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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Shifting Signifiers of Otherness: The 2002 "DC Snipers" in the U.S. Press

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U.S. news coverage of crime or terrorism perpetrators belonging to "Other" identity groups tends to focus on single, salient signifiers of race, religion, and immigration status. This mixed-method data analysis of coverage of the 2002 DC sniper shooting spree in the *Washington Post* and *Seattle Times* presents a theoretical case study of multiple and layered Other identities. Signifiers of blackness, Muslim identity, immigrant identity, and veteran status were all present in newspaper portrayals of Muhammad and Malvo, and journalists appeared to vacillate between them. Thus, in the absence of a single, salient form of Other identity, the use of shifting signifiers reflected newspapers' confusion about Muhammad and Malvo's identity, as well as the uncategorizable nature of the crime itself.

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For 3 weeks in October 2002, two snipers held the Washington, DC, area in their grip of terror, killing 10 and critically wounding 3 along the Beltway. Unseen and unheard, with no discernible motive or rationale in selecting victims, they picked off their prey at shopping centers, gas stations, parking lots, and a middle school. Uncovering few leads and facing growing public panic, the news media attempted to speculate about the likely shooter: In interviews, expert profilers assumed the sniper was a lone White male in his thirties or forties (Censer, 2010, p. 115; Smolkin, 2002, p. 27).

But the October 24 arrest of the perpetrators proved them wrong: "Certainly no one predicted the eventual suspects would be two Black men, the elder, John Allen Muhammad, 41, a father figure to the younger, John Lee Malvo, 17. No one envisioned Malvo as a Jamaican immigrant or Muhammad as a drifter born in Louisiana — many of the profilers said they were local" (Smolkin, 2002, pp. 26–27). Today, Malvo is serving multiple life sentences, while Muhammad was executed in 2009.

The news media and experts had not anticipated the complex sets of identities embodied by Muhammad and Malvo. This confusion in the initial accounts would be carried throughout the weeks of news media coverage that followed, as the duo's

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multiple, overlapping identities became moving targets for journalists. Mass communication research on media representations of racial, religious, and immigrant identity tends to focus on a single mode of Other identity (e.g., blackness, Muslim identity, Jamaican immigrant identity) and the ways in which that specific group is constructed or stereotyped in news media accounts. We chose the DC snipers as a significant theoretical case study because few similar high-profile crime or terrorism cases encompassed so many disparate yet salient identities, each with their own historical patterns of representation and cultural codes, in one set of perpetrators. Muhammad and Malvo challenged and confounded news media's ingrained cultural codes regarding Otherness, which rely on neatly categorical identities: The Other is either Black, foreign-born, or Muslim—not all three, and not with some identifiers overlapping between two individuals, some distinct between them. Hence, the DC snipers provided an opportunity for this study to both challenge and illuminate representational patterns for a number of Other identities, and to analyze what happens when the very purpose of categorical news-media stereotyping—to simplify our understanding of the Other, and of a heinous crime or terrorist act—becomes impossible, and anything but simple.

Describing Muhammad and Malvo's overlapping and distinct identities not only proved confusing to news media professionals at the time of arrest, but also became an even more complex task as more information was uncovered about the duo. For instance, they were both Black, but only Muhammad was African American. Malvo had emigrated from Jamaica illegally in 2000. Likewise, both men were adherents to the Nation of Islam, a U.S.-based and Black-centered Muslim movement founded in the 1930s. Yet Muhammad had converted while serving in the Gulf War, while Malvo converted only after meeting Muhammad. The men's relationship was also unusual: Muhammad, 41, was a father figure to Malvo, 17, and appeared to have a disproportionate amount of influence on the minor.

The purpose of this study in examining the postarrest newspaper coverage of Muhammad and Malvo is to gain further insight on how the news media construct—or fail to construct—Other identity when multiple cultural codes are embodied by high-profile crime suspects. This study builds on previous work that analyzed more typical newspaper coverage of minority perpetrators, in which one or two dominant signifiers were assigned to them. These studies examined Jiverly Wong, a mass shooter primarily characterized as an Asian immigrant (Chuang, 2012), and Faisal Shahzad, a homegrown terrorist primarily characterized as an apparently assimilated, but ultimately alien, Muslim immigrant (Chuang & Chin Roemer, 2013). By conducting a similar analysis on Muhammad and Malvo, this study suggests that representation of insider versus outsider status can be understood through a more complex lens, and that news media do not always arrive at a conclusive representational pattern.

