

Overcoming Disrupted Fairytales and Wasted Whiteness:

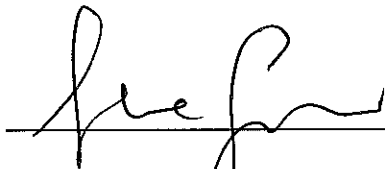
Media Guides for Diverse Victims of Violent Crime

By Buffy Lockette

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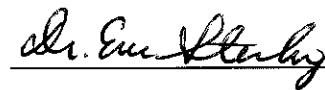
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OVERCOMING DISRUPTED FAIRY TALES AND WASTED WHITENESS:
MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR DIVERSE VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME

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Introduction

Tune in to CNN Headline News or Fox News Channel almost any evening and you will likely be presented the image of a beautiful young female from an affluent family who is missing or has been murdered. Homicide victims JonBenet Ramsey, Laci Peterson and Natalee Holloway all became household names due to prominent national media coverage of their mysterious disappearances. Their youth, gender, race, socioeconomic status and physical appearance each fit the profile of the kind of missing person to whom America's 24-hour television news networks dedicate an abundance of airtime: they were young, White, attractive girls and women from affluent families.

When Laci Peterson was reported missing on Christmas Eve of 2002, images of the pregnant White woman were flashed on CNN and Fox News. The loss of the pretty former cheerleader from an affluent neighborhood in Modesto, California, was proclaimed an American tragedy. The search for her body, ensuing murder investigation and the trial of her husband for the crime became a national media sensation. Yet there was little to no mention in the news of Evelyn Hernandez, a pregnant Salvadoran-American woman who had gone missing in the same area a few months prior to Peterson's disappearance. The two expectant mothers both met the same end – at the bottom of the San Francisco Bay with their heads and other appendages detached from their bodies – yet only one woman's funeral and memorial service was aired live on national television.



People magazine archives

Media Bias and Missing White Woman Syndrome

For every missing person case that gets reported in the national news, there is often a similar case of at least one less privileged person who has also disappeared in the area. For every homicide story focusing on a White female, there are several murder victims in that same community whose families are seeking justice. As outlined in Table 1, there were numerous homicides in the years some victims gained national media attention. For example, in 2002 – the year Laci Peterson was murdered – the Federal Bureau of Investigation recorded 14,054 homicides in the U.S.¹ Of these, 809 were, like Peterson, White women aged 25-29. Yet, Peterson became the celebrity homicide victim of the year. In 1996, the year JonBenet Ramsey was murdered, there was a homicide committed every 27 minutes in the U.S. The FBI recorded 15,848 homicides that year and, among them, 101 were Ramsey’s age. Yet, 20 years later, the name “JonBenet” still garners headlines while her peers remain unknown by the general public.

¹ FBI, Uniform Crime Reporting Index, <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr> (accessed March 26, 2016).

Table 1

	Annual Homicides	Gender	Race	Same Age Range
JonBenet Ramsey (1996)	15,848	Male: 12,195 Female: 3,631	White: 7,647 Black: 7,638 Other: 425 Unknown: 138	Ramsey, Age 6 Range: 5-8 Victims: 101
Chandra Levy (2001)	13,752	Male: 10,503 Female: 3,214	White: 6,750 Black: 6,446 Other: 368 Unknown: 188	Levy, Age 24 Range: 20-24 Victims: 2,651
Laci Peterson (2002)	14,054	Male: 10,779 Female: 3,251	White: 6,757 Black: 6,730 Other: 377 Unknown: 190	Peterson, Age 27 Range: 25-29 Victims: 2,059
Natalee Holloway* (2005)	14,860	Male: 11,683 Female: 3,155	White: 7,133 Black: 7,125 Other: 390 Unknown: 212	Holloway, Age 18 Range: 17-19 Victims: 1,349
Caylee Anthony (2008)	14,180	Male: 11,059 Female: 3,078	White: 6,838 Black: 6,782 Other: 321 Unknown: 239	Anthony, Age 2 Range: 1-4 Victims: 338

* Missing teen Natalee Holloway of Birmingham, Ala., went missing while on vacation in Aruba in 2005. The numbers reported are of homicide victims in her home country during that same year, though she went missing and is presumed murdered in Aruba.

