Erasing Race in the Canadian Media: The Case of Suaad Hagi Mohamud

Felix Odartey-Wellington
Cape Breton University

ABSTRACT This article proposes a critical race theoretical approach to news discourse to counter the erasure of race in Canadian public discourse, using media coverage of the Suaad Hagi Mohamud affair as a case study. Between May and August 2009, Mohamud, a Canadian of Somali origin, was stranded in Nairobi, Kenya, because Canadian authorities voided her passport on the erroneous grounds that she was an impostor and consequently procured her prosecution by Kenyan authorities. While Mohamud's case received extensive media coverage in Canada, much of the coverage failed to interrogate the possibility that her experience was racially motivated, despite facts that should have raised such concerns. Consequently, this article adopts a critical race perspective in discussing mainstream media coverage of the case and suggests alternative media discourses that engage with the race question in relevant cases.

KEYWORDS Communitarianism; Critical race theory; Discourse; Media; Race

Introduction

In this article, I interrogate Canadian news media coverage of the Suaad Hagi Mohamud affair. Mohamud, a Canadian of Somali origin, was wrongly branded an impostor by Canadian officials while she was returning to Canada from Kenya. Additionally, Canadian authorities procured Mohamud's prosecution by their Kenyan counterparts, after she had spent eight days in prison due to the disagreement over her passport.

Felix Odartey-Wellington is Assistant Professor, Communication Department, Cape Breton University, P.O. Box 5300, Sydney, NS B1P 6L2. Email: felix_odartey@cbu.ca.

identity. Thereafter, she was stranded for three months in Kenya before being allowed to fly back to Canada after DNA evidence confirmed her identity. I argue that despite cause to suspect that Mohamud's treatment by Canadian officials could have been racially motivated, most Canadian news media did not explore this issue. Even when Mohamud returned to Canada and, together with her legal counsel, called attention to potential racism in her case, it did not receive sufficient visibility in most news media. In discussing the Mohamud affair, I am informed by Yasmin Jiwani’s (2006) analysis of the mainstream mediation of the 1997 Reena Virk murder in Victoria, British Columbia, as an example of the erasure of race from mainstream discourse in Canada. This erasure, Jiwani argues, has negative consequences for people of colour: by obscuring the existence and inimical consequences of racism, this erasure perpetuates systemic racism in Canada. A basic assumption in Jiwani’s critique is that given Canada's heritage of conquest and colonialism, it is “a society structured in racial dominance” (Hall 1980), to the extent that, despite current commitments to racial equality and multiculturalism, vestiges of racial dominance and discrimination exist.

Flowing from the foregoing, I propose a critical race theoretical approach to news discourse to counter the erasure of race in the media and public discourse of a Canadian society structured in racial dominance. I therefore discuss Mohamud's case and how it was treated by Canadian news media, particularly The Globe and Mail, National Post, and Toronto Star. Based on my analysis, I argue that unlike the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail and National Post failed to critically assess the possibility of racial motivation in Mohamud's experience. Drawing on a communitarian ethos consistent with Canadian democratic values, I argue that Canadian media have a critical role in interrogating racism as a significant social issue, and also that the potential racial implications in a case such as Mohamud's require critical media interrogation due to the ramifications for Canadian multiculturalism.

Critical race theory and media studies

As a reaction to legal liberalism and critical legal studies, critical race theory emerged as a multidisciplinary field with a commitment to mapping connections between dominant socio-legal values and the reproduction of racial subordination (Aylward, 1999; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). Additionally, critical race theory can serve as an effective analytical perspective in media studies, because it facilitates the scholarly interrogation of issues of race in the media in a manner that proactively highlights the marginalization and experiences of people of colour.

In law, a critical race perspective rejects the dominant race-neutral approach to legal cases, and where there are potential racial implications, it requires

the advocate to ask the ‘race’ question and to contextualise the problem by putting it in the social context of the history of racism. A critical race advocate faced with an interracial crime must ask: What role did race play in the crime itself, and what role will it play in the trial of the black accused? (Aylward, 1999, p. 137)

This is the proactive character of critical race theory. A critical race perspective in media studies would therefore reject default colour-blind assumptions of media objectivity.
It would provoke research that asks critical questions about the role of the media in the perpetuation of systemic racism through the erasure of race from mainstream discourse. Such a study of the media is highly relevant, because the media play a key role in the social construction and interpretation of reality, especially the reality of social attitudes, beliefs, and race and power relations (Mahtani, 2001). This is particularly manifest in the editorial decisions that result in the inclusions and exclusions that characterize the construction of news discourse (Jiwani, 1995).

Although Carol Aylward's (1999) work on critical race theory pertains to the area of law, it offers a useful framework that is applicable to media analysis. Drawing on her work, I propose that a critical race approach in analyzing media discourse in Canada requires, first, awareness that racism is a part of the Canadian socio-historical fabric, although this is often obfuscated by contemporary articulations of Canadian multiculturalism. One also needs to be aware of the “role the myth that Canadian society does not have a racist past plays in the perpetuation of racial oppression” (Aylward, 1999, p. 134). The next step is to identify when race might be implicated in an issue of public concern, to raise the “race question” if the media have failed to do so, and also to undertake an in-depth analysis of the issue and its media coverage. As Aylward suggests, “the issue of race should only be ruled out after an analysis that is grounded in the everyday lived experiences of people of colour has been made” (1999, p. 138). Finally, where a determination is made that race might have been a causal factor in a given case, a critical race approach requires the analyst to suggest alternatives to media discursive practices that are identified as marginalizing people of colour.