Because of the intensity of news coverage and feelings of panic that engulfed the Beltway region prior to the suspects' arrests, most previous studies of the DC snipers placed little, if any, emphasis on Muhammad or Malvo's coverage postarrest. Many

concluded that the news media exacerbated the public's fear by hyperbolizing the danger presented by the snipers on the loose (Censer, 2010; Lisheron, 2002; Muzzatti & Featherstone, 2007; Smolkin, 2002). None of these studies analyzed coverage from the period after the suspects were identified. In our study, we take a different view, picking up after the arrest in order to focus on the complex identities of the suspects themselves.

Literature overview

Mass media and the Other: The intersection between semiotics and Orientalism

One of the central concepts to this study is that of the cultural construction of Other identity. This study draws heavily from contemporary research in the fields of media and semiotics. In the early 1980s, Stuart Hall described the role of representation in media production and consumption as a "circuit of culture," or regulating cycle of meaning through representation, identity, production, consumption, and subsequent reproduction (1997a). The media is both a cocreator and a product of the "*dominant cultural order*," which favors certain connotative codes over others (Hall, 1980, p. 134).

Hall's theories on the relationship between denotation and connotation as one of power and the perpetuation of power are rooted in the work of semiotician Roland Barthes in the late 1960s. Barthes emphasizes the role of cultural context in the processing of media representation through distinct levels of meaning. The resulting levels, denotative meaning and connotative meaning, distinguish between the descriptive level of communication and more complex level of cultural codes and context: "The whole of semiological analysis usually requires, in addition to the studied system and the (denoted) language which in most cases takes it over, a system of connotation and the metalanguage of the analysis which is applied to it" (Barthes, 1967, p. 94).

Also instrumental to Hall's scholarship on the Other is the work of postcolonial scholar Edward Said. Said defines Orientalism as a systemic, hegemonic system of beliefs and representations through which the White European West perceives and interacts with the "Orient," or foreign East. "Orientals"—Eastern, darker-skinned, non-European—are processed into the West's collective consciousness through this powerful dichotomy, which continually establishes and maintains the White European perspective's dominance (Said, 1978).

As a media scholar, Hall brings together the postmodern concepts of Orientalism with the semiotic analysis of Barthes to highlight the role of in-group versus out-group binaries. Hall writes: *"The argument here is that we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'"* (1997b, p. 235). These constructions not only define the dominant cultural order, but are also inherent in language itself. Hence, a "racialized regime of representation" is established that defines nonwhites with Other (Hall, 1997b, p. 249). In this out-group category are all those who are not part of the dominant cultural order, nor are producers of the media. A broad array of theoretical and empirical studies has addressed the mass media's role in

perpetuating and disseminating the majority culture's Orientalist representations of nondominant groups, and how the media weaves those representations into collective cultural memory (Browne, Firestone, & Mickiewixz, 1994; Campbell, 1995; Covington, 2010; Gandy, 1998; Karim, 2000; Pascale, 2007; Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2013). Particularly in stories about crime and terrorism, this legacy of Orientalist media representations has reinforced cultural codes that suggest the safe, normal, and rational insider exists in contrast to, and is in many ways defined by, the alien, dangerous, and irrational outsider, the Other.

Kerner and beyond: Representations of Blacks and Black masculinity

These concepts of hegemonic media perceptions of the Other came to the fore in 1968 when the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission, addressed racial inequality in the United States in the wake of riots in the major urban centers of Los Angeles, Chicago, Newark, and Detroit. Along with other institutions, the news media was criticized for reporting and writing "from the standpoint of the white man's world. … Slights and indignities are part of the Negro's daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls the 'white press'—a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the bias, the paternalism, the indifference of white America" (National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 366). This report's findings on U.S. news media have informed subsequent studies on representations of minorities (Campbell, 1995; Gandy, 1998; Wilson et al., 2013). Such studies have concluded that in post-Kerner years, overtly negative representations of Black Americans were replaced by more subtle, complex forms of subversion. Wilson et al. describe "stereotypical selection" as a more benign-seeming coverage phase, aimed at keeping minorities "in their place" (2013, p. 134). One particularly persistent stereotype is the association of African Americans, particularly Black men, with violence and crime (Allan, 2004; Covington, 2010; Dashiell, 1996; Gandy, 1998; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2002; Johnson & Dixon, 2008; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2003).

Most contemporary studies on the topic of Black male identity and its constructions have their origin in the work of Frantz Fanon, an early-20th century psychiatrist and revolutionary whose controversial 1952 text *Black skin*, *white masks*, revolutionized discussions of the psychology of race and language in the late 1970s and 1980s. Fanon argues that Black males are colonized through language, or forced to internalize negative stereotypes about Black identity in the course of accepting the language of a dominant White cultural order (Fanon, 1967).