Supermarket checkout lines across the U.S. present shoppers with headlines from one of the nation's most popular magazines, *People*, which publishes celebrity news and human-interest articles. It also features the occasional missing person case or true crime story. The magazine's online archives include a collection of cover images from its entire 42-year run. When accessed on January 17, 2016, the archive contained 2,191 covers and 55,436 stories. A search revealed the magazine dedicated six magazine covers to recovered kidnapping victim Elizabeth Smart, most recently a 2012 cover story entitled "Elizabeth Smart's Dream Wedding." The magazine featured homicide victim Laci Peterson on its cover 17 times from 2003 to 2006. Recovered kidnapping victim Jaycee Dugard appeared on the cover of *People* three times,

including being named one of the “25 Most Intriguing People” in 2009 when she was featured on the cover next to Academy Award winning actress Sandra Bullock, “Twilight” star Robert Pattinson and musician Taylor Swift. The “Missing Persons” folder in the online archive contained 18 articles, which featured on the cover 30 unique missing persons (some appearing on the cover more than once). Out of the 30 people on the cover, 27 were girls or women, 24 were White, and all of them were younger than age 42 (most were teens and young adults). In 2001, a cover story titled “Vanished” focused on the “hundreds of American women” who disappear every year. All four women featured on the cover were White.² These examples from *People* magazine suggest that some people don’t count as “people” in the U.S. According to the magazine’s own audience profile on its advertising rate card, 73% of its 41.7 million readers are women with a median age of 46.2 and a median household income of \$68,776.³ Racial data is not provided. This data would indicate that women themselves are the ones consuming these stories.

What makes one homicide case worthy of national news coverage? Why do the victims who receive massive media attention always seem to be young, White women from good homes? Women studies scholar Rebecca Wanzo identifies the phenomenon as a “Lost Girl Event,” which she defines as a media spectacle in which a missing or murdered girl or young woman comes to

² *People* archives, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/covercollections/0,,00.html> (accessed January 17, 2016)

³ 2016 Rate Card, *People*, effective January 1, 2016. <http://static.people.com/people/static/mediakit/media/pdf/ratecard.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2016)

represent the ideal citizen that the government has failed to protect.”⁴ These stories, she argues, contain messages that romanticize the nation’s past and emphasize innocence as a precondition of worth. Such stories idealize the victim and label her life a “disrupted fairy tale,” while at the same time marginalizing those of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. The assumption, then, is that the abduction of someone like Elizabeth Smart – a pretty, White, harp-playing Mormon teen from a wealthy Utah family – is extraordinary, while the same act committed against a poor Black child is to be expected.

In 2006, American studies scholar Sheri Parks used the phrase “Missing White Woman Syndrome” when discussing the phenomenon during an interview on CNN’s *Showbiz Tonight*. She stated:

Since we can’t solve all the problems, since we can’t save all the women, this woman becomes a symbol. That’s what happens to people. This woman becomes a symbol, and if we save her for a few days, we’re OK...what’s wrong with that is that we don’t care for everybody in the same way.⁵

Following Parks’ statements, CNN correspondent Tom Forman responded on his news blog:

I’ve never, not even once, seen a story spiked because the victim was not attractive enough or the wrong race. But I’ve seen plenty of stories fall by the wayside, pushed down and out of the show, because a consensus develops that says, “You know, I don’t think our viewers are very interested in this case.” Is that racism or realism? We can’t cover every murder, but ignoring them all or reporting just statistics seems irresponsible. So how should we decide whose life or loss is covered?⁶

⁴ Wanzo, Rebecca. “The Era of Lost (White) Girls: On Body and Event,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19.2 (2008): 99-126.

