

The Framed Victim: Analyzing the Jennifer Laude Case in American and Filipino News Reports

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Abstract

The news media can be a veritable battleground in which concepts of race, nation and gender compete in the public imagination. This is demonstrated in ways that the murder of transgender Filipina Jennifer Laude is framed by American and Filipino news reports. This paper argues that the framing of the Jennifer Laude case serves to support the dominance of the U.S. Military and to perpetuate a gendered “othering” of Filipinos. For this study, Todd Gitlin’s model of media framing analysis is used to evaluate six of the most popular texts by mainstream American news media as well as six of the most popular texts by mainstream Filipino news media published two days after the crime. A comparison of trends in each news media shows that while Jennifer Laude is framed more as a deceitful sex worker in American news reports, she is seen more as a victim of a hate crime in Filipino news reports. Both American and Filipino news reports also discuss the case vis-à-vis the current ambivalent political and military relationship between the two nations, albeit in varying terms. While Filipino news reports tend to contextualize the case as part of a long string of crimes committed by members of the U.S. military in the Philippines, it is found that through framing devices such as Trivialization, Polarization, Marginalization, and Delegitimization, the American news media disempowers the Jennifer Laude case from creating any meaning that might be regarded as oppositional by the dominant ideology of U.S. Supremacy.

Keywords: Transgender, Media Framing, Gender Studies

1. Introduction

...It is a war on the global poor, the majority of whom have, by racial, gendered, and sexualized measures been rendered value-less, inhuman, even though it is their very strength of presence and resistance, their very lives and labor, that provide this war with its object, its alibi, its ideological meaning, its physical, bodily terrain. For what is this war without the infliction of death and of the damage on people whose very existence is deemed a threat to security – people who are casualties of war inasmuch as they are already casualties of that normal order of systemic violence and exploitation that some call peace?
-Neferti Xina Nardine Tadiar, “On the Axis of Empire”¹

What happens when a person is killed? What stories get told? Perhaps a eulogy filled with respect and admiration for the deceased, a damning speech for the murderer, a call for justice. But what if said victim was transgender? And non-white? And what if the suspect was a white, heterosexual American soldier? Who gets to be put on trial, and who gets to try the case? Stories like these are rarely covered by mainstream media, but when they do get covered, they bring

to sharp focus issues of race, nation and gender. Such is what happened after the murder of transgender Filipina Jennifer Laude.

The Jennifer Laude case has become the subject of many news stories both in the U.S. and the Philippines. Although shocking, this is not unprecedented, and is but the latest in a long string of unresolved crimes committed by members of the U.S. military in the Philippines since the two countries signed the Military Bases Agreement (MBA) in 1947, which gave U.S. soldiers near-total exemption from Philippine criminal jurisdiction.² This event has generated discussions regarding its implications not only for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community, but also for the political ties binding the Philippines with the U.S.

After a joint training mission between U.S. and Filipino forces that concluded on October 10, 2014, U.S. Marine Scott Pemberton went bar-hopping in Olongapo City, close to the naval base. Pemberton and friends met Jennifer Laude and her friends in a bar on October 11. Witnesses then saw Pemberton checking into the Celzone Lodge with Laude, only to leave alone a few hours later. Laude's naked body was found in the room around 11 p.m. that night, exhibiting signs of strangulation or asphyxiation.³

Various news sources, both American and Filipino, at the very least agree on these facts. But how to process this information is a different matter. Although one of the most important tenets of journalism has been objectivity and the dissemination of unbiased information, professors Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver argue that there is also a hidden element in the news text: "[I]nformation in a news story can cement the link [between concepts], but it relies on a frame to build the associations."⁴ This paper argues that news stories of the Jennifer Laude case serve to support the dominance of the U.S. Military and to perpetuate a gendered "othering" of Filipinos.

In his essay "Encoding/Decoding", media scholar Stuart Hall posits that mass media makes meaning out of subjects by producing discourses about them within a "complex structure in dominance" in which "new, problematic or troubling events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our taken-for-granted knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to make sense."⁵ Meaning is prompted by the way subjects are framed within news texts. Bryant and Oliver found that the process of "framing" associates subjects with culture-based meaning, norms and values that exist outside of the text. "News frames function to suggest how audiences can interpret an issue or event."⁶ When a subject cannot so easily fit into the dominant discourse (as in the case of Jennifer Laude), framing mechanisms in a media text serve to highlight the differences of the subject and dissociate it from the dominant discourse. One way this is done is through what Hall calls inferential racism, "apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions."⁷ In the case of the Philippines, these notions have been brought on by a long, complicated, and deeply-entangled relationship with the U.S.

