

**Rooting out the Weeds:
Securing white settler & psychiatric supremacy through *The Review of the Roots of
Youth Violence***

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Rooting out the Weeds: Resisting white settler & psychiatric supremacy through a critique of “The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence.”

In the summer of 2007, following the death of a student in a Toronto high school, Premier Dalton McGuinty commissioned former Chief Justice and Attorney General Roy McMurtry and former Speaker of the Legislature Alvin Curling to investigate the ‘crisis of youth violence’ in Ontario. A panel of inquiry was put in place to understand the ‘causes of youth violence’ and as a result, in November of 2008, *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* report was released. My talk will examine what is produced through this report, in the province’s attempts to understand and prevent the ‘roots’ of youth violence. Specifically I look at what stories about raced violence and interventions on this ‘epidemic’ are created and maintained through this report, and ultimately, how the provincial narrative that emerges from this review plays a function that works to solidify white settler supremacy, and legitimizes the construction of policy recommendations aimed at further intervening on racialized bodies in Ontario.

The inquiry produced an extensive five volume report that combined totals just under 2,000 pages. The stated intent of *The Review* is clear: the province wants to discover what the ‘roots’ of the problem of youth violence are. Those roots are immediately identified as resulting from disadvantage: from racism, from poverty, from systemic marginalization. It is this ‘disadvantage’ that *The Review* concerns itself with. From this inquiry, *The Review* is a document that informs us how we are broken, and how the province is to be made whole again.

I will start this talk exploring how it is that *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* creates youth violence in Ontario as unquestionably raced violence, and explore how systemic violence is unrecognized in the report, and instead understood as inequality. From there I will explore a few of the recommendations put forward in the report, including the urge for the province to collect race-based data on contact with the criminal justice system. I also explore how “cultural competency” training asks white settlers to learn about Others in order to better know their culture, and help integrate

them into our own. Finally, I discuss how policy recommendations within the report encourage the province to replace the overpolicing of such communities and substitute such practice by increasing mental health services in educational and community settings.

The Problem of Violence

Of significant issue when trying to write an analysis of racialized violence on a report that *racizes* violence requires a decoding of the term. What is meant by violence in this report? What is said, what is done? What violence is problematized, how is it named, how is it dropped? The violence that *The Review* contends itself with is that of perpetrated violence – violent criminal behaviour that is enacted on another. *The Review* focuses specifically on gun violence, “on the most serious violence involving youth. We also address the other forms of violence that can be its precursors, but consider the heart of the matter to be those youth who are so alienated and disconnected from our society that they carry guns and often use them in impulsive ways, demonstrating indifference to the consequences and placing no value on human life”(McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 2). *The Review* places great emphasis on unveiling the ‘roots’ to such violence, and to do so turns to uncover the structural ‘roots of the immediate risk factors’ that lead to severe violence. These roots are identified as poverty; racism; community design; the educational system; health issues; lack of economic opportunity; denial of youth voice; immigrant settlement issues; and the justice system.

These identified ‘roots’ and the structural problems that lie within affected communities (racialized, poor, immigrant, inner city, unhealthy, unemployed – referred to as the ‘disadvantaged’), while understood as systemic issues, still come to land on *particular bodies*, and are graphed onto ‘at risk’ individual youth. In identifying structural issues as the root causes of severe violence, those bodies that lie within those structural dynamics come to be the living embodiment of systemic forces. Thus, regardless of the emphasis that it is structural causes that create ‘disadvantaged’ (and thus violent)

youth, the problem is still localized on the now-marked bodies that bear the graphing of disadvantage. This is the process by which, through the report, violent youth comes to stand in for poor, racialized, inner city Black youth.

You can see this process by which structural violence comes to be racially embodied and individualized through an analysis of text, such as:

circumstances such as poverty, racism, lack of family supports and the like do not directly cause violence. Instead, but importantly, they are sources of – in our parlance, the roots of – the immediate risk factors for violence involving youth, including alienation, oppression, lack of hope or empathy, low self-esteem, impulsiveness and no other apparent means of being heard nor of addressing inequities and unfairness . . . We do, though, go on to address the interventions that are still required at the individual level to deal with those youth who develop the immediate risk factors about which we are so concerned” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 225).