**Erasing race**

Since I regard the Mohamud affair as epitomizing the erasure of race in the media, it is useful to provide a brief rendition of Jiwani's (2006) discussion of the erasure of race in the Reena Virk case. Jiwani argues that “mediated racism works by commission and omission” (p. 65). One way in which mediated racism operates by omission is through the evacuation of race and racism from mainstream narratives—narratives that account for events without acknowledging real or potential racial causes. Jiwani calls this phenomenon “the erasure of race.” To explain this phenomenon, she interrogated the mainstream mediation of the Reena Virk case. Virk, a 14-year-old girl of South Asian origin, was savagely beaten and drowned by a group of juveniles in Victoria, BC, apparently due to a boyfriend conflict with Kelly Ellard, a White girl who was a member of the group that assaulted Virk. Indeed, after the assault, it was Ellard and Warren Glowatski, a White boy, who continued the beating, completing the deed by drowning Virk in the Gorge Waterway.

Stuart Hall's (1981) work is relevant in discussing the erasure of race by the news media to the extent that he regards the media as apparatuses that produce, reproduce, and transform ideologies. Hence, the media play a role in providing the conceptual tools for constructing social reality and, consequently, the frameworks for understanding issues associated with race and racism (Hall, 1981). Discussing the erasure of race by the news media therefore requires acknowledging the social construction of news as reality (and the consequent ideological properties of news discourse) implicit in Hall's observations. Hall also offers an effective linguistic framework...
for understanding the less-overt forms of racism that exist in contemporary media. He calls this linguistic framework “the grammar of race” (p. 15). Among other things, this grammar conveys racist positions through silences or omissions. In news discourse, these silences result from the media’s power to define the agenda and issues in news and current affairs reportage. To the extent that the media omit racism from the discussion when dealing with matters of public concern, the media allow racist tendencies to thrive unchecked.

Adapting the foregoing to Mohamud’s case, we can say that the media had various options for articulating or constructing the reality of the affair. It could be constructed as a case of the Canadian government failing one of its citizens abroad; or it could be constructed in a manner that raises questions about potential racial ramifications, to the extent that Mohamud is Black, has an Islamic-sounding name, and wore a hijab in her official photographs.

Canada as a society structured in dominance
Another contribution Hall (1980) makes to race scholarship is his work (building on Althusser) on “racially-structured social formations” or “societies structured in dominance.” Such societies have a particular heritage (e.g., a colonial heritage) that makes racial dominance an element of the national formation, even if racial dominance is not explicitly espoused. In this sense, racism may subtly influence articulations of mainstream discourse. I suggest that in societies structured in dominance, the grammar of race becomes an operative linguistic category for erasing race from mainstream discussions of matters of public concern. The grammar of race also renders less overt, ostensibly innocuous racist discourse as common sense. This is because overt racist discourse is obnoxious (and therefore incongruous) in most contemporary social contexts. As well, to the extent that a society is structured in dominance, racism has a systemic and endemic character, such that many members of society may be oblivious to moments of racism in everyday discourse.

Canada as a nation emerged from a history of conquest and colonisation (and at certain stages of its historical development, legally permitted discrimination based on race). Hence, discursive moments of this heritage are overtly and covertly present in the postmodern re-articulation of Canadian nationhood. This article therefore considers Canada to be a society structured in dominance. This position is not novel in Canadian critical race scholarship (see, for example, Bannerji, 1997; Jiwani, 2006; O’Connell, 2010; Razack, 1998, 2002; Thobani, 2007). As a society structured in dominance, Canada suffers from a case of systemic racism, as various commissions of inquiry have concluded (Aylward, 1999; Backhouse, 1999). In fact, Canadian jurisprudence backs the argument that systemic racism exists in Canada. As the Supreme Court of Canada observed in R. v. Gladue (1999), the Parliament of Canada included S718(2)(e) in the Criminal Code (1985), requiring courts to be cognizant of the unique case of Aboriginal offenders in sentencing, because of the systemic racial discrimination that Natives face in Canada. In R. v. Spence (2005), the Supreme Court acknowledged the existence of systemic racism in Canada, echoing the observation of the Ontario Court of Appeal in R. v. Parks (1993) as follows:

Racism, and in particular anti-black racism, is a part of our community’s psyche…. A significant segment of our community holds overtly racist views. A
much larger segment subconsciously operates on the basis of negative racial stereotypes. Furthermore, our institutions, including the criminal justice system, reflect and perpetuate those negative stereotypes. These elements combine to infect our society as a whole with the evil of racism. Blacks are among the primary victims of that evil. (R. v. Spence, 2005, para. 31)

It is pertinent that the court in R. v. Parks noted that in Canada racism is manifested in three ways. There are those who expressly espouse racist views as part of a personal credo. There are others who subconsciously hold negative attitudes towards black persons based on stereotypical assumptions concerning persons of colour. Finally, and perhaps most pervasively, racism exists within the interstices of our institutions. This systemic racism is a product of individual attitudes and beliefs concerning blacks and it fosters and legitimises those assumptions and stereotypes. (R. v. Parks, 1993, para. 43)

The court’s observations in R. v. Parks are relevant in Mohamud’s case in many ways, not the least being that the court acknowledged the existence of systemic racism in Canadian institutions. This level of acknowledgment would rationalize a query as to whether Mohamud’s experience with Canadian foreign affairs officials was racially motivated. In this regard, equally pertinent is the court’s position that “the perceptions of those who claim to be victims of racial prejudice cannot, necessarily, be equated with the reality of such victimisation. However, to reject such perceptions out of hand, especially when they are strong and widespread, is perhaps to demonstrate the very racial bias of which they speak” (R. v. Parks, 1993, para 53).