Over the last 2 decades, studies by Entman and Rojecki (2000) and Jackson and Dangerfield have drawn attention back to the construction of Black male identity by U.S. media, and consolidated the diverse body of post-Fanon discussions of the complex layers of Black male identity. For example, Jackson and Dangerfield argue that Black masculinity becomes cultural property as Black men are stigmatized in media as criminal, hypersexual, and incompetent (2002). Portrayals of Black men as dysfunctional in their romantic and family relationships, particularly as husbands and fathers, are also prevalent (Gray, 1996; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2002). Gray concluded

that mass media represents Blacks in a dichotomous manner, with the dominant mode being that of the "unemployed, unskilled, menacing, unmotivated, ruthless, and irresponsible" urban underclass that adhere to separate moral codes from "everyone else," and a small minority of Blacks as "gifted and successful individuals," such as in the television series *The Cosby Show* (1996, p. 142).

Orientalism and Kerner as applied to post-9/11 coverage of Muslim Americans

Theories of news media hegemony and constructions of the Other, as well as the Kerner Report's observations on the news media, have been applied to portrayals of Muslims and Muslim Americans, particularly after the September 11 attacks. Said himself, in 1981, demarcated the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a "signifier," or a starting point from which the West perceived the resurgence of Islam as a potential threat (1981, p. 26). Said's influence, in particular, can be seen in the discourse on media representations of Muslims in a self-versus-Other framework that pains Islam and its adherents as inherently violent and anti-American (Danis & Stohl, 2008; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008; Jaysane-Darr, 2010; Jiwani, 2004; Karim, 2000; Kumar, 2010; Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Powell, 2011; Qureshi & Sells, 2003). Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007) argue that Muslim Americans were misrepresented in post-9/11 coverage in much the same way that Black Americans were misrepresented in the news media after the 1960s riots.

Research questions

The application of theories on representations of the Other to news coverage of layered identities provides an opportunity for media scholars to analyze the possible overlaps between patterns observed in coverage of Black, Muslim, and immigrant identities. This study considers theoretical frameworks provided by Hall, Barthes, and Said in the context of postarrest newspaper portrayals of John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo. The aim of this study is to determine what strategies were utilized by newspaper journalists to characterize the duo and their unusual, shocking crime.

This study uses newspaper coverage of Muhammad and Malvo to examine the following research questions:

RQ1: Were Orientalist discourses of Otherness deployed in newspapers' postarrest constructions of Muhammad and Malvo?

RQ2: Given Muhammad and Malvo's varied and overlapping Other identities, did a clear pattern of signifiers and cultural codes emerge in portrayals of either or both suspects?

RQ3: Were unique signifiers used to portray Muhammad versus Malvo as distinct from each other?

RQ4: How did newspapers attempt to contextualize Muhammad and Malvo in light of the unique and sensational nature of their crime?

Method

Through a mixed-methods data analysis of newspaper coverage, this study explores how Muhammad and Malvo were portrayed after their October 24, 2002, arrest. The initial search was conducted on newspaper articles published in the month following the DC sniper arrests, or October 25 to November 25, 2002. The search terms used for U.S. newspapers were "John Lee Malvo" or "Lee Boyd Malvo," the two aliases used by the younger suspect. The news article searches were performed using Malvo's name because the study's goal was to analyze stories in which both suspects were described, and Malvo rarely appeared in print without a mention of Muhammad. This initial search yielded approximately 2,000 hits. We subsequently decided to limit collection efforts to articles from two daily newspapers: The *Washington Post* and the *Seattle Times*, totaling 141 articles ($N = 141$) for the 1-month postarrest period after duplicate articles were eliminated. This decision was made intrinsically, based on clear patterns in the number of articles mentioning Malvo by name in the top-25-circulation newspapers, as well as in reflection of Malvo and Muhammad's personal connections to the geographies of the Washington, DC, and Seattle, Washington, areas (They had lived in the Seattle suburbs prior to embarking on the sniping spree).

Articles were collected using a combination of the Factiva and LexisNexis databases, and the online archive of the *Seattle Times* website. We decided to limit the collection to the month after the arrest because articles toward the end of this time frame and beyond were found to focus primarily on the legal implications of charging the snipers, such as a battle over the venue for the first court case or the possibility of the death penalty for either or both suspects. Of the 141 articles from the two newspapers, 104 were from the *Washington Post* and 37 were from the *Seattle Times*. All of the *Washington Post* articles were authored by *Post* staff. Of the *Seattle Times*'s stories, 16 of the 37 were solely authored by other newspapers (via wire services) or the Associated Press, including 7 of those attributed to the *Washington Post*. Those 7 stories were not treated as duplicate articles, because they were all altered or edited somewhat as they appeared in the *Seattle Times*, including one that was combined with an Associated Press report. The aim was to analyze coverage as it appeared to readers of those 2 newspapers, so the use of wire stories, including those from the *Post*, was deemed relevant.

