

2022

# "Stay sexy and don't get murdered:" race, gender, and the meaning/making of true crime

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/46941>

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**“STAY SEXY AND DON’T GET MURDERED:” RACE, GENDER, AND THE  
MEANING/MAKING OF TRUE CRIME**

by

**HEATHER A. MOONEY**

B.A., Clark University, 2011

M.A., Simmons University, 2015

M.S. Simmons University, 2015

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2022



Approved by

First Reader

---

Jessica T. Simes, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Sociology

Second Reader

---

Heather Schoenfeld, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Sociology

Third Reader

---

Sarah Miller, Ph.D.  
Senior Lecturer of Sociology

Fourth Reader

---

Deborah Carr, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology

Fifth Reader

---

Ashley Mears, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology

## DEDICATION

This (and everything I do) is dedicated to my amazing sister, Sara Mooney, my loving husband, Christopher Cleary, my dearest grammy Roberta, and my wonderful and supportive parents, Allison and Peter Mooney. This is further dedicated to all the support people and pets in my life, including my very best friends from kindergarden to high school, college to graduate school. Thank you for inspiring me, supporting me, pushing me, challenging me, motivating me, reminding me what matters, taking me on adventures, making me laugh, and bringing me back down to earth when I start to float away.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would have been possible without the support, understanding, and critical mind of Dr. Jessica Simes, whose patience, inspiring research methods and analysis, careful editing, and unwavering support guided this work. It further would not have been possible without my fantastic committee, Dr. Sarah Miller, Dr. Deborah Carr, and Dr. Heather Schoenfeld, who have been the most amazing mentors and colleagues during my dissertation and academic job process. Thank you all for being there for me, for your time, energy, and consideration. You have taught me not only how to be a strong researcher and theorist, but how to lead by example, be an effective mentor, as well as a more resilient and supportive person. I also wish to thank Dr. Ashley Mears for her incisive critiques, mentorship, and guidance over the years, as well as Dr. Saida Grundy for her energy, enthusiasm, and generative observations—both in class and during one-on-one meetings—which truly helped motivate this project. I am also sincerely grateful for my students at Boston University at Simmons University for their wisdom, wit, and curiosity. My students inspire me every day.

I also wish to thank Julia Modigliani, my kindergarten teacher who always supported and cared for me, and Andrea Kalember, my high school Advanced Placement English Literature teacher, for introducing me to literary theory and research while providing me with the nurturing classroom space that I needed at the time. I am also eternally grateful to Dr. Nina Kushner, Dr. Melissa Butler, Dr. Jay Elliott, Dr. Debra Osnowitz, as well as the Sociology and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Departments at Clark

University, for inspiring and enabling me to pursue social science research and critical theory from an interdisciplinary lens. I am further thankful for my experiences in the Gender and Cultural Studies department at Simmons University, and am especially appreciative of Dr. Jo Trigilio, Dr. Jyoti Puri, and Dr. Saher Selod. I carry your wisdom, guidance, and knowledge with me, and am truly grateful for the time and energy you have invested in me as a student, colleague, and person over the years.

Finally, I want to lovingly and humbly acknowledge my wonderful friends who kept me both motivated and sane during this six-year process: Mariellen Robotham, Lianne Roux, Selma Hedlund, Kelsey Harris, Margaret Nicholson, Lauren Montgomery, and last—but certainly not least—Dana Ahern, for his unparalleled emotional support and copyediting skills as we navigate the delights and challenges of doctoral studies together. My love and gratitude to you all is endless.

**“STAY SEXY AND DON’T GET MURDERED:” RACE, GENDER, AND THE  
MEANING/MAKING OF TRUE CRIME**

**HEATHER A. MOONEY**

Boston University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2022

Major Professor: Jessica T. Simes, Assistant Professor of Sociology

**ABSTRACT**

True crime—whether appearing in books, podcasts, films, internet forums, or documentaries—is a burgeoning area of entertainment. The narrativization of crime relies on sensationalism; it is designed to evoke an emotional experience and inform emotional states (Bishop 2014; Robertson 2019; Wiltenburg 2004). Data suggests that over 70% of true crime consumers of true crime are women, and the vast majority are White, heterosexually-partnered, and college educated (Boling and Hull 2018; Ask Wonder 2020). To account for this gendered pattern of consumption, scholars argue that fear of being a victim, learning “survival” strategies, and/or navigating past traumas motivates women’s disproportionate consumption, rendering true crime a form of narrative risk management (Browder 2006; Vicary and Fraley 2010). However, this does not completely explain the draw for true crime, especially when analyzed along the axis of race. If consumption of true crime is a coping strategy to deal with myriad forms of gendered vulnerability, why do White women partake while women of color—particularly Black, Latina/x/e, and Indigenous women, who are statistically more at risk for such egregious violence—do not?

I use true crime as a case to theorize the relationship between gender, race, and  
vii

emotion, especially perceptions of risk and vulnerability. This cross-disciplinary dissertation uses survey data, over 120 interviews, responsive journaling, and comparative discourse analysis of popular true crime coverage, to theorize the relationship of race, gender, and emotion in the production and consumption of true crime.

Moving beyond a simple critique of textual representation, I argue the charged and selective stories in true crime, as well as its formulaic structure and content, are a site of racialization *vis-à-vis* narrative and emotive constructions of risk and social control. These narratives of “White-on-White” crime represent a *White myth*, adapted for a moment where (White) America is paradoxically more aware of racial inequality while retaining notions of a “post-race” and “color blind” society. I further examine the interrelationship of race, gender, and emotion in the engagement and effects of true crime communities, including the role of (anticipated) victimhood, fear, as well as perceptions of risk, resistance, and time. In closing, I examine the maintenance and violation of feeling rules (Hochschild 1979; Wingfield 2010), or “appropriate” displays of affect, in true crime consumption. I further explore how lived distance from violence is inversely related to one’s tolerance for representations of violence, and how the emotional experience of gendered vulnerability is translated into extensions of state power. In sum, this project explores how Whiteness and femininity undergird a draw towards *dark leisure* as a site of “edutainment,” or educational-entertainment, as well as knowledge consumption and production.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vii
Chapter 1 – Introduction and Literature Review .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review .....	5
True Crime: A Brief History of Sensationalism .....	5
Witnessing, Spectacle, and Spectators .....	9
Representing Crime: Victims, Race, and Gender in the “Culture of Control” .....	11
Feeling Risk: Framing Race, Gender, and Emotion.....	19
Mapping Consumption: Narratives, New Media, Fandom, Communities, Leisure, and “Edutainment” .....	26
Key Findings and Chapter Overview .....	35
Chapter 2 – Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis .....	39
Introduction.....	39
True Crime as a Case.....	40
Participant Recruitment, Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis .....	43
Consent and Confidentiality .....	53

A Note on Positionality .....	54
A Note on Whiteness and Scholarly Research .....	55
Significance and Conclusion .....	59
Methodological Appendix .....	63
Survey Format and Questions.....	63
Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Consumers and Producers .....	68
Optional Journaling Prompts .....	74
Chapter 3 – The Making of True Crime: “Racial Grammar” and Critical Approaches to Narrative .....	76
Introduction.....	76
True Crime: An Overview .....	78
True Crime: Material and Economic Structures of Production .....	81
The (Narrative) Structure of True Crime.....	85
The Making of Truth.....	85
Rhythm, Formula, and Sensemaking .....	87
Race, Representation, and Symbolic Structures .....	91
“Interesting” versus “Boring:” Constructing Aberration in True Crime.....	95
White Myths: Race, Gender, and the “Racial Grammar” of True Crime.....	100
True Crime and/as Resistance.....	108
“Narrative Justice” .....	111

Conclusion .....	116
Chapter 4 – True Crime Communities: Formation and Mobilization.....	119
Introduction.....	119
True Crime Communities .....	121
Community Building: Forging Relationships.....	123
Community Building: Empowerment and “Consciousness Raising” .....	125
Community Building: Prevention and “Situational Awareness” .....	127
Community Building: “Victims-in-Waiting” .....	131
Community Mobilization: Representation, Recent Cases, and Alerts .....	139
Community Mobilization: Grassroots and Community Justice.....	143
Crowd-Sourced and Community Justice versus Armchair Detectives .....	147
Conclusion .....	150
Chapter 5 – Feeling Risk: Race, Gender, Emotion, and True Crime.....	152
Introduction.....	152
Feeling Rules .....	155
Feeling Rules: Prevention and Education.....	155
Feeling Rules: Risk, Race, and Gender .....	158
Feeling Rules: Temporality, Bearing Witness, and Constructing the (Moral) Self.....	164
Breaking Feeling Rules: Anger.....	167
Breaking Feeling Rules: Arousal .....	170

Gendered Vulnerability and/as State Power .....	177
Conclusion .....	184
Chapter 6 – Conclusion: “True Crime is a One Way Mirror” .....	186
Introduction.....	186
Discussion.....	187
“Racial Grammar” and White Myths .....	187
Race, Gender, Emotion, and Time.....	188
Gendered Vulnerability and/as State Power .....	192
Implications .....	193
Future Research.....	195
Conclusion .....	197
“True Crime is a One-Way Mirror” .....	197
References.....	200
Vita.....	222

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Theoretical Cases and Analytic Frames.....	41
Table 2: Survey Data.....	47
Table 3: Interview Respondents.....	50

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Most Watched Genres on Netflix (Forbes 2021) .....	28
Figure 2a, 2b, and 2c: Images from CrimeCon (The Washington Post 2019) .....	30
Figure 3a and 3b: National Police Gazette Covers (National Police Gazette 2022).....	78
Figure 4: Google Searches for “True Crime” Over Time .....	82
Figure 5: Geographic Concentration of Google Searches for “True Crime” .....	82
Figure 6: True Crime Podcast Twitter Followers by Gender (Joyce 2018) .....	84

## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Within the last decade, true crime entertainment has exploded. This once marginal (and “unseemly”) genre has proliferated across entertainment sites, including on-demand streaming platforms. True crime is featured on 15-minute to two hour long podcasts, web-series, documentaries, and multi-episode docuseries, sensationally describing more notorious serial killers and criminals, such as Jim Jones or Ted Bundy, as well as lesser publicized cases. While true crime covers a wide variety of crimes and related topics—including unjust trials, unsolved or cold cases, mysterious disappearances, white collar crime, and the exotic animal trade—the majority of true crime entertainment revolves around murder and bodily harm. Although true crime content and availability has expanded, now including everything from more familiar news coverage and novels to in-person meet ups, the consumer base and popular coverage remains notably stable. True crime consumption has been and continues to be highly patterned, with women aged 18-34 representing around 73-75% of true crime consumers.<sup>1</sup> Of those women, the vast majority are White, heterosexually partnered, and college educated (Ask Wonder 2020; Vicary and Fraley 2010; Boling and Hull 2017).

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use the words “man” and “women,” with the understanding that these categories are fundamentally incomplete and limited. I employ this language due to existing consumer reports and empirical studies that use binary conceptions of sex and gender. While my survey and interview data attempts to remedy this gap, most reported identifying as ciswomen or assigned female at birth, even as their gender identity is redefined over time.

Current scholarship suggests that women voraciously consume true crime due to experiences with or fear of potential trauma, and consumers use true crime as a form of “risk management” to better identify and protect themselves against harm (Vicary and Fraley 2010; Boling and Hull 2017; Munroe 2020). However, crime has overall decreased in recent years (Gramlich 2019)<sup>2</sup>, and the likelihood of being victim to such crimes (including rape, torture, and murder) is low in general, especially if the perpetrator is a stranger. Further, unlike the majority of the true crime consumer base, these violent crimes are notably higher for women “at the margins:” women of color, women who work in the sex industry, are economically disenfranchised, suffer from addiction or another disability, or who identify as transgender or otherwise gender non-conforming (Sanders and Platt 2017; Harrell 2016; Gyamerah, Baguso, Santiago-Rodriguez, Arayasirikul, Lin, Turner, Taylor, McFarland, Wilson and Wesson 2021).

Further, experiences of violence are deeply stratified by race. While White people constitute 65.7% of the US population, they experience a rate of 5.1 for risk of serious violence. In contrast, Black Americans represent 12.1% of the population with a rate risk of 9.2 for serious violence, Hispanics constitute 15.2% of the population with 7.0 risk, and Indigenous people or American Indians comprise .5% of the population with a risk rate of 12.1 (Harrell 2007; Warnken and Lauritsen 2019). Black and Indigenous women (American Indian and Alaskan Native) experience the highest rates of homicide for women across all racial categories in the United States—4.4 and 4.3 per 100,000

---

<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the summer of 2020, homicide rates began to increase intensely, increasing 35% from 2019 – 2020 (Reinberg 2022).

population, respectively—and over half of those murders (53.3%) are related to intimate partner violence (Petrosky, Blair, Betz, Fowler, Jack, and Lyons 2017). Clearly, experiences of murder and other forms of direct violence are racially patterned, with people and women of color experiencing significantly higher rates of more serious violence, including torture and homicide, accounting for population.

If, as scholarship suggests, consumption of true crime is a coping strategy to deal with myriad forms of gendered vulnerability and trauma, why do White women partake so voraciously, when women of color do not? While women of color, specifically Black, Latina/x/e, and Indigenous women do engage with the genre, it is with markedly less frequency and often with different motivations than their White counterparts. Put another way: what does this strikingly specific consumer base and leisure practice reveal about race and gender, affect and emotion, individuals and society, risk and vulnerability, and crime and punishment, in our current moment?

In this dissertation, I examine race, gender, and emotion in relation to the consumption and production of the true crime genre. Using survey data, interviews, and comparative discourse analysis, I explore how racialized and gendered subject positions inform explicit and latent motivations, interests, and rationales for true crime consumption, and explore what such consumption patterns might suggest about raced and gendered identity formations. I argue that true crime consumption and production—as a site of emotive constructions of violence and deviance—can be better understood when putting gender and race in conversation, exploring the co-constitutive relationship between race and gender. In other words, by identifying explicit and implicit motivations

for engaging with this genre, including senses of risk and vulnerability as linked to representations of crime, punishment, justice, and the state, true crime consumption and its effects can be better understood as a gendered *and* racialized phenomenon. I use true crime as a case to analyze the affective, gendered, and racialized processes manifest in the interactional consumption of knowledge and entertainment and/as *dark leisure* practices.<sup>3</sup>

My data suggests that race and gender are embedded in the consumption of true crime, and that true crime is employed and experienced differently based on racialized positionality, and in turn, invites different effects. Indeed, a charged paradox emerges in interviews and true crime coverage, particularly regarding privilege, safety, and constructions of the state. On the one hand, the White women I interviewed are largely aware of “White privilege,” their relative safety from such violent crimes, the genre’s tendency to give disproportionate attention to cases with a White victim and perpetrator, and broader patterns racialized state violence (especially with national attention to the 2020 murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests). On the other hand, consumer’s senses of gendered risk and vulnerability are amplified by true crime, which purportedly offers “bystander intervention” and “situational awareness” as violence prevention strategies, and readily employ the (racial) state as a critical player in maintaining women’s safety from (men’s)

---

<sup>3</sup> I use the term *dark leisure* to describe leisure practices that centralize and commodify lived human suffering for various motivations, often described as “educational” purposes. These can also include slum or poverty tourism, prison tourism, plantation tourism, dark tourism, as well as ghost tours and horror movies.

violence. These senses of individualized, stylized, and gendered safety behaviors are often coupled with a vicarious and voyeuristic relationship with the state, which ultimately re-engage and reproduce the state as the arbiter of justice and social order. As such, the state is re-invoked as a necessary institution, with policing and punishment as a problematic but imperative practice in the prevention and response to (gendered) violence. In this way, true crime consumption and associated communities “hail”—*a la* Althusser (1971)—a racialized and gendered sense of risk and vulnerability that affectively reproduces the racial and carceral state (Goldberg 2002; Simon 2007).

In this introduction, I begin with a brief history of the true crime genre and a discussion of relevant literature, including sociology of culture, race and representation, theories of (racialized) emotion and habitus, senses of risk in relation to identity and social location, as well as perspectives on true crime narrative and communities, leisure practices, and consumption. In closing, I provide an overview of the chapters that constitute this dissertation project.

## Literature Review

### *True Crime: A Brief History of Sensationalism*

Although the term “true crime” only dates to the nineteenth century, the phenomenon itself is significantly older, with “true crime to fit every decade” (Browder 2010: 124). Since its inception, true crime has intentionally employed sensationalism as a narrative tool, making it distinct from other sorts of crime reporting. The earliest true crime reports can be traced to Europe in the 1500s. These were disseminated through oral

and written word, including ballads, broadsheets, and pamphlets, each recounting crimes and executions of the condemned to the general public. Such reports were curated as visceral cautionary tales, often using religion as a proxy for morality and as the necessary cornerstone of social order. At this time, reports employed the perspectives of victims, and emphasized religious worship, pious family-life, and acquiescence to governmental authority as the primary means to prevent such crimes (Wiltenburg 2004). And beginning with execution sermons in the late seventeenth century, the United States began to disseminate social and religious agendas through crime narrative, following a similar trajectory to European true crime reporting (Frost 2016).

Later, secular explanations for crime became more mainstream. This new framing constructed crime and moral actions through humanist, enlightenment ideals, including judicial control, punishment, and state power. True crime narratives began to incorporate perspectives of the perpetrator, inviting consumers to vicariously experience the lurid details of the crime as well as the guilt and regret of the perpetrator. Here, true crime consumers were able to adopt the perspective of the perpetrator while feeling disgust for their actions; a relationship defined by simultaneous intimacy and distance, which helped produce an internal map of purity and “pollution,” or taboo (Douglas 2002 [1966]). As judicial processes and state power became new symbols of human reason, their status was cemented through individuals’ emotional states, using sensationalism as a tool to disseminate ideology and build institutional trust (Wiltenburg 2004). In the burgeoning true crime genre, criminals and crime became employed as a metric by which to assess and establish one’s own moral position. In this way, true crime sought to ensure the

relationship of public order *vis-à-vis* the interior life of individuals, using external and affectively charged responses, i.e., sensations, to produce an internal moral map. As such, while the narrative form and content have varied, true crime consistently (re)emerges as a means to ideologically and affectively transmit socio-cultural norms around im/morality, crime, violence, and deviance.

Today, still following secular and sensationalist logics, contemporary true crime often covers outlandish, salacious, and violent crimes. It highlights the biological and psychological predispositions of perpetrators, and follows investigations and court proceedings (Frost 2016; Seltzer 2006). Despite the contemporary emphasis on the secular, true crime consumption also retains latent Durkheimian threads of collective effervescence, “the sacred,” and the pursuit of justice as shared totem and ritual (Smith 2008; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Other scholars have pointed to the gory content of true crime as representing and reproducing a troubling sociality based on violence; a symptom of late modernity. For cultural theorist Mark Seltzer (1997; 2006), the growing attention to true crime related content, such as serial killers, indicates a new (anti-) “hero” of the American public, and represents the “convening of the public around scenes of violence [...] [which] has come to make up a *wound culture*: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (Seltzer 1997: 3). Ultimately, regardless of latent function or cultural meaning of true crime, the genre remains an affectively charged and seemingly righteous site for identity and community building in our current moment.

While true crime represents a clear case of the relationship between individual emotion, affectively-tied collectives (as victims, spectators, and witnesses), and social norms as disseminated through leisure practices, there is no scholarship that critically analyzes how a genre that is animated *by* emotion that disseminates norms *around* emotion is differentially experienced in relation to one's (raced and gendered) positionality. As a sensationalized genre that puts violent crime into narrative form, true crime overwhelmingly permeates contemporary media platforms, including books, podcasts, YouTube channels, and on-demand streaming services.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the decentralized and diversified presence of contemporary true crime makes any universal patterns hard to discern. However, despite this proliferation, the consumer base and included content remains highly patterned—especially in regards to race and gender—making it an apt case to examine the relationship of race, gender, and emotion, through charged narratives of violence and justice.

---

<sup>4</sup> As discussed, true crime has historically been available through written texts, periodicals, ballads, and true crime novels have retained their appeal, especially so since the 1960s. Some famous titles include Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), Gabriel Garcia-Marquez's *News of a Kidnapping* (1996), John Grisham's *The Innocent Man* (2006), and Dave Cullen's *Columbine* (2009). Contemporary true crime shows have integrated and highlighted new technologies, like *Forensic Files* (1996-2011). "Adjacent" true crime also borrows from reality TV formats, such as *The First 48* (2004 – present) or *The People's Court* (1981 – present). True crime is further circulated on devoted YouTube channels, audio books, and podcasts, where experts and lay people alike detail violent crimes, mysterious disappearances, investigations, and any resolutions. Fictionalized shows also incorporate true crime elements, where plot points are "ripped from the headlines." This can be seen in *Law & Order* and associated spin-offs (1990 – present) and other dramatized narratives "based on a true story." Perhaps more embellished (but still "true") depictions include *Mindhunter* (2017 – present), which details the birth of the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit, *Narcos* (2015-2017), about Columbian drug lord Pablo Escobar, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* (2019), a film starring Zac Efron about infamous 1970's serial killer Ted Bundy, and the miniseries *Waco* (2018), about the development of David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Texas, which culminated in a violent 51-day standoff with the FBI in 1993.

### *Witnessing, Spectacle, and Spectators*

Beyond consumer demographics, true crime content itself is notably patterned around race, overwhelmingly featuring missing and murdered white women and girls (Stillman 2007; Moss 2019), leading some to lament “the Unbearable Whiteness of true crime” (Weinman 2020). Beyond literal content, the genre more broadly provides some insights into its specific appeal and emergence, which can be theorized from a critical and intersectional lens. Like pornography (eliciting orgasm or ejaculation), melodrama (tears), horror (shuddering, screams, or chills), and comedy (laughter), true crime is a *body genre* (Williams 1991) in that it invites the visceral, physical experience of fear, horror, and disgust. As such, true crime is fundamentally sensational; it is designed to evoke and inform physical and emotional responses (see Wiltenburg 2004), which are contoured by race and gender.

The specific bent of true crime further represents what sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2009) describes as *law and order pornography* or *penal pornography*. For Wacquant, law-and-order pornography “reduces the fight against delinquency to a ritualized spectacle that serves only to feed the fantasies of order of the citizenry and signify the virile authority of state decision-makers” (2009: 243). The state is “virile,” with the barbaric “fantasies” of the populace “ogling” punishment, revealing a context in which legal process and punishment is carried out for exhibition and spectacle. Considering the charged elements of penal pornography and the highly racialized reach of law, policing, and punishment, this arguably represents a “colorblind” and contemporary form of *folk*

*pornography* (Hall 1979),<sup>5</sup> or a powerfully charged and well-circulated image depicting anti-Black violence, which perversely ferments White racial community and solidarity. While true crime covers more of the social and legal process surrounding a crime, it maintains spectacular representations of crime and consequence that cultivate collective identity, and reifies the (racial) state as the key site for justice, punishment, and retribution (Durkheim 1958; Goldberg 2002; Seltzer 1997, 2006; Smith 2008; Simon 2007; Wacquant 2009).

As a visceral and sensational spectacle, true crime positions consumers as spectators and witnesses of crime and punishment as part of a collective, where witnessing describes “reluctant or testimonial observation” and spectatorship describes “participatory and invested” viewing (Brown 2014: 190). While witnessing can provide “feminist interventions” to violence (see Chatterji 2012), it can also serve “as an instrument of affective imperatives, emotive gestures [...] negotiating the terms of the cadaver of the other [...] [*where*] *the viewer is absolved of indictments of the violent participatory gaze*” (Brown 2014: 183; emphasis added). Specifically regarding crime and punishment, cultural criminologist Michelle Brown (2009, 2010) describes the *penal spectator* as a member of privileged classes who is exempt from the reach of the *carceral state* (Simon 2007), but still “plays” with the spectacle of punishment, ultimately perpetuating the system through a limited and removed position that is disguised as

---

<sup>5</sup> Historian Jaquelyn Dowd Hall (1979) coined the term *folk pornography* when describing the extensive coverage of lynchings, where widely circulated news stories of Black men accused of raping White women cumulated in the brutal murders of Black men (as well as Black women) by White lynch mobs. For Hall, this extrajudicial violence cultivated a perverse sense of racial collectivity, identity, and imagined superiority for Whites.

intimate understanding and objective knowledge. According to Brown, this simultaneous distance/proximity to penal apparatuses produces a specific subjectivity: “The penal spectator [...] is a temporal possibility and proclivity, a logic which expresses durability and prevalence in a contemporary framework amid particular sets of cultural conditions” (2010: 111). In true crime consumption, witnesses and/as spectators engage long-form narratives of violence, death, and descriptions of punishment, through different means and to different ends.

*Representing Crime: Victims, Race, and Gender in the “Culture of Control”*

Culture and its numerous systems of representation, including media, is one way social inequalities are maintained and reproduced (Lull 1995; Golash-Boza 2015). At the same time, culture is an interpretive, performative, and collective process, or a “tool kit” of various stories, symbols, and rituals, which actors employ to solve problems and negotiate their social worlds (Swidler 1986). This research connects cultural systems of representation with cultural processes of (embodied) performance, exploring how seemingly less significant, “micro”-level behaviors (such as leisure activities like true crime consumption) map onto broader discourses, patterns, and systems, which cyclically structure and (re)produce the cultural scripts that undergird individual actions and perspectives.

In describing contemporary themes in Western culture, sociologist David Garland (2001) argues that contemporary anxieties about crime and crime control in the United States have very little to do with actual crime rates. Instead, these anxieties precipitated

by changing social, economic, racial, and gender orders, where the unstable and “unruly” underpinnings of modern life accelerate the spread of a *culture of control* (Garland 2001). In his analysis, Garland (2001) largely focuses on increasing economic divides and capitalism as the “engine” of the culture of control. However, (state) recognition of violence, crime, criminality, victimhood, and deployment social control is stratified, and the culture of control *itself* is a racialized and gendered socio-ideological and institutional system. In turn, this dissertation attends to how the state—as a material, ideological, symbolic, and narrative system—system shape individual and collective sense of identity.

Mass media plays a key role in the production of this developing social order.

Garland (2001) highlights how the emergence of mass media between the 1950s through today contributes to the culture of control. He states (2001: 157-158, emphasis added):

TV has changed the rules of political speech. The TV encounter—with its *soundbite rapidity, emotional intensity, and its mass audience*—has tended to *push politicians to be more populist, more emotive, and more evidently in tune with public feeling* [...] The partly subconscious fears and resentments [...] find a cultural outlet and expression on the TV screen. They are played out there in the form of revenge dramas and morality tales, narratives of crime and punishment, stories of criminals brought to justice, and news of atrocities that *ignite outrage and demand catharsis*. These media representations undoubtedly give shape and emotional inflection to our experience of crime, and do so in a way that is largely dictated by the structure and values of media rather than the phenomenon it depicts. Television’s selective coverage of factual crime stories and its unrealistic crime dramas tend to distort public perceptions of the problem. *So too does its privilege of what might be called “victim discourse” over “system discourse”* [...] *This emphasis pushes us to respond to crime as an emotion, human drama and it prompts us to think of criminals as more numerous, more threatening, and more dangerous than they typically are* [...] *My point is [that] the mass media has tapped into, then dramatized and reinforced, a new public experience—an experience with profound psychological resonance—and in doing so it has institutionalized that experience. It has surrounded us with images of crime, pursuit, and*

*punishment, and it has provided us with regular, everyday occasions in which to play out the emotions of fear, anger, resentment, and fascination that our experience of crime provokes. [...] Public knowledge and opinion about criminal justice are based on collective representations rather than the thing itself. [...] The simultaneous spread of these cultural practices has reduced the psychological and emotional distance [of crime] [...]*

I quote at length here to illustrate how the material (new technologies), temporal (emergence at a high crime moment), and affective (anger, fear, fascination) elements of true crime consumption shape one's relative sense of risk, crime, justice, and punishment. Further, as Garland (2001) suggests, the outpouring of these narratives that "[reduce] the psychological and emotional distance" of crime has measurable effects on individual beliefs and behaviors. Exposure to crime narratives can result in a distorted sense of crime, criminal acts, and risk, ultimately correlated with an increasing citizen demand for tougher crime policies, including three strikes laws and increased policing (Callanan 2005). This also impacts voting behaviors, perceptions of changes in the judicial system, dis/trust of police, support for the death penalty, elevated perception of risk in neighborhoods and states, as well as an overestimation of crime rates and likelihood of personal risk of victimization (Bouzis and Creech 2018; Bruzzi 2016; Callanan 2005; Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn 2011; McCabe 2022; Webb 2021).

As part of this unfolding culture of control and (re)produced by mass-media, Garland argues that "crime has been re-dramatized" (2001: 10; Wacquant 2009). In this re-dramatization, the current victim rights movements have helped redefine the key characters associated with law and justice. Now, *the victim* plays a key role in shaping the emotional tone of conversations around crime, and by extension, law and policy.

Symbolically, the victim becomes a *proxy* for the public, and the victim (i.e., the public) deserves protection *by* the state as opposed to protection *from* the state (see also Bandes 2009; Sarat 2001; Garland 2001). This sense of shared victim identity (and national identity) undergirding the victim rights movement was explicitly rendered by Attorney General Janet Reno during her address to a victims' rights conference in 1996. She described, "I draw most of my strength from victims, for they represent America to me: people who will not be put down, people who will not be defeated, people who will rise again and stand for what is right... You are my heroes and heroines. You are but a little lower than the angels" (quoted in Simon 2007: 89).

As Garland describes, the "victim is no longer an unfortunate citizen who has been on the receiving end of criminal harm [...] [There is] a new collective meaning of victimhood, and a reworked relationship between the individual victim, symbolic victim, and the public institutions of crime control and criminal justice" (2001: 12). In true crime, the dramatization of crime and the emotionally and morally charged role of an "underserving" victim (as an individual and collective) are explicit and central to this charged media product, consumed on-demand as a leisure activity. As Garland (1990: 255; emphasis added) argues,

we need to study not just the grandiloquent public statements which are occasionally made but also the *pragmatic repetitive routines of daily practice*, for these routines contain within them distinctive patterns of meaning and symbolic forms which are enacted and expressed every time a particular procedure is adopted, a technical language used, or a specific sanction imposed.

As such, various narratives of crime—including the consumption of true crime as a

routinized leisure practice—is a site through which the symbolic economy of “crime,” including its racialized and gendered currents, can be theorized.

Crime narratives—as part of the victim-focused, penal iconography that is central to the unfolding culture of control—can take many forms, including: crime logs, victim impact statements, true crime stories, and dramatized fictions. Both “crime” and “narrative” are tied up in material and symbolic systems of legibility (Butler 1990, 2009), based on a dynamic interplay of state actors, institutions, media actors, and in/formal investigators that generate, collect, release, and circulate evidence. While what is included in crime content matters, so too does what is selectively erased or ignored in crime coverage. As sociologists Travis Linnemann and Corina Medley note in their analysis of redacted government documents, “the black bars set across a white background clearly delimit that which the viewer knows or can know, from that which cannot or must not be known” (2018: 2). While these “black bars” may be literal or constituted through absence, the resulting impact on consumer knowledge is analogous.

Clearly, selective and/or limited release of information can limit true crime coverage, but true crime narratives are also bound by the racialized, gendered, and other contours of the genre and media more generally. True crime coverage is often limited to extreme—and frequently intimate and/or sexualized—physical violence against White women and girls (Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade 1995; Moss 2019; Sommers 2016; Stillman 2007). In contrast, state violence, gang violence, scams, and white collar crime is largely excluded, and even crimes that “fit” traditional true crime genre (including Black serial killers, the rape and murder of Black women and girls, and high numbers of

missing and murdered Indigenous women) do not appear with great regularity in mainstream true crime coverage.

Despite lacking coverage in true crime, hegemonic systems of representation overwhelmingly criminalize Black and Brown bodies (Alexander 2010; Muhammad 2010). The collapse of Black and Brown people with criminality has myriad material, ideological, embodied, and socio-legal effects, including: scientific racism (Graves 2004; Muhammed 2010), stereotype threat (Steele 2011), the school-to-prison pipeline and disproportionate discipline of students of color (Hemez, Brent, and Mowen 2020), implicit racial bias (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, Davies 2004), explicit racial bias (including associations of raced bodies—especially non-White immigrants and Black Americans—with criminality [Alexander 2010; Simes and Waters 2014; Waters and Kasinitz 2015; Welch 2007]), redlining, ghettoization and (punitive) containment (Waquant 2001, 2009), unequal policing and surveillance (Capers 2009; Flores 2016; Rios 2011), disparate police use of force and sentencing (Goff et al 2016; Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018), the school-to-prison pipeline (Hietzeg 2016), mass incarceration and racial disparity in prisons (Alexander 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008), among other deleterious effects.

Representations of crime and deviance—as well as their material bases—employ, produce, and reify (racialized) frames and ideologies (Goffman 1972), producing a persistent though fallible illusion of coherence that works in service of White supremacy. Historically and through today, racialized *danger narratives* are a vehicle through which Black and Brown men are criminalized in mainstream media (Bhatia, Poyntine, and Tufail 2018; Muhammad 2010; Wyss 1999). Perhaps paradoxically, Black and Brown

men (and women) are largely absent in the traditional true crime genre, which overwhelmingly features “White-on-White crime” in privileged and protected *White spaces* (Anderson 2014) with White victims and White male perpetrators (Webb 2021). Unsurprisingly, White men—despite their overwhelming presence as perpetrators in true crime—tend to elide labels of criminality and violence, which is less “sticky” (Ahmed 2004) for White individuals than for people of color. *Hegemonic masculinity* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) is one vehicle through which masculinities are demarcated as “good” and “bad,” and through this racialized categorization men of color are imagined to contribute to White women’s always-already victimhood, whereas White men—and their institutional symbols, like the state and law—are its imagined protectors (Beydoun 2018; Brown 1995; Rondini 2018).

As an integral part of the culture of control, the “victim” position itself is inflected by race and gender, and the vulnerability, victimization, and suffering of White women is a familiar trope in true crime and in American history more broadly. This is especially apparent in relation to the colonial state and colonial efforts more broadly. For example, *captivity narratives*—a subgroup of danger narratives mentioned above—featured (embellished, exaggerated, and sometimes outright fictionalized) descriptions of White women who were captured and/or killed by Indigenous or Native American people, a theme which fascinated White audiences from the 1600s through the 1900s, and still today (Webb 2021; Wyss 1999).

True crime mirrors this trend, and coverage overwhelmingly features White women as victims.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, White womanhood signals victim status *despite* contrary evidence; even when suspected of criminal activity, White women’s vulnerability is emphasized (Dirks, Heldman, and Zack 2014). This is replicated in news media coverage, and the term *missing White woman syndrome* (Stillman 2007) captures the immense media attention devoted to missing and murdered White women and girls. Empirical studies confirm this, showing how White women are employed as “ideal victims” by news media, often receiving more frequent and intensive news coverage compared to their male or non-White counterparts (Klinger 2018; Sommers 2016). Importantly, “ideal victimhood” is moderated by age and place of coverage, and the coverage of White women in true crime media is not monolithic, showing how other areas of identity can complicate such a resonant *controlling image* (Hill Collins 1990). For instance, White women are generally constructed as “good girls” (through mothering, education, employment, age), or as “bad girls” (sex workers, engaging in promiscuous behavior, or otherwise deviating from gendered expectations) (Slakoff and Fredella 2019). However, even within the “bad girl” frame, missing, victimized, and/or murdered White women receive a disproportionate amount of media attention, prompting some scholars to call for

---

<sup>6</sup> Historically and through today, White women’s assumed sexual purity and embodied vulnerability has been used as a foil to Black men’s supposed sexual licentiousness and violence, and used as justification for lynching and other horrific forms of anti-Black violence (Smängs 2019; Wood 2018). Interestingly, in true crime, White women are prominently featured and rendered (sexually) vulnerable even without the presence of Black men or another racialized “Other,” though this still retains elements of racialization that will be discussed in chapter three.

legal action to promote more equitable media coverage in search of resolution and justice (Moss 2019).

These narratives of crime, violence, and deviance, coalesce and relationally employ particular frames (Goffman 1972), in turn forming a (colorblind) *racial grammar* of hegemonic discourse (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Spillers 1987). In sum, race and gender clearly play a role in representations of crime, victimization, violence, *and* senses of risk and vulnerability, all of which are key components within the consumption and production of true crime within a broader culture of control.

#### *Feeling Risk: Framing Race, Gender, and Emotion*

As representations of crime and criminality circulate along race and gendered lines, these symbolic systems are folded into and employ racialized *frames* (Goffman 1972; Feagin 2013; Butler 2009). As described by Joe Feagin (2013), the *White racial frame* incorporates racial stereotypes, narratives and interpretations, racial images, inclinations to discriminatory action, and racialized emotions, largely stemming from European colonial expansion (see also Hall 1992). These (White) racial frames are integral to North American culture broadly; as Erik Withers argues, “Whiteness is alive, in action, and within this social process, culture develops in ways that secure racial interests and racial hierarchy” (Withers 2017: 2-3; Hughey 2009).<sup>7</sup> As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2019: 4) describes,

---

<sup>7</sup> Whiteness precariously rests on and is violently enforced through imagined superiority, violence, expansion, possession, embodied behavior, emotional display, and fear, codified and protected by socio-legal apparatuses (Ahmed 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2019; Butler 1993; Du Bois 1920; Feagin, 2013; Sullivan 2006; Haney-Lopez 1996; Muhammad 2010; Roediger 2006; Apple 1998; Guess 2006; Anderson 2014).

despite variance, the racial order is reproduced because interacting individuals are constrained by social relations, group belonging, and historically constituted emotional group norms. Most Whites follow the normative racial script because they have adopted dominant actors' emotional repertoire.

Given this observation, it follows that true crime—as a profoundly raced and gendered genre in terms of content and consumption patterns—employs and reproduces White racial frames. In turn, this enables insights into the relationship of race and gender in relation to narratives of violence, especially regarding the affective contours of the White racial frame.

As discussed, true crime is theorized as one site where gender (and now race) informs differently experienced senses of risk, allowing for insights into how the White racial frame is experienced, internalized, enacted, and articulated by study participants. Indeed, (White) women's proclivity for true crime has certainly not gone unnoticed, and journalists as well as scholars of literature, (social) psychology, communications and media, and criminology have all explored different consumer motivations for engaging with true crime. Data suggests that over 70% of true crime consumers are women, and consumer reports show the vast majority of these women are White, 18-34 years old, college educated, and heterosexually partnered (Ask Wonder 2020; Boling and Hull 2018).<sup>8</sup> Existing scholarship maintains that fear of being a victim, learning “survival”

---

<sup>8</sup> Women's disproportionate engagement with true crime, particularly with coverage featuring a female victim and a male perpetrator, is perhaps surprising. Men are more likely to be physically violent, play violent video game, seek out historical documentation of violence, and demonstrate less aversion to gore and death generally—as measured by men's relative willingness to talk about or physically interact with dead animals or people—compared to women (Phan, Jardina, Sloane Hoyle, and Champarro 2012; Vicary and Fraley 2010).

strategies, and/or navigating past traumas, ultimately motivates women’s consumption of true crime (Browder 2006; Vicary and Fraley 2010). This suggests that true crime consumption is a form of gendered risk management informed by past and/or anticipated experiences with violence.<sup>9</sup>

Even as individual senses of risk are highly personal, social psychology literature agrees that perceptions of trust, safety, risk, and associated (emotional) display are shaped by identity and social location, including race, class, and gender (Cruwys, Ferries, Rathbone, Greenaway, and Saeri 2021; Froyum 2010; Kish-Gephart 2017; Kurtz and Zuckerman 1978; Zuckerman 1979, 2007). As Bonilla-Silva (2019: 3) describes, “[racialized emotions] are group-based and relational [...] Their group-based nature reflects the different positions of actors in racialized societies;” for instance, risk estimation and sensation seeking is higher in men than in women, and higher among White Americans than Black Americans (Kurtz and Zuckerman 1978; Zuckerman 1979, 2007). Given that the true crime genre is expressly designed to evoke and direct emotion (Wiltenburg 2004), and the reality that the genre maintains such patterned raced and gendered consumption, true crime offers a unique case to explore the reproduction and rupture of these tensions around race, gender, risk, and emotion in relation to the White racial frame.

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, alternative explanations abound, namely that high rates of consumption may be related to the audience’s desire for punishment or the consumer’s vicarious experience of extra-judicial power (Stoneman and Packer 2020; Gray and Benning 2019; Rogers 2015). However, I argue that punishment and (extra-) judicial power—including their definitions, evaluations, limitations, and implementations—are inextricably connected to deeply felt senses of vulnerability and risk, which is (in part) tied to raced and gendered positionality.

As mentioned, perceptions and experiences of risk is important to theorize from a racial and gendered perspective, especially given existing scholarship and interviewee's consistent assertion that safety concerns and risk management motivate true crime consumption. True crime is not just a form of risk management; it is—perhaps by extension—a form of vicarious risk *taking* related to the (racialized, gendered) self and identity (Zuckerman 2007), especially as interviewees describe the horror, disgust, fear, excitement, anxiety, and practical strategies accrued through their true crime consumption.

Goffman (1967) described high stakes voluntary risk-taking as “action,” which involves the acquisition and maintenance of strength of one’s “character,” such as being “courageous,” having “integrity,” and demonstrating “composure.” For Goffman, these extreme behaviors model the qualities social members need to exemplify if the social order will continue to exist.<sup>10</sup> However, engaging in true crime is clearly *not* skydiving, bungee jumping, free climbing, speeding, hazardous drug-use, or any other high risk activity. As a result, true crime consumption is more precisely a form of *sensation seeking*<sup>11</sup> for consumers, which is defined by one’s relative tolerance for risk despite the “actual” risk itself (i.e., the immediate/potential reality of uncertainty related to material,

---

<sup>10</sup> This has been further theorized as “edgework” (see Lyng 1990; 2014), where the “edge” is “the boundary between order and disorder, form and formlessness [...] involving more concretely the lines separating life and death” (Lyng 2014: 449). Here, actors negotiate corporeal/fixed boundaries of “no return” through high risk activities, to momentarily (though effectively) obliterate the boundaries of self, identity, and society (Lyng 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Social psychologists understand sensation seeking as a way individuals manipulate their internal states through a spectrum of emotions ranging from boredom to anxiety, as a means to modulate “optimal level of stimulation” and “optimal levels of arousal” (see Zuckerman 2007).

physical, psychic or symbolic loss is not the objective of the behavior) (Zuckerman 2007, see Lyng 1990).

The emotional engagement and motivation reported by true crime consumers follow the dynamic explicated in Goffman's theories of "action" and "character," discussed above. However, instead of "integrity" or "composure," my study respondents described true crime consumption as a moral imperative, or a necessary task, representing a moral self; it is a "duty," a way to "bear witness," "bring to light," and "listen" to victims, their loved ones, and their communities. In this way, consumers partake in a (vicarious) risk experience through their (moral) "actions," i.e. through their true crime consumption, using moral imperatives as a frame for this (vicarious) risk experience. As such, consumers partake in vicarious risk and experience sensation seeking, while simultaneously constructing a moral self. True crime consumers further employ terms related to risk and risk management as the primary way to explain their motivation and behavior, suggesting a layered relationship between the behavior (i.e. "action"), the framing or explanation ("morality" and "vulnerability"), and one's perceptions of self (i.e., "character"). For my interviewees, such "actions," "framings," and good "character" oscillates between (potential) victim and good citizen. This is especially interesting in relation to figurations of race and gender, and realities versus projections/imaginaries of risk. Experiences and articulations of emotion, perceptions of fear and risk, and leisure practices like true crime consumption are all empirically shown to be racialized and gendered. As such, studying crime media and its' consumers offers an apt site to analyze

the burgeoning interrelationship of race, gender, and felt experience of risk within the White racial frame and culture of control.

Beyond scholarship in social psychology, critical race scholars have theoretically and empirically demonstrated how Whiteness is a cultural system and a series of “embodied habits” (Sullivan 2006), or a “phenomenology” (Ahmed 2007). These external systems have coercive effects on individuals, shaping their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) and associated internal states. Samuel Perry points to *racial habitus*, or “a matrix of tastes, perceptions, and cognitive frameworks that are often unconscious (particularly for Whites), and that regulate the racial practices of actors such that they tend to reproduced the very racial distinctions and inequalities that produced them” (2012: 90). Like the White racial frame (Feagin 2013), (racialized) emotion is part of one’s *emotional habitus* (Gould 2009), where such racial segregation and hierarchies *vis-à-vis* affect and emotion can become “durable” (Bonilla-Silva 2019: 7). This is empirically demonstrable; for instance, building off of Arlie Hochschild’s (1979) work on *feeling rules*, or the shared rules of emotion that influence how people experience and express feeling in a given social relation, Aida Wingfield (2010) identifies *racialized feeling rules*. For Wingfield, emotions are “racially segregated,” and emotion “thus [represents] an intangible area [...] where racial divides are reinforced and maintained” (2010: 267).

While racialized emotions emerge as a result of inequality, the connection of race with emotion has also been employed in service of White supremacy. For instance, studies of evolutionary science and social Darwinism in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States show how “sentiment” and “sensation” were identified as affective

and embodied sites linked to White “civilization” and racial “progress,” thus producing gendered and racialized taxonomies of emotion and associated display through social Darwinist and evolutionary logics (Schuller 2012, 2018). As such, emotion—whether experienced individually, in relation, collectively, or produced institutionally—has always been situated within broader systems of race and gender.

As social and cultural historian Joy Wiltenburg describes in her account of true crime, “Crime was to be avoided partly by piety but also by adherence to secular norms, *especially the proper regulation of emotion*” (2004: 1400, emphasis added). The sensational structure of true crime, the associated emotional lessons, and patterned consumer base, render it an important site to examine the interrelationship of race, gender, representation, and emotion. As emotion is an important vector for mapping race—and true crime is site for emotional socialization—it is imperative to explore how such emotion is constructed, experienced, and individually/collectively “orienting” for people and populations through numerous social practices, including leisure activities such as true crime consumption (Ahmed 2004; Mowatt 2012).

The gendered *and* racial patterns of true crime consumption illuminate inadequacies in existing (social) psychological explanations, and this is further underexplored from a sociological perspective. While existing scholarship clearly signals the importance of “feeling” and gendered positionality in consumption, it does not consider how race *and* gender relate to the felt experience and rationale behind true crime engagement. As scholars argue, emotion is another site that remains “racially segregated” (Wingfield 2010), and the sensational nature of the true crime genre invites critical

analysis of the felt relationship between race, gender, and stratified experiences of “risk” and vulnerability within the culture of control more broadly.

*Mapping Consumption: Narratives, New Media, Fandom, Communities, Leisure, and “Edutainment”*

Most simply, true crime is a narrative, and an exceptionally formulaic one that “[deals] with the darkest side of human beings” (Avanas Álvarez 2019: 140). Narratives represent “forms of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and [retain] elements of collective action frames, but unlike all three, they can be identified in a chunk of text of speech by their formal features” (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes 2011: 112). The “formal features” of narrative include a clear plot (structure of story indicated by the cause-and-effect of described events), characters (at least one being empathetic to the audience), and beginning/conclusion, as well as the timing and placement of the story-telling itself. More symbolically, narratives help facilitate “bonds of belonging” to the self and others, including national ideologies, and also serve as a framework to articulate one’s experience and actions (Polletta et al 2011: 113).

As a particularly powerful and sensational narrative, true crime stories have long appeared in novels, documentaries, and television shows, though podcasting and docuseries have become a primary vehicle for the genre. The 2014 release of “The Case of Adnan Syed” on the podcast *Serial* arguably placed both podcasting and true crime on the map as a popular site of entertainment (Bishop 2014; Robertson 2019), which has been immensely profitable to media corporations and individuals alike. “The Case of

Adnan Syed” sparked numerous spinoff podcasts dedicated to Syed’s case, and also precipitated the outpouring of true crime podcasts such as *Criminal*, *RedHanded*, *Wine & Crime*, *True Crime Garage*, *Morbid*, *Court Junkie*, *Crime Junkie*, and *Last Podcast on the Left*.<sup>12</sup> As of August 2019, there were over 200 true crime podcasts available on iTunes, and in May 2021, true crime podcasts made up 50% of the top ten podcasts on iTunes (Webb 2021). At the time of writing, true crime podcasts account for three out of the top ten podcasts across all platforms globally (All Top Everything 2022).

Podcasters, Youtubers, and other content creators monetize their platform through Patreon (subscription donations from fanbase), advertising, branded merchandise, and even books, such as the 2019 book that inspired the title of this dissertation, entitled *Stay Sexy & Don’t Get Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide*. This memoir is from Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, co-hosts of the true crime comedy podcast with a purportedly feminist bent entitled *My Favorite Murder*. Along with former television show host and now conservative talk show host Joe Rogan, Kilgariff and Hardstock are two of the “richest podcasters in the world” since their debut in 2016. The show generated 15 million dollars in revenue in 2019, and Karen, a comedian, and Georgia, a former entrepreneur, each command a net worth of approximately 20 million dollars, impressing the economic viability of this genre (Shapiro 2020).

---

<sup>12</sup> In addition, recent docuseries like *Tiger King* (2019), *Making a Murderer* (2017), *Night Stalker* (2020), *The Vow* (2020), *Atlanta’s Missing and Murdered* (2020), *Murder on Middle Beach* (2020), and *Framing Britney Spears* (2021), now dominate streaming sites, including Amazon Prime, HBO, Netflix, Apple TV, and Hulu.

While television channels, like True Crime Network, and long-standing programs, such as *Women Who Kill* or *Forensic Files*, are devoted to true crime, new media's coverage of true crime is expanding. The proliferation of this type of media, as well as crime fiction like *Law and Order*, *CSI*, or *Bones*, have been associated with the "CSI Effect." The "CSI Effect" is correlated with changes in collective behaviors, including large numbers of students seeking degrees in forensics and criminology, many of whom identify as women and report being inspired by the television shows they grew up with (Avanas Álvarez 2019; Webb 2021). New media platforms—such as podcasting and web series—provide a particularly apt site to explore the intersectional and affective aspects of consumption. This is especially relevant for streaming "on-demand" content or participation in digital forums generally, as websites, podcasts, and YouTube videos can be accessed outside the confines of scheduled broadcasting. Indeed, both "real" and fictionalized crime stories exceeded all other genres on Netflix throughout 2020, peaking during COVID-19 related isolation. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Most Watched Genres on Netflix (Bean 2021)

Top 20 Netflix shows when Covid-19 kept us home: Crime exceeds comedy  
 Genres in inner circle, Show titles in outer circle  
 Width of bars in outer circle proportionate to rank and length of time spent on Netflix's Top 10 page (US)



Source: Forbes (2020)

With this new media, there is an increasing *demassification* and *asynchronicity* of media consumption (Williams, Rice, and Rogers 1988), meaning individuals can select what they want to engage with and when to create a more tailored viewing experience around their schedules. Relatedly, as media becomes more (genre-)specific, there are higher levels of *interactivity* between producers and consumers (Williams, Rice, and Rogers 1988), meaning consumers and producers can collaborate on and respond to user generated content, comments, and requests. In true crime, producers solicit stories from their audience through email, Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, sometimes highlighting personal survival stories or local crimes on their broadcast. Given the user-behavior enabled by new media platforms, it is somewhat simpler to disentangle and understand

market segmentation, reactions, and trace patterns of consumption, community formation, as well as participant demographics and motivation.

True crime communities—where consumers connect with other consumers, producers connect with fans, and true crime reporters do research—are robust. Fan groups of specific podcasts or general interest groups populate digital spaces, from social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, Discord, Clubhouse, TikTok, or devoted forums like WebSleuths. While live events such as podcast recordings or “CrimeCon” hosted by the TV network Oxygen occur—often featuring memorabilia, picture booths, podcasters, and “experts” from forensics, law, police, and news media (see Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c)—digital communities also display a marked sense of collectivity; these “affective atmospheres” (Lupton 2017) can serve as a space for community building, as well as reflect and (re)produce social cohesion and exclusion, including inequalities around race (Murthy and Sharma 2019).

Figure 2a, 2b, and 2c: Images from CrimeCon (The Washington Post 2019)





Others are more skeptical of the collectives generated by true crime content, regardless of the emotional states, experiences, and motivations of community members.

As Mark Seltzer (1997: 3-4) describes in his theorizing of *wound culture*,

[...] The mass attraction to atrocity exhibitions, in the pathological public sphere, takes the form of a fascination with the shock of contact between bodies and technologies, a shock of contact that encodes, in turn, a breakdown in the distinction between the individual and the mass, and between private and public registered. One discovers again and again the excitations in the opening of private and bodily psychic interiors: the exhibition and witness, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public. In wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle.

Here, Seltzer writes that the sociality around shared “witnessing” of violence and “torn” bodies and psyches—such as true crime coverage and associated communities—are symptomatic of the *pathological public sphere*. For Seltzer, the pathological public sphere is precipitated by an unstable sense of identity coupled with an increase in technology. For Seltzer, technology is a tool for perpetrating violence, and simultaneously, it is a tool to heal wounded people and solve crimes (referencing the Unabomber and the television show *ER*, respectively). He describes this new relationship

to bodies, violence, and technology as the “body-machine complex” (Seltzer 1992; 1997), a condition that is unique and endemic to modernity. As Seltzer (1997) goes on to describe, the sociality precipitated by wound culture is motivated by a uniquely “modern” blurring between self and other, intimacy and distance, public and private, fact and fiction, act and fantasy. As such, collectives are formed and maintained through vicarious experiences and shared witnessing of violence and trauma.

Regardless of the underlying “meaning” or function of true crime communities, true crime consumers continue to gather in physical and virtual spaces. For this stage of the study, digital communities are the main subject of interest for several reasons: the limitations imposed by COVID-19, the opportunity for longitudinal study of these spaces, and the polarizing presence of “crowd-sourced justice” or (the less flattering) “armchair detectives,” both describing groups of people aggregate evidence and work with law enforcement to solve cases or tip off police to incidences of potential violence with varying degrees of success. In these (virtual) spaces, participants have conversations about true crime, share and gather evidence, evaluate new true production and content, and post a range of questions (from case clarification, to publicizing missing persons information, to seeking area florists and reputable gynecologists).

Arguably, these digital community members engage in documented fandom practices. Like many other fandom communities, such as Comicon or “Trekkies” attending *Star Trek* conventions, true crime communities retain virtual and material elements bound together through shared interests and practices. Similar to the behaviors of soap opera viewers, true crime consumers incorporate their love of true crime into

their daily activities and life generally, and use the genre to interpret and frame various public and private experiences (see Harrington and Bielby 1995; Callanan 2005). However, the “fan” bases associated with true crime engage the content and each other differently, often collaborating on evidence gathering and working with offline institutions, such as police, much more frequently than other fan communities. Further, there is more emphasis on “correct” (emotional) comportment when engaging with true crime. For instance, some of the typical elements of fan communities and fan fiction—such as creative writing and imagining romantic or sexual relationship between or with the characters—are frowned upon in true crime circles, and young girls interested in true crime are frequently critiqued for their “inappropriate” engagement with the genre and its myriad antagonists (especially after the attempted mass shooting in Canada by two self-described “Columbiners,” including a young woman and her male partner [Ross 2015; Munroe 2020]).

As a site for community and sensational content, true crime helps facilitate “bonds of belonging” through “edutainment.” It is designed to be both educational and entertaining, blurring the line between leisure and cognitive engagement (and, arguably, the line between self and other, as well as objective reality and fictionalized narrative [see Flis 2010; Seltzer 2006; van Krieken and Sanders 2017]). While all participants touted the “educational” power of true crime, there were varying levels of comfort describing true crime as “entertainment.” Despite this resistance, all participants noted that it is a semi-ritualized and largely pleasurable leisure activity, performed during their free time and low-stakes work or home tasks. Of course, what we do in our “free” or down time

does not operate in a vacuum outside of social and political forces. Leisure practices and subcultures/communities are a mirror; they are a product and outcome of various systems, including axes of identity and positions of privilege and marginalization, such as race, class, sexuality, and gender (Hebdige 1979; Lloyd, King, McCarthy, and Scanlan 2007; McRobbie and Garber 1977; Mowatt 2012; Floyd 1998; Rojek 1995; Weinberger, Zaviskca, and Silva 2017).

Finally, as “tempting as it is to disregard sites of penal leisure and entertainment as pure or morbid spectacle, such practices serve as important sources of evidence about how citizens attempt, or fail to attempt, to understand and process the meanings surrounding punishment” (Brown 2010: 118). We must analyze the “pragmatic repetitive routines of daily practice, for these routines contain within them distinctive patterns of meaning and symbolic forms” (Garland 1990: 255), and ultimately (re)producing and contesting the logics of crime, law, and punishment. Leisure, as a social and political action, must be carefully analyzed, with special attention to the broader dynamics of *risk society* (see Ford 2020) and its relationship to the culture of control, which is both an impetus of and proposed solution to the anxieties precipitated by risk society. Leisure practices, including true crime, serve as a site for knowledge as well as entertainment, community formation, (extra-legal) justice, a site to incite and “store” emotional experiences, allowing for further contextualization and theorization of leisure practices from a critical and intersectional lens.

## Key Findings and Chapter Overview

So, to oversimplify a central research question, why do White women love true crime? When prompted directly with this question, participants offered the following explanations in order of frequency. The first, following existing scholarship, is *safety and security*, where true crime represents experiences that consumers (specifically female consumers) have had or may have in the future, and it teaches practical tips for prevention and intervention.

The second is *representation in and identification with* existing content. As true crime overwhelmingly features White women, participants believe that White women are more likely to be interested in it. This relates to the consumer's morally charged desire to "bear witness" and "memorialize" the victim; as content representation aligns with consumer identity, they feel a sense of kinship and want to pay their respects. Others described this representation more critically, not only in terms of raw numbers but also in terms of symbolic representations of gender and Whiteness. For instance, (White) male serial killers are often described as "brilliant" or "masterminds," appealing to imaginaries of White superiority in the audience even through the most egregious of characters (McCabe 2022). As a 31-year-old White woman called Emma describes,

...It goes back to the whole thing of being White women, there's just something there, waiting...if she isn't dead yet, she's waiting for it...I think society tells White women they are a victim-in-waiting, and that's the most important thing that can happen to a woman, is to be a victim of a crime.

This suggests a symbolic tie between (White) femininity and death, or perhaps more

specifically, a tie between White femininity, victimhood, and social value (Klinger 2018; Kristeva 1982).

The third is *felt proximity to risk and violence*, which is somewhat of a paradox to the first. Both White respondents and respondents of color described how White women are less likely to experience harm, and this lived distance enables a voyeuristic intimacy rationalized through (potential) victim-status. Participants of all races also explained that White women are less likely to have mistrust of police and judicial systems, and therefore have the emotional bandwidth for a genre that often glorifies the state and police investigators. The fourth is *material differences in time and energy*, where respondents—exclusively women of color—described material differences in White women’s available time and energy that can be coupled with a voyeuristic entitlement. As Ada, a 42-year-old Black true crime podcaster described,

Who’s the least busy person in the United States? White women...I’m not saying that there are some boss women or whatever. But who’s most likely to be at home with the kids? Who’s most likely to be doing the food shopping and the grocery shopping and got something going on in their ears? Who’s most likely to be nosy enough to be so fascinated with other people’s lives like that, right? I mean, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean no disrespect. But you know, White women are kind of nosy. They always want to be everybody else’s business. They want to know what’s going on. So there’s a curiosity thing there. But I think it’s probably similar to why White women are the primary users of something like Pinterest or whatever. Y’all got the least to do.

Each answer provides at least an implicit reference to identity and associated resources—both material and intangible—as related to true crime engagement. Of course, these explicit answers do not tell the whole story, and there are several key thematic findings in the data, three of which will be explored in the following chapters. Following the

demographic trends in the content analysis, I largely focus on Black and White respondents living in the United States and Canada for this dissertation. Following this introduction, chapter two describes the study's methods, data collection, and data analysis, and includes a Methodological Appendix. Guided by abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I use over 120 interviews, survey data, responsive journaling, and comparative discourse analysis to theorize true crime consumption. Following the data and methods chapter, the substantive chapters are organized as follows.

First, in chapter three, I explore the making of true crime, analyzing how true crime is made and the role of race, gender, emotion, and narrative in true crime production, and situate true crime within broader narratives about risk and violence. I explore the role of a rhythmic and formulaic narrative structure, the role of production in shaping the genre, the construction of crime as “interesting” or “boring,” and how true crime participates in racialization despite the relative absence of people of color. I further examine how the power of true crime can be employed more subversively, using the 2019 podcast *Somebody* as a case to understand the resistant potential of the genre. Second, in chapter four, I examine the meaning and making of true crime and true crime communities. I analyze how White women use true crime to build community and relationships, and use the genre as a site of “empowerment” with a troubling investment in punishment. In contrast, women of color, particularly Black women, use true crime to activate networks in pursuit of justice for cases that may otherwise be ignored. I further explore how true crime communities differently value “crowdsourced” justice, and how

the state is re-engaged as a necessary actor in managing crime and deviance. Third, in chapter five, I detail race, gender, the felt experience of true crime, and its relationship to risk, pleasure, and (state) power. I theorize gender, race, and the feeling rules in true crime consumption, the “breaking” of feeling rules (including anger and arousal), the role of risk, one’s relative proximity to risk and violence, and how gendered vulnerability is translated into state power through competing discourses of “risk” and “empowerment.” Finally, in the conclusion, I overview the findings, identify areas for future research, and synthesize the key themes in the data.

## CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

### Introduction

Philosophically guided by critical realist and interpretivist approaches, this research primarily employs an abductive approach to grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Neuman 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Though an iterative process, grounded theory invites researchers to focus on the “emergence” of data trends, hypotheses, and theory to cyclically define and refine the research question and focus areas of the analysis. In particular, grounded theory’s tools of theoretical sampling, comparative processes, and data saturation provide useful insights into true crime consumption (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Neuman 2014). While pure grounded theory follows an inductive approach to theory building, I use an abductive approach to grounded theory that explores emerging trends through the lens of existing theory (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This process generates new theory while extending and applying existing theory.

In this overview of data collection and methods, I first detail the case selection, followed by data collection processes, methods, theoretical and purposive sampling, analysis strategies, and consent and confidentiality protocols. Next, I detail researcher positionality, the possibilities and problems with critical Whiteness studies, study limitations, and areas for future research. I close by summarizing the study significance and conclusion. The Methodological Appendix—attached at the end of this chapter—details the survey, producer and consumer interview schedule, and journaling prompts.

## True Crime as a Case

While most literature on the *racial state* and *carceral state* attend to demographic inequalities, punitive sentencing policies, and changes in incarceration over time and place, less attention has been given to the gendered, racial, and affective dimensions that contribute symbolically and directly to these disparities within the *culture of control* (Garland 2001; Goldberg 2002; Simon 2007). Given the stark patterns associated with this exploding genre—which is overwhelmingly consumed by and features White women—true crime media and associated consumption habits represent an apt empirical case to explore deeply “felt” understandings that undergird broader socio-legal projects, such as mass incarceration. I also explore emerging dynamics of race, gender, and emotion; constructions of crime, punishment, justice; as well as raced and gendered leisure practices in late modernity and risk society (Ford 2020; Seltzer 1997). As such, I use true crime as an empirical case, attending largely to consumer experience as well as true crime media content and structure. Further, engagement with true crime represents what I describe as a *dark leisure* practice, where consumption of violence as an “edutainment” practice becomes a site of knowledge, memory, and identity formation/reification.

Beyond the empirical relevance, this project explores several theoretical cases of interest to sociology, humanities, and interdisciplinary scholarship. These theoretical cases and analytic threads are clustered based on their interrelationships, and are listed in order of their project import. Though all are intertwined, they are separated here for analytic clarity. Each theoretical case and analytic component identified below is

informed by a *critical intersectional analysis* that largely attends to the nexus of race, gender, and emotion, and the linkages between macro-levels of culture and more micro-levels of culture, including individual and group experience and behavior. See Table 1.

Table 1: Theoretical Cases and Analytic Frames

<i>Theoretical Cases</i>	<i>Analytic Frames</i>
<b>Macro-Culture</b> The state and media	Culture (of control) Racial state Carceral state Media and representation Constructing social control, violence, justice, and punishment
<b>Macro- and Micro-Culture</b> Consumer behavior Consumption behavior	(Dark) leisure “Edutainment” Witnessing and spectatorship (Digital) true crime communities
<b>Macro- and Micro-Culture</b> Affect, emotion, and time	Risk and risk society Pleasure Racialized habitus Racialized feeling rules Emotional habitus Emotional capital Emotion and time (Late) modernity

The first cluster of cases explores more macro-expressions of culture, positioning each of which within the (racialized) *culture of control* (Garland 2001). This also relates to broader symbolic and cultural systems and their material base, including the *racial state* (Goldberg 2002), the *carceral state* (Simon 2007), as well as associated *media and representation* produced within this context. Within media and representation, I explore representations of and engagement with *social control, violence, justice, and punishment*.

Second, I link micro- and macro-expressions of culture, especially surrounding *consumer behavior* (including perception and experiences) and *consumption behavior*. Here, I explore the relationship of (*dark*) *leisure practices* and *edutainment* media to *witnessing and spectatorship*. I use true crime consumption to more broadly theorize (*dark*) *leisure*, “*edutainment*,” and—following Michelle Brown (2009, 2010) and Loïc Wacquant (2009)—the role of *witnessing and spectators*. Indeed, “bearing witness” to these violent atrocities was often referenced as a draw for consumers, inviting critical theorizing of identity, positionality, moral selves, and spectatorship. Relatedly, I examine how consumer behavior manifests in the formation of (*digital*) *true crime communities*. While employed for different reasons, true crime communities (whether online or in-person) remained an important—though at times contested—motivation for consumers to continue their true crime consumption.

As another site connecting micro- and macro-levels of culture, the third cluster of cases builds on the second, analyzing *affect, emotion, and time*. Here, I employ critical race and critical Whiteness studies to empirically theorize emotional experience (especially the felt experience of *risk* and vulnerability in relation to pleasure and other experiences of arousal), emotional display and comportment, and habitus. These are further guided by interventions such as Gould’s (2007) *emotional habitus*, Perry’s (2012) *racialized habitus*, and Wingfield’s (2010) *racialized feeling rules*, which identify how emotional experience and display are stratified across populations. This is especially salient for a genre that historically relies on emotional incitement that is simultaneously raced and gendered regarding content and consumer identities. Of course, all of these

cases are based on data collected in a particular moment in *(late) modernity*, where *risk society* is marked by feelings of risk, hyper-individualism, and decreasing trust in institutions (see Ford 2020; Seltzer 1997). As such, investment in this genre—especially as an educational medium with identifiable patterns in content, production, and consumption—offers unique insights into race, gender, risk, crime, punishment, and justice, as articulated by actors in our current moment.

The empirical case of true crime yields several theoretical cases, enabling insight into the co-constitutive relationship of micro-level behaviors and macro-social contexts. In theorizing the dynamics of culture and action, I give particular attention to racialized and gendered articulations of emotion and risk in relation to narratives of crime, violence, and the state.

#### Participant Recruitment, Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis

Given the scope of the true crime genre, the data for this project comes from various sources, and includes a survey, semi-structured interviews, and responsive journaling. It also includes systematic content and discourse analysis of social media pages, true crime YouTube channels and comment forums, as well as transcripts of podcasts or other audio broadcasts, including *My Favorite Murder*. Data collection began in November 2020 and was paused in January 2022.

Given the interest in true crime communities and new media, theoretical and convenience sampling was employed to initiate participant recruitment collection (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). While the sampling strategy was limited due

to COVID-19, the theoretical emphasis on communities and associated relationships forged around true crime was very amenable to online data collection. To be discussed later in this chapter, purposive sampling was employed in the summer of 2021 to diversify the study sample, particularly in regards to race. The twelve-question survey about true crime consumer behavior was first administered via Reddit. Reddit, or the “front page of the internet,” is a digital forum, maintaining one of the biggest true crime communities on the web besides Tumblr (which has since banned “adult” content, including many true crime pages) and dedicated sites such as WebSleuths or CrimeHQ. These sites are the primary ways that true crime consumers interact and form communities. Because of that—and Reddit’s overall status as hosting the largest true crime communities—it offers one of the most effective platforms to solicit interviewees engaged in true crime consumption.

Reddit consists of an array of niche communities, or “subreddits,” devoted to a variety of topics, ranging from “politics” to “dogs with jobs.” Reddit is a particularly useful forum to analyze true crime consumption and new media, as it is primarily a site for aggregating, rating, debating, and discussing topics relevant to a given subreddit. On Reddit, posts are “upvoted” or “downvoted” by users, creating a user-generated and interactive news and media site. While perusing subreddits, users can sort posts by “new,” “hot” (trending), “controversial,” or “top posts” of the last day, week, month, year, or since the inception of the subreddit. As one YouTuber describes, “if Google is where you go to search for things, Reddit is where you go to see what others have found” (Grey 2013).

With assistance from the subreddit forum moderators, I posted the survey and call for interview participants in general true crime forums (r/TrueCrime, r/TrueCrimeDiscussion, r/RedditTrueCrime), specific true crime forums (r/MassKillers, r/SerialKillers, and r/Columbine, r/Delphi), and in true crime podcast forums (r/MyFavoriteMurder, r/LastPodcastontheLeft, and r/CrimeJunkie). Any true crime focused subreddit with regular member activity within the last month and more than 10,000 “subscribers” was contacted with outreach materials. Despite attempts to correspond with moderators of all true crime communities, not all outreach yielded a response. Without moderator response, I would post the recruitment material to the page directly. Posting without moderator approval occasionally resulted in the post being removed due to violations of the subreddit’s rules, usually citing the post as “off topic” or “irrelevant” to the subreddit. Post removal occurred between 20 minutes to 48 hours after posting, but always gleaned comments and survey submissions prior to removal, showing subscribers’ regular engagement with subreddits.

One particularly compelling insight from survey data is exactly how gendered the consumption of true crime is, as Reddit users overwhelmingly skew male, with 67% of users identifying as male, White, and politically liberal (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, and Mitchell, 2016). Indeed, even the primary relationship forum on Reddit, r/relationships—which one might typically assume is predominantly female users—skews male in terms of posting and comment engagement (Dolan 2022). While primarily sampling and recruiting through a male-dominated site could have shaped data collection, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents and interview participants identified as

female, confirming existing research that highlights the deeply gendered interest in true crime (Vicary and Fraley 2010; Ask Wonder 2020; Boling and Hull 2018).

At the time of writing, the survey has yielded over 900 responses, 948 to be precise. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and it sought basic demographic information as well as participant elaboration on questions such as “how often do you consume true crime,” “what is your favorite true crime show, book, or broadcast,” “when did you start listening to true crime,” and “why do you enjoy true crime?” The survey was also distributed via interview participants following the interview to share with relevant friends and networks. As anticipated, the vast majority of the respondents are heterosexual White women in their twenties and thirties living all over the United States, largely college educated and relatively financially stable. See Table 1 for survey respondents and the Methodological Appendix for survey format and questions.

Given that Reddit is available to anyone with Internet access, I did receive some international responses in the survey, and interviewed a small portion (n=18) of non-US based individuals. While there are some small but interesting variations in this group’s responses, all reported consuming American true crime regularly and primarily, as well as British and Canadian source material. As one 20-year-old White female respondent from Germany described, “I don’t feel like [German true crime] content is that original because [...] they talk about cases that American [producers] have talked about a bunch, so I don’t feel like [...] anything new comes out of the German true crime community, it’s more just pulling American [content].” Other international respondents agreed, saying it’s largely a “United States thing,” often attributed to reporting and media laws

(leading to extensive coverage) as well as lax gun laws (leading to more murders and violent crimes). See Table 2.

Table 2: Survey Data

<b>Demographic Information</b>				<b>True Crime Habits</b>	
<i>Gender Identity</i>		<i>Sexual Identity</i>		<i>How often do you consume true crime?</i>	
Male	13.29%	Heterosexual	63.97%	Daily	45.73%
Female	80.35%	Lesbian or gay	4.78%	A few times a week	36.03%
Trans man	2.02%	Bisexual	21.42%	Weekly	8.25%
Trans woman	0.43%	Queer	6.51%	A few times a month	7.45%
Nonbinary	3.61%	Specified	3.33%	Monthly	0.58%
Specified*	0.29%	Total	100%	A few times a year	1.88%
Total	100%			Total	100%
<i>Race</i>		<i>Education</i>		<i>Relationship to Genre</i>	
Black or African American	3.31%	Some high school	7.08%	Produce	0.44%
Hispanic	4.70%	HS diploma/equivilant	10.55%	Consume	91.13%
Latino/a/x/e	4.01%	Some college	26.30%	Both	8.43%
Asian	1.38%	Associate's degree	5.20%	Total	100%
South East Asian	0.83%	Bachelor's degree	31.50%		
Indigenous	1.52%	Master's degree	13.58%	<i>Age of Regular Engagement</i>	
White	75.28%	Other advanced degree	5.78%	Childhood (<10 years)	22.03%
Bi or multi racial	5.80%	Total	100%	Adolescence (11-17)	44.20%
Specified*	3.18%			Late adolescence (18-22)	11.01%
Total	100%			Young adulthood (23-39)	8.70%
				Middle age (40-59)	2.03%
				Older adulthood (60+)	0.00%
				Specified	12.03%
				Total	100%
<i>Age</i>		<i>Nationality</i>			
18 or under	5.78%	USA	81.08%		
18-25	32.30%	Internationally based	18.92%		
26-29	19.22%	Total	100%		
30-35	19.80%				
36-40	9.39%				
41-45	6.36%				
46-50	2.75%				
51-59	3.03%				
60+	1.45%				
Total	100%				

\* "Specified" refers to individuals who identified their racial or gender identity as something outside the provided categories.

The end of the survey offered the option to be contacted for an interview by leaving their email address. Several individuals followed up with me via Reddit's Direct Message system or via my email listed in the post and survey information in addition to submitting their contact details through the survey, indicating their excitement. To be discussed in-

depth below, I also used Twitter and Clubhouse as a site for purposive sampling to diversify my sample across racial groups. Finally, I did some outreach via WebSleuths, Bumble BFF, and Instagram, but due to limitations in the forum design, my recruitment on these platforms yielded limited success.

Participants were contacted for interviews if they left contact information in the survey field and met the inclusion requirements (18 years or older and a regular true crime consumer). Interviews ranged from 60 minutes to three and a half hours, with most lasting 75-90 minutes. Participants received a \$10 gift card as thanks for their time. All interviews were conducted remotely, either by Zoom, Teams, or phone. Interviews were transcribed automatically with Zoom's transcription function, manually transcribed by the researcher, or (in two cases) sent to a contracted transcriber with approval from Boston University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

At the time of writing, 123 interviews have been conducted, the majority being heterosexual White women from all over the United States between the ages of 18-35 (n=89). The vast majority of interviews were with one participant, however some interviewees attended with a friend, or pulled in a family member during the interview to share their thoughts on my questions. As such, two small "focus groups" were organically administered. To balance the huge response from White true crime consumers and to reach saturation in a comparative category, I used purposive sampling strategies (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967) to garner more racial and ethnic diversity in the data set, directly emailing true crime producers in the United States identified as Black, Indigenous, or Latino/a/x/e and requesting an interview with them and/or their support in

recruiting participants in the summer of 2021. In addition to outreach to true crime producers of color, I also used Twitter and Clubhouse to circulate recruitment information in digital spheres that are not as White-dominant. I created a new Twitter account and posted the study information, using the hashtag “#truecrime” to garner respondents.

I also followed true crime podcasts with Twitter accounts that are produced and consumed by people of color, and sent direct messages to account holders to seek their aid in publicizing the study. Some true crime podcasts were defunct, in which case I reached out to the previous producer. While not all outreach yielded a response, I was fortunate to connect with a Black true crime podcaster who became a key informant in this study, especially given her focus area and audience demographics. She invited me on her podcast to interview me about the study, and she invited me to her weekly true crime focused Clubhouse session to publicize the study and recruit more participants of color. To further incentivize participants, I also increased the participant incentive by \$5 (total \$15) for new interviewees. As saturation was reached with White, heterosexually-identified, and female-identified respondents, any survey respondents matching these demographic criteria who requested an interview from summer 2021 onward were politely declined, pre-screened using their survey submission.

Since December 2020, I have been fortunate to interview stay-at-home mothers, law enforcement officials, social workers, business professionals, undergraduate and graduate students, professors, teachers, lawyers, religious leaders, therapists, and veterinarians, as well as producers of nationally-renowned true crime television shows

such as Nancy Grace, true crime podcasters (including those focused on missing and murdered people of color), and career crime reporters for news media. Most engaged with true crime every day or at least several times a week, devoting an estimated one and twenty hours to true crime consumption weekly. True crime was most often engaged through podcasts, documentaries, and YouTube channels. Several reported reading true crime materials as well, as books were often their first form of exposure to the genre. See Table 3 for an overview of interview respondents, and the Methodological Appendix for the interview schedules for consumers and producers.

Table 3: Interview Respondents

<b>Interview Respondents (N=123)</b>			
<i>Gender</i>		<i>Educational Attainment</i>	
Female	109	High School Diploma or Equivalent	12
Gender Fluid	1	Some College	21
Male	12	Associate's Degree	6
Trans	1	Bachelor's Degree	55
	123	Advanced Degree	29
			123
<i>Race</i>		<i>National Origin</i>	
White	94	United States*	105
Black or African American	17	Canada	6
Latina/o/x/e	7	England	5
Bi or Multi Racial	5	Germany	2
	123	Spain	1
		New Zealand	1
<i>Sexuality</i>		Switzerland	1
Heterosexual	88	Nigeria	1
Bisexual	19	Portugal	1
Gay or Lesbian	5		123
Queer	6	<i>Annual Household Income (USD)</i>	
Asexual	2	<\$10,000	3
Unknown	2	\$10,000 - 19,999	14
Questioning	1	\$20,000 - 29,999	8
	123	\$30,000 - 49,999	23
		\$50,000 - 69,999	14
<i>Age Range</i>		\$70,000 - 99,999	20
18-25	31	\$100,000 - 149,999	15
26-29	28	>\$150,000	14
30-35	34	Unknown	12
36-40	8		123
41-50	16	<i>Relationship to Genre</i>	
51-59	3	Consumer	112
60+	3	Producer and Consumer	11
	123		123

\*One interviewee identified as a member of a Native American tribal nation in the United States, and another as an Indigenous woman adopted from a South America who grew up in the United States who identified her race as Latina. Both are included under "United States" for clarity.

Interview questions covered basic habits around true crime consumption, the emotional experience of consumption, involvement with and observations of digital communities, as well as their reflections on true crime content generally. In closing, I solicited their

thoughts on punishment, justice, and the criminal justice system, as well as other “dark leisure” practices. If applicable to the respondent, the interview tool also included questions on true crime production, though most interview participants (n=112) were just consumers of the genre. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to participate in responsive journaling, detailing their responses before, during, and after engaging with a true crime episode or broadcast of their choice. If completed within three months of the interview, participants received an additional \$10 gift card for the journaling activity. At this time, 20 interviewees in total have participated in the journaling portion of this study. Journaling prompts can be found in the Methodological Appendix.

Following the tenets of grounded theory, open coding was employed to identify major themes in the interview data in NVivo (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Abductive analysis was used to refine existing and emergent themes during the axial and selective coding process, and iterative memoing was used throughout data collection to synthesize the data set (Charmaz 2006; Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

Podcasts and YouTube videos were selected for analysis based on popularity, content, and producer identification. Again, I employed purposive sampling to account for the obvious skew of true crime that features hosts and content centered on White murderers and victims, and intentionally sought out true crime coverage of Black, Latino/a/x/e, and Indigenous individuals. For YouTube coverage, audio transcripts and associated comment sections were analyzed using elements of content analysis as well as comparative narrative analysis (Fairclough 1989; Franzosi 1998; Neuman 2015; Ruiz

Ruiz 2009) via MAXDQA Pro Software, which automatically populates the transcripts and comment sections of provided weblinks. For podcasts, transcriptions were either available online, or selectively transcribed by the researcher. Similar to the interview analyses, open coding was used to identify major themes in this data set, and abductive analysis informed the iterative coding process (Charmaz 2006; Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

### *Consent and Confidentiality*

Given the nature of human subjects' research, all survey collection, consent forms, outreach materials, and interview protocols were approved by Boston University's IRB prior to data collection. Upon researcher screening, eligible interviewees were contacted via email with available dates, meeting options (Zoom, Teams, or phone), and a short consent form for their review. In addition to information provided on the survey submissions, participants were re-screened at the time of the interview to ensure they were 18 years of age or older and to triangulate their survey reports. Before starting the interview, I thoroughly reviewed the consent form with the participant(s), to ensure they understood the study purpose, their rights, associated benefits and risks, contact information to address any concerns or complaints, and confidentiality protocols. As this is a low risk study, only verbal consent was required from participants. In addition to providing the consent form prior to our meeting and reviewing the document before the interview began, a consent form signed by the researcher was emailed to participants in a post-interview follow up email for their records.

Zoom was the primary means of facilitating and recording interviews, but some were conducted via Teams or a phone call based on the participant's preference. Recording processes—including Boston University's Cloud hosting for all Zoom recordings and local storage procedures—were explained to participants to ensure informed consent. Once the recorded interview was downloaded from Zoom, Teams, or Google Voice, the file was encrypted and kept on a locked computer, labeled using a randomized four digit code. All participants permitted recording. Following the interview, the researcher signed the consent form and returned it to the participant via email, along with the journaling prompts, outreach script, and the \$10 or \$15 gift card. Most recordings were automatically transcribed using Zoom's record function, and the audio files and transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Some were selectively transcribed by the researcher, and two were fully transcribed by a Boston University IRB-approved contract worker who signed a confidentiality agreement. In this dissertation, all interview names are pseudonyms given by the researcher; race, age, and gender are as described by participants.

#### A Note on Positionality

I am a 32-year-old White cis-gender woman, heterosexually partnered, college-educated, and fortunate to have secure housing and regular income in the northeast United States. Before beginning this project, I was familiar with some popular true crime media, and my familiarity has grown significantly since beginning this research. Thus, I was able to discuss the genre with participants somewhat easily, especially for well-

known cases. Given that many of my respondents are White women who share my positionality, this may have predisposed them to feeling more comfortable with me and perhaps yielding richer and more honest answers from respondents; some even mentioned seeing “we” and “us” in the true crime genre and its fanbase. Of course, this positionality also limits my world view and shapes the data collected, populations reached, sample constructed, and findings addressed. By extension, my positionality may have adversely affected the comfortability of participants who do not share my social position, limiting their ability and/or desire to fully share their thoughts. However, every effort was taken to increase respondent comfort throughout the research process.

#### A Note on Whiteness and Scholarly Research

The focus area of this study is, in many ways, problematic, as the research itself participates in the reproduction of White-centered scholarship that has long dominated the social sciences (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; McDermott and Sampson 2005). Historically and through today, Whiteness (much like maleness, ability, heterosexuality, and other privileged identities), is assumed the default by which “Others” are assessed, labeled, and systematically marginalized. As such, much critical race scholarship rightfully impresses the import of naming and “decentering” Whiteness, to more critically and accurately attend to processes of power, racialization, and associated effects (see Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003).

The call to name and decenter Whiteness has been answered by many scholars, who have responded to this problem in a plethora of ways. Some of these include:

studying the racial structure of organizations (Ray 2019); examining legacies of anti-Blackness, slavery, and colonialism in resource allocation and discursive forms, including in the knowledge production of the social sciences (Du Bois 1935; Fanon 1952, 1962; Muhammad 2010); centering experiences of people and communities of color (Bettie 2002; Du Bois 1899; Shedd 2015; Wingfield and Alston 2013); exploring the layered relationship of race, including Whiteness, to other axes of oppression (Crenshaw 1991) and associated situated knowledges (Hill Collins 1990); examining and naming racism and anti-Blackness in individual behaviors, as well as in the state, institutional and organizational processes, patterns, and effects (Bell 1980; Bracey 2014; Gonzalez Van Cleve 2016; Omi and Winant 2004; Steele 2011; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, and Okazaki 2013); among myriad others. Per theoretical and empirical analysis, it is clear that naming and removing Whiteness from the (often unnamed) center of analysis opens up important possibilities for understanding the social world. This naming and decentering process is critical; indeed, the “racial innocence” that White people experience from being supposedly “non-raced” helps enable continuing legacies of White supremacy and racial animus (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bernstein 2011).

With these principles in mind, this study aims to carefully support this strong tradition of critical analysis, even with the clear focus on White women. First, I follow W.E.B. Du Bois’ important notes—both implicit and explicit—regarding Whiteness. In *Darkwater* (1920), Du Bois describes,

But what on earth is Whiteness that one should so desire it? Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it

comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of Whiteness on the shores of our time. Its first effects are funny: the strut of the Southerner, the arrogance of the Englishman amuck, the whoop of the hoodlum who vicariously leads your mob.

Here (and to be explored more in chapter four), Du Bois is articulating Whiteness as desire, ownership, religion, and an embodied behavior that can be theorized through its evolving discursive and material emergence. Sara Ahmed (2007) describes this as the *phenomenology of Whiteness*, or a racialized structure of experience and consciousness that leaves imprints as it moves through the world. For Ahmed (2007: 149), Whiteness “[can] be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space, and what they ‘can do.’”

Contemporary studies show a mixture of “pride, denial, and ambivalence” related to White identity (Jaret and Reitzes 1999; McDermott and Sampson 2005: 256). As scholars like Du Bois have indicated, Whiteness is not an “invisible privilege;” instead, it is hyper visible, ever-present, evolving, contingent, relational, and situational (Omi 2001; Gonzalez Van Cleve 2016). Put another way, the “conditions and practice of Whiteness [render] the notion that Whiteness might be invisible [...] bizarre in the extreme” (Frankenberg 2001: 76). Following Du Bois and other scholars, such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003; 2012; 2019), Ruth Frankenberg (1993, 2001), and Sharon Sullivan (2006), I aim to critically, theoretically, and empirically examine latent and explicit manifestations of Whiteness, especially in a moment of mainstream awareness of state sanctioned anti-Black violence and other forms of inequality.

Second, I attempt to diversify the study content to analyze the stories of people of color as true crime consumers and producers. As discussed earlier in this chapter, I intentionally diversified my sampling strategy to reach more people of color and ensure their perspectives are robustly represented. These efforts will continue in later iterations of this study. Third, in “studying up” (Nader 1972) to understand the relationship between race, gender, emotion, and constructions of deviance, I examine how White women occupy a position of privilege and subordination within the racial state, and explore how privilege is, in part, rationalized through both real and anticipated/imagined forms of physical violence and subordination. This simultaneous position offers interesting insights into the felt experience of shifting racial and gendered orders in risk society and the culture of control (Ford 2020; Garland 2001), as well as associated changes in beliefs and behaviors (from voting to police reports [see Callanan 2005]). Fourth, I aim to understand and theorize how Whiteness emerges in different sites and how racial systems evolve, using leisure practices as a case to complexify existing sociological theories of race, identity, and culture while linking their micro- and macro-expressions. Finally, this study empirically adds to theories and debates on intersectionality by comparatively highlighting the felt experience of risk, race, and gender, critically theorizing identity in relation to emotion and institutions.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, as discussed, the data is skewed in terms of respondents, the majority being White, heterosexual, and college educated

women. However, given that this represents the primary consumer base, this is also a strength of this data set. Second, and by extension, these findings are not certainly causal or generalizable. Further research will more deeply investigate the experience of true crime consumers of color in order to more substantially expand the discussion on race and gender in true crime, as well as other axes of identity (such as socioeconomic status) and other beliefs/practices (such as political affiliation, religious identification, and educational attainment) to examine the validity of these findings. Third, the genre itself is shifting and amorphous. Many participants had trouble operationalizing true crime. However, the broad definition of “true cases about crime put into narrative format” captures the range of the genre, and this complexity opens up areas for inquiry surrounding narrative and documentary media, especially as what “counts” as true crime is beginning to expand. Finally, this project only employs interviews, surveys, responsive journaling, and materials-based methods (including websites and YouTube videos) as the primary sources of data. Given the limitations imposed by COVID-19, the opportunities for field research at live meet-ups or podcast recordings was not feasible. However, future research will employ field data to enrich the current data set to develop a deeper understanding of race, gender, and sociality in relation to the affective contours of true crime.

### Significance and Conclusion

Crime and media are two vehicles that have been shown to incorporate and extend racialized discourses (see Garland 2001). Further, cultural depictions of crime represent

important sites for understanding raced and gendered ideologies, as well as embodied practices and associated affective states. True crime is one of the mediums that, given its patterned consumer base, enables unique insight into how leisure practices inform, perform, reify, and invite novel and familiar displays of gendered and racialized subjectivities, especially in regards to emotion and deeply felt senses of risk, fear, and safety, and—relatedly—conceptions of morality, justice, and crime. As cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2004: 119) describes, “rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective.”

With true crime, White women are able to engage extreme violence while being removed from such violence. At the same time, these respondents name the risk of such violence as the motivation for their distant engagement. These layered, paradoxical positions are undergirded by the state as the specialized apparatus for redress, punishment, and justice. This vicarious and voyeuristic position is indicative of how race, gender, and vulnerability coalesce and are interactionally reified through true crime consumption. With renewed attention to the role White women play in perpetrating and upholding systems of racial violence and social control—such as the national attention to “Karens” “BBQ Becky’s” or “Permit Patty’s” (see Chokshi 2018; Nagesh 2020; Zhao

2018)—exploring the contours of White women’s simultaneous (gendered) oppression, (racial) privilege, and the tools employed to navigate both, is an urgent task.<sup>13</sup>

As tempting as it is to malign the few viral Karens as aberrations and dismiss the intimate and penetrating relationship of race, gender, and the state, this project empirically and critically explores racial power, gendered subordination, as well as affective and narrative imaginaries of crime and violence and their more micro-articulations, such as “anxiety,” “anger,” and “awareness,” also described as “see something, say something.” Perceptions of risk—i.e., perceptions of fear—are central to framing and justifying these actions. For instance, as Jennifer Schulte exclaimed in her 2018 phone call to police, “I was wondering when the police are going to come and help me! [...] I’m really scared! You gotta come quick!” This panicked phone call was in response to an innocuous activity, a Black family barbecuing in a public park, which ultimately earned her the moniker “BBQ Becky” (Zhao 2018).<sup>14</sup> In this way, White

---

<sup>13</sup> The emergence of “The Karen” is a complex one. As “Karen” sky-rocketed to the 20 most popular name choices for newborn girls in 1941 and remained at the top of the list for three decades, the name itself is a relic of an older, more conservative America. As shorthand for an attitude of entitlement, control, and—often—a particular haircut, “Karen” has become a term that encapsulates a variety of behaviors that often entail the hailing of institutional or organizational power to meet specific ends at the expense of retail workers, revelers, homeowners, BBQ-ers, bird watchers, children, and many others. Unsurprisingly, some have protected themselves against this term by claiming fear, mental illness, or employing notions of legality. It has been charged as both a sexist term and novel national scapegoat, and others have argued the term “too cutesy” and flippant for such violence, like “memeifying death” (Young 2020). Perhaps most persuasively, some critique the “Karen” as a “wish fulfillment fantasy [...] a White person’s fantasy that racism is just a matter of a few semi-hysterical, possibly mentally unstable [...], ranting on the fringes, dismissed with a flick of the screen” (Mishan 2021). Regardless of the “meaning” of “The Karen,” White women’s role in maintaining and extending the racial and carceral state is an important area of analysis.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, (White) fear is also recognized as a legitimizing force for murder. For example, Darren Wilson, a White police officer who murdered Michael Brown, a Black eighteen-year-old in 2014, described Brown as an unkillable “demon” who “charged” him despite the multiple gunshot wounds discharged by Wilson in Brown’s back (Calamur 2014). Ultimately, Wilson’s “fear” of imminent harm was deemed legitimate by the courts, and he was released without consequence.

fear—and the perverse pleasures that can accompany it—is central to the maintenance and extension of racial projects. Building on theories of racial habitus and racialized feeling rules, this project expands beyond the few viral Karens to explore how White women more generally occupy an ambivalent position that is reinforced by true crime consumption, where the reality of and potential for risk, or one’s sense of vulnerability, become reified through shared “edutainment” leisure practices that support and re-engage the (racial) state.

## Methodological Appendix

### *Survey Format and Questions*

#### **Boston University**

**Hello! My name is Heather and I'm a PhD candidate in Sociology at Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, studying the production and consumption of true crime. This brief survey is to gather general information on those interested in true crime. If you are 18 years of age or older and would like to participate, please continue to the survey below.**

**The purpose of this study is to analyze how and why people produce and consume true crime, exploring the gendered, racialized, and emotional dimensions of the genre. You are being asked to participate because you listen to, read, or watch true crime content at least once a month, and/or you are active in virtual true crime forums (such as Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook), following and/or posting content in the last year. Your participation is voluntary.**

**If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a 5-10-minute survey containing demographic questions and questions about your interest in true crime. The survey does not contain any risks beyond those you would normally encounter in everyday life. You will not be asked to provide your name or any identifying information, and your answers will be kept in a secure encrypted file on a password protected computer.**

**If you have any questions about the survey, please contact the investigators (researchers) for this study at the addresses below:**

**Heather Mooney, PhD Candidate  
96 Cummington Mall, Boston MA, 02139 hmooney@bu.edu**

**Jessica Simes, PhD, Assistant Professor (Faculty Advisor) simes@bu.edu  
96 Cummington Mall, Boston MA, 02139**

**If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Boston University IRB directly, at 617-358-6115 or irb@bu.edu.**

**I understand, continue**

## Boston University

### What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Trans man
- Trans woman
- Nonbinary
- Please specify

---

### What is your racial identity?

- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Latino/a/x
- Asian
- South East Asian
- Indigenous
- White
- Bi or multi racial
- Please specify:

---

### How old are you?

- 18 or under
- 18-25
- 26-29
- 30-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- 46-50
- 51-59
- 60+

**What is the highest level of education you've completed?**

- Some high school
  - High school diploma or GED/equivalent
  - Some college
  - Associate's degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Other advanced degree
- 

**How would you describe your sexual identity?**

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian or gay
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Please specify:

**Where did you grow up? Please include your country of origin and state/region of origin (i.e., USA, Massachusetts, Boston).**

**When did you start listening to, watching, or reading true crime?**

- Childhood (10 years or younger)
- Adolescence (11-17)
- Late adolescence (18-22)
- Young adulthood (23-39)
- Middle age (40-59)
- Older adulthood (60+)
- If you started listening, watching, or reading true crime at a specific time or moment, please state that age and elaborate if you want to:

**How often do you watch or listen to true crime?**

- Daily
  - A few times a week
  - Weekly
  - A few times a month
  - Monthly
  - A few times a year
- 

**Do you produce true crime content (videos, podcasts, articles) or do you consume it (read, watch, comment)?**

- Produce
  - Consume
  - Both
- 

**Currently, what is your favorite true crime broadcast (podcast, YouTube channel, etc.) or film/documentary?**

**If you have one, what is your favorite true crime story?**

**Why do you consume true crime? Select all that apply.**

- I find it interesting
- I find it exciting
- I find it relevant to my life experiences
- I enjoy the hosts
- I enjoy the community (online, in person, among friends)
- I enjoy the mystery
- I enjoy learning about psychology
- I enjoy learning about history
- I enjoy learning about the investigations
- I enjoy trying to solve unsolved crimes
- Other, please specify

**Thank you for participating!**

**If you wish to participate in a 60-90 minute virtual interview on this topic, or have questions about the study, please enter your email below and I will be in contact with you directly as soon as possible.**

**For the interview, identifying information will also be kept confidential and you will receive a gift card (Amazon, Target, CVS, or Starbucks) as thanks for your time.**

**Finish and Submit**

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Consumers and Producers*

Interview Subject Code Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Duration: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

**SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR CONSUMERS  
AND PRODUCERS OF THE TRUE CRIME GENRE.**

***I. Personal History and Profile***

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What's the highest grade you've completed, or degree you have?
3. What did you study in school?
4. What do you do for work?

*Personal History and Profile: True Crime Information*

1. How often do you read, watch, or listen to true crime?
  - a. How many hours per week or month do you engage with true crime?
    - i. Maybe make a probe about watching v. producing?
  - b. Is this different pre/post COVID-19? How so?
2. When did you start watching, reading, or listening to true crime?
  - a. Did this correspond with any major life events or experiences?
3. Are there periods of your life when you've engaged with it more than others?
  - a. Why do you think that is?
4. What is the "sub-genre" of true crime you're most interested in, if any?
  - a. Serial killers, spree shooters, cults, unsolved, etc.
5. What is the most memorable true crime story you've heard?
  - a. What about it makes it memorable?
6. For you, is true crime as a "hobby," entertainment, educational, or something else?

*Reflections on the Medium*

1. What other sorts of media do you consume?
  - a. What, other than engaging with true crime, do you do for leisure?
2. How do you listen to or watch true crime? Podcast, video, book, etc.
  - a. What medium do you prefer?
  - b. Is there any medium that you dislike? Explain.
3. What do you look for in a true crime show, book, or broadcast?
  - a. Host(s), forum dynamics, content, etc.

- b. Gender dynamics in presentation
- c. What about this is appealing to you?
- d. Is there anything that is not appealing to you, or would make you *not* engage with a particular show, broadcast, or book?
- 4. Is there “good” and “bad” true crime? Explain the difference.\*\*
- 5. What does true crime mean to you?

## ***II. Experience of Consumption***

- 1. Do you watch or listen with people, or on your own? Is there a person or group or people who you consume or discuss it with?
  - a. Do you share your true crime interests with people?
  - b. How do they respond? Explain.
  - c. Do you think true crime has a particular reputation? If so, what? Is that reputation stigmatized?
- 2. When do you listen to or watch true crime?
  - a. What time of day?
  - b. What feeling or experience typically prompts you to watch or listen to true crime?
- 3. What are you doing when you consume it?
- 4. What is your emotional experience during consumption?
  - a. What emotions register to you while listening?
    - i. Do any linger with you? If so, which?
  - b. Do other activities trigger similar emotions or feelings?
  - c. What bodily sensations do you have?
- d. Do you remember if you have ever stopped something, or paused, rewound, or re-read something? What was it?
  - i. What was the last moment when you were engaging with true crime where you had an extremely negative or extremely positive reaction?
- 5. How does true crime make you feel?
  - a. Why do you like true crime?

## ***III. Reflection on (Digital) Community and Participation***

- 1. What true crime focused communities, if any, are you involved with? Online, in-person, etc.
  - a. Which ones? How often?
  - b. To what degree? Are you a “lurker” or more active participant?
  - c. Have you attended or do you plan/hope to attend any meet-ups or live events? What was that experience like?
- 2. In terms of these communities, especially for online forums, what is highlighted on them by moderators or participants?
  - a. What do true crime focused communities, either generally or a one with more specific focus area, discuss?

- b. Are there any recurring themes or conversations that you have noticed?
- c. Are images included? Crime scene photos, memes, etc. What are they?
- 3. How do these forums or platforms influence what is included in true crime?
  - a. Do you see crossover between consumer requests and producer output?
- 4. Do you think there is a “diversity” of people who are active in true crime forums?
  - a. For example, do you see diversity in terms of producers and consumer/participant race, sexuality, age, gender, nationality, etc.?
- 5. Do you think true crime consumption on forums has “real world” effects? What are they?
  - a. Does this motivate your participation?
- 6. What do you learn from these communities?
- 7. Why do you follow or engage with these communities?

#### ***IV. Reflection on Production***

- 1. What is your role in production?
- 2. Walk me through the general production process.
- 3. What was the last project you worked on?
  - a. How did you choose this project?
  - b. How long did it take?
  - c. How big is your team?
  - d. What are the key roles in production, and who does them?
- 4. What do you cover in your forum/Podcast/YouTube Channel/TV show/writing?
  - a. What are the most common cases?
  - b. How are cases selected?
  - c. What do you hope to accomplish from your coverage?
  - d. Are different stories better for different mediums? For instance, are some better suited for books, documentaries, short films, podcasts?
- 5. How do you choose a given true crime story to cover?
  - a. Are there any that are not included? If so, which ones and why?
  - b. What would you like to cover? Is there anything missing from coverage?
- 6. In your opinion, who produces “good” true crime?
  - a. Who are they?
  - b. What makes it good?
  - c. In your opinion, what does it take to be a good producer of true crime?
- 7. Would you say those who produce true crime represent a diverse group?
  - a. Age, race, gender, sexuality, nationality?
  - b. Do you think this affects coverage and reception? If so, how?
- 8. Are you involved in any true crime social media, for your program or others?
  - a. In terms of these communities, especially for online forums, what is highlighted on them by moderators or participants?
  - b. What has feedback been like? Who is your base and how are they responding to you?

9. Do you think there is a “diversity” of people who are active in true crime forums?
  - a. For example, do you see diversity in terms of producers and consumer/participant race, sexuality, age, gender, nationality, etc.?
10. Do you think true crime production and consumption has “real world” effects? What are they?
  - a. Does this motivate your participation?

#### ***V. Reflection on Content***

1. How do you define true crime?
  - a. What would you say are the differences between true crime and shows like *Cops*, *The First 48*, or *Judge Judy*?
  - b. What about shows like *Law and Order*?
2. Who do you think is represented in true crime content?
  - a. Is this a diverse group, i.e. race, sexuality, gender, nationality, etc.?
  - b. Who is left out of the genre?
  - c. What is left out of the genre?
3. What do you think are the key components or themes of a “true crime” story?
  - a. Is there a plot arc? Beginning, middle, and end?
    - i. How do you feel about true crime stories that are unresolved?
4. Who are the key “characters” of a true crime story?
  - a. Do you identify with, or distance yourself from, any characters in particular?
  - b. Of these characters, who do you find most emotionally compelling? The least?
5. How are teachers, social workers, counselors, therapists, or health care workers, represented in the genre?
6. How are police officers, lawyers, judges, investigators, detectives, CIA/FBI agents, or other legal actors depicted in the true crime you engage with?
7. How do you think institutions (like schools, universities, hospitals, religious institutions, criminal justice system) in general are represented in the genre?
8. What is presented as strong or compelling evidence in true crime?
9. What does punishment look like in these cases? What does justice mean to you in these cases?
10. How has your engagement with true crime influenced how you think about crime, risk, and violence?
  - a. What about the criminal justice system?
  - b. What about possibilities for criminal justice reform?
11. If anything, what do you learn from true crime?

#### ***VI. Wrap Up***

1. Who do you think are the primary producers and consumers of true crime?
  - a. Most consumers are women. Does this surprise you?
    - i. Why do you think this might be?

2. If you're comfortable telling me, have you ever been a victim of a crime, or known someone who was?
  - a. Do you think this has influenced your true crime consumption?
3. After reflecting on true crime during this interview, why do you listen to true crime?
4. If there is one thing you want me to know about true crime as a genre, what would that be?
5. What questions should I be asking?
6. Do you find yourself attracted to other "dark" leisure practices, like horror movies, ghost tours, or dark tourism (for example, to places Auschwitz, Lizzy Borden's house, New Town Connecticut, Littleton Colorado, Alcatraz Prison, Chernobyl, or Plantation Tours in the US)?
  - a. If so, what is the connection? If not, why not?

#### *Demographic Information*

1. Location: Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
2. Education: What's the highest level of education you've completed?
3. Gender: What is your gender identity?
4. Ethnicity: What is your ethnic background?
5. Age: When were you born?
6. Income: If you're comfortable telling me, what is your annual income?
  - a. < \$10,000
  - b. \$10,000 – 14,999
  - c. \$15,000 – 19,999
  - d. \$20,000 – 29,999
  - e. \$30,000 – 49,999
  - f. \$50,000 – 69,999
  - g. \$70,000 – 99,999
  - h. \$100,000 – 149,999
  - i. > \$150,000
7. Sexual Orientation: If you feel comfortable telling me, what is your sexual orientation?
8. Relationship Status: What is your current marital status?

#### *Recruitment and Optional Study Continuation*

1. Can you think of a few people who have similar interests who would like to be interviewed? If so, will you pass along my email and a recruitment message?
2. Are there any true crime forums, videos, books, or podcasts you might recommend to me for analysis?
3. Did you complete the survey? If not, I'll send you a link with the gift card.

4. If you are interested in continuing to participate in this study, would you be willing to document one or more of your experiences listening to or watching true crime narratives, tracking your emotional experience and any key themes/areas that you respond to while watching or listening? The same confidentiality protocols will apply and another \$10 gift card will be provided as thanks for your time. I have journal prompts available to help guide you, but you can answer them as much or as little as you want to.

### *Optional Journaling Prompts*

#### **RACE AND GENDER IN TRUE CRIME: SEMI STRUCTURED JOURNALING PROMPTS**

Thank you for participating in this study on race, gender, and true crime! Depending on the length of the episode you select and the depth of your responses, this activity should take 30 minutes to two hours of your time.

Below is a list of semi-structured prompts to help guide your reflective journaling. This list is merely a guide; *you can skip questions, write as much or as little as you choose, and/or provide any other information you think is relevant.*

For submission, you can answer directly in this document, respond in a separate text document, or write notes on paper. Whatever format you choose, please email me (Heather Mooney, PhD Candidate, Sociology, Boston University) the file(s) at [hmooney@bu.edu](mailto:hmooney@bu.edu).

Please send the materials to me within three months after our interview. After receipt, I will send you a digital \$10 gift card as thanks for your time.

#### **Before:**

1. What is the date and the local time?
2. Where are you listening, reading, or watching?
3. What are you listening to, reading, or watching?
  - a. If applicable, what episode?
4. Did you choose this material for a specific reason?
5. What prompted you to start watching or listening at this moment?
6. How are you feeling prior to starting the episode?

#### **During:**

1. Are there any disclaimers or “trigger warnings” given?
  - a. If so, what are they? When are they provided?
2. What is the general story/stories outlined in this episode? (I.e., cold case, murder, assault, stalking, etc.)
3. Who are the key characters? (I.e., spouses, family, strangers, victims, perpetrators, children, cults, etc.)
  - a. If included, what is the race, gender, sexuality, and/or national identity of the key characters?
4. Are there any institutions or institutional actors involved in this case? (I.e., courts, police, social services, teachers, etc.)
  - a. How are they represented?
5. Is there resolution? If so, what is it?

- a. Are there any social and/or legal consequences? What are they and what are your thoughts about them?
6. While listening, what parts elicit a strong emotional reaction? (I.e., disgust, excitement, curiosity, anxiety, fear, surprise, satisfaction, etc.)
7. If applicable, what is the host like?
  - a. If there are multiple hosts, what is their dynamic like?
8. Anything else you want to add?

**After:**

1. What did you take away from the episode, book, or film?
2. Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?
3. How did this compare to other true crime stories?
  - a. Was anything missing or exceptionally good?
4. Did you do or will you do any follow up research on this case, or have discussions about this case?
  - a. If so, where? With who?
5. Would you listen to or watch this again? Why?
6. How are you feeling after listening to the episode?
7. Any other thoughts or reflections?

## CHAPTER 3 – THE MAKING OF TRUE CRIME: “RACIAL GRAMMAR” AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO NARRATIVE

### Introduction

True crime has a long history in the United States and Europe. Despite changes in form and thematic emphasis—such as the importance of religious piety, or the “truths” facilitated by technological or scientific innovations—its past and current production and consumption structure yield important insights into the shifting (though perpetually racialized) socio-moral structures of United States’ society. True crime reflects and reproduces deep seated understandings of risk, violence, justice, and morality. Relatedly, socio-ideological systems like criminal justice and law, forensics and science, institutional support and neglect, as well as identity (including representations and intersections of race, gender, and sexuality), are salient in true crime. All of this congeals in a broader socio-cultural terrain that is racialized, gendered, and affectively charged. The sensational and persuasive power of this edutainment genre<sup>15</sup>—and the narratives and associated explanations it carries—impacts (felt) constructions of race and gender. Thus, exploring the making of true crime, its internal structures, and subsequent social effects, is an important exercise. In addition to analyzing narrative form and content, I attend to the raced and gendered circuits and structures of true crime to better understand the “felt” contours of the racialized *culture of control* (Garland 2001).

---

<sup>15</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, edutainment media is content that is both educational and entertaining. While a more recent term, it can be retroactively applied in particular instances. It is defined as “entertainment (as by games, films, or shows) that is designed to be educational” (Merriam-Webster 2022).

First, I explore a general history of true crime. Second, I analyze material and economic structure of the genre, as well as the symbolic contours, including race, gender, and performative allyship. Third, I examine the narrative structure of true crime, including its rhythmic and formulaic elements, and how scholars use content and narrative arc to determine what true crime “is.” Fourth, I examine the narrative components of true crime in relation to race. I analyze how true crime is understood in relation to race and representation by producers and consumers, paying attention to how racialized narrative tropes are employed to frame true crime cases and coverage as “interesting,” or worthy of narrative coverage, versus “boring” and subsequently unworthy of analysis. Here, I discuss the affective and gendered contours of what I describe as *White myths*, and the relationship of racialized “danger narratives” (also known as “captivity narratives”) to the White-dominated true crime genre, as well as the charged tropes of White feminine vulnerability and apparatuses of racialized social control in an era that is paradoxically defined by “colorblindness” and racial consciousness (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Webb 2021). Fifth, despite the hegemonic power of true crime, I further consider how true crime opens possibilities for more critical storytelling and possibilities for redress, which Neroli Price (2020) describes as *narrative justice*. I conclude with an overview of the power of true crime stories, discussing its deeply problematic elements as well as its subversive possibilities in providing support, healing, and justice for otherwise marginalized cases, and how the power of the genre can potentially be harnessed for transformation and resistance.

### *True Crime: An Overview*

As discussed in chapter one, true crime has a long history, especially so in Europe and the United States. Ian Case Punnett—former journalist, current multimedia studies scholar, and author of *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives*—argues that the long genealogy of true crime originates in the Bible with the story of Cain and Abel (Punnett 2018: 5). At the very least, violent crime narratives have extensive legacies; once prominent in execution narratives, ballads, poetry, and sermons, the vehicles for and the (thematic) messages of this genre have since evolved based on advances in forensic technology, socio-cultural shifts, and advancements in media forms (see chapter one; see Wiltenburg 2004). For example, *The National Police Gazette* was one of the first and most prominent periodicals to blend burgeoning scientific expertise with grisly murder stories (Burt 2017). Still today, over 176 years later, the publication describes itself as “covering crime, sports, celebrities, and all things sensational since 1845” (*National Police Gazette* 2022), indicating the longstanding presence of salacious edutainment media. See Figure 1a and 1b.

Figure 3a and 3b: National Police Gazette Covers (National Police Gazette, 2022)



The popularity of this type of coverage prompted media sites to devote attention to gritty coverage of “real” crime and violence, promising titillating tales of crime, violence, gore, and justice to readers. “Danger narratives,” “whodunit” or “whodunitwhydunit” detective stories, “howcatchem” stories (where the crime and identity of the perpetrator is known and the chase is centralized), spy narratives, and other related focal themes, have captured the attention of the public to varying degrees, facilitating the expansive reach of (true) crime stories (Burt 2017; Murley 2008; Punnett 2018; Webb 2021). As these true crime media content and format emerged, full-length texts such as *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1966) and Vincent Bugliosi’s *Helter Skelter* (1974) arguably provided the contemporary template and structure of crime stories, and perhaps yielded the strongest influence in shaping the content and form of true crime today (Burt 2017).

Currently, true crime coverage spans from more familiar novels, television shows, and documentaries, to podcasts, devoted true crime YouTube channels and videos, as well as serialized, on-demand streaming shows. Amateur crime aficionados and experts (including journalists, former and current police officers, detectives, and lawyers, among others) produce a range of content devoted to (true) crime and justice, accessible to anyone with cable television or an Internet connection. Despite marked shifts in media vehicles, the genre remains recognizable, using the documentation of real events saturated with emotion. As such, true crime continues to disguise its sensationalism, entertainment value, and emotional/moral lessons in its appeals to objectivity, often represented by scientific, investigative, and juridical procedures (see Wiltenburg 2004).

Despite such prominence and persistence over time, true crime remains definitionally fuzzy, lurking at the edges of “ripped from the headlines” crime fiction,<sup>16</sup> news media, investigative journalism, and documentary. Indeed, there are ongoing debates in journalism studies and literature about whether or not true crime constitutes documentary, narrative journalism, news, or something else, given the room for interpretation and “sway” in this media form, which has been critiqued.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, despite

---

<sup>16</sup> “Ripped from the headlines” refers to programs such as *Law & Order: SVU*, where fictionalized renderings of national cases or news stories are employed in the story line. For instance, *Law and Order: SVU* produced several episodes focusing on rape in higher education during national attention to sexual assault on campuses. The program even produced less ambiguous episodes depicting specific events, such as former pornographic actress Miriam Week’s (Belle Knox’s) experiences at Duke University, and Emma Sulkowicz’s protest of Columbia University’s administration’s handling of sexual assault (Karlin 2014; Sanches 2015).

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Netflix’s 2015 documentary *Making a Murderer* is one example of true crime coverage that has been accused of being particularly “biased,” “inaccurate,” and “unfair to police” (Thompson 2016; Thompson 2020).

the emphasis on “truth,” true crime’s relationship to fact is subject to layers of interpretation and reconstruction.

*True Crime: Material and Economic Structures of Production*

As discussed in chapter one, true crime is an immensely profitable and popular enterprise. Arguably, the success of *Serial*’s “The Case of Adnan Syed” in 2014 hastened the growth of the on-demand true crime industry (Bishop 2014; Robertson 2019). Recently, in 2020, crime and true crime shows and movies exceeded all other streamed content on Netflix, peaking during COVID-19 related isolation (Bean 2021). Not one to miss the explosive revenue possibilities, streaming services like Hulu, Amazon Prime, and HBO also began producing extensive true crime collections. Even more classic mediums, such as true crime novels, have increased in popularity in recent years: in 2016, 976,000 true crime books were sold, and in 2018, that number vaulted to 1.6 million (Packer n.d.).

At the time of writing, there are over 2,800 true crime podcasts available for streaming across platforms, and true crime focused podcasts are routinely overrepresented in the top ten of podcasts on Apple iTunes, Spotify, and other streaming services (Webb 2021). The hosts of *My Favorite Murder* are two of the “richest podcasters in the world,” each commanding a net worth of around 20 million dollars. Their show accrued 15 million dollars in revenue in 2019, which led to them securing a 10 million dollar deal with Stitcher, and landed them at number two on *Forbes*’ inaugural ranking of the top-earning podcasts, surpassed only by conservative podcaster Joe Rogan,

host of “The Joe Rogan Experience” (Shapiro 2020). In addition, branded merchandise, sold-out tours and podcast recordings, Patreon subscription services, advertising revenues, and book deals continue to generate revenue for true crime podcasters and YouTubers.

According to Google Trends (2022), searches for “true crime” have risen steadily over time across the globe, though this is notably stratified by geographic location, which aligns with my data and existing scholarship. See Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: Google Searches for “True Crime” Over Time

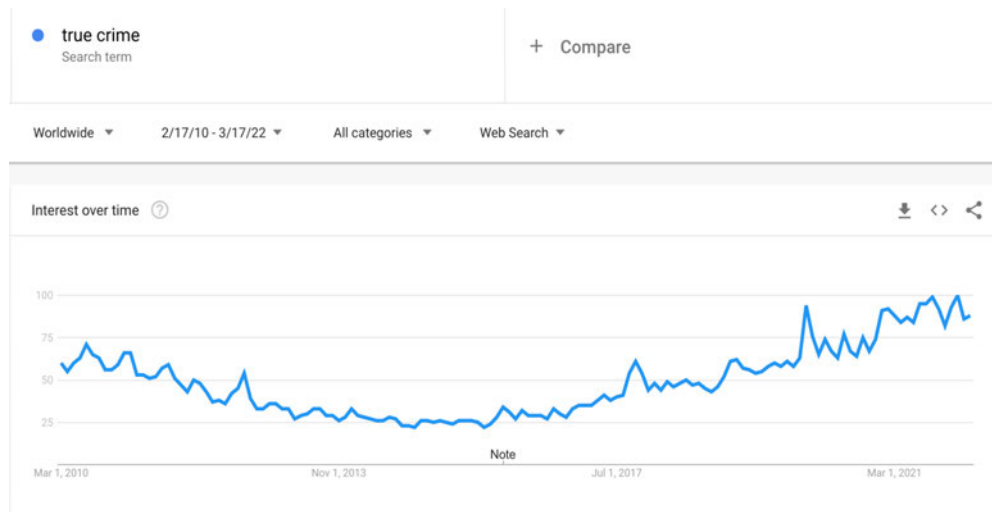
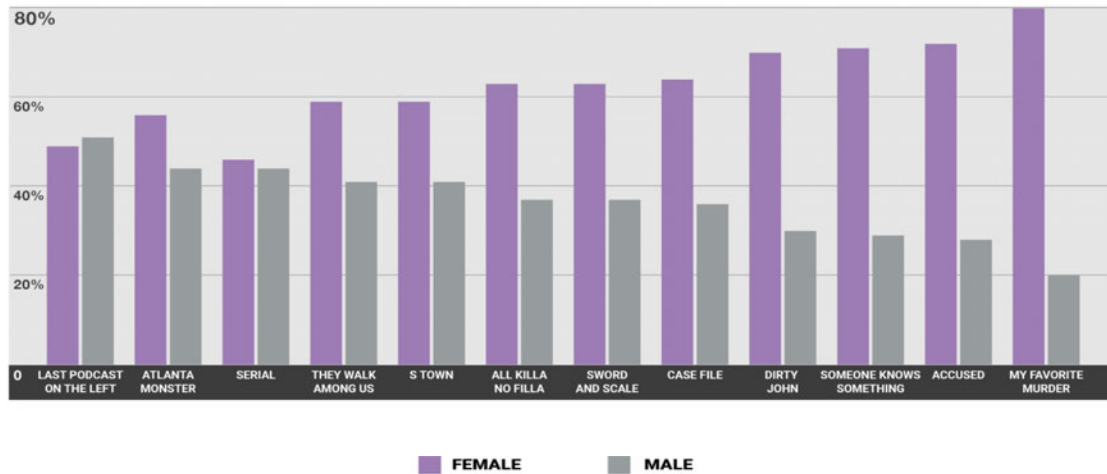


Figure 5: Geographic Concentration of Google Searches for “True Crime”



In addition to stratification across places—including at the national and state level—true crime is immensely patterned by consumer and producer demographics. In terms of production and consumption, White people are overwhelmingly represented in and involved with the true crime genre (Conroy 2019; Hunt and Ramón 2021). As discussed, this is clearly gendered as well as racialized. Consumer report data estimates 73-75% of true crime consumers are college educated, heterosexually partnered White women, from 18-34 years old (Ask Wonder 2020). A recent study found that women make up 73% of the true crime podcast audience (Boling and Hull 2018). Another study revealed that women wrote 70% of the reviews of true crime books on Amazon, and when given a choice between reading a true crime book or a book about war, 77% of women selected the true crime text (Vicary and Fraley 2010). Women make up over 80% of CrimeCon attendees (Munroe 2020), and in 2018, women constituted the vast majority of the audience of the twelve most popular true crime podcasts except for one where men are only slightly overrepresented (Joyce 2018). See Figure 6.

Figure 6: True Crime Podcast Twitter Followers by Gender (Joyce 2018)



Rachel Munroe, writer and author of *Savage Appetites: Four Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession*, sums this phenomenon up neatly: “[television] executives and writers, forensic scientists and activists and exonerees all agree: true crime is a genre that overwhelmingly appeals to women” (Munroe 2020: 7). While much has been made about the gendered dynamics that constitute just under three-quarters of the consumer base, as yet, no scholarship has substantially attended to the role of race (and, by extension, the co-constitutive relationship of race and gender) in theorizing true crime consumption. I critically analyze how true crime narrative is a vehicle that employs and deploys a particular *racial grammar* (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Spillers 1987), enabling insights in Whiteness, femininity, and broader senses of justice, violence, and morality in the culture of control.

## The (Narrative) Structure of True Crime

### *The Making of Truth*

While the economic structure, production, and consumption of true crime matters, the related representational and symbolic elements are reinforced and complicated by the broader narrative structure of true crime. As simultaneous documentary, news media, and edutainment, true crime—with its sensational, moralized content and myriad opportunities for opinion and misinformation—is particularly amenable to interpretation, exaggeration, and fabrication. Even the most well-researched shows are subject to re-presenting and re-ordering of events for consumption, and ultimately, have a fraught relationship with the truth it purports to surface.

Jean Murley, an English literature scholar and author of *The Rise of True Crime: 20th Century Murder and American Popular Culture*, defines true crime as “a murder narrative whose truth claims are unchallenged by its audience and taken as ‘real,’” despite the fact that “true crime always fictionalizes, emphasizes, exaggerates, interprets, constructs, and creates ‘truth’” (Murley 2008: 13). In slight contrast, Mark Seltzer emphasizes how “true crime is fact that reads like, or looks like, crime fiction” (2008: 11), which highlights the similarities and slippage between “fact” and “fiction” in true crime as indicated by its typical narrative form and tropes. Indeed, true crime (and other forms of documentary media) “blends” and “oscillates” between fact, fiction, and opinion, all under the broader guise of objectivity (Flis 2010), with bigger implications for how people engage with the social world more generally, including legal systems

(Callanan 2005; Bruzzi 2016). Ultimately, scholars agree that true crime retains a fraught but intimate relationship between fact and fiction, blending real and imagined under the larger banner of objective truth.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, even if the facts are directly adhered to as closely as possible, the saturation of such selective cases yields a fictional representation of reality, precipitated by the skew in perspective about actual, more general realities of crime and violence.

In *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives*, Ian Case Punnett employs two domains to determine whether or not a story about crime is, in fact, a true crime narrative. First, like Murley and Seltzer, Punnett identifies the importance but relative “adaptability” of “truth,” wherein a given narrative is “*striving* to be as true as possible” (Punnett 2018: 96; emphasis added), often shaped by author interpretation. The second is about the narrative tropes and associated objectives (and/as thematic content) in the presented story. For Punnett, these encompass: the search for justice for the victim, awareness raising about systemic or structural injustice, and highlighting the importance of forensic technology in case resolution. Indeed, these tropes, objectives, and themes are familiar to many true crime consumers, including my study respondents. As a result, true crime serves as a modern “folk tale” that “[explains] a truth to the public” (Punnett 2018: 98); it represents a narrative filled with ideologies, meaning-making, and purpose (Polletta et al 2011), under the banner of objective truth and reality.

---

<sup>18</sup> Arguably, even vehicles that traditionally deliver objective truths, such as the news, can be analyzed using narrative and genre analysis, which yields interesting insights about power, narratives, and cultural mores and values (Buozis and Creech 2018).

These working definitions from Murley (2008) and Punnett (2018) reflect the organic definitions provided by respondents during interviews. For the sake of clarity, these formal definitions and participant responses led me to a broad definition that simply incorporates these key elements: true crime is a true or real story about a violent and/or criminal act put into a narrative structure. However, what does this narrative contain, how is it structured, and how is it circulated? With what effects? And what can the symbolic and structural elements of the genre tell us about race, gender, and emotion today?

Indeed, as mentioned above, the illusion of coherence and truth in the structure and content of true crime has effects on consumers and society writ large. In his dissertation examining true crime and crime narratives from 1925 through 1991, Andrew Burt (2017: 1), a literature scholar, describes how the “fictional elements [of true crime] can affect culture until the two become inseparable and stresses a comprehensive view of criminality.” Further, as criminologists Alexis Durham, H. Preston Elrod, and Patrick T. Kinkade (1995: 143) show in their content analysis of true crime cases, “compared with official data on murder [...] the portrayal of homicide in the true crime realm is extremely narrow, and significantly differs from the full range of cases that typify murder in America.” As a result, consumption is correlated with a skewed perception of potential risk, as well as crime in general, despite the genre’s overarching emphasis on true events and real stories (Callanan 2005; Webb 2021).

*Rhythm, Formula, and Sensemaking*

As described by language researcher Kobie van Krieken and communications scholar José Sanders, the “activity of sharing stories is supposed to be a deeply rooted and universal phenomenon enabling humankind to entertain one another, establish group identities, and learn how to act and react in unexpected or dangerous situations” (van Krieken and Sanders 2017).<sup>19</sup> True crime stories, like other narratives, are “forms of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and elements of collective action frames, but unlike all three, they can be identified in a chunk of text or speech by their formal features” (Polletta 2011: 112). The formal features of true crime are clearly identifiable through content, but also through stylistic genre conventions that are notably formulaic. As Mark Seltzer (2005: 35) notes, “the conventions of the genre are in fact instantly recognizable; in fact, there is nothing more recognizable about true crime than its utter conventionality.”

Especially after Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, true crime has become even more conventional, and, as a result, perhaps “comforting” despite the highlighted brutality. Jean Murley (2008: 3; emphasis added) argues, “We read true-crime books and blogs and watch the television shows and films because they promise to furnish answers to serious questions about human behavior, because *they’re formulaic and therefore as addictive and soothing as old-fashioned mystery novels*.” This argument is not uncommon; indeed, scholars argue that the “formulaic nature” of true crime (and crime fiction) provides consumers with:

---

<sup>19</sup> To be discussed more in chapters four and five, true crime is a powerful vehicle to establish in-group (and out-group) identity, as well as learn violence prevention and intervention strategies.

...a safe frame in which to develop stories that deal with the darkest side of human beings [...] [the genre] [offers] the public a sense of security and reassurance as they show a predictable development of the investigation and a final resolution of the crime that often culminates in the restoration of the status quo where evil is punished [...] These stories gain their strength from the almost obsessive repetition of a narrative structure where the detective faces the disruption of the social order (Avanas Álvarez 2019: 140, 142)

Popular conversations, personal anecdotes, and study participants further allude to the “calming” effects of true crime for its primary consumer base. Some describe the genre as “a source of comfort [...] during times of extreme anxiety,” as it is “somehow relaxing [...] almost calming” (Ragsdale 2018; Susan 2017) for consumers. Some online videos even combine ASMR (whispered voices) and true crime cases to aid viewers in “[falling] asleep—though the content is actually horrifying” (Blatchford 2020; Kohn 2020). In addition to using true crime as background noise for their daily activities, many interviewees in this study described true crime consumption as “soothing,” “cathartic,” “therapeutic,” “relaxing,” or “instantly” putting them to sleep.

The formulaic “rhythm” of true crime is part of a bigger rhythm of return-to-order, a linear cause-and-effect process that culminates in a somewhat predictable resolution, acting as a narrative container to manage the horror of violence. Put another way, the “reality” of such horror is made palpable for (largely White and female) consumers by the familiar and rhythmic, i.e. “soothing,” structure of most true crime coverage.<sup>20</sup> However, the consistency and clarity of this rhythm provides a false

---

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Sara Ahmed connects repetition with the production of Whiteness as a phenomenology. Ahmed (2007: 159) writes, “Whiteness is an effect of what coheres rather than the origin of coherence. The effect of repetition is not then simply about a body count: it is not simply a matter of how many bodies are ‘in’. Rather, what is repeated is a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space, which claims space

assurance; as discussed in this chapter, the narrative's internal consistency does not mean that the truth or reality is adhered to in true crime, or that safety and prevention from harm is guaranteed.

A textual analysis of true crime (and other forms of documentary media) shows how this sort of genre engages in both *meaning making* and *sensemaking* for its audience. Meaning making is an individual process that can either challenge or confirm one's view of reality and their relationship to the world in general (Krauss 2005: 762). Sensemaking, in contrast, reorients a group into a shared, constructed reality. As Karl Weick (1995: 14), an organizational theorist, describes, "the concept of sensemaking is well named because, literally, it means the making of sense. Active agents construct sensible, sensible events. They 'structure the unknown'" (see also Punnett 2018). The *sensational* nature of true crime speaks to how "sense" is made through the repetitive, affective, embodied, and emotionally charged site of gendered vulnerability. The formulaic structure and rhythm of true crime help illuminate why sensemaking *vis-à-vis* true crime is so powerful, impacting consumers on short and longer terms, serving to both excite and soothe the audience. To be discussed more in chapter four, the content, rhythm, and narrative structure of true crime are part of how individuals and collectives build, construct, and explain their reality (see Polletta et al 2014), including the felt reality of risk and vulnerability. Ultimately, true crime offers an apt site to analyze and better understand

---

*by the accumulation of gestures of 'sinking' into that space. If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home, then those bodies take up more space. Such bodies are shaped by motility, and may even take the shape of that motility."*

the relationship of race and gender—especially Whiteness and femininity—to formulaic constructions of fear, justice, violence, and morality, not just in terms of content, but also regarding the rhythms of the larger narrative structure.

### *Race, Representation, and Symbolic Structures*

Identifying and describing the terms of content and production circuits was fairly straightforward for participants, and respondents easily identified associated patterns without question. In terms of true crime content, respondents (and scholars) identified how Whiteness saturates the genre (Munroe 2020; Webb 2021). Specifically, when asked “who or what is missing or excluded from the genre,” participants readily answered that the genre was overwhelmingly White, featuring White male perpetrators and White female victims, and therefore excludes anyone outside those identity categories.<sup>21</sup> Several participants even used the more academic term *missing White woman syndrome* (Stillman 2007), and quickly lamented how true crime participates in and reproduces such skewed and White-centric representation.

Dawna, a Black career news reporter and true crime podcast host in her “mid-40s,” echoed this, and said she actively worked to redress these gaps in representation. She explained that she “[chooses] a story [for her podcast] based on news coverage. If it’s a person of color, I think that a lot of time the media ignores stories about people of color or don’t give them the same treatment as a White case.” As a result, she intentionally

---

<sup>21</sup> The focus was further limited nationally, often featuring stories from the United States and occasionally, Canada and England.

identifies and highlights these stories. In addition to the absence of racial diversity, participants also identified other areas of identity that are marginalized in true crime: ability, immigration status, LGBTQ-identification, age, and class-status. Interestingly—and to be discussed later in this chapter and in chapter five—only two participants identified that true crime actually excludes the majority crime itself, including the lion’s share of violent crimes and homicides (Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade 1995).<sup>22</sup>

In addition to identifying that the content is racially skewed, the production process, narrative structure, and story design are also impacted by racial disparities, and by extension, “carry” and reproduce them. While I interviewed fewer producers with insider knowledge (n=11), all interviewees reported or speculated that true crime is generally produced by White people, especially for major television networks like Oxygen or Discovery. Their speculation is empirically true, and further extends to more mainstream and contemporary true crime media; indeed, true crime is overwhelmingly dominated by White people, and White women play a particularly large role in mainstream true crime media (Conroy 2019; Hunt and Ramón 2021; Munroe 2020; Webb 2021). Podcasts such as *My Favorite Murder*, *Crime Junkie*, or *Morbid*, and many true crime documentaries, including *Making a Murderer*, are produced and directed by White women. Importantly, respondents of all races insisted that this is shifting as media types proliferate and production access increases. While there are certainly more podcasts

---

<sup>22</sup> Beyond concerns of representation, other major themes respondents identified include: (in)justice, criminal justice actors and apparatuses, psychology (particularly of perpetrators), institutional neglect, as well as the effects of such violent actions on families, communities, and the legal system.

available that are produced and directed by people of color, it remains to be seen if these narratives will be equitably integrated into mainstream true crime coverage.

As true crime is, reputedly, focused on justice (see Punnett 2018), “justice” is integral to the symbolic and representational structure of true crime. Given the high levels of interactivity between consumers and producers—especially in new media like podcasts or YouTube videos—fans push for “justice” from true crime producers and their content on various platforms. One particularly heralded form of this call for justice is podcaster fundraising, and interviewees were eager to report contributions to fundraising facilitated by podcasters. This included one *Crime Junkie*’s hosts, Ashley Flowers, who has raised \$300,000 through her nonprofit “Season of Justice,” which made grants towards 53 unsolved murders (Hill 2022). In a similar vein, *My Favorite Murder*’s crowdsourced donation of over \$1,000 to “End The Backlog,” an organization devoted to ending the backlog of rape kits in the United States, prompted fans to identify the “top ten times *My Favorite Murder* was super feminist and we loved it” (Mason 2017). While donation drives such as this did occur, the pursuit of “justice” was more often signaled through podcaster language and terminology. In interviews, primarily White consumers commended podcast hosts for pointedly changing language around marginalized groups. Some examples include using the word “sex worker” instead of “prostitute,” or doing mini-series on Black Lives Matter or the Central Park Five. While language certainly matters in the construction of our world, this arguably constitutes a *performative speech act* (Ahmed 2011), wherein producers and their consumer base can signal investment in social and racial justice without substantive efforts (or even foreclose such possibilities).

While these fundraising efforts and language adjustments were lauded by interviewees, they did not effectively redress the issues of lacking representation in production and, by extension, a notable lack of perspective due to the knowledge that accompanies lived experience. Although representation is critical, it seems efforts for racial justice can actually be diluted by and through true crime. In terms of representation and associated knowledge, these differences on the “backend” of production are apparent to consumers, especially for Black interviewees. Amber, a 29-year-old Black woman, described the differences between Black and White true crime podcasts and podcasters as such (emphasis added):

If they're Black they're going to talk about Blackness, then they're going to bring out like “hey these victims aren't talked about, this was ignored, etc.,” versus something like Crime Junkie [podcast hosted by two White women], they may or may not talk about it [...] Most White podcasters don't talk about it or it's just one line, but they don't elevate why it's only one line. Other podcasters or podcasters of color always talk about why there's this lack of information, nobody cares about this, so let's talk about it [...] So once I found Black podcast this year and it's like yes, thank you! [...] I noticed the differences like, “oh okay, yeah that's how I would talk about this...”

As Amber describes, she is attuned to the difference in content as well as framing and motivation when listening to White and Black true crime producers. For White producers, Amber observes race is only given “one line” to signal the symbolic economy of social justice, whereas Black true crime producers weave race, racism, and White supremacy throughout their discussion of the case, given its frequent centrality in and to the narrative.

Colleen, a Black 29-year-old true crime podcaster, condemned the way White podcasters attend to stories of missing and murdered Black people, and how such performative investment in racial justice is not just empty, but exploitative. She explained, “around [news coverage of] Black Lives Matter, people were tagging me with their little ‘Oh, my goodness support these Black podcasters...’ like I’ve been here for a long time, and all of a sudden George Floyd dies, and now you suddenly care? Come on now. And are they still doing that? No.” She went on to describe how bigger true crime podcasts will use (i.e., steal) content from lesser-known podcasts such as hers, indicating how performative allyship is employed to the benefit of White people, such as increasing listenership without providing due credit. Here, the performance of justice and inclusion forecloses its actualization. By signaling social justice, the “feeling” of “doing justice” becomes satisfying for White podcasters and their audience, though this is revealed as ineffective (and harmful) to the groups the coverage purports to support. In this way, true crime is not only racialized and gendered in its representation and circulation, but also in its internal production structure and subsequent circulation.

*“Interesting” versus “Boring:” Constructing Aberration in True Crime*

As producers and consumers readily noted, true crime is a racialized genre in production, form, content, delivery, and consumption. Indeed, the vast majority of participants, regardless of race or gender, were critical of mainstream true crime coverage. In interviews, participants expressed the need for increased coverage of missing and murdered Black, Indigenous, and Brown people. According to producers,

this is not just due to systemic neglect and racism directly, but also due to the limitations imposed by production, in terms of time allotted and perceptions of audience “interest.” For instance, Dawna—a Black news reporter and seasoned true crime podcaster—began a podcast focused on missing and murdered Black people due to the lack of representation, but further due to the structural limits of her work as a news reporter. She explained that she started a podcast because “I have more freedom to say and do what I want with the story in my podcast, and the duration can be my choice. In my daily reporting, my time is limited because my stories are part of a newscast, and limitations are put on the length of a story.”

Like Black consumers and producers, White producers also lamented the limits of the genre, which they attributed to network executives who are only invested in highlighting certain stories. These White producers worked in news media but also on true crime television shows, featured on shows like *Nancy Grace*, or devoted networks like Oxygen or Discovery. In interviews, White producers working on televised true crime stories acknowledged that “sexy” cases that can be “assembled” into a mystery are key to a successful pitch for television shows and reporting. For these producers, “sexy” is shorthand for cases that feature an attractive White woman from a middle to upper middle-class home who is murdered by a loved one. “Sexy” is also code for a “relatability factor,” likely generated by production companies identifying the presumed (and aspirational) characteristics and ties associated with their audience. Consumers confirmed this trend, reiterating how typical true crime coverage features a female victim who is White, blonde, attractive, and affluent—also described as a “cheerleader” type.

Hannah, a 28-year-old-White woman who works in true crime media, described how, in her efforts to diversify coverage for televised true crime programs, she

came across this story of this man who [...] was released from prison because the judge literally said he's too old to commit any more crimes. He ended up killing a homeless woman in front of her two 11-year-old boys. And I was like, this story's perfect [...] they let him out of prison because he's too old and he offended anyway. But [...] the network came back and said that her [the victim's] life was "too sad" before the murder. So they rejected it.

As such, "relatability" is not just about embodied characteristics, but also the emotional weight attributed to the story: "sad" is not "sexy." In addition to the imagined relatability factor is how well the case lends itself to the given narrative structure, or how amenable a given story is to being "assembled" into a mystery that resonates with the "rhythm" of true crime.

As part of the rhythm of true crime, producers insisted that twists and turns, red herrings, and a general ambiance of mystery are a requisite for true crime coverage.

Hannah continued: "People point out there's, you know, Black-on-Black<sup>23</sup> violence, but those stories don't make it to air because it's usually a shooting in the inner city and they know who it is right away [...] they find out who it is extremely fast so a lot of those cases are just over." However, homicide clearance rates are exceptionally low in many cities, suggesting that the cases are not "over;" instead, they are ignored. Indeed, Flint, Michigan has the worst murder clearance rate in the United States, with only 17.5% of murders resolved in the city (Clarke 2018). In 2020, when murders spiked, police

---

<sup>23</sup> Importantly, "Black-on-Black" violence or crime is not a useful frame of analysis or reference in understanding crime and/or race, especially given its regular incorporation into anti-Blackness and White supremacy (see Cacho 2012).

clearance rates dropped, and less than 50% of murder cases were cleared nationally (Li and Lartey 2022), and this is still deeply stratified by place (and by extension, race and class).

Another consumer echoed this, describing “gangs” and “street crimes” as “not interesting” or “boring,” which is especially important as “interest” or “curiosity” (in psychology, motivation, crime, effects, and so on) is one of the primary rationales explaining true crime consumption. According to White consumers and producers attempting to “diversify” cases, there is just too much evidence and too little mystery to incite audience “interest,” despite the variety of crime and violence experienced in and beyond the “inner city.” This extended to observations of what “counts” as true crime; television shows like *The First 48*, which often feature murders of Black and Brown people in the “inner city,” were not interesting to participants, and thus not included in their true crime repertoire. At times, respondents critiqued *The First 48* and related shows (like *America’s Most Wanted* or *Cops*) as being racist and/or too police-centric. However, this does not account for the “boring” label attributed to such cases, and this can further be understood as the “everydayness,” or perverse banality and perceived normalcy of Black death, as articulated by White consumers and producers (see Agamben 1998).

As Mark Seltzer argues, one of true crime’s narrative techniques and audience appeal is the rupture of “normalcy.” In *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*, Seltzer writes (2006: 1-2),

This is “normal time” in the world of the new normal: “normal, too normal” in the sense that, in the stock Western, it is “quiet, too quiet.” [...] These are the ordinary days in which “nothing out of the ordinary” is the

promise, or terror, of one run-of-the-mill day after another. And hence it is the risk, or promise, of what has been called “the normal accident:” the sudden but always imminent, unforeseen, and endlessly previewed shock to the system. This is the abnormal normality of true crime.

What Seltzer observes is that true crime is, in fact, “boring.” It is about the “imminent, unforeseen,” yet profoundly formulaic rupture of normalcy—the “abnormal normality” of too *much* normalcy—followed by the subsequent return to stasis, inevitably to be disrupted again. And, importantly, normalcy is defined by raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized structures of power, the self, family structure, vocation, and so on. As such, true crime is about egregious violence carried out against the “most innocent” and “most vulnerable” in an otherwise quiet (“too quiet”) setting enshrined with symbolism, such as the domestic space or suburb (or other protected and privileged *White spaces* [see Anderson 2014]). However, for White consumers and producers, this feels exciting *and* soothing in its return to order, righteous and benevolent for its emphasis on justice, objective and true in the fetishism of technologies and presentation of “real” events, and “interesting” or compelling in the disruption of an imagined yet affectively-charged “normalcy.” In contrast, “inner city” crime, Black death, and other forms of violence are not spectacular. This imagined normal is not punctured by violence and death; rather, violence and death *are* the (presumed) normal. As Hannah suggests, this kind of “sad” is not “sexy.” These are the racialized micropolitics of “everyday violence” (Cacho 2012) expressed in and through the production and consumption of true crime narratives, circulated and consumed as a leisure practice.

The racialized elements of true crime are not exclusive to the makeup of its content. It is through such rhythmic and sensational “sense making” that Whiteness and/as normalcy is reassembled and reproduced under the rubric of objective truth. In true crime, aberration and violence is seen as such in its relation to a perception of normalcy, and the normalcy is what is violated and returned to “order.” The racist notion that “Black-on-Black” violence and Black death is somehow banal, routinized, or expected, changes the barometer of normalcy to one that is endemically defined by— instead of ruptured by—violence. For White interviewees, this implicit observation does not invite an increase in true crime coverage about these cases or outcries of injustice. Instead, racialized, gendered, and affectively charged normalcy (as disseminated through representation and narrative form) reproduce and recenter Whiteness not only as the “norm,” but as always-already vulnerable and in need of protection and justice.

*White Myths: Race, Gender, and the “Racial Grammar” of True Crime*

True crime narratives—with their consistent systems of representation, “strangely soothing” (Munroe 2019: 27) internal rhythms and pseudo-promises of closure, emphasis on truth and perpetual slippage between fact and fiction, and affectively-charged stories for meaning making and sensemaking within individuals and among collectives—employs and deploys a colorblind racial grammar that (latently) signals Whiteness, its perceived innocence, morality, and imagined vulnerability, as well as associated sensemaking in the culture of control (Weick 1995; Garland 2001). In general, narratives are powerful tools, and true crime narratives are no exception; their rhythm, structure,

content, and emphasis on “objectivity” and “true events” inform how we understand and “make sense” of our world. Importantly, narratives do not exist outside bigger institutions, systems, and ideologies, which ultimately have power over narratives and their effects, and in part determine the “legibility” of a narrative (Butler 1990; 2009). As Francesca Polletta (Polletta et al 2011: 118) writes in her review of the “Sociology of Storytelling,” narratives may maintain progressive potential, but they are also rife with inequalities.

Narratives and selves are brought into being, whether in the formal setting of the court, the semiformal setting of the self-help group, or the informal setting of family dinnertime conversation. People can and do contest narrative conventions, based on conventions they have learned in other settings. But the contest is uneven: Those advantages outside the institutional setting tend to be advantaged within it, whether because they have a better grasp of storytelling norms or because they are heard as having (and helped to have) grasp of such norms. These studies also make clear that institutions depend on storytelling.

As Polletta et al (2011) indicates, stories cohere and congeal within broader contexts of privilege and marginalization. Indeed, this is often the scholarly and popular story of true crime consumption: men’s violence against women exists, gender is a site of violence and marginalization, and true crime narratives “safely” help mitigate the trauma and risks associated with feminine embodiment and expression under patriarchy. In many ways, this makes sense. True crime offers women the outrage, compassion, and institutional recognition of and resolution to victimization that has historically (and through today) been ignored, both socially and in the legal system. In true crime narratives, as in real life, White women are often victimized by White men—male strangers, family members, partners, and

friends—and there is something satisfying (comforting, even) with the criminal justice system and society writ large recognizing and redressing such harms. However, such institutionalized redress promotes problematic effects regarding the racial and carceral state, especially given the disproportionately negative impact on people and communities of color.

Whiteness is a powerful symbol, and some scholars argue that true crime signifies a “sullied” or polluted White femininity. Barbara Klinger, a professor of film and media studies, says that the (murdered) White female body discovered in various states of decay signals gendered and sexual systems of representation under patriarchy. Klinger (2018: 523) describes,

Whiteness enables a gothic darkness to be at once spectacularly eye-catching and culturally resonant [...] At the same time, the victim’s association with earth, water, blood, and/or decomposition [...] accords with longstanding rituals of defilement that enunciate sexual difference in patriarchal systems seeking to control femininity through stigma [...] The WFV [White female victim] is privileged racially in crime sagas, but only through equally timeworn scenarios of polluted femininity rooted in gothic displays of sullied whiteness.

In this way, White female victims in true crime are “dirtied” in true crime *vis-à-vis* their proximity to the earth, signifying a sort of “polluted” femininity even without the presence of masculine bodies or subjects. Such “sullied” Whiteness under White supremacist heteropatriarchy has a long history that is relationally produced, not just by binary gender constructs but also through racialized or colonized “Others” (Wyss 1999). Importantly, just as a male or masculine subject

is not required to produce femininity, a raced “Other” is not always necessary for the mechanisms of racialization to operate.

To better understand racialization *through* Whiteness, it is valuable to situate true crime and depictions of “White-on-White” violence in relation to more obviously racialized narratives, including “danger” and “captivity” narratives that criminalize and vilify people of color, especially Black and Brown individuals and populations (Muhammad 2010; Elliott 2006; Webb 2021; Wyss 1999; Davis 2006). There is a long history of racialized danger narratives in the United States and Europe, often circulating in tandem with the burgeoning true crime genre (Wyss 1999; Davis 2006; Webb 2021). While true crime is different from danger or captivity narratives, it does retain some similar thematic elements that are important to explore; namely, White femininity, vulnerability, and a methodical “return to order” through apparatuses of social control.

Historically, racialized “danger narratives” and “captivity narratives” are stories about White women’s supposed vulnerability to men of color and racialized populations generally. For example, Mary Rowlandson’s famous account of her six year captivity by Indigenous Americans was a bestseller when it was published in 1682. Copies of her story, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson” were “read to pieces” by the public (Davis 2006: 1; Wyss 1999). Today, it is considered a formative American work in the genre of captivity narratives. In this and similar stories, White women’s supposed vulnerability is

employed to anchor and symbolize White fear and anxieties about social, political, and racial change, such as colonial expansion and immigration (Wyss 1999). Summarized neatly by legal scholar Lindsey Webb (2019: 140),

Danger narratives portray people of color as being more devious, less trustworthy, and more violent than white people—indeed, more inherently criminal in almost every way. These narratives arise in different eras and in different political settings, but traffic in the same fear-based tropes in which people of color commit disruptive and terrifying acts of criminality and violence, and order must be restored by White-imposed punishment and control.

While the symbolic power of White womanhood is central to these stories, danger narratives serve another purpose within broader symbolic economies of White supremacy, which permeates through today.<sup>24</sup> The restoration of order offered by true crime involves the leveraging of apparatuses and agents of social control, particularly the criminal justice system that disproportionately and negatively affects people and communities of color. Importantly, within this broader “colorblind” and “post-race” moment (where White America is paradoxically more aware than ever before of institutionalized anti-Black racism and violence), it is valuable to follow these representations of vulnerability, Whiteness, femininity, and social control, as they are crucial to the staying-power and resonance of danger narratives, and—by extension—the maintenance of the racial (and carceral) order. Following these threads enables an

---

<sup>24</sup> In June 2015, for instance, while Donald Trump was on the presidential campaign trail, he employed danger narratives through his racist description of Mexican migrants: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending people that have a lot of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Mark 2018).

understanding of how racialization works in this current moment. Even without a person of color directly featured in the story, the logics of fear, gender and femininity, race, and White sanctioned social control, as well as discourses of (White) women's empowerment and feminism (to be explored more in chapter five), participate in the maintenance and extension of racialization by employing emotionally and morally charged tropes and motifs.

Like danger narratives, I argue that true crime constitutes one of many *White myths*, where key characters and themes from the mythology of White supremacy, colonialism, racism, anti-Blackness re-emerge to similar ends. I suggest that these White myths inform the narrative content and structure of the *White racial frame* (Feagin 2013).

As Joe Feagin (2013: 13; emphasis added) argues,

Central to the dominant racial frame are several “big picture” narratives that connect frame elements into historically oriented stories with morals that are especially important to White Americans. These emotion-laden scenarios include stories about white conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement. They make powerful use of stereotypes, images, and other elements from the overarching frame. They include rags-to-riches narratives such as that for early English colonists. According to this mythological narrative, most English “settlers” came with little, but drawing on religious faith and hard work they “settled” and made a nearly “vacant” land prosper, against “savage” Indians. This heroic narrative was later extended as whites moved westward and concocted a “winning the West,” manifest destiny myth. In that narrative White “settlers” again fought battles against “savage” Indians, with the heroes being rewarded with land and villainous Indians being killed off or isolated on reservations. (The facts, such as the reality that the Indigenous peoples were the successful and established settlers of lands that were stolen from them, are often suppressed in these narratives.) Interestingly, these fictional White narratives are still very much with us. Today, in their homes and in schools and the media a great many Whites tell themselves and others false and fabricated narratives of how this country was created and founded. Perhaps most importantly, many try to live by the emotion-

laden values and fiction-laden interpretations that they claim as meaningful from these common mythological narratives.

According to Feagin, the White racial frame employs narrative, especially heroic tales, to justify expansion and colonization, ultimately cultivating “a common mythological narrative” about rugged individualism and the just rewards of “hard work.” I argue that there are many narratives that constitute the White racial frame, including and beyond the mythos of “bootstrapping” Feagin mentions, such as White saviorism and charged stories of the vulnerability of White women vulnerability to racialized men, exemplified in the infamous 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* (Cole 2012; Wallace 2003). Further, as Feagin details above, while the White racial frame was originally constructed and deployed through racialization and racial projects, it continues to operate and produce race even in a “post-race” or “colorblind” moment; an emotion-laden narrative about risk, vulnerability, justice, and (return to) order.

Following, the narratives documenting “White-on-White” violence such as true crime are *not* racially neutral. Even without the presence of a person of color, true crime is part of the maintenance and extension of racialization and the racial state, as seen with the persistent tropes around gender, vulnerability, fear, and judicial/punitive avenues for redress, the current narrative of the White racial frame (Feagin 2013). The routinized emphasis on “White-on-White” crime without framing or acknowledging it as such, the hyperbolic centralization of White women’s vulnerability, the traffic in nebulous fear of “crime,” and celebratory emphasis on institutions that commit violence against people of color under the guise of “protection” and “law and order,” reveals the key components of

White myths, as well as their persistence and adaptability in the White racial frame. Put another way, contemporary true crime is a danger narrative adapted for a “colorblind” moment (see Webb 2021).

True crime’s myopic focus on “White-on-White” crime distorts the realities of the criminal justice system, in terms of overall crime rates and estimation of potential victimization, among other things. While my respondents were overwhelmingly critical of police and criminal justice institutions, the extreme (though not representative) cases featured in true crime served to highlight the continued social “need” for apparatuses of social control. Relatedly, true crime consumers in general *feel* more educated about crime, investigations, trials, and punishment than the general population (Bouzis and Creech 2018; Bruzzi 2016; Callanan 2005; Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn 2011; McCabe 2022; Webb 2021). My respondents repeatedly confirmed this, impressing the “educational value” they associated with the genre, which imparted knowledge about crime and deviance, as well as the role of personal responsibility, surveillance, and a “see something, say something” approach as a means to prevent such atrocities (to be further explored in chapter five).

In this way, White myths such as true crime are disseminated as educational tools, and within this educational framework it represents and incites—as well as employs and deploys—a racial grammar. This racial grammar is also a moral grammar; it is charged representations of right and wrong, safety and violence, and justice and punishment. It is explicit as well as latent; it is symbolic, affective, and narratively reproduced, using the gendered vulnerability that defines White femininity and associated fear of violence as an

opportunity for “prevention,” punitive and pleasurable surveillance, legal intervention, and subsequent expansion of the racial and carceral state.

### True Crime and/as Resistance

As discussed, true crime tends to evoke and reproduce narratives and emotionally charged subject positions that unfold within broader and interrelated systems of inequality, including race, crime, and justice. While this chapter delineates how the structure of narrative and systems of representation in true crime contribute to the racial and carceral state through formulaic narrative structures, gender, and sensation, there are arguably ways this genre can be innovative, and employed to re-articulate violence and harm more critically.

As English literature scholar Elena Avanzas Álvarez (2019) describes, true crime and crime fiction are *performative*, as described by Judith Butler (1990), or a *transgression*, as identified by Gilles Deleuze (1994 [1968]). For Álvarez (2019: 143), the extremely formulaic genre of crime procedurals and crime fiction

can be understood from a performative point of view as an extreme repetition of norms and cultural images that define a product [...] the foundation of a cultural production based on mythic origins that are understood as immovable even though they are really a social construction and, therefore, artificial.

This repetitive formula often places the true crime consumer in the place of a key character in crime narratives: the detective. This repetition, implied character identification, and “shared” solving of a crime invites an “objective” and action-oriented perspective on socio-cultural events and institutional processes.

The real-life effects of reading a text “performatively” are clear, and an increase in crime media can be correlated with economic, employment, and academic shifts, especially given the gendered bent of true crime and crime serials. To illustrate her case, Álvarez (2019: 147) points to the increase of female detectives and crime experts in relation to the “CSI Effect,” where record numbers of young people (and young women especially) have demonstrated an increased interest in programs like Criminology or Forensic Anthropology, and attribute this career path to their lay interest in true crime and crime fiction. While her goal did not come to fruition, Carrie, a 31-year-old White woman, articulated this phenomenon:

So actually, when I was in middle school, the character B.D. Wong [fictional character and psychiatrist for the district attorney in *Law and Order: SVU*], I wanted his life: I wanted to be a forensic psychologist so bad, because I was always fascinated in the psychology aspect and the “why” people do it. And ranging from smaller crimes—smaller being relative—to the genocides and stuff like that, the really big political stuff. So it was always just a fascination and trying to learn the reason why, and trying to get into their heads.

Bradlee, a 26-year-old White woman, echoed this. She described her interest in true crime in relation to her academic interests.

I think, with the scientists and the crime scene investigators, that was something that I was very interested in when I was in college [...] But after I got over the like wanting to be a medical examiner, I was very interested in forensic anthropology. And so that was my focus, when I was in college, was criminal justice, with the mind of what it was what I would do, and then [the TV show] *Bones* came on, that show was so popular, and I was like “oh yeah, that’s what I want to do.”

Many more participants reported an interest with true crime as it aligns with their current or anticipated professions, including lawyers, criminologists, trauma advocates, nurses,

psychologists, social workers, etc., even applying the knowledge from true crime into their training and/or occupation. For instance, Liana, a 19-year-old Black woman pursuing social work for her bachelor's degree in Canada, explained that

I can bridge a lot of the information I've learned in true crime into my studies. [...] I have noticed a lot of my [social work] professors don't like discussing criminal and deviant behavior and stuff. But I think that that's a disservice. And I also think that there's a lot to be learned from them. So to me [true crime] means an opportunity to learn in a way that I was never presented with.

As Carrie, Bradlee, and Liana indicate, true crime invites aspirational and practical pursuits. Relatedly, true crime consumption does measurably impact behavior, whether in terms of voting, support for the death penalty, estimation of crime rates, perceptions of risk, dis/trust of police, or even directly donating to police to “crowdfund” funding for specific cases, and so on (Bouzis and Creech 2018; Bruzzi 2016; Callanan 2005; Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn 2011; McCabe 2022; Webb 2021; Hill 2022). To be discussed more in chapter four and five, others argue that true crime sharpens legal understanding (Bruzzi 2016) or provides “real life” tips and strategies for resistance and harm reduction or avoidance (Boling and Hull 2018; Vicary and Farley 2010; Webb 2021). Given the performative effects and the reality that the genre retains the demonstrated potential to impact behavior and perceptions, it follows that true crime can mobilize more progressive responses that critically engage ethics and (racial) justice.

Additionally, scholars of documentary and journalism describe how investigative journalism, including true crime, frequently contains

a coherent moral order, where malicious or neglectful institutions wronged less powerful individuals. In this way, investigative stories use the

authority achieved through objective reporting to substantiate indignation at the violence of an assumed social order [...] In this way, investigative journalism acts as a cultural genre that both embodies and reproduces a general structure of fairness (Bouzis and Creech 2018: 1439).

As such, the power of true crime and its penetrative moral lessons can be levied in different ways. While this absolute moral order can contain and maintain mechanisms of inequality, it can arguably be directed differently. Indeed, many respondents credited true crime (including more mainstream coverage) for deepening their understanding of justice, including institutional failures, police violence, and racism and marginalization, in turn fostering a more critical perspective. Participants described how true crime “fuels [their] desire for criminal justice reform,” “motivates [them] to act,” and illuminates the “problematic nature” of the state and legal apparatuses. True crime’s fundamentally sensational structure, the repetition and “performative” engagement with the text, and claims of objectivity, make it a powerful site to reproduce *or* complicate hegemonic understandings of institutions, inequality, violence, and social phenomenon. Further, given the documented effects on consumer beliefs and behaviors, the genre’s structured attention to justice and morality make it a potentially transformative tool that can be used to convey more socially just, representative, and progressive messages to consumers.

### *“Narrative Justice”*

Despite such capacity, most true crime is not critical or subversive. However, there are some stories that spark change, offering a vehicle to tell compelling stories about violence, marginalization, and inequality that the banality of bureaucracy tends to

obscure (Gonzalez Van Cleve 2016) . Given the influential nature of the genre in terms of form and content, it is important to consider alternatives, and explore how some employ the formula and rhythm of true crime to progressive ends. For instance, in the 2022 podcast *The Real Killer*, Kay Lincoln and the Midwest Innocence Project tells the story of the wrongful conviction of her father, Rodney Lincoln, ultimately leading Missouri Governor Eric Greitens to commute his sentence (Mather-Glass 2022). Perhaps most famously, the 2014 release of *Serial's* “The Case of Adnan Syed”—in addition to sparking numerous spinoffs and catalyzing the outpouring of true crime podcasts—ultimately reopened Syed’s case due to this journalism coverage, though the Supreme Court ultimately refused Syed’s petition for an appeal (Yuhas 2015; Higgins 2019).

To be further discussed in chapter four, there are a fantastic variety of true crime podcasts with a more critical bent. This includes Black and Latino/a/x/e podcasters and producers covering cases otherwise ignored and forgotten by mainstream media, such as “The Highway of Tears” in Canada. From the podcast *Girl, Have you Heard? True Crime and Black History*, host Jada Hope describes her episode on the Highway of Tears as such:

The Highway Of Tears is a strip of land which is approximately 724km long in British Columbia that stretches from Prince Rupert to Prince George. Since 1969, and possibly sooner, primarily Indigenous women, estimates are anywhere between 18 and over 40, have gone missing or have been found murdered along the Highway Of Tears. It is an area where serial killers both known and unknown are active. They continue to be active with no consequences and no real concern of being caught because the majority of the targets are Indigenous women and girls and based on BC history the police in that area do not typically care to take cases involving Indigenous women and girls seriously. It is also apparent that racism is hugely wrapped up in these cases, the way they are handled,

the way they are reported and the way the families are supported after the tragedy occurs. The RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) only opened investigations into these disappearances and deaths in 2005 after immense public pressure to do so. They however, only acknowledge and are investigating 18 cases and are ignoring many others when a lot of the public feel they should obviously be included. Few, if any cases have been solved and many also remain cold. Just like in all of the other cases, where the police have been overall extremely ineffective and they are relying solely on public tips now to make any sort of advancement.

As indicated in this episode description, it is clear that critical coverage is incorporated and centralized in discussion of recent and ongoing cases, with an emphasis on race, policing, neglect, and marginalization.

While content matters, so too does the production, editing, and (narrative) framing of a case. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the structure and rhythm of true crime are powerful, creating a “container” for the gore and horror while narratively and structurally reproducing White myths. However, the attributes of this genre can arguably be employed more critically to different ends. For instance, Rachel McCabe, an English literature scholar, argues that the 2019 true crime documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* was produced and edited to strategically incite a different response to Bundy than previous representations. For McCabe, this documentary uniquely highlights how Bundy’s privilege protected him. McCabe (2022: 34, 49) describes:

While previous depictions of Bundy have focused on his supposed genius, Berlinger’s [producer of the Ted Bundy Tapes] documentary explores how White male privilege and incompetence allowed for evasion of police for nearly a decade [...] While he was previously thought of as a handsome super genius whose superiority allowed him to easily pick off women, he

is now understood as a monster, but one who was constantly allowed to brutalize women because of his White male privilege.

By creating juxtapositions in perceptions and reality, McCabe argues that the structure of this documentary destabilizes the mythic lore of Bundy that has consecrated him as a household name. Such critical content, framing, and story structure can provide in-roads to a more subversive true crime genre, still using sensational techniques, moralized frames, and storytelling.

In terms of critical representation and narrative structure, a recent and compelling example is the podcast *Somebody*. *Somebody* was released in 2020, and the podcast covers the case of a 22-year-old Black man named Courtney Copeland who was shot in Chicago and died in police custody. Courtney's mother, Shapearl Copeland, began an investigation into her son's murder after the police refused to share updates or evidence with the family when she was already suspicious of the official version of events. Shapearl, along with the Invisible Institute (a journalistic non-profit production company), filed 80 requests for public records, consulted forensic experts, interviewed 40 of Courtney's friends and family, and identified new eyewitnesses in the search for answers about her son's death.

*Somebody* does the investigative work of the police as well as the narrative work of media, while substantively attending to the penetrating reality of (institutional) racism that is ever-present in the podcast. Through *Somebody*, the audience bears witness to the "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) of systemic inequality, institutional racism, and police violence and incompetence. This unique perspective is described by communication

scholar Neroli Price as *narrative justice*. As Price (2020: 2) describes in her review of the podcast,

Somebody wrestles control of the story away from the police and offers Courtney's family a form of narrative justice in the absence of any meaningful criminal justice. As Shapearl reflects, "the podcast allows you to tell your child's story and to actually push those who are in charge of pursuing justice for you, making them do their job." In this context, narrative offers a path towards police accountability, and importantly, a way for Shapearl to continue mothering her son.

In this way, *Somebody* reveals the potential for justice through narrative, in terms of individual and community healing as well as providing clarity and accountability. To be discussed more in chapter four and five, this framework of justice, healing, and institutional accountability notably deviates from the individual "empowerment" experienced by surveillance and vicarious retribution. While *Somebody* is faithful to some narrative tropes associated with true crime and investigative journalism, including audience stakes (i.e. investment) and cliffhangers, it does not always incorporate the standard conventions, such as a linear structure and bifurcated, moralized frames. As Price (2020: 9) describes, the "series does not try to make sense out of a senseless murder. It does not divide the characters up into "good" and "evil" camps. There are no simple, tidy conclusions. [...] The messiness of lived experience seeps into the narrative structure." The podcast series ends with announcement that Courtney's murderer has been identified, but the name is not (yet) released to the audience, likely due to ongoing court proceedings. While *Somebody* would not have been possible without donations and support, it does gesture towards the possibilities of true crime to expand understandings

of systemic violence, provide at least some healing if not resolution to unsupported cases, and expand understanding of crime, violence, and neglect beyond the typical featured case, while integrating the “authority of experience” or “passion of experience” (hooks 1994)—something notably missing in most true crime, as Amber described above—to subversive ends.

### Conclusion

True crime most broadly features true or real stories about a violent and/or criminal act put into a narrative format. This chapter examines claims of truth, representations of crime, race, and gender, and narrative structure itself to analyze the latent and explicit messages of true crime. In recent years, true crime has cemented its status as extremely lucrative and incredibly popular. While the reach and popularity of true crime has expanded, the genre remains highly patterned around race and gender, notably in terms of the stories represented in mainstream true crime, as well as the overall consumer base; college-educated White women account for over 70% of all true crime consumers. This sensational genre and associated narratives are a part of gendered and raced sensemaking, carrying ideologies, rationales, logic about the world under the broader guise of objective truth.

This is further reinforced by the clear formula and rhythm of true crime texts. These provide closure, providing a comfort and familiarity that contains the “horror” of such violence. However, in mainstream coverage, this rhythmic formula is defined by those who identify cases as “interesting,” and worthy of coverage, or “boring,” and

ultimately ignored. In true crime, aberration is defined in relation to “normalcy,” a framework that relies on the supposed normalcy (and “protected” status) of White bodies and White spaces (Anderson 2014). The linear narrative and provided “conclusion” serves to repair the rupture of violence, which consumers desire and vicariously experience through this media form. In interviews, White respondents problematically suggest that “Black-on-Black” or “inner city” crime is “boring;” it supposedly lacks the appeal of “White-on-White” crime, perhaps due to the violence and death always-already associated with flattened understandings of “gangs” or the “inner city.” However, because true crime as a narrative is fairly powerful at the sensory level, covering often excluded cases with strategic changes to the formula can be a tool for resistance, healing, and closure, or a site of “narrative justice.” More critical coverage, like the podcast *Somebody*, invites more subversive and innovative interventions, responses, and perspectives, by employing an adapted version of typical true crime coverage and narrative form.

In sum, I argue that mainstream true crime is a sort of contemporary danger narrative that participates in racialization and the maintenance of the racial and carceral state even as it centralizes “White-on-White” crime (see Webb 2021). The immense skew in the genre’s content and its alleged representation of reality do not address or engage the majority of any crime (including sexual violence, property crimes, drug crimes, violent crimes, and homicide). The empirical reality of crime and violence is not reflected in true crime stories. As one of many White myths, true crime emphasizes White women’s perceived vulnerability and associated risks, while advocating for White-

sanctioned and institutionalized interventions that disproportionately and negatively affect people of color (like police surveillance and intervention, imprisonment, legal reform, and the death penalty). Despite being overwhelmingly featured as perpetrators in this genre, White men are able to elide such un/intentional consequences, as the label of “criminal” is not as “sticky” for White populations as it is for people of color (Ahmed 2004). In turn, and to be discussed more in chapter five, criminal justice institutions and other agents/apparatuses of social control continue to extend their surveillance and criminalization of—as well as neglect and direct violence against—people and communities of color.

## CHAPTER 4 – TRUE CRIME COMMUNITIES: FORMATION AND MOBILIZATION

### Introduction

The extent and veracity of online or digitally connected true crime focused communities yielded interesting somewhat unexpected findings in the data set.<sup>25</sup> By this, I am referring to communities that center discussion, analysis, and questions surrounding true crime, both “closed” and ongoing cases. These communities highlight a range of true crime and adjacent content, featuring a focus on unique cases (such as Jon Benet Ramsey, Sam Little, or the Columbine massacre), specific content creators (from *My Favorite Murder*, to *Last Podcast on the Left*, to Bailey Sarian’s true crime and makeup tutorial YouTube channel), to new stories and documentaries, unsolved or ongoing cases, and opportunities to participate in “crowd sourced justice,” whether on specific sites such as WebSleuths, or on a subcommunity in a more general social media forum, like Reddit or Twitter. Social media handles and hashtags connect true crime consumers with a variety of related subgroups, content creators, and other consumers with similar interests.

While primarily existing online, these communities have in-person off-shoots, including live podcast recordings, local meet ups or gatherings, and large-scale in-person events hosted by television networks like CrimeCon (which reports over 80% female attendees, the majority being White [Peterson 2019]). This annual event features criminal

---

<sup>25</sup> Of course, given the study design and participant recruitment, I necessarily missed those who consume true crime in relative isolation. However, several interviewees did give study information to their friends, family members, or neighbors who regularly consume true crime, but did not partake in online communities. This indicates how true crime, as a common interest, “binds” within smaller and larger networks, both virtually and in-person.

psychology experts, lawyers, forensic experts, survivors of violent crime, photo opportunities, and various retail items. Although all participants engaged in varying degrees with digital communities, such as “True Crime Tuesdays” on Clubhouse or location based “Murderino”<sup>26</sup> Facebook groups, most participants planned to and/or had been to a live meet up in the past. This suggests a blurring between “online” and “real life” relationships that are facilitated through true crime. To be discussed more later, this further indicates how pervasive true crime is in consumer’s daily lives, as well as the powerful role of edutainment media in shaping collective and individual behaviors.

True crime communities retain particular *affective atmospheres* (Lupton 2017). Affective atmospheres refers to the “feelings that are generated by the interactions and movements of human and nonhuman actors in specific spaces and places [...] A key feature of this concept is the recognition that affect is not an individual response but is shared and collective, an intensity of feeling that moves between people” (Lupton 2017: 1). Despite the same general content in true crime media, the affective atmospheres of true crime communities—articulated by one’s individual motivation, rationale, and engagement with such communities, observations and experiences of such collectives, as well as the subsequent effects of community engagement—have raced and gendered contours.

In this chapter, I first describe the centralization of community to true crime consumption. Next, I explore dynamics of *community building*, including the forging of

---

<sup>26</sup> “Murderino” is a term given to *My Favorite Murder* fans, and a “person with a borderline obsessive interest in true crime, and the specific nature and details of disturbing murders” (Hullinger 2016).

relationships, empowerment, prevention, and the making and experience of shared “victim-status” for White female respondents. Next, I examine *community mobilization*, where true crime provides Black women a problematic but critical vehicle to increase media representation of Black victims, spread awareness about current cases, and invites “grassroots justice,” indicating how true crime can be leveraged as a form of *narrative justice* (Neroli 2020; see chapter three). I also examine perceptions of *armchair detectives* versus *grassroots or community-based justice* to examine how leisure activities such as edutainment media informs broader socio-political projects within the *culture of control* (Garland 2001), including an uneasy but pleasurable surveillance of the self and communities (see Irvine 2008), support for policing, and perceptions of crime, justice, and legal institutions. I conclude with a discussion of how these two communities are experienced and leveraged differently, and how the affective and temporal elements of true crime communities relate to raced and gendered positionality.

### True Crime Communities

For my respondents, most true crime consumption often began before 17 years of age. About a quarter of participants reported their true crime interest was piqued as a result of the 24-hour-news cycle (many referencing the Columbine massacre or 9/11). Others referenced books left around the house, or explained that their curiosity developed due to a local murder, both lesser and more well-known. While true crime consumption seemed to fluctuate in intensity over time for participants—especially after the birth of children, when true crime stories became more upsetting and difficult to engage with—it

was ubiquitously linked to a memorable (and often pleasurable) exposure during childhood or adolescence.

Interestingly, most participants reported true crime as *always* having a relational element, even if it was not (yet) part of a full-fledged community dynamic. Most interview and survey respondents recounted fond memories of watching *Dateline*, *America's Most Wanted*, or *Forensic Files* with their female relatives, often their mothers, sisters, aunts, or grandmothers, and—albeit significantly less frequently—with male relatives. In adulthood, the familial element accompanying true crime waned, but was still a notable trend that informed true crime engagement. In one particularly memorable instance, I interviewed a pair of “true-crime obsessed” sisters in their early thirties during a visit home over the holidays, who pulled their mother into our virtual interview to reflect on their cross-generational true crime interest.

As all participants were over 18 and most were living with roommates, friends, or partners at the time of the interview, the familial component of true crime consumption was less prevalent in their current engagement with true crime. However, community and relationships were still an integral part of respondents' true crime consumption, extending far beyond immediate family members or “real life” friends. Communities were regularly formed through virtual mediums based on true crime interests, whether broad or more specific, and all respondents dabbled in true crime communities to varying degrees. However, the ways true crime communities were approached or engaged, their expressed purpose, and desired outcomes were notably different across racial groups.

In my sample, while both Black consumers and White consumers engaged true crime communities, the communities were engaged with differently. Primarily White female participants emphasized true crime consumption *and* communities as a way “prevent” violence, “bear witness” to atrocities, and bring cases “to light,” and interviewees of all races described the “educational value” of true crime. However, the expectations for participant decorum, consumption behavior, and the rationale motivating community engagement were patterned. White true crime consumers described true crime communities as a means to access and *forge*, or *build*, new relationships based on mutual interests, essentially using true crime communities as a way to build friendships over a shared hobby. For Black women respondents, true crime was a means to *activate* or *mobilize* community, or to bring community members together and alert them of a case. Ultimately, this (implicitly and directly) encouraged community mobilization as a crucial means to solve crimes, especially in a broader context of racism, misogynoir, institutional neglect, and trauma.

#### *Community Building: Forging Relationships*

While family relationships and friendships were a part of the majority of participants’ history with true crime, White women had a unique perspective on the relational aspects of true crime in their adult lives. Indeed, relationships were a central part of true crime for many White female consumers. White respondents emphasized true crime and associated communities as a place to build community and make new friends, and/or used true crime content as a way to reinforce existing relationships (scheduling

true crime marathons with friends, for instance). This was an overarching theme in the data; for White women especially, “friends” represented an integral part of the true crime experience that helped make it so enjoyable. Even without the inclusion of “real life” friends, participants regularly described the experience of solo consumption as a relational experience, which was part of the appeal. For example, Margaret, a 31-year-old White woman, described listening to podcasts as “[feeling] like it’s with some friends sitting on a couch with some beers talking about it.” While consuming alone precipitated such a sense of (imagined) connection, joining a virtual community, going to a podcast recording, or attending a meet-up amplified them. I spoke to participants who had traveled internationally to see podcast recordings, who—to be discussed later in this chapter and in chapter five—expressed a sense of shared “empowerment” in consuming true crime, and further described how such events felt like “being in a giant room with friends who all have the same inside jokes.”

This sense of intimacy, trust, and connection *vis-à-vis* true crime spilled into online communities, which frequently deviated from crime-related topics and highlighted “NRM,” or “not murder related” content. Despite the occasional discussion of local and nationally-known cases, Brenda, a 64-year-old White woman, described her local true crime focused Facebook group as being a source for friends and trustworthy advice rather than a source for true crime. She explained,

I just saw [on a true crime forum] today, “Do you know anybody I’m looking for a new gynecologist,” or “does anybody know how to arrange flowers,” “where do I take my cat” [...] or “I’m new to the area and I knew this was a group of people I could trust to ask this question.” And it’s kind of true, you meet somebody across a crowded room, and yeah if

you like true crime, we are sisters forever. We will forever be bonded and I trust you with my secrets because you like murderers [laughs]. Okay there's a little weirdness there, but I think it's true.

Here, true crime—whether experienced solo, online, or in person, or engaged with through known or virtual connections—became bigger and more complex than the content itself. Instead, the genre for White women is profoundly relational and a site of mutual sociality, and in a genre that generally seems to invite paranoia, the emphasis on trust and relationships is an interesting outcome. For many White female consumers, true crime became a vehicle to build new relationships, reinforce existing relationships, or even act as an occasional substitute for “real life” relationships; the genre cultivates “bonds” between “friends” and “sisters,” who share “advice,” “trust,” “jokes,” and “secrets.”

#### *Community Building: Empowerment and “Consciousness Raising”*

Importantly, this (imagined) relationship was often amplified with true crime content produced by women, and particularly those that offered a purportedly feminist critique. Contemporary true crime, especially podcasts like *My Favorite Murder* or *Crime Junkie*, are two immensely popular (White) women-run podcasts that often emphasize underlying issues related male patterned-violence against women and girls, such as rape culture and victim blaming, and by extension, sexism and patriarchy. As Colette, a 39-year-old White woman described, “I was always brought up like, ‘be polite’ and things like that. But now it really has made me think that if a certain situation arose [...] You can ‘fuck politeness,’ like, you don’t always have to be polite ... My response if I was

approached by someone would be a little different, now that I've listened to more true crime." While overwhelmingly described by White respondents, some participants of color identified similar themes, indicating patterns of shared gendered socialization across racial groups. Christianna, a 28-year-old White Hispanic woman, emphasized how true crime has taught her that she doesn't have to

[talk] to people that I don't want to. If someone approaches me, I don't have to talk to you or engage with you. I can absolutely ignore you. This never even occurred to me until I listened to these podcasts. I think it has made me a little more cautious in some ways, and more able to trust my instincts without apologies.

This acknowledgement of and resistance to (female) socialization invited by true crime consumption—such as “being polite” or trusting the instincts young girls are often told to ignore—gave these women a newfound sense of security. Many White women participants especially described a deeper understanding of the role of misogyny in men's violence against women, both in terms of “stranger danger” as well as risks associated with male partners, friends, and relatives. In this way, true crime becomes a vehicle for solidarity, even a site of “consciousness raising” (MacKinnon 1982) for consumers. This novel language and social framework to situate their experiences—both actual and potential—was energizing, and many White women reported feeling safer and more connected as a result of true crime forums/communities, even as their awareness of potential risk was notably increased by it.

*Community Building: Prevention and “Situational Awareness”*

As interviewee awareness of potential risk increased in proportion to their true crime consumption (to be discussed more in chapter five), White respondents in particular emphasized “prevention” and “situational awareness” as a means to frame and rationalize true crime engagement. While this was true for all respondents, it was especially prevalent for White female respondents. Of course, this occasionally deviated beyond individual efforts, and some participants described multi-valiant efforts for prevention that were enabled through the educational lessons of true crime. Raquel, a 35-year-old White woman, answered how true crime helps her understand the micro- and macro-linkages in criminal behaviors to ensure best preventative efforts. “So it’s more so just an interest in [...] learning about the components, and seeing how it contributes to an overarching trend, so you can ensure crime prevention. Not like in a *Minority Report*<sup>27</sup> kind of way, but just putting preventative measures in place.”

For most of my interviewees, however, true crime consumption and communities offered opportunities for intervention, prevention, validation, and healing on a more individual level, which was part of the larger group experience. Following existing literature on the genre, true crime was used by study participants as a tool to manage past, future-potential, or currently ongoing traumas (Boling and Hull 2018; Browder 2006;

---

<sup>27</sup> *Minority Report* is a 2002 fictional science-fiction and action movie based on the short story of the same name by Philip K. Dick (originally published in 1956). The movie focuses on a “pre-crime” program, where clairvoyant humans known as Precogs predict crimes, enabling police to stop crimes before they happen.

Munroe 2020; Vicary and Fraley 2010). Kayleen, a 32-year-old White woman from Canada who hosts true crime discussions, explained,

Women watch true crime to understand red flag behavior and men. It's a poor substitute for the emotional education that we should be giving teens and younger school aged children, they should be getting it at home from their parents [or at school]. But people, they're not getting that emotional nurturing [...] And so they grow up, they have incredibly dysfunctional relationships, myself included, and they can't afford therapy, even me! I can't afford it ... But it's still not enough, people literally tell me "I watched true crime to help me understand red flag behavior in other people, what am I missing, what can't I see, why don't I notice... Why did I land in a marriage with kids, and my husband is beating me, and I can't figure out why, and so I started watching true crime to help understand how to not set him off and how to defuse that situation and then he broke my neck" [...] Women tell me that they watched true crime to figure out how to get their husbands to stop beating them. Like, what is this? And we don't we don't say that about other genres right [...] And that is something that is so profoundly upsetting to me that somehow this genre has turned into a very real life tool for a lot of people.

As Kayleen vividly describes, true crime perversely provides a form of low-cost therapy for women, which teaches consumers how to avoid and even "defuse" violent situations—albeit with limited success. While Kayleen's position as forum moderator enabled her to aggregate insights into why women involved with true crime forums consume the genre, her overall sentiment of prevention education echoed across interviews, especially for White female respondents. While Kayleen emphasized the immediate harm associated with domestic violence, most participants expressed that true crime teaches "prevention" of future-potential events.

While some respondents, including Kayleen, emphasized the structural failures to incorporate socio-emotional and relationship education, true crime content and associated "lessons" reported by participants generally follows the popular logic of situational

awareness and bystander intervention in a risk-aware and risk-averse society (see Ford 2020). As Kayleen and other interviewees identify, true crime is a “real life” tool, employed to identify the various moments leading to violence that, in turn, provides opportunities to avoid such a gruesome outcome. The awareness they described was a special type of knowledge, uniquely accrued in true crime consumption as the genre reflects “reality.” While communities and true crime content are the vehicles by which this intervention approach is circulated, it is largely (and perhaps paradoxically) framed as an individual action and responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

White women participants emphasized awareness of risk for themselves and others as a means to effectively identify, intervene upon, and ultimately prevent violent actions. In the *My Favorite Murder* Reddit group, participants would occasionally post about being “saved” by a fellow “Murderino,” emphasizing how membership in a true crime community supports violence prevention. “Prevention” and “intervention” were broad terms frequently employed in interviews, often leveraged vaguely in relation to one’s sense of “risk.” For respondents, the term prevention signals an action-oriented outcome of their true crime consumption, specifically informed by understanding *why* such violence occurred. As an extension of this action-oriented outcome, respondents also offered more specific techniques related to “prevention” and “intervention,” which

---

<sup>28</sup> Of course, community and vague references to “feminism” or “women supporting women” through bystander intervention behaviors remained a latent thread, referencing collective efforts through an individualized framework. For instance, *My Favorite Murder*’s tagline and book title, “stay sexy and don’t get murdered,” or “SSDGM,” was a way for digital community members to signal group belonging *and* sign off on personal anecdotes shared in virtual forums about uncomfortable situations, “near misses,” local reports, and stories of interrupting potentially dangerous situations, as well as more tangential topics like “Murderino” inspired art or tattoos.

they largely gleaned from true crime narratives. Detailed in chapter five, the preventative measures described by participants were broad, ranging from “trusting your gut” to carrying weapons and calling the police. In the employment of these interrelated frames, prevention, intervention, and risk were more broadly incorporated into “situational awareness,” which emerged as the central strategy and crux of violence prevention efforts in the interviews.

Situational awareness was described as an imperative, which was both confirmed and amplified by true crime consumption as a personal and social responsibility. Brenda, a 64-year-old White woman described how true crime helps consumers, as individuals and as a community, are able to “recognize behavioral problems way before they get out of hand. We can look, and if we care, we can take responsibility. We can see these things, and we can stop a lot of it.”<sup>29</sup> This recognition and responsibility started—and usually ended—with individual efforts, but all emphasized surveillance and/as awareness. Marcy, 47-year-old White Woman, stated that true crime has

...definitely taught me to be more vigilant. It opens my eyes to that type of people that potentially are out there. I was always very trustworthy, you know, ‘Oh, they look nice,’ or whatever. So, it’s taught me not to be so trustworthy. I have pepper spray and I have a stun gun now [...] I guess I’m just more aware.

---

<sup>29</sup> For a select few, prevention efforts were tempered with a sense of resignation. Bridget, a 33-year-old White woman, explained: “there are just some evil people in the world. And there’s nothing we can do to prevent them from doing that. And it’s frustrating because everybody wants to find a way to fix it, but I don’t think there’s a way to do that. I don’t think there’s a way to fix things, and stop mass shootings from happening. I don’t think there’s a way to prevent something like that from happening. There are some people like that and there’s nothing you can do to stop them. They’ll find a way.”

For Marcy and other study participants, “situational awareness” and “hyper-vigilance” are two sides of the same coin. In part, this is attributed to the emphasis on “instinct” and individualized risk management strategies. And while situational awareness is an individual action, it was what was most often promoted by true crime communities and largely White true crime consumers as an easily implemented behavior to *avoid* harm for the self and others. Interestingly, the emphasis on situational awareness precipitated an increase of surveillance and/as “awareness” as an uneasy but pleasurable experience, which resulted in a careful scrutiny of the self and others as potential victims or, significantly more often, as potential perpetrators.

*Community Building: “Victims-in-Waiting”*

The emphasis on empowerment and prevention precipitated positive responses from participants. However, this also indicates a pervasive sense of gendered vulnerability, which is continuously reinforced through the recurring emphasis of true crime content that often features body-based and intimate violence against (White) women and girls. These are the two poles of true crime communities for White female respondents, which represent two co-constitutive parts of the same phenomenon: empowerment and prevention from victimhood versus always-already (potential) victimhood. In this way, the true crime communities accessed by White women had a notably victim-centered inflection, where group identity was ritually confirmed through shared identification with (future-potential) victims.

True crime communities seem to provide a powerful sense of group identity and social cohesion. The relationship between group identity, social cohesion, rituals, and boundary-maintenance is well-theorized in sociology (Durkheim [1912] 1995), and true crime consumption and communities retain ritualistic—or at least highly routinized—consumption and engagement behaviors. CrimeCon or live podcast recordings were described as a “pilgrimage,” and listening to true crime podcasts was an integral part of study respondent’s daily routines, some even using true crime during exercise activities to spark anxiety and “run faster.” While true crime communities and content provides a vehicle for relationships, empowerment, and disseminating prevention-education strategies, they also exemplify myriad types of boundary work, ritualized actions, and identity building for collectives and individuals. One especially persistent site of identity *and* boundary work in these true crime communities is the construction of victims and the circulation and, arguably, internalization of victim-status through true crime.

True crime that was not appropriately “victim-focused” was sharply disparaged as being offensive by respondents.<sup>30</sup> This construction of victims—through age, familial relationships, friendships, career-aspirations, and so on—relationally produces constructions of perpetrators, which is amplified by the focus on their psychological makeup and personal history. Even less damning depictions of perpetrators, which include descriptions of trauma, abuse, and neglect leading up to their crimes, are still in sharp relief to victims themselves. As such, words like “monsters” or “evil” were readily

---

<sup>30</sup> However, it remains unclear what actually constitutes “victim-focused” true crime, especially given the continued and overwhelming emphasis on perpetrators’ life history, family dynamics, and psychology, in the vast majority of true crime.

juxtaposed with “innocent” individuals, families, and communities, and readily deployed as a means of affectively and clearly demarcating the boundaries between “victims” and “criminals”—the two primary, relationally produced, and cyclically recurring true crime characters. Indeed, as Jean Murley argues, true crime is one of the few places in American culture where the “rhetoric of evil is used without ambiguity, irony, or postmodern questioning of absolute moral categories” (Murley 2008: 3). This is part of the moral structure, or grammar, of true crime.

In interviews, nearly all White respondents reported “identifying” with the victim and their loved ones to varying degrees. Some further identified with police and detectives.<sup>31</sup> As interviewees overwhelmingly reported “identifying” or “empathizing” with victims (or their family members and friends), this serves—in part—to establish a ubiquitous sense of victim-status and perpetual vulnerability, whether oriented towards past, present, or future-potential experiences, which is reinforced and reproduced by White true crime communities and associated content. Xara, a 26-year-old Black woman, described the relationship between race, gender, and victimhood as such:

Especially in this demographic group [White women], which perhaps one could say would be the least likely to be the victim of violent crime, but hears stories from the media and their homes and their communities and whatever their whole life that they are the most likely to be the victims of violent crime...And there’s this tension there, with the data showing that you’re probably not going to be the victim of violent crime while also being like, “My Whiteness, my womanhood coexisting puts me at extra risk, so I need to consume true crime media to stay ahead of the threat, to know what the threat looks like, to know what I could do if met with the threat.” That, and then the stereotypical victim in true crime media being a White woman, just confirms that belief.

---

<sup>31</sup> And, two times throughout the interviews, with the perpetrators.

Here, Xara outlines how the reality of harm is eclipsed by an overwhelming race and gendered identification with vulnerability, which cyclically shapes individual perspective, beliefs, interests, and behaviors, including the draw to true crime and subsequent explanations. Referenced in the introduction, Emma, a 31-year-old White woman also described this phenomenon, offering an incisive critique of the perverse privileges associated with Whiteness and femininity: “I think society tells White women they are a victim-in-waiting, and that’s the most important thing that can happen to a woman: to be a victim of a crime.” These observations are compounded by interviewee’s ubiquitous emphasis on prevention, suggesting that, on some level, White women do experience themselves as *victims-in-waiting*, precipitating a deep and pervasive sense of anxiety and fear, as well as providing a sense pride, selfhood, and connectedness. In this way, victimhood and associated narratives is always-already circulating through symbolic economies of race and gender, which is uniquely and intensely reproduced through true crime and true crime community dynamics.

This deeply felt and vivid demarcation of victim (as self) and perpetrator (as monstrous Other) is clear in true crime content and participant self-reports. Indeed, while some participants were pro-death penalty in these instances, many interviewees rejected it and insisted on life in prison, rehabilitation when possible, and/or said that victim’s families should decide the fate of convicted murders. However, the push for more punitive measures, including physical punishment, was more readily observed in group settings outside of an interview format, which interviewees shared with me. For instance,

Ellen, a 29-year-old White woman, explained how the energy on forums and during live recordings can slide from bonding and what sociologists might describe as *collective effervescence*, or shared experience of emotional electricity animated by the “doing” of group belonging, into more punitive directions (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 1958, 1969; Throop and Laughlin 2002; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Ellen wryly reported,

...There was a video that was posted on a subreddit recently where there was like a child rapist, who is being attacked by another prisoner who’s also on his way to jail, and [forum members] were like L-O-L, you like got what you deserved [...] I feel like people are okay with letting quote unquote criminals perpetrate the violence they want to do [...] And sometimes [...] she’ll [host] talk about some guy who died in prison, or was beaten up by other inmates, or got the death penalty...and the cheers that erupt in the room when she says things like that [laughs] it’s a bit concerning [...] I guess, we can feel better about it because they’re just prisoners anyway they’re already in jail so who cares.

As Ellen describes, the true crime communities she engages with are perpetually undergirded by the defining of others as deviant and deserving of punishment or death, especially when the punishment is delivered through a proxy, such as the state or an incarcerated individual. Here, *law-and-order pornography* (Wacquant 2009) becomes a form of *folk pornography* (Hall 1979) in a networked, digital age: a gendered, raced, and ritualized process of affirming shared identity through acts of (extra-legal) punishment and justice (Gray and Benning 2019). These affective atmospheres of true crime communities may seem different—one emphasizing vulnerability and resistance and another celebrating punishment—but they are two sides of the same symbolic figure: the (White) victim. Whether empowered or punishing, the figural victim is, somewhat surprisingly, depicted as a righteous agent with power within the self *and* over others.

These affective atmospheres can also be theorized in relation to Whiteness and/as religion. In *Darkwater: Stories from Beyond the Veil*, Du Bois (1920: 30-31; emphasis added) writes,

Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of Whiteness on the shores of our time. Its first effects are funny: the strut of the Southerner, the arrogance of the Englishman amuck, the whoop of the hoodlum who vicariously leads your mob.

Here, Du Bois points to how Whiteness is an embodied behavior as well as a “religion.” Following Durkheim, religion does not necessarily require a formal church space, God(s), or other holy figures. Instead, religion is a unifying set of ideas around morality, the sacred and profane, rituals and rites, with “congregants” united under a Church (see Durkheim [1912] 1995). Du Bois identifies the problematic imperatives of Whiteness-as-religion: ownership, rage, fear, god-complex, expansion, and embodied expressions of privilege. In these descriptions of true crime communities and gatherings provided by respondents, there is a religious undercurrent, an ecstatic collective effervescence that comes from a shared sense of belonging, united by and through the sacred figure of victims and victims-in-waiting. True crime communities feature the characteristics of a Durkheimian “Church:” moral centers, boundaries between the “sacred” and “profane,” mythologies of justice and fairness, ritual practices, and “congregants” bound together by their shared “religious” object, or totem.

Following Durkheim's assertion that organic solidarity and a complex division of labor invites secular or civil religions, the "individual" ultimately becomes a site of worship, a sacred symbol that takes the place of holy objects. Relatedly, the deviant—especially those who violate the *cult of the individual*, or the religion of secularism—becomes a symbolic figure through which group identity can be ritually enacted and confirmed (Gray and Benning 2019). In addition to this theorizing of religion, Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) work on "the crowd" names the ecstatic and sublime experience of group ritual, identity performance, and collective belonging, an experience alluded to by true crime community members. As described above, this is especially palpable during live meet-ups, but also reported in digital spaces.

Much like his astute observation of Whiteness-as-religion, Du Bois (1920, 1935) provides a more critical discussion of collective effervescence. Du Bois characterizes Klux Klan violence, lynching, and race riots—such as the Rosewood Massacre in Florida—as the work of the "mob." Here, he adds an analysis of race to theories of group sociality and collective behavior. As indicated by Durkheim, the "crowd" is powerful, uniquely affecting individuals in a collective way; as such, the crowd is transformed through collective effervescence. In contrast, rather than name the ecstatic properties of group belonging, Du Bois more critically discusses the transformative power of the White mob. The collective effervescence of mob invites

...[t]he kind of thing that men are afraid or ashamed to do openly, and by day, they accomplish secretly, masked, and at night [...] it shields itself in the mob mind and then throws over all a veil of darkness which becomes glamor. It attracts people who otherwise could not be reached. It harnesses the mob. Total depravity, human hate and Schadenfreude, do not explain

fully the mob spirit in America. Before the wide eyes of the mob is ever the Shape of Fear. Back of the writhing, yelling, cruel-eyed demons who break, destroy, maim and lynch and burn at the stake, is a knot, large or small, of normal human beings, and these human beings at heart are desperately afraid of something. [...] It is its nucleus of ordinary men that continually gives the mob its initial and awful impetus. Around this nucleus, to be sure, gather snowball-wise all manner of flotsam, filth and human garbage, and every lewdness of alcohol and current fashion. But all this is the horrible covering of his inner nucleus of Fear.

Here, Du Bois describes the monstrous, racialized “gestalt” produced by the mob. I quote at length here to indicate the more troubling dynamics of collective effervescence, especially in relation to race and emotion. Du Bois indicates how lynchings and anti-Black violence serve to reify White supremacy through the horror of “mob justice,” which was mobilized by Whites’ collective identity and a shared emotion: White fear. Specifically, this White fear is catalyzed by (imagined) violence and (White) victimhood. Here, the ecstatic “doing” of group identity is revealed as more complex than Durkheim suggests. For Du Bois, White fear binds, reproduces, and violently expands, in some ways beyond recognition.

As seen in true crime communities and gatherings, Whiteness and femininity “bind” together, facilitating a sense of interpersonal intimacy and collective effervescence through the (imagined) fear of always-already victimhood, or victims-in-waiting; an uneasiness experienced, in part, as pleasure. This further retains elements of religious fervor as described by Durkheim, and more critically by Du Bois. While this is described as a sense of friendship and belonging, investment in prevention, and a shared identification with and/or interest in victims, it reveals a more ominous underbelly that is

mobilized by (collective) White fear and collective identity. Here, victim-status is learned and magnified, and can be activated or elided by participants<sup>32</sup> without a sense of responsibility to the perpetuation of myriad forms of violence itself, violence that is systemic, symbolic, direct, state sanctioned and perpetrated, as well as extremely racialized.

*Community Mobilization: Representation, Recent Cases, and Alerts*

For the Black women I interviewed, the sense of community and justice was described differently. In discussing true crime forums, Mikayla, a 28-year-old Black woman reflected on true crime communities with more distaste and discomfort than White participants. She said,

I think there's something really strange about creating community around like the deaths or harm of people you don't know [...] it's not how I choose to create community. It doesn't seem like my place, like there's actual people that knew and loved these people, while they were here. And [...] I do sometimes find that true crime communities can be incredibly racist sometimes.

Indeed, the Black women I spoke to tended to dismiss most “mainstream” true crime communities. As Mikayla suggests, this was due to the racism within the communities, in

---

<sup>32</sup> This paradoxical, ambivalent position where victim-status can be employed or rejected was neatly summarized by Nicole, a 29-year-old Black woman with a singular true crime interest in White collar crime and scams. Speaking about the Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos case, Nicole described how “one week you [Holmes] are trying to shed your White femininity, and emulate behaviors that White executive business men have. And in the next minute, you're, intentionally or not, or consciously or not, getting off and banking on your White femininity, and how this country feels about protecting White women and saving White women, and feeling sorry for White women, so she did both. But, that is actually kind of smart and kind of interesting how she managed to do that, but I think she's just out and about, living her best life.”

the content and coverage itself, as well as for other reasons, including the jokes, intimacy, and the unsettling excitement that seemed to percolate in White true crime communities. For the women of color I interviewed, especially Black-identified women, true crime and associated communities is not about empowerment or prevention, or a site through which community is forged and reinforced through a distant yet intimate spectacle. Instead, true crime emerges as a vehicle to *mobilize* or *activate* existing networks and communities, impressing the known importance of grassroots organizing outside of formal apparatuses for people of color.

Part of this mobilization involved correcting an already skewed representation in true crime media. Here, true crime serves as a vehicle to represent what had been erased or ignored through direct violence as well as neglect. Black-centered and hosted true crime podcasts, such as *Crime in Color*, *Sistas Who Kill*, *Black Girl Missing*, *Girl, Have You Heard?*, *Fruit Loops*, *Bruh It's a Murder*, and *Affirmative Murder*, explicitly name the lack of coverage of Black and brown victims and perpetrators in mainstream true crime. For instance, on the *Froot Loops* website, the podcast description notes: “We are two female true crime enthusiasts who aim to bring you the often untold stories of crimes committed by serial killers of color. Because contrary to popular [belief], not all serial killers are White!” *Crime Noir* begins each episode by stating “this is a true crime podcast, telling our stories.” *Crime in Color* is focused on “people of color in true crime.” *Black Girl Missing* begins their podcast saying, “when Black girls go missing, their cases are extremely underreported in mainstream media. We want to shift the narrative. We

invite you to listen, learn, and do whatever you can to help us bring as many of these girls home as possible.”

Black true crime podcasters emphasize not only historical and contemporary examples of crime focusing on people of color—including Black slaves murdering plantation owners—but also provide explicit critiques of the police and investigation process. Given that much of this coverage focuses on current or relatively recent cases, the producers also provide resources to report information about the incident covered. *Black Girl Missing*, for instance, incorporates the “Aisha Alert” (as opposed to “Amber Alert”) every episode, providing detailed, up-to-date information about recently missing Black girls under the age of 18. This emphasis on real-time information, “alerts,” and currently active/ongoing cases reveals the importance of community mobilization, as well as the temporal elements of true crime communities, which are racialized and affectively experienced. Due to the nature of active cases and ongoing alerts, there is an endemic sense of *urgency* for the Black women I spoke with regarding true crime.<sup>33</sup> This adds another layer to the affective atmospheres of true crime communities, where gendered and racialized positionality influence shared experiences of emotion and time.

Although my current sample size is small (n=17), for the Black true crime producers and consumers I interviewed,<sup>34</sup> true crime production and consumption had an expressed, material purpose rather than a solely affective or imagined one. Other scholars

---

<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the majority of cases discussed by White true crime consumers were solved (at least formerly), and/or contained in the past, such as the Black Dahlia, Jon Benet Ramsey, or the Ken and Barbie Killers.

<sup>34</sup> For all interviewees of color (Black, Hispanic, Latina/o/e/x, or bi or mixed race), n=29.

have found similar themes, such as Neroli Price's (2020) analysis of the podcast *Somebody*, discussed at length in chapter three. In *Somebody*, a Black mother "does the work that should be done by police" (Price 2020: 1), questioning police explanations and centering the experiences of herself and community writ large after her son is found shot in front of a Chicago police station. In the true crime coverage generated by Black women, normative true crime techniques are engaged *and* subverted. While telling real stories in an adapted but familiar narrative format, this coverage often names and critiques systemic anti-Black violence. Instead of presenting police or detectives as heroes, these narratives highlight police violence, White supremacy and racism, as well as other social and institutional failures. This pattern extends to Black true crime communities, which yields notably different effects and framings when compared to their White counterparts.

Colleen, a 29-year-old Black true crime podcaster, hosted regular true crime discussions and posted missing persons information throughout her social media pages. During our interview, she talked extensively about leveraging her network as part of justice. She used her social networks to spread information about current cases and solicited input from her listeners on cases to cover. Colleen even interviewed families of crime victims, ultimately producing multipart episodes on their loss in hopes of resolving their case, like when a Black would-be fraternity brother was found dead after "pledging" a predominantly White Greek chapter. As discussed, given the immediacy of these cases, these reports further retain a sense of urgency that is less palpable in more traditional true crime reports. Here, future-potential "prevention" efforts are eclipsed by the immediate

need for mobilization, seeking a resolution that otherwise may be unlikely. For Black true crime consumers, associated (digital) communities are used to spread time-sensitive messages and activate grassroots awareness. This is in sharp contrast to forums seeking general advice, discussing old cases, building new relationships, or reinforcing existing ones. Ultimately, Black true crime communities tend to emphasize current and ongoing cases featuring Black and Brown people as a tool to provide coverage to otherwise lesser-publicized, or outright ignored, cases.

*Community Mobilization: Grassroots and Community Justice*

As a part of remedying erasures in media and an extension of the associated alerts, Black true crime podcasts and communities emphasized community mobilization and grassroots justice rather than seeking redress through formal and institutional apparatuses. Amber, a 24-year-old Black woman, described the community focus as unique to Black podcasters.

I think the type of recommendations [podcasters] receive are different [...] So a White podcaster receives a more mainstream story, something that we've heard on the news before something that [their audience] wants to hear those podcasters talk about specifically, versus with Black podcasters, those are like stories that we've heard in our neighborhoods or in our communities that may have gotten local attention, but nobody outside of the area will ever know about it.

Here, local attention is amplified and circulated through true crime coverage, encouraging and inviting community members to engage with these cases more deeply across community spaces. In describing a true crime podcast devoted to missing and murdered Black people, Laurel, a 43-year-old Black woman, said of the host: "she'll just

tell you about people that are missing and ask you to look them up, and be on the lookout for them. [It's] actually like community organizing in a podcast, where we got to find these girls, because the police aren't going to." During our interview, Mikayla joked that true crime is actually the best case for defunding police, given the amount of unsolved and botched cases depicted in true crime—a viewpoint that was shared by a handful of respondents, including one White woman. Mikayla elaborated,

It's usually not the police actually being good reporters or good investigators [...] it usually has a lot more to do with community care with extremely dedicated parents, or with neighbors being vigilant, or with the woman just escaping by herself [...] [These stories] create this idea that these apparatuses [the police, the state] exist to protect us from all this danger when it's like we've always been our own protectors, our communities and our neighborhoods, and that's why it's so important to have strong neighborhood settings, because it just keeps everybody safer.

For these women, true crime communities are an extension of community in general, and are a site of security that could be activated as a form of collective redress and healing. In this way, true crime production, consumption, and community had an expressed purpose rather than an affective, interpersonal, or imagined one.

This extended beyond the specifics of true crime consumption and into reflections on lived experience. Liana, a 19-year-old Black woman living in Canada, described,

With speculation around the Jon Benet Ramsey case, if that happened in a Black family at the time it did...[at least] for my experience and my family, if a brother was suspected of abusing a sister, the brother would no longer be in effect. So I think it's just very different...I've only been alive 19 years but abuse is tolerated very differently [in her community]. So a lot of the cases that you see escalate, specifically with sexual violence that leads to murder, it's just not tolerated. [...] And in terms of girls getting kidnapped and stuff, it's not dealt with primarily through law enforcement, it's dealt with community based justice, at least previously when my dad lived in Guyana...So you're not going to find someone sitting there,

giving a ten hour report on all this stuff. They're just going to go and deal with it. And they will distribute community justice in the way it's deserved.

For Liana, her observations and knowledge of family history reiterated the emphasis on community focused and directed justice for her family and Black communities in Canada.

Importantly, there were tensions among respondents of color, and especially for Black respondents, about what “community justice” should look like in practice. Generally, answers ranged from abolishing police and prisons to integrating better social supports throughout one’s lifespan and providing more rehabilitative programming, with only two respondents invested in the continued use of prisons. During a true crime focused Clubhouse session in fall of 2021, I listened to Black female true crime consumers discuss the most recent R. Kelley case, regarding his repeated rapes and other forms of sexual violence against Black teenage girls. A debate ensued about whether or not it was possible to rehabilitate him, and whether or not he should be incarcerated for his crimes. Several of the participants in the Clubhouse room spoke against his incarceration, citing the extensive racial violence perpetrated by the state and the impossibility of rehabilitation in prison. Some even identified themselves as sexual abuse survivors, and wished for healing for perpetrators *and* victims/survivors outside of the confines of prison walls, referencing restorative justice and other progressive reforms.

Colleen, a 29-year-old Black woman and true crime podcaster, was clearly upset by this response, and said to the group that she wanted R. Kelley in prison. Although she was careful to say she supports rehabilitation in some cases and agrees there is clearly racism embedded in the process, organization, and outcomes of the criminal justice

system, she emphatically stated “Sure, rehabilitate him. But I don’t want him rehabilitated around me, my family, or my community.” Colleen continued, explaining how Black women and other marginalized groups—despite their vulnerability—will be (and, in Colleen’s experience, are) expected to forgive and provide supportive services, i.e. provide “rehabilitation,” for even the most egregious offenders. For Colleen, without radical and sweeping social change, abolishing prisons and police will only return dangerous offenders to vulnerable communities for their “rehabilitation,” and some of these communities they targeted in the first place due to their relative marginalization. Her emphasis on supporting and protecting Black women specifically alludes to how other protections and options are not available to lower-income communities of color; one’s mobility can be extremely limited, and the ability to resist such programming through Homeowners Associations or simply move away from these locations is not always possible. For Colleen, while criminal justice is fundamentally racist and needs major changes, the protective elements provided by the apparatus must be maintained to protect the women she deems uniquely vulnerable to violence.

Regardless of their diverse stances on prisons and police, for Black participants, true crime served an express purpose that was tied to *community mobilization*, information dissemination, and the need for community-led investigations and justice due to erasure and neglect. In contrast, for the White respondents I interviewed, true crime communities were a site of relationship and *community building*, specifically around a hobby or leisure activity rather than a sense of urgency and community-driven obligation. Cases were not discussed with the same gravity in White true crime circles; they were a

charged vehicle to facilitate interpersonal friendships and solicit general life-advice, rather than an in-road to mobilize collective action.

### Crowd-Sourced and Community Justice versus Armchair Detectives

Given the racialized patterns around the role and utility of true crime and associated communities, it is unsurprising that participants were fairly divided along racial lines regarding “armchair detective work.” While all acknowledged the potential value in “tips” and how crowdsourcing information that can lead to resolution in otherwise unsolved cases (Gray and Benning 2019; Rogers and Coliandris 2015), respondents described its utility to varying degrees.<sup>35</sup> In general, White female respondents acknowledged the utility of such efforts but were much warier of crowd sourcing justice, referencing the potential for obsession, libel, character assassination, and how over-zealous individuals can insert themselves into “police business” without adequate knowledge of the case. Susan, a 44-year-old White respondent, explained it as such: “I think solving a case is a little ambitious... This citizen detective thing strikes me as really gross, it’s like...gamifying solving crime.”

Arguably, this racialized and gendered pattern follows feminist critiques of the state, where the repressive arm of the state apparatus acts as a (White) masculinized protector of the (normatively) feminized and vulnerable, or victims, by guarding against dangerous “Others” and punishing their transgressions. Rather than participate in the

---

<sup>35</sup> While a small portion of my sample, the White men I interviewed reported working with directly police, including filing potential mass-shooter reports with the FBI and supporting the police department during local murder investigations.

evidence gathering and analysis associated with “armchair detective” work, White female respondents preferred bystander intervention or “awareness” strategies, preferring to monitor and then report suspicious behavior to police or state apparatuses. The skepticism of “crowdsourced justice” and simultaneous emphasis on surveillance sometimes triggered acute anxiety about other true crime community members. Indeed, despite the overwhelming emphasis on positivity and trust through true crime communities, White women regularly reported that “too much” interest in true crime was a red flag itself, citing concerns about “armchair detectives” actually being incognito “copycats” who diligently observe online forums and research cases to refine their criminal tactics.

Both Black consumers and producers of true crime, as well as a few White true crime producers, tended to be a bit more optimistic—albeit cautiously—about crowd sourced justice. Bella, a White 28-year-old career crime reporter, described how true crime communities are “getting smarter,” and praised their collaboration with police departments and investigators. Black respondents explicitly identified long standing problems with police as the primary reason for engaging crowd sourced and community-engaged justice, despite potential challenges. Colleen, a 29-year-old Black woman and true crime podcaster, was very conscientious about the potentials and pitfalls of web sleuthing in relation to crime, as a result of White supremacy and police violence. She stated,

White supremacy and police have done a number on Black people, and so there’s just a natural distrust of the police [... ] And sometimes it can create a hysteria on social media that might not be backed up with facts

[...] But because the police have a history of not treating our cases well, then the general public decides to take matters into their own hands [...] Like, I could tweet right now that you, Heather Mooney, is about to kill me, and I'm sure I could get some hysteria going [laughs]

While it was useful and effective to get coverage through social media—a vital source for information gathering and dissemination, which was one of Colleen's primary motivations in doing her podcast—she highlights how ongoing legacies of racialized trauma can incite an overzealous response to potentially unfounded information. However, given the dearth of coverage of missing and murdered Black and Brown people, this practice is still essential in gathering and disseminating information that will hopefully lead to resolution in otherwise ignored cases. Ali, a 36-year-old Black woman and true crime producer, said of citizen detectives,

I don't think there's anything wrong with it [crowd sourced justice]. It would be nice if the people that were in charge of doing the investigations were able to think in these well-rounded ways that the average Joe who is reading about it on a news site or hearing about it on radio that's like "Oh this isn't really. Something about this seems off. Maybe let me look into X, Y and Z." And if somebody who doesn't have access to witnesses or crime scenes or something is able to figure out these connections and connect these dots, why aren't the people in charge of doing these investigations able to think at least in the same way?

As Ali described, the "average Joe" is able to provide insights that the "people in charge" might otherwise miss, indicating the importance of community engagement when seeking case resolution and justice. In my sample, Black women identified the importance of crowd-sourced justice for marginalized groups, which ultimately superseded the potential problems. In contrast, the White women I interviewed—especially the consumers—were far warier of generally community involvement, instead favoring individualized

“situational awareness” coupled with formal intervention. In sum, true crime communities and associated opportunities for crowd-sourced justice is imagined somewhat differently by consumers and producers of the genre, informed by raced and gendered positionality.

### Conclusion

For all respondents, true crime had a relational component. However, this relational aspect was experienced and described in different ways in the culture of control, and ultimately led to different beliefs and behaviors. For the White women in my sample—despite verbal resistance—true crime was a leisure activity. True crime and associated communities are a site for friends, empowerment, consciousness raising, a place for life advice, and prevention-education lessons. However, their relationship to true crime was also contoured by a shared victim-status, which was powerfully undergirded by expressions of power and surveillance, over the self, (potential) victims, (potential) perpetrators, and others deemed “deserving” of punishment. For the Black women I interviewed, true crime was a place of work. They emphasized true crime as a tool to remedy uneven media coverage of victims and perpetrators, as well as provide alerts and activate community networks as a source to resolve open cases. While “watching” is key in both communities, what Black and White women are invited to “look for” *vis-à-vis* true crime is different, and each associated community impresses a different purpose for looking: one for current victims, and one for potential perpetrators.

For White female consumers, this leisure practice forged community through shared interests, where victim-status was binding and, at times, vengeful. In this way, the experience of *wound culture* (Seltzer 1997, 2006) is racialized and gendered. As Seltzer (1997: 4) describes, “in wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle.” While “the wound” is central, this clearly plays a more prominent role in White women’s true crime communities and consumption. For the Black women true crime consumers I interviewed, the emphasis is not so much on the body itself, but on collectively working to literally or symbolically/representationally “find” the body in the first place. As a result, there were different levels of tolerance for “grassroots justice.” White women were conscientious of activating true crime communities given the potential problems they identified with “too much” citizen involvement. In contrast, Black consumers and producers emphasized the necessity of community engaged justice through activating community ties because—despite myriad limitations—it offers the best in-roads to resolution outside formal state apparatuses, which are fundamental to maintaining racism and exacerbating racialized trauma.

## CHAPTER 5 – FEELING RISK: RACE, GENDER, EMOTION, AND TRUE CRIME

### Introduction

In this study, sociological research methods and cross-disciplinary theoretical frames<sup>36</sup> were employed to focus on the production and construction of emotion, specifically attending to its relationship with the (carceral) state and the broader *culture of control* (Garland 2001). As discussed throughout this dissertation, true crime represents a unique case for a theoretical inquiry into emotional structures and experience due to the genre’s fundamentally sensationalist nature; the genre has consistently employed charged narratives as means to disseminate social, political, legal, moral, and religious ideals. As such, true crime both reflects *and* reproduces social norms on an emotional level, using sensational stories of violence and justice to socialize citizens (see Wiltenburg 2004). This produces an internal map of “purity” and “pollution,” where the deeply felt and internalized responses to sensationalist narratives about violence contribute to the maintenance of a hegemonic moral order (see Douglas 2002 [1966]).

Given the sensational structure, formulaic (and powerful) content, and patterned consumption of true crime, the consumer relationship to the genre and the genre itself serves as a useful case to analyze the production of race, gender, emotion, and the construction of and engagement with the state through leisure practices. This approach

---

<sup>36</sup> While emotion has always been a latent theme in sociological work—for example, W.E.B. Du Bois asked “how does it feel to be a problem” and subsequently named “double consciousness” (2014 [1903]), Émile Durkheim identified “collective effervescence” (1995 [1912]), Karl Marx described the experience of “alienation” (2006 [1932]), and Mills described “personal troubles” (1999 [1959])—sociologists and social theorists have increasingly analyzed emotion as a central variable, exploring its social location, as well as its stratified experience and effects (Ahmed 2004; 2011; Bericat 2015; Hochschild 1979; Thoits 1989).

links two distinct expressions of culture: more “macro” socio-cultural logics and discourses with more “micro” behaviors, which reflect and reproduce deeply held beliefs about justice, violence, risk, and crime. As such, this chapter explores some of themes that are central to the research questions motivating this project: What is the relationship between race, gender, and the felt experience of risk? How does sense of risk and vulnerability relate to action on individual and social levels? How do felt perceptions of risk invoke and/or elide the (racialized) culture of control?

This chapter begins with summarizing how risk management, or references to safety and security, are employed as the fundamental motivation for consuming true crime for consumers of all racial backgrounds. Next, I analyze how consumers use affectively charged moral rhetoric to construct the self through one’s “appropriate” engagement with true crime. Despite participants’ clear knowledge of the “correct” mode of emotional engagement (i.e., prioritizing safety and education), multiple types of emotional experiences emerged in the data. Respondents regularly employed boundary work, or efforts to indicate “legitimate” or “illegitimate” forms of true crime consumption and associated emotional display, to clarify the most appropriate form of emotional comportment, display, and experience associated with true crime. “Legitimate” emotions and motivations included education, fear, safety, and mourning/memorializing. “Illegitimate” ones included anger, identification with perpetrators, romantic or sexual arousal, or using true crime to manage ongoing mental health challenges, like anxiety or depression. Despite such boundary work, some participants—often reluctantly—described their less “acceptable” forms of engagement with the genre, such as feelings of

pleasure and arousal. As such, I explore the maintenance and violation of *feeling rules* (Hochschild 1979; Wingfield 2010)—or the established rules of feeling that guide social circumstances and interactions—examining the latent but notable role of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” emotional display and comportment.

Next, I explore how race and gender shape respondent’s experience of risk versus realities of violence. Following, I examine how this (felt) proximity to risk and violence informs one’s engagement with true crime. In closing, I explore how—despite acknowledgement of racial privilege and state violence—gendered vulnerability is the overarching discourse evoked by (White) participants. As discussed in chapter four, shared (potential) victimhood and fear “bind” consumers together, contributing in part to the veracity of true crime communities. While the reality of male patterned violence against women and girls (such as domestic and sexual violence and associated trauma) is not to be understated, its repeated appearance in true crime and situated emergence invites particular effects, including engagement with the state that ultimately supersedes consumer critiques of social control and state apparatuses.

For my participants, Whiteness, gendered vulnerability, and senses of risk yield notable affective and material outcomes that they attribute to true crime; put another way, participants describe how consumption impacts their emotional states and beliefs, as well as their lived actions or behaviors. Following Du Bois (1920, 1935) and Ahmed (2004), this (White) fear is expansive, unfolding across multiple sites, times, and spaces in response to imagined threats. The acute anxiety of (future-potential) gendered violence is amplified in true crime and by its consumption. This persistent arousal is both mitigated

*and* reinforced by perpetual (and pleasurable [see Irvine 2008]) surveillance of the self and others, ultimately mobilized by a sense of righteousness and moral obligation (i.e., bearing witness, seeking justice, and violence prevention). To contain this acute and persistent fear, White respondents repeatedly name surveillance of the self, others, and shared spaces as key to prevention. As a strategy, such surveillance supports and engages state power, which (re)positions the state as the problematic but necessary arbiter of justice, punishment, and resolution.

### Feeling Rules

#### *Feeling Rules: Prevention and Education*

As identified by previous scholars, risk management is the primary rationale that explains the gendered draw to true crime. This research confirms this; indeed, risk management was repeatedly identified by interviewees as motivating their true crime consumption. Following, it seems the broader expressed purpose of true crime is *education*; it is an informative site that provides risk management in narrative form to consumers. Participants regularly used terms like “safety,” “situational awareness,” “preparedness,” (bystander) “intervention,” (crime) “prevention,” and “education,” insisting that true crime offered “real-world” instruction for individual safety, thus impressing the known feeling rules of true crime consumption, including risk management, safety and security, and vulnerability. This experience of risk and associated vigilance is experienced as an imperative, and true crime is employed as a tool to educate themselves and others about harm (and, by extension, prevent it).

As mentioned, *risk* was directly mentioned and more generally alluded to in these interviews as the primary impetus for consumption, and this was true across racial groups. Allie, a 29-year-old Black woman, expressed “it’s so bad, but I always think ‘Oh, this is how people get kidnapped.’ So it’s got a funny protective factor because I watch a lot of crime shows, so I’m like ‘nope, not going to go out there.’” Lily, a 28-year-old White woman, described,

It’s a cache of knowledge that I can tap into if I find myself in a bad situation, or think I’m in a bad situation. And I think learning about crimes, how and why they’re committed, who commits them most often, you know...It’s a very valuable resource to a lot of women. I mean most women get murdered by their husbands! That’s crazy to think about because I mean I have a husband. You have a husband, it’s just like “whoa, okay, maybe I should learn more about this for self-preservation.”

Gina, a 31-year-old Hispanic woman, lamented how—despite living in a world that prioritizes formal examinations—there are no “tests” for the “biggest responsibilities in our lives:” to ensure people’s ability to identify and prevent such situations.

Sage, a 27-year-old White woman, described how:

I live in a pretty safe place but still, [as a woman], I’ve had those feelings of being uncomfortable and feeling unsafe. And it’s part of telling me what not to do, or keep an eye out for this. In the back of my mind, I’m thinking “lock your doors, pay attention, be conscious,” [even if] you can’t always prevent things. I think it’s also about the stories and the history of it, especially with larger events like Columbine, understanding why things happen, and how we can prevent it, and improve for future people’s experiences.

As Sage demonstrates and many other respondents confirmed, “risk” is the motivator and “prevention” is the action-oriented outcome. Respondents described how they employed true crime to mitigate risk, as well as to identify and understand “why” these crimes

occurred in the first place; for respondents, the knowledge imparted by true crime is a key source of prevention efforts. As respondents readily described, risk—whether regarding intimate heterosexual relationships, “stranger danger,” and mass violence—can be mitigated through an “understanding” that true crime purportedly provides. This understanding should be employed “responsibly,” or used in a way to reduce or entirely prevent such violence in the future.<sup>37</sup> In turn, the “responsibility” of prevention efforts runs the gamut from individual awareness to broader forms of redress, namely understanding the social-contextual factors that lead up to atrocities like school shootings.

While risk and associated prevention education was central, the emphasis on true crime as a learning tool took other forms. As a result of this educational bent, interviewees sometimes reported “consuming for an imagined future,” or using the genre as a site of cultural capital if the coverage is deemed relevant to their current or anticipated profession (see Weinberger et al 2017; see chapter three). Some of these current or future-potential goals referenced included lawyer, trauma advocate, psychologist, social worker, children’s therapist, police detective, or counselor (see chapter three). When describing this sort of motivation, respondents used education (instead of “curiosity”) more broadly to frame their lay interest in various fields, such as psychology, violence prevention, history, legal procedures, and victim’s services. As described, true crime consumers are clearly aware of the “feeling rules” and emotional comportment associated with “appropriate” true crime consumption. Importantly, both

---

<sup>37</sup> As mentioned in chapter four and to be discussed later in this chapter, another domain of consumer “responsibility” is only consuming “respectful” true crime that is “victim-centered,” and does not glorify or romanticize perpetrators.

these frames employ “education” as a motivating factor, but this vacillates between risk management (and potential victimhood) and professional interests (and good or moral citizenship), negating the pleasure that is palpable in consumer motivation. Ultimately, it is clear how (future-potential) risk and education (and/as prevention) are central to the narrative frames/rationales and “feeling rules” of true crime consumption, which is couched in the discourse of learning, awareness, and intervention, often at the individual level for White consumers.

#### *Feeling Rules: Risk, Race, and Gender*

As discussed, all participants across racial groups emphasized safety and vulnerability, employing this as the fundamental impetus for engaging true crime. While this was true across respondents groups, the feeling itself precipitated different concerns—and ultimately motivated different behaviors—moderated by the race and gender of the respondent. This is especially clear when comparing across categories, illuminating how gendered and racialized frames are differently employed in explaining different experiences of risk and vulnerability.

For example, male respondents were a small part of the interview sample (n=12) and most identified as White (n=10). While risk management was less central for these respondents, comparing their respondents to female-identified participants yields interesting insights, especially as their articulation of risk management follows typical masculine gender roles. Often, these respondents assumed the roles of protectors or gatekeepers of community safety, especially when compared to responses from female

consumers, thus indicating the salience of raced and gendered positionality in framing one's leisure practices. Shaun, 27-year-old White male and true forum moderator, explained how he engaged with true crime as a form of education and crime prevention. This is true for his virtual and physical presence: as a security worker and community expert on crime, he was particularly devoted to helping his small local police department, even working with them on developing cases. Shaun even reported forum participants posting intentions of mass-shooting on the forum to the FBI's cyber-crimes unit, resulting in an arrest.

Another 39-year-old White male, called Christopher, described,

I feel like that's one of the things that all these stories make me do is that I do have my guard up more often, and more often than not I have a knife on me. So if I feel threatened [...] if I'm unsafe, I'll have my knife in my hand and I'll be ready to stab somebody [...] I have to, you know, 'cause I don't want him coming after me or my wife or my kid. Like I think it's a good thing to make you not necessarily paranoid, but just kind of prepared.

In addition to feeling prepared, Christopher emphasized carrying a weapon and his role as a "protector" for his family and community. While men are a small part of the overall sample and consumer base broadly, their insights are an opportunity for triangulation of this analysis, highlighting how risk is experienced in relation to positionality, revealing how emotion and subsequent responses *to* emotional experiences reflect and reproduce racialized and gendered phenomena.

For White female respondents, experiences of risk were mitigated in different ways. To manage this (potential) harm, consumers, producers, and true crime hosts alike

centralized risk management, and surveillance in particular, as motivation for production and consumption. In the first episode of *My Favorite Murder*, for instance, the hosts describe how true crime is a form of preparedness *vis-à-vis* awareness and knowledge. Georgia describes, “to me it’s like show me everything, so I can avoid it [...] And also, I feel like, the laws of physics is that, the more you know about something the less likely it is to happen to you.” Her co-host, Karen, responds, “that’s what all this is, really. I just want to collect information and theories and stories so that I can be braced, so that when I see that weird one thing out place, the knife out of the block, I’m ready” (“My Firstest Murder” 2016). This is in sharp contrast to the Black-run podcasts discussed in chapter four, where, for instance, the *Black Girl Missing* begins each podcast by stating: “when Black girls go missing, their cases are extremely underreported in mainstream media. We want to shift the narrative. We invite you to listen, learn, and do whatever you can to help us bring as many of these girls home as possible.” The approach to understanding violence and crime that highlights knowledge as prevention against potential violence—or the “laws of physics”—versus redress for existing violence, encapsulates how race and gender differently orient consumers to true crime.

Following, participants asserted that true crime offered “real-world” instruction that other genres do not. Respondents joked about living in rural areas but always locking their doors and windows, and shared true crime tips with me about what to do during a kidnapping, such as biting the inside of a car trunk to leave teeth marks so police could identify them in the investigation process. While this was employed positively, the underlying paranoia and anxiety was palpable. This was especially for the White women

in my sample, who feared stranger danger rather than institutional neglect or systematic violence. Chloe, a 26-year-old White woman, described this paradox:

[True crime] definitely changed how I view the entire world. I don't think everyone is going to hurt me, but I can see that everyone can, and has that ability to, or they could. I know this! Last summer I was reading *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and I was sitting in the public park, [and] I mean my town is super safe... And I was just sitting in this public park, and literally every time someone walked past me, I looked up to follow them to make sure they weren't coming near me... And I was sitting in a certain area where people couldn't pass me on both sides, and it was just interesting because that book is so beautifully written you're just fully involved in it. So I was like, "I can't read this in public," because I am aware of my surroundings. I can see how [true crime] increases anxiety and can cause problems and can make you not want to be out in public or be around other people. And I think that's the other part of it, is it just makes you more aware of your surroundings. I always carry pepper spray and a long thing on my keys to stab someone with, and it just kind of makes you... cautious of your surroundings. And I think that's a major benefit to true crime and listening to *My Favorite Murder*, they talk about it a lot. And you don't want to be involved in it to the point that you're afraid to go outside, but you still want to be aware, and I think that's a weird benefit to consuming true crime.

As Chloe indicates, the sense of security offered by true crime material was paradoxical; it is at once anxiety-inducing and anxiety-mitigating, both stressful and pleasurable.

Through a more abstract example, Leah, a 30-year-old White woman, explained why the paradox persists through metaphors of visibility and/as knowledge (and in turn, prevention and risk mitigation). Leah describes how true crime is like the first season of the Netflix television show *Stranger Things*. For Leah,

Part of the reason that show was so scary is because you didn't see what the monsters were. But then once you see the monsters, it somehow becomes a little less scary [...] It's a similar thing [where] I feel like I know the facts, I know what happened, or how things went down, it's a

little easier [...] obviously the crimes are still horrific and scary, it just still feels somehow a little less or just a little more manageable to process.

For Leah, experiencing the fear precipitated by true crime was a way to explore vulnerability from a distance, to “see what the monsters are” and make them less overwhelming. Here, despite an immediate increase in anxiety, true crime offers comfort and anxiety mitigation *through* narratives, or vicarious experiences, of risk. In this way, true crime is not just a form of risk management, it is a form of vicarious risk *taking*. This risk is intimately experienced through the narrativization of “real” events and is simultaneously distant due to one’s immediate surroundings; the “real” of reality, the “real” of true events and their consumption, and the “real” of embodied fear collapse, blurring the lines between vicarious and direct experience, coloring consumer perspectives in different ways. Consumers, especially White women, use the genre to explore gendered vulnerability from a relative distance, and the subsequent risk management practices and attendant sense of security is achieved through a distant though (perceived) intimate relationship with such violence.

Black women participants also reported such deep awareness of risk, such as locking car doors to prevent unwanted intruders, and one 26-year-old Black woman described how true crime “keeps [her] head on a swivel.” However, this sense of risk management is much more layered, with Black women respondents often referencing fear, violence, and insecurity as endemic rather than episodic. Ali, a 36-year-old Black woman and true crime producer, described this: “I lived as a woman, a Black woman, and it’s like, ‘Oh, you guys are kind of catching up that nobody’s safe.’ I’ve always

understood that. But now, other people seem to be catching up. The world is a dangerous place. You can't trust everybody. I've lived that my whole life already."

Black women respondents further explained that police and investigators are untrustworthy and not invested in solving cases involving women of color. Thus, for Black female consumers, safety and risk management was a necessary supplement to a social and institutional landscape that does not prioritize the safety and wellbeing of women and girls of color. Mikayla, a 28-year-old Black woman explained,

It is not news to me that the world was not created to keep me safe. This is not new information [...] [but] I'm information gathering too, because I'm thinking clearly, if I get kidnapped the cops aren't coming, so sometimes in these stories, they will give actual useful advice about safety.

Here, the tips Mikayla describes are not so much about prevention or the "monsters" *per se*, but more about knowledge as a tool to manage inevitable and pervasive *institutional* neglect. Further, for Mikayla and many other Black women I interviewed, the notion of "safety" and violence "prevention" was an impossible ideal—even laughable—given the structural, symbolic, and direct violence women of color disproportionately experience. While the "tips" provided by true crime are useful and speak to a shared experience of gendered risk, these emerge in an emotional and social context that are shaped by raced and gendered positionality, especially in relationship to the state and what "prevention" is actually for. While all participants shared perceptions of risk and vulnerability, the position they adopted in relation to risk was notably gendered and raced, articulating a raced and gendered "habitus" in relation to perceived risk and potential violence.

*Feeling Rules: Temporality, Bearing Witness, and Constructing the (Moral) Self*

In addition to the educational frameworks that are valorized by participants, many interviewees also emphasized that true crime consumption is a moral “duty” to victims, and by extension, victim’s families and communities, especially in “remembering” past victims and “preventing” future harm. White respondents especially condemned the use of violence and trauma as spectacle, instead proposing “witnessing” or “memorializing” as more ethical modes of consumption, though the difference is unclear.<sup>38</sup> This ethical framing was likely employed to mitigate the unseemly associations with true crime. Only occasionally using words like “looky loos,” “gallows humor,” “*schadenfreude*,” or “rubbernecking,” most respondents flatly refused to designate their interest in true crime as morbid curiosity. Despite some obvious discrepancies, respondents defaulted to a moralized rationale when framing their true crime engagement, perhaps due to some shame or discomfort associated with such morbid leisure practices. This moral emphasis maintained some threads of risk management and education, such as the notions of responsibility and prevention described above.

As discussed, participants—especially White participants—reported that true crime is a way to “memorialize” victims and “keep their memory alive.” Some digital true crime communities would post about the anniversary of the event and/or about the victims, including their interests or extracurricular activities, or describing birthdays and

---

<sup>38</sup> To be discussed later in this chapter, this represents a form of boundary work, where consumption itself required a particular emotional engagement that—in some ways paradoxical to the centrality of risk management and prevention education logics—was “victim focused” rather than “perpetrator focused.”

potential life milestones (like high school or college graduations) that, sadly, would never come. This was also explicitly tied to participants' understanding and positioning of themselves in relation to broader dynamics of crime, violence, awareness, and prevention. White and female-identified participants routinely described their consumption as a way to "listen" to victims and their loved ones, or "bear witness" to atrocities. This was a "duty," a way to "shine a light" or serve as a "silent witness," which would help keep the victim's "memory alive" and provide (symbolic) "support" for the families, loved ones, and communities affected. Some participants stated that this sort of witnessing has broader impacts, and can even "change legislation" to be more preventative and victim-focused. While these are powerful phrases, this deviated sharply from the direct action and community engagement invited by true crime consumers and producers of color, who emphasized witnessing in pursuit of case resolution rather than anticipated future-potential harm, foregrounding an immoral society rather than a moral self.

Following Goffman, these charged visual metaphors indicate how individual "action" and (vicarious) risk taking is an integral part of articulating and presenting the self and desirable societal characteristics (see Goffman 1967). Respondents constructed the action of true crime consumption as a moral responsibility, and in turn, represented themselves as moral actors, remembering the otherwise ignored or forgotten, even if only through passive listening. This also reveals how morality is constructed and articulated, and how it relates to other domains of the self. In this way, the feeling rules of true crime are expressed through narratives of risk, management of safety, and prevention, which

are further embedded in the construction of the self as a moral agent and actor. This is especially so for White female respondents, who seemed particularly invested in rationalizing their interest in true crime.

Here, White women describe true crime consumption as a pro-social action in-of-itself, consistently referencing “witnessing” as a necessary site of redress. This helps signal moral character without any substantive investment; victims—in addition to how consumers construct themselves (see chapter four)—become a part of how the consumer constructs a moral self, and leisure and associated pleasures are reframed as a solemn, ritualized, and moralized activity. These terms are powerfully inflected by ocular metaphors, such as sight, light, and visibility, which symbolically signal how true crime content and consumption foregrounds individual vision and feeling as a powerful tool.<sup>39</sup>

This is in sharp relief to Black true crime consumers. While “looking” for recently missing Black and Brown people is an integral part of consumer motivation, Black consumers instead emphasize strategic action, curated coverage, and community mobilization. While “witnessing” itself is still vital—especially given the disproportionate lack of attention for these cases—it is part of a larger ecosystem and toolkit of strategies to resist direct violence against Black women, as well as institutional violence and neglect more broadly.

Further, for Black women consumers and producers, the act of witnessing is often set in the present, guided by detailed information about clothing, hair styles, or other

---

<sup>39</sup> To be discussed later in this chapter, vision emerges complexly in true crime, and respondents slip between the supportive and punitive elements of seeing, referencing “witnessing” as a form of redress and “surveillance” as a form of necessary protection.

identifiers associated with the victim. To be discussed more at the close of this chapter, for White consumers and producers, “witnessing” is directed to the past, and anxiety about potential harm is directed at the future. The experience of true crime consumption engages these temporal and affective poles. Further, this invites general “surveillance” as a form of pleasurable prevention of future potential harm, while precipitating and modulating levels of arousal. For the Black true crime consumers and producers I interviewed, coverage of systematic discrimination and endemic violence against Black women and girls is not about constructing a moral self; instead, it is about exposing an immoral society, specifically regarding the persistent reality of racial inequality and myriad forms of violence against Black and Brown people, especially women and girls.

### *Breaking Feeling Rules: Anger*

Beyond the emphasis on risk management, educational and professional interests, and the moral self, other (emotional) motivations, incitements, and displays emerged in the interviews. While experiences of pleasure, arousal, and anger were palpable in the interviews—even without explicit reference—they were quickly shuttered away. One particularly surprising finding was the use of true crime as a means to manage anger, anxiety, or depression, which was expressed by some of the White women in my sample. The intensity of this feeling varied, and was explicitly and tacitly referenced. One participant described her interest in true crime as an opportunity to “look into the abyss and stare into the void,” and another explained how true crime makes her aware of the world’s “ugly reality.”

Other (predominantly White) respondents detailed seeking out true crime when they felt “angry at the world,” or made off-color jokes about true crime providing a fantasy script about violence against their husbands or male partners. Gillian, a 20-year-old White woman, said she would “end up on *Snapped* [a show about women murdering men] because I am gonna end up killing my son’s father.” Sarah, a 24-year-old White woman, similarly described true crime as “anger porn.” In this way, true crime becomes an emotional repository for women’s anger. This was echoed by a 24-year-old Black woman, Raina, who eloquently described the relationship of race, gender, emotion, particularly anger. She describes how, “in general, women are taught that feelings like anger or bitterness...Those kinds of emotions are very negative and we have to keep them inside, and I think that true crime gives me a valid space to feel those emotions, without necessarily having to be labeled as bitchy.” Later, when commenting on the overwhelming Whiteness of true crime consumers, Raina elaborated,

I think it goes back to that concept of anger. I think that White women, specifically, are very into true crime for that reason, and I think that Black women already automatically labeled the angry Black woman. So to some extent, we have this super big fear of being the angry Black woman. But at the same time, in a way, it kind of frees us from the fear of expressing anger, because we know you already assume we’re angry. And I think White women, they don’t have the ability to show anger...Like, they are generally not seen as angry, and so I think that for them that might be a really good outlet for that.

Here, it is clear that feeling rules that are reified as well as ones that are “broken” are embedded in racialized and gendered systems (Hochschild 1979; Wingfield 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2019). Raina’s observation is especially interesting as the vast majority of White respondents foregrounded risk and fear, despite “righteous” anger being a latent

thread in discussions of punishment and justice (see chapter four). Fear, risk, and victimization can certainly evoke anger, but those states are often perceived as incompatible; an “angry” victim is less socially acceptable than an “innocent” victim or victorious “survivor,” and this is even more complicated by expectations for racialized and gendered comportment. The relationship between *controlling images* (Hill Collins 1990), their emotional contours, and the use of true crime media as a repository for anger that is otherwise socially unacceptable (whether unexpected or expected, such displays are still unacceptable), indicates how true crime serves as a charged medium to navigate and (re)produce racialized and gendered emotional displays.

At times, this anger turned inwards, and White female respondents occasionally described using true crime to exact harm against themselves. Some reported strategically implementing it as part of “therapeutic” interventions to deal with anxiety, depression, or intrusive thoughts. Others described needing to monitor their consumption, as they would sometimes use true crime as a problematic coping strategy. Olive, a 22-year-old White woman described, “honestly, whenever I get really depressed it’s like [...] I see it as sort of a mental form of self-harm, because people went through these horrible things and I need to hear their stories and feel awful because they went through these awful things, and it’s not healthy [...] But it sort of is what it is.” This was an interesting theme in the data, where true crime consumption enables—for some—depression, anger, anxiety, and self-injurious behavior, thus troubling the affective frames of vulnerability (risk) and empowerment (prevention) that are often associated with true crime.

### *Breaking Feeling Rules: Arousal*

While the feeling rules for individual consumers were made clear by their presence, deviations, and respondent backpedaling, it was also indicated by strongly-felt expectations of “appropriate” consumer comportment. This emotional boundary work appeared in myriad ways, especially regarding consumer’s affective responses but also in terms of media content and structure itself. All respondents agreed that perpetrators should *not* be celebrated, and sharply critiqued true crime as a genre for participating in the glorification of murderers. (Though it is unclear what constitutes “victim-focused” true crime due to the overwhelming emphasis on perpetrator life and family history, psychological makeup, and behaviors.)

Although some respondents expressed occasional concerns about serial or spree killers lurking in true crime communities, interviewees were most vocally uncomfortable with young women’s presence in communities. This is especially true regarding the romanticization and sexualization of perpetrators, though the pleasurable aspects of consumption more generally was clear. White female respondents brought up concerns of romanticization and sexualization of perpetrators frequently, without any researcher probing. This type of true crime engagement sparked alarm and disgust, and respondents shared examples of where teenage girls known as “Columbiners” or “Stanzas” (referencing the Columbine shooters and the Sandy Hook shooter respectively) “photoshop flower crowns on school shooters” and write fictional romances starring themselves and the perpetrator(s). The social sharing site Tumblr was identified as the

worst offender for this type of content. Bella, a 28-year-old White woman and career crime reporter, described:

We see this a lot with Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris [...] and we even saw it to some extent with Adam Lanza [...] And so there's this weird [thing] like, teenage girls, instead of having the boy band crushes that we had, they have boyband crushes on these guys. Every once in a while I'll go down the rabbit hole or have to see this for myself, like "you were like not even born when this happened!" And so there's just such a level of separation. Because it's not real to them, you know.

To be discussed more later in this chapter, Bella echoes how *proximity* versus distance to violence shapes one's engagement with true crime. Of relevance here, Bella also indicates how true crime consumption and engagement requires a specific emotional comportment and response to the content; teenage crushes and associated fanaticism are looked at with disdain. As such, the sexual experiences and proclivities of younger women and girls were especially policed, as their engagement may become problematic and violate the affective rules and moral boundaries of true crime consumption. However, this was only true for the White women in my sample. In contrast, respondents of color did not indicate any concern about—or even knowledge of—this phenomenon.

Despite the ubiquitous distaste for these unseemly "fandom" activities, other respondents described true crime consumption as an experience of pleasurable arousal. Experiencing pleasure in these (dark) leisure practices was an obvious though dirty secret for most interviewees. Despite laughter and even glee during interviews,<sup>40</sup> many faltered over words such as "favorite," "like," "love," "entertainment," and "enjoyment." While

---

<sup>40</sup> Many interviewees seemed to use true crime stories similarly to gossip or rumors, where such scandalous stories were employed to facilitate a sensational and intense connection between story tellers.

this could be gleaned by descriptions such as “enjoyment,” it also contained a more explicit sexual inflection, and podcast hosts would occasionally remark on the relative attractiveness of the perpetrators, such as Ted Bundy or Paul Bernardo (of the so-called “Ken and Barbie Killers”) both positively and negatively. Exclusively White female interviewees described true crime as “murder porn”<sup>41</sup> and highlighted the connection to sexual fantasies and BDSM. Caroline, a 60 year-old-White woman, tentatively described, “you know, even though I don’t want to think that it’s sexually arousing, but ... I think it might be,” in a seemingly vague reference to herself and the consumer-base at large. Whether rooted in the eroticization of men’s violence/gendered subordination, fantasies of relinquishing control, or something else, emotional displays were carefully managed, and true crime catalyzed a spectrum of feelings for consumers, from titillation and laughter to anger and disdain.

Despite these various deviations and associated boundary work, risk management—or anxiety, paranoia, fear, mitigated by education, preparedness, and empowerment, and the pleasure of consumption—remained the most salient emotional experience across interviews. Importantly, even as risk was the most often cited reason for consumption, the potential for such violence was quickly eclipsed by acknowledging the actual *possibility* of experiencing such violence; all White interviewees (especially those who are educated, gender conforming, and heterosexually-partnered) acknowledged experiencing such egregious violence was slim. Many White women directly

---

<sup>41</sup> Anger porn, mentioned earlier, centralizes arousal through explicit and latent emotional experiences, and the experience of anger as a site of pleasure. The phrasing of “murder porn,” while similar, suggests arousal or the incitement of arousal through depictions of murder/physical harm.

acknowledged the protective power associated with their racial and social class privilege, and only a small handful reported being victims or knowing victims themselves, impressing the lived distance from such violent possibilities. While these findings align with existing theories of true crime consumption that show how the knowledge acquired from true crime is related to perceptions of current or future vulnerability, this data also complicates it, revealing a deeper story about race, gender, emotion, relative privilege, pleasure, and risk. The constructions of self, detailed feeling rules, deviation from known feeling rules, and policing thereof, indicate the multiple ways risk and associated narratives permeates and frames one's lived experience and interpretation of others. However, to be further explored below, the type of vulnerability identified, and associated strategies to protect against it, is inflected through race as well as gender.

### Proximity to Risk and Violence

As discussed at length above, risk was cited as the primary motivation for consuming true crime, indicated explicitly as well as through continuous boundary work and constructions of "appropriate" true crime consumption. True crime precipitated an immediate increase in anxiety, as well as a more general "awareness" of (potential) risk factors, which quelled uneasiness. In this way, true crime ultimately provides an alleviation of anxiety (and outright pleasure) *through* narratives of risk. For true crime consumers, risk is intimately experienced through the narrativization of real events and identification with victim-status and gendered vulnerability. However, especially for the White women in my sample, this was tempered by the acknowledgement that such

violence was unlikely, though this observation was often not made critically and was mentioned off-hand across the interviews. In this way, the “real” of consumer surroundings, the “real” of violent and true events, the “real” of social and economic deprivation and associated vulnerability, and the “real” of embodied fear, tinge lived realities with a penetrative sense of risk and vulnerability. As Gabby, a 31-year-old biracial woman describes,

I feel like college educated women, White women, are more likely to be financially stable [...] the opposite of being in poverty, so they're more educated, they have less crime [...] It's almost kind of out of the realm of possibility for people close to them. Maybe that's part of it, and then I think, maybe also people from lower socioeconomic statuses, they're more likely to be exposed to crime [...] and so they're not really going to seek out reading that as entertainment because that's kind of their life.

This signals yet another paradox that emerged in the data: a deep feeling of risk, vulnerability, and suspicion, that is simultaneously undermined by the known reality of protective factors, including race and socio-economic status. In this, it becomes clear that risk is the gendered, affective, and moralized narrative frame employed to rationalize the pleasures associated with privilege and lived distance from harm.

Put another way, it appears that the distance from realities of violence is what—in part—draws White women to true crime. Xara, a 26-year-old Black woman, explained:

I'm thinking that if you're alive and in your community violence is an everyday occurrence, what, then, is the need to seek out more violence to seek out true crime? Versus if you're a college educated White woman and live in a community where violence is not the norm or violence doesn't happen very often, then it has that sensational quality.

Ife, a 21-year-old Black woman, explained this similarly:

So we make jokes in Nigeria, like “Okay, this country is bloody enough, so why would someone want to see something that gruesome?” [...] It’s like oh, you’re in no way unknown to the feeling of these cases... Like instead of hearing a story that should shake you, you’re just like, “yeah, okay.” Because, normally, you’d see something worse than that, so you’re really known to the feeling, or to the impact of that, is really familiar to you...

As Gabby, Ife, and Xara identify, distance from risk invites more engagement with it due to the emotional bandwidth for such horrors, making space for the pleasurable, sensational factors that accompany consumption.

While the Black women in my sample easily identified the relationship between racial privilege and emotional bandwidth for violence, White women articulated this pattern as well. For instance, Chloe, a 26-year-old White woman, explained that when she was working with children in a hospital and advocacy center, it changed her desire and ability to engage with true crime. She described the period when she was

the least involved in true crime. [...] I remember distinctly going to watch some show, and I was like I can’t watch this anymore, because I’m living it every single day, and I’m seeing these real life cases. Every day when I get home I need to watch *The Office* or *Parks and Rec*.<sup>42</sup> It’s like I can’t watch what I’m living every day, so during those two years, I did not watch very much or listen to very much or read very much because I was living it, but then as soon as I quit that job and started grad school, [true crime consumption] just completely went up again.

Some participants articulated this differently. For instance, when asked to account for the large number of White female true crime consumers, Brianna, a 22-year-old White woman, said

I don’t know why that is. Maybe because...I don’t know, maybe more Black people probably have a firsthand experience with [violence and the

---

<sup>42</sup> *The Office* (2005-2009) and *Parks and Rec* (2009-2015) are mockumentary style sit-coms about work colleagues and relationships.

criminal justice system]...I mean, statistically speaking, there are fewer Black people, but there's more being arrested and put in prison and that sort of thing, so they're closer to it in that sense, people of color in general.

Raquel, a 35-year-old White woman working towards an advanced degree in criminal justice, offered a long list of reasons for this discrepancy (including White women's frequent representation in true crime and media content, youth exposure, and so on). Ultimately, Raquel closed her comment by stating, "maybe because minorities are disproportionately at risk for being victims of crimes [...] Maybe it's just because it's like, 'oh I experienced this, this is something too close to home.'" Interestingly, for these respondents, this was not answered in terms of White privilege and associated protection; instead, they foregrounded the marginalization and violence experienced by some individuals and communities of color. Perhaps their focus on people of color is due to the (hyper)visibility of Black and Brown individuals and communities in imaginaries of violence, crime and deprivation (see chapter three). Or, perhaps it is because the naming of such protections obviously points to the inadequacies of risk management as an explanation for (White) women's draw to true crime, despite it being the fundamental framework evoked to rationalize user engagement.

While the emphasis was continually on risk as a primary motivation for consumption, respondents repeatedly indicated how actual *distance* from such potential harm yields more emotional bandwidth for and more interest in such content, even as the genre cyclically incites deeper anxiety about the daily realities of risk itself. In effect, proximity to risk has an inverse relationship to the foregrounding of fear and/as

motivation: the farther away one is from actual potential risk, the more respondents expressed feeling risk itself and identifying it as a central reason for consumption, and the more risk (in this context) was experienced enjoyably. This was especially obvious to the Black women in my sample, though White respondents would occasionally make this connection explicit as well. Ultimately, even as White participants acknowledged the unlikelihood of such violence, they also identified fear of violence as the primary frame employed to explain consumption habits, and simultaneously, consumption itself heightens their immediate senses of vulnerability and fear. Consciously or not, engaging with this fear (that was often experienced as intimate and personal) was an experience made possible and pleasurable through its un-reality.

#### Gendered Vulnerability and/as State Power

Paradoxes were rife in these interviews: “real” versus “fake,” senses of vulnerability and risk versus protection and empowerment, and closeness to violence that was narratively facilitated and made palpable (even enjoyable) to consumers through distance from actual violence. As a result of these oscillating extremes, *ambivalence* was a central theme in the data. White women in particular expressed an affective ambivalence as part of the gendered and racial contours of penal spectatorship (Brown 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2019).

Through *performative speech acts* (Ahmed 2011), White women, on the one hand, name White privilege, describe how experiencing such violence is “unlikely,” criticize police brutality, the criminal justice system, and the state, and call for more

attention to violence against people of color in true crime and news media generally. White respondents often referenced “last summer” (i.e., the protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020) to anchor their self-described “new” understanding of racism, White supremacy, and violence, especially state-sanctioned murder against Black and Brown people. On the other hand, despite these acknowledgements, White women describe how true crime content gives them a glimpse into the “real world” of ever-present gendered vulnerability, which requires hyper-vigilance, monitoring, and state intervention to ensure one’s safety and security. This adds yet another paradox: critique of the (racial) state and support of it, both condemning the police and calling them.

Amanda, a 29-year-old White woman, describes what she learns from true crime as such: “I know when to call the authorities. Like, if I hear noise in my neighborhood, I don’t want to be that person that just assumes that it’s nothing, no. I’m going to go look outside and I’m going to call 911 because...it’s [awareness] a practice on a weekly basis, I think, and I think that’s a really positive outcome.” The refrain of knowing when to “report” and to who was echoed throughout the interviews as part of situational awareness and necessary intervention. Dawn, a biracial “White passing” 43-year-old woman, reported true crime was an emotional “a call to action” for her. She described: “Sometimes [true crime] does make you a little bit enraged when people get away with things for so long, especially when it comes to the police or when you see a pattern of things that need to change in society or the legal system. It makes you want to actively do something about it.” When asked what she does in response to these feelings, she described “I’ve made several reports to CPS [child protective services] [...] I participate

more in issues that affect people of color, and [I've] written letters to senators and congressmen about issues I felt were important.”

With such a lurid and selective focus, true crime incorporates stories and interventions that construct the carceral state and policing as a necessary apparatus. In turn, it is the primary institution employed when something seems “out of place.” Interviewees made (at time repeated) reports to police and sheriff departments as well as other state institutions, which was due to knowledge gleaned from true crime. April, a 30-year-old White woman, explained that her husband worked in underground city construction, and described what happened after a new co-worker of her husband’s disclosed a sex offender charge. She excitedly explained,

This man has already been convicted. He was hired, and for whatever reason, decided to tell people that he’s a convicted sex offender. Maybe he has to tell people, I don’t know [...] And he had mentioned “Oh, you know this happened, I was 18 and she was 13, and blah blah blah.” And my husband told me this and my friend—the one who also is all about true crime, the one whose children I watch— she was a corrections officer for a long time, and she wanted to be a police officer, she wanted to be a homicide detective. And she knows how to dig, and she found this information about this man and she goes “no, he’s lying. With his charge, there’s only one thing he could have done, and that is that he molested and raped a small child.” [...] He wasn’t in jail long enough! He was sentenced to twelve years and only served seven [for the previous charge]. We also know that he doesn’t live at his registered address, and he lives with a woman who has children, and I have actively been trying to get him put back in jail, but nobody listens to me so [laughs] [...] He lives with someone who has small children! We have actively contacted her [the woman resident] saying, “hey, you know who you live with, right?” And we never get a response from her. And my husband’s like, “I don’t know, maybe I should just drop something on him one day” ... I was like “no, no, please don’t” [laughs] [...] We’ve called the non-compliant sex offender line multiple times, we’ve called them repeatedly, nobody ever answers, because they’re probably busy, but no messages have ever been returned to us, and I’ve called multiple times. I also called [the] county,

which is where [the] sheriff's department is, and they've never done anything. [...] I don't have a good opinion of the police or justice system for many reasons, but this is only solidifying it more for me.

April's detailed report is interesting, albeit somewhat troubling. It brings together several key themes in the data, including vulnerability, responsibility, emotional intensity, risk, fear, true crime centered relationships, ritual, sensationalism, prevention, punishment, the necessity of state intervention, the failures of the state to intervene, as well as the necessary surveillance of (potential) perpetrators (in contrast to such awareness leading to the recuperation of victims/survivors) while alluding to the "pleasures of surveillance" (Irvine 2008: 10) that bubbled throughout the interviews. Most obviously, it indicates how true crime invites state intervention through edutainment frameworks, which requires persistent awareness and outreach to authorities (and occasional sleuthing deemed appropriate due to one's proximity to and investment in the state, or even suggestions of vigilantism).

Here, White consumers position themselves through moral, affective, and juridical discourses that ultimately re-engage and reproduce state power, illuminating the raced and gendered dimensions of the *phenomenology of Whiteness* (Ahmed 2007). True crime traffics in fear, especially fear of violence against White women, and that fear is mobilizing for consumers, who are also community members with varying levels of community and political engagement. This fear and endemic sense of future-potential risk is part of the *psychological wage of Whiteness* (Du Bois 1935); it is a phantasy, a pleasurable neuroses, problematically institutionalized into systems of "law and order" and social control.

Implicitly or explicitly, true crime advocates for the expansion of legal oversight and systems of punishment to prevent and remedy such atrocities. Indeed, recent legal policies like Megan’s Law, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, and the Pam Lynchner Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act, encapsulate a short list of statues passed in the wake of such “White-on-White” crimes, which ultimately increase the reach and strength of law and law enforcement (see Webb 2021). While such statues are a product of cumulative effects, sometimes law enforcement is directly funded by true crime fans, where donors around the country have given over a million dollars to police departments to investigate specific cases. In lieu of donations, companies like DNASolves or JusticeDrive, invite individuals to provide DNA submissions to help support resolution of cold cases, using their platform “purpose-built for law enforcement” (Hill 2022).<sup>43</sup>

In this way, true crime represents more than just “copoganda.” Writing for *Mother Jones*, social commentator PE Moskowitz (2020; emphasis added) described,

The narrative of policing and courts allows us to pretend there is order in our world: There are clear good guys, clear bad guys, and, hopefully, a tidy resolution—the bad guy gets caught; the victim, whether dead or alive, gets some semblance of justice. True crime, for the most part, does not challenge this narrative [...] The vast majority treat police as undeniable heroes, and frame punishment and imprisonment as a form of

---

<sup>43</sup> This, of course, is fraught with racial dynamics and inequalities. As Hill’s article in the *New York Times* describes, “Natalie Ram, a law professor at the University of Maryland, expressed concern about ‘the public picking and choosing between cases,’ saying investigative priorities could be determined by who can donate the most. Ms. Ram said the ‘largest share’ of cases solved so far with the method ‘tend to involve White female victims. [...] An existing bias toward prioritizing white victims, which has been documented in media coverage, could be compounded by the demographic makeup of the genealogy databases. Their composition ‘skews heavily white,’ according to a recent law review article, which contrasted these databases to state collections of DNA, such as the F.B.I.’s Codis, which overrepresent Black people, who are more likely to be arrested and have their DNA taken” (Hill 2022).

feminism: If only more men were behind bars, women could begin to thrive. *Evil is out there. It's okay to call the police.*

For my respondents, true crime is an “edutainment” tool, an instructional manual, that reifies a “carceral feminism” (Richie 2012) or even a “femonationalism” (Farris 2017) that is, paradoxically, explicitly aware of realities of racial stratification enforced through state apparatuses. While April maintains she has a poor opinion of police, she consistently engages them based on the knowledge and fear accrued by true crime, and her consumption becomes a source of pleasure and connection to her partner, friends, and community more broadly.

Despite this (somewhat muted) awareness of state and police violence, true crime affectively reinforces already “disciplined imaginations” (Kaba in Waldman 2020). It offers opportunities for “empowerment,” “consciousness raising,” and even “feminist” messaging, while *depicting* a pervasive and perpetual victim-status through formulaic and emotive narrative structures that, in turn, cyclically *instill* permanent/perpetual victim-status. Such a distant sense of risk and possibilities for resolution are, for many interviewees, a pleasurable (though modulating) experience. Ultimately, this can foreclose or limit creative possibilities for thinking outside the carceral state, especially when experiencing fear. This type of penal spectatorship (Brown 2010) produces a paradoxical position; one that is somewhat aware of state violence and White supremacy, but one that defends and employs the state due to the expanding and permeating power of (White) fear (Du Bois 1920, 1935) and gendered vulnerability associated with Whiteness and femininity. It is an affective and racialized position, a deeply felt and embodied

“technology of Whiteness” (Russell 2020) defined by proximity *and* distance to crime, risk, and violence. While this ambivalence can be mobilized to more progressive ends (see Bonilla-Silva 2019), perceptions of gendered vulnerability and future-potential risk are the sentiment problematically anchored to the racial and carceral state *vis-à-vis* true crime and associated narratives.

Nicole, a 29-year-old Black woman, elaborated on this:

So I imagine that the hang ups that I have about watching or reading or hearing about someone being brutally murdered, don't exist for every White person who watches true crime. I don't imagine that they have the same sort of hang ups that I have. [...] I'm just a Black person that lives in this country [...] I don't think White people have that sort of experience of like, every day you're not surprised to be hear a story about a White woman being brutally murdered by the state, for example, so you don't have that experience, it's just watching private citizens murdering each other, in a state like seven states away from you...It's different. Like, can you have a comfortable separation there [...] The separation is like...that's safety and security there. There's that comfort of the distance [...] We can't escape the state, so we have a state on our necks, and you don't. You're free. You're not plagued by as much pain and trauma. And that's not to say that White people don't have their own stuff, right, but it's different.

Clearly, the position of ambivalence is a privileged one not afforded to Nicole. Instead, Black true crime producers and consumers focus on the state as a perpetrator of violence and encourage individuals to do the work White women's ability to engage in extreme violence, while being removed from such violence, and simultaneously naming risk of such violence as the motivation for their engagement, is indicative of how race, gender, and vulnerability coalesce and are interactionally produced through such dark leisure practices.

## Conclusion

As a firmly sensational genre with a clearly patterned consumer base, true crime represents an apt site to theorize the relationship between race, gender, and emotion. This chapter began with an exploration of feeling rules in true crime consumption, highlighting the relationship of risk, prevention, and education as the primary frames employed to rationalize consumption. These framings relate to the construction of a moral self, where White true crime consumers emphasize consumption as a “duty,” where they can “witness” and help “memorialize” victims and such violent atrocities. With such deeply felt and moralized positions, this also precipitates the breaking of feeling rules and boundary work around consumption. Emotions like anger, depression, romantic or sexual arousal, and desire were present in the data but policed to varying degrees by respondents, further emphasizing the “acceptable” displays of emotional states and consumer comportment. Of course, all of this is stratified around race and gender, where the affective components of controlling images become more visible.

These emotional dynamics of risk and risk experience are more complicated than they appear on face-value, as they are rife with paradoxes. As a result, (felt) proximity to risk and violence emerges as a salient theme, where further distance *from* risk yields more emotional bandwidth *for* risk centered narratives and vicarious risk taking, which re-emerges as a site of pleasure. This is interesting, particularly as (potential) risk is repeatedly named as the primary motivator for consumption. Black women and women of color easily and clearly identified the relationship between the lived distance from

violence and subsequent interest in violence in the interviews, which White female consumers also alluded to in different ways.

Importantly, these emotional experiences invite different outcomes that map onto positionality. White women individually “witness,” “surveil,” and enlist the police and the (carceral) state to prevent what they identify as future-potential harm; in turn, gendered vulnerability is the overarching discourse that supersedes critiques of racism and the racial state. In turn, the state is employed as a problematic but necessary tool to mitigate this gendered vulnerability, and working outside the state is considered to be rife with potential issues (see chapter four). In contrast, the Black women in my sample employ narrative justice and community “awareness” to crowdsource and spread information, while simultaneously critiquing the state’s refusal to address current, active, and ongoing cases, as well as an active perpetrator of violence itself. These produce two ways of articulating and engaging the genre: one oriented towards “memorializing” past losses and “preventing” future-potential violence, and another navigating a persistent present of searching and recovery.

## CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION: “TRUE CRIME IS A ONE WAY MIRROR”

### Introduction

Using over 120 semi-structured interviews, survey data, responsive journaling, and content and discourse analysis, this dissertation theorizes the relationship of race, gender, and emotion in the production and consumption of the true crime genre. In no small part, people engage in *sensemaking* (Weick 1995) of their world through stories, whether fictionalized, true, or somewhere in between (see Polletta et al 2011), and true crime is no exception. Recognizing the latent and explicit themes of the stories we tell, who is included, who is excluded, how these representations are framed, mapping the history and current emergence of such stories, and understanding their effects (ideological, material, and embodied), represents an important task. For true crime, the formulaic, patterned, and sensationalized content and the patterned consumer base make the genre an apt case to examine the “felt” contours of the racial and carceral state in the broader *culture of control* (Garland 2001).

The first chapter of this dissertation introduced the topic and overviewed relevant literature, while the second chapter detailed data collection and methods. The third chapter examined the production of true crime and its explicit and implicit effects. The fourth chapter explored true crime communities, shared victim-identity, and *narrative justice* (Price 2020). The fifth chapter examined race, gender, and emotion in relation to the state. In this conclusion, I provide a discussion of the key interventions that emerged from the data. Following, I detail the implications of this research. I overview its contributions to sociological literature, the discipline more broadly, and how the findings

may support public and human service initiatives outside of the academy. In closing, I discuss future research opportunities, and conclude with a brief overview of this dissertation and the associated findings.

## Discussion

### *“Racial Grammar” and White Myths*

As discussed in chapter three, the production and consumption of true crime is patterned. The economic viability of this edutainment genre, the notable traction of particular programs (such as *My Favorite Murder*), the prevalence of *missing White woman syndrome* (Stillman 2007) and its disproportionate representation in the genre, as well as the producers and consumers of true crime media, are notably structured around race and gender. This spills over into the narrative structure of true crime, where the genre incorporates and extends a *racial grammar* (Bonilla-Silva 2011; Spillers 1987). This permeates narrative structure, manifest and latent content, and the formulaic “rhythm” of the genre, which emphasizes linear cause-and-effect, closure, and reliance on “truth” and “justice,” as signaled through forensic technology and juridical apparatuses, including police and the courts. This is further entangled with the moral grammar of true crime, which makes it especially compelling for audiences. I argue that true crime is one of the many narrative domains that constitute and extend the *White racial frame* (Feagin 2013), further rationalizing it through internally referential signifying systems. I describe the narrative arc and rhythm of true crime that perpetuate this White racial frame as one (of many) *White myths*.

While most recognizable through their incorporation of a racialized “Other,” as seen in danger or captivity narratives (Davis 2006; Webb 2022; Feagin 2013; Wyss 1999), many White myths have been effectively adapted for a “post-race” and “colorblind” moment. In true crime, myopic representations of gender, race, vulnerability, fear, representations of (Whiteness and/as) “normalcy” (Seltzer 2006; Anderson 2014) and its rupture, and the return to the state as the fundamental apparatus for resolution and mitigation of fear-based anxieties, reproduce the themes that lend continued traction to White myths, and highlight how White myths narratively contribute to racialization and the production of social value around certain cases. Importantly, true crime powerfully affects consumers on a personal and social level, and can even reopen cases and change legislation (Callanan 2005; Álvarez 2019; Bouzis and Creech 2018; Bruzzi 2016). As such, the power of this genre can arguably be leveraged differently. Pragmatic use of tropes, narrative arcs, and production structures, shows how true crime can also serve as a site of subversion to hegemonic narratives about crime and violence (McCabe 2022), or even provide narrative justice to otherwise marginalized and ignored cases (Price 2020).

#### *Race, Gender, Emotion, and Time*

As explored in chapter five, emotion is central to this sensationalized *body genre* (see Wiltenburg 2004; Williams 1991), which is moderated by race and gender. While evocations of risk, and by extension, prevention and education, were central, participants also reported arousal, rage, and entertainment. And at times, participants implicitly

referenced *controlling images* (Hill Collins 1990), articulating the relationship between race, gender, and emotion, which are always already (but differently) imposed given one's social positionality. This was true for individuals and collectives, and these reports of emotion in relation to true crime content yield interesting insights about experiences of race and temporality.

Chapter four examined true crime communities, and especially the juxtaposition between *community formation* for White female participants versus *community mobilization* for Black female respondents. Most importantly, this analysis illustrated how community building, especially for White interviewees, resulted in a shared identity that was paradoxically defined by feelings of risk and vulnerability (to future-potential harm) as well as empowerment (individual and collective knowledge and/as prevention and intervention). This was clear not just in physical gatherings, but in digital communities and individual explanations, where interviewees explained their draw to the genre.

Using a respondent's language, I describe this position as *victims-in-waiting*, wherein White women claim victimhood through future-potential violence, despite acknowledging their relatively secure reality. This theme is further examined in chapter five, where participants explained how one's lived *proximity to risk and violence* is inversely related to their emotional bandwidth for gory content such as true crime, despite increased consumption being correlated with higher estimation of risk and victimization for respondents generally. While Ada, a 42-year-old Black true crime podcaster postulates how White women are more privileged and therefore less busy, more nosy,

and have more time for true crime, it is clear that emotion is another resource available to White women made possible by their relative safety from harm. In this way, victim-status is cultivated by true crime, but its fallibility is indicated by White women's own acknowledgement, and, perhaps more implicitly, their overwhelming interest in and pleasure gleaned from the genre, despite the insistence that such risk is an ever-present reality.

This shared victim identity, or victims-in-waiting, was also expressed through ritualized behaviors that yielded a sort of *collective effervescence*, or an ecstatic "doing" of group identity and belonging (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Gray and Benning 2019). Here, White women engaged in a sort of *consciousness raising* (MacKinnon 1982), where gendered subordination can be collectively identified and strategically avoided. However, this "doing" of collective identity also incorporated celebrations of (extra-) judicial violence, where punishment and physical harm against perpetrators were celebrated, ultimately encapsulating Du Bois' (1935) critique of "the mob," as well as the "expanding" and the religiously-infused structures of Whiteness. Here, fear "binds," and the vulnerability and "righteous" anger associated with victimhood are leveraged accordingly, despite the acknowledged reality that such a lived experience may never come.

In chapters four and five, I continue this analysis of emotion and time, and how these are interconnected, racialized, and affectively anchored. True crime content narrates and constructs time and order, and ultimately invites particular affects that are temporally rooted. For White true crime content and communities, most coverage is contained in the

past, with cases closed or unresolved with a deluge of speculation. Following victims-in-waiting, the future is experienced as potentially threatening, whereas the present—the act of consumption itself—is defined by leisure, or a sort of vicarious risk taking or sensation seeking to modulate boredom (Zuckerman 2007; Goffman 1972). The past, as contained in true crime case coverage, is—according to participants—a site for mourning; following interviewee’s construction of a moral self, it is the consumer’s “duty” to “bear witness” to violence and harm. Despite the emphasis on risk and mourning, true crime is a fundamentally pleasurable experience, further inviting the “pleasures of surveillance” (Irvine 2008: 10) as indicated by interviewees.

For Black true crime consumers and associated true crime content, the coverage often focus on the present, highlighting current or ongoing cases requiring community mobilization to redress police and media failures to attend to these cases. This focus on the present may weave in histories (institutional racism, neglect) and futures (possibilities of family reunification, justice, necessity and power of community support and grassroots organizing), but the focal emphasis is on the “now.” As a result, for the Black women I interviewed, the present in true crime is not defined by leisure, but by work, suggesting an endemic state of urgency that is anchored in the present and community organizing rather than oriented towards the known past or unknown future. In sum, this suggests two ways of being and engaging the genre that are moderated by the race and gender of the consumer and producer: one oriented towards “memorializing” past losses and “preventing” future-potential violence, and another defined by a constant present guided by search and recovery efforts.

### *Gendered Vulnerability and/as State Power*

Chapter five detailed the relationship of true crime and gendered vulnerability to the maintenance and expansion of state power. As discussed in chapter three, true crime is one (of many) White myths in theme, form, and structure; a danger narrative adapted for a “post-race” and “colorblind” moment, where gendered vulnerability and the necessity of the state and other apparatuses of social control is emphasized. Part of the “prevention education” respondents gleaned from true crime was about when to involve the authorities. Due to heightened anxieties about gendered risk and the emphasis on community surveillance for possible perpetrators precipitated by true crime consumption (versus community mobilization and awareness raising efforts to find missing women and girls), the White women in my sample reported readily engaging with the police and legal apparatuses due to the knowledge gleaned from true crime. As such, despite simultaneous critiques of the state and police made by respondents, these apparatuses are still readily, righteously, and—at times—gleefully employed as the primary solution to prevent and intervene in potentially violent or criminal situations.

While interviewees expressed the connection between true crime and their engagement with police, there are recent reports of consumers even funding police department investigations or donating DNA to law enforcement-specific platforms, like DNASolves or JusticeDrive (Hill 2022). Further, as participants insisted, true crime can indeed “change legislation.” Legal policies like Megan’s Law or the Pam Lynchner Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act represents just two of a litany of statutes

passed in the wake of such “White-on-White” true crime coverage, ultimately increasing the reach and strength of law and law enforcement that disproportionately and negatively affects people and communities of color (see also Brown 1995; Spade 2015; Webb 2021). Indeed, while narratives of gendered vulnerability are important to consumers in many ways, they are co-constitutive with and inseparable from imaginaries of race, the state, and unfurling apparatuses of social control. Such anxious risk, neurotic pleasure, and associated action is part of the *psychological wage of Whiteness* (Du Bois 1920), a sort of delusion or phantasy that continues to propel the “expanding” reach of White fear (Du Bois 1920; Ahmed 2004; Meyers 2019). This phantasy is problematically institutionalized in an attempt to allay such fear, yet unfolds and “protects” at the expense of marginalized populations. The numerous paradoxes that unfold in this research illuminate how (future-potential) gendered vulnerability is the overarching logic that supersedes racial justice.

### Implications

This cross-disciplinary dissertation provides data-driven theoretical interventions of relevance to sociology, women’s and gender studies, critical race and ethnic studies, law and legal studies, social psychology, and communication studies, among others. Most obviously, this contributes to the recent outpouring of think pieces, books, and scholarly research in social psychology, literature, and media studies regarding the relationship of gender and true crime consumption. While the disproportionate amount of female consumers has not gone unnoticed, I argue that the lack of attention to race renders

existing explanations incomplete. This study adds texture to existing “risk management” explanations by contextualizing fear and victimhood in relation to raced and gendered positionality within the unfolding culture of control. I also examine realities versus imaginaries of risk as articulated in a broader history of narrative—as a vehicle to disseminate evolving ideologies and internal emotional maps—in the United States. In addition to analyzing content, I use interviews, surveys, and responsive journaling to garner a more in-depth understanding of gendered risk, its stratified experience, and subsequent access to socio-legal mechanisms of power.

Given the theoretical grounding and disciplinary position of this dissertation, this research is poised to most significantly contribute to sociological literature from a variety of subfields. Working at the intersections of literature on race, gender, and representation, consumption and leisure, and emotion and feeling rules, this dissertation draws on an interdisciplinary set of literatures to expand our understanding of criminalization, mass incarceration, and structural racism in the United States, in relation to the linked micro- and macro- expressions of culture, theorizing patterned and formulaic leisure behaviors.

While literature on mass incarceration and social control tends to focus on demographic inequalities, punitive sentencing, and changes in incarceration over time and place, there is significantly less attention to the gendered, racial, affective underpinnings that contribute (symbolically, politically, and directly) to these continuing disparities within the broader culture of control. In this dissertation, I use true crime to examine this understudied social process, which affects the beliefs, behaviors, and perspectives of individuals and collectives in ways that are deeply “felt.” This project is

especially important in a context of growing digital media, which brings the public even “closer” to direct observation and experiences of violence, and—through production and consumption—carries evolving moral, racial, and gendered meanings of victim, offender, crime, and justice.

Further, this research can arguably provide support for other initiatives, including human and social services. While this research is not policy oriented, these findings help unpack the relationship of charged crime media to behaviors, perspectives, and perceptions of reality, which many scholars have already demonstrated (Callanan 2005; Álvarez 2019; Bouzis and Creech 2018; Bruzzi 2016). Additionally, this research adds to understandings of fear and experiences of risk, and how these emotional experiences are shaped by gendered and raced positionality, which may be of use to community workers, social workers, or members of police and law enforcement when understanding fear and how to mitigate and respond to individual anxieties.

### Future Research

Within this data set, there are several themes that merit further exploration, including how different types and forms of true crime consumption shapes individual’s perspectives, the role of memorialization, and the victim-focused narratives of true crime. First, continuing the research on true crime and communities, I will continue to outreach to consumers and producers of color to undertake a more robust analysis of the relationship of race and true crime. I will also more deeply undertake content and

discourse analysis of true crime content and associated social media presence and commentary.

While the focus of this dissertation has been interviews, I will use precise comparative categories, such as Brittany Vaughn's and Bailey Sarian's (a Black and a White woman, respectively) true crime and makeup focused YouTube channels, to highlight the similarities and differences in the construction of crime and emotion in relation to race and gender. Second, I will attend in-person events, such as CrimeCon, local meet ups, and podcast recordings, to gather more data on true crime communities. Third, I will triangulate this data by examining how other identity categories—such as class, educational attainment, religious beliefs, and political affiliation—shape one's interest in true crime. Relatedly, it would be interesting to look at another related genre with raced gendered consumption, such as histories of war, and compare how men of different racial backgrounds articulate their engagement with the genre.

Beyond true crime and related media, future research will explore other sites of *dark leisure*, a term I use to describe leisure practices associated with the commoditization of human suffering, often for educational purposes. For example, dark tourism is a growing practice that prioritizes places where atrocities occurred, including mass graves, prisons, dungeons, serial killer haunts, and where “communism” took place. Aside from behaviors that categorically fit this burgeoning area of interest, it is also important to explore more the “benign” heritage tourism that disguises clearly darker elements, such as using plantations as tourist and wedding destinations, or field trips to the Alamo. This builds from some of the key themes in this dissertation, including the

narrativization of truth and real events, edutainment opportunities, leisure practices, the relationship of witnesses/spectators to violence, the construction of violence, death, and horror, as well as broader areas like culture, memory, race, gender, emotion, and time.

### Conclusion

#### *“True Crime is a One-Way Mirror”*

Annabelle, a 22-year-old White woman, described her experience with true crime in general as “completely voyeuristic. There’s no way for the person to turn around and look at me through the window...It’s a one-way mirror.” Made famous through crime media of all sorts, one-way mirrors are often featured in signature interrogation rooms, where a select few can see into the room and monitor an interaction (often between a purported criminal and law enforcement officer), while those inside the room cannot see out, highlighting the power associated with the “gaze” of the state. Instead of seeing out, the internal wall looks like a mirror to those inside of it. The expressed meaning of Annabelle’s analogy—voyeurism—was echoed in different ways throughout the interviews, but something about her metaphor resonated more deeply, in part due to the integration of such police and crime associated symbols into more conversational parlance.

I agree with Annabelle’s assertion that true crime is a one-way mirror, in part due to the voyeuristic position, but also for other reasons. It seems to me that true crime is a one-way mirror where White women as consumers are invited themselves in the reflective internal wall of the interrogation room. Instead of “silent witnesses” that see

into the “truth” or “hard reality” of violence and crime, White women—as true crime consumers—are invited to look at themselves from within the structural confines of the state and associated “disciplined imaginations” (Kaba in Waldman 2020) as signified by the interrogation room itself. From the reflective side of the one-way mirror, without broader contextualization of crime and punishment, White women look at themselves—their deaths, their mourning, their pain, their mutilation, their loss, their murder, their impact, their resolution, their search for justice—represented literally (in terms of story selection), symbolically (as individual and collective victims-in-waiting), narratively (White myths, racial grammar), and affectively (in competing experiences of risk, vulnerability, pleasure, and empowerment). Gendered vulnerability and male patterned violence against women and girls is real, and such violence and trauma has far reaching effects. However, the magnification and codification of White women’s always-already vulnerability into discursive, political, and legal systems reinforces and extends the reach of the carceral state, which—despite its expressed motivation—disproportionately and negatively impacts already marginalized communities (see Brown 1995; Spade 2015).

Throughout this dissertation, I have engaged true crime’s emotive narrative and symbolic structures, social effects, as well as producers and consumers’ understandings of the genre and associated communities, both virtual and in-person. All of this attends to how raced and gendered positionalities can be theorized through one’s relationship to and engagement with such a charged leisure activity. While the genre is powerful and contains subversive potential, it is more often a site that maintains hegemony through charged constructions of vulnerability, risk, violence, morality, and justice, experienced

pleasurably. The production of these mythologies informs the deeply felt contours of the carceral and racial state in the broader culture of control. While this analysis does not claim to be causal or generalizable, it does provide insights into how leisure activities and edutainment media relate to identity and participate in systems of sensemaking, linking micro- and macro-expressions of culture through consumption.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2007. "A phenomenology of whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8: 149-168.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22(2): 117-139.
- Ahmed, Sara, 2011. *On Being Included*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh, England: Edinburgh University Press.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- All Top Everything. 2022. "Top 10 Most Popular Podcasts in the World 2022." *All Top Everything* <https://www.alltopeverything.com/top-10-most-popular-podcasts/> (Retrieved March 8, 2022).
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm> (Retrieved January 5, 2022).
- Anderson, Elijah. 2014. "The White Space." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(1): 10-21.
- Andreas, Peter, et al. 1996. *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: The Regents of the University of California.
- Apple, M. W. 1998. Forward. In J. L. Kincheloe, S. R. Steinberg, N. M. Rodriguez, & R. E. Chennault. (Eds.), *White reign: Deploying whiteness in America*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Ault, Alicia. 2019. "These Haunting Red Dresses Memorialize Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women." *Smithsonian Magazine*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/these-haunting-red-dresses-memorialize-murdered-and-missing-indigenous-women-180971730/> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).
- Avanas Álvarez, Elena. "Criminal Readings: The Transformative and Instructive Power of Crime Fiction." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 42(3): 140-150.

Bandes, Susan A. 1999. *Passions of the Law*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Bandes, Susan A. 2009. "Victims, "Closure," and the Sociology of Emotion." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 72: 1-26.

Barthel, Michael, Galen Stocking, Jesse Holcomb, and Amy Mitchell. 2016. "Reddit news users more likely to be male, young, and digital in their news preferences." *Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media*. <https://www.journalism.org/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male-young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/> (Retrieved February 28, 2021).

Bean, Travis. 2020. "These Were The 25 Most Popular Shows on Netflix in 2020." *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbean/2020/12/19/the-25-most-popular-shows-on-netflix-in-2020/?sh=25f8e256666b> (Retrieved August 27, 2021).

Bericat, Eduardo. 2015. "The sociology of emotions: Four decades of progress." *Current Sociology* 64(3): 491-513.

Bell, Derrick. 1980. "Board v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma." *Harvard Law Review* 93(3): 518-533.

Belle, Rachel. 2019. "Why are white women so obsessed with true crime?" 97.3 Kiro News Radio <https://mynorthwest.com/1494828/true-crime-white-women-obsessed/> (Retrieved March 25, 2022)

Bernstein, Robin. 2011. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Bettie, Julie. 2002. *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Beydoun, Khaled A. 2018. "Lone Wolf Terrorism: Types, Stripes, and Double Standards." *Northwestern University Law Review Online* 112(5): 1213-1244.

Bhatia, Monish, Scott Poyntine, and Waqas Tufail, eds. 2018. *Media, Crime, and Racism*. England, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bishop, Katrina. 2014. "How 'Serial' is making podcasts mainstream." *CNBC* <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/11/21/podcasts-are-going-mainstreamheres-why.html> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).

- Blatchford, Emily. 2020. "ASMR: What Is It and Why Are People Into It?" *Huffington Post* [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/asmr-what-is-it-and-why-are-people-into-it\\_n\\_61087611e4b0999d2084fb96](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/asmr-what-is-it-and-why-are-people-into-it_n_61087611e4b0999d2084fb96) (Retrieved March 11, 2022)
- Blee, Kathleen M. 1998. "White Knuckle Research: Emotional Dynamics in Fieldwork with Racist Activists." *Qualitative Sociology* 21(4): 381-399.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Boling, Kelli S. and Kevin Hull. 2018. "Undisclosed Information—Serial Is My Favorite Murder: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 25(1):92-108.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2011. "The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35(2): 173-194.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2019. "Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions." *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 1-25.
- Bracey, Glenn E. 2014. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of the State." *Critical Sociology* 41(2): 553-572.
- Brewer, Rose M., and Nancy A. Heitzeg. 2008. "The Racialization of Crime and Punishment: Criminal Justice, Color-Blind Racism, and the Political Economy of the Prison Industrial Complex." *American Behavioral Scientist* 51(5): 625-644.
- Browder, Laura. 2010. "True Crime" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, Catherine Ross Nickerson, editor. Pp: 121-134. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Kimberly Juanita. 2014. "Regarding the Pain of Others" in *Feeling Photography*, Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, editors. Pp: 182-200. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brown, Michelle. 2009. *The Culture of Punishment*. New York: NYU Press.
- Brown, Michelle. 2010. "Penal Spectatorship and the Culture of Punishment." In *Why Prison?* Edited by David Scott. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

- Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bruzzi, Stella. 2016. "Making a genre: The case of the contemporary true crime documentary." *Law and Humanities* 10(2): 249-280.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* New York, NY: Verso Books.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia." In *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London, England: Verso Books.
- Buozis, Michael and Brian Creech. 2018. "Reading News as Narrative: A Genre Approach to Journalism Studies." *Journalism Studies* 19(10): 1430-1446.
- Burt, Andrew T. 2017. "True Crime Does Pay: Narratives of Wrongdoing in Film and Literature." PhD Dissertation, Department of English, Northern Illinois University.
- Browder, Laura. 2006. "Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39(6):928-953.
- Brown, Ruth Nicole. 2013. *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Cacho, Lisa Marie. 2012. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Calamur, Krishnadev. 2014. "Ferguson Documents: Officer Darren Wilson's Testimony." *NPR* <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony> (Retrieved January 14, 2022).
- Callanan, Valerie J. 2005. *Feeding the Fear of Crime: Crime-related Media and Support for Three Strikes*. New York, NY: LFB Scholarly Publishing.
- Capers, Bennett. 2009. "Policing, Place, and Race." *Brooklyn Law School*. 44 Harv. C.R. - C.L. L. Rev. 43: 43-78.

Connell, Raewyn, and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829-859.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Chatterji, Angana. 2012. "Witnessing as Feminist Intervention in India-Administered Kashmir" in *South Asian Feminisms* by Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose, editors. Pp 181-201. Durham: Duke University Press.

Chokshi, Niraj. 2018. "White Woman Nicknamed 'Permit Patty' Regrets Confrontation Over Black Girl Selling Water." *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/us/permit-patty-black-girl-water.html> (Retrieved January 14, 2022).

Clarke, Matt. 2018. "U.S. Murder Clearance Rates Among Lowest in the World." *Criminal Legal News* <https://www.criminallegalnews.org/news/2018/feb/16/us-murder-clearance-rates-among-lowest-world/> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Cole, Teju. 2012. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/> (Retrieved April 5, 2022).

Conroy, Oliver J. 2019. "Why Are Women Obsessed with True Crime? Rachel Munroe has Some Answers." *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/aug/20/rachel-monroe-savage-appetites-true-crime-book-interview> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-1299.

Cruwys, Tegan, Laura J. Ferris, Joanne A. Rathbone, Katharine H. Greenaway, and Alexander K. Saeri. 2020. "When Trust Goes Wrong: A Social Identity Model of Risk Taking." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes* 120(1): 57-83.

Cunningham, David. 2009. "Ambivalence and State Control: State Action Against the Civil Rights-Era Klu Klux Klan." *Qualitative Sociology* 32: 355-377.

Davis, Elizabeth. 2006. "Why Are Captivity Narratives So Popular?" Np. <http://www.saumag.edu/edavis/2010AmLit/Research/Paper2010.htm> (Retrieved March 25, 2022).

- Deleuze, Gilles. 1994 [1968]. *Difference and Repetition*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Dirks, Danielle, Caroline Heldman, and Emma Zack. 2015. 'She's White and She's Hot, So She Can't Be Guilty': Female Criminality, Penal Spectatorship, and White Protectionism." *Contemporary Justice Review* 18(2): 160-177.
- Doane, Woody, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, eds. 2003. *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dolan, Eric W. 2022. "Men discuss heartache on Reddit's relationship forum more than women, study finds." *Psy Post*. <https://www.psypost.org/2022/01/men-discuss-heartache-on-reddits-relationship-forum-more-than-women-study-finds-62339> (Retrieved January 12, 2022).
- Douglas, Mary. 2002 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro*. Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 2014 [1903]. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1920. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1935. *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Durham, Alexis M., H. Preston Elrod, and Patrick T. Kinkade. "Images of Crime and Justice: Murder in the 'True Crime' Genre." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 23(2): 143-152.
- Durkheim, Emile. [1900] 1969. "Two Laws of Penal Evolution." *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 38:32-60.
- Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1938. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1958. *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Durkheim, Emile. 1969. "Two Laws of Penal Evolution." *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 23: 32-61.

Dymock, Alex. 2017. "Prurience, punishment and the image: Reading 'law-and-order pornography.'" *Theoretical Criminology* 2(2): 209-224.

Elliott, John Huxtable. 2006. *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Fanon, Franz. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Fanon, Franz. 1962. *Wretched of the Earth*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Fairclough 1989. *Language and Power*. London, UK: Longman Press.

Farris, Sara R. 2017. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Feagin, J.R. 2013. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.

Ferguson, Matthew, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby. 2015. "Bridging or fostering social distance? An analysis of penal spectator comments on Canadian penal history museums." *Crime Media Culture* 11(3): 357-374.

Flis, Leonora. 2010. "The blending of fact and fiction in three American documentary (crime) narratives." *Acta Neophilologica* 43(1-2): 69-82.

Flores, Jerry. 2016. *Caught Up: Girls, Surveillance, and Wraparound Incarceration*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Floyd, Myron F. 1998. "Getting Beyond Marginality and Ethnicity: The Challenge for Race and Ethnic Studies in Leisure Research." *Journal of Leisure Research* 30(1): 3-22.

Ford, Allison. 2020. "Emotional Landscapes of Risk: Emotion and Culture in American Self-sufficiency Movements." *Qualitative Sociology* 44:125-150.

Frankenberg, Ruth. 2001. "Mirage of an unmarked whiteness." In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* by BB Rasmussen, E Klinenberg, IJ Nexica, and M Wray, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The social construction of whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Franzosi, Roberto. 1998. "Narrative Analysis-Or Why (And How) Sociologists Should be Interested in Narrative." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 517-554.
- Frost, Rebecca. 2015. "Identity and Ritual: American Consumption of True Crime." Open Access Dissertation, Michigan Technological University. <https://digitalcommons.mtu.edu/etdr/17> (Retrieved March 1, 2021).
- Froyum, Carissa M. 2010. "The Reproduction of Inequalities Through Emotional Capital: The Case of Socializing Low-Income Black Girls." *Qualitative Sociology* 33: 37-54.
- Garland, David. 1990. *Punishment and Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Garland, David. 2001. *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967, 2009. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Goff, Phillip Atiba, Tracey Lloyd, Amanda Geller, Steven Raphael, and Jack Glaser. 2016. "The Science of Justice: Race, Arrests, and Police Use of Force." *Center for Policing Equity*.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Double Day.
- Goffman, Erving. 1972. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Golash-Boza, Tanya. 2015. "The Spread of Ideology: Controlling Images and Racism in the Media." *In Race and Racisms: A Critical Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, Theo. 2002. *The Racial State*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Gonzalez Van Cleve, Nicole. 2016. *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Google Trends. 2022. "True Crime." *Google Trends*.  
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=true%20crime>  
(Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Gould, Deborah. 2009. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Graves, Joseph. 2004. *The Race Myth: Why We Pretend Race Exists in America*. Boston, MA: Dutton Publishing.

Gray, Garry and Brigitte Benning. 2019. "Crowdsourcing Criminology: Social Media and Citizen Policing in Missing Person Cases." *SAGE Open*: 1- 15.

Grey, CGP. 2013. "What is reddit?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tII022aUWQQ>  
(Retrieved February 26, 2021).

Guess, Teresa. 2006. "The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence." *Critical Sociology* 32(4): 649-673.

Gramlich, John. 2019. "5 facts about crime in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/17/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>  
(Retrieved October 30, 2020).

Gyamerah, Akua O., Baguso, Glenda, Santiago-Rodriguez, Aria Sa'id, Sean Arayasirikul, Jess Lin, Caitlin M. Turner, Kelly D. Taylor, Willi McFarland, Erin C. Wilson and Paul Wesson. 2021. "Experiences and factors associated with transphobic hate crimes among transgender women in the San Francisco Bay Area: comparisons across race." *BMC Public Health* 21, 1053. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11107-x>  
(Retrieved January 5, 2022)

Hall, Jacquelyn D. 1979, 1993. *The Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Haney-Lopez, Ian. 1996. *White by law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Hardstark, Georgia, and Karen Kilgariff. 2016. "My Firstest Murder." *My Favorite Murder*. <https://www.podgist.com/my-favorite-murder/1-my-firstest-murder/index.html>  
(Retrieved March 1, 2021).

Harrell, Ericka. 2007. "Black Victims of Violent Crime." *Bureau of Justice Statistics*  
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/bvvc.pdf> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).

- Harrell, Ericka. 2016. "Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2014." *Bureau of Justice Statistics* <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0914st.pdf> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).
- Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby. 1995. *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.
- Heitzeg, Nancy A. 2016. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Education, Discipline, and Racialized Double Standards*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Hemez, Paul, John J. Brent, and Thomas Mowen. 2020. "Exploring the School-to-Prison Pipeline: How School Suspensions Influence Incarceration During Young Adulthood." *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 18(3): 325-255.
- Heitzeg, Nancy A. 2016. *The School-To-Prison Pipeline: Education, Discipline, and Racialized Double Standards*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Press.
- Higgins, Tucker. 2019. "Supreme Court won't give Adnan Syed new trial in 'Serial' podcast murder case." *CNBC News* <https://www.cnb.com/2019/11/25/supreme-court-wont-give-adnan-syed-new-trial-in-serial-podcast-case.html> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).
- Hill, Kashmir. 2022. "The True Crime-Obsessed Philanthropists Paying to Catch Killers: When the police can't afford to solve cold cases using DNA databases, deep-pocketed donors can." *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/27/technology/dna-tests-crime-solving.html> (Retrieved March 29, 2022).
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hinton, Elizabeth, LaShae Henderson, and Cindy Reed. 2019. "An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System." *Vera Evidence Brief*. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/for-the-record-unjust-burden-racial-disparities.pdf> (Retrieved May 6, 2022).
- Hochschild, Arlie. 1987. *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Oxforshire, UK: Routledge.

Holbrook, Morris B., and Elizabeth C. Hirschman. 1982. "The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun." *Journal of Consumer Research* 9(2): 132-140.

Hughey, Matthew. 2009. "The Janus-face of whiteness: Towards a cultural sociology of white nationalism and antiracism." *Sociology Compass* 3(6): 920-936.

Hullinger, Jessica. 2016. "I am a murderino: let me tell you about My Favorite Murder." *The Week*. <https://theweek.com/articles/654473/murderino> (Retrieved October 5, 2021).

Hunt, Darnell and Ana-Christina Ramón. 2021. "Hollywood Diversity Report 2021." *University of California Los Angeles* <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2021-Film-4-22-2021.pdf> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).

Irvine, Janice M. 2008. "Transient Feelings, Sex Panics, and the Politics of Emotions." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14(1):1-40.

Jaret, Charles, and Donald C. Reitzes. 1999. "The Importance of Racial-Ethnic Identity and Social Setting for Blacks, Whites, and Multiracials." *Sociological Perspectives* 42(4): 711-737.

Joyce, Gemma. 2018. "Podcast Audiences: Why are Women Such Big Fans of True Crime Podcasts?" *Bandwatch* <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-podcast-audiences/> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Karlin, Lily. 2014. "Duke Porn Star Belle Knox On The 'SVU' Episode Based On Her Story." *Huffington Post* [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/duke-porn-star-svu\\_n\\_6041258](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/duke-porn-star-svu_n_6041258) (Retrieved March 18, 2022).

Krauss, Steven Eric. 2005. "Research Paradigms and Meaning Making: A Primer." *The Qualitative Report* 10(4): 758-770.

Kish-Gephart, Jennifer J. 2017. "Social class and risk preferences and behavior." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 18: 89-92.

Klinger, Barbara. 2018. "Gateway Bodies: Serial Form, Genre, and White Femininity in Imported Crime TV." *Television & New Media* 19(6): 515-534.

Kort-Butler, Lisa A.; Sittner Hartshorn, Kelley J. 2011. "Watching The Detectives: Crime Programming, Fear of Crime, and Attitudes About the Criminal Justice System". *The Sociological Quarterly*. 52 (1): 36-55.

Kohn, Isabelle. 2020. "The Latest ASMR Craze Involves Tales of Crime and Murder." *MelMag* <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/the-latest-asmr-craze-involves-tales-of-crime-and-murder> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, NY: Columbus University Press.

Kurtz, James P. and Marvin Zuckerman. 1978. "Race and Sex Differences on the Sensation Seeking Scales." *Psychological Reports* 43(3): 529-520.s

Li, Weihua and Jamiles Lartey. 2022. "As Murders Spiked, Police Solved About Half in 2020." *The Marshall Project*. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/01/12/as-murders-spiked-police-solved-about-half-in-2020> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Linnemann, Travis. and Corina Medley. 2018. "Black sites, 'dark sides.' War power, police power, and the violence of the (un)known." *Crime, Media, Culture* 15(2): 341-358.

Lloyd, Chris, Robert King, Maree McCarthy, Melissa Scanlan. 2007. "The association between leisure motivation and recovery: A pilot study." *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* 54(1): 33-41.

Lull, James. 1995. *Media, Communication, and Culture: A Global Approach*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Lupton, Deborah. 2017. "How does health feel? Towards research on the affective atmospheres of digital health." *Digital Health* 3: 1-11.

Lynch, Mona, Marisa Omori, Aaron Roussell, and Matthew Valaskil. 2013. "Policing the 'progressive city.' The racialized geography of drug law enforcement." *Theoretical Criminology* 17(3): 335-357.

Lyng, Stephen. 1990. "Edgework: A social psychological analysis of voluntary risk taking." *American Journal of Sociology* 95: 851-856.

Lyng, Stephen. 2005. *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking*. New York: Routledge.

Lyng, Stephen. 2014. "Action and edgework: Risk taking and reflexivity in late modernity." *European Journal of Social Theory* 17(4): 443-460.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1982. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7(3): 515-544.

- Mark, Michelle. 2018. "Trump just referred to one of his most infamous campaign comments: calling Mexicans 'rapists'." *Business Insider* <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-mexicans-rapists-remark-reference-2018-4> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).
- Marx, Karl. 2009 [1932]. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books.
- Masad, Ilana. 2019. "Why Do We Find True Crime Fascinating? 'Savage Appetites' Looks For An Answer." *NPR* <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/20/751236235/why-do-we-find-true-crime-fascinating-savage-appetites-looks-for-an-answer> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).
- Mason, Heather. 2017. "10 Times My Favorite Murder was Super Feminist and We Loved It." *CulturesS: Fansided*. <https://culturess.com/2017/01/02/10-times-favorite-murder-super-feminist-loved/3/> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).
- Mather-Glass, Jane. 2022. "Rodney Lincoln's daughter never stopped fighting to prove his innocence. A new podcast tells their story." *NPR: St. Louis on the Air*. <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/show/st-louis-on-the-air/2022-01-27/rodney-lincolns-daughter-never-stopped-fighting-to-prove-his-innocence-a-new-podcast-tells-their-story> (Retrieved May 5, 2022).
- McCabe, Rachel. 2022. "Conversation with a killer: the Ted Bundy tapes and affective responses to the true crime documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film* 16(1): 38-54.
- McDermott, Monica and Frank L. Sampson. 2002. "White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology* 2005(31): 245-261.
- McRobbie, Angela, and Jenny Garber. 1977. "Girls and Subculture." *In Resistance through Ritual: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, 209–23. Birmingham, UK: CCCS Birmingham.
- McRobbie, Angela and Sarah L. Thornton. 1995. "Rethinking 'Moral Panic' for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds." *The British Journal of Sociology* 46(4): 559-574.
- Merriam-Webster. 2022. "Edutainment definition." *Miriam Webster Online*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/edutainment> (Retrieved March 25, 2022).
- Meyers, Ella. 2019. "Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on White Dominion." *Political Theory* 47(1): 6-31.

- Mills, C.W. 1940. "Situated actions and vocabularies of motive." *American Sociological Review* 5(6): 904-913.
- Mills, C.W. 1999 [1959]. "The Promise" in *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills and Todd Gitlin. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Mishan, Ligaya. 2021. "The March of the Karens." *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/12/t-magazine/white-women-karen.html> (Retrieved August 28, 2021).
- Moss, Jada L. 2019. "The Forgotten Victims of Missing White Women Syndrome: An Examination of Legal Measures That Contribute to the Lack of Search and Recover of Missing Black Girls and Women." *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 25(3): 737-764.
- Moskowitz, P.E. 2020. "True Crime Is Cathartic for Women. It's Also Cop Propaganda." *Mother Jones* <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2020/06/true-crime-podcasts-white-women/> (Retrieved March 8, 2022).
- Mowatt, Rasul. 2012. "Lynching as Leisure: Broadening Notions of a Field." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56(10):1361-1387.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. 2010. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Munroe, Rachel. 2020. *Savage Appetites: True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Murley, Jean. 2008. *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger Press.
- Murthy, Dhiraj, and Sanjay Sharma. 2019. "Visualizing YouTube's comment space: online hostility as a networked phenomena." *new media & society* 21(1): 191-213.
- Nader, Laura. 1972. "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up." *ERIC.gov*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED065375> (Retrieved April 29, 202).
- Nagesh, Ashitha. 2020. "What exactly is a 'Karen' and where did the meme come from?" *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-53588201> (Retrieved January 14, 2022).
- National Police Gazette. 2022. "Welcome to the National Police Gazette." *National Police Gazette Enterprises, LLC*. <http://policegazette.us/> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).

Nakayama, Thomas K., and Robert L. Krizek. 1995. "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81: 291-309.

Neuman, Lawrence W. 2014. *Social Science Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches – Seventh Edition*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limited.

Nevins, Joseph. 2002. *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on "Illegals."* New York, NY: Routledge.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

No author. 2020. "Data Around the Crime Genre." *Ask Wonder*. <https://askwonder.com/research/data-around-crime-genre-i3m0o1j89> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).

Omi, Michael. 2001. "(E)racism: emerging practices of antiracist organizations." In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* by BB Rasmussen, E Klinenberg, IJ Nexica, and M Wray, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 2004. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Packers, Issy. N.d. "The Rise of the True Crime Series and Why We're So Obsessed with Them." *The Everyday*. <https://theeverydaymagazine.co.uk/photographyandfilm/the-rise-of-the-true-crime-series-and-why-were-so-obsessed-with-them> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Peterson, Britt. 2019. "Victims, Families, and America's Thirst for True Crime Stories." *The Washington Post Magazine*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2019/07/30/feature/victims-families-and-americas-thirst-for-true-crime-stories/> (Retrieved August 27, 2021).

Petrosky, Emico, Janet M. Blair, Carter J. Betz, Katherine A. Fowler, Sharon P. Jack, Bridget H. Lyons. 2017. "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Homicides of Adult Women and the Role of Intimate Partner Violence — United States, 2003–2014." *CDC: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 66:741–746. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6628a1External>.

Perry, Samuel L. 2012. "Racial habitus, moral conflict, and white moral hegemony within interracial evangelical organizations." *Qualitative Sociology* 35(1): 89-108.

Phan, Mikki H., Jo R. Jardina, Sloane Hoyle, and Barbara S. Chaparro. 2012. "Examining the Role of Gender in Video Game Usage, Preference, and Behavior." *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting* 56(1): 1496–1500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1071181312561297>.

Polletta, Francesca, Pang Ching Bobby Chen, Beth Garrity Gardner, and Alice Motes. 2011. "The Sociology of Storytelling." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37: 109-130.

Price, Neroli. 2020. "Narrative Justice: Somebody Delivers the Answers the Police Will Not." *RadioDoc Review* 6(1): 1-12.

Punnett, Ian Case. 2018. *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives: A Textual Analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Rafter, Nicole. 2007. "Crime, film and criminology: Recent sex-crime movies." *Theoretical Criminology* 11(3): 403-420.

Ragsdale, Melissa. 2018. "Reading True Crime Makes Me Feel Less Anxious—For a Good Reason." *Bustle* <https://www.bustle.com/p/reading-true-crime-makes-me-feel-less-anxious-i-think-i-know-why-9809694> (Retrieved March 11, 2022).

Ray, Victor. 2019. "A theory of racialized organizations." *American Sociological Review*. 84(1): 26-53.

Reinberg, Steven. 2022. "U.S. Gun Homicides Jumped to Highest Level in 25 Years During Pandemic." *US News and World Report* <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-05-10/u-s-gun-homicides-jumped-to-highest-level-in-25-years-during-pandemic> (Retrieved June 17, 2022).

Richie, Beth. 2012. *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*. New York: New York University Press.

Rios, Victor. 2011. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Robertson, Jamie. 2019. "How podcasts went from unlistenable to unmissable." *BBC News* <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49279177> (Retrieved October 31, 2020).

Roediger, David R., 2006. *Working toward whiteness: How America's immigrants became white: The strange journey from Ellis Island to the suburbs*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

- Rogers, Colin and Geoff Coliandris. 2015. "The expert citizen: The key to future police legitimacy?" *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 88(2): 95-105.
- Rojek, Chris. 1995. *Decentering Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory*. New York: SAGE Publications.
- Rondini, Ashley C. 2018. "White Supremacist Danger Narratives." *Contexts* 17(3): 60-62.
- Ross, Selena. 2015. "Halifax shooting plot: inside the social media world of foiled 'Columbiners.'" *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/foiled-halifax-mall-shooting-tumblr-columbiners> (Retrieved January 26, 2022).
- Ruiz Ruiz, Jorge. 2009. Sociological Discourse Analysis: Methods and Logic. *Qualitative Social Research* 10(2). <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1298/2882> (Retrieved February 26, 2021).
- Russell, Lani. 2020. "Cultural competence as a technology of whiteness: race and responsabilisation in Scottish health and social care." *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare* 14(1): 74-86.
- Sanders, Teela, and Lucy Platt. 2017. "Is sex work still the most dangerous profession? The data suggests so." *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/is-sex-work-still-the-most-dangerous-profession-the-data-suggests-so-81854> (Retrieved October 30, 2020).
- Sarat, Austin. 2001. *When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sanches, Camille. 2015. "Law and Order: SVU tackles campus sexual assault." *Columbia Spectrum* <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/spectrum/2015/04/01/law-and-order-svu-tackles-campus-sexual-assault/> (Retrieved March 18, 2022).
- Sarbin, Theodore. 1995. "Emotional Life, Rhetoric, and Roles." *Journal of Narrative & Life History*, 5(3): 213–220. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jnlh.5.3.03emo>
- Schuller, Kyla. 2012. "Taxonomies of Feeling: The Epistemology of Sentimentalism in Late Nineteenth Century Racial and Sexual Science." *American Quarterly* 64(2): 277-299.
- Schuller, Kyla. 2018. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Seltzer, Mark. 1992. *Bodies and Machines*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Seltzer, Mark. 1997. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." *The MIT Press - OCTOBER* 80: 3-26.
- Seltzer, Mark. 2006. *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Seltzer, Mark. 2008. "Murder/Media/Modernity." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38(1): 11-41.
- Shapiro, Ariel. 2020. "Crime Does Pay: 'My Favorite Murder' Stars Join Joe Rogan As Nation's Highest-Earning Podcasters." *Forbes*  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielshapiro/2020/02/03/crime-does-pay-my-favorite-murder-stars-join-joe-rogan-as-highest-earning-podcasters/?sh=6bf457c61377> (Retrieved January 7, 2022).
- Shedd, Carla. 2015. *Unequal city: Race, Schools, and Perceptions of Injustice*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation Press.
- Simes, Jessica T. 2017. "Place and Punishment: The Spatial Context of Mass Incarceration." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 34(2):513-533.
- Simes, Jessica T., and Mary Waters. "The Politics of Immigration and Crime." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethnicity, Crime, and Immigration* by Sandra Bucerius and Michael Tonry, eds. Oxford Handbooks Online.  
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199859016.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199859016-e-023> (Retrieved December 17, 2017).
- Simon, Jonathan. 2007. *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Nikil Pal. 2014. "The Whiteness of Police." *American Quarterly* 66(4): 1091-1099.
- Slakoff, Danielle C., and Henry F. Fradella. 2019. "Media Messages Surrounding Missing Women and Girls: The 'Missing White Woman Syndrome' and Other Factors that Influence Newsworthiness." *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society* 20(3): 80-102.
- Smängs, Mattias. 2017. "The lynching of African Americans in the U.S. South: A review of sociological and historical perspectives." *Sociology Compass* 11: 1-13.

- Sommers, Zach. 2016. "Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 106(2): 275-314.
- Smith, Phillip. 2008. *Punishment and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spade, Dean. 2015. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17(2): 64-81.
- Steele, Claude. 2011. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Stillman, Sarah. 2007. "'The Missing White Girl Syndrome': Disappeared Women and Media Activism." *Gender and Development* 15(3):491-502.
- Stoneman, Ethan, and Joseph Packer. 2020. "Reel cruelty: Voyeurism and extra-judicial punishment in true-crime documentaries." *Crime Media Culture*: 1-19.
- Sullivan, Sharon. 2006. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Susan. 2017. "If You Don't Laugh, You'll Scream: True Crime, Anxiety, And Facing Danger With Humor." *Book Squad Goals: Blog* <https://www.booksquadgoals.com/blog/truecrimeanxiety> (Retrieved March 22, 2022).
- Swidler, Anne. 1986. "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273-286.
- Timmermans, S., and Tavory, I. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." *Sociological Theory* 30(3):167-186.
- Thoits, Peggy. 1989. "The Sociology of Emotions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15: 317-342.
- Thompson, Dave. 2016. "Netflix's Making a Murderer: The Omission of Critical Facts Creates Bias." *Loss Prevention Media* <https://losspreventionmedia.com/netflixs-making-a-murderer-the-omission-of-critical-facts-creates-bias/> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).

Thompson, Andy. 2020. "Five years after its release, 'Making a Murderer' remains immensely popular. But critics say it's one-sided, inaccurate and unfair to police." *Post Crescent* <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2020/12/18/making-murderer-avery-dassey-series-resonates-five-years-later/3885117001/> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).

Throop, Jason C. and Charles D. Laughlin. 2001. "Ritual, Collective Effervescence and the Categories: Toward a Neo-Durkheimian Model of the Nature of Human Consciousness, Feeling, and Understanding." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16(1): 40-63.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2001. "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Punishment & Society* 3(1): 95-134.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Waldman, Ayelet. 2020. "Should I Help Incarcerate the Man Who Tried to Sexually Assault Me?" *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/should-i-want-man-who-tried-sexually-assault-me-behind-bars/616514/> (Retrieved May 11, 2021).

Wallace, Michele Faith. 2003. "The Good Lynching and "The Birth of a Nation": Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow." *Cinema Journal* 43(1): 85-104.

Warnken, Heather, and Janet L. Lauristen. 2019. "Who Experiences Violent Victimization and Who Accesses Services?" *Center for Victim Research* [https://ncvc.dspace.org/bitstream/item/1270/CVR%20Article\\_Who%20Experiences%20Violent%20Victimization%20and%20Who%20Accesses%20Services.pdf?sequence=1](https://ncvc.dspace.org/bitstream/item/1270/CVR%20Article_Who%20Experiences%20Violent%20Victimization%20and%20Who%20Accesses%20Services.pdf?sequence=1) (Retrieved October 31, 2020).

Waters, Mary C., and Philip Kasinitz. 2015. "The War on Crime and the War on Immigrants: Racial and Legal Exclusion in the Twenty-First-Century United States." In *Fear, Anxiety, and National Identity*, edited by Nancy Foner and Patrick Simon. New York, NY: The Russell Sage Foundation.

Webb, Lindsey. 2021. "True Crime and Danger Narratives: Reflections on Stories of Violence, Race, and (In)Justice." *The Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice* 24: 131-170.

Weick, Karl E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weinberger, Michelle F., Jane Z R. Zavisca, and Jennifer M. Silva. 2017. "Consuming for an Imagined Future: Middle-Class Consumer Lifestyle and Exploratory Experiences in the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Consumer Research* 44(2): 332-360.

Weinman, Sarah. 2020. "The Future of True Crime Will Have To Be Different." *Buzzfeed News* <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sarahweinman/the-future-of-true-crime-black-lives-matter> (Retrieved March 14, 2022).

Welch, Kelly. 2007. "Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23(3): 276-288.

Whitehouse, Harvey, and Johathan A. Lanman. 2014. "The Ties That Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification." *Current Anthropology* 55(6): 674-695.

Williams, F., Rice, R.E., and Rogers, E.M. 1988. *Research Methods and the New Media*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Williams, Linda. 1991. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44(4): 2-13.

Wiltenburg, Joy. 2004. "True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism." *The American Historical Review* 109(5):1377-1404.

Wingfield, Aida Harvey, and Renée Skeete Alston. 2013. "Maintaining Hierarchies in Predominantly White Organizations: A Theory of Racial Tasks." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(2): 274-287.

Wingfield, Aida. 2010. "Are Some Emotions Marked "Whites Only"? Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces." *Social Problems* 57(2): 251-268.

Wingfield, Aida, and Renee Skeete. 2014. "Maintaining Hierarchies in Predominantly White Organizations: Theory of Racial Tasks." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(2): 274-287.

Withers, Erik T. 2017. "Whiteness and culture." *Sociology Compass* 11: 1-11.

Wong, Gloria, Annie O. Derthick, EJR David, Anne Saw, and Sumie Okazaki. 2013. "The What, the Why, and the How: A Review of Racial Microaggressions Research in Psychology." *Race and Social Problems* 6: 181-200.

Wood, Amy Louise. 2009. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Wood, Amy Louise. 2018. "The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 3-4: 757-788.

Wyss, Hilary E. 1999. "Captivity and Conversion: William Apess, Mary Jemison, and Narratives of Racial Identity." *American Indian Quarterly* 23(3-4): 63-82.

Van Dijk, Teun A. 2003. "The discourse-knowledge interface." In *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity* by Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (eds). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Krieken, Kobie, and José Sanders. 2017. "Framing narrative journalism as a new genre: A case study of the Netherlands." *Journalism* 18(10):1364-1380.

Vicary, Amanda M. and R. Chris Farley. 2010. "Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?" *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1(1):81-86.

Young, Damon. 2020. "Yeah, It's Time to Bury the Cutesy 'Karen' Nickname for Dangerous White Women." *The Root*. <https://www.theroot.com/yeah-its-time-to-bury-the-cutesy-karen-nickname-for-da-1844248172> (Retrieved August 27, 2021).

Yuhas, Alan. 2015. "Maryland judge orders Serial subject Adnan Syed's case reopened." *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/06/serial-adnan-syed-case-maryland-judge-reopens-case> (Retrieved March 23, 2022).

Zhao, Christina. 2018. "'BBQ Becky,' White Woman Who Called Cops on Black BBQ, 911 Audio Released: 'I'm Really Scared! Come Quick!'" *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/bbq-becky-white-woman-who-called-cops-black-bbq-911-audio-released-im-really-1103057> (Retrieved January 14, 2022).

Zuckerman, Marvin. 1979. "Sensation Seeking and Risk Taking," in *Emotions in Personality and Psychopathology*, by C.E. Izard, editor. Pp. 161-198. New York, NY: Plenum Press.

Zuckerman, Marvin. 2007. *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior*. New York, NY: Routledge.

VITA

