

Cultural Daily

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Caylee Anthony or Alexis Glover? Race and the Murder of Children

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Thursday, July 7th, 2011

Everyone seems to be upset about the outcome of the Casey Anthony trial. Given the media circus – and what has been divulged about the facts of the case – the outrage seems justified. What we know is that Caylee Anthony is dead and it appears that her mother must have had something to do with her murder. The murder of a small child is a horrible act. It is even more terrible when a parent or guardian – whose duty it is to protect that child – is responsible. But the lesson of the Casey Anthony trial is not just one of a (possible) miscarriage of justice or a murderer who beat the system. It also tells us a lot about the value of some children in our society and the lack of value of others.

In 2008, the same year that Caylee Anthony was killed, [Banita Jacks](#) murdered her four daughters and left them to rot in her home. She claimed the girls were possessed by demons and therefore she decided to starve, beat, strangle and stab them. Also in 2008, [Mya Lyons](#) was found brutally stabbed to death in an alley in Chicago. Her father was charged with her murder. The following year, [Alexis Glover](#) – a mentally disabled young girl – was killed and dumped in a river by her mother. The common denominator between these murders is the race of the children. They are all black. There are also hundreds of missing black children. While we continue to watch updates on the Natalee Holloway case, and watch made-for-TV movies about her story, black girls (and boys) barely make the news.

The lack of attention to the murders, abuse or kidnappings of black people is not a new phenomenon. In fiction, Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas murdered two women (*Native Son*, 1940). The brutal murder of Bessie (black) is only mentioned in court because the prosecutor uses Bessie's body to prove the much more important – and shocking – rape and murder of Mary (white). Scholars have also been discussing disparities in mediated racial representations for decades. We know that African American males are over-represented in news stories about violent crime. We know that black suspects are more likely than white suspects to be shown in handcuffs. Even *Time* magazine came under fire during the OJ Simpson trial for darkening his mug-shot on their [cover](#). We also know that murders and disappearances of young, white and (often) blonde girls are media events and the girls themselves become well-known, household names: [Natalee Holloway](#), Caylee Anthony, [JonBenet Ramsey](#), [Elizabeth Smart](#). We all know their names. How many of us have heard of Mya Lyons or Alexis Glover?

In our Internet world these disparities reach beyond the evening news or our local papers. A Google search of “black girl murdered” turns up “hits” for two African American girls killed recently by police. But the first “hit” is of [Latasha Harlins](#) – murdered by a Korean shopkeeper in 1991. While we should all remember Harlins I find it disturbing that the first “hit” is of a 10 year old case. Have no other young black people, no black children, been murdered, abused or gone missing over the last decade? Searching “black child murdered” is even worse – it starts with Emmett Till (murdered in 1955), then gives us The Atlanta Child Murders (1979-1981). Scrolling down, we will find the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church murders (1963). But we also find stories on blacks who have committed murder – or are accused of doing so. Doing a search of “girl murdered” isn’t really that much better. The Casey Anthony trial is, unsurprisingly, the first “hit.” There are then some general sites devoted to missing and murdered children. One site gives the story of a girl murdered while undergoing an exorcism. None of these “hits” are for children of color. Apparently, we have to ask specifically to find information about black, Latino or Asian children who have been killed or abused.

Why is this important? Because the assumption (in Google at least) is that those searching for children who are missing or murdered are looking for white children. We have to ask to find information on non-white children but we are automatically given information on white children. This problem is compounded by the lack of coverage in traditional news outlets. We can easily find information about Natalee Holloway, Caylee Anthony or even [Martha Moxley](#) because their stories have been told, over and over again, by local, national and international news sources. We know their names.

But how do we Google search for children whose names, if they are reported at all, are gone from the television and newspapers after one or two days? What about the hundreds who are never reported in the media? When Bigger’s girlfriend Bessie was beaten and thrown down the air shaft, no one cared. No one missed her. No one looked for her. She was only found because the police were looking for Bigger – the murderer of Mary Dalton. And Bessie’s body was simply evidence, like a knife or bloody glove, used to prove Bigger’s guilt in raping and killing Mary. A murdered young black woman, absence any connection to whites, would not receive scrutiny nor investigation. Wright was [criticized](#) for writing a story full of propaganda and racial stereotypes. But perhaps Wright was not so far off. Though it’s been more than 70 years since *Native Son* was published, the bodies of black girls (and boys) are still less worthy of attention than those of whites. Caylee Anthony deserves justice. Her murderer(s) should be punished to the fullest extent of the law. But so should those responsible for all the dead and missing black children. And we deserve to know those children’s names.

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