The resulting analysis examines how key aspects of Muhammad and Malvo's Other identities were represented through explicit references to "Black," "Muslim," "Jamaican," or "immigrant," as well as references to Muhammad's marital and custody disputes or his anti-American sentiments. We aimed to use elements of quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis to address both denotative and connotative signifiers, capturing the range of subtleties described by scholars such as Wilson et al., in modern representations of race and Otherness. According to Hall, the denotative versus connotative dichotomy is useful "for distinguishing . . . the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect" (1980, p. 133).

This study's mixed-methods approach aligns with Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie's definition of a mixed-methods data analysis as "the use of quantitative and qualitative

analytical techniques, either concurrently or sequentially, at some stage beginning with the data collection process, from which interpretations are made in either a parallel, an integrated, or an iterative manner" (2003, pp. 352–353). Some elements of quantitative research, such as providing numerical comparisons for the frequency of certain coded categories (i.e., modes of representation) were employed to provide a means to "estimate the frequency of a particular defined phenomenon according to other predefined variables and to be able to generalize those frequencies" (Brannen, 2004, p. 313). This approach was specifically utilized for those code categories representing the most concrete signifiers in the study, such as references to key identifiers such as "Black," "Muslim," "Jamaican," "immigrant," or "illegal immigrant." For aspects of the articles that operated on more nuanced levels, a qualitative textual analysis based on Barthes and Hall's semiological approaches was applied.

A content analysis of the sample was conducted, using 7 code categories to determine whether and how Muhammad and Malvo's race and religion, as well as Malvo's nationality and immigration status, were represented. These categories distinguished between "Muslim" and specific references to the Nation of Islam, as well as phrases like "Jamaican national" or "Jamaican immigrant" versus references to Malvo's illegal status. The two suspects were coded separately to discern any distinctions between the two.

In order to determine additional themes in Muhammad and Malvo's characterization, initial reading of the articles was conducted before a coding scheme was finalized. Twelve additional categories were inductively developed based on more prominent characteristics, most of them linked to Muhammad, such as his military history, custody battles with his ex-wife, anti-American sentiments, and possible mental instability. Few, if any, were found on Malvo alone, but 2 categories were identified about his relationship with Muhammad, referring to Muhammad's undue influence and the fact that Muhammad often represented himself as Malvo's father, or was mistaken to be a father figure. Finally, categories were developed to determine if Muhammad and Malvo were contextualized with other serial killers, spree killers, or terrorists, and which ones.

We acted as first and second coders, analyzing each article in a second reading based on the 7 predetermined categories, as well as the 12 inductively developed categories. Intercoder reliability of the complete results was found to be .86 based on percentage agreement. Anecdotally, we agreed that 1 category in particular proved difficult to code meaningfully:

Muhammad and Malvo were compared to such a wide range of serial killers and terrorists, in such a wide range of contexts, it was difficult to discern which comparisons were relevant, or to identify which killers or terrorists were the most prominent parallels. This challenge had no numerical impact on intercoder reliability; we did deem the diversity of comparisons significant in and of itself, and will discuss this phenomenon in the *Findings* section.

Findings

Intensive postarrest focus on suspects gives way to legal and local issues

As to be expected, the arrest of the sniper suspects after 3 weeks of public fear and uncertainty resulted in a nationwide news event. Twenty-seven of the total 141 articles appeared on the first 2 days after the arrest alone. The *Post* had 10 stories on October 25, the first day after the arrest, alone. Overall, 57, or 40% of the studied articles, were published within the first week.

Both newspapers ran lengthy profiles of each suspect on October 25, and continued to publish further updates on them as more details emerged, such as additional crimes to which they were linked. By November 1, the start of the second week, the focus of the coverage began to shift. The *Post* ran a story headlined, "No masking sense of relief," about local families enjoying Halloween trick-or-treating without fear of the snipers, demonstrating a change in focus from the shootings themselves to their impact on the local community. Likewise, a lengthy story the next day, "Families seek justice, differ on what that is," prefaced a dominant theme in the *Post*'s coverage for the coming week: The battle over whether the first trial would be in Maryland or Virginia, and justice for the victims' families (Pressley, 2002).

Black identity was downplayed, but implicit in coverage

Muhammad and Malvo's shared Black identity did not appear to be emphasized in the newspaper stories through direct mentions of race. Of all 141 articles, only 13 (9%) were found to have explicit references to the suspects being Black. These references were nearly always made in a relevant context, such as the racial implications of a death penalty case. The *Seattle Times*'s first-day coverage included a *Los Angeles Times* story that states, "Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening in May imposed a moratorium on capital punishment over concerns of racial bias. The two suspects are black" (Savage, 2002).

