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A woman's place: constructing women within true crime narratives

Abstract:

Writers do not have to position the female body as a contested space: simultaneously conceived of as a commodity, honoured as a site of self-expression, and visualised as a vehicle for reproduction. This competition of ownership facilitates the commandeering of the female body for a variety of purposes such as the pursuit of financial or political gain. In this way, women who are central to true crime cases – as victims or as perpetrators – can be objectified by writers for the popular press in the rush to tell a story and, in some instances, marginalised, even as their stories are re-imagined. These ideas are explored through two cases that unfolded in Sydney, Australia, in the late-nineteenth century – the gang rape of Mary Jane Hicks and two murders ostensibly committed by Louisa Collins. A brief examination of the contemporary coverage of these cases unpacks how the bodies of both women were conscripted by writers for other purposes – first, to sell papers, and second, to argue for the abolition of the death penalty. This article then looks at the re-telling of these events in Frank C. Johnson's *Famous Detective Stories*, which allowed mid-twentieth century true crime writers to re-ignite debates around publishing and punishment found in the original reportage. Almost 130 years after the first of these crimes took place, this article contends offering a feminist framework to review these, and similar, cases demonstrate circulation figures and discussions around the ethics of punishment are not dependent upon the appropriation of the female body.

Biographical note:

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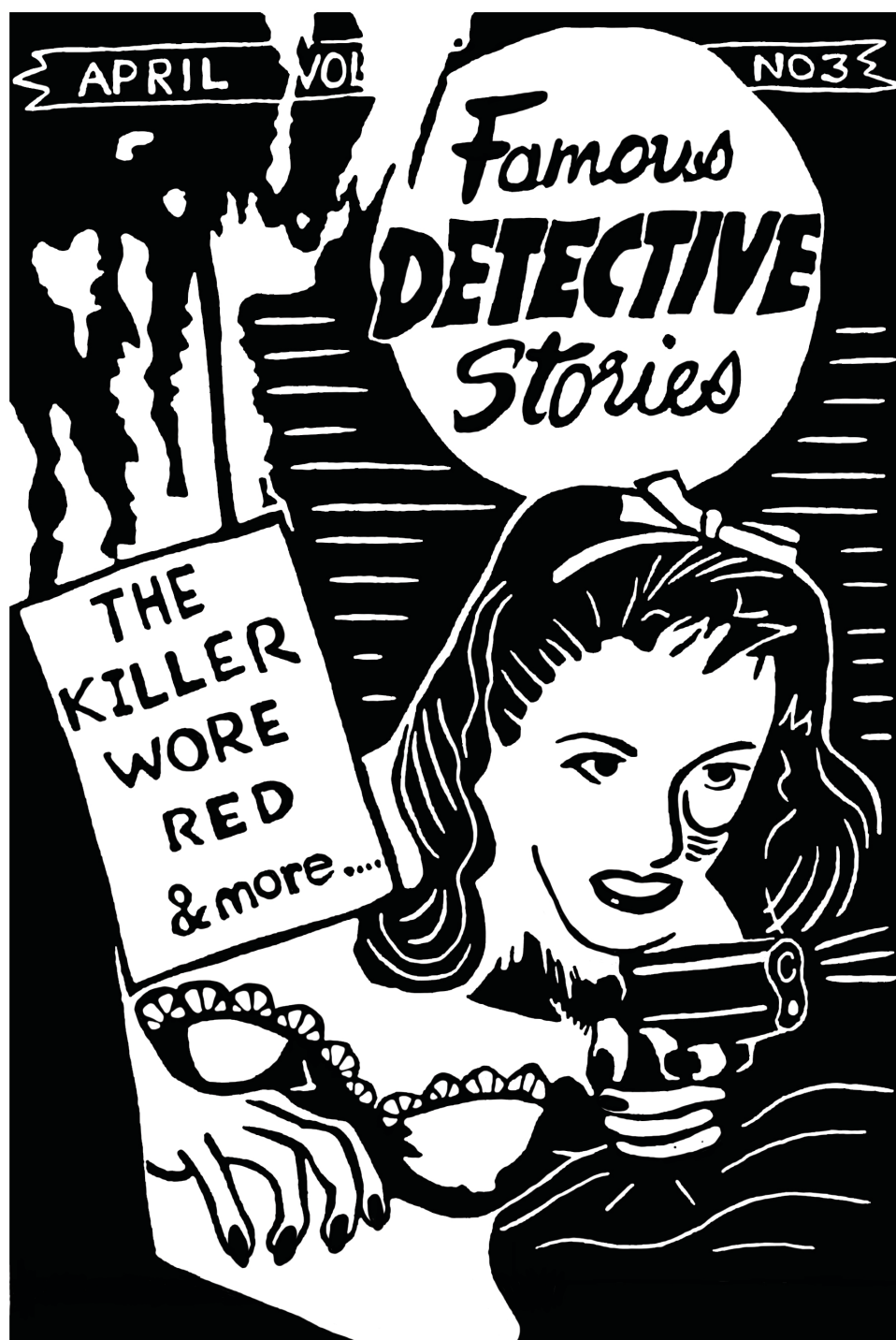


