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Of Monsters, Mothers and Murders:
Fear, Loathing and “Aussie True Crime” in Tabloid Women’s Magazines

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Abstract

This article combines Entman’s approach to media frames and Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine in a critical, close, textual analysis of the ways in which Australian women’s magazines frame murder crimes and female criminality. Using recent case studies of crime features and special issues within Australian tabloid women’s magazines, this study examines the selection and arrangement of textual features, especially sensationalistic attention-arresting headlines and visual elements, which over-emphasise and misrepresent feminized and maternal aspects of violent “true” crimes. I argue that female offenders are constructed here in tabloid narratives, intended for female audiences, as one-dimensional hate objects, or dehumanised, monstrous “Others.”

Keywords: true crime, women’s magazines, media frames, monstrous-feminine

Introduction

Despite the recent proliferation of “true crime” texts, across multiple forms of Western mainstream media (Boling, 2019), there is a dearth of feminist textual analysis investigating the representation and consumption of female offenders and murderers in Australian tabloid magazines specifically targeting women. These magazines, which over-represent underclass women’s crime and imagined deviance, may amplify deep-seated fears, beliefs and biases about class and gender in the wider criminal justice system and expanding corrections industries. As Feinstein (2021, 149) observes, the (American) public frequently form their views of female offenders, and particularly incarcerated mothers, through exposure to sensationalized and stereotypical media representations, which “ultimately frame women in a way that legitimates their incarceration.” Similarly, Australian tabloid magazines frequently frame underclass or working-class female offenders, as monstrous and disgusting, through dehumanising and objectifying images and narratives, for the entertainment of female spectators and readers. It is important to critically examine the portrayal of female offenders in entertainment media because these (mis)representations may influence public perceptions and ultimately, criminal justice policies (Call, 2021). In Australia, the incarcerated and the formally incarcerated, (Carceral citizens), are especially vulnerable to such stigma, exclusion and marginalization which may, in turn, lead to unemployment, homelessness and even reincarceration within the wider context of tough on crime policies (Hopkins, 2015; Harmes, Hopkins & Farley, 2019; Hopkins, 2021).

Tabloidized True Crime in Australian Women’s Magazines

Traditionally, tabloid publications tend to fall into that camp of non-elite media which focuses on scandal, sex, crime, entertainment and lifestyle coverage over “hard news” or information, while “tabloidization” also points to increasing pressures to attract and arouse audiences through such orientations and approaches to content, style and format (O’Sullivan, 2005). As Nick Davies (2009) has argued, both traditional tabloid and mainstream media organisations have been transformed since the mid-1990s by commercial pressures to keep up with online news delivery and fast, sensationalized, digital journalism (or cybersphere “churnalism”), which emphasizes speed over accuracy or simplicity over complexity (p. 147). Once widely viewed in derogatory terms as a form of “low” culture, appealing only to uneducated audiences, tabloid forms of mass media have been increasingly legitimated and mainstreamed as “participatory media,” which allow “at least an illusion of access” or democratization, by inviting audiences to tell their stories, vent opinions and generally perform the moral self, through emotive personal narratives (O’ Sullivan, 2005). As O’Sullivan (2005) notes, the framing of these emotionally-charged human-interest stories and subject positions may, at the same time, be presented as humorous or ironic. Australian tabloid weekly women’s magazines, such as *Take 5* and *That’s Life*, certainly fall into this journalistic camp, especially with their comical headlines emphasizing the strange and horrific, alongside weekly invitations to readers to write in and share secrets, scandals and “real” stories of “shocking crime.” Unfortunately, however, increasing tabloidization and troping of female offenders as evil caricatures in Australian crime writing, compounded by new ubiquitous multimedia technologies of representation may frustrate successful rehabilitation and re-entry of Carceral citizens. In recent years public and private new media surveillance makes it increasingly difficult for formerly incarcerated people to shed their criminal identities within a mediated “Carceral web” of “digital punishment” which makes them “hypervisible” post-release (Gurasami, 2019, p. 435).