⁵ Parks, Sheri. CNN *Showbiz Tonight*, aired on March 17, 2006, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0603/17/sbt.01.html>. (accessed March 12, 2016).

⁶ Forman, Tom. “Diagnosing Missing White Woman Syndrome,” posted on March 18, 2006, <<http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/2006/03/diagnosing-missing-white-woman.html>> (accessed February 12, 2016)

What this reporter failed to consider is the hegemonic system in the U.S. that leads audiences to prefer stories about victims from the dominant class. Foreman shrinks away from acknowledging the role the media plays, suggesting that producers and editors are simply giving their audiences what they want. He is ambivalent to the power of the media to shape public interest and fails to question why the public is infatuated with stories about missing White women to begin with. Conversely, feminist scholar bell hooks places the media within a larger cultural context that exists within America's "White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy."⁷ She blames our nation's oppressive culture for the existence of the sexist, racist and classist messages that are communicated through the media and argues that each member of society, including the oppressed, is responsible for changing this discourse.

An African-American columnist for the *Washington Post*, Eugene Robinson, says the U.S. is obsessed with "Damsels in Distress" only when the victims are White, which reflects America's deep-rooted prejudice against people of color. He writes:

This country has made undeniable progress against racism in my lifetime, but the Damsels' coverage suggests to me that on some visceral level people of color are still seen as The Other. It suggests that, for some reason, many Americans can become emotionally involved with the travails of a distraught family that happens to be White, but not a family of color.⁸

⁷ hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

⁸ Robinson, Eugene. "Cable Can't Get Beyond the Pale," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2005, Opinion/Editorial page.

Narrating and Framing Crime

Scholar Jessie Daniels argues that reality television viewers demand narratives that focus on the travails of White people and affirm stereotypical views of people of color. In his quantitative content analysis of the program *Intervention*, Daniels discovered that the lives of drug addicts were portrayed differently depending on race. Using the term “Wasted Whiteness,” Daniels argued that *Intervention* producers present White drug addicts as a particular loss to society.⁹ Through addiction, *Intervention* subjects have thrown away their lives of promise, thereby wasting their Whiteness and, therefore, their privilege. People of color are portrayed on the show as less of a loss because little was expected of them to begin with. Perhaps this is why the news media makes a bigger deal about the death of White female crime victims. Unlike other victims, their lives should have been a fairy tale featured on the society pages – not in the obituaries. Instead, someone abducted and/or killed them and wasted their Whiteness.

Within the field of anthropology, cognitive linguists argue that we see the world through “frames,” grouping metaphors and ideology around lenses through which we view the world.¹⁰ Ottenheimer uses the example of the “Founding Fathers” as a metaphorical frame through which American’s view the nation as a family that sends its “sons” to war. Frames give people the tools to think about and discuss ideas. Ottenheimer argues that people struggle to understand that which they have no frame for in their language. People dismiss

⁹ Daniels, Jessie. “*Intervention*: Reality TV, Whiteness, and Narratives of Addiction,” *Advances in Medical Sociology* 14 (2013): 103-125.

¹⁰ Ottenheimer, Harriet. “The Anthropology of Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology.” Southbank, Victoria, Australia: Thomson, Wadsworth, 2006.

