VIOLENCE AND SOCIETY

A Reader

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"The Sexual Politics of Murder"

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The Sexual Politics of Murder

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When is an act sexed? When do you kill, or die, as a member of your gender, and when as whoever else you are? Are you ever anyone else?

—Catharine A. MacKinnon (1982b, p. 703)

Those of us who are... so much influenced by violence in the media, in particular pornographic violence, are not some kind of inherent monsters. We are your sons, and we are your husbands, and we grew up in regular families.

—Ted Bundy (Lamar 1989, p. 34)

They made me out to be a monster... but, even my worst enemies admit that I was a good father.

—Joel Steinberg (Gross 1989, p. 72)

In her recent book, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism*, Robin Morgan (1989) relates an incident that occurred during a civil rights movement meeting in the early 1960s. A group composed of members of both the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (with men outnumbering women three to one) had gathered in the wake of the disappearance of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. The FBI, local police, and the national guard had been dredging local lakes and rivers in search of the bodies. During this search, the mutilated parts of an estimated 17 unidentified bodies were found, all but one of whom were women. Morgan recalls that a male CORE leader, upon hearing that news, agonized: “There’s been a whole god-damned lynching we never even knew about. There’s been some brother disappeared who never even got reported.” When Morgan asked, why only one lynching and what about the other 16 bodies, she was told: “Those were obviously sex murders. Those weren’t political” (pp. 223–24).

Twenty years later, that perception still holds sway. For example, in the spring of 1984, Christopher Wilder raped and murdered a still unknown number of women. About to be apprehended by the police, he shot himself. The *Albuquerque Tribune* (April 14, 1984, p. 2) commented:

Wilder’s death leaves behind a mystery as to the motives behind the rampage of death and


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terror. With plenty of money, soft-spoken charm, a background in photography, and a part-time career in the glamorous sports car racing circuit, Wilder, 39, would have had no trouble attracting beautiful women.

This man not only murdered women but first extensively tortured them. Although the FBI refuses to release all the details of that abuse, it was revealed that Wilder had bound, raped, repeatedly stabbed his victims, and tortured them with electric shocks. One woman (who survived the attack) had even had her eyelids glued shut. Obviously, Wilder did not wish to date, charm, or attract women; his desire was to torment and destroy. From a feminist perspective, there is no mystery behind Wilder’s actions. His were sexually political murders, a form of murder rooted in a system of male supremacy in the same way that lynching is based in white supremacy. Such murder is, in short, a form of patriarchal terrorism.

That recognition, however, is impeded by longstanding tradition, for, as Kate Millett (1970) noted in her classic work, Sexual Politics:

We are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation. . . . And yet . . . control in patriarchal societies would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as an ever-present instrument of intimidation. (pp. 44–45)

Early feminist analysts of rape (Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1983; Russell 1975) asserted that rape is not, as the common mythology insists, a crime of frustrated attraction, victim provocation, or uncontrollable biological urges. Nor is it one perpetrated only by an aberrant fringe. Rather, rape is a direct expression of sexual politics, a ritual enactment of male domination, a form of terror that functions to maintain the status quo. MacKinnon (1982a) further maintains that rape is not primarily an act of violence but is a sexual act in a culture where sexuality itself is a form of power, where oppression takes sexual forms, and where sexuality is the very “linchpin of gender inequality” (p. 533).

The murders of women and children—including torture and murder by husbands, lovers, and fathers, as well as that committed by strangers—are not some inexplicable evil or the domain of “monsters” only. On the contrary, sexual murder is the ultimate expression of sexuality as a form of power. Sex murder (what the FBI also terms “recreational murder”) is part of a tradition that Mary Daly first named as gynocide (1973, p. 73). As further defined by Andrea Dworkin (1976), gynocide is “the systematic crippling, raping, and/or killing of women by men . . . the relentless violence perpetrated by the gender class men on the gender class women.” She adds that “under patriarchy, gynocide is the ongoing reality of life lived by women” (pp. 16, 19).

It is only through an extraordinary numbing that such a reality can be denied, for the terrible reminders are everywhere: in the ubiquitous posters pleading for information about women who have “disappeared”; in the daily newspaper reports of various public and private atrocities. In January and February 1989, along with all the grimly usual stories, three others demanded my attention. The first was the conviction of Joel Steinberg—the batterer, child killer, familiar family member, and self-proclaimed “good father”—for the death of his illegally adopted daughter. The second was the execution of serial sex killer Ted Bundy, the ultimate stranger and paradigmatic “good son.” The third also is related to serial murder: hundreds of women, many of whom police say were working as prostitutes, have been murdered in the past seven years on the West Coast by killers such as Seattle’s “Green River Killer” and the Los Angeles “South Side Slayer.” Currently, in San Diego County, 39 women who have been categorized as “prostitutes, drug addicts, and street denizens” have been killed since 1985, while in Los Angeles, police are investigating the murders of 69 prostitutes and the killings of 30 other women in what they term “street murders” (Overend and Wood, 1989; Serrano 1989). In this article, I will look at some of the issues raised by these three separate but related gynocidal events.
Mixed Signals

He was giving me mixed signals. He would praise me and build my ego. On the other hand, he was constantly critical. And he would strike me.