Several mentions of race were made in the context of the inaccuracy of profilers' expectations that the sniper would be a White male. A first-day *Post* story reported, "No expert suggested that a pair of black males, a middle-aged man and a teenager, might be suspects" (Tucker & Kovaleski, 2002). A *Post* story reported from Bellingham, Washington, described a bar at which Muhammad had been a regular as a place where he "did not stand out much, even though he was a black man in a very white town" (Booth, 2002). These two examples both use Black as a signifier linked to signs embodying outsider status, a surprising presence within an expected norm. They suggest a larger sense of not-belonging, insofar as Muhammad and Malvo's crime was not perceived as a "Black crime," consistent with mistaken popular beliefs about the dearth of Black serial or mass killers (Walsh, 2005).

The absence of direct references to Muhammad and Malvo's Black identity is mostly likely a result of journalistic practice surrounding racial identifiers of crime suspects. Associated Press stylebook and conventional journalistic practice has long discouraged the identification of crime suspects by race unless relevant (Associated Press, 2012; Jones, 1996; Lehrman, 2008; Tenore, 2012). Even in a

February 2012 update to the Associated Press stylebook that changed course from previous editions by allowing racial identification in descriptions of crime suspects when "using police or other credible, detailed descriptions," the entry maintained that "the racial reference should be removed when the individual is apprehended or found" (Associated Press, 2012), as would apply in postarrest articles about Muhammad and Malvo.

Studies focusing on visual imagery have argued that a suspect's racial identity can be at once implicit and so widely known it does not need to be reiterated. Dashiell's findings in her content analysis of broadcast coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial noted that in 1994, few news media outlets directly referred to Simpson's race. However, Dashiell points out, "Although the transcripts rarely mentioned the race of O. J. Simpson, the fact that he is African American is well known. His race is clearly visible in the networks' video" (1996, pp. 168–169). While Simpson's celebrity certainly renders him distinct from Muhammad and Malvo, who were unknown until their arrests, the intense news media coverage, including police mugshots to snapshots obtained and distributed by wire services, produced a similar effect within the first postarrest day of news coverage. Abraham and Appiah and Lipschultz and Hilt found in two separate studies that photographic representations or mugshots of (noncelebrity) individuals of identifiable race in news stories, even when not accompanied by textual references, had an implicit stereotyping effect (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2003).

A more qualitative approach reveals frequent use of signifiers that suggest links to stereotypical cultural codes of Black masculinity described by Fanon (1967), Entman and Rojecki (2000), Jackson and Dangerfield (2002), Dashiell (1996), and Gray (1996). The first-day, front-page *Washington Post* story of the arrest begins, "The two suspects are an apparently penniless Army veteran of the Persian Gulf War and his teenage companion" (Morello, Davenport, & Harris, 2002), thus highlighting Muhammad's unemployment and instability as a contrast to his veteran status, which would otherwise signify a desirable insider/American status. The story goes on to note that the "twice-divorced" Muhammad "never rose above the rank of sergeant" despite 15 years in the Army, once again countering his veteran status with cultural codes of family dysfunction and incompetence. On the same day, the *Post* also ran its first profile of Muhammad, headlined, "John Allen Muhammad; a failed businessman and frustrated father," emphasized familiar signs in the literature: Incompetence, familial dysfunction, criminality, poverty. "John Allen Muhammad, 41, is a serial loser," the *Post* profile begins, "He is a failed businessman whose karate school and car-repair business went bust, a twice-divorced father whose ex-wives didn't trust him with his children, a man whose unremarkably messy life disintegrated into homelessness and theft" (Witt & Blum, 2002). Similarly, a *Seattle Times* first-day profile of Muhammad contains similar signifiers, describing Muhammad as "a familiar criminal type: a troubled, angry man fascinated with powerful guns and at loose ends, bouncing from address to address across the country, spewing violence and abuse in his wake" (Seattle Times Staff, 2002).

Here, the signifiers associated with theory on Black masculinity intersect with broader cultural codes associated with Orientalism and Otherness. Said himself was influenced by Fanon, and many recent studies on representations of blackness cite Said, so their theoretical lineages are hardly disparate. In the quotation from the *Seattle Times* profile, Muhammad as "familiar criminal type" becomes a dangerous and irrational "troubled, angry man" motivated by an inherent attraction to violence, "spewing [it] in his wake." These cultural codes cast Muhammad as Said's Oriental: "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, and 'different,'" in contrast to the European, who is "rational, virtuous, mature, and 'normal'" (1978, p. 40). The same profile fixates on Muhammad's exercise fixation, "a lifelong, almost obsessive fitness habit that packed hard muscle on a lean, 180-pound, 6-foot-1 frame" (Seattle Times Staff, 2002). This emphasis on Muhammad's body is consistent with Fanon's theories of the reductive use of the Black male body in media and literature. Similarly, Jackson and Dangerfield describe the linking of the Black male body with violence as a common media projection (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2002).