Fig. 1. Ulrike Sturm, *The killer wore red*, linocut, 2016

Introduction

The female human body has, across cultures and throughout history, been regularly positioned as a contested space: the physicality of the feminine simultaneously conceived of as a commodity, honoured as a site of self-expression and, perhaps most consistently and obviously, visualised as a vehicle for reproduction. Another trend is the positioning of the female body as a device for entertainment. Though the idea of woman as amusement or distraction is not new, the advent of a variety of new media forms has seen this particular use of the female body proliferate. Much work has been dedicated to this topic, with a recent example being from Tara Moss, who has written about the cultural norm of the male appreciating the female form (2014). In this space of women-as-entertainment, women are occasionally offered as complex figures, yet more often are portrayed as divested of all power, presented as a superficial extra to fill out scenes within a storyline and, in some instances, as a victim of gendered violence. These efforts to reveal women's bodies as disempowered are a reflection of how the 'female body has been the site of continuing battles of science, technology and the state versus nature' (Arneil 1999: 90). These complex ideas are explored by A Andreas Wansbrough in the next article of this Special Issue. It is sufficient to note here, that Wansbrough states: 'respect for the body, for its rights and integrity, is fundamental and yet for men to view women in terms of the body is reductive – male-chauvinists and misogynists very often view women as nothing else' (2016: 3).

The application of these varied conceptions of the female body has changed over time, but in many instances and for a range of contexts – from choices over contraception to choices around marriage – it remains that a woman's body is not always entirely her own. She is subject to legal, political as well as social constraint and moral regulation. These myriad, and often overlapping, competitions of ownership serve to facilitate the forced recruitment of the female body for a variety of purposes. Examples of these include a general desire to coerce and to control, to more specific pursuits of pecuniary interests or political gain. In this way, women who are central to true crime narratives – whether in the role of victim or of perpetrator – can be objectified by the popular media in the rush to tell a story to a public demanding details and, ostensibly, justice. In the world of true crime, and indeed the world of crime fiction, women present as more exciting, more tantalising, if they break the law: 'especially if they commit crimes of violence, it makes front page news' (Radford 1996: 229). In some instances, these women are marginalised by writers if their circumstances are extrapolated from a set of personal events into broader debates, including those that surround ideas of justice and punishment. Such arguments advocating responses to wrongdoers along a continuum that situates education and rehabilitation programs at one extreme, and retribution and judicial execution at the other.

There are multiple lenses through which to view issues around the construction, and subsequent treatment, of women within society. Feminism operates 'within and across a variety of intellectual, historical, political, geographic, and temporal frames' (Hawkesworth 2006: 25). Yet, the goal of these numerous feminisms is, essentially, the same: equality for women across all aspects, and all stages, of life. As Penelope Deutscher has noted, the justifications 'for the relegation of women to domestic and private spheres have been based on the devaluation of feminine embodiment, which

goes back at least to Aristotle's depiction of man as physiologically superior and woman as a misbegotten or imperfect man' (1998: 11). In the context of various criminal, or indeed generally deviant, behaviours such imperfections are exacerbated. This is reflected in the, often shared, views of conservative media and traditional criminology that, 'on the whole, women's "roles" demand from them more constrained behaviour' (Radford 1996: 229). Being *bad*, if superimposed with ideals of gendered norms, becomes much worse.

It is important to understand that 'feminism is a contested term, even among women committed to improving the conditions of women's lives' (Hawkesworth 2006: 25). In response to this, this research focuses on a single frame within the range available from feminist discourses. This frame is the fundamental right, for every woman, to claim ownership of her own body, and maintain the 'physical and mental integrity' of that body (Meulders-Klein 1983: 29). Thus, the work presented here is simultaneously: an acknowledgement of this fundamental right of ownership; an attempt to ensure the debates of what feminism is (and how equality between men and women should be achieved) do not generate a distraction from the discussion around women, crime and the body; and, a creative non-fiction experiment in relation to true crime writing.