Ironically, contemporary Canada prides itself on a multiculturalist posture distinct from what exists in the United States (Razack, 1998). Arguably, Canada has one of the most multicultural and tolerant societies in the modern world. As the Supreme Court noted in R. v. Gladue (1999), “Canada is a world leader in many fields, particularly in the areas of progressive social policy and human rights” (para. 52). Indeed, the existence of corrective legislation such as the Criminal Code’s S718(2)(e), as well as the judicial posture signalled by R. v. Gladue (1999), demonstrate attempts by some state institutions to combat systemic racism. However, as Mahtani (2001) argues, “Complex forms of racism can emerge in countries where official multiculturalism is legislated … Canadian multicultural policy … often ensures that forms of institutionalised racism are rendered invisible” (p. 101).

Thus, various critical scholars have identified ways in which colonialist mentalities and racial dominance continue to exist cheek-by-jowl with the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism. For example, Razack (1998) highlights the racial dominance implicit in Canada’s seemingly progressive immigration and refugee discourse. And despite multicultural policy advancements in Canada, David Tanovich (2006, 2008) is concerned that racial profiling, as a motivating element in the criminalization of people of colour, is often ignored in judicial narratives, resulting in “sounds of silence” (Tanovich, 2006, p. 34) that perpetuate systemic racism in Canada. Because of these “sounds of silence,” Tanovich (2006, 2008) and Berger (2004) call for attitudinal shifts in the construction of judicial narratives so as to ensure the visibility of racial dynamics.
My article carries this argument into another domain, as does Jiwani (1995, 2006), that racial dynamics must not be erased from media narratives.

Since Canada is at once a society structured in dominance and one that is multicultural, with several liberal and progressive institutions, it is important, as Hall (1980) and Jiwani (2006) propose, that one take a position in opposition to the dominant discourse, without which it would be difficult to effectively identify the traces of racism in mainstream discourse. This underscores the relevance of a proactive, critical race position. This positioning is important, since covert racist discourse manifesting inferential racism is effectively the articulation of racist moments to liberal-democratic moments that are contradictory to racism. In a word, inferential racism in societies structured in racial dominance “is a product of an articulation of contradictions ... a contradictory unity” (Hall, 1980, p. 326).

Work on the media's erasure of race and its consequences develops an area of scholarship to which Carol Tator and Frances Henry have made extensive contributions (see, for example, Henry & Tator, 2002). It is useful to borrow a caveat from their work that when talking about the erasure of race in the Canadian media, it is not to suggest that all Canadian media practitioners are racist or guilty of racism. This is a point that Hall (1981) has made on the media’s ideological functions. Indeed, given the diversity offered by the contemporary mediascape, it should come as no surprise that there would be a lack of homogeneity in how the media treat current affairs.

**The Suaad Mohamud case**

Suaad Hagi Mohamud immigrated to Canada in 1999. On May 21, 2009, she was attempting to return to Canada from Kenya when local immigration officials prevented her from boarding her flight on the grounds that her facial features were inconsistent with the photograph in her passport (a significant disparity being the size of her lips). Mohamud contacted the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi for assistance and provided several pieces of identification, including her citizenship card and an Ontario driver’s licence, to prove her identity. High Commission staff were dissatisfied and thus confiscated and voided her passport. Due to the conflict over her identity, the Kenyan authorities incarcerated Mohamud for eight days before releasing her on bail. Meanwhile, Canadian officials in Nairobi advised their Kenyan counterparts that thorough investigations had exposed Mohamud to be an impostor, and thus called for her prosecution. This prompted the Kenyan authorities to level identity fraud charges against Mohamud. When she persistently offered her fingerprints for comparison with fingerprints she provided in her application for Canadian citizenship, Canadian officials were unable to conduct a test because they claimed that fingerprints are normally destroyed after the determination of citizenship applications, and hence were unavailable for comparison in her case. Back in Canada, legal counsel retained for Mohamud initiated litigation against the Canadian government on her behalf, and in late July 2009, the government requested that Kenyan authorities stay proceedings in the case until a DNA test had been conducted to establish Mohamud’s claims. In mid-August 2009, the DNA tests on Mohamud, her son whom she had left behind in Canada, and her ex-husband conclusively vindicated her identity claims. Based on this development, Kenyan prosecutors dropped charges that had been levelled against...
Mohamud, and she returned to Canada on August 15, 2009. She has since sued the Canadian government, and although at the time of writing the case is ongoing, its results have no bearing on this article.

**Media analysis**

In total, I reviewed 438 print news items obtained through the ProQuest Canadian Newsstand electronic database relating to the Mohamud affair between July 2009 and January 2010. For the purposes of this article, I focused on news items between July 2009, when the story broke, and August 2009, when Mohamud and her counsel made direct references to the potential racial undertones in the case. I took into account how the case was treated in Canadian mainstream print media but centred my analysis on items from the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Toronto Star*.

