

Critical Criminological Perspectives

Criminology and Queer Theory Dangerous Bedfellows?

Matthew Ball



Critical Criminological Perspectives

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Dangerous Bedfellows?

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For Christian

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Introduction

In October 2014, in an apartment in Brisbane, Australia just one block from where I live, Mayang Prasetyo was murdered by her husband Marcus Volke. Despite the alarming frequency of such domestic homicides—on average, in Australia, a woman is murdered by an intimate partner every week (Mouzos and Rushforth 2003; Cussen and Bryant 2015)—such violence rarely attracts significant media attention, and almost never makes the front page of the newspaper. This particular case, however, *did* hit the front page of the local newspaper, *The Courier Mail*, the next day, not because of any shift in public concern over domestic homicides, but rather because two key aspects of Prasetyo’s life and death were ripe for sensationalising in what is one of Rupert Murdoch’s less prestigious tabloids.

First, the circumstances of her murder were particularly grisly, and rarely seen in Brisbane. When police were called to investigate reports from neighbours about an overpowering smell coming from the apartment, they found that Volke was allegedly cooking parts of Prasetyo’s body, having killed her in a domestic dispute a few days prior. He fled the scene and subsequently killed himself in a dumpster located in the apartment building in which I live. Such circumstances rarely go unreported.

Second, Prasetyo was a transgender woman and had been a sex worker. The front page of *The Courier Mail* thus featured an image of Prasetyo posing in a bathing suit, along with a headline that read ‘Monster Chef and the She Male’. The report, which continued inside under the headline ‘Ladyboy and the butcher’, contained more photos of Prasetyo in bikinis, and focused on the fact that she was a transgender woman and had advertised herself as a ‘top high-class Asian shemale’ (Brennan et al. 2014; Stephens 2014).

This reporting drew considerable community outrage, with the Australian Press Council later finding that the focus on these details was ‘gratuitous’, caused ‘substantial offence’, and was ‘not sufficiently warranted in the public interest’ (APC 2015). While it is certainly not representative of the general reporting of the case, much of the reporting did devote inordinate attention to such details, over and above what we might consider to be a more pressing and concerning point about this case—that it occurred at the intersection of the epidemics of violence against women (particularly at the hands of intimate partners), violence against transgender people generally, and more specifically violence against transgender people of colour. This misplaced focus on Prasetyo’s transgender and sex worker status turned her into an aberrant object whose intimate life and tragic demise could then serve as the targets of fascination and titillation as much, if not more, than they could as prompts for empathy. This focus also made it more difficult for her to be able to access the status of victim, at least in some mainstream media reporting.

Mayang Prasetyo’s death and its aftermath highlight some issues that are central to the criminal justice experiences of many transgender people. It illustrates the limitations of the state in preventing intimate partner violence, violence against transgender people, and violence against people of colour, not to mention violence against sex workers. It brings to light the difficulties that transgender people experience accessing the status of victim. And it shows just how tenuous one’s hold on that status within the media may be. While they play out in different ways and to varying extents, these issues are also encountered by those who consider themselves to be part of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex,