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Young Men and Dead Girls:

A Rhetorical Analysis of True Crime

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By

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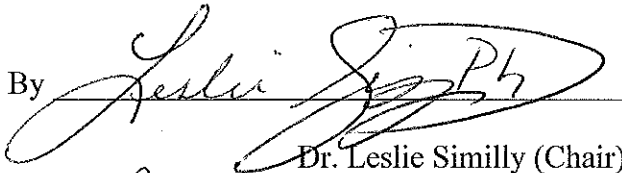
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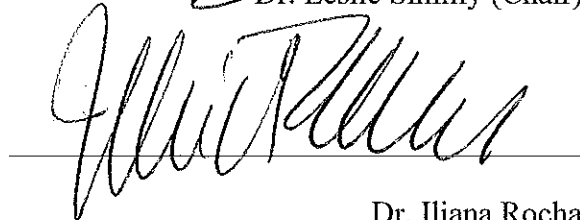
YOUNG MEN AND DEAD GIRLS: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF TRUE CRIME

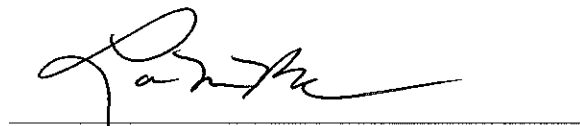
A THESIS

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Abstract: There are a startling number of shows in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that depend on the imagery of dead women as a component of storytelling. From shows that focus on serial killers to podcasts about men accused of murder, the image of the female corpse remains prominent and concerning. Though narrators, producers, and writers may be female, a patriarchal voice still dominates the discourse in most of true crime. True crime discourse has a long and complex history that transgresses national boundaries. Scholars have examined all facets of the discourse from its roots to its implications on American culture. True crime is not anything new in the world of entertainment and has a long history that contributes to its richness as a discourse. The focus of this research is to discover whether or not the presence of women in true crime denotes female control of language, or knowledge construction. This research uses both the actual media themselves, as well as responses garnered from internet research to analyze the discourse as a whole. I will discuss both true crime as a genre, which it is traditionally referred to as, and as a discourse. Michel Foucault is the primary theorist implemented in this research, with other scholars used to connect Foucault's concepts to true crime discourse. The results of this research revealed the genre depicts women's bodies as the consumable product that true crime sells frequently and in large quantities. The impending fear of death is an intense and undeniable fear that cannot be understated. While women consume true crime for different reasons, one of the most commonly discussed and substantial is based on the desire to learn to cope and protect oneself from future trauma. This research does not aim to state that these issues are new, only that they are relevant in this specific cultural moment. Those who are controlling the discourse are acting within a framework that emerged from years of patriarchal power structures framing language about gender and the phenomenon of violence. This type of media is not simply entertainment; true crime does inform the way society talks about and interacts with violence. This creates space for the discourse to eventually shift, and change the conversation about violence against women. The discourse has the potential to change, but only if the genre becomes aware of the larger social issues it reinforces. Future research could explore the potential of this growth and its impacts on the discourse.

*Young Men and Dead Girls: A Rhetorical Analysis of True Crime*

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## Methodology

This project will examine the complex relationship between true crime and systems of oppression across mediums and in various rhetorical situations. The aim of this project is to highlight the ways in which a genre that is often viewed as “low-brow” significantly shapes the dominant discourse on death, violence, and discrimination. This thesis considers various types of media under the true crime umbrella including podcasts, streaming services, television, traditional broadcast television, books, blogs, etc. I will use both the actual media themselves, as well as responses garnered from Internet research to analyze the discourse as a whole. I will discuss both true crime as a genre, which is traditionally referred to as a discourse. Michel Foucault is the primary theorist implemented in this research, with other scholars used to connect Foucault’s concepts to true crime discourse.