Shifting signifiers were used in Muhammad's and Malvo's portrayal

Though newspapers favored stereotypical signifiers over overt references to Muhammad's blackness, references to his Muslim religion were not restricted by Associated Press stylebook rules. Accordingly, newspapers identified Muhammad as Muslim more often than they referred to him as Black, but not by much: In total, there were 16 articles that referenced his religion, comprising 11% of all of the analyzed articles. Nearly all (12) of the articles referencing Muslim identity appeared in the *Washington Post*. Of those, 8 also elaborated that he was an adherent to the Nation of Islam. The majority (13) of the *Washington Post* and *Seattle Times*'s references to Muhammad's Muslim identity occurred within the first 3 days of postarrest coverage, often concurrent with speculation about his terrorist intent or ties to groups like al-Qaeda. As early as the first day of postarrest coverage, a *Post* article appeared to put the issue to rest, quoting an FBI official saying, "Even if this guy is a radical Black Muslim type, that doesn't make him al Qaeda or anything close to it. … This was a freelance operation, and it's not clear that his sympathies were even a part of his motive" (Schmidt & Becker, 2002). Yet, the same story paraphrased a former FBI official wondering, "Who can predict what will make someone snap and begin an intensely personal jihad?" A November 10 *Seattle Times* story picked up on this language, concluding, "Muhammad was a man on a mission. Independent of any known terrorist group, it appears, Muhammad began his own sort of jihad" (Tizon & *Seattle Times* Investigative Staff, 2002). The use of the signifier "jihad" not only links Muhammad's wrongdoing to Islam, but also underscores a familiar post-9/11 discursive pattern in which the word "jihad" was reappropriated by the news media and non-Muslim public to link to signs of violence and terrorism (Jaysane-Darr, 2010; Kumar, 2010; Powell, 2011).

As references to Muhammad's religion in the sample tapered off, we found increasing references to Malvo's Jamaican identity. In total, 27 of the articles, or about

one-fifth of the total, contained at least 1 reference to Malvo's Jamaican nationality. He was referred to in various articles as a "Jamaican citizen," "originally from Jamaica," "Jamaican national," "Jamaican-born," "Jamaican immigrant," "from the Caribbean," or simply, "Jamaican." Few other characterizing signifiers related to Malvo alone were found, and only 2 of the analyzed articles made reference to the fact that he was also a Muslim convert. It appeared that outside of his relationship with Muhammad, Malvo was associated primarily with two signifiers: Jamaican and undocumented immigrant. However, for the latter, most of the 21 references appeared in the last 2 1/2 weeks of the study period and were made in context of relevant legal issues, such as his inability to purchase a gun or Muhammad's role in helping Malvo enter the country with false documents.

In fact, Malvo's unusual relationship with Muhammad as a father or Svengali-like figure emerged as the younger man's only other prominent characteristic. Seventeen articles mentioned that Muhammad was either like a father or claimed to be the father of Malvo, while 10 referred to Muhammad's undue influence on him. As an October 27 *Post* article describes, "the Army veteran and the fresh-faced kid from the Caribbean cemented their relationship. Muhammad called Malvo, or sometimes stepson. Malvo called him sir" (Higham, Witt, & Whoriskey, 2002).

This phrasing, "the Army veteran and the fresh-faced kid from the Caribbean," reflects a pattern seen in many of the newspaper articles over time as they honed in on one or two signifiers to characterize each of the snipers. The practice amounted to a semiotic shorthand to handle repeated references in many stories to the same suspects. Typical of such phrases were "the former military man and his teenage Jamaican protégé," from a November 3 *Washington Post* story (Higham & Kovaleski, 2002). The *Seattle Times* used similar signifiers in this manner, but added something about each suspect's local ties: "John Allen Muhammad, 41, a Gulf War veteran formerly stationed at Fort Lewis, and Lee Boyd Malvo, 17, a Jamaican immigrant who attended Bellingham High School last year" (Seattle Times Staff and News Services, 2002).

As seen in these examples, Muhammad's military history became one of his most prominent characteristics in the postarrest newspaper coverage. Twenty-two of the articles, or 16%, referred to his being a member of the military or service in the Gulf War. While typically, references to service in the U.S. military or veteran status are signifiers that would link to insider and American cultural codes, all of them were juxtaposed with his other failures in employment, relationships, and fatherhood. In addition, 10 articles referenced Muhammad's possible mental instability and 12 mentioned that he had threatened his wife, thus invoking signs that reframe his veteran status into a possibly war-scarred man prone to mental illness or domestic violence. These signifiers, coupled with reminders that Muhammad's fitness obsession and firearms knowledge stemmed from his military training, ultimately recontextualize his veteran status. They link it to the same cultural codes identified in the previous section as consistent with Orientalist and historic stereotypes of Black masculinity: Irrationality, dysfunction in relationships, violence, and physicality.

