

Who is Canadian Now?: Feminism and the Politics of Nation After September 11

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the recent media attack on a speech by Canadian feminist Sunera Thobani, revealing the media's participation in the consolidation of the post-September 11 "national security" discourse. After analyzing the critical mainstream "freedom of speech" discourse, the paper provides an anti-racist feminist reading and reflects on current feminist organizing strategies.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie l'attaque récente des médias contre le discours de la féministe canadienne Sunera Thobani, révélant la participation des médias dans la consolidation du discours sur la "sécurité nationale" post 11 septembre. Après avoir analysé la tendance critique du "discours sur la liberté," l'article offre une lecture féministe anti-raciste et reflète sur les stratégies organisatrices féministes courantes.

Herizons, one of Canada's most popular feminist magazines, called it "The Speech That Shook the Country" (2002). On October 1, 2001, Sunera Thobani, well-known Canadian feminist, former President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), and a professor of Women's Studies, presented a keynote address to the "Women's Resistance Conference" in Ottawa. In the post-September 11 "race toward war," Thobani's speech cogently outlined, and unequivocally challenged, some of the well-established and brutalizing intentions and outcomes of US foreign policy (Black Radical Congress 2001). Drawing attention to the "patriarchal, racist violence" fuelling the current "war against terrorism," Thobani's address was also framed around an urgent call for activism. In her words: "The women's movement has to stand up to this. There is 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."¹

Thobani's speech, presented to an audience of five hundred feminists at an historical women's conference, "brought delegates to their feet in applause no less than five times" (Croft 2002, 6). This is hardly surprising. In addition to being timely and relevant, the speech presented a well-contextualized and multi-layered analysis of

several pressing concerns. Thobani drew incisive connections among globalization, colonization, anti-racist organizing, racial profiling, peace coalitions, the role of US foreign policy in installing the Taliban regime, and the current scapegoating of immigrants and refugees in Canada and the US after September 11. Despite this complexity, the media coverage produced a highly selective and decontextualized account that attacked both the speech and Thobani herself. Most of the coverage was a mix of racist, anti-feminist and anti-immigrant epithets from editorial boards, columnists, cartoonists, letter-writers, a premier, a Liberal senator and some academics. Targeted as a particularly extreme and irrational feminist, Thobani was thoroughly chastised for a number of apparent transgressions. To name a few, she "ranted" and "raved" throughout her speech, was "simply outrageous," she propagated hate, was historically inaccurate, and was "manipulative," "fanatic," "terrorist" and "anti-American."²

In this paper, I analyse the media coverage which constructed Thobani's speech as an event of national concern. I argue that the media reaction was more than just an attack on Thobani and her speech. It also generated a moral-political discourse of "national security"³ which uncritically backed the growing support for war, in the process calling for

a narrowing of the definition of who is considered "Canadian." In particular, immigrants of colour (perceived to be) non-Western, especially "Arabs" and "Muslims," were targeted.⁴ But as the attacks on Thobani reveal, such attacks had serious and particular implications for immigrant women and women of colour in Canada.

I next examine a popular critical discourse which was already circulating as a critique of post-September 11 abuses of civil liberties, but which developed a specific critique of the media attack on Thobani. I argue that this critique, which circulated in various public sites (such as e-mail, petitions, press releases and a few articles in mainstream media) was important, but limited. It identified the media attack as part of a generalized crackdown on freedom of expression and argued, in opposition, for Thobani's right to express her opinions. I argue instead that it is crucial to understand this attack more comprehensively through anti-racist feminist analyses which foreground the dynamics of gendered and racially-organized national exclusions and inclusions. As Nandita Sharma has argued, in such nationalist moments, women conventionally "rendered as the Other are seen as embodying the very differences between nations" (2000, 11). The attack on Sunera Thobani is a specific example of this nationalist Othering process, part of a long history of nationalist discourses which operate at the nexus of intersecting and exclusionary racist, anti-immigrant and sexist "ideological and material processes that make some people - and not others - 'Canadian'" (Sharma 2000, 6). The central argument of this paper is that in their attack on Thobani and her speech, the media were key participants in widespread post-September 11 calls for a further narrowing, and intensified regulation, of the racialized and exclusionary insider/outsider relations of belonging that have historically constructed Canada (Bannerji 2000; Das Gupta and Iacovetta 2000; Sharma 2000; Thobani 2000). I further demonstrate that "white backlash," evident in current constructions of national belonging, is continuous with historical forms of racist and gendered nationalist forms of exclusion, regulation and belonging.

