coverage.

Another of the major themes in her speech addressed the racism that rose to the surface post-September 11<sup>th</sup> in both The United States and Canada, locating “America’s new war” within the “continuity of North/South relations, rooted in colonialism and imperialism” (Thobani, 2001: 1)<sup>2</sup>. Dr. Thobani further urged her audience to take a stand against the U.S. militarization resultant from the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (Transcript, *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A6). The reaction within mainstream media was swift and included calls for her job as well as for the cessation of federal funding to similar future conferences. This moment, when taken within the context of September 11<sup>th</sup>, serves to provide a particularly powerful picture of the way in which public space in Canada operates.

Understanding this has implications that reach beyond the mere observation of an interesting event. Indeed, this is an incredibly important topic for several reasons. First, using the “Thobani Moment” as a means of illustrating the processes at work within public spaces allows for an important contribution to the highly contested body of literature surrounding public space. I will begin by examining this literature and end with an analysis that will show the ways in which current conceptualizations of public space are flawed. My choice of sources from within public space and post-colonialist/ant-racist literature is based upon their relevance, and instructiveness, to this topic; this relevance

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix Two for the full text of Dr. Thobani’s October, 2001 response to the controversy caused by her speech.

was determined through extensive engagement with the general body of literature. Those articles and books most cited are the ones used most heavily within this thesis.

While the existence of inclusive public spaces is vital to the health of democracy, I argue that creating such spaces is contingent upon an accurate understanding of the ways in which they operate within the world as it actually exists. Furthermore, examining the barriers to the inclusivity of public space directly impacts the viability of Canadian democracy in that it highlights the difference between *de jure* and *de facto* rights, rights that are taken for granted by the majority of members of Canadian society but which are called into question post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Most importantly, we will see how race and ethnicity intersect with all of these issues, as exemplified by the intense racialization of “immigrant” people of colour in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, the media is an incredibly important component of public space. Though the media’s overt function is to inform, as well as to allow citizens access to an arena in which they may debate issues of common concern, covertly it is an ideological space. As such, mainstream media is exclusionary in that it is one of the primary sites in which commonsense racism, classism, and sexism become normalized<sup>3</sup>. As Lutz and Collins (1993) assert, “American journalism, in particular...demonstrates its objectivity by presenting itself as neither liberal nor conservative, but centrist. ...The fact that the American center is a culturally and historically specific place rather than a universal objective viewpoint...is not

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<sup>3</sup> By “commonsense” racism, classism, and sexism I mean to refer to the taken-for-granted beliefs and attitudes held by dominant members of society regarding members of particular social groupings. These beliefs and opinions inform the ways in which members of such dominant groups in society interact with people of colour, the poor, and women. As Agnew argues, “The dominant group in a society exercises the power to label and define people, and these definitions construct relations between them” (1996: 19). In other words, commonsense, or “everyday”, racism, sexism, and classism is “often automatic and unconscious” (Ibid.).

discussed” (243). As we will see, the Canadian media functions in much the same way, and thus exemplifies the ways in which public space contracts. As many theorists point out, however, public space is always contested<sup>4</sup>. In response to the exclusionary norms of mainstream public space, we see the emersion of alternative public spaces, or what Fraser (1993) terms “subaltern counterpublics”. These spaces are the primary ways in which the contraction of public space is resisted.

## **Methods**

The most appropriate way of addressing the above issues is through the performance of a media discourse analysis. This analysis focuses on the themes that emerge within a given text. In general, discourse is “a complex unit of linguistic form, meaning and action that might best be captured under the notion of a communicative event or communicative act” (van Dijk, 1988: 8). Discourse can further be defined as having three main components (Henry and Tator, 2000: 18). The first consists of “a topic or area of social experience to which making sense is applied” (Ibid). Next is “a social position from which this sense is made and whose interests it promotes” (Ibid). Finally, discourse includes “a repertoire of words, images, and practices by which meanings are circulated and power applied” (2000: 19). The media’s response to Dr. Thobani’s speech is one such communicative event or act; the Thobani Moment in general is characterized by all three of these components. Performing a discourse analysis, then, is an excellent means of revealing “social, political, economic or legal inclusion or exclusion (2000: 18),

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<sup>4</sup> One of the major ways in which public space is contested stems from its relation to the private sphere. Any issue or voice excluded from public space necessarily becomes part of the private realm. Thus, much attention within public space theory is given to what should and should not be included in the public due to the fact that this public/private distinction has ramifications for the inclusivity of public space.

which is absolutely central to the understanding of the expansion and contraction of public space.

The analysis of written text is particularly difficult, in part because of the fact that the “interactional nature of discourse appears less obvious [than in other forms of discourse, such as the analysis of talk]: the writer, the text, and the reader are less closely participating in one spatiotemporally identifiable location” (van Dijk, 1988: 9). It is also difficult due to the fact that “our forms of communication can never capture reality in its natural or essential form. ...Instead, all forms of knowing and talking about reality require position-taking, and consequently help to construct the very phenomena of which they speak” (MacDonald, 2003: 11). Because of this, there are many elements that must be given consideration in order to adequately complete a discourse analysis of print media. These include the grammar and coherence of each article analyzed, the role of knowledge in interpretation, analysis of macrostructures, superstructures, relevance structuring, and rhetorical structures (1988: 10-15).

A grammatical analysis is focused on “possible [as well as] preferred typical grammatical structures” that characterize news articles within print media (van Dijk, 1988: 10). For example,

A headline like “Police kills demonstrator” puts police in first, subject position and expresses that the police has agent role. ...[T]he headline “Demonstrator killed” may make the role of the police implicit. At the same time, the headline becomes syntactically ambiguous: It could also read as a description of an event in which the demonstrator was the killer or more generally associate demonstrators with killing. ...*Negative roles of the elite tend to be*

*dissimulated by this kind of syntactic downgrading and implicitness* (1998: 11 [emphasis mine]).

Paying attention to grammar reveals one of the ways in which opinion formation, post-September 11<sup>th</sup> as well as in regards to media coverage of Sunera Thobani's speech, is shaped and manipulated. This also sheds light on the ways in which dominant ideology operates within the media as a public space.

As noted above, it is also important to determine whether or not a given article is coherent. "A text is coherent if it describes a possible sequence of events (acts, situations). Hence, *coherence depends on our knowledge and beliefs about what is possible in the world*" (van Dijk, 1988: 12 [emphasis mine]). This is incredibly relevant to this thesis, for it is this knowledge of the social world that illuminates the reasons *why* public space operates in the way that it does. Van Dijk (1988) asserts, "our subjective understanding of the coherence of a news report may depend on whether or not we share a particular knowledge script or socio-political attitude" (13). Here is yet another way in which the media as a public space is exclusionary and silencing. Although the mainstream media portrays itself as centrist and objective, as we will see in more detail in the following chapters, this "centrism" and "objectivity" is in actuality reliant on an ideological position, a sociohistorical context. As such, articles may carry resonance for a majority of readers, given that they share this ideological position, while simultaneously alienating and silencing those readers who do not. This became especially clear in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Particularly during the period immediately post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, one gets the impression that public space collapsed; though there was no shortage of commentary and coverage of these events, to a large extent there appeared to be, within mainstream media, space only for a specific interpretation and reaction.

Analyzing the mainstream media's reaction to Dr. Thobani's speech provides an excellent illustration of this fact, while an analysis of alternative media reactions serves as a counterbalance, as an example of the ways in which public space simultaneously resists this contraction. It is therefore important, while performing this analysis, to keep the following question in mind, "What ideas, values, notions, concepts, [and] beliefs...are spread by the media, and [which of these] is neglected by the media?" (Berger: 1982: 46).

The next step in the analysis of discourse is of particular importance. The macrostructure of a news article "makes explicit the overall topics or themes of a text and at the same time defines...its upshot or gist" (van Dijk, 1988: 13). Superstructure, or the way in which news articles are structured overall, is also important here due to the fact that in general articles are organized so that the "most important" information comes at the beginning (1988: 15). This has interesting implications for discourse analysis:

The most important information of a news event for one person or group may not be so for another. This also means that the...organization of a news report may well be biased, for instance when a relatively unimportant piece of information is expressed in the headlines or lead or when important information is placed at the end or omitted altogether (Ibid.).

In this thesis, therefore, I pay as much attention to what is actually said and how, as to what is absent. Indeed, "what is not said may even be more important, from a critical point of view, than what is explicitly said or meant" (1988: 17).

Finally, it is important to give attention to both the relevance and rhetorical structures of the news articles examined herein. The former is concerned with the superstructural aspect of discourse analysis; the concern is with where "important

information” is placed within a given article. The fact that most often, such information appears at the outset is significant in terms of “ideological production” since, generally, both headlines and the placement of important or relevant information enhances the retention of information by the readers (van Dijk, 1988: 16). Stated differently, relevance structures serve as a signal to readers of what is important. Rhetorical structures, on the other hand, are used to make a given text more persuasive to readers (Ibid.). For example, “news reports excessively use numbers (whether correct or not) to signal rhetorically their exactness and hence their objectivity” (Ibid.).

At a fundamental level, “journalists do not write articles, they write stories – with structure, order, viewpoint and values” (Bell, 1998: 64). When performing an analysis of media discourse, it is therefore important to consider what story a given article is actually telling. “Only after we are clear what the story says will we be in a position to see what it does not say” (1998: 66). Often, seemingly straightforward articles are in reality much more complex than they seem upon first glance. Therefore, understanding the themes that emerge within media discourse “makes us aware of the complexity and ambiguity of news. ...It leads us to consider why...particular events have been reported at all” (Ibid.). As mentioned above, the context in which media stories are produced cannot be ignored. When performing a thematic media analysis one must “take account of the sociohistorical conditions within which the object of analysis is produced, constructed and received” (Bourdieu, cited in Fairclough, 1998: 142). In other words, the fact that the production of media coverage and discourse is, at its core, “social practice” must be acknowledged (1998: 143). Recognizing the media as an ideological space is thus central to a thematic analysis of text.

In general, then, I perform a thematic analysis of newsprint and online documents in order to address each of the issues raised above. This approach is concerned primarily with “the way social power, dominance and inequality are produced, reproduced and resisted by text...in the social and political arenas of society. ...[I]t identifies forms and practices and ways of behaving according to an identifiable discourse” (Henry and Tator, 2000: 19). Newspapers articles published in three mainstream Canadian newspapers, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *The Province*, between September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001 will be examined, as will those found within two alternative media sources, *Rabble.ca* and the *Independent Media Center*. Articles included in this analysis are those having to do with the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the ramifications of these events in terms of social policy and legislation, and coverage given to Sunera Thobani. Particular attention is paid to macrostructure, or themes, that emerge, allowing for the identification of the “boundaries of ‘legitimate discourse’” (2000: 18 [original emphasis]). The recognition of these boundaries, as well as of the ideological positionings underlying them, allows for a clear understanding of the operation of public space in Canada. Specifically, articles were collected in the following manner: First, I read media coverage for each day between September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001 inclusive; at the end of each day’s coverage, I recorded the themes that emerged within the text; I then proceeded to choose which articles to include in Chapters Two and Three based upon how representative they were of these themes. Many of the articles chosen addressed more than one of the themes, while some focused in their entirety on a single issue. In order to avoid omission bias as much as possible, I tried to include a wide range of articles, editorial pieces, and letters to the editor. In engaging with the text in this way,



I found that each theme persisted throughout the time period examined. Furthermore, I found these themes prevalent enough that I reached the point of saturation; therefore, articles omitted from this analysis did not result in the omission of a theme. Because of this, a thematic analysis of text was incredibly useful in terms of identifying dominant discourses operating within the media at this time. This, in turn, is instructive to the discussion and analysis of public space in Canada. Though other methods, such as interviews, would have also been instructive to the issues addressed herein, the scope of this work, as well as resources, inhibited me from doing so. Furthermore, my focus is specifically on the media as a public space. Discourse originating within this space itself was, therefore, most useful for my purposes.

As mentioned earlier, the first chapter of this thesis is concerned with the theoretical foundations of public space. The conceptualization of public space put forth by Jurgen Habermas (1981) is discussed, as are critiques of said conceptualization. I then move on to a theoretical discussion of Fraser's (1993) "subaltern counterpublics", the historical social construction of people of colour, particularly immigrant women of colour, and the ways in which such a construction intersects with mainstream media coverage and strategy. Chapter Two provides an in-depth discussion of the results of the discourse analysis, focusing on four major themes that emerged in the media's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage before moving on to a discussion of the Thobani Moment itself. Finally, a detailed analysis is presented in which the previous chapters are synthesized and expounded upon. I then conclude by summarizing this thesis in general, highlighting the ways in which this work contributes to theories of public space.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **MORE THAN JUST A PARK: THEORIES OF PUBLIC SPACE**

Although public space is often understood in geographical terms (for example, as a public park or sidewalk), much of the literature and my research focuses on the public as an, “abstract space in which citizens discuss and debate public issues” (Oliver, 1999: 38). Operationalizing public space in this way raises many important and thought-provoking questions about citizenship, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and what defines social spaces as “public” in the first place. The way in which public space is defined is complex and my research indicates that it both contracts and expands (i.e. resists contraction) and that these processes often happen simultaneously. I examine a range of theories of public space to explore this dynamic as it occurs in Canadian media coverage of Sunera Thobani’s October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 criticism of U.S. foreign policy.

Different theorists conceptualize notions of public space in varied ways. Within their work, definitions of, and criteria for, participating in public space are contested. A major theme in all work regarding the public, however, is that of inclusion versus exclusion (Fraser, 1993; Robbins, 1993; Young; 1987). In spite of feminist and anti-racist/post-colonialist criticisms of the actual characteristics of Western public spaces, the notion of public space remains normatively inclusive (Travers, 2000). Such a normative definition is highly problematic if the fundamentally political process of deciding what resources and spaces are common and who is therefore entitled to a share of them is neglected.

## Habermas' Public and its Critique

A so-called "common sense" definition of public space is offered by Jurgen Habermas (1981) who envisions it as an arena of discourse wherein citizens come together to discuss issues of common concern. This common sense notion has been revealed by a range of critics to be inevitably exclusive of some persons and some issues as they are defined as other than common concern (for example, Fraser, 1993; Robbins, 1993; Hoendahl, 1992). What defines common concern from particular interest is one of the most contested components within public space theorizing. As indicated by the opening definition of public space above, Habermas' work on public space is a popular starting point for theoretical work relating to this topic, as well as an appropriate one for my work in this area, as he is considered perhaps *the* great theorist of public space. In his work on public space, Habermas (1981) is concerned with the means of achieving inclusivity. It is this focus, more than his means of achieving such inclusivity, that is shared by a range of contemporary theorists (Fraser, 1993; Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1987). Exploring Habermas' theorizing on the "public sphere" in relation to that of his critics is an effective, and frequently used, approach for developing theories of public space that more effectively incorporate an understanding of the power dynamics that include some while marginalizing others.

According to Habermas (1981), participation in the public sphere is reliant on what he terms "communicative rationality". This is predicated on the notion that

[A] communicatively achieved agreement must be based *in the end* on reasons. ... Thus the rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of argumentation as a court of appeal that makes it

possible to continue communicative action with other means when disagreements can no longer be repaired with everyday routines and yet are not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force. ...[T]he concept of communicative rationality, which refers to an unclarified systematic interconnection of universal validity claims, can be adequately explicated only in terms of a theory of argumentation (1981: 18 [original emphasis]).

In other words, the Habermasian conceptualization of public space is contingent upon the existence of identifiable issues of common concern, what he terms “universal validity claims” (Ibid.). Furthermore, participants’ claims are evaluated on the merit of their arguments alone; one’s status has no place within the public realm, nor does any sort of coercive or emotive interaction. Indeed, status, coercion, and emotion have no place in a public space founded upon the ideal of communicative rationality, for such rationality requires that “the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding” (1981: 286).

Approaching argumentation in this way is, according to Habermas, what allows so-called issues of common concern to be adequately addressed within the public (Ibid.).

For Habermas, public space

At one level...designated an institutional mechanism for ‘rationalizing’ political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) the citizenry. At another level, it designated... discursive interaction. Here the public sphere connoted an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters. The discussion was to be open and accessible to all; merely private interests were to be inadmissible; inequalities of status were to be bracketed;

and discussants were to deliberate as peers (Fraser, 1993:

4).

The above conception of public space raises important issues. According to Nancy Fraser, “A discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction” (1993: 6). As we will see, issues of rationality, status-bracketing, and what is delineated as “common concern” all have consequences for the inclusivity of public space. Indeed, each of these issues is problematic in that they require a very particular epistemological approach on the part of participants. In other words, the necessary conditions for inclusive public space laid out by Habermas in fact privilege some voices while excluding others.

The Habermasian conception of rationality is synonymous with the words unbiased and unemotional. For Habermas, it is the force of the better argument *alone* that creates agreement and consensus amongst peers (Habermas, 1981: 285). Robbins argues, “The Habermasian ideal, which rules out anything that gets in the way of rationality, by the same token rules out differences in ethos” (1993: xix). According to critics, the Habermasian model’s “opposition between reason and irrationalism is problematic insofar as it underestimates local and particular rationality” (Hoendahl, 1992: 107). This issue cannot be separated from the attempt, in much of the work dealing with public space, to delineate what constitutes an issue of common concern, for the argument is often made that private concerns do not belong in the public realm. The above conceptualization of rationality as well as the terms “public” and “private” have serious implications for the inclusivity of public space due to the fact that they are, “frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics, and to valorize others” (Fraser, 1993: 22).

A Habermasian public self, writes Iris Marion Young, has

No particular history, is a member of no communities, has no body...the ideal of the...public as expressing the general interest, the impartial point of view of reason, itself results in exclusion. By assuming that reason stands opposed to desire, affectivity and the body, the...public must exclude bodily and affective aspects of human existence (1987: 66).

Again we see how rationality, the separation between public and private, and inclusivity versus exclusivity are intimately connected, for frequently what emerge as topics of “common concern” have their origins in lived experience, something that is both highly biased and personal (i.e., considered irrational and private). Furthermore, “only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them...the existence of a common good cannot be presumed in advance [therefore] there is no warrant for putting any strictures on what sorts of topics, interests, and views are admissible in deliberation” (Fraser, 1993: 19-21). Because of this, the “private” is a necessary part of public space. It can assist participants in discovering their common concerns, if indeed there are any to be discovered. Young (1987) underlines this point when she writes, “we need to transform the distinction between public and private [to one] that does not correlate with an opposition between reason and affectivity and desire, or universal and particular” (73). Instead, Young (1987) suggests that the private should perhaps be defined as that which the, “individual has the *right* to exclude others from” (74 [emphasis mine]).

Furthermore, a public space reliant on rational dialogue leads to exclusion. Underlying Habermasian public space is the assumption that the ideal means of communicating is the same for everybody. This has tangible and serious consequences

for actual participation. According to Patricia Hill-Collins (1990), dialogue is always an emotive process. Indeed, arguments and ideas cannot be separated from the individual who advocates them (1990: 215). People feel compelled to engage in dialogue because they agree or disagree on an issue, because it affects them on an *emotional* level in some way. "Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument" (1990: 215). It is precisely one's status set that informs which issues are of common concern because it is this that affects the experiences that one has had. By relegating lived experience to the private realm, thus privileging a rationality characterized by so-called detached argumentation, and by insisting that status is of no consequence, Habermasian public space in fact ensures that entire segments of the population themselves become part of the "merely private" and are, therefore, invisible and/or silent (Young, 1987: 59).

Related to this issue is the notion of "status-bracketing". According to Habermas (1981), within public space it should be possible for one's words to stand on their own. Therefore, the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, have no place within the public; they are better left as a part of the private realm. Such status sets are not relevant, since it is the force of the better argument alone that is important. This claim, however, is both idealistic and naïve. The statuses that one occupies inform the way in which one views, and interacts within, the world. "Status-bracketing", therefore, is not only impossible, but leads to the exclusion of those who occupy the very statuses that are here deemed irrelevant and, ultimately, inconsequential.