Newspapers and experts demonstrated confusion about nature of the crime

We found it difficult to code for comparisons between Muhammad and Malvo's crime and the crimes of other serial killers and terrorists, as well as for the newspapers' attempts to define the crime, as the news articles themselves appeared confused on the issue. Scattered comparisons appear in the sample to a wide range of killers and terrorists, including the Unabomber, serial killers Thomas Lee Dillon and Ted Bundy, and "shoe bomber" Richard Reid. Each mention was usually applied to one specific aspect of the sniper case, and did not suggest the killers had similar modes and motives. For example, the *Seattle Times* mentioned the Unabomber in the context of who informed on Muhammad, reporting that "much as the Unabomber was betrayed by his own brother, Muhammad was informed on by an Army buddy and longtime friend" (Seattle Times staff, 2002). Similarly, the *Post* mentioned Reid because authorities were interested in the fact that both he and Muhammad had ties to Antigua, but otherwise had uncovered no connections between the two (Lengel, 2002). In addition, such comparisons were often qualified with statements like, "Sometimes it is a historian's sad duty to confess that history is no guide," from a criminal justice historian's quote in the October 25 *Post* (Tucker & Kovaleski, 2002).

Another plausible explanation for these inconsistent comparisons was that the experts quoted in the news media found Muhammad and Malvo's crime undefinable and without easy precedent, suggesting that these fleeting mentions of other killers (about 1–3 articles mentioning each 1) were merely tenuous attempts to create linkages to limited aspects of the case, as opposed to true analogies. Indeed, many examples were found in the articles of conflicting attempts to create new signifiers that could give shape to an unimaginable crime. The in-depth November 10 *Seattle Times* profile that concluded Muhammad was on "his own sort of jihad" expressed confusion over the perpetrator's motive, reflecting the list of the shifting signifiers observed in our analysis:

> He was an angry ex-husband, and an angry member of the Nation of Islam, a Black Muslim who considered the U.S. a terrorist state. … In the end, if he is convicted, the conclusion may be that Muhammad's motivation was as multifaceted as the man himself. Maybe he was an angry father, an angry Black Muslim and an extortionist.

The article then concluded, "Or maybe he was simply angry" (Tizon & *Seattle Times* investigative staff, 2002).

Some initial attempts were made to define the act as terrorism, especially in the early reports that mentioned his Muslim faith, anti-American sentiment, or investigations into ties with al-Qaeda or similar groups. These were quickly dismissed by law enforcement authorities, prompting an October 25 *Washington Post* story to state, "Whether they establish links to terror groups or not, the Washington sniper has unquestionably terrorized the region" (Schmidt & Becker, 2002). The phrasing metaphorically calls into question the very definition of terrorism, suggesting it can be expanded to any crime that terrorizes large numbers of people. The

aforementioned October 25 "history-is-no-guide" story also contains another expert opinion underscoring the idea of an undefinable crime, asserting, "I can think of no similar shooting or murder pattern in American history. This was not a true serial killer, or spree killer or mass murderer. It is more akin to a kidnapping, with ransom notes, than simple murder" (Tucker & Kovaleski, 2002). Contrary to this opinion, Holmes & Holmes, in their study *Serial Murder*, categorized Muhammad and Malvo as "spree killers," defined as those who kill three or more people within a 30-day period and distinct from serial killers, who kill multiple people over longer periods of time with cooling-off periods in between (Holmes & Holmes, 2010, pp. 35–36).

Conclusion

The trajectory of contemporary news-media studies on race and Other identity, particularly in relation to crime and terrorism, has focused on the evolution of stereotypical representations that tend to focus on a single signifier of Otherness (blackness, immigrant identity, Muslim identity, etc.) and link perpetrators' violent, deviant motives to that identity feature (Campbell, 1995; Chuang, 2012; Chuang & Chin Roemer, 2013; Covington, 2010; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998; Jaysane-Darr, 2010; Karim, 2000; Kumar, 2010; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2003; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007; Wilson et al., 2013). This theoretical case study sought to challenge that paradigm by applying semiological analysis to a high-profile crime case in which the perpetrators embodied multiple salient Other identities, some distinct, some overlapping—and each with its own history and patterns of representation. Given such a complex and layered set of cultural codes, would newspaper journalists choose some signifiers over others, for the sake of simplicity? How would news media construct Otherness when the most common strategy for doing so—the oversimplication of a perpetrator into a single racial or religious stereotype—was confounded?

