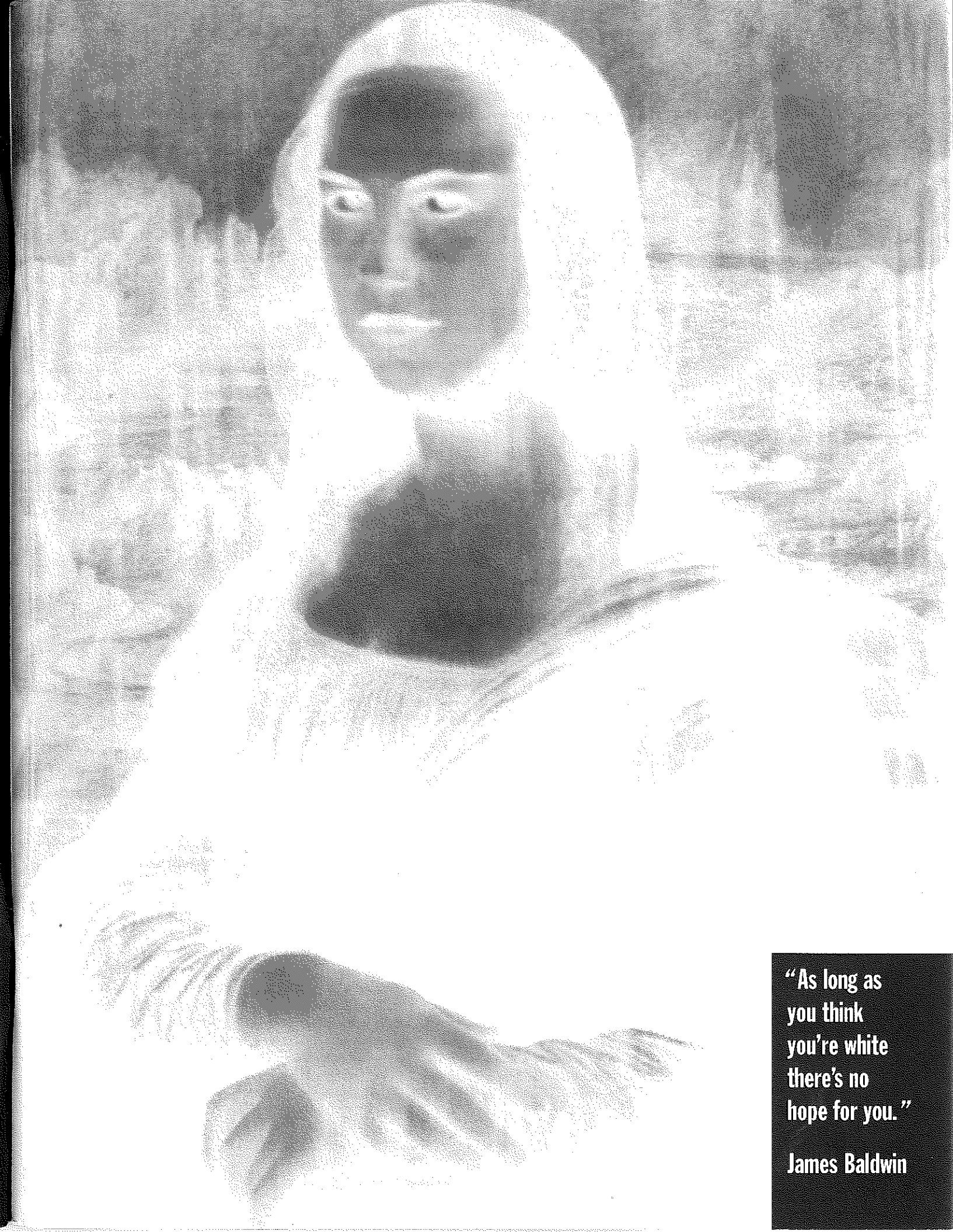


M. NOURBESE PHILIP

HOW WHITE IS YOUR WHITE?