In focusing on print media, I am conscious of their “traditional role as providers of analysis and extended information” (Zelizer & Allan, 2002, p. 7). My choice of the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Toronto Star* was strategic. Both the *Globe* and the *Post* are regarded as national papers in Canada, for they are distributed nationwide (although they are both Toronto based). While the *National Post* leans to the Right ideologically (Alhassan, 2007; Henry & Tator, 2002), the *Globe and Mail* is more centrist, although the latter also has the tendency to veer rightwards (Alhassan, 2007; Odartey-Wellington, 2009). As national newspapers with different ideological positions, how the *Post* and *Globe* treat a matter of public concern is highly relevant. The *Toronto Star* is the largest circulating paper in Canada, though its readership is mostly concentrated in Ontario (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2010). The *Star* adheres to a left-of-centre orientation (Alhassan, 2007) and also adopts a social-justice editorial posture. Since the paper was the first to break the Mohamud story and has a strong Toronto focus (Mohamud is a Toronto resident), a social justice orientation, and a large readership, it was an obvious choice for my study. What the three newspapers share is that they are all “quality” newspapers that Richard Ericson and his colleagues define as having “longer items, features and continuing stories on complex matters affecting business and political elites on a national and international scale” and “a concern with being a source of record” (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991, p. 35).

My method of analysis is informed by Eduardo Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory of articulation. Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize discourse as a social construction resulting from an articulation of “moments,” ordinarily floating in a discursive contestation as “elements” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2004, p.26; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p.105). The dynamics of news production accurately illustrate articulation. As Amin Alhassan succinctly puts it, “[T]he practice of journalism is the art of articulation” (2004, p. 28) because news items are discourses produced by the editorial articulation of competing interpretations of social phenomena. In my study, therefore, I investigated how the Mohamud affair was articulated or framed in the news reports and editorials relating to the matter. Articulation enables an analyst to identify other potential articulations of a subject as well as elements excluded from a dominant discourse.

**The Toronto Star’s coverage of the Mohamud case**

The *Toronto Star’s* John Goddard broke Mohamud’s story on July 1, 2009, in a report
emphasizing her plight as a Canadian trapped in Kenya because authorities claimed she no longer resembled the photograph in her passport (Goddard, 2009a). Goddard followed up with another story on July 8, along similar lines, but this time included an update from the Department of Foreign Affairs: “Following an extensive investigation, officials at the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi have determined that the individual arrested by Kenyan authorities is not Ms. Suaad Mohamud Hagi” (Goddard, 2009b). In both stories, Goddard insinuated that Canadian authorities were not exactly forthcoming regarding the case. Goddard’s subsequent stories on Mohamud between July 15 and 28 sought to keep the public spotlight on her case and get Ottawa to act on the matter (Goddard 2009c-e). A story in the Toronto Star on July 21 reported legal initiatives that Mohamud’s Canadian counsel were taking on her behalf, and also that a Liberal party parliamentary critic had criticized the Conservative federal government for “devaluing citizenship” in her case (Aulakh, 2009a), by failing to act expeditiously in the matter. However, the parliamentary critic is not reported to have raised the issue of ethnicity, and appeared to concentrate solely on Mohamud's citizenship. The discursive articulation that had crystallized by this point in the Star was that a Canadian citizen in distress had been abandoned in a foreign jurisdiction by the Canadian government, and hence there was a need for remedial action. This discursive position was adequately reflected in a Star editorial titled “Ottawa’s Rabbit Hole” on July 21 (2009), as well as updates on July 22, which mentioned that Mohamud’s Canadian counsel had requested a DNA test to vindicate her claims (Aulakh, 2009b), and July 23, that the government had consented to the DNA testing (Aulakh, 2009c).

Similarly, a story in the Star on July 25 focused on the fact that the Canadian foreign minister had finally broken his silence to shift the burden of proof of citizenship solely onto Mohamud (Wadhams, 2009). This prompted a letter published in the Star on July 27, 2009, as follows:

Well, I don’t always look like my passport photo either—I often wear glasses, and sometimes I shave my beard—yet not once have I been questioned by the authorities over this. I wonder if it’s because I’m white and Canadian born. (Bryce, 2009, p. A10)

In the totality of the Toronto Star’s narrative thus far, this letter was the first to introduce the subject of race into the discussion of Mohamud’s case. Similarly, another letter to the editor published by the paper on August 7 decried Ottawa’s reaction to a number of cases, including Mohamud’s, stating:

Does anyone think that if any of these Canadian citizens were white and Christian rather than black and Muslim they would be abandoned by our government? The obvious racism of the Harper regime is creating two classes of Canadian citizens based on colour and religion. (McCaskell, 2009, p. A20)

The August 12 issue of the paper carried significant coverage of Mohamud’s case, because, as it reported, the federal government had finally commenced formalities for her return (Goddard, 2009f). Although the Toronto Star itself did not explore the matter of race at this stage, another story in the paper quoted Henry Pardy, a former senior Canadian foreign officer who hinted at the discrimination implied in the contrast be-
tween how Mohamud’s case had been handled as compared to the Conservative federal government’s reaction to the case of Brenda Martin’ (Woods, 2009, p. A1).

In the same August 12 issue, the Toronto Star’s Christopher Hume made a radical discursive intervention in the case, in a provocative article titled “Is Citizenship Now Defined by the Colour of Your Skin?” Hume (2009) charged that Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s regime is determined to create different categories of citizenship. According to the administration’s new meaning of Canadian citizenship, the main qualification is not residence, place of birth, oath of allegiance or passport—it’s the colour of your skin. (p. A6)

Hume based his contention on the particulars of Mohamud’s ordeal, arguing:

Had Mohamud been a white mother from Leaside, you can rest assured that Harper himself would have led the charge to have her repatriated. And we’re not talking about the Omar Khadrs, or the Maher Arars, men suspected of real or imaginary ties to terrorist organisations. We’re dealing with a single mom who produced her Shoppers Drug Mart Optimum card and even receipts from a local dry cleaners. (p. A6)

A letter to the editor expressed similar sentiments:

Have you ever seen a passport photograph, or any other ID photo for that matter, that really looks like you? If the authorities went by my photo, I would be put in prison at the drop of a hat. But I am white, have an Anglo name and so I am not automatically looked upon as suspect. (Vivian, 2009, p. A18)