The Philippines, according to political scientist David Wurfel, is the only former colony of the U.S. in South East Asia, with "a cultural as well as structural legacy"⁸ of dependence to the U.S. This relationship extends well after the nation's independence and up to today, through the implementation of a neocolonial foreign policy characterized by free trade agreements and military treaties. Even today, after the permanent military bases have been dismantled in 1991, the U.S. maintains a strong military presence in the region through joint military exercises under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1998 to battle militant Muslim insurgency in Southern Philippines, and more recently under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of April 2014 to fend off the growing threat being felt in the Southeast Asian region coming from China. Even though the EDCA operates under a language of cooperation and equity, stating that "all United States access to and use of facilities and areas will be at the invitation of the Philippines and with full respect for the Philippines Constitution and Philippine laws,"⁹ the very nature of the agreement only further enforces the dominance of the U.S. and the dependence of the Philippines to its military prowess.

U.S. dominance further extends to gendered and racialized media representations of its neocolonies such as the Philippines. Postcolonial theorist Anita Loomba asserts that colonial discourse has predominantly envisioned native lands in a feminized manner; language during that period refers to lands being discovered, dominated, conquered and subdued. Conversely, she says that "female bodies symbolise the conquered land"¹⁰ where all of the colonizer's hopes and fears are usually encapsulated in the gendered representation of the body of the colonized. In time, Loomba notices tropes appearing in the language of colonial fantasy, such as the exotic, passive, veiled woman, but also the intractable, deviant Amazonian. In the meantime, Oriental men are portrayed either as effeminate cowards or lusty villains. Stuart Hall finds that these gendered, racial representations can still be observed in the media today, "re-worked in many of the modern and updated images, constructed on a very ancient grammar."¹¹ And as sociologist Chong-suk Han states, these media representations more often than not are gendered, and "have worked to construct Asian men [and women] as fundamentally foreign, threatening, and perhaps most importantly, as inferior to white men [and women]."¹²

2. Methodology

It is through this framing of Jennifer Laude as a transgender Filipina “other” that American news media texts assert the dominant ideology. In order to detect these framing devices, this study utilizes Todd Gitlin’s model of media framing analysis as it was understood in a similar study by Laura Smith.¹³ Gitlin’s model looked for “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse.”¹⁴ He distinguished four framing devices being used by the news media: (a) Trivialization, or making light of the opposition; (b) Polarization, or emphasizing the extreme nature of the opposition; (c) Marginalization, or showing the opposition as deviant or unrepresentative; and (d) Delegitimization, or using undermining language and grammatical devices such as quotation marks around words. This paper will look into how these devices are used in the news about the case.

As the crime happened on October 11, 2014, only news articles published online between October 13 and 14 were used. The search was made in news.google.com. Because of the limited number of articles published within such a narrow timeframe, there was a limited sample. These were the six most popular/referenced texts published by mainstream American news media as well as the six most popular/referenced texts published by mainstream Filipino news media (see Table 1).

Table 1. Most searched American and Filipino news articles published October 13-14, 2014.

AMERICAN NEWS		FILIPINO NEWS	
<i>Bloomberg News</i>	- U.S. Marine Held in Philippines After Transgender Murder	<i>Inquirer</i>	- AFP condemns killing of transgender
<i>Fox News</i>	- Marine held in connection with probe into murder of transgender Filipino	<i>ABS-CBN News</i>	- Used condoms found near murdered transgender
<i>USA Today</i>	- Filipino transgender advocates call killing a ‘hate crime’	<i>GMA News</i>	- Leftist solon: Slay of transgender woman worse than Nicole rape case
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	- Philippines Killing Dents U.S. Relations	<i>Sun Star</i>	- US Marine in transgender slay to face raps
<i>VOA News</i>	- Murder Case Snags Flourishing US-Philippines Security Relations	<i>Philippine Star</i>	- US bars warships from leaving Phl
<i>CNN</i>	- U.S. Marine identified as suspect in transgender woman’s death in Philippines	<i>Rappler</i>	- Filing of charges vs US Marine may take weeks

Instead of counting the number of times each framing device is used in each article, the number of articles that contained any instance of the use of a device was tallied. Certain keywords and phrases to look for were specified for each device. Images used within the articles are also reviewed as supportive “arguments” for the framing devices. The usage of these devices is compared between both American as well as Filipino media to check for patterns of framing in each of nation’s media.