—Hedda Nussbaum (Hackett 1988, p. 60)

On November 1, 1987, six-year-old Lisa Steinberg was brought to a hospital emergency room unconscious and with injuries that led to her death four days later. The two people who had been raising her in their Greenwich Village apartment—Joel Steinberg, a lawyer who had illegally adopted the child, and Hedda Nussbaum, the former children’s book editor he lived with and battered for some 12 years—were brought in by the police for questioning. Suspicion was directed at Steinberg in part because upon being told that the child had suffered at the very least “permanent brain damage,” he joked that “Lisa would never be an Olympic athlete.” At first, both Nussbaum and Steinberg were charged with second-degree murder, but a year later, as the trial began, the prosecution dropped the charges against Nussbaum. No longer a defendant, she became the key witness in the state’s case. The trial was televised, and for seven days, Nussbaum told of her abusive relationship with Steinberg; videotapes of her extensively and permanently damaged body and face were introduced as evidence. Massive national attention was focused on the trial, with Nussbaum and Steinberg continually described as “national symbols” of domestic abuse. On January 30, 1989, Steinberg was convicted of a lesser charge, first-degree manslaughter in the death of Lisa Steinberg.

Steinberg has consistently refused to admit his guilt; he denies that either Lisa or Hedda was abused, claims that Lisa’s death was accidental or that Nussbaum killed her, and proclaims himself to be “a victim.” Yet, no matter how reprehensibly Steinberg behaves, he has largely been overshadowed, particularly among feminists, by the troubling and controversial figure of Hedda Nussbaum. In part, this is due to the enormous media attention; millions watched on live television as the disfigured Nussbaum told her story of their mutual cocaine abuse, his increasingly bizarre and torturous beatings over a period of 10 years, her desire to protect and remain loyal to her batterer, and her overwhelming adoration of him. This case has opened up debate among feminists as to the culpability of Nussbaum herself, her moral responsibility in the murder of the child. After beating Lisa into unconsciousness, Steinberg went out for three hours. During that time, Nussbaum did not call for emergency help because, as she testified, she was afraid such an action would show disloyalty and distrust to Joel. When he returned, they freebased cocaine together and did not call for help until the following morning. Some feminists are now asking, was Nussbaum victim or collaborator?

Steinberg had used not only physical force but elaborate psychological manipulation to control Nussbaum. In 1982, Nussbaum lost her editor’s job; the battering had caused her to miss too much work. By 1984, eight years after they began living together, Nussbaum’s physical appearance had deteriorated to such an extent that she rarely left the apartment. Thus isolated, she was particularly prey to Steinberg’s mind games. Aided by cocaine, he convinced her that her friends and family (and eventually even the two children) were part of a hypnotic cult that was out to get them. Ironically, of course, the only cult involved was the cult of one that Steinberg was forming around himself. She later recalled: “I loved to listen to him talk. Basically, I worshiped him. He was the most wonderful man I had ever met. I believed he had supernatural, godlike power” (Hackett 1988, p. 60). As in other patriarchal cults and religions, the female supplicant provides fodder for the pornographic fantasies of the empowered, god-identified men. Nussbaum recalled: “Many days and nights, Joel would push me to fantasize about the cults, about the sexual encounters he said I had with all these people, and about pornographic videos I had supposedly made. Joel got me to believe these things happened, but I never had any recollection of them” (Weiss and Johnson 1989, p. 90).

The battering of Nussbaum’s body was clearly recapitulated in Steinberg’s simultaneous battering and disfigurement of her memory and mind. That psychological manipulation took shape not only in the bizarre cult delusion but
also in the quotidian mixed signals he consistently sent to her. Many who have studied or experienced abusive men would agree that such behavior is common, perhaps dramatized most vividly in the show of love and affection that often follows a beating. Indeed, contradictory messages—for example, dress glamorously, but if you are raped, you were asking for it—frequently riddle patriarchal communications. Not insignificantly then, one of the most blatant of such mixed messages can be found in the February 13, 1989 issue of People Weekly. The cover itself shows a large photo of an unsmiling and clearly disfigured Nussbaum, flanked by two smaller pictures of Joel and Lisa. Underneath, the copy asks the “haunting question. How could any mother, no matter how battered, fail to help her dying child?” In the story, told by a “close friend,” Nussbaum is presented as the largely pathetic victim of a sadistic monster. We are told in great detail of the horrors of Steinberg’s abuse:

Steinberg had kicked her in the eye, strangled her, beaten her sexual organs, urinated on her, hung her in handcuffs from a chiming bar, lacerated a tear duct by poking his finger in the corner of her eye, broken her nose several times and pulled out clumps of hair while throwing her about their apartment. “Sometimes he’d take the blowtorch we used for freebasing and move it around me, making me jump. . . . I have burn marks all over my body from that. Joel told me he did this to improve my coordination.” (Weiss and Johnson 1989, pp. 89-90)

This last quote from Nussbaum is reiterated in a blown-up section on the left side of a two-page spread. On the right (p. 91) is an advertisement for Neutrogena soap. It features a large photo of a grinning woman, Cathy Guisewite, cartoonist and creator of the strip “Cathy,” as well as a highlighted quote from the woman herself:

I know all about eating a cheesecake after a bad date. People say, “You know exactly how I feel; I’m so relieved that somebody else sits in the closet and eats a cheesecake after a bad date.” I think I verbalize for a lot of women

the anxieties and insecurities we live out every day, like I’ll buy anything that will promise me a miracle. But, I’ve bought the 25-step skin care and it’s still in the bottom drawer, because I never have the energy even to get to Step Two. I always go back to Neutrogena Soap, because it’s so simple. I mean, I stagger into the bathroom, I wash my face, and I can handle it. It’s the one thing I don’t have to torture myself about.

In order to understand the mode of communication here, it is useful to borrow a concept from television criticism. Raymond Williams (1974) has described a central characteristic of the television experience to be that of flow—that is, TV programs are surrounded by commercials and other programs, an uninterrupted following of one thing by another. One result of this flow is a powerful tendency to blur the contents together, a result encouraged by programmers “so that one program leads effortlessly into the next” (Adler 1976, p. 7). Commercial advertisements that accompany programs also participate in this flow pattern.

Cognizant of this media structure, we might consider the basic message that the juxtaposition of article and ad in People Weekly delivers. Key themes in each are torture, feminine insecurities, anxieties, and masochism. We move from a graphic description of the torture of a former successful career woman (Nussbaum) to the smiling confession of egregious self-torture by a current career woman (Guisewite). (We might note that Guisewite’s “torture” also can be traced to an “abusive” man, the “bad date” for whom she locked herself in a closet.) Moreover, after reading “Hedda’s Story,” including its mention of the six times Hedda left Joel Steinberg (the lifelong “bad date”) only to return, what can we make of these strategically placed and highly resonant words of Guisewite: “I never have the energy. . . . I always go back. . . . because it’s so simple. I mean, I stagger into the bathroom, I wash my face, and I can handle it.”

While Nussbaum’s torture by a man she continued to live with is appalling (though fascinating enough to rivet the nation), Guisewite’s self-torture is pitched as normal, representative, and smingly cute. Though the article superficially abhors Nussbaum’s battering (all the
while describing it in titillating detail), the entire media package subtextually attempts to instill in women the very attitudes (insecurity, masochism, self-abuse) that result from abuse. This is a mixed message par excellence, replicating the typical pattern of the batterer.

The patriarchal construction of female victimization is at the heart of the debate over Nussbaum’s collusion. Susan Brownmiller, in a New York Times editorial (1989a) as well as an article in Ms. (1989b), has argued vehemently that feminists should not support “unquestioningly the behaviors and actions of all battered women. . . . The point of feminism is to give women the courage to exercise free will, not to use the ‘brainwashed victim’s’ excuse to explain away the behavior of a woman who surrenders her free will. Victimhood must no longer be an acceptable or excusable model of female behavior” (1989b, p. 61). She condemns Nussbaum as a “narcissist,” “empty at the core” (1989a, p. A19) and finds that she was a “participant in her own and Lisa’s destruction” (1989b, p. 61). In some ways, particularly if one assumes the perspective of the abused child, such an argument might be compelling. However, this argument collapses in a number of significant ways. First of all, it takes the burden and the focus off Steinberg; once again, the question centers not on how the man could have done this rape, battery, murder, incest, and so on, but on how the woman could have let him. Second, it seeks the reason for battery in the personality of the woman, in this case her “narcissism,” and not in male dominance. Finally, Nussbaum’s failure to summon emergency aid for Lisa as she lay unconscious was abusive, but an understanding of that behavior must first be sought not in Nussbaum’s personality, but in her oppression in the nuclear family and in her status as a torture victim (Russell 1982, pp. 273–285).