"Status-bracketing", as one of the central assumptions underlying Habermasian public space, leads us to believe that "societal equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy" (Fraser, 1993: 9). Rather than facilitating equal exchange in the

public realm, “status-bracketing” actually inhibits it. Because society as a whole is stratified, relations of domination, even if not formally sanctioned, necessarily informally infect public space (1993: 9). As Marx argues,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance (Tucker, 1978: 172).

In other words, within public spaces, it is the case that particular segments of the population’s interests (i.e., the interests of those who are the so-called “gatekeepers” of public spaces, for example, newspaper editors) are often presented as the interests of all, as *universal*. Therefore, in order for public spaces to truly be inclusive it is necessary to “unbracket inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them” (1993: 11). Doing so allows participants in the public to uncover the informal relations of domination at work within such spaces, thus aiding in the identification of true issues of common concern.

### **Subaltern Counterpublics**

The assumption inherent to Habermas’ (1981) conceptualization of public space is that a single, comprehensive public is preferable to many, competing publics. This assumption is the subject of criticism by many theorists (Fraser, 1993; Robbins; 1993;



Felski: 1989). Indeed, the problems with the Habermasian notion of public space outlined above has led many theorists to argue that in fact a multiplicity of public spaces is necessary if true “participatory parity” and inclusivity is to be achieved (Fraser, 1993: 18). This development has also taken place in part due to recognition that public spaces are always “invested with power, however marginally or covertly” (Robbins, 1993: xvii). As such, there is widespread agreement, particularly amongst critical, post-colonialist, and feminist theorists, that dominant (or official) public space has become *hegemonic* public space (Robbins, 1993; Arendt cited in Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1987). Fraser (1993) writes,

[T]he official bourgeois public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination. This is the shift from a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one. ...The official public sphere, then, was – indeed, is – the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new hegemonic mode of domination (8).

Fraser (1993) further argues that competing publics, or what she terms “subaltern counterpublics” are not a new phenomenon. “Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois [Habermasian] public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (Ibid). Fraser asserts that such counterpublics “...emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics [and] help to expand discursive space” by providing a place in which “assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation...now [can] be publicly argued out” (1993: 15).

Counterpublics have two main characteristics. The first is their “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” (Fraser, 1993: 15). The second is their function as a site in which people can organize and develop activities that challenge the wider, hegemonic public (Ibid). While these spaces are not, by definition, necessarily emancipatory and/or egalitarian, they do have a great deal of emancipatory *potential* in that they allow access to groups of people who are silenced within the mainstream, hegemonic public. Here, “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1993: 14). Counterpublics, however, need mainstream public space in order to fulfill these aims due to the fact that the mass media is an important means of “potentially reach[ing] vast audiences” (Felski, 1989: 173). This puts participants in a difficult position. In order to *gain* access to the dominant public, they must *have* access to the dominant public. This is surely a latent reason that many alternative publications have arisen, though the manifest explanation for this phenomenon is more likely that they help to generate “...a consciousness of community and solidarity” amongst members (Felski, 1989: 168).

Another reason for the proliferation, and importance, of counterpublics stems from their potential to revitalize public space in general. Hannah Arendt (1992) argues that public space has been transformed into a “...pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer ‘act’ but ‘merely behave’ as economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers” (cited in Benhabib, 1992: 75). Habermas (1981) echoes this concern in his discussion of the colonization of the “lifeworld” (i.e., actual lived experience) by the “system” (i.e., institutionalized means of producing and consuming)(see Felski, 1989:

165). Young also identifies with this perspective when she states, “contemporary social life has itself collapsed the public and...emancipatory politics requires generating a renewed sense of public in modern political theory” (1987: 73). Counterpublics, by serving to expand discursive space as well as by providing a support network for voices typically silenced by mainstream public space, are necessary to the development of this renewed sense of the public. They are capable of returning some agency to those operating within hegemonic public space.

The formation of counterpublics is also problematic in some ways. Inclusivity is still an issue here, as is representation. For example, feminist counterpublics have been criticized on the grounds that they silence women of colour, as well as those of particular socio-economic statuses, whose experiences of gender oppression are often quite different than that of the middle-class white woman’s. Because of this, Felski (1989) argues that it is perhaps best to think of feminist counterpublics as,

...Coalitions of overlapping subcommunities, which share a common interest in combating gender oppression but which are differentiated not only by class and race position but often by institutional locations and professional allegiances, and which draw upon a varied range of discursive frameworks ...[Counterpublics seek] to establish connections between previously distinct forms of knowledge (1989: 171).

Such a conceptualization is relevant to all kinds of counterpublics – not just so-called feminist ones. Ideally a multiplicity of counterpublics serves to help regulate the dominant public, to assist in its expansion so that important issues, previously excluded, can instead be addressed.

Theorizing counterpublics has implications for the “real world”. For example, when attempts were made within mainstream media to silence not only Dr. Thobani, but a whole range of critical voices as well, we began to see these voices picked up and circulated within many already existing counterpublics. These subversive spaces, then, serve as a means of expanding dominant public space. In this sense, they are one of the major ways in which public space in general resists contraction and, in so doing, they aid in the push for more inclusive public spaces as a whole, as we shall see.

### **“Strong” Publics, “Weak” Publics, and People of Colour**

Fraser (1993) further differentiates between what she terms “strong publics” and “weak publics”. The former is one in which, “discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making” (24). The Canadian parliament is a good example of such a public. The latter is one in which, “deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation” (1993: 24). An example of this sort of public is the media. Strong and weak publics interact and often function to strengthen the hegemonic public as a whole. The mainstream media is an incredibly important component of the dominant public. “[N]ot only is the dominant media controlled by elite interests, but within the dominant discourse that structures media content, the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction prevails” (Jiwani, 1998: 54). This “us” versus “them” distinction is one that helps to solidify national identity by providing, “access to and structure for a common stock of knowledge thereby creating an ‘imagined community’” (1998: 54). “The media...favour a ‘middle-of-the-road’ approach that is predicated on the notion of assumed consensus” (1998: 61). This consensus is fallacious and, together with the creation of this “imagined community”, reflects the tendency for white, middle-class, heterosexual, male experience

to become the universal experience, the societal norm. Importantly, this experience includes means and methods of engaging in discourse.

Living in a society in which having the above characteristics is normative, we come to define what is public as what conforms to the norm and what is private as those activities and identities that deviate from it. Issues of “common concern”, therefore, become those of interest to the dominant, the “normal”, and the mainstream media reflects this fact. Those in control of the material production of media (for example, newspaper editors) are responsible for determining what is an issue of common concern and therefore worthy of publication. While the media presents its claims as objective, as relating to issues of common concern, and as accessible to all, in reality this is a space in which certain ways of knowing are privileged over others and certain voices are kept silent. One of the media’s functions is that of ideological production and, as such, it is by no means an inclusive public space. Despite Canadian demographics, for example, there remains “a pronounced absence of representations of racialized people in the national Canadian media... The continuing *absence* of people of Colour in the dominant media signifies their invisibility and non-status within the symbolic social order” (1998: 58 [original emphasis]). This relationship between the media and the social construction of people of colour will be addressed in further detail throughout this thesis.

The lines between weak and strong publics are blurred. Media and state bureaucracies affect one another to an increasingly large degree. This blurring, coupled with the commodification of both of these arenas, “makes it increasingly impossible to identify any independent arena for the critical and informed formation of public opinion” (Felski, 1989: 166). This is exacerbated by the fact that both government, and perhaps to

an even greater extent, media in their catering to the “norm”, exclude entire portions of the population. This implicitly conveys the message that such opinions are not relevant to *public* opinion. Debates surrounding the notion of “the public” are inherently political. In talking about the inclusivity (or lack thereof) of public space, we are also talking about citizenship, about who is “truly” Canadian. Jiwani (1998) asserts, “the tendency of the media to focus on women of Colour as representing just the interests of immigrant women serves to underscore the popular stereotype that there are no people of colour who have been Canadians for generations. It also problematizes the notion of Canadian identity” (62).

The exclusion of people of colour within the media, and hence from dominant public space, can be traced back to the period of British colonialism.

[R]epresentations of racialized groups achieved widespread circulation during the height of colonialism... The superiority of the colonizers was affirmed and reaffirmed through various discursive practices and forms of knowledge production that underscored the inferiority of subject races. Such a grammar revolved around three major axes: the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of subject races, the necessary domination and subordination of subject races, and the transference of these inequalities from the realm of history and society to the realm of nature, thus making them seemingly immutable (Jiwani, 1998: 55).

It was in these early representations that the aforementioned “us” versus “them” dynamic was “implicitly encoded...which helped to congeal a sense of national and racialized identity” (1998: 56). Inherent in all of this is the homogenization of people of colour, and

the stereotyping of various groups as deviant or as, “an extreme version of some trait such as sexuality, inability to adapt, weakness, and so on” (1998: 56). Indeed, post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, the notion of the “deviant” immigrant person of colour has become pronounced. We are beginning to see a shift take place here, one in which the racialization of minority groups is not only perpetuated, but used to render particularly immigrant people of colour into potential terrorists. The consequences of this sort of discursive shift are devastating. If access, as far as hegemonic public space is concerned, was difficult for marginalized voices to gain before, now it is in many cases practically impossible. When access *is* granted to people of colour, the legitimacy of their opinions and knowledge claims are further undercut by the mainstream public’s skewed perceptions of their criminality. The sense not only that such participants’ opinions and knowledge claims are illegitimate but, further, that they are not *entitled* to speak at all, has garnered an incredible sense of urgency for many of those patrolling the boundaries of the mainstream public. This completely undermines the potential for a truly inclusive public space to exist.

Historical representations of the “colonized” served purposes other than the bolstering of national identity. Colonizers also constructed the indigenous peoples of the colonies as backwards, inferior, and uncivilized in order to legitimize colonialism and imperialism (Carty, 1999: 33). Colonizers often categorized people of colour as more or less civilized based on their “willingness” to give into the colonizers’ civilizing mission (1999: 39). “Good” people of colour, therefore, became those who were willing to assimilate, who were dependent upon those who colonized them as well as grateful to

colonizers for “civilizing” them – in short, who were passive. Today’s media discourse reflects how this view of people of colour persists,

Cultural conflicts, arranged marriages, oppressive cultures, exotic dress and foods – these are the stock in trade of the press’s coverage of racialized women. These representations serve to affirm and reaffirm the superiority of the dominant society while underscoring the unbridgeable difference of racialized communities. *‘They’ are thus rendered as unassimilable, unwilling, and unable to become part of the national self, thereby emphasizing self-identity through exclusion* (Jiwani, 1998: 61 [emphasis mine]).

A rather pervasive narrative surrounding immigrant women of colour can also be traced back to the British Empire and is relevant to the discussion of how Canadian media currently operates. At the time of British colonialism, white, Westerners viewed women of colour, particularly those from developing nations, as “helpless and needing to be saved from their own backwardness, a condition born of a backward culture” (Carty, 1999: 38). In contemporary Canadian media, when women of colour are present, they are often featured, “when they are victims of cultural conflict. Unable to reconcile seemingly disparate cultures, they become the darlings of the dominant media” (Jiwani, 1998: 60). Jiwani (1998) terms these women “bleached ethnics” because, “they downplay race and underscore the necessity of assimilation” (60). In doing so, they become like “us” because they, too, are “...unable to understand the contradictory and oppressive culture of [their] parents” (1998: 60). But what of when the critique offered up by immigrant women of colour is a critique not of their parents’ culture but, rather, of Canadian society? Just as colonial representations of racialized groups allowed, “...the



colonial powers to assume a visage of benevolence [as well as] the pretext of helping indigenous women” (1998: 58), current representations allow contemporary Canada to do much the same thing. When criticism is leveled at Canadian society, this benevolence is challenged as illusory, or at the very least as problematic. Once this happens, the reaction is fast and swift – delegitimize the voices of these second-class citizens; they are ungrateful for the opportunities living in Canada has afforded them; they are not entitled to speak.

Modern media, while still playing upon the trope of the “primitive” and/or “uncivilized” cultural practices of indigenous, as well as immigrant, people of colour sometimes do so in more insidious ways. Here, instead, the “...intention is to show not the savagery, but the serenity of [for example] African village life – ways of an ancient people ‘unchanged even down to modern times’” (Hall, 1990: 17). Rather than barbarism or deviance, the image that is conjured up is picturesque, quaint, and romantic and appeals to people in much the same way as a trip to the zoo. The message, however, is still the same: these cultures are, “preserved in economic backwardness and frozen in history for our anthropological eye by forces unknown to them” (Hall, 1990: 17).

Another representation prevalent during the colonizing period that persists in today’s media is that of the women of colour as highly sexualized (Jiwani, 1998: 57). “They were seen as being extremely fecund and likely to give birth to numerous offspring who might then challenge or invade the empire” (1998: 57). Alternately, immigrant people of colour are often portrayed as “threats to the economic order due to their stealing jobs and taking away scarce resources” (1998: 60). Particularly relevant to this thesis, however, is the portrayal of women of colour as representing “fringe elements” of

society (Jiwani, 1998: 61). This is due to the media's aforementioned "middle-of-the-road" approach:

Framing issues in a binary manner – constructing them as having two opposing sides – enables the media to persuade the viewer/reader that either extreme is radical and represents fringe elements. However, when one side has more power and is considered to be legitimate (e.g., the government), then the other side is considered to be less legitimate, more radical, and extreme (1998: 61).

Thus,

It is the government side – the side of "reason" and assumed consensus – that is represented as reflecting national identity. In contrast, the fringe elements are usually constructed as representing those problematic peoples that refuse to "fit in" (1998: 61).

Employing this strategy has four main consequences. The first is its facilitation of the exclusion of people of colour from public space through the perpetuation of many of the aforementioned stereotypes. Second, it encourages the public to embrace the media's "moderate" perspective by making such a perspective seem both "attractive and reasonable" (Jiwani, 1998: 64). Third, it contributes to the continued racialization of people of colour. Finally, it reinforces problematic conceptions of national identity. "This ideological work of producing and reproducing a sense of nation-ness depends on the media being able to identify and portray groups that can be framed as 'extremists' – as not fitting into society" (1998: 65).

The media's ability to influence readers, and contribute to the exclusion of people of colour, particularly immigrants, from public space is particularly insidious.

[T]hrough extensive reporting, the media in general, and the Press in particular, are able to define a public debate and to communicate the essential contents of situation models that have a lasting effect of people's "social knowledge" ...[T]he opinion structures adopted by the readers closely follow[s] those made available by the Press (van Dijk, 1991: 244).

This further illustrates our previous discussion regarding the blurring of the lines between "strong" and "weak" publics. When people's opinions on issues are so strongly influenced by an arena of discourse that is fundamentally exclusionary, and those opinions in turn affect, for example, decisions about policy, then the arena in which such decisions are made becomes exclusionary as well. As we will see, post-September 11<sup>th</sup> the media's coverage contributed to the pressure to implement changes in Canadian immigration policy. This creates a cycle of exclusion, silencing, and speaking-for that is extremely hard to break.

Much of the literature dealing with public space contains a call for a revised conceptualization; one that aims for inclusivity, but which also does so in a way much different than what Habermas envisioned. While public space is constantly written about as contested, it still tends to remain conceptualized as rather static. Hegemonic public space is highly exclusionary and contracted; there are very few accessible avenues of discourse and dissent available, particularly to marginalized voices within society. As has been argued, however, subaltern counterpublics work to expand such public space by challenging dominant discourse; by prioritizing the agency of their members and, in many cases, by challenging the modes of discourse privileged by those within dominant spaces. It is a mistake to overlook this particular aspect of the way in which public space

operates. Doing so neglects the dynamism of public space. Therefore, a new theorization of public space must include recognition of this, for such recognition could perhaps enhance the emancipatory potential intrinsic to public spaces.

In this chapter, the conceptualization of public space within current literature has been addressed, as have the strategies utilized by the mainstream media, both historically and at present, in representing people of colour. In the following chapters we will see that within the mainstream Canadian public, for a person of colour to use a critical voice regarding Canadian issues is unacceptable, not because her/his opinion may not be that of the majority, but rather because there is a feeling that she/he is not *entitled* to speak. This is the case not only for people of colour, but for those occupying all sorts of other statuses as well. If the voice is not that of the “norm”, then the very voice itself is contested. Being a “true” Canadian citizen, and therefore having real access to public space, requires membership in certain social groupings and is contingent on one’s placement in the social hierarchy. This will become increasingly apparent as we move, in Chapter Two, from a description of the media’s post-September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage to that of the Thobani Moment itself.

## CHAPTER TWO ASSIGNING BLAME: EXPLORING THE MEDIA'S POST-9/11 COVERAGE

Looking at how public space expands and contracts by highlighting the “Thobani Moment” is very instructive. It is important, however, to put this moment into context, to describe the climate that existed in mainstream public space prior to Sunera Thobani’s speech and its aftermath. The data collected toward this end begins September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and ends September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and has been taken from *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Province*, and *The Globe and Mail*. The Thobani Moment begins October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001 and ends October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001. As with the contextual data, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Province*, and *The Globe and Mail* were all examined. In addition, articles from independent media sources such as *Rabble.ca* and the *Independent Media Center* ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)) were also collected.

Several themes emerged rather quickly in the contextual data. Perhaps the most persistent and seemingly important themes were the United States of America’s response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (i.e., the so-called “War on Terrorism”), the terrorists (who they are, how they got into the United States, and how they seemed to be “normal” members of the community), security issues (particularly border security), and retaliation against Muslim Americans and Canadians in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Several sub-themes arose in relation to these overarching themes. Specifically, in relation to the “terrorist” theme, we encounter the sub-theme of “terrorist motivation”. In relation to the theme of security, we can see the emergence of the sub-theme of anti-terrorism legislation/immigration legislation and the concern over the curtailment of civil

liberties in Canada. Describing these themes in more detail is necessary for establishing a context for the Thobani moment itself. Indeed, doing so will prove highly instructive both to this discussion as well as to the analysis, which follows.

### **The War on Terrorism**

Within the first two days of the attacks on The World Trade Center, attention in mainstream newsprint media turned to the United States of America's response. The prevailing attitude seemed to be that this was "another Pearl Harbor" (for example, *The Vancouver Sun*, September 11, 2001, 3; *The Province*, September 11, 2001, A2, 4, 5; *The Globe and Mail*, September 12, 2001, N3, 8) setting the stage for some discussion of military response. It also became quickly apparent, however, that this would be a war like no other fought in American history – the identity of the enemy as well as where that enemy was located were altogether unclear. There seemed to be little question that the culprits of these attacks were "Islamic militants" and their connection to Osama bin Laden was addressed by the newspapers even before the American government issued any statements to that effect. This theme persists throughout the time period examined, though the articles evolve from speculation to detailed discussion of exactly what course the United States and its allies plan to take.

One of the most important speculative articles encountered in relation to this theme was published in *The Globe and Mail* on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and is entitled, "The sleeping giant wakes up angry". This article manages to address all of the themes mentioned above with the exception of retaliation against Muslim Canadians and Americans and opens by expressly comparing the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> to Pearl Harbor. The author, Marcus Gee, writes that just as was the case after Pearl Harbor,

massive retaliation from the United States is to be expected: "Expect an all-out war on terrorism that will almost certainly include some kind of U.S. military strike. Expect a more assertive United States, far more willing to throw its weight around and far less likely to listen to the doubts of its allies or the United Nations" (N8). Gee also writes,

The problem, of course, is whom to go to war against. It's far from clear who is responsible for the attacks, and even if the culprits are eventually identified, fighting a dispersed and furtive band of terrorists is different than taking on an enemy nation in a conventional war. ...The problem, again, is to identify and track down the enemy. That will be particularly hard given the failure of U.S. intelligence to predict yesterday's attacks, revealing a woeful unpreparedness. Since Pearl Harbor, the U.S. intelligence services have never fallen down so badly (N9).