Beneath the “much vaunted claims of democratization of popular media” and the rise of “reality” media frames, however, there is also a common undercurrent of exploitation, humiliation and misrepresentation of the already socially and economically marginalized in these texts (Tyler, 2008; Skeggs & Wood, 2012). As Tyler (2008) has pointed out, class disgust reactions are counted on and courted through the darkly comic and grotesque (mis)representations of the “white poor,” and working-class mothers particularly, in contemporary,

consumer culture, news media and websites. Moral judgements are central to this popular production and consumption of the lower classes as disgusting, immoral and ridiculous (Tyler, 2008). Skeggs & Wood (2012) have also critically interrogated the class shaming pleasures and moral discourses of reality television, which often rely on an exploitative (re)framing of “bad” working class characters an audience will love to hate; “where we experience pleasure and disapproval simultaneously” (p. 9). Similarly, the depiction of certain kinds of deviant “out of control” working class mothers and grandmothers as “mad, bad and ugly” (*Take 5: Crime and Puzzles*, 2019) in contemporary Australian tabloid women’s magazines, makes for an illuminating case study of gendered and classed framing which potentially reinforces the stigma of marginalized populations. As we shall see, the emotionally-charged representations of white, working class mothers in the “real crime” features of Australian tabloid weekly women’s magazines, and their “crime and puzzles bumper” special issues in particular, take this popular cultural trend to new carnivalesque extremes.

True crime stories for women are also illuminating examples of what Kate Manne (2019) terms, victim blaming, misogynistic “moral narratives,” that not only single out and punish certain kinds of “bad” women, but which establish a kind of moral priority amongst victims of gendered and family violence (p. 223). As Jenny Kitzinger (2004) has pointed out, personal stories of abuse and performances of victimhood have been increasingly appropriated and subject to media representation since the 1990s, often through sensationalist and voyeuristic “reality” framings. Australian tabloid women’s magazines, such as *Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* (2019), certainly take the sharing and exploitation of abuse stories to new extremes in their cover stories and headlines (“Raped by a Nun!”; “This is What Grown-Ups Do: He Told Me He’d Teach Me to Kiss Like an Adult”), while routinely encouraging readers to share their own abuse or domestic horror narratives (“Do YOU have a story; We pay for stories!”). Hence, this study examines popular Australian tabloid women’s magazines and their processes of repackaging true crime as pleasurable entertainment.

Theories and Methods

This study specifically offers a close, textual analysis of the framing of female perpetrators of violent crime and family abuse, in popular Australian tabloid women’s magazines. While the “monstrous murderess” is neither a new social problem nor a new archetype, the tabloid framing of her is intensifying, shifting and merging with new modes of “true crime” entertainment styled to achieve maximum attention, interaction and moral reaction. I argue that this kind of tabloid (mis)representation of female offenders has moved almost entirely away from the conventions of news reporting to be consumed by the language, logics and mythologies of fantasy and entertainment genres. These texts, therefore, exemplify the commercialized, carnival elements of contemporary popular culture which Presdee & Carver (2001) define as the postmodern “carnival of crime.” Feminized true crime narratives are also analysed here in part through the feminist theoretical framework of Barbara Creed’s (1993) concept of the monstrous-feminine, or woman as monster mythology, which still underpins much contemporary popular culture. In her classic analysis of Hollywood horror films like *Alien*, Creed (1993) built on Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection, to demonstrate how the feminine difference is frequently represented as monstrous and grotesque. This feminist framework of the monstrous-feminine has been developed in previous studies, not only to explain traditional media misogyny in crime reporting (Jewkes, 2015), but to analyse the proliferation of misogynistic memes and discourses of online hate in trolling cultures and “alt-right” communities (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). Jewkes (2015) has explored the mediated, archetypal examples of “monstrous mothers” who kill, harm or neglect children, including, for example the sensationalized, de-contextualized treatment of female killers in Australian and British newspapers. When it comes to delighting in macabre true stories of domestic deviancy and horror, however, it is difficult to imagine a more illuminating example than the new breed of Australian women’s tabloid weekly magazines, such as *Take 5* and *That’s Life*, which are subject to critical feminist and framing analysis below.