3. Data

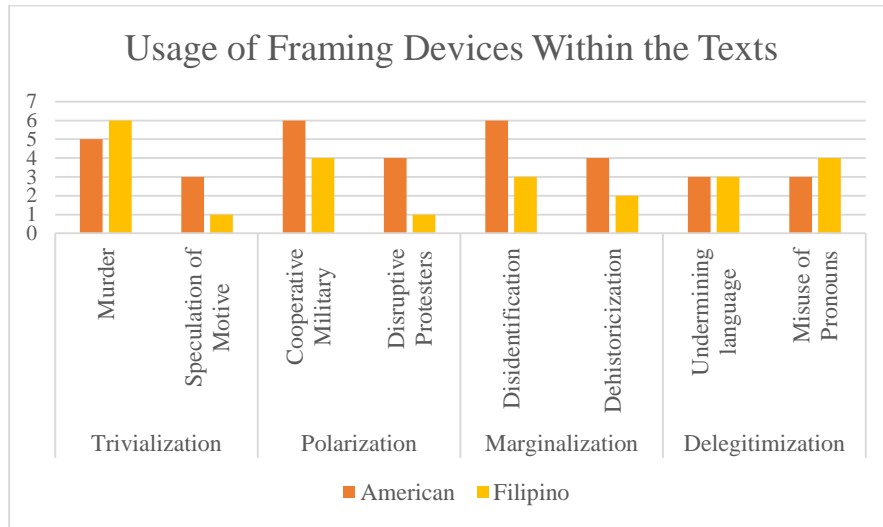


Figure 1. Comparing the Usage of Framing Devices in American and Filipino Texts

After tallying the number of articles utilizing each framing device, patterns began to emerge. As seen on Figure 1, within the sample, American texts generally had a greater likelihood of using Gitlin’s framing devices compared to Filipino texts.

3.1. Trivialization

Trivialization can be found in the downplaying of the seriousness of the crime. In this case, we look for 1) whether the crime was labeled a murder or a more serious “hate crime” or a crime committed on the basis of race, religion, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity¹⁵, and 2) whether any speculation of a possible motive for the crime was made in an attempt to justify the act.

Analysis of the articles found that only 2 out of the 6 American texts used the term “hate crime” and only 1 out of the 6 Filipino texts used it. Most texts preferred to label it a murder instead. While texts from both countries exhibit a high degree of trivialization on this aspect, there is a slightly higher degree in Filipino texts. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the Philippines, unlike the U.S., does not have a hate crimes prevention act like the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Act of 2009.¹⁶ Lack of legislation criminalizing acts of discrimination may certainly impact the language used in the reporting of crimes such as this.

One would think that speculation has no place in journalism. However, 3 of the American texts speculated on a possible motive for the murder, and all of them suggested that Private Pemberton was driven to kill her because she deceived him, such as when Bloomberg News reported that “a friend of the victim told police that her friend became uneasy because the man hadn’t realized they were transgender.”¹⁷ In contrast, only 1 of the Filipino texts, from ABS CBN News, speculated on possible motives. Although it initially suggested that the murder was possibly due to Laude’s deceit, the text discounts this, saying that “authorities doubt this theory because of the used condoms discovered in the room.”¹⁸ Instead, they said Laude may have tried to steal from Pemberton. So we can see a greater attempt by American media to find some justification from the crime, diverting the attention from the crime and suspect and focusing the discourse towards the victim. Such a framing device implicitly blames the crime on the victim for being the way she is; that merely by being transgender, she was seen as lying to him and being deceitful, which further connotes that being transgender is like living a lie.

3.2. Polarization

Polarizing devices suggest that the differences between the two sides are irreconcilable, and that only one side can be definitely right, with the other being definitely wrong. Polarization was determined through 1) the use of words such as “cooperation”, “pact” and “allies” to describe the US Military and the EDCA in a positive light, and 2) the use of words such as “protesters,” “activists” or “leftists” to describe the Filipino LGBT community in a negative light.