The paper ends with a brief commentary on the range of feminist perspectives that emerged in response to the attack on Thobani, and offers

some reflections on the challenges and possibilities these responses imply for strategies of resistance in the current climate.

ANATOMY OF AN ATTACK

Over a period of six days, in six newspapers, a total of 119 items focused on Sunera Thobani and her speech. Judging by sheer volume alone, "excessive" seems an apt descriptor for this outpouring of commentary. A "national security" discourse, coupled with a Eurocentric sense of national pride over Canada's perceived esteemed place in "Western Democracy," overwhelmingly dominated the coverage. The authority of this "national security" discourse hinged on the selective repetition of the "soaked in blood" phrase from Thobani's speech, which was meant to convey her "extreme anti-Americanism." Naming Thobani "anti-American" positioned her simultaneously as an enemy of (and outsider to) both "Western democracy" and "Canadian values." Indeed, the incessantly repeated claim that Thobani's speech was "Anti-American" operated as a code that evoked a broader terrain of gendered, racialized and national meanings, all intended to undermine her authority as a speaker.

This discursive terrain was well-represented in editorials, regular columns, guest columns, headlines and letters to the editor. For example, all four Editorials published that week reduced the content of her speech to "virulent Anti-Americanism," which became their basis for a complete condemnation of the speech and the speaker. A selectivity process was also evident in the practices employed around the publication of the transcript. Despite the fact that the full text of the speech was available from the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC) almost immediately, both the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *National Post* chose to publish only small and distorted portions of it (each amounting to less than one-quarter of the entire transcript). The *Toronto Sun*, which was arguably the most unrelenting in its attack, chose not to publish any portion of the transcript. While the *Vancouver Sun* might be praised for publishing the entire transcript, it nevertheless provocatively framed the speech within the highly decontextualized and vilifying phrase "It's

bloodthirsty vengeance." Ultimately, the hyper-selective editorializing that week produced a representation of the speech that reduced Thobani's argument to a "[vicious, poisonous] diatribe" against the United States and Western democracy.

At one level, these homogenizing practices functioned to delegitimize her arguments by representing Thobani as extremely irrational and inflammatory. Of the eighteen regular and guest columns that appeared in those six days, for example, all but two used their allotted space as a forum for discrediting Thobani. One regular columnist called her an "idiot," some characterized her speech as "hate-filled," one called her the "Nutty Professor," several charged her with "ranting" and "raving." Over thirty letters expressed profound moral indignation, variously claiming that Thobani's speech rendered them "outraged," "dismayed," "horrified," "appalled and ashamed," and "disgusted."

Anti-feminism and anti-immigrant racism were also central sustaining discourses as many commentators connected Thobani's so-called "anti-Americanism" to her feminist affiliations (especially her long-past term as elected President of NAC and her current post as a professor in a Canadian Women's Studies department) and to her history as an immigrant to Canada. Prominent in both letters and columns, for instance, was a taxpayer discourse which drew on both anti-immigrant and racist nationalist sentiments. Those employing this discourse secured their own sense of belonging in the nation by referencing the misuse of "our" taxes by Others/outside to the nation. A letter printed in the *Ottawa Citizen*, for example, argues that "[o]nly in Canada, it seems, could such an ill-informed and hateful person as Ms. Thobani get so much public-funding to put forward her awful agenda." A *Toronto Sun* columnist extended the discourse to include an anti-feminist agenda which also situates NAC as an outsider to the nation. In her words, "[t]his hatred for our free world comes from a lady, who didn't mind Western world taxpayers paying her salary...while NAC took millions of our hard-earned tax dollars."