On the
lack of colour
in the
Bernardo/
Homolka
affair.



“As long as
you think
you’re white
there’s no
hope for you.”

James Baldwin

Real conversation in the Oakwood/St. Clair area, Toronto, Canada.

"Gurl, thank god Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka not Black." I breathed this sentiment over the telephone to a macomere [Caribbean demotic for confidant] of mine in the first few weeks of sordid testimony. "Damn right!" she replied. "All like us so would have got our deportation orders by now." My macomere then wondered aloud how come The Sun was not calling for them to be deported back to where they came from. "Where's that," I asked. "Hell?" She laughed. "No - somewhere in Europe." "Same thing," I replied. She laughed again and suggested we start a campaign to deport them.

**Lawrence Brown and O'Neil Grant were arrested and charged in the robbery and shooting that took place at the Just Desserts restaurant on April 5, 1994. Clinton Gayle has been charged in the murder of a white policeman on June 16, 1994.*

This may seem an odd take on a trial whose reporting has served us up, in consistently terrifying and horrific details, the life, times and murderous activities of these two white yuppies from hell, more recently displaced to St. Catherines, Ontario. But not so odd when you consider how the media have dealt, or not dealt, with the issues of race and ethnicity as they relate to this trial.

Bernardo and Homolka. The names reek of "ethnicity" in the way in which the word has come to be defined in Canada: all those who are white but not Anglo-Saxon or French. The white ethnics. In multicultural Canada there is a sense in which ethnicity has become the preserve of the white ethnics, while Africans, Asians and First Nations remain the sole occupiers of the terrain of race. Which too often means that race=colour=blackness. Seldom is whiteness given the tangibility and solidity attributed to blackness. As a colour. As a category. Except in conversations among Black people. While he may have overstated the case with respect to Europeans—"no one was white before s/he came to America"—James Baldwin understood that neither were Africans "Black before [they] got here...[and] were defined as Black by the slave trade." In other words, over and above ethnicity whiteness is as much a construction as blackness, and both can be located in specific historical, socio-political contexts. One of the most pernicious effects of the construction of whiteness in the New World was the projection of all negative characteristics onto the Other - first the Native then the African. Whiteness, according to David Roediger, in *Towards an Abolition of Whiteness*, then becomes not so much a culture, "but precisely the absence of culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back."

(Imaginary conversation "overheard" on the Bathurst bus.)

"Girl you know what ethnic group dem two white devils belong to?"

"All I know is dem white-"

"But don't Bernardo and Homolka sound foreign to you?"

"Damn right - as foreign as some of those African names I hearing."

"Child, you notice how no matter how foreign and strange white people does be, nobody making dem out to be different."

The names Bernardo and Homolka are far more "foreign" sounding and "different" than Clinton Gayle, Lawrence Brown, or O'Neil Grant, Black men, who, in 1994, galvanized media attention and public discourse around issues of race and crime.* Bernardo desired to, and at one point did, change his name to the less foreign-sounding Teale; he and Homolka refused to live in Toronto because of all the immigrants and crime! Yet there has been no exploration of these issues (except when it relates to rap music... but more of that later). Where are the outcries to send these individuals back to where their DNA originated? Around the time of Clinton Gayle's arrest, I recall one CFRB reporter advocating that Canadian citizenship be revoked in cases where the crime was serious enough. **By any standard, the crimes carried out by Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo qualify.** Further, in the internment and treatment of Japanese Canadians during World War II, there exists more than sufficient historical precedent for the revoking of Canadian citizenship and "repatriation" of individu-

als. It was their blood and ethnicity that determined what happened to the Japanese. It was their race that overrode Canadian birth and Canadian citizenship. Issues of origin, nativity and citizenship dominated and shaped the public discourse around the arrests of Lawrence Brown, O'Neil Grant and Clinton Gayle, and established Canada as a space of purity and innocence that was somehow contaminated by the presence of Black people and "Black crime." These issues have been noticeably missing in the case of Bernardo and Homolka: all we have been left with is a mysterious woman and a man who longed to be a white rap musician.