## Organization

First, I will discuss the ways in which true crime is a male dominated and patriarchal discourse and how this dynamic shapes true crime media. Who controls a discourse, according to Foucauldian theory, is a crucial factor in the composition and maintenance of a discourse. Next, I will use Foucault's theory of grids of specification as a tool to illuminate the racial and gender disparities that are at the core of true crime. I will mainly focus on the term victim and how the limitations around this term impact the type of true crime media available to consumers. The term victim will be explored in its connections to race, class, and gender. Finally, I will employ Foucault's concept of will to truth in order to explain how true crime relies heavily on its status as nonfiction in order to disseminate knowledge. True crime, as a genre, couched in the realm of nonfiction and news reporting, offers a complicated system of knowledge making. For all of these chapters, I will provide cultural artifacts that illustrate the renderings of true crime as it actually exists in popular culture. Writings by popular culture journalists will also be used to provide a window into the public perception and response to true crime discourse.



## Introduction

For some Netflix fans, a fun Friday night involves watching the latest documentary about a notorious serial killer or the new season of *Making a Murderer*. The rise of true crime as a genre has taken on a new form since the creation and popularization of the Internet and digital media. Before the twentieth century, print news coverage and novels detailing horrific events were the public's only access to gruesome tales of murders and disappearances. Now, in the twenty-first century, the Internet and modern television provide constant and unlimited access for people to consume and share stories or theories regarding various murder cases. This shift has moved beyond the delivery of information and garnered its own discursive community. True crime creators are making content that seems to elicit a strong response from a fan base that has quickly grown over the last decade.

True crime is typically comprised of stories that focus on all investigative and legal aspects of a crime in a style classified as nonfiction or documentary depending on the medium. Most true crime takes a forensic approach to narrative structure, beginning with background about the individuals involved or the police arriving at the crime scene. After the individuals and the criminal act is established, the show proceeds to build explanation of the crime and follow a subsequent trial or investigation. The topics of these stories can cover a variety of gruesome and horrifying topics such as murder, kidnapping, cults, etc. While true crime makes it seem that the genre is objective in its storytelling due to the reiteration of facts and scientific findings, there is a strong emotional undercurrent to true crime content.

True crime discourse relies heavily on themes of sensationalism discussed throughout this project. In the article “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” Joy Wiltenburg explains the roots of sensationalism in relation to true crime: “The word 'sensationalism' was invented in the nineteenth century as a pejorative term, to denounce works of literature or journalism that aimed to arouse strong emotional reactions in the public. Focusing on the senses as the key site of stimulation, the word emphasizes bodily and nonrational reactions” (1378). I will not be using sensationalism as a pejorative term in this research, but rather only as a method of arousing emotional response in the reader. Emotions and emotional language are powerful tools to communicate values and tell stories, and I will delineate the ways in which emotions play into true crime discourse within this project. True crime should not be discarded or excluded from rhetorical analysis because it communicates meaning to consumers via emotion; therefore, I argue this highly emotional language and imagery is part of what draws people to consume true crime media.

True crime content is different from crime dramas such as *Law and Order: SVU* and *Criminal Minds*. While these shows share similarities with true crime, their key differences are that they are fictional, and the audience is aware of this and suspends disbelief as part of their consumption. This research will critique true crime’s designation as nonfiction and how that designation impacts consumers. Crime dramas typically focus on a set cast of characters and how that set cast responds to crimes they are tasked with solving. With true crime, each story features real people with no underlying human drama other than the crime in question. Though crime dramas are worthy of analysis and interrogation for the values and beliefs they reinforce about violence and the criminal

justice system; however, for the purpose of this work, crime dramas are not treated as part of true crime discourse.

True crime's popularity dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the root of the type of true crime we see today started with Truman Capote's book, *In Cold Blood*. The book details a horrific murder and subsequent investigation that occurred in Holcomb, Kansas in 1959. Many scholars view this book as a pivotal moment for American true crime. While Capote's novel has become a staple of American nonfiction, much of true crime is still viewed as low-brow entertainment. Many of the other true crime novels that came after *In Cold Blood*, while popular, have not reach the canonicity that Capote's novel has. The works of Anne Rule and Vincent Bugliosi have garnered much attention and praise from the public without critical approval. These works are written off for the same reasons that Wiltenburg explains—they rely on sensational and heightened imagery of violence and death (1379). Works that are popular, like those of Rule and Bugliosi, are still considered key cultural artifacts when analyzing true crime as a discourse community. True crime is composed of texts that are mostly considered low-brow, but that does not discredit them from rhetorical analysis.

