Chapter 5

News-Mediated Narratives of Disappearance
Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, and Conventions of Dead Women in the News

In this chapter I focus on news-mediated narratives about dead women in the 2000s. The disappearance of three young women—Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson, and Natalee Holloway—set off national news frenzies, especially during the period in which law enforcement searched for their (presumed) dead bodies. Images of the women, which saturated the news media, served as stand-ins for their corpses. The badly decomposed bodies of Chandra Levy and Laci Peterson were eventually found, but no one was convicted of Natalee Holloway’s murder. I show how the news media frames the stories through maternal melodramas and myths that locate contemporary gendered violence in a timeless, eternal realm. I also argue that the news commodifies the women’s real-life tragedies for a voyeuristic global audience and amplifies this information in ways that spread fear and anxiety to all women.

Chandra Levy was a smart 24-year-old woman from Northern California who was interning at the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington, DC, while pursuing a master’s degree at the University of Southern California. Like many mobile young men and women in today’s world, she was far from her home, her parents, and her school friends. On the same day (May 1, 2001) that she was scheduled to leave
Washington, DC, Levy decided to visit Rock Creek Park after looking up the area on the web. Then she went missing. According to Terry Parks, founder of the nonprofit 3-Children Organization, she fits the profile of a typical missing adult person in the United States: she was a female between the ages of 18 and 25 who became the prey of a predator “after going to a new place on [her] own.”1 Her remains were not found until May 2002. An illegal immigrant was arrested in March 2009 and later convicted of murdering her.

Twenty-seven-year-old Laci Peterson, who coincidentally came from the same hometown in Northern California as Levy, had a perfect middle-class marriage—or so it appeared. Although there were no indications that her husband, Scott, was abusive or acutely unhappy during their years together, he took a ruthless route to change his marital status and to renounce impending fatherhood. He apparently murdered his pregnant wife on December 24, 2002; Laci’s body and the body of her fetus were found in mid-April 2003 along the shore of San Francisco Bay. Scott Peterson was convicted of murder on November 12, 2004.

Eighteen-year-old Natalee Holloway was an “A” student whose high school class flew in May 2005 from Birmingham, Alabama, to the Caribbean island of Aruba to celebrate their recent graduation. Seven adults went along to chaperone the 124 students who came from upper-middle-class families. The young graduates, perhaps naively regarding Aruba as a sun-drenched playground, circulated through the island’s tourist haunts. Last seen with three local young men after an evening of drinking, Natalee vanished. Although several men were arrested for presumably murdering her, her body was never found.

While recounting these deaths, I contextualize them within historical trends in American society, something the news stories generally neglect to do. The news serializations of these deaths show only the steady repetition of the outcomes of gendered violence; the outcomes become a given facet of the American mediatized habitus, or everyday lived reality.2 The frame of these stories never shifts to allow a movement away from the immediate present tense; there is little historicization in these accounts of missing women. This is a pattern that Marian Meyers argues has obscured our understanding of the structural roots of male violence against women: “The media’s preference for psychopathological explanations for sexist violence is . . . the predominant frame offered by the news media within the United States, serving to limit discussion so that it excludes a feminist analysis that would take into account cultural and social factors such as patriarchy and misogyny.”3 I also find the