This social explanation as to why it is that Black male youth are violent replicates a similar argument that is presented in Angela Harris’ work on gender, race and criminal justice. It offers us a compensatory explanation as to *how* and *why* Black men use violence, but leaves unqueried *what* is being constituted as violence. In Harris’s article, she theorizes that Black “men use violence or the threat of violence as an affirmative way of proving individual or collective masculinity, or in desperation when they perceive their masculine self-identity to be at risk” (Harris, 2000: 781). Harris explains why Black men are violent, instead of questioning how it is that they have come to be understood as the harbingers of violence. In a similar fashion, *The Review*, in unveiling the roots to youth violence as being about racism, poverty and so on, reinscribes ‘youth violence’ as erupting from the untenable wrongs of systemic disadvantage. This works, again and over again, to solidify severe violence as existing within the Black male body. It works to create, over and above all else, this figurehead subject as described in the report:

It takes a certain desperation for a young person to walk our streets with a gun. The sense of nothing to lose and no way out that roils within such youth creates an ever-present danger . . . The unfortunate – and often tragic – reality is that it will often take very little by way of provocation or incentive to trigger that latent violence once we have let the immediate risk factors develop. This most often puts other youth in danger’s way, but can do the same for any of us, because it creates a reality in which violence is unpredictable – unpredictable in location . . .” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 18-19).

From hereon in, the subject that we recall when reading the text and imagining youth violence is an angry black teenager, carrying a gun, possibly carrying it into ‘our’ neighbourhood. The text produces the truth that it might not be ‘their’ fault, but also the fact that ‘they’ are still guilty.

Left at the periphery is the *what* of violence. The roots of structural disadvantage that are thoroughly fleshed out in the report are not understood as structural violence. They are happenings, they are unfortunate, but they are not understood as violence. What should be called systemic violence is understood in *The Review* as inequity, and inequity must be tackled if we are going to prevent the roots of youth violence (racism, poverty, ill health) to take hold of our disadvantaged populations. These inequities (not violence)

have grown over a number of years. They were not created by one party or government or segment of society. We all bear the responsibility for having let a series discrete policy choices, including the failure to implement the recommendations of earlier reports, undermine the social strength that Ontario needs in order to be a safe, prosperous and inclusive society for all. Just as those policy omissions and commissions grew over time, so will it take time to remedy them. There are initiatives such as anti-racism, addressing the circumstances of poverty and mental health, and starting to build community

hubs that can and should be advanced immediately (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 228).

The talk of violence in this report is thus that of individualized, criminal violence. Structural violence is understood rather as inequity and disadvantage. These disadvantaged communities allow for us to intervene on their behalf, for “because *they* have not advanced as we have, it is our moral obligation to correct, discipline, and keep them in line and to defend ourselves against their irrational excesses” (Razack, 2008: 10). Though the report tries diligently and almost desperately to understand violence as arising from systems of social oppression, it fails to identify that collective oppression as violence. By failing to do so, it maintains the signifier of violence as one that is individually perpetrated, and localizes that violence as discharging through ‘disadvantaged’ youth. Never are the systemic oppressions that as a province were are implicated as producing understood as violence, and as such never are we as a white settler community understood as the instigators and perpetrators of violence.

It is important to ask, why so much attention to violent crime? As *The Review* itself confesses, “violent crime has actually decreased in this province during the past 20 years . . . From 1986 to 2006, violent crime has dropped five per cent” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 84). While gun violence has risen by 25% since the 1970’s, total homicide rates have gone down (Ibid).” If violent crime has in fact gone down, why the need for the inquiry, the extensive review, and the numerous policy recommendations that flow from it? *The Review* takes the position that regardless of the fact that we are safer than in years prior, what actually matters is how we as a province conceive of ourselves as imperiled. *The Review* notes that “results of a 2007 general population survey suggest that over 70 per cent of Toronto residents believe that crime has increased significantly over the past 10 years” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 83), and asks the reader “What level of safety is sufficient” (Ibid: 100)? *The Review* falls back on the refrain that what is important is perceived threat, that “whether or not Ontarians should believe that they are safer than in the past, many feel that the province is more violent than it was. This matters because the fear of crime, especially the kind that we have

described, can not only hurt the economy and reduce levels of civic engagement, but it can also serve to stereotype and isolate particular communities” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 101).

