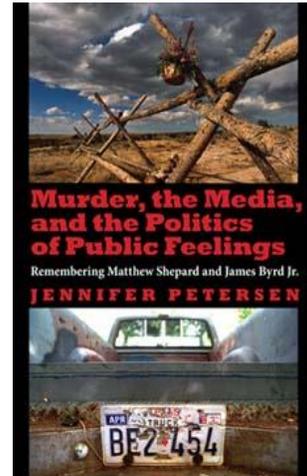


Jennifer Petersen, **Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings: Remembering Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr.**, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011, 222 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Carrie A. Rentschler  
McGill University

In his book *Delightful Murder*, Ernest Mandel (1984) declared that “the social history of death is a precious source of information about the social history of life” (p. 40). Across U.S. news and popular culture, murder stories tell audiences who they ought to fear, what places they ought to see as safe or dangerous, and who they should or should not identify as victims. By directing us how to feel, tales of murder tell us how to evaluate other people and places. Jennifer Petersen’s book ***Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings*** incisively dissects the moral and affective politics of murder coverage and how these mediated politics organized the production of U.S. hate crime legislation.



The book’s analysis is anchored around two cases from 1998 that signaled the failures of liberal political culture in the United States: the murder of James Byrd, Jr., in Jasper, Texas, by a group of white supremacist-identified men, and the beating death of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. The book analyzes a set of key differences in the terms—and passions—of public debate around their murders, examining how public feeling materially organized the shape and definition of hate crime legislation. Petersen combines media analysis of local and national print and TV news coverage of the cases with revealing material gleaned from extensive interviews she conducted with those most directly involved in the legal responses to the murders: the local activists who formed the Laramie Coalition to demand local hate crimes legislation, Laramie, Wyoming city council members who advocated for and against the municipal bias crime ordinance, local Laramie police and religious leaders, several members of the Texas legislature, and advocates working for the Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby of Texas. Petersen grew up in Laramie and did her graduate work in Texas, providing her with knowledge of these case settings that few others have.

*Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Feeling* offers readers a productive model for how to deploy affect theory in the analysis of public discourse and social activism, asking readers to “look at the political origins and deployments of expressions of feelings in public” (p. 45). Through examination of the “discursive side of feelings” (p. 14), Petersen tracks how media coverage, activist organizing, and legal argumentation mobilized debate around hate crime legislation in terms of affective proximities and distance, feelings of shame and disgust, and emergent political affinities defined by race, class, gender, and sexuality. Petersen pushes her readers to think differently about what constitutes the content of media and legislative debate, arguing for the materiality of emotions that circulate in cultural practices of mediation. Referring to what she calls “the fuzzier aspects of public formation,” she proposes a model of publicness that attends to “the social relations . . . and impulses that drive individuals toward identification

Copyright © 2013 (Carrie A. Rentschler, [carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca](mailto:carrie.rentschler@mcgill.ca)). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

with the peculiar collectivity of publics"—those "under examined parts of political communication and the role of media in politics" (pp. 59–60) that are largely affective in nature. Across the two cases, Petersen analyzes how publics form through the cultivation of proper feeling by media institutions and legal systems.

The book's introduction clearly sets out Petersen's approach to the media, legal, and activist construction of the Shepard and Byrd cases as affective political processes of making publics. Through this lens, she demonstrates how forms of white racial identification with Shepard and class differentiation between him and his killers, and racial dis-identification with Byrd and political and class dis-identification with his killers by a White-identified public, became the grounds for making justice claims. For readers interested in the author's mixed methods approach, Petersen provides further details of her research methodology in the book's appendix.

The book has four main chapters. Chapter 1, "Mourning Matthew Shepard," examines how news coverage crystallized feelings of proximity to Matthew Shepard as a victim of homophobic violence. The longest of the book's chapters, Chapter 1 reveals how Shepard, unlike Byrd, came to represent a national, mournable (white-identified) victim, "the first victim of anti-gay violence to be so publicly mourned as a national loss in the mainstream media" (p. 28). Matthew Shepard's murder came to articulate the grievability of queer bodies in national terms, through journalistic portrayals of him primarily as a young, white, middle-class gay man out of place in Laramie, Wyoming, cast against the rural stereotypes of masculinity, class, and illiberalness identified with his killers. Petersen's analysis is especially sensitive to regional differences in press treatment, revealing an uneven distribution of national mourning. In Laramie, Petersen found that a local public took shape through expressions of shame in response to national coverage that identified residents as distanced from national norms of masculinity and concern for others. She also discovered that press coverage in the Northeast and Midwest presumed audiences would care more about Shepard and what his murder represented than audiences in the South and Northwest. In addition to studying how the press framed Shepard as a grievable victim, Petersen turns to letters to the editor to more generally examine how "national discourse produced local expressions of shame" (p. 48) against Laramie's seeming illiberalism and rural working-class masculinities.