Drawing upon too many feminist frameworks has the potential to make these women disappear beneath a debate between different feminist values. Similarly, writing a set of narratives in a style too distant or too dramatic could, in a different way, commandeer these women, taking their circumstances to produce a product – in this instance, the article for an academic journal – and reinforce a pattern of storytelling that realises these women as parts of an elaborately plotted work accommodating a vast array of players, rather than acknowledging these women as the central protagonists of their own, in this case tragic, narratives. Thus, the writing that follows is an attempt to navigate a middle path within the realm of true crime writing: one that does not diminish the significance of the events that took place yet does not sensationalise these stories. One of the tools utilised to achieve this end includes regularly referring to these women by their first names only, to emphasise that these are women we could have known, interacted with, or been related to. Another tool is the deployment of first person narration within the conclusion – to identify authorial ownership and, importantly for this work, to take responsibility for the writing, both practice and outcome, presented here. First person, here, acts as a mechanism to ensure the arguments offered within the concluding summary are segregated from the main work and, in doing so, reduces the risk that these words serve as merely another distraction to the stories of the women discussed. In this way, this work is an attempt to return the female body to at least two women: Mary Jane Hicks and Louisa Collins. In addition, this work questions the ease with which women's bodies are assumed as tools to bolster the true crime corpus.

Mary Jane Hicks

On Saturday, 11 September 1886, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the 'Terrible Outrage on a Girl' (Anon 1886a: 4). An outrage was a particularly demeaning and simultaneously neutral Victorian euphemism for a gang rape: victims were routinely marginalised in this way to ensure Victorian sensibilities went unchallenged. The girl,

upon whom this outrage was committed, was Mary Jane Hicks.

The attack had occurred the previous Thursday, 9 September, in a place known as Mount Rennie. This poorly defined parkland sat on the borders of some of Sydney's working-class suburbs, the terrain in sharp contrast to the beautifully manicured gardens found in wealthier areas of the city. Today, this area of Sydney, part of Moore Park, is a landscape famous for the silhouette of the Sydney Cricket Ground and for expensive commercial and residential real estate. This early report appeared on page ten. A few days later, on 13 September, the story 'The Outrage Upon a Young Girl' – complete with a statement that had been made by the victim and the news that eight men who had been identified as being involved in the attack, were in custody – had been brought forward to page four (Anon 1886b: 4). The Mount Rennie Outrage, sometimes referred to as the Waterloo Outrage, dominated the press for months; however, the aftermath of the crime, particularly the punishments meted out to the perpetrators, generated much more debate than the crime itself did. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion on the story of Mary Jane and the stories of the men who assaulted her.

Mary Jane was a sixteen-year-old orphan, who, after receiving a basic education at a convent school in Bathurst, moved to Sydney. As part of an effort to find work, she was on her way to an employment registry in Castlereagh Street on the day of the crime. A cab driver, Charles Sweetman, approached her and offered to take her into town. Reluctantly accepting what she believed to be a kind offer of assistance on a hot day, Mary Jane was taken not into the city but out to Moore Park. After his own attempt to rape Mary Jane was interrupted, the cab driver abandoned her in the area. It was here, at Mount Rennie, that the brutal attack took place. The specifics of the vicious, and prolonged, assault have been documented, in excruciating detail, elsewhere. It is enough to note here that fifteen 'men, most under the age of 20 were arrested for the assault, as was ... the cab driver. Eleven of the young men were tried for rape: nine were found guilty and two were acquitted' (Gleeson 2004: 189). Of the nine found guilty, three had their sentences commuted on appeal. Another appeal and another two sentences were commuted, leaving four men to hang.

Throughout the trial, and after sentencing, debate raged around the brutality *versus* the necessity of capital punishment. Was it the place of a civilised society to hang their citizens? Was hanging the only meaningful deterrent for the continued committing of violent crimes? Much attention was paid to Mary Jane, the victim, and while many newspapers were sympathetic, writers in *The Bulletin*, a major conservative publication of the day, criticised both Mary Jane and the newspapers reporting her story (Gleeson 2004: 189). The case came to be understood along class lines and much was made of character. Working-class young men were pitted against the girl whom *The Bulletin* labelled an 'unfortunate' (another Victorian euphemism; this word was often used instead of prostitute). In this way, *The Bulletin*, as a major news outlet and significant storyteller, worked to re-frame the events, in an astonishing example of victim blaming, that were central to the case – Mary Jane's body was not *taken*; it was *given away*. The only bodies taken were those of the men the state would have hanged, a result some posited as a 'cumulative verdict' and retribution for so many unpunished gang rapes at that time (Allen 1990: 54). For, as invasive and as violent as the Mount Rennie Outrage was, the crimes committed against Mary Jane were not considered to result in 'an

exceptional event' but instead was just one in a series of 'similarly appalling crimes' that could be traced from 'Mount Rennie back to the Mount Carmel and Waterloo cases of 1883' (Philadelphoff-Puren 2010: 3).