Straightaway we see, in relation to the overarching theme of U.S. response, some conjecture as to changes in United States foreign policy as a result of the attacks, although surprisingly little attention was paid to this issue overall. This issue is addressed a bit more, albeit rather offhandedly, at the conclusion of the article:

[T]he United States may...adopt an Israeli-style policy of assassinating terrorists leaders, even if it means ignoring or changing a law that forbids U.S. officials from having anything to do with such killings. ...The United States may take a page from British history and resort to gunboat diplomacy, using force to create a "limited imperium" led by Washington. ...[T]he United States might even be forced to take over and run troubled countries like Afghanistan to prevent them from being used as staging grounds for attacks on the United States. The trouble with

that, of course, is that it would expose the United States to charges of colonialism. Militant leaders would have new fuel for their jeremiads against the Great Satan (9/12/01 N8-9).

Notice that despite the author's assertion that "...it is far from clear who is responsible for the attacks" (N8), an assumption seems to have been made that those responsible are not only militant, but Muslim as well. This assumption is evident in the language the author has chosen, as well as in the geographical location he gives as an example to illustrate his point.

Another instructive example of the sort of speculative discussion of possibilities for the War on Terrorism appears in *The Province* on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001. This article presents a so-called "Scenario for Invasion" describing not only what the "forward operations base" may look like but also describing the ways in which the "joint special forces team" may be deployed (A7). More interesting than the substantive content of this piece, however, is noticing how the article itself is laid out, the language that is used, and the way in which the headline of this article was changed from what it read in the first, morning edition of the *The Province* to that of the final, later edition. In the original edition, the headline reads, "How they [The United States] could *nail* bin Laden" (A7 [emphasis mine]) whereas in the final edition, the headline has been changed to "How they could capture bin Laden" (A7cc). In altering even this single word, the entire tone of the article is changed. The usage of the word "capture" is far more temperate, as well as far more specific, than the usage of the word "nail".

A graphic three-quarters of a page in size outlines the five steps necessary to accomplish the goal of capturing bin Laden. This illustration overpowers the article itself



and it is interesting to note that while the language used within the graphic lends itself to being read as though it were a concrete, official plan, the article itself is, as was mentioned above, nothing more than speculation. For example, Step One in the graphic reads, "SAS and American special forces move overnight to take up positions in the surrounding mountains, overlooking the caves where bin Laden and his troops are hiding" (A7) whereas the article itself reads, "The joint special forces team, *expected* to involve the U.S. Delta Force and the SAS...will wait there, practicing operation scenarios together. *Once bin Laden's location is pin-pointed*, the force *would* have to move quickly to ensure that he is given no chance to move on" (A7 [emphasis mine]). Step Four in the graphic reads, "Special forces descend cliff above cave using rapelling technique, storm cave and disable bin Laden and guards" (A7). In the article itself, the information is presented in a far less confident manner: "Speed would be of the essence for the snatch squads, with the method they use to move in depending heavily on the surrounding terrain. *They might be landed by rope on to the heights above the caves, rapelling down to the target*" (A7 [emphasis mine]). In presenting the graphic first, and in making it the focal point of the entire page, readers are encouraged to see it as a summary of the article below. This is not troubling in and of itself. The problem, however, is that if this summary is read at the exclusion of the actual article, it appears to present a truth that in reality does not exist. It is important to notice variations in language and the layout of articles because the above technique is also characteristic of news coverage of the Thobani Moment and has serious ramifications for public space, as we will see.

## Who Did This and Why? The Terrorists

In the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, many articles seemed to focus initially on what exactly that morning looked like – detailed timelines (see, for example, *The Province*, 09/12/01: A8-10) were published, as were detailed eyewitness/survivor accounts (*The Province*, 09/12/01: A12-13; 09/14/01: A7). Many of these articles, however, contained some telling statements regarding who the culprits of these attacks were. Indeed, the identities of the terrorists were defined precisely by publishing statements delineating what the terrorists were not. For example, Jean Chrétien's statement that "[S]uch an attack is an assault not only on the targets but an offence against the freedom and rights of all civilized nations" (*The Province*, 09/11/01:A6) was widely quoted and is telling of one conception of those responsible for the attacks – the terrorists, whomever they are, are not from any civilized nation, they despise the values of civilized nations, and they are "cowardly and depraved" (A6). As the period of time after the attacks increased, however, attention turned toward astonishment at the fact that many of the terrorists had lived unnoticed in the United States for extended periods of time before the attack. In other words, while on the one hand we see discourse surrounding the theme of who the terrorists are centering on the notion of militancy, irrationality, savagery, and so forth, on the other hand, we see discourse that almost seems disbelieving of the fact that the culprits of the attacks were actually human beings, well-spoken, well-mannered, and seemingly "normal" members of the communities in which they lived.

In the initial days after the attacks, statements such as Chrétien's, "Who is the exact enemy? I will not speculate at this time. I'm sure that the Western world has to

react and that the Western world will react” (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/13/01: A14) seem to best sum up the initial framing of who was to blame. Statements like these make very clear assumptions about who is to blame, but this blame is leveled relatively covertly. The assumption is, right from the beginning, that the culprits cannot be “Western”. Letters to the editor are particularly illustrative of this conceptualization of the terrorist identity: “Mere words of condemnation in the aftermath of Tuesday’s tragedy are useless. The U.S., Canada and other democracies have little choice but to engage in the eradication, without mercy, of any state or organization that participates in or supports terrorism...” (Alan Black, *The Vancouver Sun*, 09/12/01: B8 [emphasis mine]), “Terrorism is the new enemy of the West” (Craig Ferguson, B8). Bush’s use of biblical language to discuss not only the United States response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, but to describe the terrorists themselves only serves to reinforce their construction as completely without reason: “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil...But good will prevail” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 09/13/01: A2). President George W. Bush was quick to point out that “[F]reedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward and freedom will be defended” (*The Province*, 09/12/01: A19).

Perhaps most interesting is how quickly the assumption that the terrorists were not only immigrants but also Muslim entered the discourse within newsprint media. In editorials this assumption is made clear through statements such as “So these cowards fly here or move here and this is the thanks we get? What a joke. We should have cracked down on Iran and Palestine a long time ago. But I’m sure George W. Bush is ready to make an example of the moronic terrorists who have killed so many Americans” (Adam Johnson-Smith, *The Province*, 09/12/01: A57). In articles, these assumptions often

surfaced more benignly. Despite the temperance of these comments, however, there is still an assumption being made that those responsible for the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> belong to a certain recognizable group, that they are not “one of us”:

In the [Seattle] public square fronting Nordstrom’s there was a lone man, youngish, who carried a handmade sign. It read, on one side, “Muslim people are good.” And on the other: “This is a time to unite, not divide.” His name was Tim Nelson, he was 41, a teacher. He had taught Muslim students before, he said, and felt compelled to be here because of that. “I started thinking about the Oklahoma City bombing, and the response in the press to that tragedy, with everyone thinking it was Muslim terrorists. There’s a lot of stereotypes we carry that [Muslims] are irrational, that they hate us for no good reason. The point I’m out here for is, there’s a blanket blame of Muslim people and I think we have to guard against that (*The Vancouver Sun*, 09/12/01: A19).

The article goes on to quote a Californian:

History shows we responded badly to the Japanese in the U.S. during the Second World War. We stereotyped the Japanese and put them in internment camps. But that kind of thinking is not the answer. I want to get the guys that did this of course. And I want justice to be done. But I don’t want to get into the baloney of “We hate these kind of people,” otherwise you get fear and bigotry and we have to try to stay away from that...(A19).

In other words, an “Us versus Them” mentality surfaced immediately after the attacks and this concern with the “Other” persists.

As more information surfaced about the identities of the culprits, attention began to turn to their motivation for attacking the United States. Several columnists pointed toward United States foreign policy, though usually when such claims were addressed in the print media examined, columnists were quick to emphasize that such qualms are not their own. Instead, they are almost always presented as the views of Osama bin Laden himself:

He was asked [in a 01/09/97 interview by CNN and in 01/09/98 by ABC] why he declared a *jihad*, or holy war, against the United States. He replied...with a summary of “aggressive intervention against Muslims,” ranging from the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia to the international embargo against Iraq. He rallied against the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon, for which an Israeli inquiry found Prime Minister Ariel Sharon indirectly responsible. He accused the United States of dismembering children; the reference was to an incident in which its ally, Israel, attacked a United Nations camp in Lebanon in 1/9/96, wounding more than 100 civilians. He referred to the plight of Muslims in Bosnia and to Jewish terrorism in Palestine in the late 1940s (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/19/01: A13).

Paul Knox, the author of this article, goes on to emphasize that “None of this is to justify acts of terror in the slightest” but “...simply to recognize clearly the source of the terrorist impulse” (A13) as well as to illustrate his assertion that “...for Washington, a sustained victory against terrorism...means somehow persuading the Muslim masses that the deafening voices of hate and intolerance surrounding them are wrong, and that America is truly on their side” (A13).

Other columnists, such as Rick Salutin of *The Globe and Mail*, had a more critical outlook, arguing that it is not adequate to dismiss the culprits' motivations as nothing more than an intense hatred of freedom, democracy, or "Western civilization" (09/21/01: A15). Instead, he writes,

When these enemies of America actually speak – including numerous interviews with Osama bin Laden – they stress a litany of U.S. policies and acts abroad. It always begins with indispensable U.S. support for Israel in its 35-year occupation of Palestinian land. Next is always the deaths of Iraqi children – half a million to a million over the past 10 years—due to U.S.-led sanctions. Other items follow, such as bombing Sudan's only pharmaceutical factory, which the U.S. now admits was an error. They never say they hate American elections or jazz (A15).

Notice the language used to level this critique, however. Salutin seems to agree that American foreign policy is *potentially* problematic, yet the key word here is *potentially* and the recommendation is merely to "resolve some of these issues" because doing so would "strip away much of the support [fanatics] find and need throughout the Muslim world" (A15). Furthermore, as the above excerpt reveals, the language used in articles such as these is incredibly noncommittal; indeed, its tone is largely dismissive overall.

While Margaret Wentz, who writes regularly for *The Globe and Mail*, in her article "Why do they hate us so much?" (09/22/01: A13) echoed the aforementioned surprise many seemed to feel upon the realization that several of the terrorists had resided in the United States prior to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, her take on the terrorists' motivation was somewhat different than those discussed previously. Rather than turn her

attention to global systemic issues that may have motivated the attacks, she dismisses these claims altogether, arguing instead that it is a product of “their” culture:

Whenever we thought of suicide bombers, we thought of desperate Palestinians, or wild-eyed fanatics from the mountain redoubts of Afghanistan. Now we know better. They turn out to be the guys next door. They watch baseball on Sony television sets. They go to bars. They eat pizza. They meet girls, or try to. They seem a lot like us, except they hate us, and want us dead. ...Some are U.S. citizens, and at least one was born in the United States. None of them were starving peasants or hopeless refugees. Most were highly educated. Some spent years in American colleges and universities. Some married American women and had American kids. And most had done a stint or two at Mr. bin Laden’s schools for terror. ...*The poison that runs through the veins of the suicide bombers does not come from America. It comes from their culture, not ours. The root causes are in their history, not ours* [emphasis mine].

### **Homeland Security: Immigration, Legislation, and Civil Liberties**

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> prompted much discussion of security and intelligence failures. The emphasis, however, was quickly placed on how security could be improved. On Thursday, September 13<sup>th</sup>, *The Province* reported, “Five of the terrorists who crashed two passenger jets into the World Trade Center are believed to have entered the United States from Canada” (A2). As was to be expected, attention turned to improving security along the Canadian-American border. Some discussion regarding the creation of common immigration laws for the United States and Canada

appeared, prompting concern over Canadian sovereignty (see, for example, *The Globe and Mail*, 09/20/01: A1, A13; 09/24/01: A7) and the potential dangers to civil liberties in this country.

Many seemed to report that Canadians would be willing to give up some of their civil liberties in exchange for increased security. *The Globe and Mail*, in an article headlined "You'll soon be watched much more, experts say", reported "...accepted notions of privacy have likely vanished forever in the dust of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington" (09/19/01: A1). Included in this article was a list of "likely" developments:

The creation of eavesdropping equipment capable of tapping into conversations that take place over wireless devices or via fibre optic cable; Pressure to reverse court rulings permitting refugees and immigrants to use Canadian constitutional guarantees; Increased use of random border checks and strip-searches; Greater scrutiny of pilots and boat owners, who are used to crossing and recrossing borders with a minimum of red tape; Rapid and unamended passage for controversial legislation to combat money-laundering and the funding of terrorist groups; the throttling of access-to-information laws; The passage of legislation allowing security forces to demand the "key" to any encryption code a citizen uses to send e-mail (A1).

By far the most attention was paid to the proposed amendments to civil liberties. Indeed, any discussion of the curtailment of civil liberties is tied to that of anti-terrorism and/or immigration legislation and vice versa. By September 20<sup>th</sup>, articles were being published containing the responses of both government officials and members of the Canadian



Muslim Civil Liberties Association (CMCLA) to new border-crossing guidelines that “highlight certain groups for tougher questioning” (*The Globe and Mail*, A6).

The guidelines indicate that men with links to certain Muslim countries and a scientific or aviation background should come under special scrutiny. ...The bulletin to border guards comes in two parts, the first listing “the employment/background characteristics that may identify terrorists” and the second listing “the travel routes and patterns that may identify Islamic terrorists (A6).

Not surprisingly, “Government ministers responsible for Canada’s border guards say the new guidelines...help identify possible terrorists but are not a form of ethnic or religious profiling” while Faisal Kutty, general counsel of the CMCLA, asserted that “...such profiling has occurred in the United States and while ineffective in rooting out terrorists, has led to harassment of certain ethnic groups” (A6).

Interestingly, this article also addressed the criticism that *The Globe and Mail* received from readers for publishing the guidelines in the first place. Many seemed to feel that by making the guidelines public, *The Globe and Mail* was actually “helping terrorists”. One reader wrote, “You have given terrorists a road map of what not to be and what not to say to officials as they try to enter Canada” (A6). An editorial published in the same edition of *The Globe and Mail* defended the paper’s decision to publish the guidelines, arguing,

It is important that any form of singling out, reasonable or not, be known to the public. Still, in the circumstances, the Canadian government’s instructions to the guards seem reasonable. This is not “racial profiling,” but a recognition that the present terrorist danger comes from certain parts of

the world. There is no reason to believe that public safety has been put at risk by reporting what amounts to a commonsense order to pay a little extra attention to people who have been to certain countries or have certain credentials. ...[A] timid media would be a self-inflicted wound to our democracy (A12).

Issues such as these have very important consequences for public space, and are quite illustrative of the way in which such space in Canada operates. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

*The Province*, September 18<sup>th</sup>, published an important article regarding proposed changes in immigration legislation. Most of the article focused on Stockwell Day's suggested changes to the Immigration Act, including "[I]mmediate security screening for all refugee claimants when they arrive in Canada...and a streamlined removal process" (A6). Day also argued that Canada needed to "outlaw terrorist groups, tighten border and airport controls, and beef up armed forces and security services" (A6). His concerns seemed to echo those of some Canadian citizens in the wake of the attacks. For example, Bruce deVenne, of Sackville, Nova Scotia, wrote, "No more illegal immigrants should be accepted, and anybody else looking to get into this country should be checked out completely. Ottawa has turned Canada into a haven for criminals and terrorists. It's time to put a stop to it" (*The Province*, 09/13/01: A43).

The United States itself also appeared to share the view that Canada's immigration laws are too lax, calling for a common North American "perimeter" (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/21/01: A6). However, "Many Canadian immigration lawyers and refugee advocates warn that harmonizing with the United States would restrict Canada's ability to welcome legitimate refugees, and unduly traumatize those who have no

documents or feel forced to resort to illegal entry to flee persecution. It would also be costly to detain them while their claims are heard (A6). Besides raising concerns over Canada's sovereignty, the language used at this time seemed to remind many of World War II and the internment of Japanese-Canadians (*The Province*, 09/17/01: A6).

According to *The Globe and Mail*, these changes in policy, as well as the introduction of anti-terrorism legislation, were seen by many "legal experts" as too dangerous to the civil liberties of those living in Canada (09/24/01: A7):

The government may well spawn even more litigation beefing up conspiracy laws and curtailing freedom of association for certain racial, cultural or political groups. The government could also target past Charter rulings that liberalized police interrogation techniques, as well as the obligation to disclose information surrounding wiretap authorizations. ... "There is going to be enormous pressure on the courts to relax these rules" [lawyer Frank Addario] said. There is no doubt that by leveling the privacy rights of every Canadian, you would get a safer country. But the price in civil liberties is too high to pay (A7).

University of Alberta law professor, Sanjeev Anand, added, "among the Charter cases that may be resurrected is the ruling from the late 1980s that extended to refugees on Canadian soil the right to a fair and impartial hearing" (A7). Obviously, an actual change in Canadian policy reflecting the above speculation has great consequences for public space. But so too does the publication of such speculation itself.

The discussion of new legislation designed to increase national security continued to appear in the paper for the remainder of September, 2001. Bill C36, Canada's proposed anti-terrorism legislation, was the subject of a *Globe and Mail* article headlined,

“Will proposed terrorism bill curtail rights of Canadians?” (09/27/01: A12). What is telling is the fact that no solid information as to the actual contents of the bill is given in this article. As with most articles published, the language was rather vague: “[T]he government has finished drafting provisions that would allow the prosecution or the extradition of anyone suspected of a terrorist bombing in Canada or elsewhere. The Department of Justice is still working on measures that will criminalize fundraising activities on behalf of terrorist groups” (A12). The article does note, however, that despite the fact that the bill had not officially been introduced it was raising concern “...among immigrant groups and civil libertarians. They worry that the government will use a broad definition of terrorism and start a list of suspected terrorist groups that could unjustly target legitimate organizations” (A12).

### **Love Thy Neighbour? Retaliation against Muslim Canadians**

Almost immediately after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, articles began to appear in the paper expressing concern over retaliation against Muslim Canadians and Americans. *The Vancouver Sun*, on September 13<sup>th</sup>, reported that, “The B.C. Muslim Association closed its Richmond school for two days as a precaution” after receiving “harassing” voice mail messages (B2). *The Province*, on September 13<sup>th</sup>, also published an article headlined “B.C. Muslims fear reprisals”, reporting, “There have been attacks on Muslims in Montreal, Oakville and Calgary. ...Muslim groups have warned members not to wear Islamic dress in public, and to be cautious in crowds. Children with Muslim names are being kept out of school” (A13). On September 18<sup>th</sup>, *The Province* reported that police in British Columbia were “bracing” for a growth in hate crimes after receiving several reports of verbal and physical attacks being leveled at people of colour (A12). RCMP

Sergeant Les Flewelling is quoted in this article as saying, "Unfortunately, some people are acting violently out of prejudice. ...They're painting people of colour with the same brush, assuming that people of many races are Muslim and, of course, forgetting that Muslim people here don't support terrorism" (A12).

Several powerful articles relating to the theme of retaliation against Muslim Canadians were published in the weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Two offer particularly useful insight into this issue, though both come from the September 14<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Globe and Mail*. In the first, entitled, "Arab Canadians have been targets of harassment", Alana Mitchell writes,

Saying they are *under siege in their own country*, Arab Canadians are shunning school, work, travel and even the streets to avoid escalating harassment from fellow citizens angry over catastrophic attacks on the United States. "*We are seen as the enemy within*," said Jihad Aliweiwi, executive director of the Canadian Arab Federation. "A lot of people feel it's probably a time to stay home (A16 [emphasis mine]).

She continues,

Included in the types of harassment across Canada are vicious emails calling Arabs "vermin", violent telephone messages, attacks on mosques in many parts of the country and personal threats. *Women and girls tend to be more heavily targeted*, especially if they wear the traditional Muslim dress. ...Some employers are arranging for Muslim and Arab workers to be escorted to and from their premises. "*We are now in a state of siege*," said Mr. Aliweiwi, adding that the *Arab and Muslim communities*

*feel they are surrounded by an intensifying "sea of hate"*

(A17 [emphasis mine]).