This paper specifically subjects crime special issues or crime special features to a form of interpretive textual analysis known as framing analysis (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2005), exploring and explaining the media bias built in the headlines, word choices, visual images, paragraph leads, key themes and moral evaluations, as constructed, selected and arranged within the text. Overall, eight tabloid “true crime special” issues from *Take 5* and *That’s Life* published between 2018 – 2020 are examined (four from *Take 5* magazine and four from *That’s Life* magazine). In particular, this paper also provides two representative case studies both taken from (Australian) *Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* (2019): “The Mad, the Bad and the Ugly” and “Is This Australia’s Worst Mum?” The study presents framing analysis of the ways in which true crime articles in tabloid Australian women’s magazines, frame and exploit female offenders as dehumanized monsters, “bad” (underclass) mothers or shocking, disgusting, non-normative (“ugly”) female “freaks” and failures. As communication theorists have pointed out, “media frames” not only define social problems, they promote particular value judgements, which in turn shape public perceptions of events and influence public opinion (Entman, 1993 & 2005; Severin & Tankard, 1997).

Take 5 and That’s Life magazines: Headline shocks and horrors

This study focuses on the women’s magazines which might be termed “supermarket tabloids”, that is, magazines published weekly which tend to rely on attention-arresting headlines to generate impulse buying from women waiting in line at supermarket checkouts. This textual analysis particularly focuses on successful tabloid magazines apparently directed at (working class) Australian women, such as *Take 5* and *That’s Life*, and especially the ideological messages of the shock headlines which dominate the magazine covers. These magazines, and their most recent (at the time of writing) 2018-2020 crime specials, were selected for analysis due to their commercial success and wide readership (in Australia). Australian *That’s Life* magazine apparently targets women, aged over twenty five, and reportedly has a readership of 843 000 “everyday Aussies”, (making it Australia’s third biggest selling weekly magazine), as well as an associated Facebook community of 920,000 - making it one of the top 3 most engaged Facebook pages in Australia (Magazine Networks Inc., 2021). Australian *Take 5* magazine supposedly provides, “heartbreaking accounts of tragedy and crime,” among other stories of “scandal, betrayal, love and loss,” to its apparent target audience of women aged 35-64, with a readership of 742,000 (Magazine Networks Inc., 2021). In order to understand the underlying themes and value judgements of these popular texts, analysis of the magazine headlines is particularly important. As Severin and Tankard (1997) pointed out, headlines are important “advanced organisers” which essentially set up the preferred interpretation of the text to follow and hence deserve further critical interrogation (p. 321).

Discussion

Despite the widespread decline of print journalism (see Davies, 2009), these tabloid magazines apparently remain commercially successful, in part because of their ability to connect with mid-life and older readers, while mimicking colourful comic book visual design, attention-arresting textual elements and interactivity with consumers. This includes a focus on prizes and puzzles, as well as encouraging readers to submit their own personal stories, written in simple but intimate first-person style, designed to trigger emotional response. The rather formulaic narrative of every crime story convention recycled in these women’s supermarket tabloids, tends to prioritise entertainment value over actual news and information about current events. Even more so than other Australian print and television media, these women’s magazines tend to focus on “shocking real crimes”, framed in ways to make murder media pleasurable for tabloid supermarket weekly magazine readers (“The Kindly Killer: Always on Hand With a Cup of Tea, Caroline Added More than Sugar...” [*That’s Life*, 2018, 19]).