Indeed, it was argued in *The Bulletin* that the State would become known, not as New South Wales but as 'Noose South Wales' (Gleeson 2004: 195). This rhetoric, as described by Juliette Peers, shows 'a lack of interest in engaging with the culpability of the working-class offenders and its slanderous representation of Mary Jane Hicks is indicative of a grander nationalist narrative of the late nineteenth century that could not "accommodate the feminine"' (in Gleeson 2004: 190). These commentaries were offered amidst a moral panic that demanded punishment as part of a process of reassurance that society was safe. A stance which, through acknowledging that such crimes occurred (and that they occurred frequently), was at odds with a widespread fear that the colony would never escape the many stains of its convict past. At the time that Mary Jane's case was being heard in the courts, the year 1901 and Federation was still many years away.

Within the courtroom, the case concentrated on the act of rape. The jury took just two and a half hours to return verdicts. The judge, William Windeyer (later Sir William Windeyer), commended the jury members for their 'intelligence' and assured the condemned that there would be no mercy and that 'no weakness of the Executive, maudlin feeling of pity, will save you from the death you so richly deserve' (in Gilling 2012: 124-125). Furthermore, the judge, when proclaiming the death sentence concluded, 'and may God help you to repent of this crime' (Anon 1886c: 5). This, instead of the more traditional, 'and may God have mercy on your soul' which, essentially, is designed to convey the idea that criminals are not, 'vermin, but our brothers and sisters gone terribly wrong' (Gleeson 2006: 268).

Louisa Collins

The story of Louisa Collins is very different to the story of Mary Jane Hicks. Often referred to as the Botany Murderess, Louisa would be the last woman to be hanged in New South Wales. Born in rural Belltrees in 1849, Louisa would marry, move to Sydney, lose her first husband, marry again, lose her second husband and then lose her own life at the age of 40, in 1889. She had ten children, seven of whom survived infancy. She would, most famously, endure four murder trials.

Executed on Tuesday, 8 January 1889 at Darlinghurst Gaol in Sydney, the controversy surrounding her conviction could be felt by all those in attendance. Of the two women wardens who escorted Louisa to the scaffold, 'one was weeping' (Anon 1889: 7). The executioner, Robert Howard, had – on account of Louisa being a woman – prepared, in a rather bizarre act of chivalry, a chair which, should she faint or become hysterical, he could sit her down in and then tie her to – sending woman, furniture and rope through the trap door. For the executioner's assistant, it was his first day on the job; the regular incumbent had 'refused to have anything to do with the execution of a woman' (Overington 2014: 236). A small group was present to witness the hanging; some members of the group were officials, others were a few of the men who had worked to

tell her story and recount 'her case avidly' in the press (Maley 2014). A modicum of dignity was restored to Louisa by at least one of those reporters who noted that, 'only a slight twitch of the hands was noticeable' (Anon 1889: 7): the chair procured by the executioner would not be required. Such levels of calm were quite an achievement. The lever designed to send the convicted to their doom was found to be stuck. Several attempts were made to force the lever until, with frantic whispers, a mallet was called for. It was written that the bungling 'sent a thrill of pain through all who heard the strokes of the mallet doing their deadly task' while the executioner was making use of the extra time to 'tighten the rope around Louisa's neck' (Overington 2014: 236). Carol Baxter has highlighted the report made in one newspaper:

"There at the end of a hideous cord," wrote the sickened *Australian Star* reporter, "dangles a mutilated corpse, all that remains of one that was a woman, a wife, a mother – but a murderess – and now – aye, God rest even her soul – the law is satisfied; she is dead" (2015: 317).

The notion that 'God rest *even* her soul' (emphasis added) draws, it is argued here, a startling parallel with the alteration of the phrase, 'and may God have mercy on your soul', that should have been heard at the conclusion of the trial of Mary Jane's rapists. This highlights the fact that even the most trusted oral traditions of the legal system are subject to being re-written to suit the opinions of storymakers and storytellers.