ideas for which they have no frame of reference. The news media uses frames to get readers and viewers to process stories. A good example of this, according to Ottenheimer, is the frames used by reporters during Hurricane Katrina. An Associated Press photo of a Black man was published with the caption "A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005." At the same time, Getty Images published a photo of a White man and woman with the caption "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana." The photos were nearly identical, and yet the Black man was framed as "looting" and the White couple as "finding" items at a grocery store. More recently, President-elect Donald Trump has used the shooting death of Kathryn Steinle to frame undocumented immigrants as criminals. Steinle – a beautiful, young, college-educated White woman – was shot on San Francisco's Pier 14 on July 1, 2015 by a homeless Mexican immigrant who was in the country illegally after being deported five times. Trump made the deportation of undocumented immigrants a central theme of his campaign platform. Just two weeks prior to Steinle's death, while announcing his bid for the White House, Trump made the controversial statements about Mexican immigrants that still follow him to this day: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...they're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."¹¹ Trump used Steinle's death weeks later to prove his point,

¹¹ Hee Lee, Michelle Ye. "Donald Trump's False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime." The Washington Post, July 8, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2016.

framing “immigrant” as “criminal.” He continued to use her as an example throughout his campaign, even mentioning her during his convention speech. Are frames responsible for Missing White Woman Syndrome? It seems the abundance of news coverage on murdered and missing White women has given the public a frame for understanding and discussing those cases. Now, when a young, upper middle class, White woman or girl is in the news because she has gone missing or has been murdered, the public can immediately call up mental images of JonBenet Ramsey and Laci Peterson as they begin to process and absorb the story. At the same time, since we have never seen a woman of color become a celebrity homicide victim, we have no frame of reference for thinking about and discussing that crime. Perhaps that is why audiences do not latch on to these stories as news producers like Forman claim.

A Discourse of Fear

In her seminal book on body politics, Bordo calls on the works of Marx and Foucault in her argument that society controls women’s bodies for the benefit of the establishment.¹² Is it possible that Missing White Woman Syndrome is a way for society to keep White women in line? Perhaps prominent media coverage about the harm that has befallen another White woman could frighten her peers into adhering to prescribed behavioral norms that benefit the patriarchy. Altheide and Michalowski argue that fear in the news is used as a form of control. Conducting a quantitative analysis of the *Arizona Republic* and

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>.

¹² Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

other news organizations, they found that a “discourse of fear” exists within news coverage. “Proactive Fear” is used as a tool to get audiences to avoid engaging in activities that will lead to victimization. The demographics of the subjects in a news article give fear an identity, as “race/ethnicity, social class, and gender concerns are implicated with fear, particularly in the context of change and ‘disorder’ in a pluralistic society.”¹³ In the first study to examine numerous types of television news programs and audience traits in relation to fear of crime and TV consumption, White women reported a greater level of fear of crime if they lived in a community with a high percentage of Blacks – despite being non-victims of crime themselves.¹⁴ A study by Chiricos and Eschholz found an increase in fear among middle-aged White women upon viewing crime reported by television news.¹⁵

If the media uses fear as a form of control and White women experience high levels of fear upon watching these segments, is the control of White women by the media intentional? If so, could this partially account for the disproportionate coverage of crime stories on victimized White women? I am of the opinion that framing has given White women the tools to absorb stories about their missing and murdered peers. Their proactive fear keeps them interested in these stories in hopes of preventing themselves from meeting the same fate. For example, Natalee Holloway was demonized for leaving a bar in a

¹³ Altheide, David L., and R. Sam Michalowski. “Fear in the News: A Discourse of Control.” *The Sociological Quarterly*. 40:3 (1999): 475-503.

¹⁴ Eschholz, Sarah, Ted Chiricos, and Marc Gertz. “Television and Fear of Crime: Program Types, Audience Traits, and the Mediating Effect of Perceived Neighborhood Racial Composition.” *Social Problems*. 50:3 (2003): 395-415.

¹⁵ Chiricos, Ted and Sarah Eschholz. “The Radical and Ethnic Typification of Crime and the Criminal Typification of Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News.” *Journal of Crime and Delinquency*. 39:4 (2002): 400-420.

foreign country with strange men. As much as women seemed to enjoy reading *People* magazine stories and watching TV news segments about Holloway's disappearance, they also seemed reassured by the manner in which she disappeared. Personally, I knew so many women fascinated by the story who said, "That would never happen to me, because I wouldn't leave a bar alone with a man I just met in Aruba." Victim blaming and "slut shaming" settled womens' fears while, at the same time, encouraged them to limit their own sexual behavior. The patriarchy then was able to control White women's bodies as Bordo suggests was intended.