In stepping back from this statement, I want to argue that the intervention that is *The Review* not only reinforces the stereotype that violent crime stems from ‘disadvantaged’ populations, but it also translates this perceived threat into an actuality through racial paranoia. And as the perceived threat of raced criminal violence is factualized through *The Review*, it allows for ‘us’ as imperiled citizens to respond to that perceived threat through a multitude of violences. It is how we are able to constitute ourselves as imperiled subjects, threatened by and only responding to the attack that is Black youth violence. It allows us to intervene, to implement, to fight back, to kill or be killed. ‘It’ (violent crime perpetrated by Black youth) must be ‘killed’ (weeded out, intervened on, governed, fixed), before it takes root, spreads like a weed, and kills us. In this way, *The Review* has generated, regardless of intentionality, a way of thinking about violent crime as raced crime. Through this race thinking, *The Review* then calls on solutions, interventions, recommendations to kill the latent violence in ‘disadvantaged’ Black male youth. Through this process, race thinking is united with bureaucracy, and is “systematized and attached to a project of accumulation, [and] loses its standing as a prejudice and becomes instead an organizing principle” (Razack, 2008: 9).

Recommending Interventions

I want to turn to a sample of interventions and recommendations that *The Review* is able to make now that the problem of raced violence has been established in the report. The productive function of *The Review* is not only that it creates the subjects of good Ontario citizens and its converse, risky Black youth. It also demands for solutions to be offered: whenever a disease is identified, treatment is in order. Countless consultations took place with a multitude of appropriate communities, and through those interactions, the consulted subjects come to know themselves as experts in the field. They also work to authenticate and legitimate the actions that *The Review* takes: a ‘best practice’

authorized through the harnessing of stakeholder and ‘vested community’ knowledge. Gilmore identifies this process as how “through formal interaction with the state (as girl, student, citizen, immigrant, retiree, worker, owner, so forth) people develop and modulate their expectations about what the state should do, and these understandings, promoted or abhorred by the media, intellectuals, and others, guide how, and under what conditions, social fixes come into being. The state makes things, but it is also a product of what’s made and destroyed” (Gilmore, 2007: 23). Through consultant engagement with authenticity (read racialized inner city subjects) not only does *The Review* meet its methodological mandate, but it also creates subjects – it creates concerned citizens within the targeted group, experts in the field of degeneracy, that in turn come to demand for themselves that something must be done.

The Review, in making a case for the problem of youth violence, in turn offers a myriad of solutions that will allow ‘us’ as a province to know ‘them’ as a troubled population. They suggest interventions on ‘us’ that will allow for better engagement and understanding of ‘them.’ And more than anything, they offer solutions that will encourage ‘them’ to know themselves, and discipline themselves, through their own self-governance. Biopolitics is also called upon to “act on the population in a *preventative* fashion,” that allows for surveillance, monitoring and recording of the troubled population. In this way, the construction of raced crime allows for ‘the disadvantaged’ to become “a purely objective matter to be administered, rather than potential subjects of historical or social action” (Hanafi, 2009: 113). The interventions and recommendations made in *The Review* create programs for

certain categories of populations – in particular among the colonized – who are not found suited to be governed as free citizens. These are basically categorized as either those who are victims of circumstances or those whose moral capabilities are so primitive or degraded so as to not be able to handle self-government . . . educational programs and information campaigns [seek] to heighten the “awareness” on technical issues such as environment, hygiene, sexually transmitted diseases, and violence against women. It [is] not enough to

tell [them] what they were and what they were not allowed to do. They also had to be *convinced* of the value of the rules (Turner, 2005: 320).

In understanding these interventions as tools used to discipline troubled targeted populations, *The Review* has the productive value of tightening, strengthening, and constantly re-securing white settler supremacy on and into denigrated populations through governmentality.

One recommendation stemming from *The Review* that I want to forefront is a way in which it allows ‘us’ to produce knowledge on ‘them.’ This is best exemplified through the one of 30 recommendations that *The Review* puts forward, and one of three recommendations made for priority implementation. This 29th recommendation, innocuously titled “Anti-Racism,” suggests that “the Province should proceed immediately to develop the methodology for the collection of race-based data in all key domains” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 381). The argument is made that in order to fix the problem of racism, it must first be made knowable: “to anchor anti-racism overall, Ontario needs to take one further overarching initiative: to mandate the collection and publication of race-based data in several key areas, including the justice and educational systems” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 240). Using Britain as a model country that has relied on race-based data since 1992, *The Review* argues that racism cannot be acted upon until it is proven: “The need for race-based data is overwhelming, and the reassurance from how normalized this has become in Britain is telling. The need should be obvious: without data we can neither prove nor disprove the extent of racism in any particular part of our society” (Ibid). In this way, the *need to know* racialized populations is moved forward. Measuring detailed accounts of race and racism is one way that *The Review* works to increase knowledge on Others in this province. Noted should be how the collection of crime rates along race lines can be used to show how racialized bodies are over-criminalized by the police. But conversely, and often dangerously, these collected statistics can also be used to solidify notions of racialized subjects as more prone to criminality.