However, the paper’s editorial on August 12 appeared to suggest that Mohamud’s experience was indicative of the government’s failure to assist Canadians abroad generally, stating:

This is a government, after all, that has proven only too willing to abandon citizens. Omar Khadr still faces trial before a tainted Guantanamo tribunal. Ottawa had to be ordered by the courts to repatriate Abousfian Abdelrazik from Sudan. And to seek clemency for Ronald Smith, a murderer who faces execution in the United States. (Editorial, 2009, p. A18)

Unlike the interventions made by Hume and Pardy in the Toronto Star that day, the editorial failed to interrogate the perception that the federal government is more helpful in the cases of some citizens than others. Also, it is perplexing that the paper conflated Mohamud’s case with Ronald Smith’s. Unlike Mohamud, Smith (who is White) has been convicted of murder and sentenced by a court of competent jurisdiction, and the merits of his matter are radically different from Mohamud’s.

An editorial titled “A Country That Abandons Its Own” in the next issue of the paper, however, articulated the potential racial element in the case, noting that Suaad Hagi Mohamud … is not rich. She’s not a political insider. She’s not a media darling. She is a black Somali immigrant who had to live on charity once Canadian authorities sent her passport to Kenyan police and suggested they prosecute her for not really being one of us. She had produced a half-
dozen forms of valid identification, but our bureaucrats closed their ears to her desperate pleas for help. (Editorial, 2009, p. A.20)

The editorial echoed a theme that Toronto Star columnist Haroon Siddiqi discussed in the same August 13 issue. Siddiqi noted that while the Conservative federal government was often loath to intervene on behalf of non-White Canadians facing national security-related charges, Mohamud’s case had nothing to do with national security, raising the suspicion that the main reason for the government’s reaction to Mohamud was because, unlike Brenda Martin, she is Black and Muslim (Siddiqui, 2009a). The Star’s Oakland Ross also explored the racial dimension in an article on August 15. Drawing on statistics regarding client satisfaction with Passport Canada, Ross (2009) stated:

It seems only fair to point out that what has happened to Suaad Hagi Mohamud at the hands of Canadian officialdom in Kenya is more the exception than the rule. Granted, this is an easier observation to make if one happens to be a Canadian-born white male who speaks with a North American accent, none of which applies to Mohamud, who was born 31 years ago in Somalia and has lived in Toronto for the past decade. Did her skin colour and original nationality play a role in her misfortune? We may never know for certain, but it is at least possible they did. “Canadians who were not born here and have accents or are visible for their skin colour are subject to more scrutiny when they enter,” said Obiora Okafor, an associate professor of law at York University’s Osgoode Hall Law School. “That’s beyond question.” (p. IN1)

In the same August 15 issue, a reader wrote:

The Harper government’s Orwellian mistreatment of a Canadian citizen is evidence of a racist attitude at the highest levels of this government. I am certain that I would not have been so callously abandoned by my country had it been me stuck in Kenya. Why? Because I’m white, I speak with a reassuring Canadian accent and I don’t have a “scary” name. (Myers, 2009, p. IN7)

Another reader wrote:

Whereas Christopher Hume’s must-read article makes a compelling case that non-white Canadian citizens (like Omar Khadr, Maher Arar, Abousfian Abdelrazik and now Suaad Hagi Mohamud) face discrimination from the Canadian government, I respectfully beg to disagree that skin colour is the driving force behind the government’s cavalier attitude toward those it views as “second-class citizens.” Instead, what is really the “hidden agenda” behind this ill treatment is that all these unfortunate people are Muslims. (Alibhai, 2009, p. IN7)

Not everyone agreed with the racial inferences. Another letter to the editor complained:

It’s been four weeks and your staff have become so fixated on this story that it has become your obsession. That doesn’t make it front-page news. If hyphenated Canadians decide to go to obscure places in the world, they should do so at their peril. It isn’t the Canadian government’s problem. (McKenna, 2009, p. IN7)
In one of the articles marking Mohamud’s return to Canada, Siddiqui asked the following questions on August 16 about the Conservative government in relation to the case: “Is it racist? Anti-Muslim? Too ideological? Prone to micromanagement? Or just plain incompetent?” (2009b, p. A15). A reader responded to Siddiqui in the August 17 issue, noting that cases similar to Mohamud’s had occurred under the watch of previous Liberal administrations and thus: “regardless of who is in power, the problem is systemic. As a previous letter writer pointed out, all of these cases involve Muslims” (Behrens, 2009, p. A10). In another article, on August 20, Siddiqui continued with his exploration of the racial theme, quoting a Canadian-Somali broadcaster as saying that “[m]any Canadian embassies have an assumption of who’s a Canadian. The colour of your skin still plays a role, even when you have a Canadian passport. I was happy when Brenda Martin was brought back from Mexico in a government jet. But we should help not just those who might look like the government’s idea of a Canadian but, rather, all Canadians” (Siddiqui, 2009c, p. A27). The paper’s editorial that day also called for legislation compelling the government to act on behalf of citizens abroad, since recent systemic failures “can leave new Canadians such as Mohamud feeling the sting of official indifference. Since 9/11, Muslims especially have suffered” (Editorial, 2009, August 20, p. A26). This theme was present in an article by the Star’s Oakland Ross in the August 22 issue of the paper (2009b). Also in that issue was a report that Mohamud had launched a lawsuit against the Canadian government over her treatment (Goddard, 2009g). The story indicated that Mohamud suspected race to be a factor in her plight. However, an August 29 article by the paper’s Thomas Walkom suggested that it was not just a matter of racism but also a matter of the Conservative government’s ideological posture toward Muslims vis-à-vis a commitment to the war on terror (Walkom, 2009). Walkom argued that there is mainstream rejection of Muslim immigration to Canada, and the government’s attitude to various cases of Muslim Canadians played to a mainstream constituency.