The events that lead to Louisa's ghastly end were long and convoluted. Accused of murdering her first, and then her second, husband in 1887 and 1888 respectively in Botany, Louisa was tried four times. There was significant doubt around the details of the cases. Both men died with traces of arsenic in their systems, but both men had worked at the local tannery and been exposed to arsenic. Furthermore, the men, in response to their gastroenterological symptoms, had been prescribed bismuth, a tonic that often contained arsenic as an impurity (Maley 2014). The key witness was one of Louisa's own children, the young May, who testified that she had seen rat poison in their family home (Cushing 1996: 148) – a practical and standard store, given the terrible living conditions in Botany at the time.

Judge Windeyer, who had presided over the Mount Rennie Outrage trial, sat for the second of Louisa's. This was not enough to secure her freedom. It is hardly surprising when it is revealed that Louisa's legal defence, Hugh Lusk, was the first barrister to be struck off the rolls in New South Wales for 'dishonesty and deception' (Overington 2014: 274). Yet these trials were, this article argues, a sideshow for what was really at stake. Yes, there was money to be made through increased circulation of newspapers. The debate around capital punishment was, again, brought to the forefront of the common consciousness. Most importantly though, these were trials not aimed at containing a single murderess but designed to contain all women. If women, the argument ran, wanted equal rights – to vote, to be paid the same as men for work of equal value – then, such equality had to be universal: women, too, would hang for murder. This was not to be a policy that could be put forward without a fight. Petitions, signed by women, proffered a complaint that 'was a reminder of the many indignities they encountered in their dealings with men, including the sexual foundation underpinning much of the brutality inflicted on them' (Baxter 2015: 252). Such public

support would prove ineffective against a system determined to achieve the desired result. After three juries failed to reach a verdict, the fourth group of twelve – participating in a law system that has been described as being ‘patient and relentless’ – simply, as Caroline Overington has suggested, ‘gave in’ (in Maley 2014). These debates around crime and punishment in the colonies would continue well into the new century and the era of Federation. The last person to be hanged in Australia was Ronald Joseph Ryan; a man who would fall to his death on 3 February 1967 at Pentridge Prison, Melbourne. In acknowledgement that the justice system can fail both the male and female body, Ryan was also convicted on questionable evidence (Main 2007: 367-375) while Colin Campbell Ross, hanged on 24 April 1922 for the murder of a young Melbourne schoolgirl, has since been proven innocent and was pardoned in 2008 (Morgan 2012: 398).

Frank C. Johnson's *Famous Detective Stories*

Frank C. Johnson was a significant force within the pulp publishing industry in Sydney during the 1940s and 1950s. This period coincided with import restrictions, into Australia, that stimulated what Toni Johnson-Woods has described as the ‘richest period in Australian literary history, thousands of titles were produced, millions of copies sold, and dozens of authors found gainful employment’ (2006: 63). Johnson produced numerous titles across the many genres that are closely associated with ‘quick and dirty publishing’ (Byrne 2015: iii). One of Johnson’s more successful titles was *Famous Detective Stories*, a series dedicated to unpacking true crime cases. Significantly, this series appeared before true crime became a widely-accepted component of publishing and selling in Australia; following the examples set by the United States market where the true crime genre, popular in the nineteenth century, became a phenomenon in the twentieth century (for a detailed discussion on the rise of true crime in the United States see Murley 2008). *Famous Detective Stories* presented a new issue each month from December 1946 until January 1954. Sold for a shilling (approximately equivalent to AUD\$3.30 at the time of writing) each issue featured an editorial and, on an average, twelve true crime tales harvested, mostly, from newspaper archives. To put this in context, *The Australian Women's Weekly* in 1946 – a publication that proudly boasted, on the cover, the sale of 700,000 copies each week – had a retail value of threepence (83 cents at the time of writing). In many respects, *The Australian Women's Weekly* was feminised pulp; for example, the 14 December 1946 issue – which came out the same month as the first issue of *Famous Detective Stories* – contained: a crime fiction tale, ‘The Gardenia Case’ by Margot Neville, comics and news and was supplemented with advertising and social pages as well as stories and more informative articles focused on the domestic domain. *The Australian Women's Weekly* was also a very neat publication, reflecting the magazine’s conservative approach. The cover of the issue noted here features a single image – a portrait of a woman, elegantly clad in hat, jacket and gloves – and one, very discreet, headline: ‘American Hats – page 11’. So, at over three times the cost, and with the luxury of a single focus, it is argued here that *Famous Detective Stories* serves to situate pulp publishing – and the stylised storytelling in these publications – in the unlikely space of a premium product.