The second productive practice of *The Review* that I would like to highlight is the way in which interventions on ‘us’ as white settlers are used to further understandings of ‘them.’ A clear example of this is also made through the Anti-Racism recommendation, which calls on ‘our’ police officers to undergo cultural competency training.¹ How the province would go about educating our police force is detailed below:

It would see the Province provide funding for immediate, in-service, neighbourhood-based training on anti-racism for front-line officers in each of these neighbourhoods. We recommend this tight focus for reasons of expedition and cost, and also because we believe that service-related training is likely to be the most effective . . . The training, therefore, is not about sensitivity in some general way, but rather focuses on ways in which a better appreciation of anti-racism will improve the officer’s performance in the particular job they are carrying out. . . Our rationale for suggesting that the initial focus for this kind of job-specific training be on front-line officers is simple: it is interactions with front-line officers that can do the most damage to race relations and where addressing concerns about racism could do the most good. We understand that those are often difficult and sometimes dangerous situations for the officers themselves, and that many of the youth they deal with seem or can be aggressive and intimidating . . . We believe that the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services should carefully examine the recent British approach of requiring officers to be “assessed as competent” on issues of race . . . a key goal of this program is to ensure that, by 2009, everyone in the Police Service is assessed as being competent about race and diversity . . . (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 243).

Programs of cultural competency call on respectable citizens to become informed on cultural difference, to get to know the Other, and to try to make sense of their culture

¹ It should be flagged that many of the programs that *The Review* suggests that we implement are modelled on programs that have been in place in the UK (our Metropole). I question whether we want to replicate our services drawing from a country whose policing, surveillance, and race relations strategies have come under much scrutiny and critique in recent years.

through our own Western lens. It is an effort that we as a multicultural province are asked to undertake, to extend our understanding of cultural difference and build bridges across discrepancy. This culturalizing move within the police force is a training tool that asks that we learn to ‘make sense’ of the ‘non-sense’ that are culturally deficit Others. It allows us to master cultural difference, and enforces the notion that ‘we’ have done our cultural homework. Now, why can’t they do theirs? In this way, *The Review* asks us to better ourselves through the mastering of Others.

Final recommendations that I want to highlight from *The Review* are those that work to increase psy monitoring within racialized inner city slums. Both recommendation numbers 15 and 28 (which is marked for priority implementation) ask for increased child and youth mental health services in ‘disadvantaged’ communities. As recommendation 15 suggests:

The province must take steps to bring youth mental health out of the shadows. The province should enhance prevention through programs that promote health, engagement and activity for youth. It should also provide locally available mental health services that afford early identification and treatment for children and youth in the context of their families and schools, that are culturally appropriate and that are integrated with the community hubs we propose (McMurtry & Curling, 2008: 377).

Further, recommendation number 28, “Children’s Mental Health” reads:

This issue affects many aspects of the roots: the stability of families and the ability of parents to work and parent, how youth develop with their peers, how they do in school, how they interact with the justice system and their life chances overall. We believe that one or more associations with expertise in youth mental health should be retained immediately to prepare a plan for universal, community-based access to mental health services for children and youth for the earliest possible implementation. They should also prepare plans for all interim

investments that are feasible within the limits of the available professional expertise in Ontario. In a province with a health budget of \$40 billion and a youth incarceration budget of \$163 million, we believe that the \$200 million estimate of the cost of providing universal youth mental health services is manageable within the government’s mandate (McMurty & Curling, 2008: 380).

It is within these recommendations towards implementing greater mental health services within these targeted racialized communities that bridges the question of how to continue to maintain white settler supremacy while still scaling back on police interventions. The answer that the report provides is one which sees the role of mental health interventions increasing in response to the call to scale back on overt over-policing in racialized communities. The notion of replacing the practice of overcriminalization of racialized youth instead with the early intervention of psy complex practices is one that should be troubled, resisted, and recognized as substituting one form of systemic violence with another.

Conclusion

The Review as a document under analysis shows us how an everyday neoliberalist government produced text can work to solidify understandings of raced violence through common sense and benevolent discourses and policy recommendations. It shows us how systems use one another to offset and relocate the powers of governance. That good intent as is runs through *The Review* under the guise of helping racialized slum spaces manage their violence works to further entrench the right that is white settler and psychiatric supremacy in this province. By upholding the credo of the inherent goodwill of our systems of governance, regardless of the talk of systems of ‘disadvantage,’ the change that must be made continues to land on individual bodies: those that have born the legacy of our collective violence.

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