While books have been a long-standing part of true crime's past, they are still relevant. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara was a highly anticipated and popular release of 2017. It was the culmination of years of research, published postmortem, surrounding the pursuit of the illusive Golden State Killer. While books are still a key component in true crime as a genre, digital media has become the epicenter of the discourse over the past twenty years. Seven of the top twenty podcasts of 2018 were categorized in the true crime genre, with *Serial* being the second most popular podcast of

the year (“Top 20 Podcasts of 2018”). Clearly, true crime is a key part of American culture; and these books, shows, and podcasts are some of the most influential pieces of entertainment that discuss death and violence.

While this content is popular, not everyone agrees about the impacts of this popularity. A recent article from *The Guardian*, published in October of 2018, outlines the complicated implications of an obsession with violent content. Author Arwa Mahdawi refers to the saturation of true crime media as “the gentrification of gore” (“As Making a Murderer Returns”). She goes on to pose a hard-hitting question, which in many ways summarizes the entire ethical quandary associated with the true crime phenomenon. She poses the question, “Should it all be used, though? These aren’t just stories – they are real people’s lives. No matter how tastefully it is done, is it not unethical to transform personal tragedies into public entertainment?” (“As Making a Murderer Returns”). Amidst the popularity of true crime, there is trepidation about the gruesome content the widespread fan base continues to promote. Most of this resistance comes from feminists who take to forums on the Internet and journalists who write opinion pieces for major online news outlets. Despite this trepidation, more and more stories are optioned for mini-series and movies every year. Even with legitimate criticisms, true crime continues to grow and captivate consumers in the United States.

All of these various types of true crime media have one cohesive theme in common: they discuss the relationship between violence and bodies. True crime discusses the violence done to women’s bodies, the violence committed by men, and how communities respond to these unsettling acts. This research aims to analyze true crime’s treatment of these topics and the larger societal implications for women.

## Survey of Scholarship

True crime discourse has a long and complex history that transgresses national boundaries. Scholars have examined all facets of the discourse from its roots to its implications on American culture. True crime is not anything new in the world of entertainment and has a long history that contributes to its richness as a discourse. Pamela Burger chronicles the historical roots of true crime in her article, “The Bloody History of the True Crime Genre.” She argues that true crime discourse has shifted and changed since its genesis (“The Bloody History”). Burger explains, true crime became prevalent in 16<sup>th</sup> century England where topical leaflets about horrific murders were sold to the public and members of the upper class read crime reports for entertainment.

Burger’s work helps to illustrate that 21<sup>st</sup> century true crime’s discussion of violence is not unfounded. The sexualization of women did not just appear suddenly and become part of the discourse. News coverage in the 16<sup>th</sup> century covered much of what is discussed in modern true crime. The sensational aspects of leaflets during this time enticed audiences to consume true crime narratives:

The types of crimes depicted in these publications will sound familiar to contemporary true crime enthusiasts: domestic or sex-related murders, women’s criminal activities, and particularly bloody assaults. As an added appeal, these publications contained woodcuts illustrating the more unsavory acts, i.e., dismemberment, torture, and, of course, witchcraft. (“The Bloody History”)

The distribution format of true crime narratives has shifted with time, but there has been little change to genre’s content. Based on the aforementioned quote from Burger, true crime has always relied on vivid and graphic imagery to garner profit. Within the 16<sup>th</sup>

century, discourse centered upon sensationalized news, for those who could read it. From that surface of emergence came the accessible true crime of today. The original form of sensationalized media allowed for the birth of the modern true crime discourse. This horrific trend continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century where books focused on crime and criminality became popular. The 19<sup>th</sup> century turned a heavy focus to serialized reporting on crime, particularly taking interest with Lizzie Borden's trial ("The Bloody History"). This serialized format has carried forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with great success. In this project, true crime will be explored with the sensational historical roots that Burger explains as the basis of the discourse. Burger's work provides a foundation to understand the social contexts from which true crime arose. An obsession with death, is one of the key components of true crime that has carried over into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a long and established history of consumers engaging with crime and death in various mediums.

Burger is not the only scholar who establishes an important groundwork for the emergence of the current true crime discourse. In Rebecca Lee Frost's work she discusses the roots of true crime narratives and places importance on the oral tradition of true crime, as opposed to Burger's work that primarily focuses on printed materials. Frost connects true crime to the history of public speeches in the United States by stating, "further investigation showed that, while execution sermons and trial reports have indeed been the subject of academic study, scholars tend to focus on one form and confine their research to the timeline in which that form was printed" (7). She frames the history of the tradition as a complex interaction between written texts and oral traditions throughout American history, while Burger focuses mostly on the British roots of true crime ("Bloody History of True Crime"). Frost explains the nuance of American true crime by

primarily arguing that true crime has persisted in America because it is a genre through which Americans express fear:

Despite the fairly recent entrance of the figure of the serial killer into crime narratives, representation of killers and victims relies on centuries of prior narratives that strive to perform the restoration ritual made necessary by criminal actions. A single crime committed between people who know each other is threat enough; multiple crimes between strangers adds to the uncertainty. As the threats change, the crime narrative adapts in order to continue to function as a restoration ritual and respond to the evolving fears and uncertainties within American society. (Frost 13)

The ritualistic aspect of true crime is something that most scholars do not address, and as a result true crime is primarily viewed in terms of entertainment. Frost differentiates herself in viewing true crime as a social and communal tradition.

Media has immense power in shaping a culture's perception and response to images of violence. This is one of the main facets of true crime discourse in which it is important to incorporate scholarship that also accounts for the impacts of news media. True crime blurs the lines between entertainment and news sources. In his article "Media Constructions of Crime," Vincent Sacco discusses the issues that arise from this history of true crime media being used as entertainment and addresses the fact that the lines between information and entertainment have become blurred and further complicates the discussion of violent crime. Sacco elaborates on how true crime brings private and public matters into conflict by saying,

While the distinction between private troubles and public issues is an important one, these dimensions are not independent. Citizens' personal troubles with crime provide the building blocks out of which public issues are constructed. On the other hand, the warnings of danger implicit in public pronouncements about the seriousness and pervasiveness of crime problems may be a source of private trouble if they exacerbate the fear of crime among those who have routine exposure to such pronouncements. (Sacco 142)

The article works to explain the ways in which perceptions of threat and violence are formed and reformed. This project diverges slightly from this model, as I will be examining the maintenance and reinforcement of current true crime discourse rather than its formation.

Sacco's work helps to point out that true crime is informed by broadcast news, and the two genres share several key characteristics. For fans of the true crime genre, it is a type of media that is consumed regularly. Similar to the constant consumption of the news, fans of true crime look to the genre as a source of information regarding violent crime. True crime also enacts the same concerns Sacco discusses; the private becomes public and vice versa. True crime exploits the private in order to create fear that what occurred in one individual's life is a possibility for anyone. He goes onto say,

As news workers observe and influence each other, and as the line between news and entertainment becomes more confused, public discussion of crime problems reflects and reinforces this consensus, and popular views of these problems begin to assume a taken-for-granted character. Inevitably, but regrettably, the emergence of such consensus



relegates to the margins the search for alternative ways of thinking about crime and its solution. (154)

Sacco describes the way information can become obscured by news reporting and entertainment media, and these blurry borders are what create the complicated genre of true crime. This aspect of Sacco's work heavily reflects portions of this project that are concerned with the will to truth in true crime discourse.

Digital media, as Sacco makes clear, is a powerful and influential force. The preexisting systems of publication such as newspapers and books created the initial language structure that validated the discourse. However, as the discourse has moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new institutional systems have come forward to reinforce the "truth" of the discourse. In his article "How True Crime Went From Guilty Pleasure to High Culture," Jake Flanagan explains the large scale systems that have formed as part of the true crime discourse:

The ascent of the ID channel mirrors the deep cultural appetite for true-crime media. The genre has been wildly popular for decades, starting with pulp fiction and continuing through America's Most Wanted and beyond. Beginning in the last few years, however, what was once largely the realm of low-brow entertainment has entered high culture—becoming precisely the kind of cerebral content, marketed to intellectual elites, that the Discovery-Times partnership sought to pin down. ("True Crime Went From Guilty Pleasure")

This discourse does not exist in random pockets or niche spaces. There are entire networks dedicated to telling these stories. The validity that comes with the creation of something as large as a separate TV channel acts to establish the power of these

narratives. Though these authors all have different standpoints of the historical roots and current incarnations of true crime, the common thread is that the genre has a complicated and fraught history.

In addition to the complicated past of true crime, it has immense sway in shaping society's perception of crime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his work, scholar Michael Buozi uses Michel Foucault to examine the ways in which true crime is becoming a discourse that challenges institutional knowledge. His article "Giving Voice to the Accused: *Serial* and the Critical Potential of True Crime" focuses on the interaction between journalism, true crime, and the criminal justice system,

The contradictory truths revealed by criminal biography—the truths of the “deviants” or Foucault’s “delinquents”—can be understood as a subjugated knowledge that has been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization.’ The routines of institutional truth in most crime narratives serve to obscure this knowledge, but Foucault argues that critical acts work to reveal such subjugated knowledges. Contemporary true crime, like *Serial*, performs this critical function by refusing to privilege institutional sources over the accused in the representation of the reality of a crime, thereby recovering the accused as a source of knowledge production. (Buoiz 255)

This article privileges the importance of the accused over other sources of information or knowledge. While Buoiz and I use the same theorist to examine true crime, we take very different positions on the subject. Buozi views true crime, through an epistemological framework, as subversive to mainstream understandings of the justice system and the authority of institutional knowledge. Through the media of podcast, Buozi believes that

the accused are allowed to challenge the establishment of criminal justice in an attempt to create new knowledge about a crime. While I do agree that there is always a tension between criminal justice and true crime narratives, I view the interaction between these two types of knowledge differently. Buzoi argues true crime can subvert institutional knowledge, while I argue, in many ways, it does not subvert but rather distorts and misuses institutional knowledge to uphold larger societal power structures. As Alice Bolin mentions, often crime narratives fall into the trap of giving the most credit to an accused male, leaving the victims voiceless (Bolin 55). Buzoi's argument presented in the article does account for various intersections of identity that complicate the ability to challenge or form knowledge. The major issue that Buzoi's argument misses is the problems that accompany the form of storytelling he sees as the answer. In a world where killers are given celebrity status, the ultimate privileging of the accused voice is detrimental to a justice system and culture that often has a complicated relationship with valuing victims.

In addition to the voices included in true crime, the center of most narratives is a deceased person and, by extent, a corpse. While some scholars particularly focus on the depiction of acts of crime, Jacque Lynn Foltyn's research emphasizes the body as a central element of any media that depicts crime. She proposes an answer to why media is so obsessed with death at all, but particularly the image of the corpse that appears in a large portion of true crime media. She refers to this obsession as akin to a popular culture phenomenon by saying, "Whether flesh, fantasy, or some hybridized version of the two, this is the corpse's cultural moment" (Foltyn 155). Though her work was published over a decade ago, Foltyn's words speak to consistent aspects of true crime as a genre. Citing

the deaths of celebrities, crime dramas, and other various forms of entertainment, Foltyn comes to the conclusion that the taboo nature of death is what creates part of the drive for media content which highlights corpses such as in true crime (160). She explains that in post WWII, sex inevitably became less taboo as morals and value systems shifted and changed in the United States; as a result, death filled in for America's ultimate taboo (158). Foltyn's work, published in the late 2000s, does not include an assessment of the current renaissance of true crime content, but still provides a substantive look at what the dead body means in the terms of a crime drama. The selling of sexualized dead bodies comes down to the entire purpose of infotainment, the overarching genre that houses true crime. Foltyn's works primarily look at the instance of the corpse in media rather than true crime as a substantive discourse. While she does propose the cultural implications of the celebrity corpse, she does not cover the rhetorical implication of the treatment of corpses on average people, particularly marginalized groups. There is great value in understanding the fantasy that the dead celebrity invokes in crime fans, and often, there is an element of fame and glamour presented in true crime that focuses on everyday people.

Foltyn's work discusses the crime drama and true crime as one in the same. The crime drama and true crime, while sharing similar elements, are, I argue, not part of the same discourse. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which they mirror and take from one another, but they both stand with their individual rules and conventions. One place the two genre's overlap, is the importance of violence to both categories of narrative. Alice Bolin discusses in her book *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* the gender inequities that are present in media that depict or use women's deaths as a plot device (24). Bolin details her concept of the "Dead Girl Show"

and its dependence on the normative nature of discourse on violence (14). Bolin's book works to document the implicit meaning of cultural texts that depict violence against women. Bolin implements the term "Dead Girl" to refer to the young women that are often killed in popular entertainment narratives (2). The key trait, as Bolin describes it, of a "Dead Girl Show" is, "As, such, the Dead Girl is not a 'Character' in the show, but rather, the memory of her is" (14). For Bolin, deceased young women are not the subject matter of these shows, but instead they act as backdrop to the drama of male desire and gaze. The Dead Girl acts as the starting point for a plot that revolves around male characters. The growth of men haunted by, or trying to solve, the dead girl's murder become more important than the dead girl herself. Bolin cites crime dramas such as *Twin Peaks* and the first season of *True Detective* that privilege the growth of their male characters over justice for the female characters. Bolin explains how the Dead Girl phenomenon is not limited to crime dramas but also appears in true crime media. Crime drama television treats women poorly in order to bolster the narratives of men, and, by extension, true crime also participates in this problematic power structure. Bolin says, in reference to the bestselling thriller *Gone Girl*, "Flynn cracks open the American mainstream and lets Nick say one of our unsayable beliefs: that it is scarier for a man to be accused than killed" (49). Bolin reaches into the heart of what connects crime dramas and true crime. Issues of gender and male privilege are evident in both genres, and, as a result, death is used as a way to prioritize men over women. Bolin's perception of male centered discourses involving crime is central to this project. While Bolin does not take a directly theoretical approach to her argument, her concepts blend well with a rhetorical lens to further examine the true crime phenomenon.

It is crucial to consider the imagery of true crime in connection with the motivations of consumers. In their landmark study, “Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?” Amanda Vicary and Chris Fraley explore the question of why women are drawn to a genre that depicts brutal violence against women. This study anchors itself by placing *In Cold Blood* as one of the discourse sites that revealed a particularly gendered interest in true crime content. More women than Vicary and Fraley were fascinated by *In Cold Blood* and, by extension, other works of true crime. The researchers address the assumption that men would inherently be more drawn to works of true crime in the following quotation:

Who finds these books appealing? It might be reasonable to assume that men would be more likely than women to find such gory topics interesting. After all, a great deal of research has demonstrated that men are more violent and aggressive than women (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wilson & Daly, 1985). In addition, men commit the vast majority of violent crimes, accounting for 79% of aggravated assaults and 90% of murders in 2007 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2007). (81)

Vicary and Fraley’s study focuses only on the relationship between women and the true crime book. However, their results are applicable to other popular true crime mediums such as podcasts, films, television shows, etc. The researchers frame books as forms of entertainment that give women direct access to stories of violence:

Consider the following passage from *The Stranger Beside Me* concerning the only victim to successfully escape from serial killer Ted Bundy: She reached for the door handle on her side and started to jump out, but the man was too quick for

her. In an instant, he had clapped a handcuff on her right wrist.... She fell backward out of the car.... Now he had a crowbar of some kind in his hand, and he threw her up against the car.... She kicked at his genitals, and broke free. (Rule, 1980, p. 116) As previously stated, people's fascination with murder may stem from a desire to avoid becoming the victim of a deadly crime (Buss, 2005). As true crime books sometimes contain successful defense tactics and escape tricks used by surviving victims, these books can offer insight into how one can achieve this goal. (83)

The way that books are used in the study can be replaced with other kinds of media. It is important to note that Vicary and Fraley's work does not directly address these other types of media, but it is reasonable to extrapolate that the conclusion could be applied across true crime. This study helps to catalogue the reasons and possible thought process as to why so many women engage in the consumption of a discourse that ultimately focuses on harm done to female bodies. The main experiment involved participants choosing between different books that included violent content. The researchers provided two book synopses to participants and asked them to pick the book they would be most likely to pick up in a bookstore, if they were told they would receive the book for free. The participants in the first group were offered a book about two women who were murdered in Hawaii or a book about two women who fought in the Gulf War. The second participant group was given the book about the women in Hawaii and the second option was a book about gang related crime in Los Angeles. The researchers wanted to clarify that the point of the study was not to prove that women prefer true crime over other genres, but instead to see if women prefer true crime over other violent content, "It is

important to note that we are not implying that all women necessarily prefer true crime books more than books of other genres but rather that, when considering stories with violent content, women are drawn to true crime stories more so than are men” (Vicary and Fraley 83). The results of the study revealed that women were more likely to choose the true crime book over a historical fiction piece with violent content (84). This first set of research was intended to establish if there was a gender difference in entertainment preferences. Vicary and Fraley then performed several studies to answer the question of why women are drawn to the true crime genre. The questions that the researchers addressed in their work were, if women enjoy this content because they learn defense tactics, because the victims are typically women, or because true crime has a heavy focus on psychological content. The study does not draw a firm conclusion as to why women are drawn to this type of content; however, the last lines of the study’s conclusion reveal that the researchers find this trend helpful for women: “Fortunately, as women continue to read these stories, they may very well be learning important skills that will prevent them from one day becoming the victim of a killer and, in turn, the unwilling star of their own true crime book” (86). The study does have limitations, the research primarily focuses on books and does not address newer media such as Netflix shows and podcasts. This research project will challenge Vicary and Fraley’s sentiment that women benefit from the consumption of these narratives. There is more to the relationship between women and the genre than the study implies.

Researchers Alexis Durham, H. Preston Elrod, and Patrick Kinkade also conducted research that provides insight into the impacts of true crime on consumers. These researchers acknowledge the prevalence of the genre in informing Americans on



crime and explored the potential impacts of that influence. They state, “it appears that the true crime genre has become an important source of information about crime for substantial numbers of American readers” (146). Their research aimed to determine if true crime reflected the actual distributions and proportions of actual crime rates in the United States. They compared a random selection of books and matched data pulled from those books to FBI statistics on crime (146). The study found that true crime focused on murder at a much higher rate than was actually occurring in the United States. The study, published in 1995, focused on only books, and at the time of the research, Netflix and podcasts were not yet forms of media. This might account for some of the realities that are now different in the genre. The researchers found that men were more often the victims in true crime narratives; however, women were still portrayed as victims more often than they are actually victims of violent crime in the United States. This study does not take into account the way true crime has evolved into a visual and oratory form of storytelling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade concluded that true crime is not an effective vessel through which Americans can gain knowledge about violent crime, “Readers cannot obtain an adequate understanding of homicide by reading true crime accounts of murder cases” (Durham et al. 150). This work helps bring into the question of ethos that true crime relies on to tell their stories. True crime relies on adjacent discourses of the documentaries and journalism to bolsters its claims of authenticity. While over 20 years old, there is still much to glean from this study when looking at the power relations between consumers and true crime content.

Laura Browder also examines the dynamics between consumer and genre in her work, “Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader.” Browder interviewed a

group of predominately white women on their perceptions of and motivations of consuming true crime media (931). Browder comes to the conclusion, in part, that women consume true crime because, “True crime allows women to gaze into the abyss—both of the terror suffered by crime victims and of their own traumatic memories—and to survive” (932). There is a sense of healing that Browder emphasizes in the interviews she conducted with a group of women who all identified as true crime fans. She identifies this commonality from the interview and then connects these ideas to the connections of the genre at large (935). For her, the discourse is a place of healing and genuine discussion for women who have faced trauma and wish to process their pain (937).