The second article in *The Globe and Mail*, written by the national president of the Canadian Islamic Congress, Mohamed Elmasry, is perhaps the most powerful article encountered. The article begins with an account of his "hoping against hope" that the attacks were not the work of Muslims who "...would compound their heinous sins by attributing them to acts of faith" (A26). This article is incredibly important, for it directly addresses the role of the media in exacerbating the situation. He writes, "Because most media people and government officials were so quick to link these skillfully orchestrated disasters to the expertise and influence of a militant Saudi dissident, Osama bin Laden, I and all Muslims were clearly 'marked' as guilty by association. ...[W]aves of anti-Islamic language have spread indiscriminately over news and Op Ed pages and throughout broadcast networks" (A26). Elmasry goes on to illustrate the ways in which the Koran "teaches zero tolerance of premeditated killing" and, just as in previous articles, to describe acts of retaliation against Muslim Canadians. These acts include "Acts of stabbing, vandalism, and physical attacks" (A26). The article concludes by stating that,

The reality is that Canadian Muslims are grieving as deeply as everyone else. In fact, we grieve a double tragedy. For even as we mourn the loss of lives Tuesday [September 11<sup>th</sup>] – including people of all faiths – we are also forced to look over our shoulders. After Tuesday's terrorist attacks, we live in fear of being found guilty by association because of North America's prevailing ignorance about our faith (A26).

Another form of retaliation against Muslim and/or Arab Canadians was more insidious in nature. An exhibit highlighting Arab artists' work at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa scheduled to open October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001 was "indefinitely postponed" after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/26/01: A5). This move is most definitely reflective of the altered climate of Canadian public space post-terrorist attacks. While Museum spokespeople maintained that the show was postponed in order to wait for a "less emotional time when visitors 'will value the artwork for the intent with which it was produced'", many of the artists themselves felt there was another reason behind the decision (A5). "'Their decision is certainly political,' said [Rawi] Hage, who came to Canada from Lebanon in 1992. 'I feel a little betrayed. I think, here's an opportunity, with all the wave of racism against Muslims and Arabs because of what happened on the 11<sup>th</sup>, to have a dialogue.' Instead, he added, 'they're playing it safe'" (A5).

### **The Thobani Moment**

As we have seen, almost immediately post-September 11<sup>th</sup> discussion within the mainstream media turned toward the military action that would potentially be taken by the United States government in retaliation for the attacks. The question of who was responsible for the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and therefore who would be subject to these attacks, was addressed simultaneously. The assumption was quickly made that those responsible were not from the "Western world" and attention quickly turned to Osama bin Laden and his "Islamist" (i.e. fundamentalist and fanatical) followers. Attention was also given to protecting the "Homeland". This included an increase in border security and the proposal of changes to immigration legislation, prompting concern amongst

Canadians for the fate of civil liberties in this country. The discourse contained within each of these themes, when taken together, helped to spawn a wave of retaliation, both verbal and physical, against Muslim Canadians as well as those people of colour perceived to be Muslim. These four themes further set the stage for the media's response to Sunera Thobani's October 1<sup>st</sup> speech. This section will begin by exploring the negative reaction of mainstream media to her speech at the Women's Resistance Conference. We will then turn to an examination of the support she received. This support is found in several editorials and letters to editor printed in mainstream newspapers, as well as within independent media sources.

First mention of Sunera Thobani appeared the day after her speech was made. However, in these initial articles, more attention was focused on the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, Hedy Fry, than on Dr. Thobani herself (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/02/01: A11; *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/2/01: A1). *The Globe and Mail*, in their October 2<sup>nd</sup> article, reported, "Ms. Fry...remained on stage during Ms. Thobani's speech, sitting in silence during *the attack on the United States*" (A11 [emphasis mine]). This "attack" included the now infamous sound-byte in which Sunera Thobani asserts that American foreign policy is "soaked in blood". According to the *The Vancouver Sun*, "MPs called on the government to fire Fry, charging that she should have immediately condemned Thobani's statements" (10/02/01: A1). On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, *The Globe and Mail* reported that British Columbia's premier, Gordon Campbell, publicly "rebuked" Dr. Thobani for her statements, stating that she was "motivated by her own hate" (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A1) although University of British Columbia vice-president



Barry McBride stated that “it is not only her right but her duty as a professor at the university to speak her mind on important issues” (A1).

Interestingly, much of the outrage expressed at Sunera Thobani’s speech stemmed from a leap in logic that asserted that any criticism of American foreign policy was tantamount to justifying the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Esther Harris, in a guest column for *The Vancouver Sun* wrote an editorial piece drawing an analogy between blaming a rape victim for her rape and blaming the United States for the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. “Sunera Thobani...lends her voice to [the] view: Blame the victim of the terrorist attacks: The people of the United States and those who govern them. Always implicit behind this kind of rhetoric – the cowardly shield of those kind of people who would blame a raped or murdered woman rather than her attacker – lies the sprouting and growing seed of justification for the perpetrator” (10/06/01: A22). An editorial printed in *The Globe and Mail* asserted,

[W]hen Ms. Thobani delivered her poisonous diatribe, the audience didn’t boo her off stage or even sit in disapproving silence. They applauded and cheered. The sad fact is that quite a few Canadians seem to feel that Americans are somehow responsible for the attacks of September 11. ...Those who attack Washington now for the errors of its foreign policy say they want to get to the root causes of terrorism, but what they really want to do is beat the Americans with a stick. That anti-American reflex, so common here in Canada, has never looked so juvenile or so pointless. Britain’s Tony Blair put it well in his rousing speech yesterday: “Understand the causes of terror. Yes, we should try, but let there be no moral ambiguity about this: Nothing could ever justify the events

of 11 September, and it is to turn justice on its head to pretend it could" (10/03/01: A16).

Notice that several things are happening in this excerpt besides the aforementioned "blame the victim" conflation. First, there seems to be outrage in both of the above articles that Sunera Thobani is not alone in her views. Second, another equation is taking place here, one in which any critique of American foreign policy is seen as synonymous with anti-Americanism (for further examples, see *The Province*, 10/03/01: A4; A28). Lastly, the tone of both of these articles seems to suggest that Dr. Thobani's statements were not merely inappropriate, but rather, *threatening*.

Indeed, many seemed to be taking the "threat" Sunera Thobani posed very seriously. Pete McMartin of *The Vancouver Sun*, wrote an article on the third headlined: "Free speech in a pristine vacuum: University defends 'Nutty Professor'" (A7). In this article he calls Sunera Thobani not just "nutty" but also a "nutcase" and a "terrorist apologist" (though this particular label he feels belongs rightly to any "lefty" who "clothe their real intent under a cloak of empathy...and then throw back that cloak to reveal the 'but' underneath"). He goes on to call her words "dangerous, deeply insulting, crackpot theories" arguing that she "...insult[ed] and demoniz[ed] not just a nation, or a hemisphere, but an entire culture with impunity" (A7). The most powerful quote in this article, however, was the following:

If she finds [the West] so devilish, why does she accept its rewards, its privileges, its guarantee of rights that allow her to spew political garbage without being shot for it, its tax dollars that constitute her pay? *Why does she not flee back to enlightened Tanzania*, that beacon of feminism she left to come to Canada? Or to Afghanistan, where feminist

seminars are held in soccer stadiums and the instructor carries a Kalashnikov? (A7 [emphasis mine]).

Evidently, the threat posed by Sunera Thobani and her words was great enough that some were calling for the cessation of federal funding to conferences “that advance the rights of women and children” (*The Vancouver Sun* 10/04/03: A14). Stockwell Day was quoted as saying, “At taxpayers’ expense, to be saying the things that she did, to be inciting the things that she did, that’s unacceptable” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A2). Chuck Stahl, Tory-Democratic Representative deputy leader, said that “conferences financed by the government should focus on attracting experts focused on finding solutions. ‘She’s [Thobani] an expert on Thobani promotion and she’s an expert on intolerance, frankly” (A2). Margaret Wentz, in her piece entitled, “Two reasons to thank Sunera Thobani”, called her an “idiot” and argued that organizers of conferences such as the one at which she spoke need to realize that “they are in danger of losing our support. The destructive ideology that has infected their planning and thinking is severely undermining the good work they do” (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/4/01: A19). Wentz concludes her article with a “suggestion” for “the governments, United Ways, good-hearted corporations and citizens who pay the bills. Tell these people it’s time to get back to service work, and stop wasting their time and money cheering for Ms. Thobani. She just gets in the way” (A19). Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, however, responded to calls for the cessation of funding, arguing, ““These types of conferences are very useful in Canada and we will not stop having social dialogue in our nation because someone made a terrible speech that we condemn 100 per cent”” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/4/01: A14).

Some Americans evidently took Sunera Thobani’s speech very seriously as well. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, *The Vancouver Sun* published a front page article headlined “Americans

denounce Thobani – and Canada”. One American, Mark Torres of Concord, California, is quoted: “Now I...know that Canadians tolerate everything, including the hatred of Americans. With friends like Canada, who needs Third World enemies?” (A7). Another “American analyst” is reported as saying that “such broad dissemination of Thobani’s speech won’t help Canada in its attempt to show the Bush administration it fully supports the war on terrorism” (A7). Perhaps most interesting about this observation, however, is the fact that with the exception of *The Vancouver Sun*, who published a full transcript of her speech on October 3<sup>rd</sup> (A6), none of the other papers examined did so. Instead, they relied on sound-bytes and extracted quotes to “represent” her statements. Further, “The Drudge Report” in the United States published an “*edited* transcript of the speech” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/06/01: A7 [emphasis mine]).

Letters to the editor also provide a good illustration of the extent of the anger and fear caused by Dr. Thobani’s words. Some examples: G. David Roelofson of Toronto wrote “Thank you, Margaret Wente, for your blunt exposure of *this radical Canadian*. Ms. Thobani is indeed an idiot. Your article was the catharsis I needed after Ms. Thobani’s ‘intellectual rant’” (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/06/01: A20 [emphasis mine]). Bob Brady, of Aldergrove, British Columbia, wrote, “Sunera Thobani should go back to her own country. Taxpayers pay her salary and it makes me sick” (*The Province*, 10/04/01: A37); Robert Turnbull of New Westminster, British Columbia asked, “Why does she not go somewhere where she can do some good, like return to her home in east Africa or the Middle East where she can assist?” (Ibid.). William Nicholls, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies and the University of British Columbia, submitted this letter to *The Vancouver Sun*:

Everyone from University of B.C. vice-president (academic) Barry McBride down is defending Sunera Thobani's right to speak as she did. Clearly, she had a right to express herself as a member of the public, as we all do. If she spoke as a professor, as she apparently did, it seems she also had an obligation to speak from academic expertise. Did she? Most of her speech was a political diatribe, with no relation to "women's studies," which is her field. As such, that major part of her utterance has no more credibility than a phone-in to a talk show. Where she did speak about women, she talked nonsense, implying that the condition of women under the Taliban's regime is the West's fault. *It is to be hoped that future tenure committees will take note of this degree of academic incompetence* (10/06/01: A23 [emphasis mine]).

Indeed, the concern voiced by this man in regards to Sunera Thobani's academic credibility was echoed by many who felt that her speech brought the credibility of women's studies as a whole into question. Steve Weatherbe, of Victoria, wrote:

*All that Sunera Thobani's comments have accomplished is to cast serious doubts on women's studies as a legitimate academic field and expose the ideological bankruptcy of the left. This notion that it is Western colonization or imperialism that keeps women in oppressed states around the world is mere cant. If anything, colonization emancipated women. ...How convenient for Africans, or Muslims or leftists everywhere to blame the consequences of their own actions and cultural choices on the United States and the West. It is so much easier than changing. But can you still get university tenure for shovelling this*

*garbage? Apparently in women's studies" (The Vancouver Sun, 10/03/01: A19 [emphasis mine]).*

Calls for Dr. Thobani's job were also voiced in letters to the editor. Gary K.

Grottenberg, of Kamloops asserted, "we should contact the president of the University of B.C. and demand that Sunera Thobani be fired. That someone so bereft of human decency should be employed by the women's studies department of a great Canadian university is simply deplorable" (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19). David Martin of Victoria implied that he would like to see similar action taken: "If Ms. Thobani talks like this in public just imagine what her views are in a classroom setting at UBC where she is a professor. Should give parents of her students some pause for thought" (A19). Irish Smith of Surrey, British Columbia, asserted, "We've given immigrants all the rights we once had. Now we have this woman, who we supported with our tax dollars, raging against North America. The scariest thing is she's teaching our children" (*The Province*, 10/04/01: A37). Some did not call for her firing. Instead they, like John D. Stohn of Toronto, argued that she should no longer receive grant money: "We can send more aid to the starving refugees in Afghanistan. We can fund it by cutting off the grants to Ms. Thobani and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women" (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/3/01: A16).

As mentioned above, however, not all of the mainstream media response to Sunera Thobani's speech was negative. The most powerful supportive and cautionary article was published in *The Vancouver Sun* on October 6<sup>th</sup> and was written by David Beers. In his article, headlined "The New McCarthyism", Beers not only dissects much of Dr. Thobani's speech, illustrating how sound-bytes and excerpts taken out of context paint a very different picture than the text in full, but also goes through much of the

media coverage from after her statements were made. He asserts that while many journalists and editorial writers wrote pieces leveling the same critiques of American foreign policy as those of Dr. Thobani, they were not vilified for it in the least:

If she was dangerous, was it because her views are wildly aberrational? No, too many other thinkers, enjoying dignified pulpits like the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *National Post*, have made virtually all her points over the past couple weeks. ...Such views as Thobani's, when elegantly spoken on the clean, quiet pages of a leading magazine or newspaper apparently pose no threat in these new times for a new kind of war. But when emotions run and a roomful of people begin to enthusiastically form a common cause for dissent, government officials are expected to shout it down – or answer for their impotence at the next session of Parliament. *You're either with us or you're against us*. One has to wonder, now that all the huffing and puffing is dying down, whether any of it served to bring us closer to defeating the enemy out there. Or whether it really was about manufacturing an enemy within (A6 [original emphasis]).

In general, it is Beers' argument that "as during the Vietnam era, some of us also will come to imagine and fear a different category of enemy within – the dissenter who sympathizes too much with those who would destroy us. The dissenter who weakens citizenry's resolve by casting moral doubt...on how our leaders choose to wage war" (A6). In other words, it is fear that led to such massive coverage of Sunera Thobani and her speech and it is fear that led to her vilification. The analogy Beers draws, as is evident from his headline, is between the response to Dr. Thobani's statements and the McCarthyism of the Cold War era. It is my contention that there is much more at work

here than even Beers asserts, as will be explained in greater detail in the next chapter. Rick Salutin, of *The Globe and Mail*, though not referring specifically to Dr. Thobani, does address the issue of the suppression of freedom of speech, indeed, freedom of *thought* (10/05/01: A17) in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. He writes,

I'm hearing a new note that says [to voices of dissent] *You're not dead wrong, but How dare you even raise these questions?* It is as if a set of official propositions has been laid down: *We are good. They are evil. It's a war. Only one side can survive. No other factors or analysis apply. Those who don't accept these propositions are fools or worse.* Anyone skeptical about these articles of faith, better watch it. I'm not saying the mood is universal – happily it isn't – but it's out there. ...[T]he price we pay is vast restriction of our freedoms and suppression of debate, in the name of the war against terror (A17 [original emphasis]).

This observation is extremely relevant to the Thobani Moment as well as to the discussion of the nature of public space in Canada post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Salutin, like Beers, sees much in common with the climate in the press at the time and the Cold War era, arguing that an appropriate response must be to continue to think critically (A17).

Many letters to the editor were also supportive of Sunera Thobani. All of the letters having to do with her speech, and the media response to it, published in *The Globe and Mail* on October 4<sup>th</sup> (A18) were sympathetic to her. These letters argued a) that it is not Sunera Thobani or her views that are dangerous. Rather, the “implication that Canadian officials should not participate in a panels at which non-official views are aired” is what is worrisome; b) Dr. Thobani was brave for standing up and voicing her



“very timely and very valid opinion”; and c) that American foreign policy is indeed problematic: “As North Americans who value the lifestyle we have become accustomed to, we all share responsibility for what happened in New York” (A18). Many of the supportive letters encountered commended Dr. Thobani for her “courage” in speaking out (see, for example, *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19; 10/05/01: A19; 10/06/01: A23). Mary Sherlock, of Vancouver, voiced her support: “Bravo to Sunera Thobani for having the courage to raise some serious questions... This recent tragedy has provided the U.S. with an opportunity for some self-examination – and we are hearing none of it” (*The Province*: 10/03/01: A29). Lauren Bacon, of Vancouver, wrote:

So let me get this straight: for speaking her mind, and daring to criticize American foreign policy, Ms. Sunera Thobani deserves to be silenced? Why, as Chuck Stahl suggests, should she “apologize to Canadians and our American cousins”? She has said nothing about the American citizenship, but rather has drawn on her rather extensive expertise to point out the mistakes of the U.S. government. I find it appalling that MPs, whose jobs supposedly include the upholding of our rights and freedoms, are calling for a retraction of Ms. Thobani’s words. Since when does Canada have a House Un-American Activities Committee? This woman is an accomplished scholar whose areas of study include globalization and its effects on women. Surely she is in a position to make informed statements about U.S. foreign policy (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19).

Another reader, echoing the above sentiments, submitted a letter providing some background on American foreign policy in Latin America, before arguing, “The most

unrecognized – and therefore deadly – consequence of the Sept. 11 attacks has been the collective amnesia suffered by leaders and citizenry of the Western World” (A19).

Lynne Jasper of Abbotsford, British Columbia, writes, “I worry when our politicians condemn her for speaking her mind. When one freedom is taken away, the rest will soon follow” (*The Province*, 10/04/01: A37). Another reader went further than merely voicing support for Dr. Thobani’s statements, asserting, “There are two types of terrorism, state terrorism and anti-state terrorism. It is interesting that the U.S. has no war against the former. This is because it is guilty of more widespread terrorism than any other state in the past 50 years. Ask the people of Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Granada, and Chile” (A19).

There was also a great deal of support for Sunera Thobani to be found at various independent media sites. At *Rabble.ca* ([www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca)), five articles were published between October 1<sup>st</sup> and October 15<sup>th</sup> related to her speech and the mainstream media’s response to it. One of these, published October 4<sup>th</sup>, is a reprint of a joint statement made by the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. In their statement, the groups’ declare, “Voices calling for alternative solutions to the September 11<sup>th</sup> crisis have been attacked, while *the space for such voices is dangerously in jeopardy*. Every person in this country should fear the potential ramifications of this blatant move to condemn, ridicule and suppress opposition to the agenda of war and violence” (1 [emphasis mine]). They argue that while the conference at which Dr. Thobani spoke aimed to address “topics under scrutiny by feminists for over 30 years”, it was impossible to do so without taking into account the

way in which the War on Terrorism interconnects with these issues (2), thus defending the subject matter of Dr. Thobani's speech. They state,

The roots and ramifications of recent global events on our movement run deep. We cannot forge ahead as though police work hasn't changed and prison populations won't increase, as though we are not threatened by further restrictions to immigration, as though racially-motivated violence is not happening, as though resources are not already being redistributed, and as though protesters are not already under attack. ...In the wake of this week's storm of controversy surrounding the speech delivered by prominent Canadian feminist Dr. Sunera Thobani on Monday, we wish to denounce the astonishing mistreatment by the mainstream media and elected members of Parliament of Dr. Thobani, the conference, its participants and movements for social change (2).

It is important to note that in all mainstream media coverage during the Thobani Moment, not once is she referred to as "Doctor". Recall from quotes and excerpts above that when we do see her title and status, it tends to be presented as that of a "Ms.". A second article briefly reiterates the support of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and the National Association of Women and Law voiced for Dr. Thobani on Parliament Hill October 4<sup>th</sup> at the launch of its "Declaration against War and Racism" (Heartfield, 10/05/01: 1).