Recent Australian examples include headline references to gender stereotypes and mythological

archetypes of: “Evil” mothers (“The Mother of All Evil: This Woman of God Rained Hell on Her Children” [Take 5, 2019]; “My Mum Was a Serial Killer: the Evil Secret behind Their Smiles.” [That’s Life, 2018]), hypersexualised manipulators, (“Seduced to Kill: Be a Man and Show Me That You Love Me.” [Take 5 Special: Crime and Puzzles 2019]; “Aussie True Crime: Women Who Kill Their Lovers” [Take 5, 2019]; “Cheating Wife Hired a Hitman to Kill Me” [Take 5 Special: Crime and Puzzles, 2019]), obsessive and dangerous stalkers (“Deadly Love Triangle: She Killed Her Rival and Stole Her Identity” [That’s Life, 2020]), “witches” (“Deadly Schemes and Women Who Kill: Wicked Witch” [Take 5, 2019]), or “devils” (“Crimes That Shocked Us: Devil in Disguise.” [Take 5, 2019]; “My Sis Said Her Bub Was The DEVIL” [Take 5, 2020]). Offenders are, in other words, represented in particular gendered ways, presented as apparently monstrous manifestations of moral failure. Just as complex histories of violence and pain are distilled into dark fairy tales of villains and victims, so too, female offenders are dramatized through discourses of criminal femininity. One exemplary “Aussie Crime Special” of *Take 5* (2019) magazine, managed to combine almost all these gendered stereotypes and narratives of criminality in one double page feature on “10 Cases that Terrified the Nation.” To emphasise the “shocking” theme in surrounding visual elements, each paragraph of the double feature included a lightning bolt graphic, with text leads on “an evil mum”, a “scheming lover,” “wife’s secret,” “sick fantasy” and “in the dead of the night.” Further blurring crime reporting with crime fiction, the same “Aussie Crime Special” immediately follows with a one-pager on *Take 5*’s “picks” of the best crime fiction under the headline “Murder She Wrote” in the same classic comic book horror fonts.

Similarly, in the *That’s Life Mega Monthly* (2020), true crime is turned into a kind of participatory game of “You Be the Judge” in crime narratives on “The Perfect Murder” and “Fatal Attraction”, where readers are encouraged to “turn over to find out the truth” or “turn over to read the verdict.” The headlines are also intertextual references to titles of Hollywood horror and erotic thriller films, heightening entertainment value by tapping into established pop cultural morality tales about dangerous, hypersexual femme fatales. In this new transmedia true crime landscape, the *Take 5* supermarket tabloid is also supported by the free to download Podcast (also available at the website): “Now you can listen to our stories! If you haven’t listened to *Take 5 Ripper Real Life*, then you’re missing out on our most shocking Aussie true crime....” (*Take 5*, 2019). As Boling (2019) pointed out, over the past decade, podcasting has both fed into and fed off growing public appetite for “true crime” entertainment while impacting public perceptions of criminal justice in unprecedented ways.

Alien Others

In another *Take 5* (2018) cover story headlined, “One-Eyed Killers,” the criminal “freaks” framing around offenders with partial blindness or eye injuries is enhanced with darkly comic paragraph leads (“these killers all had their sight set on one thing”). The same feature also offers shocking offender photographs, mixing meme-posting elements of comical and colourful weirdness into the reporting of true crime as carnivalesque entertainment. As Presdee & Carver (2001) observed, it is the “transgressive excitements” of the world of carnival, or the thrill and the threat of the bizarre, which is being commercialized here for popular consumption (p. 32). The textual framing of the “one eyed killers” as dehumanized, Alien Others in this *Take 5* feature is also enhanced by the selection of science fiction style comic book font in green colours. The internet meme visual elements also appear in the comic style speech bubbles, frequently placed above the photographs of criminals, graphically putting words into their mouth (such as “beam me up Scotty”) to further reinforce the ideological message that these offenders are ridiculous, inhuman creatures or Aliens. Story headlines are typically also in red, retro-style, dripping-blood, framing some form of “family tragedy” with visual elements reminiscent of classic Hollywood horror film promotion posters. Hence, in such colourful (intertextual) ways, the pain, humiliation and suffering of certain criminal others is repackaged as “fun” for paying audiences (Presdee & Carver, 2001, p. 11).

