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Book review: *Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders: Histories of Gender, Violence and Victimhood* by Louise Wattis

[Hannah Hamad](#)

Louise Wattis, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, 179pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-01384-4, £49.99 (Hbk)

Published in the 'Palgrave Studies in Victimology' series, which aims to respond to the recent growth in criminological emphasis on 'meeting the needs and rights of victims of crime in criminal justice policy and practice' (front matter), *Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders* by Louise Wattis is an outstanding piece of feminist scholarship. First, it concisely communicates the facts pertaining to the series of killings of women that blighted northern England from 1975 to 1980. More significantly, in laying out the findings of her research, comprising oral history interviews and critical analysis of cultural texts commenting on the case (including popular criminology and literary accounts), Wattis shifts the focus of attention away from the perpetrator of these crimes. She gives voice instead to women who lived in the area through those years, illuminating and elucidating their experiences of womanhood in that charged time and place. She has thus written a new feminist history of the Yorkshire Ripper murders that foregrounds and interrogates intersections between gender, violence and victimhood in relation to this iconic instance from 1970s British social history.

Wattis's methodologies constitute what she offers up as 'feminist cultural criminology' (p. 1), which stresses the importance of the part played by gender in both social enactments of violent crime and its cultural representation. Thus, the approach to examining this case is fundamentally concerned with how violent crime

exists in the public consciousness, viewing it through the lens of gender. More specifically, as Wattis asserts of these murders and cultural responses to them, 'the nature of this case has much to tell us about feminism' (p. 2). In bald terms, Wattis characterises her book as 'an oral history project exploring memories of the murders, complemented by interrogation of the portrayal of the murders in true crime and crime fiction' (p. 9). In broader terms, she speaks to what the work achieves as a piece of scholarship, stating that she focuses on these specific crimes 'to expand analysis of a range of criminological concerns', and that the chapters thus 'contribute to a "cultural, creative, critical criminology", taking in history and cultural studies' (p. 15).

The book begins with an introductory chapter that overviews the pertinent details of the case and lays out the methodological approaches. Regarding the latter, Wattis highlights her use of oral history to make an intervention into how the case has heretofore been historicised, and her use of a feminist framework to highlight the ideological stakes of revisiting it. Her focus of attention in the second chapter is on history and place and the 1970s Yorkshire socio-historical context of the events. She correspondingly argues that there is an extent to which these killings must be understood as crimes specific to a particular time and place, and that the identity of that place has been transformed and redefined in the historical aftermath. Chapter 3 deals with the gendered nature of the figure of the serial killer, and, with specific regard to the Yorkshire Ripper case, it interrogates the part played by cultural formations of masculinity and misogyny in shaping its representation.

Chapter 4 is arguably of greatest interest to readers of *Feminist Review* due to its exploration of how the Yorkshire Ripper murders are bound up with the history of UK

feminism during the period in question. Specifically, Wattis goes to lengths to convey the nature of the relationship between the murders and the burgeoning of radical feminist activism across the UK, but especially in the localities of Leeds and Bradford. Here she points to flashpoint instances of some non-violent direct action undertaken by women's organisations like the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists and Women Against Violence Against Women to illustrate 'how feminist activism was galvanised by the murders and the cultures of misogyny and victim-blaming that surrounded them' (p. 15). Chapters 5 and 6 both deal with the representation of victims, with the former focusing on how the murdered women were remembered by the participants of Wattis's oral history project, and the latter on how they have been depicted in true crime accounts and literary crime fiction.

Wattis takes her place alongside other feminist scholars who have written on the murders and their cultural mediations, including Nicole Ward Jouve, whose book *The Streetcleaner* (1986) was the first book-length cultural analysis of the case to treat it from an explicitly feminist perspective, and Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, whose book *The Lust to Kill* (1987) was path-breaking in its feminist investigation of the gender dynamics of sexual murder. Arguably though, it was the foundational work by Wendy Hollway (1981) interrogating discourses of masculinity and sexuality in news media coverage of the Ripper trial, published here in this journal in 1981, that set the high standard for those doing feminist work on this subject matter who followed, and which has been admirably met by Wattis. Beyond the realm of academic scholarship, Mandy Merck (1981) also emerged as an important feminist voice on the matter with her *Spare Rib* magazine article about misogynist media reportage of the case and trial, while Joan Smith's 'There's only one Yorkshire

Ripper' (1996 [1989]), the centrepiece of her iconic essay collection *Misogynies*, remains definitive.

Wattis's work is also timely. It stands out as the scholarly foundation of what has emerged as a broader wave of renewed revisionist feminist interest not only in this case but also in the Whitechapel murders of 1888, specifically regarding the contextualisation of the lives and identities of the women who were murdered and grievously assaulted. Relatively, these women have been ignored and misrepresented by history—their stories glossed over, their characters smeared and their voices silenced. History has instead invested in the sensationalist mythologising of the perpetrators and their misogynist violent crimes. In thus pushing back against the patriarchal inertia that has characterised the way this case and others have been historicised, *Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders* does high stakes ideological work. In this way it also sits well alongside noteworthy cognate and contemporaneous texts that emerged following its publication. For example, beginning 26 March 2019, Liza Williams' documentary miniseries *The Yorkshire Ripper Files: A Very British Crime Story* (2019) aired on BBC Four. Despite the title, this documentary is ideologically and conceptually in keeping with Wattis's scholarship, insofar as its interest lies in the relationship between gender, violence and victimhood, in situating this relationship within the sociocultural context of the historical period in which the crimes took place and in giving names, voices and faces to the women affected by these crimes.

The publication of Carol Ann Lee's *Somebody's Mother, Somebody's Daughter* (2019) is also highly significant in this regard. Meaningfully riffing on the title of Gordon Burn's account of the life of the perpetrator, *Somebody's Husband*,

Somebody's Son (1984), which itself riffs on words used by police in entreaties and appeals for information as to the killer's identity, Lee's book is a myth-busting and immensely moving contextual account of the lives and identities of each of the women who were known to have been Ripper victims. In this way, it does similarly recuperative feminist ideological work to Hallie Rubenhold's contemporaneously published *The Five* (2019), which likewise intervenes in the entrenched patriarchal historicisation of the Jack the Ripper murders, telling fulsome and richly researched stories of the lives of the murdered women with empathy and long overdue respect for their humanity. All this is testament not just to the timeliness and topicality of *Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders* but also to the realities of what is ideologically at stake in revisiting the murders in this way and at this time. It is essential reading.

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