Chapter 2, "'Hate Is Not a Laramie Value': Translating Feelings into Law," examines how media-fueled affect and identification around the Shepard case was negotiated in debate and institutionalized into the process of making municipal law around the May 2000 passage of the Laramie City Council ordinance on bias crime. Petersen illustrates how local residents' and city council members' sense of being in the public eye defined the very terms of debate around the local ordinance. In addition to requiring police to keep better statistics on hate crimes, the ordinance also modeled social relationships and cultivated the affective norms of belonging and public performance that were central to its passage.

In Chapter 3, Petersen analyzes how media coverage of the murder of James Byrd, Jr., distanced audiences from the victim and the racial violence he suffered, while simultaneously mobilizing pity for him, disgust for his killers, and political hope for the nation. She examines the murder coverage through the perspective of racial melodrama, adding a crucial focus on black male suffering to a dialogue that includes Rebecca Wanzo's (2009) analysis of melodramatic representations of African American women's

victimization in *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised* and Carol Stable's (2006) essential text *White Victims, Black Villains* on the racial androcentrism of U.S. crime news. Petersen conducts a comparative analysis of the black press and mainstream news media portrayals, though she focuses more centrally on the latter, interrogating how mainstream news portrayed Byrd's unnamed disability in order to sympathetically depict him as lacking agency, in contrast to contemporary news coverage of hyper-violent, criminalized black men. News coverage also sought to locate Jasper, Texas, where the racially motivated murder occurred, within liberal narratives of the South as antimodern and historically distant—key elements of story plot and setting that constitute American racial melodrama. Petersen argues that news coverage strategically restaged the South as a site of American racism in order to emotionally mobilize the death penalty against two of Byrd's killers and present their sentences as righting years of historical violence that white citizens committed against African-Americans.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the emotional mediation of the Byrd murder in the news, Chapter 4 complicates the politics of victim visibility by interrogating the politically organized publics that formed around the Texas passage of the James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Act. Petersen approaches these publics as simultaneously ideological and emotional, tracing how their affective orientation to the problem of bias crime made certain kinds of arguments possible based on the visibilities and invisibilities of different kinds of hate crime victims. In the context of conservative assaults on queer political movements, the chapter pays particular attention to the ways testimony by the families of murder victims—and specifically the families of murdered racialized gay men—helped defuse politically conservative attacks on the legislation. While the testimony of family members affected by antigay violence became visible in the backstage of committee debates, the more public floor debates (many of which were televised) were couched primarily in terms of racial violence. As Petersen argues, the visibility of race and the invisibility of sexual orientation marked a key political strategy for differentiating between injustice and hate violence. Yet that invisibility, she demonstrates, also enabled white and straight-identified lawmakers to relate to the victims of antigay violence in ways they refused to do with victims of racial violence, while black and Latino Texas lawmakers spoke to their own experiences of discrimination as further visible evidence of racial injury. Chapter 4 incisively unpacks the sexual and racial politics of visibility mobilized around this historic piece of legislation, making a significant contribution to current debates in the field that center on issues of visibility and identity politics.

The book's concluding chapter, "Feeling in the Public Sphere," returns to a conceptualization of a political economy of feeling: how mediated emotion produces publics and how law institutionalizes public feelings. Arguing against the idea that emotions and cultural practice are ephemeral, Petersen asserts a materialist understanding of emotion located in the practices of representation and debate that constitute the case construction of the Byrd and Shepard murders and the legislation they inspired. Who is publicly remembered and grieved, Petersen argues, are material effects of the cultural and affective work of emotion in murder's representation and legislation. Petersen's book offers a model for thinking about political subjectivity and legislative activism generated on affective grounds.

The book is an especially teachable text, providing a crucially needed model—and vision—for how to study affective politics in the field, providing a complement to other texts such as Grossberg's (1992) *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, Kintz's (1996) *Between Jesus and the Market*, and Gregg's (2006)

*Cultural Studies' Affective Voices*. The book integrates the study of activism, media coverage, political actors, and legislative debate, and will be of great interest to readers in media studies, rhetoric, public sphere studies, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, African American studies, critical criminology, and law.

### References

- Gregg, M. (2006). *Cultural studies' affective voices*. London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place: Popular conservatism and postmodern culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kintz, L. (1996). *Between Jesus and the market: How emotions matter in right-wing America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mandel, E. (1984). *Delightful murder: A social history of the crime story*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stabile, C. (2006). *White victims, black villains: Gender, race and crime news in U.S. culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wanzo, R. (2009). *The suffering will not be televised: African American women and sentimental political storytelling*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.