What ethnic groups do these two I-didn't-do-it-s/he-did-it white criminals belong to, anyway? Since the trial, newspaper accounts have revealed that Bernardo's DNA is of the hard-working Italian type from his father's side and Anglo-Canadian from his mother's. The name Homolka **sounds** Eastern European. Nothing, however, has been revealed about this woman's ethnic background. And whatever the various ethnic communities to which this couple belongs, none has been called on to explain how it is going to control this type of heinous crime by its members. Neither is the white community (is there such a thing?) or the various white communities called on to explain how they have produced such monsters. Where are the calls for the control of **white** crime, particularly **white** sexual crime? The silence resounds all the more loudly because it hasn't been addressed or broken.

What is the colour of white ANYWAY? The colour of power - physical and economic - the colour of fear and, at times, loathing. From the perspective of many Black people that is. Similarly, the colour of black, from the perspective of many white people, is also the colour of fear, loathing and threat - primarily physical. What makes the experiencing of these two racial colours different, however, is that it is **white people** who control the production of images of Black peoples. The latter lack similar control over the portrayal of whites and for the most part even of themselves. Further, integral to being socialized as a Black person is the acquiring of a sensitivity to **how** you are seen through the eyes of white people - what W.E. du Bois described as "second-sight" or "double-consciousness" that only allows you to see yourself "through the revelation of the other world." Black people bear constant witness to the fear and loathing in which they are held. From the smallest act of someone instinctively drawing away from them in fear or disdain, to the much larger picture of the primarily negative representation of Blacks in the media, Blacks see their blackness represented back to them in unwholesome, unpalatable ways.

It is uncommon, however, for white people to experience or even see themselves as white—they just are—let alone witness their whiteness as a representation of negativity. Everything around them conspires to show them otherwise. One of the most memorable scenes in Spike Lee's movie *Malcolm X* is of the epiphanic moment when the young Malcolm, sitting in the prison library, understands how the meanings of the words black and white bear witness to the lived experience of Black people.

Like blackness whiteness is highly visible (to Blacks and all those upon whom it impacts negatively) while being simultaneously invisible. Invisible because, in a society steeped in racism and ethnocentric ideology, white and whiteness become equated with normalcy, while its effects - primarily negative (for white people as well) - remain remarkably visible to all those who care to look. Integral to the invading, settling and exploiting of the peoples and lands of Africa, Asia and the Americas was the ideology of white supremacy. Yet so out of touch with reality is the ideology and practice of whiteness, that in 1992 the United States, Canada and other like-minded nations were hell-bent on "celebrating" the 500th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the New World. That this "discovery" meant genocide for Native peoples seemed not to matter to the celebrators.

The essence of whiteness is its irrevocable link and untrammelled access to power, accompanied by an inability to countenance being threatened in any way. The backlash against affirmative action policies both in Canada and in the United States bears overwhelming witness to this. "By giving special attention to other races," Andrew Hacker writes in *The Nation*, "[affirmative action] devalued being white. Thus for the first time...Caucasians were made to feel they no longer came first...they had a taste of what it might be like to be black...they haven't enjoyed the experience...." In pretending whiteness doesn't exist, that normal equals white, the power of whiteness grows exponentially. It metastasizes. It also

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grows crazed, and because one of its aspects is never being able to see its own self, never being able to see how **others** see you, never being able to see that your presence and action may cause pain, whiteness is essentially oppressive. But not only is it "oppressive and false" as Roediger writes, "...whiteness is **nothing but** oppressive and false." And in never being able to see itself, whiteness must feed on something else. On the Other. So that Paul Bernardo becomes understandable, according to some media, only when we explore his desire to become a rap musician. "This is the closest you get to look inside the mind of Paul Bernardo when he committed the crimes," reports *The Toronto Star* quoting Crown Attorney Greg Barnett. And that epitome of whiteness - of white middle-class blandness which Italians so appropriately and succinctly call "mangiacake" - that self-described product of rap music, Paul Bernardo himself, states that he "grew up with this shit. It's in my veins." And "(w)hite kids were eating the stuff up," opines the *Star* reporter in profound conclusion.