Judy Rebick, in her October 5<sup>th</sup> article entitled "Soaked in Censorship" is, as most of those supportive of Sunera Thobani, quite concerned about the consequences for freedom of speech given the "ferocious attacks" leveled at her after her speech (*Rabble.ca*, 1 [originally published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's website

[www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)]). Much of Rebick's article is dedicated to backing up two of the most prominent sound-bites from Sunera Thobani's speech: "American foreign policy is soaked in blood" and "There will be no emancipation for women anywhere on this planet until Western domination of this planet is ended". She asserts, "What was said has been shamelessly distorted by the right-wing media, which seems to see an opportunity here to batter the women's movement, as well as to create war mania" (2). Like Beers of *The Vancouver Sun*, Rebick is curious as to why Sunera Thobani has been singled out since she is certainly not the only one to hold the opinions, as well as make the claims, that she does. Her answer: "While others may be saying the same thing in Canada, no one has said it with as much passion. *At least not in public*" (2 [emphasis mine]). Also like Beers, Rebick feels the response of Canadian officials to Dr. Thobani's statements "smacks of a new kind of McCarthyism" (2). However, unlike supportive columnists in the mainstream media, Rebick acknowledges that something else is at work here when she writes, "Thobani has always enraged the chattering classes for her *refusal to play the submissive role they expect from immigrant women of colour*" (2 [emphasis mine]).

Lynn Coady's article expresses further outrage at the way in which Sunera Thobani has been treated since her appearance at the Women's Resistance Conference. In particular, she is upset by pundit Christie Blatchford's claim that "the opinions expressed by Sunera Thobani reflect the thinking of...the 'ruling elite'" (*Rabble.ca*, 10/10/01:2). She writes,

Could it be that by "ruling elite", Blatchford is referring to the occasional letter-writer to the *Globe* or the *National Post* or *The Vancouver Sun*? Otherwise, from what I can see, the "ruling elite" is very much united against

thoughtful criticism, socio-political context and thoroughgoing debate with regard to “America’s New War”. ...Meanwhile, Thobani has found it necessary to post a security guard outside her office door – thanks, largely to the fact that the local media stopped just short of calling for her head. If there’s a ruling elite that supports the opinions of Sunera Thobani, I can only assume they’re in hiding. And these days, you can’t really blame them, now, can you? (2-3).

Coady, like most of those who have written words supporting Sunera Thobani, is frightened for freedom of speech in Canada. The climate in this country, she feels, has become one in which the statement, “The terrorist attacks were horrible and wrong, but...’ is ‘despicable’” and tantamount to heresy (1).

Most frightening...is the way in which Thobani’s speech has been used to reinforce the appalling chill that has fallen over free speech in this country and the U.S. Over the past month, journalists and public figures who haven’t fallen into line with the Wentes and McMartins of the world are being censored, reprimanded and, in some cases, fired for offering anything other than wholehearted support of the United States government and whatever course of action George W. Bush deems fit to follow (2).

It is interesting to note that the last article relating to the Thobani Moment published by *Rabble.ca*, is somewhat critical of the content of Sunera Thobani’s speech, though not of her right to say it.

The talk for which she is pilloried is, in the copy I have, unremarkable for what it says, and remarkable for what it does not. ...What I find missing is any real attempt to distinguish the position of the terrorists from those she feels

for, like Iraqi or Palestinian families. You can't just "appropriate" someone else's pain and rage, declare yourself their representative, and then use them to serve an agenda like Islamic fundamentalism. Yet I can't find Sunera Thobani drawing such a distinction (Salutin, 10/12/01: 2).

This article is important in that it serves as an example of what the response of the majority of those writing for the mainstream media to Dr. Thobani's statements should have looked like. Rather than regressing into name-calling and slander, this article keeps the focus where it should have been all along – on the substantive arguments themselves.

The *Independent Media Center* response came in the form of comments posted on-line by readers after a transcript of Sunera Thobani's speech was published on their website. Out of four comments posted between October 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup>, two were supportive of her statements and two were not. Fern Narod, on October 8<sup>th</sup>, wrote, "[Thobani's] speech is clear, honest, concise, and a relief to hear. No wonder many are attacking her. It...doesn't support the lies and policies of governments." Kat, of Victoria, had this to say:

I think this kind of speech should be broadcast on every radio station, television and in every newspaper. It is eloquent and informed and it speaks from the heart. I wish every one in the whole of North America could appreciate the wisdom of Prof. Sunera Thobani's words. I feel very enraged every time I hear about more bombing going on in Afghanistan. My only question is: how do we stop this madness? (10/15/01, [typos in original]).

The negative responses to her speech, however, echoed some of the sentiments expressed by members of the mainstream media. Michael Whittington wrote,

It seems ridiculous to me that [Thobani] should be proclaiming her garbage from a country that is even more lax than the U.S. in its tolerance for 'immigration'. Maybe she would like it better back 'home' where she came from. Else, she can keep her mouth shut, and appreciate the fact that she can spout off her nonsense and not have to worry about getting her head chopped off (10/15/01).

Sandro, a history major from Montreal, stated that he could not even finish Sunera Thobani's speech, so disturbed was he by "her inability to understand geo-politics and our role in it. ...[I]t stuns me to here someone not even bother to present the ACTUAL facts of American foreign diplomacy (more importantly, history), which by itself, has not been the crux of the problems found in any volatile region" (typo in original). He continues, "I always snicker to myself when people justify and protect societies that would rape and murder dissenters such as herself. Quite frankly, I am tired of hearing such musings" (10/15/01).

As we have seen in this chapter, four major themes emerged in the mainstream media's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage. These were the United States of America's response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (i.e., the "War on Terrorism"), the terrorist identity, homeland security, and the retaliation against both Muslim Canadians and Americans in the wake of the attacks. The description of the media's coverage relating to these themes provided context for the Thobani Moment itself. Examination of media coverage of Sunera Thobani's speech allowed for the identification of several themes; amongst these were the delegitimization of Sunera Thobani herself and the intense racialization of people of colour, including Thobani. The infringement of civil liberties was also shown as exemplified by each of the above themes. The responses published

within alternative media sources during the Thobani Moment further illustrates the extent to which participants in Canadian public space feared for the fate of civil liberties in Canada, as well as highlights the severity of the mainstream media's response to Sunera Thobani's speech. In the following chapter, particular attention will be paid to the ways in which the description of media coverage within this chapter can be applied to the analysis of the operation of Canadian public space.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### PEELING THE ONION: ANALYSING THE MEDIA'S POST-9/11 COVERAGE

When Sunera Thobani made her October 1<sup>st</sup> speech, she was, within the mainstream public, vilified for it. Not just because her sentiments were offensive to some, but rather, because she had sentiments in the first place. Though she used her considerable expertise in the areas of women's studies and globalization to make her arguments, she was offended, and she spoke from that feeling. Rather than bracketing her status, her status informed her arguments. In a mainstream public that presents itself as utilizing unbiased, unemotional rationality, detached argumentation, and the bracketing of status, Dr. Thobani's actions were received as much more than an offence to polite sensibilities. They were received as though she had committed some sort of "crime" against those she challenged. At the same time that the media was used as a means of silencing her voice, it was also used as a place to rally behind her in support of both her person and her words. Theorizing public space is not just an academic, abstract task. It is also fundamentally a political one. The way in which public space operates *in the real world* has ramifications for the health of our democracy, as well as for the level of social inequality we observe within that democracy. Engaging in discussion of the nature of public space is also engaging in discussion about the emancipatory potential of public space. It is because of this that the conversation is an absolutely crucial one.

The purpose of this chapter is to flesh out some of the important issues raised in Chapter One by applying them to the description of the media's coverage of Dr. Thobani's speech compiled previously. I will begin with a detailed discussion of public space – particularly the notions of inclusion versus exclusion and "common concern"

before moving on to discuss the social construction of people of colour in Canada. This will also provide me with the opportunity to address the racialization of so-called “minority” groups, and the rendering, by the media, of members of such groups into potential terrorists. Further, it is important to address the issue of counterpublics – can *Rabble.ca* and the *Independent Media Center* truly be considered counterpublics? If so, does their formation facilitate the expansion of public space in relation to the Thobani Moment? Do the letters to the editor discussed in the previous chapter represent the formation of a new counterpublic? The issue of inclusivity will be addressed again in this section, as it is also important to the discussion of these types of public spaces. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of how each of the above issues relates to the contraction and expansion of public space as a whole.

### **Public Space: Inclusion, Exclusion and Issues of Common Concern**

There is little doubt in most people’s minds that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and its ramifications in terms of The War on Terrorism, retaliation against Muslim Canadians, and security issues, are all topics of common concern. As such, coverage of these subjects within media outlets was unsurprising. Indeed, it was to be expected that the mainstream media, as one of the most influential “weak publics” (Fraser, 1993: 24), would be the source from which most would receive their information on the above issues. It was also a place in which, through letters to the editor as well as editorial and comment pieces, members of Canadian society could engage in dialogue and debate regarding these issues. What is problematic, however, is how quickly it became apparent that only *certain* members of Canadian society were entitled to speak, and thus included in the discussion.

This is quite apparent in looking at the Thobani Moment. In examining issues of common concern, and the inclusivity of public space, I am also examining issues of citizenship, of who is considered “truly” Canadian. While those who criticized Sunera Thobani, such as William Nicholls, Emeritus Professor at the University of British Columbia, often mentioned the fact that she “...had a right to express herself as a member of the public, as we all do” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/06/03: A23), the sentiment that she was not entitled to say the things that she did was still present. Though September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath were seen as issues of common concern, it seemed they were not Dr. Thobani’s concern. This is evident in several of the letters to the editor on the topic. When readers wrote that “all that Sunera Thobani’s comments have accomplished is to cast serious doubts on women’s studies as a legitimate field” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/10/01: A19) or that it was “deplorable” that someone so “bereft of human decency” should be employed at “a great Canadian university” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19), their comments reflect this sentiment. Indeed, as was established in the previous chapter, many had made similar observations to those of Dr. Thobani, without suffering nearly the same consequences. The responses to her speech mentioned above, as well as to Dr. Thobani herself, are examples of the manifestation of the sentiment that issues of American and Canadian foreign policy post-September 11<sup>th</sup> were not her concern and as such, she was not entitled to speak about them.

The mainstream media in Canada takes a “middle-of-the-road” approach, “framing issues in a binary manner – constructing them as having two opposite sides” (Jiwani, 1998: 61). As such, the media portrays either extreme as “radical and represent[ing] fringe elements” (1998: 61). In this way, the media is very much a

Habermasian public space, in that it touts itself as concerned with presenting rational, unbiased information to the public. Dr. Thobani was, by her critics, constructed as irrational and highly biased. Indeed, even prior to her October 1<sup>st</sup> speech, when still president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), she was portrayed by Canadian mainstream media as, “passionate, angry, militant, and demanding. This type of representation is often juxtaposed with equally extreme depictions of far-Right groups...Thus, in the public’s imagination as well as in the media, the two extremes are rendered illegitimate – as irrational movements” (1998: 64). This is evident in Stockwell Day’s assertion that Dr. Thobani’s speech was “motivated by her own hate” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A1). It is further evidenced in letters to the editor in which she is called a “radical Canadian” (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/06/01: A20). Furthermore, statements such as that of Chuck Stahl, Tory-Democratic Representative deputy leader, asserting that she is little more than “an expert on Thobani promotion and...an expert on intolerance, frankly” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A2) serve to delegitimize her. In other words, both her person and her words had no place in the public realm.

Those who managed to write articles wondering why there was such a response to Sunera Thobani’s words picked up on the fact that she was certainly not alone in making the points that she did. David Beers seemed to feel that the response was one whose aim was to crush dissent; the threat posed by Dr. Thobani actually had less to do with her than with “a roomful of people [who] begin to enthusiastically form a common cause for dissent” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/06/03: A6). Rick Salutin, of *The Globe and Mail*, makes a similar observation to that of Beers. He sees little room for dissent, stating, “I’m

hearing a new note that says *You're not dead wrong*, but *How dare you even raise these questions?*" (10/05/01: A17). Indeed, there is certainly validity to those arguments.

Dissent was seen, by many, as an inappropriate response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and this is very important in terms of the inclusivity of public space. If the media, as a dominant public space in Canada, is supposed to be an "abstract space in which citizens discuss and debate public issues" (Oliver, 1999: 38), then it is apparent, again, that only certain citizens with certain views on these "public issues" need apply. However, while Beers' and Salutin's points regarding the stifling of dissent are certainly valid, it is important to note that despite their quite critical statements, despite their dissent, no one called for their job or labeled them as idiots, nutcases, or terrorist sympathizers. The fact that they were exempt from the sort of vilification that Sunera Thobani was subjected to gets at the heart of the matter. As we shall see, the reaction of the media to Dr. Thobani's words is directly influenced by her status as an immigrant woman of colour.

Importantly, it was the media itself that chose to publish Sunera Thobani's words. *The Vancouver Sun* published a transcript of the speech in its entirety (10/03/01: A6). *The Province* and *The Globe and Mail*, however, did not, choosing instead to rely on sound-bytes, excerpts, and the representation of her words by columnists. This has interesting ramifications for the inclusivity of public space. On the one hand, covering Dr. Thobani's speech makes the media in fact appear concerned with acknowledging "different" voices. Stated differently, the publication of articles relating to Dr. Thobani's statements allows the mainstream media to appear both inclusive and unbiased to its readers. This serves to encourage the public to embrace the media's seemingly

“moderate” perspective by making such a perspective seem both “attractive and reasonable” (Jiwani, 1998: 64).

In addressing the inclusivity of public space, however, we are also addressing the issue of citizenship, of who is considered to be “truly” Canadian. The strategy utilized by the media, in other words, further functions to reinforce a sense of national identity, thus strengthening the “Us” versus “Them” dichotomy that was so easily recognizable in the media’s post-September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage. For example, recall Jean Chrétien’s statement that “the Western world has to react [to the terrorist attacks] and...the Western world will react” (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/13/01: A14). In this statement, a clear distinction is being made between “Us” and “Them” and this distinction is only reinforced by statements such as President Bush’s “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil...But good will prevail” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 09/13/01: A2). Using language like this not only makes it clear that the “villains” are not considered Western, but also they are not rational; they are *evil* and “depraved” (*The Province*, 09/11/01: A6).

As coverage continued, and reports began to appear stating that many of the terrorists had lived in the United States unnoticed for some length of time prior to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the “Us” versus “Them” distinction intensified. Articles such as Margaret Wente’s “Why do they hate us so much?”, through its warning that the terrorists, depraved and evil as they secretly are, “turn out to be the guy[s] next door”, served to perpetuate a growing sense of fear in the hearts and minds of the newspapers’ readers. Since we had all read that the culprits could not possibly be “Western”, nor from any “civilized” nation, and since they were so shockingly capable of hiding within American society, all immigrant people of colour suddenly became suspect. Thus, on a

fundamental level, the media was now able to frame all immigrant people of colour as potential extremists, and therefore, as not truly “fitting in”. “This ideological work of producing and reproducing a sense of nation-ness depends on the media being able to identify and portray groups that can be framed as ‘extremists’ – as not fitting into society” (Jiwani, 1998: 65). The response to Sunera Thobani’s speech was exacerbated by this strategy, since she immediately became a “case in point” of the hidden extremism of some seemingly “respectable” members of Canadian society. In other words, through its coverage of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, its aftermath, and Dr. Thobani’s speech, the strategy employed by the media is one in which it is legitimated, thus gaining influence not only amongst readers but amongst “strong” publics such as the government as well. At the same time, the media, in its representation of Sunera Thobani as a “radical” manages not only to delegitimize her but also to perpetuate fear of backlash, of being vilified, or even of losing one’s job, amongst those who might agree with her and would potentially have echoed her statements. While appearing at once inclusive and moderate, the media gains the ability to promote the *exclusion* of certain voices without the repercussion of losing legitimacy with their readers. This makes the mainstream media an incredibly powerful and coercive public space. This is also perhaps the major way in which the media has become a hegemonic public space.

### **The Social Construction of People of Colour in Canada**

The discourse present in the media surrounding not only Sunera Thobani’s speech, but also the retaliation against people of colour as a result of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, is similar to that regarding the social construction of people of colour. Indeed, this latter discourse informs the former. Furthermore, the strategy utilized by the

media discussed above can be said to contribute to the rendering of racialized people into potential terrorists. In this section, my aim is to explore these issues further, in an effort to continue to flesh out the way in which public space in Canada operates. This discussion will focus first on the way in which the historical construction of people of colour resembles and informs the way in which they are currently constructed. I will then move to a discussion of the role this construction plays in the response of the media to Dr. Thobani's speech. Finally, I will discuss how these issues, as well as those concerning the infringement of civil liberties, are tied to this aforementioned racialization.

As was mentioned in Chapter One, during the period of British colonialism, representations of people of colour "implicitly encoded" the 'Us' versus 'Them' dynamic, by portraying people of colour as *biologically* inferior to their white colonizers" (Jiwani, 1998: 55 [original emphasis]). This tendency revolved around the construction of people of colour as deviant or as "an extreme version of some trait such as sexuality, inability to adapt, weakness, and so on" (1998: 58). As was discussed briefly above, this discourse has remained pronounced within mainstream media. Though Dr. Thobani, at least through coverage of her speech, and other, particularly Muslim, people of colour, were granted access to public space, the legitimacy of their opinions and knowledge claims are undercut by the mainstream public's skewed perceptions of their criminality. Almost immediately post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, Muslim Canadians became the victims of physical and verbal harassment stemming from the perception, then unfounded, that the terrorists were "Islamic fanatics". The feeling amongst this group that they were becoming seen as "the enemy within" became widespread (*The Globe and Mail*,



09/14/01: A16), as did the perception of being “under siege in their own country” (A16 – 17). Indeed, many were quick to point out the role that the media had in exacerbating this situation: “Because most media people...were so quick to link these skillfully orchestrated disasters to the expertise and influence of a militant Saudi dissident, Osama bin Laden...all Muslims were clearly ‘marked’ as guilty by association” (Elmasry, 09/14/01: A26).

Whereas historically, people of colour were constructed by colonizers as backwards and uncivilized in order to legitimize colonialism (Carty, 1999: 33), in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> discourse, it is the terrorists who are constructed as “uncivilized” or “depraved”. Statements such as Margaret Wente’s “The poison that runs through the veins of the suicide bombers...comes from their culture, not ours. The root causes are in their history, not ours” (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/22/01: A13) reflect the analogy that can be drawn between the colonialist discourse surrounding people of colour and the current discourse surrounding the terrorists. However, due to the fact that, as we saw above, all people of colour quickly became suspect post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, and were indeed seen as “guilty by association”, the discourse surrounding the construction of the terrorist identity very quickly becomes a discourse surrounding the social construction of people of colour *in general*.

As was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the tendency was for colonizers to categorize people of colour as more or less civilized based on their willingness to give into the colonizers’ civilizing mission (Carty, 1999: 309). The consequence of this is that “good” people of colour became those who were willing to assimilate, who were dependent upon those who colonized them as well as grateful to

their colonizers for “civilizing” them. In other words, “good” people of colour are *passive* people of colour. Canada’s history as a white settler society further contributes to the current silencing of racialized groups. Agnew points out that Canadian immigration policy prior to the 1960’s was geared toward preserving Canada as a “white man’s country” (1996: 28). The stereotypes of people of colour present during colonialism outlined above were explicit in early Canadian immigration laws. “[P]urity was equated with whiteness, and hence indirectly with European culture” (Valverde as cited in Agnew, 1996: 39). Thus, “Eurocentric ideas were employed to construct the idea of the nation, motherhood, and morality. ...[S]uch a lens rendered immigrant women outsiders” (Ng, cited in Dua, 1999: 14). Though the laws have changed, “through cultural images in stories, narratives, and photographs, Canadians [continue to be] divided into a normalized group and ‘others’. ...[T]hese images lead to psychological and socio-economic consequences for women of colour, who must work harder to establish themselves as thinking, rational, legitimate members of society” (Dua, 1999: 22).