In her Times editorial, Brownmiller (1989a) deplores what she finds to be a common feminist identification with Nussbaum to be both “simplistic and alarming.” She further observes: “Significantly, no man of my acquaintance has felt the need to proclaim that he, but for the grace of God, could have been a Joel Steinberg. Decent, honorable men rushed to put a vast distance between themselves and Lisa’s convicted killer” (p. 19). Yet, in some ways, much of women’s vituperation against Nussbaum equally might stem from an identification with her, followed by a horrified denial and distancing. Furthermore, and this is my central point, of course men both decent and indecent will rush to disassociate themselves from a man who has been publicly shown up as a batterer and murderer. Prior to his public humiliation, or with fictional representatives of the type, some of those very same men frequently gush with admiration for and identification with the sexual criminal. This male rush to disassociate (especially after the fact) is characteristic of a patriarchal culture in which awareness of institutionalized male supremacy is repressed. Thus, in myriad ways, the culture regularly double-thinks a distance between itself and sexual violence, denying the fundamental normalcy of that violence in a male supremacist culture and trying to paint it as the domain of psychopaths and “monsters” only (Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Caputi 1987). The career of sex killer Ted Bundy is especially instructive on this point.

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The Boys Next Door

Most men just hate women. Ted Bundy killed them.

—Jimmy McDonough (1984, p. 3)

At some point when I was writing my book, The Age of Sex Crime (1987), an analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of serial sex murder, I had a dream that I was back living in the white, middle-class, suburban neighborhood I grew up in and that Ted Bundy had moved in a few houses down. This was but one of several such dreams I had while engaged in the writing. Still it made a deep impression on me. Certainly, it meant that my subject was getting closer and closer to my psyche. But it also was significant that the nightmare figure was Ted Bundy, for Bundy is almost universally hailed as the killer who represented the all-American boy, the boy next door who did not marry but, rather, killed the girl next door.
Ted Bundy committed serial murder, and FBI statistics show that this new type of murder has increased drastically in the United States in the last 20 years. In addition, in 1984, the Justice Department estimated that there were at the very least 35 and possibly as many as 100 such killers roaming the country. Justice Department official Robert O. Heck summed up the general situation:

We all talk about Jack the Ripper; he killed five people [sic]. We all talk about the “Boston Strangler” who killed 13, and maybe “Son of Sam” who killed six. But we’ve got people [sic] out there now killing 20 and 30 people and more, and some of them just don’t kill. They torture their victims in terrible ways and mutilate them before they kill them. Something’s going on out there. It’s an epidemic. (Lindsey 1984, p. 7)

Although Heck’s statement is superficially correct, his language obscures what actually is going on out there, for the “people” who torture, kill, and mutilate in this way are men, while their victims are characteristically females—women and girls—and to a lesser extent younger males. As this hierarchy indicates, these are crimes of sexually political, essentially patriarchal, domination. So hidden is this knowledge, however, that criminologist Steven Egger (1984), after first noting that all known serial killers are male, goes on to observe: “This sexual differentiation may lead researchers to study maleness and its socialization as an etiological consideration. However, the lack of this obvious distinction has apparently precluded such study” (p. 351). Yet most researchers have not yet made that so obvious distinction because to do so would inevitably introduce the issue of sexual politics into sexual murder.

Although sexual force against women is endemic to patriarchy, the twentieth century is marked by a new form of mass gynocide: the mutilation serial sex murder. This “age of sex crime” begins with the crimes of “Jack the Ripper,” the still unidentified killer who in 1888 murdered and mutilated five London prostitutes. Patriarchal culture has enshrined “Jack the Ripper” as a mythic hero; he commonly appears as an immortal figure in literature, film, television, jokes, and other cultural products. The function of such mythicization is twofold: to terrorize women and to empower and inspire men.

The unprecedented pattern laid down during the Ripper’s original siege is now enacted with some regularity: the single, territorial, and sensation-ally nicknamed killer; socially powerless and scapegoated victims; some stereotyped feature ascribed in common to the victims (e.g., all coeds, redheads, prostitutes, and so on); a “signature” style of murder or mutilation; intense media involvement; and an accompanying incidence of imitation or “copycat” killings. Ripper-type killers include the “Lipstick Killer,” the “Boston Strangler,” the “Son of Sam,” the “Hillside Strangler,” the “Green River Killer,” and the “South Side Slayer,” to name only a few.

The Ripper myth received renewed attention in 1988, the centennial year of the original crimes. That occasion was celebrated by multiple retellings of the Ripper legend. In England, Ripper paraphernalia, such as a computer game, T-shirts, buttons, and cocktails appeared (Cameron 1988). Retellings included a British-produced massively promoted made-for-TV movie, Jack the Ripper; an exploitation thriller, called Jack’s Back, about a killer of prostitutes in contemporary Los Angeles; and scores of new books on the master killer.