Interspersed throughout this dominant media framing were some occasional, but rare, challenging voices. Most took the form of letters to the editor expressing support for Thobani's right to

speak. A number praised her for providing a "refreshing" feminist political analysis, for raising "serious questions" about US foreign policy, and for having the courage "to tell the truth after September 11." Some even rebuked the mainstream media for its "hysterical coverage" of the event. Such items provided a welcome and much-needed counter-framing to what one reader called the media's "cowardly spectacle." In reinterpreting the speech as a defense of freedom (not an attack on it), this reader was one of the few published who actually acknowledged Thobani as "an accomplished scholar" having "extensive expertise" on the subject. However sparse, such representations were an important reminder that there was actually more than one interpretation of this event circulating in the public sphere.

MAKING SENSE OF THE CRACKDOWN ON DISSENT

While not well-represented in the media, a common critical response to the attack on Thobani and her speech did emerge in broader public discussions. This response explained the attack primarily as an example of the generally intensified crackdown on political dissent and/or freedom of speech. *Globe and Mail* columnist Michael Valpy, for example, was one of only two renegade columnists that week who chose not to contribute to what he called the "political and media bile dumped this week on feminist academic Sunera Thobani." Instead, he employed this critical discourse to focus on how it is currently "[r]isky for whoever speaks out."

This critical discourse was necessary for highlighting and explaining the underlying implications of the broader, more generalized, post-September 11 policing of popular dissent or opposition. The seriousness of this crackdown on dissent has been abundantly evident. In Thobani's case, there were calls for her to be fired as well as a "hate-crime" complaint filed against her with the RCMP. With its broadly inclusive framework, and its incisive focus on acts of censorship, the mainstream "freedom of speech" discourse is needed to make connections between seemingly isolated events. In the US context, for example, this critique has highlighted the silencing of prominent

public critics and celebrities (e.g., writer Susan Sontag, talk-show host Bill Maher, documentarian Michael Moore). And, across North America, this critical framework has been useful for highlighting post-September 11 attacks on academic critics and for organizing in their defense. For example, the president of University of British Columbia, and a number of Thobani's colleagues there, defended her by using this discourse. Politically effective for building broad-based coalitions of support and resistance, this critical discourse has facilitated calls in support of academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to dissent. Without a doubt, this critical framework has been vital for acknowledging current power imbalances (national and international) in which a decisive shift to the right has allowed conservative forces to exert real influence over academics, governments and the media.

Given its obvious relevance as a framework for critical analysis and political mobilization, a critique of the limits of the discourse is important as a means for strengthening it. In this regard, my main concern is that it was not effectively mobilized to incorporate and sustain a critique of the politics of difference, especially those inhering in nationalist invocations, underlying the generalized crackdown on dissent. It does not adequately acknowledge how the terrain of dissent and representational legitimacy is not (and has never been) equal for all in Canada, nor has it actively addressed how the consequences for speaking against the nation in the aftermath of September 11 is highly contingent upon one's historical location in the Canadian national imaginary.

Most broadly, the "freedom of speech" framework typically fails to interrogate the specificity and multiplicity of subjects' (often contradictory) material and discursive locations, thereby often failing to highlight that not all speakers are equally at risk of censorship. In the attack on Thobani, for instance, it did not adequately account for why some, and not others, were disproportionately subjected to a massive and sustained attack on the front pages of the nation's major dailies. It did not explain why many who spoke out have mostly been ignored by the media (as in the case of former NAC President Judy

Rebick) or, when covered by the media, were not vilified (as in the case of current Governor General Adrienne Clarkson). Both of these prominent national figures also spoke out in opposition to the post-September 11 war-mongering and other atrocities, but neither was subject to the kind of attack experienced by Sunera Thobani. As a generalized focus on the crackdown on dissent, this mainstream critical discourse did not adequately account for these different responses to, and treatments of, dissent.