At first glance, the researcher looking for overt references to racial or other forms of identity in two of the prominent newspapers in the postarrest coverage, the *Washington Post* and the *Seattle Times*, might conclude that no dominant patterns of representations of Otherness emerged. In fact, we observed patterns of shifting signifiers, from Black/African American to Muslim to undocumented immigrant and Jamaican (focusing on Malvo), and even to less concrete identities, such as Gulf War veteran and estranged husband/father. Rather than to interpret this as a lack of a pattern, we argue that the apparent indecision and confusion demonstrated by the newspaper coverage was significant in and of itself.

To summarize our analysis, we found very few direct references to Muhammad and Malvo's Black identity, in large part because contemporary journalistic practice and Associated Press Stylebook guidelines prohibited racial references in suspect descriptions. However, widely published photographic images left no question as to Muhammad and Malvo's race after the first postarrest day's coverage. Furthermore, consistent with Wilson et al.'s theories on "stereotypical selection," signifiers linked

to cultural codes historically associated with Black masculinity were present in descriptions of Muhammad's financial and relationship failures, as well as his fixation on his body. In fact, the most common portrayals of Muhammad could be summed up with Gray's description of the media-constructed Black male as stereotypically "unemployed, unskilled, menacing, unmotivated, ruthless, and irresponsible" (Gray, 1996, p. 142). In the absence of literal references to "Black" or "African American" identity, these connotative codes, in conjunction with photographic images, produce an Othering effect that upholds Hall's hegemonic "racialized regime of representation."

Further evidence of the newspapers' apparent confusion was seen in other shifting signifiers used in portrayals of Muhammad, starting with his Muslim religion. Direct references to Islam were particularly prevalent in the first few days of postarrest coverage, before speculation about terrorist intent or al-Qaeda ties was ruled out. However, throughout the study's time frame, signifiers linked to Islam, such as the word "jihad," were still applied to Muhammad. Over time, signifiers associated with Muhammad placed greater emphasis on his personal life, such as his custody battle and threats related to his ex-wife, or his military history. Malvo, on the other hand, had virtually no identity in the newspaper stories outside of his Jamaican nationality and undocumented status. Neither fact was mentioned in more than 1 out of 5 stories—a surprising fact, given the United States' preoccupation with immigration policies and enforcement after the 9/11 attacks. It appeared that Malvo's individual identity, in life and in newspaper representation, was overshadowed by his relationship with the overbearing, Svengali-like Muhammad. Finally, as coverage continued, newspaper stories arrived at a form of semiotic shorthand that honed in on Muhammad's veteran status and Malvo's youth and Jamaican nationality, though the range of signifiers described above was still present.

Therefore, this study is significant because it demonstrates that, despite a tendency to seize upon single-identity stereotypes when presented with one salient attribute of Otherness, journalists are easily confounded when presented with complex and layered identities. Given the increasingly global, diverse, and multiracial nature of American society, we anticipate that news media professionals will be confronted with such multiple-identity cases, in contexts including and beyond crime stories.

The newspapers' confusion about Muhammad and Malvo's identity also echoes confusion about the crime itself, which was characterized as unprecedented and defying categorization. The confounding nature of both identity and crime echo Walsh's (2005) study findings, which attribute confusion about the DC Sniper shooting to societal misperceptions of "Black crimes" not including serial killing. Opportunities for further study could develop more refined coding for attempts to define the crime, particularly through the lens of race. Study of photographic or video images in print and broadcast journalism would provide another dimension of racial identity as Abraham and Appiah and other scholars observed.

Ultimately, we must note that the lack of a definitive signifier of identity or a categorization of the crime did not preclude the traditional Othering patterns of

news media. *All* of the shifting signifiers used to describe Muhammad and Malvo were linked to Otherness; even Muhammad's veteran status, a potential signifier of insider/American status, was recontextualized into Orientalized stereotypes of irrationality and violence.

Perhaps an October 26 *Washington Post* article provided news media with the only viable strategy to cope with the representational confusion: To create new words, new signifiers. "Now comes another specimen of terrorist under the media microscope: The psycho sniper," the *Style* section article, "The warped mind or warped soul at the heart of a killer," states. "The loser empowered by the gun" (Leiby, 2002). The choice of the signifier "psycho," perhaps rendered somewhat flippantly (which might be expected from the *Style* section over the front page), links to cultural codes not only related to mental illness, but also mental illness as rendered in fictional thrillers. The implication is that Muhammad and Malvo cannot be defined by the discourse of criminal justice experts or FBI profilers; they exist outside of a known reality in a realm that strains credulity—and hence, strains our existing discourse and vocabulary of identity and Otherness. And this, it can be argued, is the greatest alienation, to be beyond even the expansive territory of established forms of Other identity. In being undefinable, yet linked to all the Orientalist qualities of irrationality, danger, and savagery, Muhammad and Malvo come to embody the ultimate form of Otherness.

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