Within months of this anniversary celebration for the mythic father of sexual murder, the focus effortlessly and eerily shifted to a figurative son of that very father—a man who himself was portrayed as a paradigmatic American son, the “handsome,” “intelligent,” and “charming” Ted Bundy. In 1979, he was convicted of three women’s deaths and is suspected of being responsible for perhaps 47 more. Bundy, like “Jack the Ripper,” is a sex criminal who has spawned a distinctive legend and been attended by a distinctive revelry. In the days preceding his death, his story dominated the mass media, memorializing and further mythicizing a killer who had already been the subject of scores of articles, five books, and a made-for-TV movie (where he was played by Mark Harmon, an actor whom People Weekly once gushed over as the “world’s sexiest man”). The atmosphere surrounding his execution was repeatedly described as a “carnival” or
“circus.” On the morning Bundy went to the electric chair, hundreds (from photographs of the event, the crowd seemed to be composed largely of men) gathered across the street from the prison. Many wore specially designed costumes, waved banners proclaiming a “Bundy BBQ” or “I like my Ted well done,” and chanted songs such as “He bludgeoned the poor girls, all over the head. Now we’re all ecstatic, Ted Bundy is dead.” A common journalistic metaphor for the overall scene was that of a tailgate party before a big game. Indications of a spreading Bundy cult continue to appear: a student group at the University of New Mexico in April 1989 offered a program showing a tape of Bundy’s final interview. The poster advertising that event displayed a likeness of the killer under the headline: “A Man with Vision. A Man with Direction. A Prophet of Our Times . . . Bundy: The Man, The Myth, The Legend.”

This sort of spontaneous outpouring of folk sentiment regarding Ted Bundy was not without precedent. In the late 1970s, when he was awaiting trial for the murder of Caryn Campbell in Aspen, Colorado, Bundy managed to escape twice. The first time he was caught and returned to custody; the second time he was successful and traveled to Florida. But upon the news of his escapes (particularly the first) a phenomenal reaction occurred. All observers concur: “In Aspen, Bundy had become a folk hero” (Larsen 1980, p. 182); “Ted achieved the status of Billy the Kid at least” (Rule 1980, p. 255); “Aspen reacted as if Bundy were some sort of Robin Hood instead of a suspected mass murderer. A folklore sprang up out of the thin Rocky Mountain air” (Nordheimer 1978, p. 46). T-shirts appeared reading, “Ted Bundy is a One Night Stand.” Radio KSNO programmed a Ted Bundy request hour, playing songs like “Ain’t No Way to Treat a Lady.” A local restaurant offered a “Bundyburger,” consisting of nothing more than a plain roll: “Open it and see the meat has fled,” explained a sign. Yet after his second escape, the FBI took Bundy seriously enough to name him to their 10 Most Wanted List, seeking him “in connection with 36 similar-type sexual slayings throughout several Western states.”

Just as Bundy’s white, young, generally middle-class victims were stereotypically (and with marked racist and classist bias) universalized as “anyone’s daughters,” Bundy himself was depicted as the fatherland’s (almost) ideal son—handsome, intelligent, a former law student, a rising star in Seattle’s Republican party. And although that idealization falls apart upon close examination (Bundy’s photographs show an ordinary face, and he had to drop out of law school due to bad grades), it provided an attractive persona for purposes of identification. As several feminist analysts (Lacy 1982–83; Millett 1970; Walkowitz 1982) have noted, a recurrent and vivid pattern accompanying episodes of sensationalized sex murder is ordinary male identification with the sex killer, as revealed in “jokes, innuendoes, veiled threats (I might be the Stranger, you know)” (Lacy 1982–83, p. 61).

After his first escape, the male identification was with Bundy as an outlaw rebel-hero. But subsequently, Bundy did the supremely unmanly thing of getting caught; moreover, at the last moment he confessed to his crimes and manifested fear of death. No longer qualifying as hero, Bundy was now cast into the alternate role of scapegoat. The “bloodthirsty revelers” outside the prison gates, through their objectification of the victims and lust for death, still mirrored Bundy, but now delightedly demanded that the preeminent patriarchal son die as a token sacrifice for his and their sins.