Analysis indicates that US papers had a higher tendency of using polarizing language. All 6 of the American texts described the US Military in a positive light, being helpful and cooperating with the investigation, such as when USA Today quoted Brad Bartelt, a spokesman for Marine Corps Forces Pacific, as saying that “the Marine Corps is working closely and cooperating fully with the Philippine National Police to ensure a thorough investigation is completed and due process of law is followed.”¹⁹ In fact, most American texts only briefly mention the crime, and describe it more as an obstacle preventing the two countries from achieving a productive Military “partnership.” Some Filipino texts also frame the EDCA in terms of cooperation, such as when the Philippine Star referred to the Philippines as the “former colony and oldest Asian ally [of the U.S.].”²⁰ In contrast, when 5 American texts discussed the Filipino LGBT organizations, they described them in terms of extreme, and at times violent, opposition, such as when Fox News reported that “40 young activists waved red flags and yelled “U.S. troops out now,” in a protest that ended with the burning of a mock American flag at the heavily secured U.S. Embassy.”²¹ Photographs that accompanied American News articles also tended to support these notions of the U.S. Military as agents of cooperation and organization (see Figure 2) and Filipino LGBT organizations as agents of agitation and destruction (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Image accompanying the article from Voice of America News.²²
Philippine Armed Forces Chief Gen. Gregorio Pio Catapang with U.S. Adm. Samuel J. Locklear.



Figure 3. Image accompanying the article from the Wall Street Journal.²³
Protesters burn a mock U.S. flag during a rally at the U.S. Embassy in Manila, Philippines, Tuesday.

When images of the U.S. Military are featured, subjects are often shown as benevolent yet imposing. This is very much apparent in Figure 2. While order and cooperation is emphasized, with the two officers walking side by side, the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command definitely stands out in his white uniform against the dark green uniforms of the Philippine Military. Meanwhile, Filipino LGBT organizations are shown to be violent and dangerous

to the global unity and cooperation espoused by the U.S. Military, especially when they are repeatedly being seen burning a mock U.S. flag.

While Filipino papers were significantly less polarizing, a high proportion (4 of the Filipino texts) still talked about the cooperative nature of the U.S. Military, suggesting that the dominant ideology of U.S. Military Power is still at work in Filipino news media, although in a less overt manner. This was, however, balanced out in 4 Filipino texts by the portrayal of LGBT organizations in positive terms as well, such as when “a lawmaker from the Gabriela party-list group... asked the government to ensure justice for the murder victim.”²⁴ Only 1 article described them as “leftists.”²⁵

3.3. Marginalization

Marginalizing the murder case involves 1) providing no context about the victim, making her appear less human and more just an anomalous casualty, as well as 2) the dehistoricization of the whole murder case, causing readers to fail to see patterns of systemic abuse enacted by U.S. servicemen in foreign military operations. It is therefore quite telling that none of the American texts provided even a brief description of Jennifer, other than that she was transgender. In contrast, 3 of the Filipino texts attempted to contextualize her by including her name, her background story, or both: “For Laude’s family, the brutal killing of their breadwinner is unbearable. Laude was paying for the education of youngest sibling Rex, and also provided for their family’s other needs.”²⁶

While 4 of the Filipino texts attempted to contextualize the murder by relating it to a 2006 rape case involving a U.S. soldier and a Filipina, only 2 American texts referenced this prior case, showing a larger tendency towards dehistoricization. This seems to suggest that there are attempts made by the American news media to isolate the crime. It is also harder to situate the case within the larger context of crimes committed by U.S. military men on Philippine soil. All in all, these efforts further marginalize the event and make it less salient to the public.

3.4. Delegitimization

Gitlin cited the use of quotation marks as well as words such as “apparently” or “reportedly” as undermining language that attempts to frame a particular argument within the text as questionable or unclear. However, it was determined that the use of undermining language did not turn out to be a helpful indicator, as both American texts and Filipino texts utilized this phrasing, such as when an Inquirer articles says that Laude “was *supposedly* killed inside the Celzone Lodge.”²⁷

Another criterion used was the tracking of the names and pronouns used to identify Laude. In a study that sociologist Lori Girshick conducted, she found that many transgender people find their reality in their gender identity (an individual’s internal sense of gender), whether or not it corresponds to the traditional gender binary. Paraphrasing sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas, she stated that “we are in charge of our perception of reality and that we hold the means to create, reinforce, or alter that perceived reality.”²⁸ To misidentify a transgender person through the use of incorrect names or pronouns denies them of their reality. Studying the news articles, it was found that Filipino texts had a slightly higher tendency of misidentifying Laude. Overall, the data suggests that Jennifer’s transgender identity situates her as a subject outside of the dominant discourse regardless of nation (see Table 2).

