

H-Net Reviews

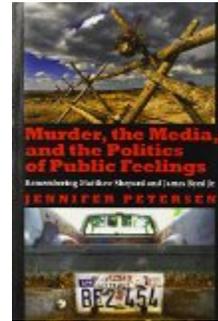
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Petersen. *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings: Remembering Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. viii + 210 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35659-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22339-5.

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Hate Crimes and the Media: How Affective Frameworks Facilitate Mourning and Justice Claims

Many of us learned of the horrific 1998 murders of Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. from network news. On June 7, anchor Tom Brokaw reported that Byrd, a 49-year-old black man living in Jasper, Texas, had been beaten by three white men, tied to a pickup truck, and then dragged down a road for two and a half miles. His decapitated body was abandoned near an African American church, a location that prompted police to treat the murder as a hate crime. Four months later, Matthew Shepard, an openly gay student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten unconscious by two white men whom he had met in a bar. A mountain biker discovered Shepard tied to a fence on the outskirts of Laramie. Shepard was flown to a hospital in Colorado, where he lingered in critical care for five days before dying.

Both murders, writes Jennifer Petersen, were extensively covered by local and national media. The crimes also “spurred highly mediated national outrage, mourning, and discussion” (p. 1). Petersen, an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, focuses on the brutal crimes to show how “specific feelings and imagined relations between the men and media audiences were constructed” (p. 5). She argues that the emotional discourse revealed structural inequities and provided opportunities to seek justice. Citizens formed groups, such as the Laramie Coalition, to advocate for the passage of a local hate-crimes ordinance. Groups also worked together to effect reform. In Texas, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Texas Civil Rights Project, the

NAACP, and other groups coalesced in Austin. Petersen concentrates in particular on the ways in which strangers joined to form publics and how this engagement was (and is) important to democratic communication.

The book’s four chapters—two each for Shepard and Byrd—are framed by an introduction and conclusion. It is not clear why Petersen writes about Shepard’s murder first, as it occurred four months later, nor is it clear why the crimes became “the most mediated [and] circulated” stories of 1998 (p. 2). She notes that the “murders were not the only, or even the most brutal, crimes committed against gay and black men and women” that year, but does not explain why they gained such traction in the news as well as popular culture (p. 2).

Petersen writes that “a very public and mediated story” about Shepard’s murder emerged in the weeks following the attack. National media framed it as a hate crime and coverage facilitated mourning by encouraging people to relate to Shepard. The 21-year-old came to represent the quintessential kid next door, and a single photograph of him standing in a kitchen circulated in the media. It, along with descriptors that focused on his small stature, “youthful innocence,” and “exceptional promise in life,” emphasized his vulnerability and innocence and “downplayed his adult sexuality” (p. 37). Petersen suggests that the image and media texts positioned him as part of a collective “us.” This frame, however, required the creation of a “them,” which was variously applied to

the two killers, the small-town attitude of Laramie, and the West/frontier.

Petersen draws on interviews with activists and city officials, public documents, and letters to the editor to explore local reactions to the murder and demands for justice. Ultimately, that took the form of a “watered-down ordinance” that passed by just one vote on May 2, 2000 (p. 69). Although the measure was limited in its scope, Petersen argues that it would not have been taken up without the media spotlight or the perceived need to demonstrate to the rest of the nation that Laramie was a “sensitive and tolerant place” (pp. 89-90).

Cultural geography also factored into coverage of the murder of James Byrd Jr. Petersen writes that journalists positioned the small, east Texas town of Jasper as a relic of the South—despite its location a hundred miles northeast of Houston. Her examples demonstrate how journalists utilize frames in their storytelling. *Newsweek*, for example, reported that Jasper was “more Deep South than Lone Star,” while *Time* similarly noted that “East Texas, with its dusty small towns and cotton fields, is more Dixie than Lone Star” (p. 109). Still, a more nuanced discussion of the implications of the circulation of journalistic frames would have added depth to this section of the book.

The discussion of how Byrd was memorialized in media texts and images reveals that most of the print stories described Byrd in “racially loaded terms” that conjured images of minstrel shows: “affable, happy-go-lucky, joyful, aimless, innocent, defenseless” (p. 103). Even more common was the word “disabled,” a vague term that the mainstream press used to highlight his vulnerability at the hands of three men. Petersen writes that the media never clearly articulated his specific disability. As a result, stories portrayed Byrd as less than fully capable, just as they had portrayed Shepard as childlike. She found that media texts—newspapers, magazines, and television combined—“circulated invitations to feel pity for the victim, disgust for the killers (and the past), and hope or pride in the nation (as a site of progress)” (p. 93). Petersen contrasts this with some reports in the black press, finding that his role as a father and grandfather offered a means for black readers to identify with Byrd. People noted proximity to him with comments such as, he “could have easily been my own 49-year-old brother.”^[1] Because Petersen discusses these “horizontal relationships” and “invitations [in the mainstream press] to feel pity and compassion” for Matthew Shepard, it might have been interesting to more fully explore this sense of kinship in the

black and gay and lesbian press (p. 103).

Although Jasper’s image seemed to suffer less than that of Laramie’s, legislation again offered the most promising avenue to create “a hopeful narrative about progressive racial justice” (p. 112). The final chapter traces the history of the James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act, which finally was passed in 2001 after a decade of debates over the inclusion of categories of discrimination that included sexual orientation. Byrd’s murder was seen as a way to “tap into the moral outrage” (p. 125). Petersen discusses the efforts of groups such as the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas, the NAACP, and the Texas Civil Rights Project to leverage that outrage through victims’ testimony. Lawmakers, cognizant of media coverage of those emotional statements, were forced to display empathy for victims and take legislative action. Ultimately, Petersen argues that the media’s focus on the murder inspired the formation of a public that mobilized for passage of the Hate Crimes Act.

The book is most compelling when Petersen incorporates primary sources into the text. For example, outrage over Shepard’s murder is evident when she quotes excerpts from editorials or letters to the editor. And the debate over the Byrd Act is more poignant when Petersen quotes victims and advocates. More often, though, she paraphrases content or offers summaries, such as when she notes that the concept of shame was “echoed by many letter writers” who were critical of Laramie (p. 46). This dilutes the “emotional public responses” to the men’s murders and mutes the voices of the individuals who sought justice on behalf of the victims (p. 155).

Petersen grounds her study in a wide array of literature about topics including the ethics of mediating suffering, masculinity, gender, class, melodrama, liberalism, the public sphere, imagined communities, reason, and emotion. This range will likely make the book inaccessible to most undergraduate students. Graduate students interested in cultural studies, gender and queer studies, and/or advocacy may find Petersen’s book useful.

The book bogs down at times due to Petersen’s tendency to repeat points. And the conclusion would have been stronger had she critiqued journalistic ethics and responsibility, or offered concrete ideas for improving “the media,” the broad term she uses throughout the book. For example, she argues that journalists utilized similar frames to tell their stories, but doesn’t critique the implications of this for the “informed citizenry” that she finds critical to democracy (p. 165). She also writes that photographs and footage of the fence where Shepard was

found were “carefully crafted” to emphasize the isolated location, while in reality, luxury homes were under construction west of there (p. 34). Similarly, she seems to suggest that media literacy is important. She poses questions such as “How does the content and circulation of media distribute and define relationships among people?” (p. 165). Petersen argues that “we need a different descriptive and normative model of the political func-

tions of media (in particular, within democratic politics),” but leaves it to readers to imagine what that model might be (p. 163).

Note

[1]. Petersen cites Joyce King, *Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 64.

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