In the final days before his execution, Bundy spoke directly about his cultural construction as a sex killer, telling James Dobson, a psychologist and religious broadcaster, that since his youth he had been obsessed with pornography. Bundy claimed that pornography inspired him to act out his torture and murder fantasies. Five years earlier, another interviewer (Michaud and Aynesworth 1983) had reported a similar conversation with Bundy:

He told me that long before there was a need to kill there were juvenile fantasies fed by photos of women in skin magazines, suntan oil advertisements, or jiggly starlets on talk shows. He was transfixed by the sight of women’s bodies on provocative display. . . . Crime stories fascinated him. He read pulp detective magazines and gradually developed a store of knowledge about criminal tech-
niques—what worked and what didn’t. That learning remained incidental to the central thrill of reading about the abuse of female images, but nonetheless he was schooling himself. (p. 117)

Bundy also spoke for himself (although in the third person since he had not yet decided to openly admit his guilt):

Maybe he focused on pornography as a vicarious way of experiencing what his peers were experiencing in reality. . . . Then he got sucked into the more sinister doctrines that are implicit in pornography—the use, the abuse, the possession of women as objects. . . . A certain percentage of it [pornography] is devoted toward literature that explores situations where a man, in the context of a sexual encounter, in one way or another engages in some sort of violence toward a woman, or the victim. There are, of course, a whole host of substitutions that could come under that particular heading. Your girlfriend, your wife, a stranger, children—whatever—a whole host of victims are found in this literature. And in this literature, they are treated as victims. (p. 117)

Bundy’s self-confessed movement from pornography (reportedly introduced to him at an early age by a grandfather who beat his wife, regularly assaulted other people, and tormented animals) to actual sexual assault is consistent with testimony from other sex offenders, including sex murderers, who claim that viewing pornography affected their criminal behavior (Caputi 1987; Einsiedel 1986).

Diana E. H. Russell (1988) has proposed a theoretical model of the causative role of pornography in violence against women. Russell first distinguishes between pornography and erotica, drawing upon a definition of pornography as “sexually explicit material that represents or describes degrading or abusive sexual behavior so as to endorse and/or recommend the behavior as described” (Longino 1980, p. 44). She defines erotica as “sexual representations premised on equality” (Leidholdt and Russell forthcoming; Russell 1988, p. 46). Using the findings from a range of social research from the past decade, Russell argues that pornography predisposes or intensifies a predisposition in some men to rape women and that it can undermine some men’s internal or social inhibitions against acting out sexually violent behavior. Bundy’s testimony clearly supports that model.

Bundy’s assertions released a wave of scorn, ridicule, and fury in the mainstream press, with some commentators seemingly more angry at his aspersions on pornography than at his crimes. As one columnist (Leo 1989) fulminated: “As Bundy told it, he was a good, normal fellow, an ‘all-American boy’ properly raised by diligent parents, though one would have liked to hear more about his ‘diligent’ mother. While nothing of this mother-son relationship is known, a hatred of women virulent enough to claim 50 lives does not usually spring full-blown from the reading of obscene magazines” (p. 53). Once again, normalcy as well as “maleness and its socialization” are vehemently discarded as an etiological consideration for sexual murder; misogynist myth prevails and the finger of blame is pointed unwaveringly at a woman. Since Bundy’s execution, an extensive article has appeared in Vanity Fair; predictably, it absolves pornography and instead condemns Louise Bundy as responsible for the evolution of her son into a “depraved monster” (MacPherson 1989).

A companion chorus of voices suggests that we cannot take Bundy seriously because Dobson, the fundamentalist crusader, led Bundy to his assertions to further his own agenda. Thus, once again, the feminist connection between violence against women and pornography is potentially discredited by its association with fundamentalism. Yet few feminists would agree with the Right that pornography is the sole or root cause of violence against women. Rather, pornography (as well as its diffusions through mainstream culture) is a modern mode for communicating and constructing patriarchy’s necessary fusion of sex and violence, for sexualizing torture. Clearly, that imperative has assumed other forms historically: the political operations of military dictatorships, the enslavement of Africans in the “new world,” witch-hunting and inquisitions by the Christian church and state, and so on. The basic elements for a gynocidal
campaign—an ideology of male supremacy, a vivid imagination of (particularly female) sexual filth, loathing of eroticism, belief in the sanctity of marriage and the family, and the containment of women in male-controlled institutions—structure fundamentalism’s very self-serving opposition to pornography.

Finally, it was claimed that Bundy, a characteristic manipulator, was simply manipulating and lying one last time, trying to absolve himself in his eleventh hour by blaming society. Yet a feminist analysis would not accept the equation that to recognize the responsibility of society for sexually political murder is to absolve the murderer. Rather, it would point to the connection between Bundy and his society, naming Bundy as that society’s henchman (albeit, like other sex criminals, a freelancer) in the maintenance of patriarchal order through force. Indeed, we might further recognize Bundy as a martyr for the patriarchal state, one who, after getting caught, had to pay for his fervor, the purity of his misogyny, and his attendant celebrity with his life.

Some of the victims were prostitutes, but perhaps the saddest part of this case is that some were not.