On the covers, and within these magazines, crime stories are advertised in extremely large type prominent headlines, using sensationalistic language (often set against cartoonish blood splatter, bullet-holes or police tape graphics and text [“Police Line Do Not Cross” *That’s Life*, 2020]) designed to stop, shock and thrill presumably jaded murder media audiences (“Get Ready to be Shocked” [*That’s Life*, 2020]). Like click-baited, self-aware social media distractions, the spoofing supermarket tabloid headlines seem designed to be almost a “knowing” prank on the viewer, deliberately playing with the boundaries of taste and credibility (“Wife’s 24-Year Cover-Up: I Buried My Hubby in the Vege Patch” [*That’s Life*, 2018]; “Horror in the Backyard” [*That’s Life*, 2020]). Moreover, the cover headlines are often far more extreme and provocative than the corresponding story inside actually justifies, particularly in the cases of local “Aussie” crime. In the profit-seeking push to sell magazines, even relatively mild “true crime” stories are apparently pushed into the formula of horrific, weird, shocking narratives of criminality, playing to the carnivalesque pleasures of the excessive and grotesque.

Digging up the dead: the “evil” women of (post)modern morality tales

These global transmedia crime stories are not only occasional “low culture” guilty pleasures, they are emerging as defining (gendered) myths of our culture, acting as a form of moral governance, through morbid fairy tales of the underclasses Other. As Kellner (1995) pointed out, media culture spectacles typically work to dramatically remind the most powerless that their exercise of violence is illegitimate and will result in either incarceration or death. As Creed (1993) demonstrated, the figure of the wicked witch has long served this function in film. Moreover, fictional witch women of gothic horror have also appeared in tabloid newspapers, woven into ‘factual’ crime reporting on intimate violence and stranger danger (Jewkes, 2015). Mallet (2014) picks up on the witch metaphor in her journalistic account of “Mothers who Murder”; “when people believe a woman guilty of the physical or sexual abuse of a child, even way before any trial or evidence has been heard and balanced against the defence, people have a visceral response – we almost revert to ancient times and want to burn the woman at the stake” (p. 6). Certainly, ancient, supernatural forces are frequently contacted in the women’s supermarket tabloid, not just in the traditional realm of horoscopes and clairvoyants (“Voices From Beyond” [*Take 5*, 2020]), but in the horror tropes of “real life” “family curses” and “witches” who (apparently) bring “evil” into the world. It is important to remember, however, that: “Labelling all acts that we don’t understand as ‘evil’ lead us nowhere” (Presdee & Carver, 2001, p. 3). Moreover, as critical readers, and as human beings, we have a moral-political responsibility to *understand*, over and above any initial feelings of fear or morbid fascination.

Case Study 1: Mug Shot Humour (Who is Grotesque?)

In one representative *Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* (2019) “bumper” special issue double page pictorial spread, entitled “The Mad, the Bad and the Ugly,” criminals are gleefully mocked in a “line-up of the most shocking mugshots ever” (pp. 16-17). Here, physical decline, related at least in part to aging, poverty or homelessness, is conflated with moral decline, in the strategic arrangement of textual and visual features. The monstrous-feminine appears again, as out of control, unkempt and gross - in the sense of both disgusting and overweight. The kind of women who appear in such pictorial spreads are what misogynistic humour and online hate communities would refer to as “hags”, that is “fleshy, damaged, violent and considerably white trash” (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018, p. 649). The magazine commentary around the female offender, in the *Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* (2019) double page pictorial spread for example includes: “Gran theft auto, is it just us or does XXX [Name Redacted] look like she’s chewing a wasp” above the mugshot image of a mature age woman, age spots exposed with no make-up, mouth open mid yell in an angry expression (p. 17). Other human beings featured in the mugshot magazine pictorial in “The Mad, the Bad and the Ugly” clearly have missing teeth, facial disfigurements, angry scowls, “bizarre markings” or just look, according to the captions, like “Frankenstein’s