Another limit is its failure to highlight how certain freedoms of speech are systematically permitted and particular discourses (re)produced. For example, there was no discussion of the fact that those who contributed to the attack on Thobani were themselves allowed a great deal of freedom to produce extensive anti-feminist, anti-immigrant and racist rants about such topics as the apparently destructive "forces of feminism and political correctness" and "the feminist war against western society." And, as a generalized critique, it failed to highlight how many enjoyed the freedom to volley a vitriolic barrage of well-worn racist/sexist tropes at Thobani and (implicitly or explicitly) feminists/women of colour. All week, commentators projected onto Thobani a range of classic Orientalist tropes, invoking and revealing the racist and imperialist imagination that fuelled this representational terrain. Most notably, Thobani was variously described as "poisonous" and "venom[ous]"; other-worldly (i.e., she was discussed as "a profoundly, mysteriously, angry woman," "a strange woman" and "bereft of human decency"); inherently and dangerously emotional (i.e., "anger-driven," "irrational," "hateful," "excitable," "intemperate," "extreme," and "delusional"). Many were also accorded the freedom to deploy the currently prevalent racist discourse whereby all (perceived) Arabs and Muslims are targeted as suspected terrorists and religious fundamentalists. Thobani, for example, was described as using "extremist rhetoric" and "rhetoric of terrorism," was frequently likened to "terrorists" and "fanatics," and was accused of "hijacking" the women's movement. Critics focusing on the fact of a generalized crackdown on dissent failed to make visible, or to explain the significance of, the gendered and racialized content

of the representational terrain being constructed on these terms.

Finally, while a critique of nationalism is certainly implied in this critical mainstream discourse, it nevertheless generally failed to foreground and examine the invocations to nation and national belonging that loomed large in this sustained public/media attack on Thobani. Primarily focusing attention on a critique of organized state and media-based right-wing suppression, a specific analysis of nationalist invocations remained largely implicit. This silence is evident in its general failure to highlight parallels between similar (but not identical) nationally- or racially-motivated sites of exclusionary meaning-making. For example, it did not produce analyses of earlier related attacks on Thobani because these were not motivated by an attempt to explicitly silence her. In 1993, two months prior to her actual acceptance as the President of NAC, Sunera Thobani was subjected to a similar series of attacks by the media and some politicians. At that time, she was labeled an "illegal immigrant" by a federal Tory MP. While the nuances of the press coverage differed from the current attack, the broad focus and content was strikingly similar. That is, both events invoked the terrain of her contested belonging in the nation as an immigrant, a woman of colour and a feminist. In both moments, the media became a key site for a broad interrogation of whether Thobani is "fit" to represent "Canadian women" and a national feminist organization. The parallels between the two events clearly suggest the importance of bringing the earlier attack into the current analysis. The narrow parameters of this "freedom of expression" discourse, however, did not require (and usually did not produce) an elaboration of these nationalist expressions.

On the whole then, paying attention to the generalized attack on dissent and/or freedom of speech could have, but generally did not, illuminate the politics of difference at work in this moment, and it has not emphasized important continuities with relevant nationalist moments across space and time. Towards a strengthening of this mainstream critical discourse, the following section outlines how to produce an integral and sustained analysis of the hierarchies and dynamics of difference that were (and are) operating in this broader crackdown on

dissent.

WHO IS CANADIAN NOW? AN ANTI-RACIST FEMINIST READING OF A NATIONAL EVENT

In Canada, as in the United States, "[r]ace has become a touchstone." As David Theo Goldberg argues in *Racial Subjects*, "the idea of race...furnishes the terms around and through which a complex of social hopes, fears, anxieties, resentments, aspirations, self-evaluations, and identities gets to be articulated" (1997, 8). For this reason, a complex and critical grammar is required to adequately comprehend how racial and national subjects are invoked in specific historical instances. It must be able to interpret, for example, the strikingly large number of calls to "we Canadians" and "our country" that infused the attack on Thobani. A *Toronto Sun* editorial, for example, represented her as outside the nation - a foreigner attacking "Canada ...our allies...our way of life." Several letter-writers also chimed in on this note: "Ms. Thobani does not know how good she has it here in this wonderful country of ours, and yet we, as passive Canadians, sit back and say, oh well...." Who (or what) national presence was being invoked (or imagined) in these words of belonging and ownership?

Anti-racist feminism is arguably the best author of the kind of critical language currently available to address these questions. In a recent collection of essays, for example, Himani Bannerji conceptualizes these politics and paradoxes of nation from an anti-racist feminist position. Her work integrally acknowledges how Canada's history of racial-colonial formation (including the policies and ideals of official multiculturalism) is constructed through a deep association between national belonging and whiteness. As she puts it: "The category 'Canadian' clearly applied to people who had two things in common: their white skin and their European North American (not Mexican) background" (2000, 64). Those who do not share these "things in common," (or who are identified as not being able to lay legitimate claim to them), are located through an "insider/outsider" status in the nation, an individual and collective experience characterized by "both belonging and

non-belonging simultaneously" (Bannerji 2000, 65). Anti-racist feminists have consistently revealed that, in Canada (and "the West"), citizenship is no guarantee of becoming an "insider" and that immigrant/women of colour, even legal citizens, have been rendered "permanent outsiders within the Canadian nation" (Gajardo and Macias 2000, 27; Dua and Robertson 1999; Sharma 2000).