Table 2. Pronouns used to identify Jennifer Laude

	she	he, no pronoun
AMERICAN NEWS -	3	2, 1
FILIPINO NEWS -	2	1, 3

The usage of the pronoun “he” is lumped together with the usage of no pronoun because the use of no pronoun also seems to reflect a failure in accepting Laude’s gender identity. Texts that did not use any pronoun at all also seemed to be playing it safe in the middle in order to avoid controversy. It is interesting to note that while the American text that did not use a pronoun also did not indicate Laude’s name at all, the 3 Filipino texts that did not use a pronoun all identified Laude as “Jeffrey alias ‘Jennifer’”, “Jeffrey, also known as ‘Jennifer’”, or “Jeffrey, who goes by the name ‘Jennifer’”²⁹ (see table 3). Note that the use of quotation marks undermines Laude’s preferred gender identity and privileges her birth name. All in all, none of the texts identified Jennifer under her preferred name only. Almost all texts addressed her as Jeffrey, some in combination with Jennifer.

Table 3. Names used to identify Jennifer Laude

	Jennifer only	Jeffrey only	Jeffrey aka “Jennifer”	Unidentified
AMERICAN NEWS -	0	1	4	1
FILIPINO NEWS -	0	3	3	0

All of these framing devices, disguised within the journalistic cloak of “truth” and “objectivity”, only naturalize these imposed assumptions of the gendered, racialized “other” and disseminate them through mass media. According to media theorist James Lull, these mass-mediated ideologies are in turn “corroborated and strengthened by an interlocking system of efficacious information-distributing agencies and taken-for-granted social practices that permeate every aspect of social and cultural reality.”³⁰ This makes these ideologies more easily digestible for news media consumers, who in turn willingly accept what Lull calls an “asymmetrical interdependence” between nation-states. This asymmetrical interdependence embodied by the power inequality between America and the Philippines is perpetuated through the types of media stories each country disseminates. Despite all efforts of Filipino news media to exert the independence of the Philippines, traces of the dominant ideology of U.S. Military Supremacy still appear in their news framing. Thus, these ideologies are internalized, and only become apparent when this “interdependence” is fractured by politically disruptive events such as this.

4. Conclusion

In the introductory quotation from Filipino-American Women’s Studies scholar Neferti Tadiar, she talks about the U.S. War on Terror launched by former President George W. Bush. But she might as well be talking about a parallel war, one that continues until today. It is a war whose soldiers are stories. The battleground is the news media. And the victims are those who do not fit within the dominant discourse. In this war, Jennifer Laude is one of the many casualties; she dies every time her story is published; her body subsumed within the hegemony of U.S. power. The weapons utilized are the framing devices. And it is through these framing devices such as Trivialization, Polarization, Marginalization, and Delegitimization, that the American news media inhibits the use of the Jennifer Laude case to create any meaning that might be regarded as oppositional by the dominant ideology of U.S. military supremacy.

The whole story is a lot more complicated than that, of course. If this case was not just about race relations, then there would be a stronger reaction from the LGBT community in the U.S. Similarly, if this was not just about gender relations, it would seem less of a demonstration of power held by Americans over one of its former territories. Unfortunately, race, nation, and gender representations within texts are all framed in such a way as to trivialize, polarize, marginalize and delegitimize the event among consumers of American news media.

Where, then, is the possibility for resistance? It must be noted that the perceived “irrelevance” of the murder case within American media is merely a construction; this is revealed by the very fact that American news media needs to constantly destabilize the resistive potential of the text through the repeated broadcast of similarly-framed stories. Why does U.S. Military power have to constantly reassert itself through media? Why does it constantly need to remind itself (and others) of its supposed dominance over the dehumanized “other”? Lull, quoting Stuart Hall, suggests that “it is crucial to the concept that hegemony is not a ‘given’ and permanent state of affairs, but it has to be actively won and secured; it can also be lost.”³¹ So it is in questioning that we can reveal the ideological processes at work between the lines. We must empower ourselves to see through the dominant discourse’s defenses, for it is primarily through a close and careful reading of our media texts that these framing devices can be identified, resisted upon, and in time, dismantled.

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