The most significant difference between the two offerings discussed here is the positioning of women. One of the primary impacts of *The Australian Women's Weekly* was the social construction of women as carers and homemakers. Women, within this publication, are firmly located within the domestic sphere. Indeed, the archive of this publication is now widely considered a valuable resource in the construction and interpretation of women's social history in Australia. In sharp contrast, *Famous Detective Stories* sought only to reinforce stereotypes of women as either victim or villain.

This article now explores the villain, as the issue of *Famous Detective Stories* that re-told the tale of Louisa Collins appeared in June 1947, several years before the re-telling of the tale of Mary Jane Hicks. Louisa was presented as a *femme fatale*. The cover of Volume 1, Issue 7 (June 1947) offers a woman in a tight, red dress who is both knowing and voluptuous – a stark contrast to the plain woman actually photographed for her prison record. Perfectly manicured hands carefully dispense arsenic into a glass of water on the cover. Framing the action of poisoning are the words: 'Murder in Secret. The Career of Louisa Collins'. The use of the word 'career' highlights the malevolency of the act: this was a woman who had to be stopped. The idea of murder as 'employment' reinforced a fear of the day when, in lieu of easily obtained divorces, women would simply murder their husbands. Additionally, the idea of a woman having a career, of any sort, even a benign one, was at least a challenge, if not a threat, to social norms of the day. Described as 'a healthy, and tolerably good-looking woman' (Anon 1888: 19), the real Louisa, as Overington observes, 'liked to dance. She liked to drink. ... She flirted with everyone' (in Maley 2014). So, even before Louisa became a 'poster girl' for the colony's 'embryonic suffragette movement' (Maley 2014), she was perceived as a threat to the ideals of what was feminine and masculine.

This article now turns to the victim. The story of Mary Jane Hicks appeared in Volume 4, Issue 3 (February 1950). These later issues do not enjoy the same levels of profuse illustration as the earlier examples of *Famous Detective Stories*, and as such there are no artistic impressions here of Mary Jane. As the image of Louisa – in its blatant misrepresentations of her – is problematic, so too is a story with no image at all. It is as if, in another way, the body of Mary Jane has been taken from her: as if no writer was sufficiently disturbed by the events to commission an image, as if no editor recognised what should have been seen as a blatant omission. Without a picture upon which readers can focus, the words used to describe Mary Jane come across as authoritative. There is no respite from a narrative of blame for, as *The Bulletin* had issued blame to Mary Jane for the crimes against her, so too did *Famous Detective Stories*.

Alan Sinclair, the author of the 'The Mount Rennie Outrage', acknowledges that the circumstances of the case are 'too revolting to even contemplate', but he does not hesitate to lay the cause of the crime at the victim's feet. He first argues that: 'Fate must have selected Mary Jane' as part of an inevitable, if violent, plan and then that 'the girl unwittingly co-operated' (1950: 17). Sinclair's re-telling relates all the elements of the events related in the press reports of 1886 and, as judge, jury, that popular press and the general public had done 64 years before, his summary presents a very firm opinion. Much is made of the youth of the men, the fanatical feminism of the judge and of Mary Jane herself. The article concludes that the case led 'many judges and juries since to

think twice before they convict young men for rape, particularly when the girl's character is not all it should be' (1950: 58). The blanket of blame, first laid down by *The Bulletin*, was clearly echoed in the pages of *Famous Detective Stories*.

'Jack the Ripper' and 'The Canonical Five'

The late 1880s would witness violent crime in Sydney, Australia. This time period would also stand witness to some of the most violent murders on record in London, England: The Whitechapel Murders of 1888. There are five women, often referred to as the canonical five, who have been definitively identified as the victims of the same killer that year. Mary Ann Nichols (died 31 August); Annie Chapman (died 8 September); Elizabeth Stride (died 30 September); Catherine Eddowes (died 30 September); and Mary Jane Kelly (died 9 November). Names of other women have been put forward over the years as having been victims of Jack the Ripper, but only to be disputed and discarded from the story of the Whitechapel Murders (Whitehead & Rivett [2001]2012: 23). A serial killer who terrorised East London, the few unquestioned 'facts about him are rather grubby and shopsoiled from so much handling, and the identity of the murderer is still a complete mystery' (Worsley 2013: 187). The case is cited here because no other case better epitomises a growing fascination with, and fear of, true crime. The levels of activity, and the volumes of literature, dedicated to Jack the Ripper are extraordinary (Odell 2006: 239). This case also offers an extreme example of the taking of women's bodies to tell a story; indeed, to tell many stories of fact and fiction. This argument is made through a brief examination of how we have heard this particular true crime tale so many times, and in so many ways, that we have become inoculated to the cruelty of the crimes committed. This inoculation can be observed in the way that explicit crime scene photographs have made their way out of police case files and into popular culture.