monster reincarnated” (*Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* 2019, p. 17). As in the (perverse) classic fairy tales mentioned above, the witch figure comes to be marked out by her ugliness and, as in the Hollywood horror genre, the thrill in the voyeuristic viewing of her comes from the shocking, the unsettling, the gross or disturbing. In this gendered, patriarchy-enforcing framing of the feature, a woman’s youthful appearance (or lack of) is also the measure of her social and even moral worth. The textual emphasis on “Gran” theft, is an apparent comic play on the assumption that this is *not* what the “good” (respectable, middle-class) grandmother (or mother) is *supposed* to look like. The apparent guilty pleasure positioning here is also in distancing the imagined respectable mid-life reader from her terrifying, “fun house mirror” opposite; the insane, ugly, old, poor, criminal XXX [Name Redacted]. Moreover, the dark comedy of the text also lies in the assumption that the “freakish” female offender could never access the forms of glamour, femininity and power which “rightfully” belongs to “respectable” middle-class women (see also Skeggs, 1997, p. 111). Yet, what is left *out* of this media frame, is that incarcerated (or formerly incarcerated) women are put under intense pressure from the neoliberal state to be responsible and respectable citizens, while at the same time frequently denied the trust, empathy and resources they actually need to be fully participating members of society. It is important to note, that in Australia, the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, (Carceral citizens), overwhelmingly come from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage, including unemployment, low educational attainment, family violence and poverty (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015). There is also a class shaming moral lesson implicit in this tabloid text, suggesting that some kinds of deviant underclass women, without the means or capacity to present themselves as “normal” and “respectable” in the camera’s eye, should expect to be treated (inhumanely) with contempt. Moreover, the framing of the text, its discourses and visual elements, rely on and reinforce other well-established moral assumptions and hidden ideological messages of women’s fashion/beauty magazines - that what is ugly must also be evil, and vice versa. Moreover, just as beauty magazines set up divisions *between* women, within a competitive hierarchy, this kind of tabloid true crime for women, also “presses buttons” (or arouses an extreme moral reaction), with conventional crime thrillers of jealous, crazy and dangerous female rivals: “Bitter Jealousy: My Sister Kept Telling Me That Her Mum-in-law’s Meals Tasted Odd” and “Killed for Being Too Pretty,” or “Jealous Mum Bashed Me for Being Prettier” and “Jealous EX Murdered my Kind Poppy” (*Take 5: Crime and Puzzles*, 2019). As Creed (1993) pointed out in her analysis of *Alien*, when a woman is defined as monstrous in Hollywood horror it is usually represented through aspects of the maternal body – the body that becomes gross and changes shape, the production of blood and waste, the capacity to reproduce and rupture. It seems, the true crime headlines, narratives and visual elements which dominate women’s supermarket tabloids, are typically focused on aspects of motherhood, especially deviant motherhood, as a seductively grotesque spectacle. What is typically left *outside* the frame in these failed/deviant mother portrayals, is the trauma the mother may have experienced herself in childhood or the profound physical, psychological and economic pressures the mother may be experiencing. Similarly, there is no acknowledgement of socio-political context and the lack of adequate support, community services and health care for vulnerable mothers in the neoliberal, post-welfarist state – those aspects of “real life” are also left outside the frame.

Case Study 2: “Is This Australia’s Worst Mum?”

In *Take 5: Crime and Puzzles* (2019), cover headlines and stories also include: “Is This Australia’s Worst Mum: Inside Her House of Horrors.” Asking, “how could she let her kids live like this,” in emotionally charged paragraph leads, the “house of horrors” feature also includes pictures of overflowing, backyard rubbish piles and “used toilet paper piled up in the bathroom,” triggering fears of the dangerous, undisciplined and disgusting underclass Other. Spectacular images of domestic dereliction dominate the frame, marking out the titillating positioning of the grotesque “bad mother” who has lost control of herself and her home. The same true crime feature also includes a typical tabloidized “gotcha” photo outing a grim, dishevelled, white, middle-aged

