

Bondi's underbelly: the 'gay gang murders'

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ABSTRACT

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, on the Bondi-Tamarama walkway and the Marks Park beat bordering it, there were a series of murders and disappearances of (presumed) gay men. These crimes – dubbed the 'gay gang murders' – remained, largely, unsolved for more than a decade when they became the subject of a police investigation and coronial inquest. In this paper I will argue that the site of the murders is crucial in helping to explain the lack of public mourning at the time over the deaths and disappearances of 'gay' men from this location. I argue that due partially to the physical location of the murders, the men were produced as non-grievable subjects, to which any public mourning was inexplicable.

As far back as 1907, Bondi was promoted as having 'the chance of being to Sydney what Coney Island is to New York, and Blackpool to the Midlands'¹. Almost a century later, Bondi is said to have lived up to the challenge. Hailed as one of Australia's, indeed the world's, most famous beaches, Bondi has become synonymous with Australian beach culture. Bondi, like the Australian beach culture it represents, functions as an emblem of national identity, signifying the combination of 'everything that is Australian'².

The 'legitimate' uses of Marks Park – as a picnic site, wedding backdrop, scenic lookout, exhibition venue and a site of historical interest – sit neatly within dominant discourses of mainstream tourism and leisure, particularly those which position Bondi as a national icon. Yet, just as a singular, definitive 'meaning' of Bondi cannot be found, there are a number of slippages in relation to how the site is used and perceived to be used. Like every cultural icon, Bondi rests on an abject underside³. Dominant cultural images, such as those produced around Bondi, come into being and are maintained over time by an operation of power that both expels non-normativity and also suppresses representations of its own operation.

In the case of the 'gay gang murders', the ideals of Australian heteronormative culture are constituted by a literally violent expulsion of queer bodies from the domain of (hetero)normativity. Like the legendary Bondi sewage that flows

from the city's more affluent suburbs into the ocean near Bondi, four of the victims in this case, Gilles Mattaini, Ross Warren, John Russell and Kritchikorn Rattanajurathaporn⁴, exemplify this abject underbelly. Not only do they represent the abject through the violence enacted on their bodies, but also because they challenge heteronormative assumptions about Australian cultural icons and sites in general.

The sanitized 'tourist-friendly' and 'family-friendly' images of Bondi, which function as an icon for Australian national identity, are built upon a structure of homophobic violence. Historically, this operation of raw violence has taken place with the complicity of institutions such as the law, police service and the mainstream news media. Each dominant image of Bondi has its suppressed, but constitutive, queer opposite which is essential to the survival of the cultural icon itself. The 'postcard perfect' legitimate, safe, public face of Bondi has an illegitimate, dangerous and queered Other, exemplified both in Marks Park's role as a beat and also in the 'gay gang murders' themselves.

This paper will explore how a physical site can work to both create and delimit representation. For the refusal to acknowledge queer space at Bondi had vitally important ramifications for understanding the 'gay gang murders'. The crime scene as a gay beat located at Bondi directly impacted on the ways the victims were represented in mainstream media and legal discourses. I argue that due partially to the physical location of the

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murders, the men were produced as non-grievable subjects, to which any public mourning was inexplicable. Despite recent shifts in later representations of them, which have allowed them some measure of 'grievability', current popular imaginings of Bondi continue to erase gay presence and usage, thus continuing to delegitimize a gay heritage.

UN/GRIEVABLE LIVES?

The site of the 'gay gang murders' at the Marks Park beat is crucial in helping to explain the lack of public mourning over the deaths and disappearances of 'gay' men from this location. As Judith Butler contends in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*⁵, some lives become worthy of public grief while others are seen as undeserving of public mourning, and indeed even incomprehensible as lives. Likewise, in her earlier work *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*⁶, Butler suggests that certain subjects are privileged over other abjected 'non bodies'. Turning her attention to the production of these 'lives not worth living', the 'domain of abjected bodies', Butler⁷ interrogates the physical and discursive conditions which render certain bodies legible, liveable, and grievable:

How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life", lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?

At the times of their respective disappearances and deaths – the late 1980s and early 1990s – the men's lives were not recognized as valuable human lives and therefore could not 'be mourned because they are always already lost, or rather, never 'were''⁸. Instead, the victims were symbolically cast out into a zone of uninhabitability with their deaths largely unrecognised and unpunished. Deemed unworthy of official resources, police inaction and mainstream media neglect and sensationalism were the predominant responses to these cases.

Gilles Mattaini headed off for an afternoon jog along the scenic cliff top walkway in September 1985. It was the last time he was seen alive. In July 1989, Ross Warren waved goodbye to friends at Taylor Square, drove off up Oxford Street, and vanished. Four months later in November 1989, John Russell was found lying in a pool of blood at the bottom of the cliffs underneath Marks Park. The following year, in July 1990, the badly battered body of Kritchikorn Rattanajaturathaporn was discovered wedged between rocks off Tamarama beach. A brutal murder, a suspicious death, and two other people missing from one of Australia's most mythicised coastlines. Four men coming to tragic ends in the vicinity of a recognized gay beat. Although this set of circumstances has many of the characteristics of a 'newsworthy'⁹ crime story, it could not be produced as such until more than a decade had passed when the four cases were officially linked in 2002.

Institutional responses by law enforcement agencies at the time ranged from disinterest and neglect to outright homophobia. Although it was a known trouble spot, Marks Park was, for the most part, ignored by authorities, which only increased the risks of violence for beat-goers. Sydney gay man, Gary Burns, recounts how in late 1988 he had been chased from Marks Park by five young men shouting 'faggot we're going to get you', managing to escape only by hiding under a car in nearby Kenneth Street¹⁰. Burns claims that when he reported this incident to the Bondi Police Station, a sergeant dismissed his complaint by saying, 'We're not interested in gay domestics'¹¹. This disinterest in activities at beats was common at the time. In the case of Marks Park, it was compounded for two reasons. Firstly, the beat's location at Bondi, and, secondly, the uneasy historical relationship between police and beat-users.

Bondi, as a counter-site or heterotopia, juxtaposes in one single geographic location 'several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'¹². The poofter-bashers, as much as the beat-users, operate as physical and symbolic sites which embody the very incompatibility of the Marks Park site itself¹³. As Stephen Tomsen has argued, the 'fixed' identities often alluded to in 'gay hate crimes' – firstly, 'gay and 'straight' and secondly, 'gay victim' and 'straight perpetrator' – are decidedly more fluid than they may initially appear¹⁴. The very category 'gay', for example, has been widely criticized as essentialist. In Tomsen's analysis of anti-gay homicides in New South Wales during 1980-2000, Tomsen argued that many of the victims may not have identified as gay and that many had marginal or no obvious links to Sydney's gay subculture¹⁵. Just as the 'gay victim' identity can be problematized, so too can the figure of the 'straight perpetrator'. According to Tomsen's study, many of the victims and perpetrators in these assaults and murders, had taken part in same-sex activity that had not been categorised or described as 'gay' or 'homosexual'¹⁶.

As well as the 'legitimate' uses listed earlier, the Bondi-Tamarama walkway and Marks Park continue to operate as sites of public cruising, 'temporary and invisible networks of queer space'¹⁷. In wake of the coronial inquest on the 'gay gang murders', Marks Park is still considered to be one of Sydney's busiest beats, with one beat-goer, Scott, claiming that he sometimes sees up to 50 men there at one time¹⁸. If one searches, for example, the 'Address4SEX Worldwide Cruising Directory', out of a possible 3443 global locations, three Bondi sites are specifically listed, namely, Bondi Beach, Tamarama, and Marks Park¹⁹. These beaches, along with North Bondi, are all considered significant sites on the 'Gay Map of Sydney' being advertised in gay travel guides²⁰ as 'gay beaches', or at the very least 'gay friendly'. This is not a recent trend. The Spanish style pavilion located at Bondi beach operated as a major beat during the interwar years and also for the duration of World War Two²¹. However, despite the evident 'gay' usage of the area, Bondi's gay past and present is erased from mainstream travel and historical discourses.

Queer spaces, such as the Bondi beats, are, however, directly contested by other marginalized sub-cultures, gangs of gay-bashers, who transform such sites into both a hunting ground and a crime scene. Beats function as hunting grounds in two ways. First, as they are the domains of men looking for anonymous sex with other men, beat-goers can be considered benign hunters in these quests. The second way, as Wayne Myslik argues, is that once 'the reputation spreads in the media that an

area is a gay neighbourhood or queer space, the violence increases. Queer spaces become hunting grounds²². As one beat-goer put it, gay bashers 'know of and hunt in the same territories as the fags they want to bash and kill'²³. Beat-goers, then, become hunted animals, the object of pursuit or attack. The detective in charge of the Bondi cliffs murders investigation, Detective Page, likened the phenomenon of poofster bashing to sport, or more specifically 'a blood sport'²⁴ and a 'team sport' which rendered the perpetrators 'cowards' who would only 'act as a group'²⁵. One of the 'persons of interest' in the Bondi cliff killings also used the sport analogy declaring that poofster bashing was, 'Something to do mate ... It's not fun ... It's a sport in Redfern ... Oh it's a fuckin hobby mate. What are you doin' tonight boys? Oh just going fag bashin''²⁶.

There is no doubt that the beat status of Marks Park contributed to its operation as a hunting ground for poofster-bashers. In the murder of Kritchikorn Rattanjurathaporn, police interviews with perpetrators suggested that the young men involved were all aware of the beat status of the park, and the way that it attracted men to the area²⁷. The assailants travelled from inner city suburbs to Bondi, and then walked to Marks Park, a long and strenuous walk from Bondi itself, with the express purpose of 'faggot bashing'²⁸, choosing Bondi because 'we know poofs would be there for sure' and 'that's where all the faggots hang out'²⁹.

Detective Page has contended that the gang of teenagers involved in Rattanjurathaporn's murder, as well as other incidents, deliberately chose the cliffside location as 'their favoured killing field'³⁰. As a popular beat, such a site would have offered a ready availability of potential victims. The perpetrators would also have been attracted by the relative seclusion of the site and its inaccessibility³¹. Like many other beats, Marks Park is poorly lit, isolated and – after hours at least – relatively untrafficked, barring beat-goers. The compromised situation of the victims, who may have been seeking or engaged in casual sexual activity with other men, would have been another drawing card for the perpetrators.

Community homophobia and indifference has also, unwittingly, aided the perpetrators of anti-gay violence. In the eyes of the wider community, and in their own opinion, gay bashers viewed beat users as 'fair game' or legitimate targets, owing to their marginalized status, and their presence at a beat site. As Tomssen³² has noted, many gay hate perpetrators have been surprised that their crimes were treated seriously by law enforcement authorities and in some cases believed their activities constituted a form of community service. Adam Graycar, Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, concurs claiming 'Some of the perpetrators ... do not believe they have done anything wrong, and in fact expect society to applaud them for what they have done'³³. Given the dearth of police response, until fairly recently, to queer bashers at beats, they might even be forgiven for such opinions, as historically police have allowed such gangs to operate in a quasi-police capacity in 'regulating' beat usage. The fact that the perpetrators believed they were doing society a favour only worked to make the victims even more *ungrievable* as they were now portrayed as little more than detritus.

Police neglect, and the reluctance of victims to report beat-related crimes, meant that gay-bashers could appeal 'to the geographic circumstances to implicate the victims themselves'³⁴.

With authorities refusing to adequately monitor the site, the violence is made to appear like a natural hazard, 'voluntarily courted by queers'³⁵. This attitude that queers deserve their vicious treatment at beats was played out throughout the initial police investigations into the 'gay gang murders'. During the coronial inquiry, these investigations came under attack, as did the officers in charge, and the police institution itself, particularly in terms of its general response to gay hate crimes. At the turn of the century, the Deputy State Coroner, police counsel and journalists described the original investigations into the Warren and Russell cases as 'seriously flawed'³⁶; an 'aborted' 'jumble'³⁷; 'sloppy', 'grossly unprofessional', 'tragically muddled', 'non-investigations'³⁸.

Police in charge of these cases were criticized for being 'slow to respond' to the attacks³⁹, for ignoring crucial evidence, and for 'fobbing off' complaints by gay victims⁴⁰. In what was described as a 'damning day' for police, the inquest heard that basic police procedures, such as taking crime scene photographs and canvassing the area, were never carried out⁴¹. It was also revealed that officers had lost paperwork relating to Warren's disappearance including the crucial Brief of Evidence, the entire transcript of Russell's 1990 inquest, vital hair samples found in Russell's hand, and the original missing person's report into Mattaini's disappearance. In her closing remarks, Deputy State Coroner, Jacqueline Milledge, described the investigation into Warren's death as 'a grossly inadequate and shameful investigation. Indeed to characterise it as an 'investigation' is to give it a label it does not deserve'⁴². Highly critical of the earlier police investigations, Milledge declared that, 'Given the disgraceful investigation into Mr. Warren's suspected death and the completely 'lack lustre' investigation into Mr. Russell's demise, it would not be unreasonable for the gay community to believe that as a group they do not warrant proper police attention'⁴³.

The reason for the disturbing inadequacy of the police investigation may have stemmed from the location of the beat itself, for the Marks Park crime-scene jars with the popular postcard 'sun, surf, sand' image of Bondi. Such ambivalence is evident in dominant representations of the Australian beach which are careful to suppress its more sinister aspects in favour of a more sanitized image. Recent publicity on the 'gay gang murders' makes explicit the tensions inherent in the dominant constructions of Bondi as a tourist mecca and national treasure. The story of the gay hate gangs and their victims is presented as a standard badlands narrative, with Greg Callaghan's telling newspaper headline, 'Bondi Badlands'⁴⁴. The mythical nature of badlands cannot be understated. As Ross Gibson⁴⁵ defines them:

badlands are made by imaginations that are prompted by narratives. A badlands is a narrative thing set in a natural location. A place you can actually visit, it is also laid out eerily by your mind before you get there. It is a disturbing place that you feel compelled to re-visit despite all your wishes for comfort or complacency.

In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands*, Gibson argues that part of the way the badlands myth operates is the fact 'that a special 'quarantine-zone' exists within a general location [which] tends to guarantee that everywhere else outside the cordon can be defined (with reference to the no-go zone) as well-regulated, social and secure'⁴⁶. Such myths imply that the

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violence 'can be assigned to a no-go area, to a place which is comprehensible as elsewhere-but-still-in-Australia'⁴⁷. Positioned in Australia's largest city, Sydney, Bondi is a densely populated and popular coastal suburb. It is certainly not isolated nor a 'quarantine zone'. Yet Callaghan successfully maps the badlands trail onto this mythic site, and in doing so, makes explicit the tensions between the safe, public face of Bondi, and its more dangerous, sinister Other. By framing 'Bondi' as a 'badlands', Callaghan demonstrates yet again the cultural ambivalence held towards this cherished Australian icon, Bondi. As he puts it, Bondi is simultaneously both an 'idyllic setting' and the site of 'horrific crimes'⁴⁸.

In Callaghan's badlands narrative, the popular cliff-top walk is described as a 'shadowy ... favoured killing field' for a 'gang of teenage thugs'⁴⁹. The iconic Bondi cliffs are described as 'bloodied', and the coastline deemed 'Hate's fatal shore'⁵⁰. In such coverage, juxtapositions between the beautiful, safe, day-time Bondi and the unbeautiful, out of control night-time Bondi are explicitly spelt out. In a description which exemplifies this polarization, Callaghan⁵¹ writes that:

The pathway skirting the cliffs between Bondi and Tamarama beaches in Sydney's upmarket eastern suburbs seems too spectacular a setting to have the stench of murder hanging over it. By day, it's crowded with suntanned locals, smartly dressed tourists and visiting Hollywood stars, but it was here in the late 1980s that a handful of young men were bashed and dragged screaming to their deaths after nightfall.

Such renderings of space – playing off the public, day-time site with its 'darker side' or 'Gothic underbelly'⁵² – imply that when the sun sets, the picnicking families, fitness enthusiasts and day-trippers disappear without a trace. As night falls, so too does the site's heteronormative and legitimate public persona. Out of the darkness, according to mainstream media discourses, the hunting ground arises, complete with men jingling carkeys hoping to gratify a sexual urge, followed by gangs of gay bashers intent on tracking their prey in their own bizarre blood sport. In this picture, the beat-goers and gay-bashers are clearly demarcated from the locals, tourists, and power-walkers as if they belong to mutually exclusive groups.

Given this deeply problematic rendering of Bondi as a cultural icon haunted by an unacknowledged queer and violent background, I would argue that the positioning of the beat at the Bondi locale was almost certainly as important as the fact that the murders took place at an 'illegitimate' relatively unpoliced site, in determining police interest in the 'gay gang murders'. The site, in this case, was of enormous consequence in determining the representation, both of the murders and of the men themselves, in legal and mainstream media discourses. As a beat, and a *Bondi* beat at that, the very crime scene worked against the murders and suspected murders of these men being taken seriously by either police or journalists.

CONCLUSION

As Butler⁵³ has argued, one of the characteristics of the publicly 'grieved life' is that the circumstances of the death should not be uncomfortably confronting for the general population. The beat location of the crimes studied here immediately disqualifies

the murders as 'grievable' in that the site itself confronted mainstream society with both public sex and visible homosexuality. These victims, then, could not possess the ideal features of the regularly mourned 'innocent victim'. Rather they were tainted by association with mainstream media and police discursive constructions of beats as illegal, risky, and tawdry. In other words, at this time, men who used beats were considered as 'guilty' as those who bashed and killed them. Due to the victims' very presence at the counter-site of a beat, their lives were deemed 'ungrievable', and the crimes against them, unimportant, at least to police, and via their symbiotic relationship, to the mainstream media as well.

This paper has demonstrated the ways in which the very site of a murder can have dramatic impact on whether or not the victim's life is considered publicly grievable. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the suspicious deaths and disappearances under investigation here were relegated to unimportance due to their occurrence at a known beat. In other words, for the police institutions and mainstream media discourses of the time to acknowledge the existence of such crimes would also have meant making evident the existence of beats and the popularity of male-to-male sexual practices. Grievable lives are only granted to those who appear to foreground 'the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility'⁵⁴. If we disavow some lives, discount them as 'ungrievable', we automatically assert, as Butler tells us, that we are 'as much constituted by those [we] grieve for'⁵⁵ as by those we don't.

In the original refusal to mourn the loss of the lives of Gilles, Ross, John and Kritchikorn, we deny any ethical responsibility we have to them as fellow citizens. Their deaths show how the location of these savage bashings somehow managed to translate their very lives as unimportant and their hold on their communities as members entitled to safety and concern as negligible. In doing this, we have allowed the site to dictate that these men were not human, indeed could not be human, because they made plain that which Australian society in the late 1980s and early 1990s preferred to keep hidden: a world beyond the comforting 'straight' one of the daylight parks, where public sex was ordinary and homosexuality everyday. Police and mainstream media discourses at this time, constituted our social world as determinedly heterosexist on the very bodies of gay men who died at beats. They insistently disavowed their responsibility, as public watchdogs, to care for all members of the community, preferring instead to state through their actions and inactions that only certain people rated the rank of 'citizen', and that men who were thrown from the cliffs at beats were certainly not amongst them.

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¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 January 1907, as quoted in Leone Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2001, p. 75

² Anne Game, 'Nation and identity: Bondi', *New Formations*, 11, (Summer 1990): 108.

³ I am using the term 'abject' in the broadest possible sense, as Julia Kristeva does in *Powers of Horror* (1982), when she suggests that 'abjection functions not simply at the corporeal and psychological level but at the sociospatial, being extended to places and people' (cited in Jarvis, 1998:192).

⁴ The 2003 New South Wales Coronial Inquest focussed, primarily, on the death of John Russell and suspected deaths of Gilles Mattaini and Ross Warren. Another victim, Kritchikom Rattanajaturathaporn, was found dead at the bottom of the cliffs at Marks Park in July 1990. Three juveniles were subsequently arrested and imprisoned for his murder.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London & New York: Verso, 2004.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York & London: Routledge, 1993.

⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, p. 15.

⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, p. 33.

⁹ Media theorists have observed that news content is produced and filtered mainly through journalists' sense of 'newsworthiness', in other words, what makes a good story. The central elements of this being immediacy, dramatization, personalization, titillation, continuity, and novelty (Ericson et. al 1989 and 1991; Chibnall, 1977; Hall et. al, 1978).

¹⁰ 'New claim on gay murders', *Sydney Star Observer*, 9 May, 2002.

¹¹ 'New claim on gay murders', *Sydney Star Observer*, 9 May, 2002.

¹² Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' Heterotopias', 1967, p. 5. Available online: <http://www.foucault.info/documents/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> [accessed 11 August 2003]

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

¹⁴ Tomsen, Stephen, 'Homophobic Violence, Cultural Essentialism and Shifting Sexual Identities', *Social & Legal Studies*, Vol. 15,3 (2006): 389-407

¹⁵ Stephen Tomsen, 'Killings as "Hate" Attacks', *Hatred, murder and male honour: anti-homosexual homicides in New South Wales, 1980-2000*, Canberra, Australia: Australian Institute of Criminology, Research and Public Policy Series, 2002,

¹⁶ Tomsen, 'Killings as "Hate" Attacks', *Hatred, murder and male honour: anti-homosexual homicides in New South Wales, 1980-2000*

¹⁷ Dereka Rushbrook, 'Cities, Queer Space, and the Cosmopolitan Tourist', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 8, 1-2 (2002): 4.

¹⁸ 'Dark Places', *Sydney Star Observer*, 17 March, 2005.

¹⁹ 'Address4SEX Worldwide Cruising Directory', <http://address4sex.com/cruising.shtml> [accessed 7 October 2005]

²⁰ For example, the *Gay Australia Guide*, *Fridae* and *Sydney Star Observer*

²¹ Gary Wotherspoon, 'City of the Plain': *History of a gay sub-culture*, NSW: Hale & Ironmonger, 1991.

²² Wayne Myslik, 'Renegotiating The Social/Sexual Identities of Places: Gay Communities as safe havens or sites of resistance?' in Nancy Duncan (ed.), *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 162.

²³ Cited in Stephen Murray, 'Self Size and Observable Sex' in Leap, William, *Public Sex / Gay Space*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1999, p. 166.

²⁴ 'Bondi Badlands', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 4-5 October, 2003.

²⁵ Stephen Page, 'Interview – Stephen Page', *Four Corners*, 16 May 2005, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2005/s1366917.htm>, [accessed 7 October 2005]

²⁶ State Coroner's Findings & Recommendations into the death of John Allan Russell and the suspected deaths of Ross Bradley Warren and Gilles Jacques Mattaini, 9 March 2005, p. 13. Available on-line, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2005/s1369269.htm>, [accessed 7 October 2005]

²⁷ Stephen Tomsen, 'Killings as "Hate" Attacks', *Hatred, murder and male honour: anti-homosexual homicides in New South Wales, 1980-2000*, p. 49.

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²⁹ Police interview with D, 29/8/90, p. 5, quoted in Tomsen, 'Killings as "Hate" Attacks', *Hatred, murder and male honour: anti-homosexual homicides in New South Wales, 1980-2000*, p. 39.

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