—Sir Michael Havers, prosecuting counsel at the trial of Peter Sutcliffe, the “Yorkshire Ripper” (Holloway 1981, p. 39)

There’d be more response from the police if these were San Marino housewives. . . . If you’re Black and living on the fringe, your life isn’t worth much.

—Margaret Prescod, founder of the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders (Uehling 1986, p. 28)

Ted Bundy’s victims were young white women and were consistently described in the press as “beautiful” with “long, brown, hair.” We can recognize some of this description as a fetishization meant to further eroticize the killings for the public. However, while some highly celebrated killers such as Bundy or David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam,” chose victims on the basis of their correspondence to a pornographic, objectifying, and racist ideal, the majority of victims of serial killers are women who, as Steven Egger (1984) noted, “share common characteristics of what are perceived to be prestigeless, powerless, and/or lower socioeconomic groups” (p. 348), that is, prostitute women, runaways, “street women,” women of color, impoverished women, single and elderly women, and so on. The Bundy murders consistently aroused not only a unique folklore and ritual revelry but also a public display of mourning because, in the first place, mainstream men could readily identify with Bundy and also because sexual murder, like rape, is understood as a property crime. A far different societal response is forthcoming when the women killed are not white, not “family women,” and not middle class. A pattern of police officials waiting an unreasonable amount of time before organizing a concentrated effort to catch a killer, failing to warn a community, refusing to initiate community involvement, prejudicially labeling victims, and ignoring community input has marked nearly all investigations of the murders of “prestigeless” women (Grant 1988a, 1988b; Jones and Wood 1989; Serrano 1989).

Everyone’s Sisters

There was wide public attention in the Ted [Bundy] case . . . because the victims resembled everyone’s [sic] daughter . . . But not everybody relates to prostitution on the Pacific Highway.

—Robert Keppel, member of the Green River Task Force (Starr 1984, p. 106)

The victims were universally described as runaways, prostitutes, or drug addicts who “deserved” to die because of how they lived. The distorted portrayal of the girls and women could be expected in a city notorious for its racism, but there was a particular sexist turn, because the victims were not only Black, but female.

—Barbara Smith (1981, p. 68; on a 1979 series of murders in Boston)
In the “Jack the Ripper” crimes, all of the victims were prostitute women. The killer (or, far more likely, someone pretending to be the killer) wrote to the press a letter that not only originated the famous nickname, but also boasted: “I am down on whores and I shan’t quit ripping them until I do get buckled.” In the late 1970s, a gynocidal killer was active in northern Britain; the first victims were all prostitute women. Perpetuating the myth of the immortal and recurring sex criminal, the men of the press nicknamed him “the Yorkshire Ripper.” As in many cases involving the serial murder of prostitute women, including those of the “Green River Killer,” the “South Side Slayer,” and a current series of murders of “prestigeless” women in San Diego County, a great deal of controversy has attended police handling, or rather, mishandling, of the case (Serrano 1989). In the wake of that controversy in Yorkshire, the British press has claimed that the major problem that the police faced in the early years of that investigation was “apathy over the killing of prostitutes.” Police work, it was declared, depends upon public interest, cooperation, and support; and, as the London Times noted, “Such was the apathy at the time that it was virtually nil” (Osman and Ford 1981, p. 5). Ironically, in Yorkshire, such open attitudes of hostility to prostitute women and apathy toward their murders were openly expressed not only by the public but also by the police themselves.

Four years after the first mutilation and murder, the killer had begun to target nonprostitute women, and West Yorkshire’s Constable Jim Hobson issued an extraordinary statement as an “anniversary plea” to the killer: “He has made it clear that he hates prostitutes. Many people do. We, as a police force, will continue to arrest prostitutes.” Here, Hobson matter-of-factly aligns “Ripper” motives and actions to larger social interests as well as police goals. He goes on, shifting voice to a direct appeal to the killer: “But the Ripper is now killing innocent girls. That indicates your mental state and that you are in urgent need of medical attention. You have made your point. Give yourself up before another innocent woman dies” (Smith 1982, p. 11). From such official statements we learn that it is normal to hate prostitute women; the killer is even assured of social solidarity in this emotion. His deeds, it seems, only become socially problematic when he turns to so-called innocent girls. Over in the Americas, one consultant on the “Green River Killer” case, psychiatrist John Liebert, offered his expert opinion that serial murderers either idealize women or degrade them, seeing women as “angels or whores, with no sensible middle ground” (Berger 1984, p. 1). Once again, we are at an utter loss in distinguishing the point of view of the ostensibly deviant sex killer from that of his pursuers or his society. Moreover, the notion that this distinction has any abiding reality in the sex killer’s mind is both erroneous and dangerous.