Overall, between July 1 and the end of August 2009, the Toronto Star ensured that Mohamud’s case entered the public sphere and kept it on the public agenda for several weeks, until the federal government brought her back to Canada. The paper’s coverage of the case initially articulated a discourse that framed the case as one of a Canadian single mom in distress due to the insensitivity of the state apparatus. However, while letters to the editor raised the racial question between July and August, the issue of race was not part of the articulation in the paper’s initial news reports, columns, or editorials regarding the case until mid-August, after which the racial element became a key moment of the Suaad Mohamud news discourse in the Star.

**The Globe and Mail’s coverage of the Mohamud case**

The Globe and Mail began covering Mohamud’s case on August 12, after she had been cleared to return to Canada. In addition to running a news story (Pritchard & Mehta, 2009), the paper also published an editorial (2009, August 12). The articulation proffered framed the case as a bad case of bureaucratic bungling and insensitivity. The thrust of the paper’s perspective on the case was reflected in a statement made by Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty in the August 13 issue of the Globe as follows: “Canadians expect their government to help them when they’re in distress, no matter where
they are ... That didn't happen in this particular circumstance, and there's no excuse for that’” (quoted in Alsop, 2009a, p. A10). In a story on August 14, Mohamud was quoted as saying, “I hope that Canada does not treat people the way they treated me. I believed we were all equal” (quoted in Alsop, 2009b, p. A10). The word “equal” here is ambiguous and, given the context of the case, should have provoked the paper to open a discussion on the racial implications, because thus far, the paper had covered the story in a race-neutral manner. Again, in an August 17 story on the case, federal New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton was quoted as saying that “in our Canada, new Canadians are given help to find good jobs and don't have to fear, when they travel abroad, that their passports will be seized and their government will deny their identity” (quoted in Leblanc, 2009, p. A6). Again, there was a hint at discrimination, but then the paper failed to interrogate the racial dimension of the discrimination.

Subsequently, the paper’s columnist Christie Blatchford (2009), in an August 19 article very sympathetic to Mohamud, compared Mohamud’s case to that of William Sampson, who was jailed and tortured by Saudi authorities for several months on concocted charges. Blatchford suggested that Mohamud’s case reflected a pattern of government neglect of Canadians abroad. Since Sampson is White, one can infer that Mohamud’s race was not an issue in Blatchford’s articulation, as another Canadian (this time, White) had also suffered an even more traumatic experience. However, such a perspective ignores the fact that in Sampson’s case, the Saudi authorities were acting entirely on their own motivation. Canada’s contribution to Sampson’s harrowing experience was the failure to act vigorously to ensure his release (Bell, 2005; Shepard, 2005).

In Mohamud’s case, however, it was Canadian authorities who requested her prosecution on the dubious grounds that exhaustive investigations had established that she was an impostor. Whether her ethnicity had anything to do with this is an issue that needed to be explored.

In an August 22 story, The Globe and Mail reported Mohamud’s lawsuit against the federal government and her counsel’s recommendation that “an independent probe is needed to find whether she was treated that way because of her Somali ethnicity” (Ha, 2009, p. A8). The report further quoted her counsel as saying that the question that needs to be posed and answered is whether the colour of her skin and her cultural background as a Somali had anything to do with her treatment.... The question has to be asked whether a Caucasian in the same circumstances would have been treated the same way. (p. A8)

Hence, the first explicit mention of race by the Globe regarding Mohamud’s case was in the August 22 issue, when Mohamud’s counsel mentioned it, almost two months after the story broke in Canada. However, the fact that the paper dedicated an entire story to this allegation was significant in making the racial angle topical. Yet when the paper next mentioned Mohamud in an editorial on August 31, 2009, it avoided the racial element. The failure to interrogate the racial dimension following her lawyer’s serious allegations of racism muted the significance of his concerns expressed in the August 22 story. Unlike the Toronto Star, therefore, The Globe and Mail’s editorial stance
was to focus exclusively on the potential bureaucratic deficiencies in the Mohamud case, and thus the paper did not explore the racial element.

The National Post's coverage of the Mohamud case
The National Post commenced covering the Mohamud case on July 23, when the federal government finally mandated the DNA tests that subsequently vindicated Mohamud's identity claims (Huber, 2009a). From the initial report, the National Post articulated the story as one of triumph for Mohamud, who would finally get the opportunity to return home. Unlike the Toronto Star, the Post did not give the story consistent coverage after the first report and resumed coverage in mid-August. In an August 12 report, the paper quoted Mohamud's lawyer as saying “there definitely needs to be a review of what went wrong. ... What is the methodology for determining that they (Canadian passport-holders) really are a Canadian citizen? We can't just go by intuition or profiling or value judgments” (Huber, 2009b, p. A5). However, the lawyer's comments did not have much visibility in the narrative. They appeared at the end of a detailed report about Mohamud's travails and the steps being finally taken by the Canadian government to enable her return. Although the story was sympathetic to Mohamud's plight, the allegation of racism would have had more visibility had it been treated as a story in its own right (as The Globe and Mail had done) or at least appeared as part of the headline. Also, when the National Post subsequently commented on the case in an editorial on August 13 titled “Mohamud's Nightmare” (2009, p. A12), questioning the government’s claim to have conducted “conclusive investigations” in the case, it did not mention the racial element, focusing only on bureaucratic failures. A letter to the editor on August 19 complained that Mohamud's case, in the context of the government's reaction to the cases of other Muslim Canadians abroad (and in contrast to the government’s reaction to the Brenda Martin case), reflected a discriminatory attitude (Jabbar, 2009). In the August 21 issue, another reader, however, disagreed:

Why is the story of Suaad Haji [sic] Mohamud's detention in Kenya now being spun as a Canadian government attack on Muslims? Every foreigner who has travelled to many African countries quickly learns that you place a US$20 bill in your passport as you present it to the immigration officer. There is nothing the Canadian embassy or any other embassy can do until the officer's face has been saved and the proper respect shown. (MacKenzie, 2009, p. A13)

Yet another reader wrote in the August 25 issue referencing Mohamud's treatment, “Our country tries so hard to be seen as a safe, multicultural haven. Maybe we should start trying to live up to that claim” (Sedaghat, 2009, p. A15).

A story in the August 26 issue of the National Post reported the charge by counsel for Guantanamo detainee Omar Khadr that racial discrimination was at the root of the Canadian government's treatment of persons like Mohamud and Khadr (Blanchfield, 2009). The story reported Alex Neve, the president of Amnesty International Canada, as expressing similar concerns. The paper, however, from the inception of the case to the end of August, did not discuss the racial dimension in any of its editorials.
that mentioned the case, even after Mohamud and some commentators had raised the race question.

**Reflection**

In a paper discussing the extent to which citizenship and race intersect in the media coverage of terrorism cases in Canada, Naava Smolash argues:

> Passports and identity documents are not the only way national membership is inscribed on human beings. Race (that shifting, slippery set of categories, which informs and is informed by media narratives) is itself a marker of belonging or exclusion. In the contemporary moment of overheated security discourses, racialisation once again marks the human body as a visible sign, an Other that can be recognised—and positioned as dangerous outsider—on sight. (2009, p. 247).

The foregoing comments by Smolash resonate with my critique of how the Suaad Mohamud affair was articulated in the media. At stake is the question of whether Canadian authorities attenuated Mohamud’s citizenship rights and privileges due to her ethnicity, in which case her experience would have ramifications for all people of colour in Canada. From a critical race perspective, it is obvious that given Canada’s history of conquest and colonialism, and given the nuances of the post-9/11 environment, there is every possibility that Mohamud’s ethnicity resulted in the loss of rights and privileges ordinarily available to Canadian passport holders. Yet *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* ignored this possibility in their editorials, although these papers, together with the *Toronto Star*, gave Mohamud extremely sympathetic attention and kept the case on the public agenda. Hence, only the *Toronto Star* made the racial element a moment of its editorial discourse. In coming to this conclusion, my article distinguishes a newspaper’s perspective offered in its editorial column and news reports from perspectives offered by columnists, op-ed authors, and letters to the editor. Also, while news narrative is shaped by a newspaper’s ideological orientation, an editorial reflects the definitive institutional voice or position of the newspaper (Alhassan, 2007; Hindman, 2003; van Dijk, 1995). As Jack Lule argues, “The editorial page is the site where newspapers self-consciously and directly react to events” (2002, p. 276).

As stated above, a news story also reflects a paper’s editorial position, for its construction is shaped by the dictates of the paper’s editorial policy. However, as observed in my analysis, even when the *National Post* reported an allegation of racism in Mohamud’s case, this was not given sufficient visibility. It is revealing that despite the *Post’s* hesitation to call attention to potential racism in the case, it was not similarly reserved in dismissing charges of racism in the case once the government made public its grounds for voiding Mohamud’s passport in response to her legal action. The *National Post* editorialized thus on October 8, 2009:

> The story was that Ms. Mohamud was the victim of incompetence—or possibly even racism—at the hands of Canadian officials. But since then, some shocking disclosures have emerged. ... She was shockingly ignorant of certain basic facts. ... She could not describe her job in Toronto, the full name of her supposed employer. (Editorial, 2009, p. A18)
In the case of *The Globe and Mail*, a relatively visible report of the allegation of racism was muted because it was not pursued in the subsequent editorial that mentioned the case. Significantly, none of the three newspapers considered in my article made an intertextual reference to the juridical findings of systemic racism in Canada and the relevance of these findings to Mohamud’s experience.

While it may be argued that the media are not duty-bound to interrogate racism in Canadian society, such an argument would not account for the communitarian ethos that influences the expectations Canadians have of their news media, and this is the subject discussed in the final section of this article.

A *communitarian perspective to mediating the Suaad Mohamud case*

This article assumes that Canadian political structures and institutions constitute what can be described as a democracy, no matter how flawed this democracy may be. In Christina Drale’s (2004) paper on the role of the communications media in a democracy, she notes the expectation that the media would function as the fourth estate, facilitating informed citizen participation in the democratic process. Hence, the expectation is that the media would be critical in posture, thereby interrogating matters that are crucial to society. In a society structured by racial dominance, this critical posture requires that the media bring to discussion matters of race and racial discrimination, because racial discrimination is antithetical to Canadian democratic values. This critical race perspective is highly relevant because the Canadian democracy is one that can be described as communitarian.

As a political theory, communitarianism conceives of rights, freedoms, and responsibilities as existing under the social contract to serve certain normative outcomes such as equality, social justice, and a sense of community (Drale, 2004; Etzioni, 1993). Amitai Etzioni points out that while communitarian ideals are identifiable throughout history, the communitarian intellectual current gained momentum in the late twentieth century when scholars like Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer challenged the strong individualist emphasis of liberalism (Etzioni, 1998). Yet it is possible to see communitarianism as an intellectual strain that emphasizes social justice in liberalism, such that communitarians are “communitarian liberals or liberal communitarians” (Selznick, 1998, p. 3).