In all the copy written about him, the **only** time Paul Bernardo is identified as white is when his desire to be a "**white** rap artist" is reported (in *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*). Bernardo, we are told, spent "hours watching old movies, stealing lines for his songs," but these movies, these old **white** movies, we must conclude, failed to influence him. It was the "rapper image," *The Toronto Star* tells us, "the guns, the **defiance of authority**" that he longed for. "He emulated big rap artists like Marky Mark, Ice-T and Vanilla Ice, playing their music over and over." (The appropriation of Black music by white musicians like Marky Mark and Vanilla Ice will be left for another time and place.) The *Star's* argument goes something like this: Paul Bernardo, a **white** male, was living the **white** middle-class life—complete with smuggling cigarettes across the border. He was, in this society, an integral part of the system of authority, so much so that police handled him with kid gloves; sat on his DNA samples of blood and saliva for well over two years; failed to follow up on tips and leads given to them by various

people; never so much as laid a finger on him to beat a confession out of him; never roughed him up; didn't fire any guns at him. This man desired to defy authority. And his models? Black rappers giving voice to the often suicidal defiance of Black youth in the face of the terrifying and totalising presence of the police in their communities. (I have in mind here the U.S.A and Canada.) Whose authority was Paul Bernardo defying? His own? Locked as he was in his whiteness, he was unable to see that he represented the very thing that many rappers critique - whiteness and all that it connotes.

Young white audiences undoubtedly find the rebellion, sexuality and humour of rap seductive; rap, however, also serves up a trenchant critique of whiteness that most of them ignore. By virtue of representing certain aspects of Black life, which **is**, after all, human life, rap is necessarily complex, contradictory, passionate and exciting. Rap is "at once part of the dominant text," Tricia Rose argues, "and, yet, always on the margins of this text." While reflecting

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the "sexual and institutional control over and abuse of women" rap is also profoundly subversive, bringing "together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues in contemporary...society." The media have ignored these complexities and batted onto the gangsta rap image of Black men as violent and predatory. In so doing they have scapegoated rap and diverted "attention away from the more entrenched problem of redefining the terms of heterosexual masculinity." So too, in focussing on Bernardo's aspirations to become a white rap musician, the media have diverted attention away from him as a white, middle-class, heterosexual male. For the record, it should be noted that despite the (for many) unsavoury lyrics of gangsta rap, no rap musician has kidnapped young girls, raped them, killed them and cut them up.

The point here is a simple one: because of the veil of protection that whiteness (and to some degree class) offers its devotees and disciples, Paul Bernardo was able to walk around raping and murdering children and women for much longer than should have been allowed. Contrast this with the passionate enthusiasm, energy, and violence exercised in the policing of Black people. On the streets. In their neighbourhoods. In their homes. And often for minor offences, or no offences at all. Consider the number of Black people shot by the police. Some, like Lester Donaldson and Albert Johnson, in their homes. Then consider again. Paul Bernardo.

Not only does whiteness become a shield against wrongdoing, as described above, but in the use of rap music—an expression of Black culture—as **the** way to understand Bernardo's psychopathic personality, there is also an insidious veiling of whiteness. In suggesting that it is only through rap that we come to understand Bernardo's crimes, the media foster an image of whiteness whose qualities of innocence, wholeness and purity are contaminated only when they come in contact with Black life, in this case rap music—when it is ingested: "white kids were eating the stuff up." Once again Blackness is pathologised: it becomes the contaminant of whiteness—Bernardo himself—as well as the **only** way into his disturbed mind. **White** movies made by **white** producers, featuring **white** actors and **white** themes which he also copiously ingested and, we are told, lifted lines from, apparently had no effect on him.