At the time of writing this article, the main article on Jack the Ripper in *Wikipedia* featured a number of images in support of the text. These included: an illustration, 'With the Vigilance Committee in the East End: A Suspicious Character', from *The Illustrated London News*; a map of Whitechapel indicating sites of murder; and an official police photograph of Mary Jane Kelly's murder at 13 Miller's Court, Whitechapel. Numerous other images are presented, mostly drawings. A digital surrogate of the 'Hell Letter', received by George Lusk the Chairman of the abovementioned Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, the letter was identified as coming 'From Hell' and was accompanied by, 'the kidney supposedly taken from the body of Catherine Eddowes' (Odell 2006: 209). It is the third image, more than any of the others offered, that serves to reinforce the argument that, in the world of true crime, a woman's body is not her own. Mary Jane Kelly was, as noted above, the fifth of the canonical five. Her murder, committed in her home, was particularly brutal. The thumbnail image of Mary, taken by an unidentified photographer, is not particularly shocking at first glance. It is small, black and white and the figure in the photograph is not easily distinguishable from its surroundings. A simple click on the image enlarges the photograph to full size. Suddenly, the misshapen figure of the thumbnail makes sense. The mutilated body of Mary is graphic and gruesome. Yet, there are no warnings in

place. There is no notice suggesting that readers might be distressed by the sight of a woman who, having had her throat cut in a way that was 'brutally efficient and skilfully carried out' (Odell 2006: 101), then had unimaginable horrors inflicted upon her. Mary's external body parts and internal organs were removed and rearranged (Whitehead & Rivett [2001]2012: 88-89). Instead of an acknowledgement that Mary Jane Kelly was a young woman; a victim of murder, the data supporting the photograph presents an acknowledgement of some examples of where the image has been published. There is, too, information providing permission to reproduce the image:

This image is in the public domain in the European Union because it is an anonymous or corporate work that was first published more than 70 years ago. This image is in the public domain in the United States because it was first published before 1923 ('Jack the Ripper' n.d.).

Mary's body was taken by the man that killed her, by a murder so brutal that a medical officer attending the scene, 'confidently assumed that ... the mutilations had taken about two hours to perform' (Fido 1987: 94). And, as the 'crime scene photograph that adorns almost every spine-broken book on the Ripper case' (Whitehead & Rivett [2001]2012: 87) clearly attests, her body has been taken from her, again and again, ever since. Re-imagined as an artefact of the true crime canon, Mary Jane Kelly's body was removed from her private home and dumped in the public domain.

Collective consumption of crime

These women lost their bodies in several ways – first, as the result of a criminal act, one that was either committed against them or was accused of them; second, through the aftermath of a crime that saw them transformed into a story: one that was utilised to increase newspaper circulation, to be gossiped about in public places, discussed in hushed whispers in private residences and, in the case of the victims of Jack the Ripper, to support an entire sub-genre of true crime known as Ripperology (Odell 2006). Perhaps the most decisive, and methodical, removal of the body from these women was, following on from the crimes for which both are now known, by the debate around capital punishment – a debate that often resurfaces when comparable crimes make their way into contemporary headlines.

As men went to the gallows and to gaol for their crime against Mary Jane, she, in turn, was sentenced by the court of public opinion. Funds were raised for her to start a new life and the Government of the day paid her passage to New Zealand (Anon 1896: 5). Mary Jane arrived in Wellington in that country, but little is known of what happened to her; all that is certain is that she died aged just 22. Interestingly, there were special editions of newspapers boasting, under 'Special Advertisements', that for only threepence readers could purchase a paper 'containing portraits of the Mount Rennie criminals, taken from life' (Anon 1887a: 6). For a shilling they could access 'Amusements' to see likenesses of the men at the Australian Waxworks (Anon 1887b: 2). There would be no such celebrity status for Mary Jane. A picture of her was never published (Gilling 2012: 235). Perhaps it is this fact that gave Frank C. Johnson permission to *not* present an image of her in *Famous Detective Stories*.