This kind of critical language and analysis, which seeks to understand the interrelated border politics of gendered, racial, colonial and national belonging, is necessary to comprehend the complex of situated meanings operating in this current attack. It helps to reveal that the speech, as well as Thobani's individual and historical presence (as an immigrant-citizen, feminist/woman of colour) on the conference/national stage, were clearly marked out by Thobani's critics as transgressing gendered and racialized national boundaries. The aftermath of the event exposed the emerging and intensified political pressure towards narrowing the boundaries of what is currently considered a permissible and legitimate space for both feminist and national politics after September 11. This is evident in the fact that most commentators were quick to contain and stabilize Thobani's personal and political history around significant markers of national and racial belonging. An article in the *National Post*, for example, used the occasion to suggest that there was something particularly suspect about the fact that Thobani "obtained landed immigrant status in 1993, the same week she was elected president of the [NAC]." Such statements made visible the historically persistent "insider/outsider" construction in the national imaginary which can be, and was in this instance, powerfully invoked to displace Thobani's actual "insider/citizen" location. It also raises questions about the place of feminism in current imaginings of the nation. Despite the lengthy and effective history of an organized anti-racist feminist movement in Canada, does the position of NAC's President continue to draw authority from a particular claim to Canadian identity (i.e., as originating from within the imagined nation and/or "the West")? Is NAC's founding category, "Canadian women," still predominantly equated with whiteness? Clearly at stake here was the gendered politics of national-racial exclusion and belonging made

visible by reiterations of Thobani's ever-contingent position in the nation, her conditional place of belonging in the Canadian imaginary, and the fragility of her claim to represent Canada and Canadian women. An anti-racist feminist reading of the attack is needed, then, to reveal and challenge the operations of the long historical gender and racial exclusions in this call for a current narrowing of borders around "insider/outsider" status in the nation.

Towards such an analysis, the remainder of this section delves into an interrogation of what Eva Mackey calls the "unmarked, yet dominant, Anglo Canadian core" that inhabits the centre of national invocations, and which is certainly circulating in this entire event (1999, 2). This focus draws attention to the naturalized subject of the insider/outsider presence within the nation: specifically, the historical presence of those white Canadians who secure this position through identifying with dominant constructions of an imagined national community, commonly invoking "our" and "we" to claim an otherwise unmarked insider place in Canada's "racial geography" (Walcott 1997, 36). In perhaps the most explicit comment of this kind, one columnist went so far as to claim that Thobani's presence made her "feel a stranger in my own land." It is difficult to know whether she was expressing fear, resentment, anxiety or all-of-the-above. Regardless, such an utterance reveals her comfortability, her sense of entitlement, in claiming uncontested ownership rights to Canada as "my own land." This persistent (but always contested) historical pairing of national and racial codes of identity (e.g., Canadian = white, immigrant=non-white) continues to allow whiteness to operate as a marker for securely claiming insider belongingness and identity in the national imaginary. Given the prevalence of such invocations displayed in the media attack, it seems crucial to consider this event as a specific enactment of what Eva Mackey has called a "broader trend of white backlash against the gains made by minorities in Western nations" (1999, 141). While Mackey's book examines a slightly different national "crisis" of almost a decade ago, her analysis of white backlash remains instructive for comprehending this current round of national reckoning.

First, as her interviews with some white

Canadians revealed, white backlash is "not framed as an overt defence of *whiteness*, but rather ... as a defence of national identity and unity" (Mackey 1999, 142 - italics not mine). The parallels to the current attack on Thobani are striking and disturbing. I have already highlighted some of the ways that racist and Orientalist discourses have constructed Thobani as a threat to "Canadian values." The frequently-invoked national "we" was used to position Thobani as a foreigner and outsider. Moreover, the racist construction of Thobani as a "terrorist" that underlies the national security discourse renders her a distinct threat to Canada. As discussed above, these kinds of invocations simultaneously reference and index a racialized construction of the nation in which a defense of whiteness is always at the (unmarked) centre. This current episode of hysteria over national security, principally targeting racialized citizens, is a telling reminder that whiteness need not speak its name to be effective.