Despite its relatively recent origins as a philosophical current, communitarianism has shaped the evolution of Canadian political culture, which is grounded on the aims of “peace, order, and good government” as opposed to the American individualistic ethos of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This communitarian character of the Canadian democracy is reflected in the observation by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Oakes* (1986) that the fundamental values and aspirations of Canadian society include

> Respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, commitment to social justice and equality, accommodation of a wide variety of beliefs, respect for cultural and group identity, and faith in social and political institutions which enhance the participation of individuals and groups in society. (para. 64)
Hence, it is argued that the Canadian perspective on freedom of expression is communitarian, because this perspective regards freedom of expression as an element existing in the context of the totality of Canadian democratic values (Mahoney, 1992). Accordingly, the rights, freedoms, and privileges that the media enjoy create a public expectation that the media would operate as a critical fourth estate in the public interest. Indeed, in the Canadian case, the argument can be made that the communitarian “public improvement doctrine” (Drale, 2004, p. 225) is what shapes public expectations of the media. Simply stated, this doctrine envisages that the media would be harnessed in the service of “improving the quality of life in the community” (Drale, 2004, p. 227). It is telling, therefore, that, for example, Canadian broadcasting policy and regulation place extensive responsibilities on broadcasters to achieve specific social goals, such as strengthening and enriching Canada’s social, cultural, and economic fabric; and promoting and supporting multiculturalism and diversity (Broadcasting Act, 1991). There is also an expectation that the broadcast media would serve as a public sphere for the discussion of matters of public concern. While the print news media are not bound by the regulations that structure the operations of their broadcasting counterparts, it is observable that they attract similar public interest expectations. (See, for instance, the perspectives offered by the Royal Commission on Newspapers in 1981, the Kent Commission, and its predecessor, the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, the Davey Commission, in 1970.)

The communitarian ethos discussed above contributes to my argument for the media to strongly articulate race as part of news discourse in cases such as Mohamud’s. It is not sufficient for the media to point out the potential bureaucratic bungling in the case to the exclusion of the inherent potential racial dynamics. From the initial stage, it was incumbent on the media to raise relevant critical race questions, such as the following: Was race a factor, directly or indirectly, in the approach that Canadian officials adopted toward Mohamud? Would government officials cavalierly maroon a White woman in Kenya as they did Mohamud? In a post-9/11 security-sensitive world, did Mohamud’s name and the fact that she wore a hijab contribute to her experience? It may turn out that race and ethnicity were not factors that influenced official decisions in this case, but these questions must be asked nonetheless, together with all the salient questions the media did ask regarding the case. And these race questions should have been asked even when Mohamud was trapped in Kenya. If she was indeed a victim of racism, it is probable that as a marginalized member of Canadian society, she would lack the resources to make crucial media interventions to call attention to that aspect of her plight, and in that regard, the media had a duty to raise the critical questions on her behalf. One cannot ignore the ramifications of the case if there was indeed racial motivation, because in that event, it could be a microcosm of the risks that the large population of Canadians of colour face.

As noted in this article, commissions of inquiry and courts of law have established the existence of systemic racism in Canada and the extent to which this permeates state institutions. These findings should have triggered media questions about racial motivation in Mohamud’s case as well as editorial discussions about the relevance of these findings vis-à-vis current realities. The approach that some media institutions
adopted in this case suggests that we are yet to fully appreciate the ramifications of systemic racism in Canada. Despite authoritative findings about the existence of systemic racism in Canada, this knowledge is yet to be mainstreamed. The fact that the majority of Canadians abhor racism does not mean that vestiges of racism do not exist within our social fabric. As this case shows, the media are effective in influencing the public agenda. Therefore, without the active engagement of the media in the debate over systemic racism, race will continue to be erased from the public agenda to the detriment of the laudable multicultural posture that Canada has assumed.

Acknowledgments
The author is grateful to the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their critical feedback. The author is also grateful to Yasmin Jiwani (Concordia University), Amin Alhassan (York University), and Erna MacLeod (Cape Breton University) for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Note
1. Brenda Martin is a Canadian who was arrested in 2006 and detained for two years in Mexico pending a trial for fraud. Her case engendered intense and sympathetic media attention in Canada. The media articulated the case as a story of a Canadian denied her legal rights abroad, with graphic details of Martin's emotional and physical distress. This must have had some effect on the Conservative Canadian federal government. The prime minister personally took up the matter with the Mexican president (Rusnel, 2008), in addition to diplomatic staff directly working on the file, the government dispatched two ministers and a member of parliament to Mexico. The government subsequently secured Martin's transfer to Canada to continue her sentence days after she was convicted and sentenced to a five-year prison term in 2008. The government also paid her fine of almost $3,500 and flew her to Canada in a private jet at the cost of $82,727 (Koring, 2010). Within days of arriving in Canada, Martin was granted full parole. Martin's case is often contrasted with Mohamud's because while Martin is White, Mohamud is Black, and some believe that the government bent over backwards to accommodate Martin because of her ethnicity (even after she had been convicted by a court of competent jurisdiction in Mexico), while, for similar reasons, Mohamud was rendered to the Kenyan authorities for prosecution.

References


Razack, Sherene. (2002). When place becomes race. In S. Razack (Ed.), Race, space and the law: Unmapping a white settler society (pp. 1-21). Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.