SECTION REMOVED DUE TO PRIVACY

As an accredited public relations professional with 20 years of experience working for and with the media, I know there are tools that anyone can use to communicate with reporters. I believe race and class privilege – and the educational and other advantages that come with it – make some families better equipped to advocate for their loved ones. Families like the Holloways and the Petersons have the benefits of their race and class to help them gain media assistance in their campaigns for justice. They have the confidence to approach journalists, the education to articulate their viewpoints, and often more time and resources to work on the case.

VOCAL: Victim Advocacy and Media Relations

In an attempt to level the playing field and help Alabama families of all demographics better utilize the media, I reached out to Victims of Crimes And Leniency (VOCAL) to offer my assistance. Funded through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, VOCAL is a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting and supporting the rights of victims of violent crimes. After researching Missing White Woman Syndrome, I met with VOCAL Director Janette Grantham twice to learn more about her organization's work with homicide victims and its experiences with the news media. We met for the first time on October 21, 2015, to get to know one another and discuss my thesis project. interest in homicide cases based on the demographics of the victim. Ms. Grantham (a White woman who became involved with VOCAL following the murder of her brother) said she does see media bias in her work and she wished there was something VOCAL could do to help all the victims' families they serve better work with the media. By the end of our talk, I had gained her trust, and we agreed to work on a media training and resource guide for her organization to provide to families. She sent me home with all the brochures and pamphlets VOCAL provides to families and gave me the freedom to draft a resource guide based on my own knowledge and experience.

On April 29, 2016, I met with Ms. Grantham again to get direction for the media guide. From our discussion, I learned that VOCAL makes itself available to work directly with the media on behalf of victims of violent crime – providing advice to families before they give media interviews, fielding media calls, contacting the media to initiate coverage, and on occasion staging media events

and press conferences. Ms. Grantham said victims' families are called upon to talk to the media more now than in decades past and, therefore, there is an increased need for media training. She said she has found local, Alabama-based news reporters to be more respectful of victims than national media outlets. She believes the news media can be beneficial to victims by pressuring law enforcement and public officials to solve crimes and serve justice. At the same time, she said news reporters hinder investigations by inaccurate reporting and (often intentionally) cause emotional pain to grieving families. Ms. Grantham believes news organizations need to hear from more victims if they are to redeem their outlets' own negative reputations. She said the media could assist law enforcement in seeking justice if racial and other forms of media bias didn't exist. Ms. Grantham believes giving families the tools to work with the media will make them feel like they can make a difference, thereby helping them in the grieving process. She would like a list of statewide media contacts so she and other victim advocates can reach out to a larger number of reporters

Media Guide

Using my own knowledge and experience as a public relations professional with experience in victim advocacy, I volunteered to create a media resource guide for VOCAL to include in the packet of information it gives to victims' families. The attached media guide provides an overview on working with the press, media contact information, sample press releases, and other tips. It is designed as a PDF that VOCAL can easily print or share electronically. My hope is that this will give all Alabamian residents – despite race, class or gender – a “how to” guide if they decide to engage the news media in their quest for

justice. Ms. Grantham has reviewed the guide and plans to begin providing it to families. She sent me an email on November 8, 2016, writing, "It was really great and has already been a big help to all of us. I have shown it to the board, and they were very impressed. Thanks so much for your hard work." I believe the next step toward combating media bias in Alabama homicide cases is to produce educational materials for VOCAL to distribute to the media to educate reporters on working with diverse victims of crime. I hope to continue providing assistance as a volunteer for this agency.

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APPENDIX REMOVED DUE TO PRIVACY