Second, Mackey has noted that, in periods of such backlash, "liberal discourses of equality, rationality, tolerance and progress are used to make *intolerance and hierarchy* logical and rational" (1999, 142 - italics not mine). After September 11, intolerance, and a backlash against insider/outside, is becoming explicitly permissible if it is invoked in defence of "western democracy" (a construct which is often made interchangeable with "American values"). Indeed, the attack on Thobani was entirely premised on, and justified through, the idea that "western democracy," and therefore freedom and equality, are under attack by outsiders. As such, it is not surprising that some of these invocations carried an explicit threat (desire?) for Thobani's expulsion from "the West," as in the following excerpts from letters:

"Canada is a democracy ... maybe she would prefer to live elsewhere in a non-democratic state such as Afghanistan." (*National Post*)

"If she did not live in a country blessed with the values and morals championed by the US, she would be imprisoned, tortured and perhaps killed for saying such things." (*Globe and Mail*)

"Women and men the world over should be thankful for Western civilization, ... It is also Western Civilization that gave Ms. Thobani a new home and the right to criticize." (*National Post*)

Such comments demonstrate Mackey's point while also revealing the operation of Eurocentric discourse, a terrain of fantasy and mythology of "the West" which (re)produces a "fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 1). The comments themselves demonstrate the absurdly contradictory, irrational and perverse logic of exclusion at work. Each of these expressions hails Canada as the height of "Western civilization" and "democracy" and "freedom" at the same time that it carries within it an utterly anti-democratic and brutal call for the suppression of a citizen's right to express a fully rational critique of the nation-state in a public forum.

On this point, it is also useful to pay attention to the attack on Hedy Fry, the state official in attendance at the conference. She was severely chastised by both opposition leaders and in the press (and eventually lost her ministerial post). Many called for her resignation for the (apparently criminal) act of "sitting silent" on the national stage during Thobani's speech. One letter-writer reprimanded Fry through an appeal to liberal values, making calls for Fry's dismissal seem rational on the basis that she "didn't even bother to stand up and defend this wonderful nation with our rights and freedoms." Despite Fry's deplorable attempt to distance herself publicly from Thobani immediately after the speech, it is important to recognize that she was nevertheless disciplined for failing to do her job according to the post-September 11 consensus of "national security." As one letter-writer put it, she "did nothing to protest Ms. Thobani's hateful slurs on our American neighbours," and, post-September 11, this seems to be justification enough to replace her in cabinet.

The different attacks on Thobani and Fry illustrate Mackey's third point that white backlash is "used to rationalize the desire for a more overtly exclusionary national identity" (1999, 142). Perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of this desire

emerged in letters and editorials suggesting that Thobani be expelled from the nation. One writer, for example, suggested that "...perhaps Sunera Thobani would like a tour of Afghanistan, led by a pro-Taliban ambassador." And two other letter-writers suggested that she "return to whence she emigrated" and that she "go back." One even suggested that "Canadian taxpayers" would be happy to provide "some additional funding to get her to the country of her choice." It is difficult to read such utterances as innocent suggestions, and they appear much more as either a thinly-disguised threat, or a punishment for stepping outside her place as silent other of the nation/western democracy. At the same time, Hedy Fry was reprimanded for failing to adequately cater to this desire for exclusion. While I certainly do not see Fry as a victim of the backlash, I think it is crucial to note how the white backlash exerted its influence even on agents of the state. Clearly, Fry was being disciplined, as Canada's "Multiculturalism Minister," for failing to contain and control the unruly multicultural "Others" on the national stage, for failing to secure the national borders from the insider/outside. A *Vancouver Sun* Editorial succinctly illustrates this sentiment in the following way: "If this woman [i.e., Hedy Fry] can't speak up in a forceful and timely way for her government and her country, then it's time for her to go." Clearly, both the cases of Thobani and Fry reveal that a desire for a more exclusionary national identity is at work in this current context.