For Louisa, her body was taken away from her by the judiciary. In a disturbing attempt to project normalcy, the corpse was described as being of, “a quiet and peaceful appearance” and, except for the ghastly wound in the throat and neck, “it might have been imagined that she died in a quiet and ordinary manner” (Overington 2014: 237). The wound cited here was horrific: Louisa had been nearly decapitated; her severed windpipe was clearly exposed as she lay upon a plinth (Overington 2014: 237). Her family did not claim her body. Two female wardens washed her and prepared her for burial. An anonymous benefactor covered the costs of transport to, and internment in, Rookwood Cemetery where she was laid to rest in an untitled plot (Overington 2014: 239). Society also took away from Louisa, Nancy Cushing observing that ‘Louisa Collins has become a symbolic rather than an individual woman’ (1996: 155). For the women who were victims of Jack the Ripper, their bodies were taken by their killer and have been repeatedly, almost routinely, taken since in the form of books, studies, exhibitions, tourist experiences through Whitechapel and various examples of tourist ephemera. Indeed, as Robin Odell has written: ‘No other murderer has given rise to such an outpouring of the printed word; indeed, few historical events have inspired so vast a literature. None has given birth to a field of interpretation and study such as that represented by Ripperology’ (2006: 239).

These cycles of the production and consumption of violence present, perhaps, one of the most complicated aspects of the standard capitalist formula of supply and demand. For, while we may be dismayed by processes that facilitate the making of money from these, and other, crimes, we need to also acknowledge that the consumption of true crime is more complicated than a simple transaction. Jean Murley has explained the genre as one which, ‘encourages reader and viewer identification with all three of its key figures to varying degrees, and different people respond differently to the possibilities of sympathizing or identifying with killer, victim, and cop’ (2008: 153). There are many different rationales to support many different preferences in reading and viewing material. Perhaps we read, and increasingly watch, true crime out of a complex combination of curiosity and reassurance. How did these terrible crimes occur? How were the perpetrators brought to justice? True crime furnishes stories that are ‘both terrifying and oddly reassuring’ (Murley 2008: 1). Perhaps, too, we engage with true crime so that we might learn about ourselves and gain a deeper understanding of those things that frighten us the most.

Conclusion

On 2 February 2015, the anniversary of the gang rape and murder of Anita Cobby, an inaugural public memorial service – to remember and celebrate the life of the young Sydney nurse – was held at Pinegrove Memorial Park. Anita had been abducted, raped and murdered in 1986. Public anger was at such significant levels that the ensuing debate around capital punishment was almost inevitable; a television viewers’ poll, conducted by a major Sydney-based television station, ‘found an astounding 92.8 percent of the 15,470 callers were in favour of the reintroduction of the death penalty’; and a petition, with ‘nearly 20,000 signatures’, calling for the death penalty was taken to Parliament House (Sheppard [1991]2008: 128). Calls for, are traditionally coupled

with calls against. The death penalty would not be re-introduced and the five men responsible were 'sentenced to life for killing Anita Cobby' (Sheppard [1991]2008: 128).

I joined hundreds of others who gathered on a hot day in Western Sydney for the memorial service. Volunteers handed out service sheets, bottles of water and white ribbons: a symbol of the need to stop violence against women. There were many more people than the chapel, even with additional seating set up outside, could accommodate. People sat, and stood, through a service that was simultaneously angry, joyful and heartbreaking. Anita's sister, Kathryn Szyszka, spoke. She was obviously overcome with emotion, yet each word was clear and deliberate. There was a sense that Kathryn believed, if she spoke slowly, she would survive this event; as she had survived the death of her sister 29 years earlier. She thanked everybody for coming. As she struggled to maintain composure, she spoke even slower. 'Everybody' sounded like two, distinct words: 'every body'. It is this, the almost accidental articulation of a common word, which, I believe, holds part of the answer to the issues raised here.

We are unable to return to Mary Jane Hicks, Louisa Collins, Anita Cobby – and so many other women, including the many women of Whitechapel – their bodies; bodies that have been tortured and taken. Yet, as readers, viewers and writers, we do have opportunities to move our own bodies into uncomfortable physical and emotional spaces, to reflect on the past and consider change for the future. If we, or indeed, if 'every body', makes an effort to connect with these women, to understand them – not just through their dramatic circumstances – but as individuals, we can, in some small way, all make a difference.

The female body does not have to be positioned by writers or cultural consumers as a contested space – conceived of as a commodity, honoured as a site of self-expression, or visualised as a vehicle for reproduction – it can be a space that is considered equal to male spaces and, thus, a space that enjoys consideration and respect. Moreover, each of us has the capacity to send out a message that women's bodies are not available to be taken through violence, taken to tell a story, or taken as an argument in a grand debate around the institution of judicial execution. Critically, in the unpacking of true crime cases, women have a fundamental right to retain their own bodies; the conscription of women's bodies, to be posited as victim or villain, is not an essential component of any of the processes that underpin verdicts of guilty or not guilty. Women's bodies are their own.

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