woman, attempting to hide her face from the camera. The arrangement of signs is clearly designed to intertwine assumptions of both guilt and low (socio-economic) status around the unwilling dehumanized subject. The feature even includes a “helpful” diagram or infographic explaining her non-normative family tree structure of multiple partners and ex-partners and their various children all living together in the one trashed house. No explanation is offered in the story, however, regarding the larger, complex, economic and taxation policies, which have created the vast housing crisis for Australia’s working poor – such topics are typically outside the tabloid frame. No matter how bad their own domestic experiences (and in Australia this is very likely to include some experience of domestic and family violence), targeted readers are offered the comfort that they are at least not Australia’s *worst* mum.

Although the neglect and abuse detailed in this family story is certainly disturbing, it is also an example of the kind of crime “reporting” that is looking for an underclass, Alien Other to shame and exploit as carnivalesque entertainment. In its colourful constructions of monsters and horrors, it is perhaps almost as much fantasy as reality. It also echoes the “white trash” form of insult and dismissal of the poor, frequently circulated in both mainstream tabloidized texts and social media platforms, which lacks humanity, sympathy and understanding of underclass lives. In the Instagram age of picture-perfect families of female celebrities on social media, such tabloid “freak” imagery apparently triggers voyeuristic delight in looking into “real lives” of the exposed, underclass Other Mother.

Even in cases where there are male perpetrators convicted of murder and a female convicted of manslaughter, it is the *female* offender highlighted in the cover headline teasers (“Greedy Courtney Could Have Saved Them but Did Nothing” [Take 5, 2018]). Even when the mother is not convicted of any crime, she still takes the (implied) blame in the moral judgements suggested by these media frames, cover headlines or advanced organizers for the true crime story. The apparent expectation suggested in the framing of the text and its pull quotes is that *a mother* should have known better or done better than invite a predator into the home: “A Murderer at our Xmas Dinner: Mum Invited Him and He Killed Her.” (Take 5, 2019); “Evil Stepdad Made Me His Child Wife: Why Didn’t Mum Save Me?” (Take 5, 2018). Hence, the sexual deviancy narrative may also mix and merge with the monstrous mother narrative in these *Take 5* cover teasers and true tales of domestic horror, for the woman is expected to subjugate her own sexual desires to the (supposedly) sacred, primary role of mother. Failure to do so is titillating, for it is monstrous, if not actually criminal, in the patriarchal moral order (“Mum Left Dad to be With My Bloke” [Take 5, 2020]). Where the mother is actually the victim of the crime, the framing may imply she was, in the simplistic moral framing of these highly subjective and emotive personal narratives, the “Evil” one (“Why I Had to Murder My Evil Mum.” [Take 5, 2019]). There is little mention here of the role of substance addiction, poverty or diagnosable mental illness in criminal femininity; characters fall instead in terms of essentialized tropes of good woman/evil woman or good mother/bad mother.

As Tisha Dejmancee (2015) has observed in her case study of reality television, while “mother blame is not a new phenomenon,” the editing and portrayals of these supposed “real-life” moms suggests that any woman who does not selflessly sacrifice her own ambitions, energy and personhood for the sake of children has somehow failed in her femininity (p. 13). It seems, in the extreme true crime universe of the supermarket tabloids, there is a comforting *Schadenfreude* pleasure offered in the spectacular femininity fails and the simplistic moral certainties promised in shock-and-horror headlines, such as: “Locked Up and Starved by Our Evil Mum: She Said We Were Devil Children” (Take 5, 2019) or “Mum’s Lies Put Me in Jail for Murder: and the Real Killer Walked Free” (*That’s Life*, 2020). Here, the hidden fears and dark fantasies of flawed mothers can be projected on to the deviant and demonized Other, in the modern participatory (“tell us your real stories”) tabloidized media landscape.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that mainstream women’s magazines differ in their degrees of click-baited, tabloid titillation and the stories they prioritize, although most are still positioned to profit from the growing audience appetite for carnivalesque true crime narratives. Most long running commercial Australian women’s magazines now include new features like *New Idea’s* (2020) regular Crime Special (“Sisters Who