In this moment, when the national security discourse is taking on a disproportionate and alarming significance, anti-racist feminist analysis of nation and nationalism is urgently needed to make sense of these media and political attacks and the hierarchies of difference that sustain them. While it is clear that there was no singular "Canadian feminist" response to the attack on Thobani, the strongest responses did nevertheless come from within the organized women's movement and feminist communities.

The section which follows examines several different feminist responses as a means to highlight, and reflect strategically upon, how multiple feminisms concretely struggle to define the broad and multi-faceted women's movement.

FEMINISM IN CANADA AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Feminists across the country responded quickly in the immediate aftermath, many expressing support for Thobani and bearing witness to the attack. As is appropriate for "the largest feminist organization in the country," NAC promptly issued a press release denouncing "recent media reports unfairly targeting women and racialized people following comments by Sunera Thobani." Although feminist responses contributed to ongoing public analysis through the circulation of press releases and statements on e-mail and the web, most were denied access to the mainstream media (Croft 2002, 8). Broadly speaking, three (sometimes overlapping) streams of critical response emerged from a diverse range of feminist supporters.⁵

First, the most complex critical analysis came from within feminist communities articulating an anti-racist analysis. The Battered Women's Support Services in Vancouver, for example, questioned "whether Sunera Thobani's speech would be making headlines...was she not a feminist immigrant of colour," and called particular attention to the media's pronounced racist "anti-immigrant sentiment." "Women's Studies professors, staff and racialised feminist academics" in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Victoria wrote a joint public letter stating their absolute support for Thobani while also providing a thorough analysis of "how racism, sexism and hegemonic nationalism work to shape 'reality'" in moments like this one. Feminist *Toronto Star* columnist Michele Landsberg's article focused on "Unmasking Bigotry Behind the Hysteria" (Landsberg 2001). These kinds of interpretations emerged from, and remain a testament to, the substantial (albeit increasingly fragmented) presence of organized political communities in Canada whose analyses are grounded in feminist and anti-racist politics of difference.

A second broad-based strand of feminist support emerged around the call to protect freedoms of speech (including academic freedom) and the right to dissent freely. This was a prominent theme on PAR-L, an extensive and active Canadian-based feminist e-mail discussion list which encompasses

a range of feminist perspectives. For almost three weeks following the attack, this issue was addressed on the list by individual feminists, national organizations (e.g., NAC and Canadian Federation of Students), local or regional feminist organizations/groups, and feminist journalists. This stream characteristically (and importantly) highlighted the vilification and demonization of Thobani. It also provided a useful site for activism through the circulation of petitions. However, as feminists at University of Victoria rightly noted, and as I have elaborated in this paper, it tended not to emphasize and integrate the gendered, racialized and national foundations at work in the vilifying impetus. Certainly, given the support this position enjoys amongst many feminists, there is room here for further strategic discussion of how to build a stronger feminist position around the very important issue of intensified curtailments on freedom of speech/dissent. Thobani herself, in her first public speaking appearance after the initial speech, suggests the potency of a position that understands the recent media events as an attack on *both* "the anti-racist women's movement" and the "freedom of dissent." My analysis in this paper supports this strategy and suggests some avenues for elaboration.

A third critical strand emerged in the context of, and was articulated through, the burgeoning post-September 11 anti-war movement. In fact, Thobani's initial speech, and her subsequent public response to the attack articulated in an essay titled "War Frenzy," clearly advanced a strong feminist anti-war position [see page 5 in this issue of *Atlantis*]. As some have noted, however, much of the post-September 11 activism within the broader left anti-war movement (in which feminists were active) has not adequately addressed or integrated questions of gender or the specificity of the current "war on terrorism" for women (Wright 2002). Given these fissures and gaps in organizing across broad-based movements, it seems important to reflect on strategies for combining these activist efforts more thoroughly and for building links between overlapping movements. And finally, as a recent essay on the topic so clearly indicates, it is always necessary to develop critical anti-racist analyses for debating the distinct, and sometimes conflicting, feminist positions articulated and being advanced in anti-war activism and peace coalitions

(Arat-Koc 2002).