Furthermore, mainstream media coverage is in part responsible for “robberies of representation” that facilitate the creation of “essentialized moral and cultural entities” (Bannerji, 1995: 36). In other words, “it is through discursive operations that racialized structures are created” (Dua, 1999: 21) These structures homogenize members of racialized groups through the reduction of the “multiple subjectivities” of ethnic identity into archetypal categories such as “*The Muslim*”, “*The Arab*”, and so on. The construction of terrorists as “evil”, “depraved”, and “uncivilized” is merged with discourse surrounding the “essentialized” Other. Thus, the rendering of people of colour into potential terrorists is both perpetuated and reinforced.

The reaction to Sunera Thobani's speech, then, has less to do with what she said than with who she is. Clearly, there were others who, in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, shared and expressed many of the same viewpoints as she did without suffering the same consequences. Therefore, though freedom of speech and dissent were certainly under attack, the vilification that Dr. Thobani received was to a large extent the result of the covert construction of people of colour operating not only in the media, but in the minds of the public as well. This social construction, then, dictates that people of colour, particularly in this case Muslim people of colour, are members of a backward culture. Furthermore, those of "them" who are lucky enough to be living in Canada should be grateful for the opportunity "they" have been given to become a part of a "civilized" culture and society. As such, "good" people of colour, again, are those who count their blessings. This is evidenced again and again within the mainstream media. Recall, for example, the letter to the editor submitted by Adam Johnson-Smith of Burnaby, British Columbia: "So these cowards fly here or move here and *this is the thanks we get?* We should have cracked down on Iran and Palestine a long time ago. But I'm sure George W. Bush is ready to *make an example* of the moronic terrorists who have killed so many Americans" (*The Province*, 09/12/01: A57 [emphasis mine]). While President Bush aimed to make an example of the terrorists, the Canadian media turned toward making an example of Dr. Thobani.

Sunera Thobani challenges the above social construction. She refuted the claim that women of colour in developing nations are a part of a backwards culture and she takes the privileges that come from living in Canada very seriously. In other words, she embraced her right to speak her mind, as any member of Canadian society is supposedly

entitled to do. In doing so, however, she violated the notion of passivity that many expect from Canadian immigrants. Stated differently, Dr. Thobani became threatening to government officials, the media, and members of the public because she refused to remain quietly ingratiating. As Judy Rebick, in her article for *Rabble.ca* wrote, “Thobani has always enraged the chattering classes for her *refusal to play the submissive role they expect from women of colour*” (10/05/01: 2 [emphasis mine]). Dr. Thobani herself writes, “The manner in which I have been vilified is difficult to understand, unless one sees it as a visceral response to an “ungrateful immigrant” or an uppity woman of colour who dares to speak out” (2001: 4). This refusal, coupled with the social construction of people of colour in general, allowed her knowledge claims to be rendered as illegitimate despite her professional and academic expertise in the area of globalization and women’s studies.

Indeed, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the coverage of Sunera Thobani’s speech downplayed, if not completely undermined, this expertise. Countless quotes from letters to the editor within the mainstream media referred to her merely as “Ms.” rather than “Dr.” (for e.g., *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19; *The Globe and Mail*, 10/03/01: A16). Articles written by several columnists omitted information relating to her expertise altogether (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/06/01: A6; A23). Her expertise was further undercut by the constant name-calling that appeared in many of the articles having to do with her speech. Dubbing Dr. Thobani as “nutty”, an “idiot”, the “Nutty Professor” and a “terrorist sympathizer” further codified her appearance as a “radical” or an extremist. Attacking the University of British Columbia for potentially granting her tenure at some point in the future, and even for hiring her to begin with, further undermined her status as a highly educated and intelligent member of Canadian

society. When government officials began to debate whether or not to continue funding conferences such as the one at which Dr. Thobani spoke, those arguing that the funding should not continue also relied on challenging her expertise, arguing that she was little more than an expert on herself and on spreading intolerance and “crackpot theories” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A1, A2, A7; *The Globe and Mail*, 10/03/01: A16).

Another discourse emerged around Sunera Thobani and her speech simultaneous to those mentioned above. Here, she was constructed as deviant in her actions. She was also constructed as personally responsible for potentially causing strain in Canadian-American relations. Articles began to emerge in which “American analysts” asserted that “broad dissemination of Thobani’s speech won’t help Canada in its attempt to show the Bush administration it fully supports the war on terrorism” (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/06/01: A7). *The Vancouver Sun* also printed a front-page article headlined “Americans denounce Thobani – and Canada” (10/06/01). One article explicitly equated Dr. Thobani’s speech with an “attack on the United States” (*The Globe and Mail*, 10/02/01: A11). It is here that we can begin to more clearly see the rendering of people of colour into potential terrorists. This process began prior, obviously, to Dr. Thobani’s speech; it is apparent in the aforementioned quotes regarding Muslim Canadians being dubbed “guilty by association”. It is also evident in the mainstream media’s discussion of homeland security and proposed immigration/anti-terrorism legislation. These previously existing issues, as well as the social construction of people of colour, contributed to government and media’s ability to explicitly dub Sunera Thobani as deviant in her actions. Indeed, in the climate that existed within public space post-

September 11<sup>th</sup>, arriving at the conclusion that she is, indeed, a terrorist sympathizer was presented within the media as “common sense”.

By September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, *The Globe and Mail* had released an article explaining that new border-crossing guidelines would be geared toward giving “special scrutiny” to “men with links to certain Muslim countries and a scientific or aviation background” as well as to “the travel routes and patterns that may identify Islamic terrorists” (A6). Members of the Canadian Muslim Civil Liberties Association (CMCLA) quickly expressed their fears that such guidelines would lead to the harassment of “certain ethnic groups” (A6) and claimed that these guidelines were a form of racial profiling. The government, as was to be expected, insisted that this was not the case; these guidelines would “help to identify possible terrorists” but nothing more (A6). These guidelines, however, are rather broad in terms of the criteria that must be met in order to justify “special scrutiny”. Indeed, a major criticism of all of the legislation being proposed at the time was that the criteria outlined within them were too broad. Bill C-36, Canada’s proposed anti-terrorism legislation, for example, raised concern “among immigrant groups and civil libertarians [who] worry that the government will use a broad definition of terrorism and start a list of suspected terrorist groups that could unjustly target legitimate organizations” (09/27/01: A12). Though it seemed that many Canadians would be willing to give up some of their civil liberties in exchange for increased security (09/19/01: A1), the question of who was really at risk in terms of giving up those liberties needs to be asked. The above border-crossing guidelines, as well as Bill-C36, have serious consequences for people of colour most of all. Many “legal experts” seemed to acknowledge this fact when they argued that such changes in policy could curtail

“freedom of association for certain racial, cultural or political groups” (09/24/01: A7) through the possibly inadvertent criminalization of such organizations.

Other risks to civil liberties also targeted, both directly and indirectly, people of colour. Pressure to revise past Charter rulings such as the right to a fair and impartial hearing for refugees as well as the liberalization of police interrogation techniques (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/24/01: A7) may be acceptable prices to pay for security in the minds of many Canadians but chances are the majority of those polled would not be affected by such changes in policy. Rather, those who are already subject to racial profiling, or who are part of various groups of political dissent (i.e. anti-globalization activists), are the targets of such changes in legislation. In other words, those who are already suspect in the eyes of the Canadian media, government, and much of the public are the ones truly bearing the burden of these costs to civil liberties. Covertly, the sentiment upon which these proposed changes in legislation are based is one in which those targeted are guilty until proven innocent. This is further evidenced by the claim, made by many officials in the United States, as well as many members of the Canadian government and public, that Canada’s immigration laws have been too lax for too long (*The Globe and Mail*, 09/21/01: A6). The assumption here is that the threat of terrorism originates outside North American borders, but because of Canada’s negligent immigration policies, it has now become a “haven for criminals and terrorists” (*The Province*, 09/13/01: A43). Two things are happening here. On the one hand, there is the threat from outside; immigration laws should be toughened to protect against this threat. On the other hand, because of Canada’s ineffectual immigration laws, there is a threat from within as well and it is for this reason that the loss of some civil liberties is seen as necessary.

Obviously, these attitudes are inextricable from the way in which the terrorist identity, and therefore that of people of colour in general, is constructed in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> discourse. Since all, particularly Muslim, people of colour are “guilty by association” changes in legislation aimed at stopping “possible” terrorists are in fact aimed directly at legitimate members of Canadian society. Here we can clearly see the underlying assumptions at work regarding who is truly a Canadian citizen. Here too we can see the threat being leveled at immigrant people of colour in Canadian society – instead of “mere” racial profiling, we see a shift towards changes in legal code that both create and reinforce the racialization of people of colour. In other words, both the social construction of people of colour in general, and the proposed changes in legislation in particular, has the effect of “manufacturing an enemy within” (Beers, *The Globe and Mail*, 10/06/01: A6). Whether or not the proposed policy changes were to take effect, the ramifications are the same in terms of the way in which people of colour in Canada are viewed. That such changes in policy were seriously considered reinforces the suspicion and fear on the part of the Canadian public that the Muslim members of their communities are potential terrorists and not to be trusted. Thus, none of them can be seen as true Canadian citizens, and therefore as full members of Canadian society. As such, they are no longer entitled to the same rights and freedoms as other Canadian citizens. It is for all of these reasons that Sunera Thobani’s speech was received with such outrage. In the end, for many, the bottom line is that Dr. Thobani, despite her credentials, despite her expertise, is not entitled to raise her voice on issues of common concern because she is not a true member of Canadian public space. In other words, Dr. Thobani herself, and



those “like her” *are* the issue of common concern to be “dealt with” by those considered legitimate members of the public realm.

## **Counterpublics**

To some of those involved, however directly or indirectly, in the “debate” surrounding all of the above issues, the treatment of Sunera Thobani, people of colour in general, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the War on Terrorism by the mainstream media was unacceptable. Such participants voiced this sentiment in letters to the editor and editorial pieces within the mainstream media. Others chose independent media sources as their outlet. In voicing their objections to the above issues they attempted to broaden the discussion in order to point out that none of these issues were as one-sided as they appeared. While participation of this kind within mainstream media can be said to help expand public space, as will be discussed in more detail below, whether or not they in effect formed a new counterpublic, separate from those already existing, is less clear.

Recall the main characteristics of a counterpublic outlined in Chapter One. Their overarching quality is that of providing a space in which “assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation...now [can] be publicly argued out” (Fraser, 1993: 15). In order to truly be considered a counterpublic, however, such space must function to provide an area of “withdrawal and regroupment...in which people can organize and develop activities that challenge the wider, hegemonic public. ...[They are the] bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (1993: 15). Both the *Independent Media Center* (IMC) and *Rabble.ca* fulfill all of the above criteria for being considered a counterpublic and each has existed for over a year. The IMC began in November 1999 at the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization

([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)). *Rabble.ca* was launched on April 18, 2001 just before the protests in Quebec City against the Summit of the Americas ([www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca)). Their mission statements are similar in nature; both aim to fuse activism and journalism in an attempt to provide what they believe to be truly democratic news coverage ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)). *Rabble.ca* is interested in “reflecting the energy of exciting new democracy movements around the world” while “also building on the strengths of the existing diverse movements for equality and social justice” in an effort to “surprise, inform, and activate” ([www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca), “about us”). The IMC aims to provide a media outlet for “the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth” ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org), “FAQ”). There are over fifty autonomous IMCs around the world and each aspires to different goals (“FAQ”). Their major goal, however, is to “foster and facilitate the development of as much independent media as possible around the world...to enable people...to realize they can take control of other aspects of their lives that they previously left up to ?experts? or ?professionals?” (“FAQ” [typed as in original]). As we can see, both of these media outlets have close ties to activism and their aims are clearly parallel to those of a counterpublic. In other words, they are spaces in which “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1993: 14).

The articles concerning Dr. Thobani and the reaction to her speech on *Rabble.ca* were most concerned with what the said reaction meant for freedom of speech in Canada. As Lynn Coady wrote, “Most frightening...is the way in which Thobani’s speech has been used to reinforce the appalling chill that has fallen over free speech in this country

and the U.S.” (10/10/01: 2). All of the articles published on this site addressed, in one way or another, the fact that “Voices calling for alternative solutions to the September 11<sup>th</sup> crisis have been attacked, while *the space for such voices is dangerously in jeopardy*” (10/04/01: 1 [emphasis mine]). It is clear from such coverage that the aim of *Rabble.ca* is to address this threat through the publication of alternative viewpoints.

In order to be considered a true counterpublic, it is not necessary to be supportive of, in this case, Sunera Thobani or her speech. Though the majority of the coverage was indeed supportive, this is not really the point. More important is the quality of any critique leveled against her speech and its ramifications for the space in which those critiques are leveled. For example, in Rick Salutin’s *Rabble.ca* article, we see a critique of her speech that appears very different from that which appeared in mainstream media. The aim here is not to vilify Dr. Thobani’s *person*, or to delegitimize her expertise, but rather to point out the weaknesses of her actual speech. Instead of dubbing her an “idiot” or calling her speech a “poisonous diatribe”, as was frequent in mainstream media coverage, Salutin discusses, instead, Dr. Thobani’s perceived failure to make “any real attempt to distinguish the position of the terrorists from those she feels for, like Iraqi or Palestinian families” (10/12/01: 2). He goes on to write that “You can’t just ‘appropriate’ someone else’s pain and rage, declare yourself their representative, and then use them to serve an agenda like Islamic fundamentalism. Yet I can’t find Sunera Thobani drawing such a distinction” (2). Again, what is significant here is the quality of the critique. Salutin’s qualms are with the *substantive content* of her speech rather than, as in the mainstream media’s coverage, with Dr. Thobani as a person. Nowhere in mainstream media was any sort of substantive critique of Sunera Thobani’s words to be found.

Indeed, it seemed as if what she actually said was beside the point. The critique, within mainstream media, was actually leveled against *her right to say the things she did*.

Again, this has ramifications for the inclusivity of public space. Whereas the strategy utilized by the mainstream media promotes exclusion, the strategy employed by counterpublics aims to create a space in which genuine debate can occur.

The coverage of Dr. Thobani's speech on the IMC website was of a different nature. Rather than articles, this response came in the form of comments posted by readers on-line. According to the IMC, since the speech was causing so much uproar within the mainstream media, it seemed appropriate to post a transcript of it on their main site so readers could see for themselves what the reaction, or overreaction, stemmed from. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, two of the four comments posted were critical of Dr. Thobani. The first resembled Salutin's approach in that Michael Sandro, the author, attempted to criticize the substantive content of her speech. He strayed from this approach, however, when he went on to write "I always snicker to myself when people justify and protect societies that would rape and murder dissenters such as [Thobani]" (10/15/01). Both this posting, then, as well as the second one, very much resembled the sentiments expressed within mainstream media. Michael Whittington wrote, "Maybe she would like it better back 'home' where she came from. Else, she can keep her mouth shut, and appreciate the fact that she can spout off her nonsense and not have to worry about getting her head chopped off" (10/15/01).

Again, though the content of these comments may be racist and slanderous of Dr. Thobani's person, and though they appear much the same as the words published within mainstream media, the ramifications for the inclusivity of the space are very different.

This is because, in general, the very nature of *these* counterpublics, particularly the IMC, differs from that of the mainstream public. The agency of participants is prioritized; there is far less fear mongering within these spaces, and as such, participants are not easily silenced. However, like mainstream media, participation in counterpublics is still contingent on access. As Travers argues,

Just as access to and participation within dominant public spaces historically has been restricted to an elite, there is evidence that cyberspace is itself an elite space. ...[T]he most obvious challenge to the democratizing potential of computer-based communications technologies is in terms of material access – to the hardware and software required for participation, the education required to make use of it, the information required to get on board, and importantly, the sense of entitlement required to produce public written statements and to take up social space (2000: 13).

Furthermore, while counterpublics such as the IMC and *Rabble.ca* do “challenge the wider, hegemonic public” (Fraser, 1993: 15), the majority of Canadians do not come to these sites to get their news. Because of this, their ability to do so is limited. Many do not know of the existence of these counterpublics, and indeed sites such as these are themselves stereotyped as “radical” and “extremist”. Therefore, though letters to the editor supportive of Dr. Thobani within mainstream media are not themselves counterpublics, they do have the latent function of helping to regulate hegemonic public space in a way in which these counterpublics cannot. Thus, letters to the editor which voice opinions and views contrary to the dominant discourse operating within mainstream media assist counterpublics by helping to pry open mainstream public space *from within*. As such, they help to accomplish the counterpublics’ goal of revitalizing

public space as a whole, despite the fact that their publication has the manifest function of allowing the mainstream media to reinforce its appearance as “centrist” and “objective”.

### **Expansion and Contraction of Public Space**

In the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and upon examining the media coverage of this event, the contraction of public space is most obvious. It is the resistance to this contraction, however, that may be more difficult to document. Within the mainstream media we can most definitely identify the extent to which public space has contracted. Any time in which we see silencing taking place within the mainstream media, through the exclusion of voices of dissent, the vilification of Sunera Thobani, and the social construction of people of colour, public space is contracting. Recall the operational definition of contraction outlined in Chapter One. This term is used to refer to few available and accessible avenues of discourse and dissent, particularly to marginalized voices within society. In this chapter we have seen how the strategy utilized by the mainstream media allows it to maintain its legitimacy while at the same time delegitimizing and, therefore, excluding those who would present a counterdiscourse surrounding the War on Terrorism and the terrorist identity. The proposed changes in legislation discussed above further reinforce the contraction of public space by limiting the freedom of association and speech for various members of society. Furthermore, the response to Dr. Thobani’s speech found within the mainstream public serves to scare people who may have echoed her sentiments into remaining silent. “The official public sphere,” writes Fraser, “...is the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new hegemonic mode of domination” (1993: 8). In the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the mainstream media, in utilizing a strategy that allows its

coverage, and the assumptions underlying that coverage, to appear both “attractive and reasonable” (Jiwani, 1998: 64) is indeed the major institutional site in which consent for the War on Terrorism and civil liberties infringement is constructed and reinforced.

The fear for the fate of freedom of speech in Canada that we have seen is well founded. Indeed, post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, the feeling that public space had collapsed was palpable. Again, however, what was less clear was the ways in which public space was also expanding. At a fundamental level, the issues being covered within mainstream media would never have appeared in the dominant discourse to the extent that they did had this crisis not occurred. In other words, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> spawned dialogue about issues, such as problematic American foreign policy and racism, that were previously absent from, or did not have a great deal of presence within, dominant discourse. This in and of itself is an expansion of public space. Indeed, the contraction of public space in actuality leads to the resistance to said contraction. When, in the mainstream media, columnists wrote articles such as Beers’ “The New McCarthyism”, they observed the contraction of public space and in effect helped to resist that contraction. Letters to the editor commending Dr. Thobani for her “courage” in speaking out, as well as echoing the notion that American foreign policy is indeed problematic further contributed to the resistance to the contraction of public space, thus promoting its expansion.

Because the contraction of public space was so extreme and so obvious post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, many Canadians previously presumably secure in their beliefs regarding the strength of democracy in Canada suddenly became insecure. Lauren Bacon’s letter to the editor reflects this when she writes: “So let me get this straight: for speaking her

mind, and daring to criticize American foreign policy, Ms. Sunera Thobani deserves to be silenced? ... Since when does Canada have a House Un-American Activities Committee?" (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A19). Another reader echoed these sentiments, arguing that "the most unrecognized – and therefore deadly – consequence of the Sept. 11 attacks has been the collective amnesia suffered by leaders and citizenry of the Western World" (A19). The extremity of the contraction of public space at this time prompted many to speak up in defence of Sunera Thobani. This support, however, was less for Thobani herself and for the views she expressed than for the rights of Canadians to express such views. In effect, this is an attempt to pry public space open, to expand it, by uncovering and making the avenues of discourse and dissent that were increasingly less visible available.