Similarly, in the sole reference made to gayness (*Toronto Star*) - the allegation of Bernardo being a male hooker in the Boystown area of Toronto—gayness is pathologised. What the reader is then left with is the intact white, heterosexual, middle-class male whose contact with gayness, Blackness and pornography - in the kingdom of whiteness these are interchangeable pathologies—contaminated him and turned him into the killer he became.

Where there are no such markers, as in the case of Karla Homolka, only mystery remains. There being no recognition that whiteness exists and is as much a construction as Blackness, there can be no pathology in what does not exist. The media - the white media - cannot understand how Karla Homolka might be the logical creation of a culture that has lodged materiality and individuality at the centre of all human activity. A culture that instills in girls and young women the desire for the perfect man, the perfect marriage and the perfect house, and which has created an environment in which girls, women and children of both sexes are at physical risk; a culture in which women, despite being tax-paying citizens, cannot fully enjoy their environments for fear of being raped and/or murdered. A culture of whiteness that, in hierarchizing cultures, peoples and genders, "attempt(s) to build an identity on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back."

Consider the refusal of Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo, descendants of immigrants themselves (as is everyone in Canada save the First Nations peoples), to live in Toronto. Why? Because there were too many immigrants - read Africans and Asians. People of colour. Black people. And too much crime! In the easy assumption of this couple from hell, that they were superior to darker-skinned peoples, is to be found that absolute and ineffable expression of whiteness. Under European colonialism, buttressed by racism and white supremacy, **the** most lowly white person, **the** most depraved white person, could go out to the colonies and immediately assume a position higher than that of an African, Indian, Chinese or Native person of greater moral standing, higher education and a better socio-economic standing. This ideology of whiteness has meant that

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the most corrupt and debauched white person in South Africa could assume greater rights, respect and treatment and consider him or herself better than any African. Whatever their standing in their communities. Whiteness has meant that the most uneducated redneck could pull rank on the most educated Black person in the U.S.A. or Canada. Today in the United States, for instance, it means that African Americans are far more often legally murdered by the state for killing a white person than whites are for killing blacks (or other whites). And finally whiteness means that Karla Homolka and Paul Bernardo after raping, degrading, killing and dismembering young women could think themselves better than the thousands of hard-working, dark-skinned immigrants to Toronto whose moral stature is infinitely superior to theirs.

Make no mistake about it, this trial has also been about whiteness. But because it has been allowed to remain invisible, whiteness remains unscathed.

The role of videotapes in this and two other recent crimes elucidates how Blackness and whiteness function differently. Although the video tape presented graphic evidence of the Los Angeles police assaulting Rodney King, the jury chose to believe that Rodney King, because he was Black, was still the aggressor and that the police were “protecting” themselves.

In the case of Karla Homolka the jury and public were encouraged to disregard the graphic evidence that she was a full participant in the crimes against the young women and believe that it was all an act on her part - that she was

being forced to do what she did—the way the L.A. police in the Rodney King case were being forced by factors we did not and could not see to behave in the way they did. Homolka’s excuse was that she was being abused; the L.A. police’s that Blacks are aggressive and physically violent. In neither case were these external factors visible on video, but their suggested reading of these videos call into question the adage that seeing is, indeed, believing.

Like the L.A. police defendants and his wife, Paul Bernardo also urged the jury to disregard what they saw on the tapes and conclude that although he appeared to be in control of much of what was happening on the tape, he did not actually kill Kristen French and Leslie Mahaffey.

Consider for a moment the videotape released around the time of the Just Desserts robbery to assist the police in their search for the perpetrators. Blurred, inaccurate and indistinct, but startlingly clear in its representation of young Black men. All young Black men. The public, as judge and jury, were encouraged to believe they could see what was in fact not visible—a clear representation of the faces of those young men; they were then sicked on the collectivity of young Black men in Toronto. All of whom became guilty by virtue of being Black. In the high visibility of Blackness the absence of detail becomes irrelevant; in the low visibility of whiteness, the plethora of detail immaterial.