The broader tenor of this critical response from within feminist communities also produced some notable silences and fractures. If Judy Rebick is correct in her assessment that the attack on Thobani was possible partly because of "the isolation of an already seriously weakened women's movement," then it is crucial to acknowledge and seek to grasp the complicated dynamics contributing to this isolation. Much of this isolation, of course, is attributable to the past several years of backlash against feminism and social movements generally, including severe cuts to social spending and funding for women's organizations over the past decade. Nevertheless, the following discussion suggests points for further reflection upon weaknesses currently apparent in feminist political organizing in Canada.

It seems useful, and necessary, to begin with a deeper analysis of NAC's response to the attack on Thobani. NAC is to be credited for taking the lead in articulating and circulating a quick response, and for representing the organization through a definitive anti-racist position. Nevertheless, it also needs to be recognized that NAC staked out a decidedly moderate position, allowing it to respond to the criticism of Thobani without mobilizing around a strong position on the substance of Thobani's speech. Instead, NAC focused primarily on defending "her democratic right to free speech" and identifying the "suppression of dissent" as a particular problem. NAC's decision to remove itself from the debate on the substance of Thobani's speech is reflected in both the content of its statement, and in its choice of activism: i.e., to launch a website campaign against "media targeting of NAC this past week" (NAC, 2001). On the whole, the statement was organized primarily as a defense of NAC itself (from media attacks), and it is on this basis that it enjoined women to engage the issue. In terms of content, the actual Press Release side-stepped a specific analysis of the substantive issues raised by Sunera Thobani in her speech. How might NAC have taken a stronger political lead to act in coalition to define and sustain a formidable feminist public discourse in this moment? What questions does its response raise about its current (and future) effectiveness and ability to carry on the legacy of anti-racist struggles

at redefining NAC? What does it suggest about internal conflicts within the umbrella organization? NAC's response indicates the need for broadening the discussion, amongst feminist communities, about the political direction of the movement's largest national organization.

And finally, it is important to note also that there was not unanimous support for Thobani within feminist communities. While most felt it was legitimate to rally in defense of her right to dissent, some also focused blame on the content of the speech itself (or, in Thobani's style of presentation). An extensive discussion of this nature ensued on the

PAR-L e-mail list, and some of the invocations warrant further critical discussion. Particularly, this line of discussion often failed to attend to the relevance of the political and social climate that cultivated the attack, focusing instead on a singular and decontextualized analysis of the meaning of her words. In a context where new lines of legitimacy are being drawn in terms of national, racial and gendered belonging, such arguments must always be contextualized within an examination of how the attack is one example of how space of legitimate claims to represent Canada and women in Canada is being further disciplined and narrowed.

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ENDNOTES

1. See *Fuse Magazine's Special Issue: War?* (February 2001). This excellent collection forcefully records the post-September 11 context of racial-national and political profiling as it happened in Canadian contexts for "citizens, immigrants, visitors of colour and any people who dared to differ or publicly dissent" (Mootoo, 2002, 14/15). It also documents some aspects of the emergent anti-war movements within which Thobani's speech/activism is located.

2. All of the media remarks cited throughout this paper were published between October 2 and October 7, 2001 in six English-language newspapers, including three national daily newspapers (i.e., *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*) and three major dailies (i.e., *Ottawa Citizen*, *Toronto Sun*, *Vancouver Sun*). I am not French-speaking, so was not able to include any francophone coverage in my analysis.

3. "National security" is a hearty nationalist trope. It has long-standing resonance in the Canadian national imaginary, and is a recurring theme in the ongoing construction and regulation of "'proper Canadian' subjects" (See Kinsman et al., 2000, 3)

4. Bill C-36, the Canadian government's post-September 11 Anti-Terrorism Act (indeed, its "national security" legislation) is the most obvious act of state violence that marks this current rise of nationalist exclusion. As cultural critic Nuzhat Abbas notes, the Bill was initiated specifically as a mechanism for "obsessive surveillance," a device legitimating racial profiling which targets "those who look Arab, who bear Muslim names, those whose citizenship might be suspect" (2002, 20). To place this recent construction in the broader context of the rise of anti-immigrant discourses and legislation in the 1990s see Thobani (2000) and Wright (2000).

5. Most of the statements and responses discussed in this section are available in the PAR-L on-line archive.

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