Kill: What Mother Could Do That?”), often with transmedia connections to their associated Podcast (“*Investigates*: the podcast that lifts the veil on some of the world’s most horrific crime”). Even the more sedate and established *Australian Women’s Weekly* (2020), tends to emphasise the “horrific” and feminized spin in their most recent choice of true crime story and headline: “The Making of a Murderess.” This same feature also includes a text box (with a bold type paragraph lead “Under her spell”) which activates the old witch archetype and mixes it with the stock, hypersexual seductress story: “A ruthless seductress, former stripper XXX [Name Redacted] would use sex to lure her lovers to perform her dirty work.” (*Australian Women’s Weekly* 2020, p. 47). The article photos feature a blonde, attractive and apparently middle-class “black widow,” and the various men that she drew into her “wicked web,” in textual features framed to emphasize the offender as a kind of arachnid Alien Other.

Generally, the more middle-class oriented women’s magazines seem to prefer their *femme fatale* figures to be middle-class, so they can also be wrapped up in a story of moral decline *and* downward social mobility. Although thick with postfeminist calls for empowerment and confidence, these women’s magazines may still symbolically punish certain types of women, with the morality tale that pride comes before a fall and excessive (monstrous and deviant) ambitions will be exposed. Presumably, the preferred reading activates both gender and class based *Schadenfreude* pleasures, especially when the outwardly respectable and presentable woman, (according to hegemonic standards), has a titillating secret flaw that brings her crashing down the ladder of an inherently competitive system.

Conclusion

Wake in fright (from the Australian dream)

Monsters and myths may indeed exist only in the realm of fantasy and entertainment (in the over-the-top tabloid titillation of working-class nightmares), yet their consequences can be also a matter of life and death in the real world, especially in the (new) media age and particularly for Carceral citizens and other marginalised groups. Inside Australian prisons, women who have a reputation for neglecting or harming children will need to be isolated for their own protection – outside the prison, their punishment continues online, through Internet circuits of discrimination, hate and (mis)information that make it difficult, if not impossible, to shed a criminal history (or self-transform into the “respectable” middle-class citizen). As previously mentioned, there is already a housing crisis in Australia and female Carceral citizens are especially exposed to homelessness, exploitation, violence and misogyny – lived realities for working class women which are typically left outside tabloid media framing of “true” crime. This study has sought to turn the focus to Australian true crime texts, and the class bias of their media frames and moral narratives, through close and critical analysis of tabloid magazines.

In conclusion, however, it is also important to note the limitations of this study, and the method of textual analysis overall, for it is, at least at this stage, a critique of text, which does not include data on how audiences and readers are actually responding and reacting to the text in action. Certainly, as a practicing teacher of both male and female incarcerated students, I already know from everyday experience that offenders are not the Evil caricatures mocked and made over as entertainment in tabloidized media. To represent them as such in “real crime” narratives of violent criminality, is a polarising and callous commercial undertaking, which has real life consequences for real people, their families and communities. Feminist approaches to media studies which engage the monstrous feminine critique not only expose the potentially dangerous framing of vulnerable women as non-normative and problematic, they also suggest a way forward through the misogynistic humour which characterises not only tabloid magazines but expanding online cultures of hate, based on fears of the deviant Other. As Sundén and Paasonen (2018) have suggested, the “politics of shamelessness”, or consciously refusing to be shamed by such (new) media framings, is an increasingly necessary feminist tactic of cultural resistance. Moreover, modern media literacy must include critique of the cultural trend of punishing the poor

through framing them as grotesque or monstrous, and therefore, apparently undeserving and deplorable. If Evil does exist, it may reside not in witches and demons, but in the expanding business of humiliating, hating and hounding the already powerless as titillating tabloid entertainment - a (new) media culture which manufactures pleasure and profit out of the misery of the already marginalised, who cannot speak back.

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