Experts have opined at length on the rarity of women indulging in crimes such as Homolka’s and Bernardo’s. The only explanation we have had for Karla Homolka’s behaviour is that she was battered. And though there have been experts who have said that her abuse - whatever its extent—is not sufficient to explain her behaviour, the image of Karla Homolka remains one of an abused woman—a victim.

At the time of writing, there has been no challenge from the women’s movement of the use of the Battered-Wife Syndrome in her case. Only relatively recently recognized in law, this defence has been used to explain why women kill their abusers. **Not** to excuse the rape, torture and murder of young women. To have this defence used to explain away Homolka’s participation in these crimes makes a mockery of the work done over the years to have this defence recognized in law. Why the silence?

Despite her involvement in these crimes, however, at some fundamental level the image of Karla Homolka remains strangely untouched, and whiteness once again becomes a shield and is shielded. Hers is a case of whiteness melded to gender. The result? A teflon princess to whom nothing sticks. Not even a murder rap. The media have described her as mysterious - the archetypal mysterious woman - even compared her to the Mona Lisa!

While there is no little stereotyping in this description, it also serves to protect her image as a white woman. She may be a sadist, she may have lured young girls to their deaths, she may even be a murderer, but she is bright. No dumb blond this, but in the top 10% of the population in intelligence. If this doesn’t undo (and it won’t) the nonsense about high I.Q. scores guaranteeing anything, I don’t know what will. She has been shown to be feisty, tough and resilient under cross-examination. Now contrast the image of the Mensa Mona Lisa with a penchant for sadism with that of Audrey Smith, the Jamaican woman who complained about being strip-searched by the police in public. Based on recent

“analysis” and “research” by the likes of Phillippe Rushton and Herrnstein and Murray of *Bell Curve* fame, we know her I.Q. to be sub-normal. Rosie di Manno of the *Toronto Star* confirms this: Audrey Smith is telling the truth because her “simplicity...just sits there like a lump on a log.” And as for mystery - the only one is why this Black woman from Jamaica was sitting on a bench in the Parkdale area late at night. That mystery has now been resolved by the investigating panel’s report with its strong suggestion that Audrey Smith was a drug pusher. No drugs were found on Audrey Smith and the issue before the panel was whether she was stripped in public. **Not** whether or not she was selling drugs. Karla Homolka, the “petite” blonde with the “pouting” bottom lip, is a woman who “felt at ease with men...”, men always seemed to find her most believable.” Audrey Smith one the other hand is “bovine” and “lumpen” (di Manno again).

That Audrey Smith has been treated shabbily is beyond denial: She has come to Canada on many occasions to seek justice, only to be returned to Jamaica without having her case heard. She has been summarily stopped at the airport in Jamaica on her way to Canada and told that the Immigration Department would refuse to allow her to enter Canada because she was masquerading as someone else. Her reputation has been slandered. Audrey Smith has not raped, tortured, or killed young girls. Audrey Smith is Black. And where whiteness reigns, her skin becomes a marker of guilt. Even when she has committed no crime. Conversely, even when the most heinous crimes have been committed, whiteness becomes a shield, offering protection and safety.

Despite the Paul Bernardos, the Clifford Olsons, and the Karla Homolkas, the most enduring image of the criminal, which has greatest currency today in Canadian society, is that of the Black male. The Bernardos remain failed **white** rap artists, the Homolkas intelligent Mona Lisas with pouting lips who feel at ease with men.

Contrary to recent reports that there are too many Chinese in Markham, too many Jews practising law, medicine and accounting and, of course, too many immigrants, what Canadian society is suffering from - ever since the first white settler arrived here—is an excess, an excrescence if you will, of whiteness. Until and unless we “attack whiteness as a destructive ideology” and “focus political energy on exposing, demystifying and demeaning the particular ideology of whiteness,” as Roediger writes, Africans, Asians and First Nations peoples—the Other as post-modernism has so aptly named us—will continue to carry the disproportionate load of deviance in this society. In the meantime, as my macomere says, “after what dem white people doing to Black people during slavery time, nothing surprising me about what dem white devils doing today.”