In the mid-1980s, at least 17 women, characterized by the police as prostitutes, were murdered within a 40-mile radius in South Central Los Angeles, a primarily African-American neighborhood; all but 3 of the victims were African-Americans. The police waited until 10 women were killed before notifying the public that a serial murderer was operating and then waited until there were 4 more deaths before forming a task force. In response to police and media neglect, Margaret Prescod, a longtime public spokesperson for US PROS (a national network of women who work in the sex industry and their supporters) founded the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders. Rachel West (1987) notes:

The Black Coalition has stated again and again that they are not convinced that all the women murdered were prostitutes and that the police have offered little evidence to support that claim. When the police could not dig up a prostitution arrest record on victim 17, they immediately said, “but she was a street woman.” This statement reflects the attitude of the police toward poor women generally, especially if they are black. We all know only too well that any of us at any time can be labeled a prostitute woman, if we dare step out of line in the way we speak and dress, in the hours we keep, the number of friends we have, or if we are “sexual outlaws” of any kind. (p. 285)
West further observes that in many other instances of serial murder, the killer might begin with prostitute women, but then moves on to women of all types (as in the “Hillside Strangler” killings). When the police or press describe the murdered women as prostitutes, it hurls non-prostitute women into a false feeling of safety. It plays upon sexist and frequently racist prejudices to mute the seriousness of the murders, and—most effectively—it diverts the blame to the victim.

In October 1888, Charles Warren, police chief in charge of the “Jack the Ripper” case, pontificated to the press: “The police can do nothing as long as the victims unwittingly connive at their own destruction. They take the murderer to some retired spot, and place themselves in such a position that they can be slaughtered without a sound being heard” (Cameron and Frazer 1987, p. 20). That sentiment was echoed, one century later, in a piece in the Los Angeles Times (Boxall 1989) titled, “Prostitutes: Easy Prey for Killers.” It portrays “drug-dazed” women, good daughters gone bad, and contains a quote from Commander William Booth of the Los Angeles police department: “I think that’s the highest-risk occupation there is. Mercenaries are way behind prostitutes. . . . There is nothing that carries the risk with it, in peacetime, as streetwalking prostitution” (p. 1). The same article states: “Police sweeps have greatly reduced streetwalking in Hollywood, police say, leaving the gritty main drags of South-Central the city’s streetwalking center. Elsewhere in Los Angeles, prostitution tends to take more sophisticated, expensive and less hazardous forms, such as escort services” (p. 23). Thus we can surmise that police actions have contributed toward creating a more dangerous city for South-Central women; moreover, these women, targeted because of their race and class, are in far greater danger than women in moneyed, white areas. Clearly, the illegality of prostitution and institutionalized harassment by the police contributes to making prostitution such a “high-risk” occupation.

Although, as far as I know, there are no national statistics kept on the number of prostitutes murdered annually, the Los Angeles police claim that there have been 69 murders of prostitute women and 30 women killed in what they call “street murders” in the past four years. Assuredly, those numbers register appalling danger. Yet the Steinberg case might remind us that each year 30 percent of all women murdered are killed by their husbands and lovers, about 1,500 women per year (Uniform Crime Reports, 1987, p. 11), and that at least 1.8 million women are beaten by husbands and lovers annually (Summers 1989, p. 54). Despite blandishments directed toward stereotypical “angels” and “good girls,” wifehood seems to rank right up there with prostitution as an endemically unsafe occupation. Faced with such statistics, the invidious distinctions collapse, and we realize with Rachel West (1987) that “the rights of prostitute women are the rights of all women” (p. 285).

As I worked on the conclusion to this piece, I listened to a National Public Radio news program (“Morning Edition,” June 7, 1989) reporting that nine women (all of whom were described as prostitutes or drug addicts) had been murdered in the past year in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the site of a notorious gang rape (Chancer 1987). Two other women have been missing for months. A serial killer is suspected; “apathy” is said to be the primary response of the mainstream New Bedford community. Obviously, we have heard this story before. Yet the ascription of “apathy,” so common in such cases, is really quite misleading. The reigning, though denied, mood is hatred, sexually political hatred. A “hate crime” is conventionally defined as “any assault, intimidation or harassment that is due to the victim’s race, religion or ethnic background” (Malcolm 1989, p. A12). That definition obviously must be expanded to include gender (as well as sexual preference). Vast numbers of women are now suffering and dying from various forms of hate crime worldwide, including neglect, infanticide, genital mutilation, battering, rape, and murder. What men might call “peacetime,” researcher Lori Heise (1989) truthfully names a “global war on women.”
Note

1. Part of this section previously appeared in my review of Susan Brownmiller’s *Waverly Place* (Caputi 1989).

References