Important to the discussion of the expansion of Canadian public space is the fact that Dr. Thobani herself published a response to the controversy caused by her speech. This response was originally printed in the journal *Atlantis*<sup>5</sup> however, it was quickly published and circulated within various counterpublics<sup>6</sup>. *The Independent Media Center*'s "Print" section ([www.print.indymedia.org](http://www.print.indymedia.org)) made her response the topic of a "Special Edition" on its website October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001. *Rabble.ca* also published a reprint of Dr. Thobani's response (October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001). It is significant to the discussion of the expansion of public space to note that a statement from *The Independent Media Center* itself precedes the text of Dr. Thobani's response. This statement reads, "This is the unedited version of Sunera Thobani's response to her critics, who have criticized her for a speech she gave at a conference on violence against women. *Judge for yourself*"

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<sup>5</sup> This information was obtained from Dr. Thobani via personal communication, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix Two for the full text of this response.



([www.print.indymedia.org](http://www.print.indymedia.org), 2001: 1 [emphasis mine]). This statement illustrates just how contracted mainstream public space truly is by providing something to which it can be contrasted. Stated differently, in trusting participants to draw their own conclusions, counterpublics such as the IMC help to pry open such spaces not only by providing “counterdiscourses” but also by prioritizing the agency of their participants. As was mentioned earlier, with the exception of *The Vancouver Sun*, a full transcript of Dr. Thobani’s speech was nowhere to be found within the mainstream media examined. It would have been reasonable for each paper to offer a transcript of the speech, with a similar statement to *The Independent Media Center’s* “Judge for yourself”, however, this was not done. Again, this alludes to the fact that the mainstream media is itself an ideological space and, as such, a space with particular, often covert agendas; one such agenda is that of “the construction of consent” (Fraser, 1993: 8). The approach utilized by counterpublics facilitates the expansion of public space by providing coverage that leaves judgment in the hands of the participant.

In her response, Dr. Thobani addresses the controversy generated by her speech directly, arguing that her choice of language was both intentional and grounded in the “politics of embodied thinking and speaking” (2001: 2). The point of using such graphic language, she argues, “...compels us to recognize the sheer corporeality of the terrain upon which bombs rain and mass terror is waged” (Ibid.). She goes on to assert that she has “always rejected the politics of academic elitism which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a ‘properly’ dispassionate professorial demeanour to establish...intellectual credentials” (Ibid.). This is an instructive sentence in terms of the expansion of public

space because within it we see Dr. Thobani's personal challenge to the mode of discourse dominating mainstream public spaces. Such discourse, as we have seen, relies heavily on so-called "rational" argumentation and reporting and therefore privileges certain modes of expression. As is to be expected, these modes of discourse tend to be those of the dominant groups in society, and also tend to render invisible members of "subordinated" groups. As Dr. Thobani asserts, the language used not only by the President of The United States, but by mainstream media as well, "is very familiar to peoples who have been colonized by Europe. Its use [post-September 11<sup>th</sup>]...reveals that it is a fundamentalist and racialized western ideology which is being mobilized to rally the troops and to build a national and international consensus in defence of 'civilization'" (2001: 3). Not only is the appearance of Dr. Thobani's response within public space itself an example of expansion, but the arguments raised, and methods used, within the response also serve as an illustration of resistance to the contraction of public space in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Furthermore, repeatedly in her response, Dr. Thobani asserts that despite the hostility of the responses to her October 1<sup>st</sup> speech, she "welcome[s] the public discussion [her] speech has generated as an opportunity to further the public debate about Canada's support of America's new war" (Thobani, 2001: 1). This statement is itself recognition of the contraction of public space as well as, importantly, the opportunity for its expansion. Dr. Thobani writes, "Wherever we [migrants] reside...*we claim the right to speak and participate in public life*" (2001: 4 [emphasis mine]). Not only through the use of embodied language, but also by claiming this right explicitly *within public space*, Dr. Thobani is encouraging, as well as furthering, the process of the expansion of Canadian

public space. By continuing to speak out, Dr. Thobani helps to encourage others to follow suit. As we have seen, a number of people have indeed done so.

Both the critical voices within mainstream media, few though they were, as well as within already-existing counterpublics, serve the important function of regulating mainstream public space. In doing so, they fight the collapse of public space and help to revitalize and renew such space as a whole. By resisting the contraction of public space, they also serve to provide a system of checks and balances for the vitality of Canadian democracy. The dissent, support, shock, and anger present within letters to the editor as well as within counterpublics remind those in positions of power that the case is not closed, that consensus has not been reached. In raising their voices, participants in these arenas further help to remind those who have been silenced that they are not alone. By preventing the total collapse of public space, by promoting its expansion, they are also pushing for the inclusivity of public space. This is absolutely necessary if public spaces are to have any emancipatory potential whatsoever. This is also absolutely necessary for the existence of a healthy democracy. In looking at the Thobani Moment in such a detailed fashion we are more capable of understanding the way in which public space in Canada operates. Such space is not static – it is, as has been shown, incredibly fluid. The processes of expansion and contraction are inextricably linked within public space as it currently functions, though it can be said that the forces of expansion may be somewhat weaker than those of contraction. In understanding the underlying assumptions that allow such blatant contraction of public space, we are also privy to information that may allow us to strengthen such space's expansion and, thus, inclusivity as well as emancipatory potential.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to use the Thobani Moment as a case study for examining the expansion and contraction of public space. This is an important subject, not only in terms of addressing gaps in theoretical literature regarding public space, but also for understanding the ways in which the discourse surrounding, particularly immigrant people of colour, affects media coverage and vice versa. Thematically analyzing articles published both in newsprint and online allowed for the dominant discourses present within mainstream media to be uncovered. This facilitated the examination of how public space in Canada operates. By focusing on the themes present within both mainstream and alternative media sources, it was possible to clearly see the ways in which public space both expands and contracts.

Indeed, in this case, the social construction of immigrant people of colour in Canada, as well as the racism it perpetuates, is one of the most significant factors contributing to the contraction of public space in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This social construction, as we have seen, allows for the continued racialization of people of colour as well as for their being portrayed as potential terrorists. Representing people of colour in this way perpetuates their being viewed with suspicion, fear, and anger by dominant members of Canadian society. This social construction is further significant in terms of the media's response to Dr. Thobani's speech, as it informed the way in which she was "handled" by the media. The Thobani Moment, then, presents us with an incredibly clear snapshot of public space post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. As such it is incredibly instructive, not only to discussion within future literature concerned with

public space, but to the study of the ways in which media discourse perpetuates the racialization of “minority” groups in Canada.

This analysis of public space began with an exploration of already-existing literature conceptualizing its appearance and operation. Despite the critiques of the Habermasian conceptualization of such spaces discussed in Chapter One, his work continues to provide the framework for the majority of literature dealing with this subject. Indeed, the Habermasian notion of public space as an arena of discourse wherein citizens converge to discuss issues of common concern in a rational, unbiased way persists as a model of what most of us expect from public spaces such as the media. The data examined herein reveals that public space is, in many ways, structured so as to operate in this fashion.

For example, in Chapter Three the strategy utilized by the mainstream media was discussed. In presenting itself as moderate, through the publication not only of Sunera Thobani’s words, but of letters to the editor as well as editorial pieces supporting her, the media legitimizes itself as both rational and objective while at the same time contributing to the representation of Dr. Thobani as radical, irrational, and intensely emotional. This is part of the reason that her words were deemed inappropriate; it was also one of the ways in which she was delegitimized. Furthermore, as we saw in the previous chapter, the way in which immigrant people of colour are socially constructed by the media contributed to the response to Dr. Thobani’s speech. This social construction, by framing people of colour as not truly fitting into Canadian society, helps to reinforce a sense of national identity that excludes racialized groups from mainstream public space. This alludes to the Habermasian focus on citizenship within the public, and further illustrates

the ways in which such space becomes exclusionary. Constructing people of colour as potential extremists relegates their voices to the private realm, while their presence in society becomes an issue of common concern to be discussed by “legitimate” members of public space.

The data further illustrates the validity of the critiques of Habermasian public space as inclusive. As Fraser argues, “A discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction” (1993: 6). Again, this alludes to the strategy discussed in Chapter Three. Though some people of colour were allowed access to public space, the legitimacy of their knowledge claims is undermined by the media’s skewed perceptions of their criminality. Furthermore, the media privilege a certain way of knowing, and of presenting such knowledge. Columnists may write in a passionate way, however that passion is mediated by a concern with rationality, with appearing objective. Thus, Sunera Thobani’s words received so much attention in part because her mode of communication was at odds with that of the dominant public. Instead of bracketing her status, Dr. Thobani explicitly thematized it. Further, she located her arguments within “the tradition of radical, *politically engaged* scholarship” (Thobani, 2001: 1 [emphasis mine]), and used “embodied” language in order to ground her claims. This was not only misunderstood by the mainstream media, but distorted as well, allowing her to be singled out and represented as fanatical and irrational. When status was explicitly thematized within mainstream media coverage, it appears to be for the purposes of providing a “native informant” view, as though one Muslim Canadian is capable of speaking for all as an expert (recall, for example, *The Globe and Mail* article by Mohamed Elmasry, 09/14/01:

A26). In Dr. Thobani's case, rather than rely on the force of her argument, her status as a professor and as an expert on globalization and women's studies was either attacked or ignored, while her status as an immigrant woman of colour was implicit in people's outrage regarding her speech.

Despite the fact that the data collected within this thesis supports many of the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter One, a major flaw of these perspectives is their tendency to discuss public space as operating in a rather static way. Thus, the examination of such space within the literature up until this point has neglected the fact that in the world as it actually exists, public space is not easily defined; the way in which it operates is constantly shifting. Indeed, contradiction is perhaps *the* most persistent characteristic of public space in Canada. This is exemplified by the simultaneous processes of expansion and contraction at work within such space. As we have seen, though the contraction of public space is most apparent upon examination of the data, forces of expansion are present as well. Too often in public space theory this latter element is neglected for the sake of discussing the public as exclusionary. Indeed, this discussion is incredibly important. However, recognition of the relationship between the processes of expansion and contraction is equally so. Understanding this relationship may allow us to make more effective recommendations for increasing the inclusivity of public space.

Also important to the promotion of the emancipatory potential inherent to public space is the way in which discourse within such spaces and discourse surrounding race intersect. As we saw in Chapter Three, the racialization of people of colour underlying media coverage has exacerbated the contraction of public space, thus contributing to it

becoming exclusionary. Understanding the covert ideological positionings of those in control of access to public spaces such as the media is important to the realization that claims made within such spaces are both historically and socially grounded. Thus, the maintenance of a critical outlook when evaluating such claims is crucial to the expansion of public space.

This alludes to one of the most substantive differences between mainstream public space and counterpublics. Though some of the responses to Dr. Thobani's speech found within particularly the *Independent Media Center* resembled those found within mainstream media, the ramifications of these responses differ greatly. Within mainstream media, the response to Dr. Thobani's speech served the purpose of exerting a certain amount of social control over readers, prompting fear of backlash against those who might echo her claims. This is particularly true of people of colour, given the aforementioned social construction operating within public space at this time. There is, despite claims of objectivity and accessibility, a hidden agenda at work within mainstream media, one in which the aim is, as Fraser (1993) argues, the "construction of...consent" (8). Whether this consent is for the War on Terrorism or the passage of problematic legislation in the name of "security", the consequences in terms of the inclusivity of public space are dire. While mainstream media attempts to shroud its biases, counterpublics tend to explicitly thematize them, making their agenda clear to participants. Thus, despite the resemblance of some of the letters posted by counterpublic participants to those found within mainstream media, due to the way in which counterpublics' are organized, such postings actually facilitate debate, promoting the expansion of public space rather than its contraction. Indeed, this approach is one of



the major ways in which such spaces serve their regulatory purpose. Making one's ideological position clear can be a means of achieving inclusivity, while the illusion of objectivity has, in this case, achieved the opposite.

The ability of the mainstream media to influence government, and public action, is strong. Because of the mainstream media's overall strategy, however, this influence has largely reinforced the contraction of public space. Indeed, the analysis presented in Chapter Three illustrates the strength of the contraction of public space post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Through the presentation of its claims as representative of consensus, of the "norm", the media has, as mentioned previously, been able to promote the exclusion of certain voices without the repercussion of losing legitimacy with the vast majority of its readers. In other words, the media is seen as representing the "rational" outlook, and therefore, those who disagree are easily rendered "irrational". The Thobani Moment as a whole illustrates this fact. The ability of the media to construct all people of colour as potential terrorists further illustrates the extent of its influence. The racialization of people of colour within the media has perpetuated and reinforced the silencing of particular voices within the mainstream public. In this case, it is clear that the media influences the government to a great extent; the government views the media as representative of public opinion and contemplates changes in policy in part based upon information found therein.

Importantly, post-September 11<sup>th</sup> coverage within the mainstream media, as well as reactions published in response to Sunera Thobani's speech, prompted some participants to question the validity of the media's representation of these events, as well as to fear for Canadian democracy and the rights such a system is supposed to guarantee

(for example, Beers, *The Globe and Mail*, 10/06/01: A6; Salutin, *The Globe and Mail*, 10/05/01: A17; Bacon, *The Vancouver Sun*, 10/03/01: A23). This, too, contributes to the expansion of public space and serves an important regulatory function. Though these voices were often quiet, placed inconspicuously deep within the newspaper or as a part of a letter to the editor section, their presence should serve as a reminder that consensus has not been reached, and that the debate is more complicated than “either/or”. Furthermore, Dr. Thobani, through the very act of making her speech, as well as through the discussion she raises in her response to the controversy caused by her speech, contributes to the mainstream discourse surrounding civil liberties. The vilification that she was subjected to as a result of her words prompted many to question what had happened to freedom of speech in Canada. This, in turn, facilitated dialogue regarding the necessity of protecting this right, of the state of democracy in Canada, and of recognition of how ridiculous the reaction to Dr. Thobani’s speech was. In other words, her speech got people talking. Thus, the very act of speaking out, and thus of helping catalyze public discussion and debate, is an important contribution to the expansion of public space.

It is important to note that there were some limitations to my research. Perhaps most significant was the inability, due to lack of time and resources, to consult media coverage other than from newspapers (i.e., television and radio). It would also have been useful to be able to examine a wider variety of newspapers. Doing so would have allowed for a more representative sampling of media coverage post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. This would have lent both reliability and validity to my arguments regarding the operation of Canadian public space. It would be interesting, furthermore, to look at the operation of public space in Canada from the perspective of a historical comparison. Investigating

media coverage prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> and comparing it to the data examined in this thesis would perhaps provide a more pristine illustration of the processes of expansion and contraction at work. It is also important to note that though the lens I used to perform this research was textual, there are other lenses. As mentioned in the introduction, it would have been both informative and useful to conduct interviews in order to see how representative mainstream media discourse is of the attitudes of the Canadian public at large, as well as to see the ways in which media discourse influences those attitudes and vice versa. Lastly, the issues surrounding counterpublics, their formation, their characterization as separate from the mainstream public, and the relationship of these spaces to the processes of expansion and contraction could have been more fully developed. Indeed, an entire thesis could be devoted to counterpublics alone. It was beyond my scope at this time to be able to more fully engage with these spaces. It is my hope that should I undertake future research theorizing public spaces, I will be able to take these limitations into account.

Despite these limitations, however, the most important contribution of this thesis is the realization that Canadian public space is not static; there are different, competing forces operating simultaneously at any given time. Though the dominant tendency within mainstream public space is that of contraction, expansion is a persistent counterforce. Thus, strategies aiming to increase the inclusivity of public space must also aim to strengthen this latter force. This raises some interesting questions, beyond the scope of this work, regarding how this can be done. Activities aimed at raising the visibility of counterpublics such as *Rabble.ca* and the *Independent Media Center* may be one way of increasing the amount of influence counterpublics have on dominant publics, thus

facilitating the process of expansion. As was mentioned in Chapter Three, the majority of those participating in mainstream public space are either unaware of the existence of alternate media sources or, conversely, are aware of them, but view them as radical and/or illegitimate news sources. The latter may be the result of a privileging of so-called “rational” (in the Habermasian sense) discourse. Therefore, any attempt to increase the inclusivity of public space must be reflexive in nature. The explicit thematization of bias, and status, must become a part of the dominant public’s mode of discourse so as to facilitate more critical consumption of knowledge claims encountered within public spaces as a whole.

## APPENDIX ONE TRANSCRIPT OF SUNERA THOBANI'S SPEECH

We, and this "we" is really problematic. If we in the West are all Americans now, what are Third World women and Aboriginal women to do? If Canadians are Americans now, what are women of colour to do in this country? And I'm open to suggestions for changing this title, but I thought I would stick with it as a working title for getting my ideas together for making this presentation this morning.

I'm very glad that the conference opened with Tina (Tina Beads, of the Vancouver Rape Relief Women's Shelter) and I'm very glad for the comments that she made, but I want to say also, just (to) add to Tina's words here, that living (in) a period of escalating global interaction now on every front, on every level. And we have to recognize that this level and this particular phase of globalization is rooted in all forms of globalization in the colonization of Aboriginal peoples and Third World people all over the world. This is the basis. And so globalization continues to remain rooted in that colonization, and I think, recognize that there will be no social justice, no anti-racism, no feminist emancipation, no liberation of any kind for anybody on this continent unless Aboriginal people demand for self-determination.

The second point I want to make is that the global order that we live in, there are profound injustices in this global order. Profound injustices. Third World women...I want to say for decades, but I'm going to say for centuries, have been making the point that there can be no women's emancipation, in fact no liberation of any kind for women, will be successful unless it seeks to transform the fundamental divide between the north and south, between Third World people and those in the West who are now calling

themselves Americans. That there will be no emancipation for women anywhere on this planet until the Western domination of this planet is ended.

Love thy neighbour. Love thy neighbour, we need to heed those words. Especially as all of us are being hoarded into the possibility of a massive war at the...of the United States. We need to hear those words even more clearly today. Today in the world the United States is the most dangerous and most powerful global force unleashing prolific levels of violence all over the world.

From Chile to El Salvador, to Nicaragua to Iraq, the path of U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood. We have seen, and all of us have seen, felt, the dramatic pain of watching those attacks and trying to grasp the fact of the number of people who died. We feel the pain of that every day we have been watching it on television. But do we feel any pain for the victims of U.S. aggression? 200,000 people killed only in the initial war on Iraq. That bombing of Iraq for 10 years now. Do we feel the pain of all the children in Iraq who are dying from the sanctions imposed by the United States? Do we feel that pain on an every-day level? Share it with our families and communities and talk about it on every platform that is available to us? Do we feel the pain of Palestinians who now for 50 years have been living in refugee camps? U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood. And other countries in the West, including shamefully, Canada, cannot line up fast enough behind it. All want to sign up now as Americans and I think it is the responsibility of the women's movement to stop that, to fight against it.

These policies are hell-bent on the West maintaining its control over the world's resources. At whatever cost to the people...Pursuing American corporate interest should not be Canada's national interest. This new fight, this new war against terrorism, that is

being launched is very old. And it is a very old fight of the West against the rest.

Consider the language which is being used...

Calling the perpetrators evil-doers, irrational, calling them the forces of darkness, uncivilized, intent on destroying civilization, intent on destroying democracy...Every person of colour, and I would want to say every Aboriginal person, will recognize this language. The language of us letting civilization representing the forces of darkness, this language is rooted in the colonial legacy. It was used to justify our colonization by Europe...

We were colonized in the name of the West bringing civilization, democracy, bringing freedom to us. All of us recognize who is being talked about when that language is used. The terms crusade, infinite justice, cowboy imagery of dead or alive posters, we all know what they mean. The West, people in the West also recognize who this fight is against. Cries heard all over the Western world, we are all Americans now. People who are saying that recognize who the fight is against. People who are attacking Muslims, any person of colour who looks like they could be from the Middle East, without distinguishing, recognizing who this fight is against. These are not just slips of the tongue that Bush quickly tries to reject. These are not slips of the tongue. They reveal a thinking, a mindset. And it is horrific to think that the fate of the world hangs on the plans of people like that. This will be a big mistake for us if we just accept that these are slips of mind, just slips of the tongue. They're not. They reveal the thinking, and the thinking is based on dominating the rest of the world in the name of bringing freedom and civilization to it.

If we look also at the people who are being targeted for attack. A Sikh man killed? Reports of a Cherokee woman in the United States having been killed? Pakistan is attacked. Hindu temples attacked. Muslim mosques attacked regardless of where the Muslims come from. These people also recognize who this fight is against. And it is due to the strength of anti-racist organizing that Bush has been forced to visit mosques, that our prime minister has been forced also to visit mosques and say, no there shouldn't be this kind of attack. We should recognize that it is the strength of anti-racist organizing is forcing them to make those remarks.

But even...but even as they visit mosques, and even as they make these conciliatory noises, they are talking out of both sides of the mouth because they are officially sanctioning racial profiling at the borders, in the United States, for entrance into training schools, for learning to become pilots, at every step of the way. On an airplane, who is suspicious, who is not? Racial profiling is being officially sanctioned and officially introduced. In Canada we know that guidelines, the Globe and Mail leaked, the guidelines were given to immigration officers at the border, who to step up security watch is on.

So on the one hand, they say no, it's not all Muslims, on the other hand they say yes, we are going to use racial profiling because it is reasonable. So we have to see how they are perpetrating the racism against people of colour, at the same time that they claim to be speaking out against it. And these are the conditions, the conditions of racial profiling. These are the conditions within which children are being bullied and targeted in schools, women are being chased in parking lots and shopping malls, we are being scrutinized as we even come to conferences like that, extra scrutiny, you can feel the



coldness when you enter the airport. I was quite amazed. I have been travelling in this country for 10 years, and I have never had the experience that I had flying down here for this conference. All of us feel it. So this racial profiling has to be stopped.

Events of the last two weeks also show that the American people that Bush is trying to invoke, whoever they are these American people, just like we contest notions of who the Canadian people are, we have to recognize that there are other voices in the United States as well, contesting that. But the people, the American nation that Bush is invoking, is a people which is bloodthirsty, vengeful, and calling for blood. They don't care whose blood it is, they want blood. And that has to be confronted. We cannot keep calling this an understandable response. We cannot say yes, we understand that this is how people would respond because of the attacks. We have to stop condoning it and creating a climate of acceptability for this kind of response. We have to call it for what it is: Bloodthirsty vengeance.

And people in the United State, we have seen peace marches all over this weekend, they also are contesting this. But Bush is (the) definition of the American nation and the American people need to be challenged here. How can he keep calling them a democracy? How can we keep saying that his response is understandable after Bush of all people, who stole the election, how can we ever accept that this is democracy?

Canada's approach has been mixed, it has said yes, we will support the United States but with caution. It will be a cautionary support. We want to know what the actions will be before we sign on and we want to know this has been Canada's approach. And I

have to say we have to go much further. Canada has to say we reject U.S. policy in the Middle East. We do not support it.

And it's really interesting to hear all this talk about Afghani women. Those of us who have been colonized know what this saving means. For a long time now, Afghani women, and the struggles they were engaged in, were known here in the West. Afghani women became almost the poster child for women's oppression in the Third World. And, rightfully so, many of us were in solidarity. Afghani women of that time were fighting against and struggling against the Taliban. They were condemning their particular interpretation of Islam. Afghani women, Afghanistan women's organizations were on the front line of this. But what (did) they become in the West? In the West they became nothing but poor victims of this bad, bad religion, and of (these) backward, backward men. The same old colonial construction. They were in the frontline, we did not take the lead from them then, where we could see them more as victims, only worthy of our pity and today, even in the United States, people are ready to bomb those women, seeing them as nothing more than collateral damage. You see how quickly the world can change. And I say that we take the lead from Afghani women. They fought back against the Taliban, and when they were fighting back they said that it is the United States putting this regime in power. That's what they were saying. They were saying, look at U.S. foreign policy!

They were trying to draw out attention to who was responsible for this state of affairs, to who was actually supporting regimes as women all over the Middle East had been doing. Sorry, just two more minutes and I'll be done. So I say we take the lead from them and even if there is no American bombing of Afghanistan, which is what all of us should be working right now to do, is to stop any move to bomb Afghanistan, even if

there is no bombing of Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people have already been displaced, fleeing the threat of war--you see the power of America here, right? One word in Washington and millions of people are forced to flee their houses, their communities, right? So, even if there is no bombing, we have to bear in mind how many women's lives have already been disrupted, destroyed, and will take generations for them to put back together again.

Inevitably, and very depressing in Canada is of course, turning to the enemy within--immigrants and refugees, right? Scapegoating of refugees, tighter immigration laws, all the right-wing forces in this community, in this country, calling for that kind of approach. This is depressing for women of colour, immigrant and refugee women, anything happens, even if George Bush was to get a cold, we know somehow it'll be the fault of immigrants and refugees in Canada, and our quote-unquote lax border policies. So I'm not going to say much about it, but I just want to expose you to how, this...continues to be resurrected anytime over anything in the world.

In terms of any kind of military action, Angela Davis (an American activist) asked in the '70s, she said, "do you think the men who are going to fight in Vietnam, who are going to kill Vietnamese women and children, who are raping Vietnamese women, do you think they will come home and there will be no effect of all of this? One women in the United States?" she was asking this in the 70s.

That question is relevant today. All these fighters that are going to be sent there, we think there will be no effect? For our women, when they come back here? So I think that that is something that we need to think about, as we talk about the responses, as we talk this kind of jingoistic military-ism. And recognize that, as the most heinous form of

patriarchal, racist violence that we're seeing on the globe today. The women's movement, we have to stand up to this. There is no option. There's no option for us, we have to fight back against this militarization, we have to break the support that is being built in our countries for this kind of attack. We have to recognize that the fight is for control of the vast oil and gas resources in central Asia, for which Afghanistan is a key, strategic point!

There's nothing new about this, this is more of the same that we have been now fighting for so many decades. And we want to recognize, we have to recognize that the calls that are coming from progressive groups in the Third World, and in their supporters, in their allies, in the rest of the world, the three key demands they are asking for: End the bombing of Iraq, lift the sanctions on Iraq, who in this room will not support that demand? Resolve the Palestinian question, that's the second one. And remove the American military bases, anywhere in the Middle East. Who will not demand, support these demands?

We have to recognize that these demands are rooted in anti-imperialist struggle and that we have to support these demands. We need to end the racist colonization of Aboriginal peoples in this country, certainly, but we need to make common calls with women across the world who are fighting to do this. Only then can we talk about anti-racist, feminist politics, only then can we talk about international solidarity in women's movements across the world. And in closing, just one word--the lesson we have learned, and the lesson that our politicians should have learned, is that you cannot slaughter people into submission, for 500 years they have tried that strategy, the West for 500 years has believed that it can slaughter people into submission and it has not been able to do so, and it will not be able to do so this time either.

Thank you very much.

Transcript provided by *The Independent Media Center* ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)); permission from Sunera Thobani<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Thobani, Sunera. "Re: FW: important: for Sunera". E-mail to the author. 26 June 2003.

## **APPENDIX TWO**

### **SUNERA THOBANI'S OCTOBER 24<sup>TH</sup>, 2001 RESPONSE TO THE CONTROVERSY OVER HER SPEECH**

My recent speech at a women's conference on violence against women has generated much controversy. In the aftermath of the terrible attacks of September 11, I argued that the U.S. response of launching "America's new war" would increase violence against women. I situated the current crisis within the continuity of North/South relations, rooted in colonialism and imperialism. I criticized American foreign policy, as well as President Bush's racialized construction of the American nation. Finally, I spoke of the need for solidarity with Afghan women's organizations as well as the urgent necessity for the women's movement in Canada to oppose the war.

Decontextualized and distorted media reports of my address have led to accusations that I am an academic impostor, morally bankrupt and engaging in hate mongering. It has been fascinating to observe how my comments regarding American foreign policy, a record well documented by numerous sources whose accuracy or credentials cannot be faulted, have been dubbed "hate speech." To speak about the indisputable record of U.S. backed coups, death squads, bombings and killings ironically makes me a "hate-monger." I was even made the subject of a "hate-crime" complaint to the RCMP, alleging that my speech was a "hate crime."

Despite the virulence of these responses, I welcome the public discussion my speech has generated as an opportunity to further the public debate about Canada's support of America's new war. When I made the speech, I believed it was imperative to have this debate before any attacks were launched on any country. Events have overtaken us with the bombing of Afghanistan underway and military rule having been declared in

Pakistan. The need for this discussion has now assumed greater urgency as reports of casualties are making their way into the news. My speech at the women's conference was aimed at mobilizing the women's movement against this war. I am now glad for this opportunity to address wider constituencies and in different fora.

First, however, a few words about my location: I place my work within the tradition of radical, politically engaged scholarship. I have always rejected the politics of academic elitism, which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a "properly" dispassionate professorial demeanor to establish intellectual credentials. My work is grounded in the politics, practices and languages of the various communities I come from, and the social justice movements to which I am committed.

### **On American Foreign Policy**

In the aftermath of the terrible September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the Bush administration launched "America's War on Terrorism." Eschewing any role for the United Nations and the need to abide by international law, the US administration initiated an international alliance to justify its unilateral military action against Afghanistan. One of its early coalition partners was the Canadian government, which committed its unequivocal support for whatever forms of assistance the United States might request. In this circumstance, it is entirely reasonable that people in Canada examine carefully the record of American foreign policy.

As I observed in my speech, this record is alarming and does not inspire confidence. 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. 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 ten 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. The list does not stop here. 150,000 were killed and 50,000 disappeared in Guatemala after the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup; over 2 million were killed in Vietnam; and 200,000 before that in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks. Numerous authoritarian regimes have been backed by the United States including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the apartheid regime in South Africa, Suharto's dictatorship in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines, and Israel's various occupations of Lebanon, the Golan Heights and the Palestinian territories. 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 means training and using death squads and assassinating leftist politicians and activists. To this end, it has a record of treating civilians as entirely expendable.

It is in this context that I made my comment that the United States is the largest and most dangerous global force, unleashing horrific levels of violence around the world, and that the path of U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood. The controversy generated by this comment has surprisingly not addressed the veracity of this assessment of the U.S. record. Instead, it has focused on my tone and choice of words (inflammatory, excessive, inelegant, un-academic, angry, and so on).



Now I have to admit that my use of the words “horrific violence” and “soaked in blood” is very deliberate and carefully considered. I do not use these words lightly. To successive United States administrations, the deaths resulting from its policies have been just so many statistics, just so much “collateral damage.” Rendering invisible the humanity of the peoples targeted for attack is a strategy well used to hide 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 bodies of these peoples as disembodied statistics and mere “collateral damage.” The use of embodied language, grounded in the recognition of the actual blood running through these bodies, is an attempt to humanize these peoples in profoundly graphic terms. It compels us to recognize the sheer corporeality of the terrain upon which bombs rain and mass terror is waged. This language calls on “us” to recognize that “they” bleed just like “we” do, that “they” hurt and suffer just like “us.” We are complicit in this bloodletting when we support American wars. Witness the power of this embodiment in the shocked and horrified responses to my voice and my words, rather than to the actual horror of these events. I will be the first to admit that it is extremely unnerving to “see” blood in the place of abstract, general categories and statistics. Yet this is what we need to be able to see if we are to understand the terrible human costs of empire-building. We have all felt the shock and pain of repeatedly witnessing the searing images of violence unleashed upon those who died in New York and Washington. The stories we have heard from their loved ones have made us feel their terrible human loss. Yet where do we witness the pain of the victims of U.S. aggression? How do we begin to grasp the extent

of their loss? Whose humanity do we choose to recognize and empathize with, and who becomes just so much “collateral damage” to us? Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements and theorists have long insisted on placing the bodies and experiences of marginalized others at the centre of our analysis of the social world. To fail to do so at this moment in history would be unconscionable.

In the aftermath of the responses to my speech, I am more convinced than ever of the need to engage in the language and politics of embodied thinking and speaking. After all, it is the lives, and deaths, of millions of human beings we are discussing. This is neither a controversial nor a recent demand. Feminists (such as of Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison, Gayatri Spivak and Patricia Williams) have forcefully drawn our attention to what is actually done to women’s bodies in the course of mapping out racist colonial relations. Frantz Fanon, one of the foremost theorists of decolonization, studied and wrote about the role of violence in colonial social organization and about 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. Eduardo Galeano entitled one of his books *The Open Veins of Latin America* and the post-colonial theorist Achille Mbembe talks of the “mortification of the flesh,” of the “mutilation” and “decapitation” of oppressed bodies. Aime Cesaire’s poetry pulses with the physicality of blood, pain, fury and rage in his outcry against the domination of African bodies. Even Karl Marx, recognized as one of the founding fathers of the modern social sciences, wrote trenchant critiques of capital, exploitation and classical political economy; and did not flinch from naming the economic system he

was studying “vampire capitalism.” In attempting to draw attention to the violent effects of abstract and impersonal policies, I claim a proud intellectual pedigree.

### **Invoking the American Nation**

In my speech I argued that in order to legitimize the imperialist aggression that the Bush administration is undertaking, the President is invoking an American nation and people as being vengeful and bloodthirsty. It is de rigeur in the social sciences to acknowledge that the notion of a “nation” or a “people” is socially constructed. The American nation is no exception.

If we consider the language used by Bush and his administration to mobilize this nation for the war, we encounter the following: launching a crusade; operation infinite justice; fighting the forces of evil and darkness; fighting the barbarians; hunting down the evil-doers; draining the swamps of the Middle East, etc., etc. This language is very familiar to peoples who have been colonized by Europe. Its use at this moment in time reveals that it is a fundamentalist and racialized western ideology, which is being mobilized to rally the troops and to build a national and international consensus in defence of “civilization.” It suggests that anyone who hesitates to join in is also “evil” and “uncivilized.” In this vein, I have repeatedly been accused of supporting extremist Islamist regimes merely for criticizing U.S. foreign policy and western colonialism.

Another tactic to mobilize support for the war has been the manipulation of public opinion. Polls conducted in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks were used to repeatedly inform us that the overwhelming majority of Americans allegedly supported a strong military retaliation. They did not know against whom, but they purportedly supported this strategy anyway. In both the use of language and these polls,

we are witnessing what Noam Chomsky has called the “manufacture of consent.” Richard Lowry, editor of the *National Review* opined, “If we flatten part of Damascus or Tehran or whatever it takes, this is part of the solution.” President Bush stated, “We will bear no distinction between those who commit the terrorist attacks and those who harbour them.” Even as the bombing began last weekend, he declared that the war is “broader” than against just Afghanistan, that other nations have to decide if they side with his administration or if they are “murderers and outlaws themselves.” We have been asked by most public commentators to accept the calls for military aggression against “evil-doers” as natural, understandable and even reasonable, given the attacks on the United States. I reject this position. It would be just as understandable a response to re-examine American foreign policy, to address the root causes of the violent attacks on the United States, and to make a commitment to abide by international law. In my speech, I urged women to break through this discourse of “naturalizing” the military aggression, and recognize it for what it is, vengeful retribution and an opportunity for a crude display of American military might. We are entitled 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?

I make very clear distinctions between people in America and their government’s call for war. Many people in America are seeking to contest the “national” consensus being manufactured by speaking out and by organizing rallies and peace marches in major cities, about which there has been very little coverage in Canada. Irresponsible media reporting of my comments which referred to Bush’s invocation of the American

nation as a vengeful one deliberately took my words out of this context, repeating them in one television broadcast after another in a grossly distorted fashion.

My choice of language was, again, deliberate. I wanted to bring attention to Bush's right wing, fundamentalist leanings and to the neo-colonialist/imperialist practices of his administration. The words "bloodthirsty" and "vengeful" are designations most people are quite comfortable attributing to "savages" and to the "uncivilized," while the United States is represented as the beacon of democracy and civilization. The words "bloodthirsty" and "vengeful" make us confront the nature of the ideological justification for this war, as well as its historical roots, unsettling and discomfoting as that might be.

### **The Politics of Liberating Women**

I have been taken to task for stating that there will be no emancipation for women anywhere until western domination of the planet is ended. In my speech I pointed to the importance of Afghanistan for its strategic location near Central Asia's vast resources of oil and natural gas. I think there is very little argument that the West continues to dominate and consume a vast share of the world's resources. This is not a controversial statement. Many prominent intellectuals, journalists and activists alike, have pointed out that this domination is rooted in the history of colonialism and rests on the ongoing maintenance of the North/South divide, and that it will continue to provoke violence and resistance across the planet. I argued that in the current climate of escalating militarism, there will be precious little emancipation for women, either in the countries of the North or the South.

In the specific case of Afghanistan, it was the American administration's economic and political interests that led to its initial support for, and arming of,

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 the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the United States and Unocal conducted negotiations with the Taliban for an oil pipeline through Afghanistan for years in the mid-1990s. We have seen the horrendous consequences this has had for women in Afghanistan. When Afghan women's groups were calling attention to this U.S. support as a major factor in the Taliban regime's coming to power, we did not heed them. We did not recognize that Afghan women's groups were in the frontline resisting the Taliban and its Islamist predecessors, including the present militias of the Northern Alliance. Instead, we chose to see them only as "victims" of "Islamic culture," to be pitied and "saved" by the West. Time and time again, third world feminists have pointed out to us the pitfalls of rendering invisible the agency and resistance of women of the South, and of reducing women's oppression to various third world "cultures." Many continue to ignore these insights. Now, the U.S. administration has thrown its support behind the Northern Alliance, even as Afghan women's groups oppose the U.S. military attacks on Afghanistan, and raise serious concerns about the record of the Northern Alliance in perpetuating human rights abuses and violence against women in the country. If we listen to the voices of these women, we will very quickly be disabused of the notion that U.S. military intervention is going to lead to the emancipation of women in Afghanistan. Even before the bombings began, hundreds of thousands of Afghan women were compelled to flee their homes and communities, and to become refugees. The bombings of Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad and other cities in the country will result in further loss of life, including the lives of women and children. Over three million Afghan refugees are now on the move in the wake of the

U.S. attacks. How on earth can we justify these bombings in the name of furthering women's emancipation?

My second point was that imperialism and militarism do not further women's liberation in western countries either. Women have to be brought into line to support racist imperialist goals and practices, and they have to live with the men who have been brutalized in the waging of war when these men come back. Men who kill women and children abroad are hardly likely to come back cured of the effects of this brutalization. Again, this is not a very controversial point of view. Women are taught to support military aggressions, which is then presented as being in their "national" interest. These are hardly the conditions in which women's freedoms can be furthered. As a very small illustration, just witness the very public vilification I have been subjected to for speaking out in opposition to this war.

I have been asked by my detractors that if I, as a woman, I am so critical of western domination, why do I live here? It could just as readily be asked of them that if they are so contemptuous of the non-western world, why do they so fervently desire the oil, trade, cheap labour and other resources of that world? Challenges to our presence in the West have long been answered by people of colour who say, We are here because you were (are?) there! Migrants find ourselves in multiple locations for a myriad of reasons, personal, historical and political. Wherever we reside, however, we claim the right to speak and participate in public life.

### **Closing Words**

My speech was made to rally the women's movement in Canada to oppose the war. Journalists and editors across the country have called me idiotic, foolish, stupid and

just plain nutty. While a few journalists and columnists have attempted balanced coverage of my speech, too many sectors of the media have resorted to vicious personal attacks. Like others, I must express a concern that this passes for intelligent commentary in the mainstream media.

The manner in which I have been vilified is difficult to understand, unless one sees it as a visceral response to an “ungrateful immigrant” or an uppity woman of colour who dares to speak out. Vituperation and ridicule are two of the most common forms of silencing dissent. The subsequent harassment and intimidation which I have experienced, as have some of my colleagues, confirms that the suppression of debate is more important to many supporters of the current frenzied war rhetoric than is the open discussion of policy and its effects.

Fortunately, I have also received strong messages of support. Day by day the opposition to this unconscionable war is growing in Canada and all over the world.

I would like to thank all of my family, friends, colleagues and allies who have supported and encouraged me.

Transcript provided by *The Independent Media Center* (<http://print.indymedia.org>); permission from Dr. Thobani<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Thobani, Sunera. “Re: FW: important: for Sunera”. E-mail to the author. 26 June 2003.



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