Browder is not in agreement with some of the other true crime scholars mentioned in this research. Though she does not cite her, she contradicts several of Foltyn’s key points about the connection between death, sex, and true crime. Browder, again citing interviews with her subject group explains the connection that she sees between sex and true crime:

Indeed, to those who do not love the genre, true crime can easily appear to be nothing more than a form of pornography—a repetition of violence, and of sexualized violence, that heightens the senses. Unsurprisingly, given the social taboos against women consuming pornography, none of the women I spoke with talked about being sexually aroused by the books, though many talked about being gripped by the violence. (933)

Browder does acknowledge that there are pornographic and sexual themes and images in true crime, but she views this imagery as secondary to other topics, such as morality (934). She diverges from Foltyn’s stance that these images depicted underlying truths

about America's relationship with death. Foltyn's argument relies heavily on the connection between the sexual and the morbid, and what this precarious connection says about the value of bodies in western culture. Browder frames true crime, and the fan base around it, as a space for intellectual discussion, "True crime books are a popular arena for metaphysical discussions about the nature of evil, the meaning of retribution, and the impossibility of knowing another" (934). She contends that true crime offers a forum in which women can discuss the nature of violent crime in a meaningful way, and combined with her earlier aforementioned comments, she proposes that this discussion helps women process and contend with trauma. For Browder, the true crime discourse acts as a site of healing and acceptance for many women. It is key to note that Browder's group was mostly white and so this assumption cannot be derived as universal for all women. However, the group Browder interviewed is indicative of the demographics of much true crime fan culture which is composed mostly of white women. Browder ends her article by stating that true crime, with all of its problems accounted for, still acts as a kind of "self-help literature" (949). It is debatable, when using a rhetorical lens if raising a genre that relies on images of brutalized bodies to the status of self-help literature is a fair assessment. To categorize, as Browder does, true crime as part self-help, part romance novel, and part philosophically conscious text is to deny the roots and basis of the genre, and to a larger scale to ignore the dominance of the male voice in works of true crime (938).

My research aims to look at the discourse from a more critical perspective as opposed to the approach taken in Browder's work. Browder uses the experiences of the women in her article to validate and defend some of the actions of the genre. Browder's

argument is not concerned with pushing the norms of the discourse and calling into question the ways in which these norms might be harmful. Instead, it promotes the noncritical consumption of true crime, by white women, for entertainment. The thoughts and choices of the women Browder interview are part of the larger rhetorical situation that my research aims to situate in the larger discourse on violence in American culture. Many of the themes that Browder identifies in true crime are not fully problematized for their rhetorical importance and power in the discourse. While Browder's work gives a window into the themes that are appealing about the genre, she does not fully tackle the way these aspects reinforce harmful power structures.

True crime is a burgeoning genre that has a rich field of scholarship surrounding it. This project works to build upon and challenge the work of these scholars in order to create a nuanced understanding of the discourse. I aim to illustrate the ways in which true crime is based in patriarchal norms that shape the way consumers understand and interpret violence against women.

## Chapter 1

There are a startling number of shows in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that depend on the imagery of dead women as a component of storytelling. From shows that focus on serial killers to podcasts about men accused of murder, the image of the female corpse remains prominent and concerning. Though narrators, producers, and writers may be female, a patriarchal voice still dominates the discourse in most of true crime. The presence of women in a project or a discourse does not denote female control of language, or knowledge construction. It is important to note, as with all things, that there are exceptions to this statement. There are podcasts and books that move outside of these parameters. However, I would still like to put forth the idea that the content that transgresses these boundaries is not part of the true crime discourse, but rather this type of content is an outlier and overlaps with more progressive and justice-focused communities.

In order to effectively address this issue, it is crucial to define true crime as a genre in order to discuss who is shaping it, as well as the genre's exact parameters. Criminal justice researchers Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade describe true crime as a genre that "presents accounts of actual crime cases, often in narrative form. The appeal of the genre is that it purports to be about the real world, not merely the fictional world of the novel" (144 Durham et. al). This definition acknowledges that the genre is a branch of nonfiction, and can take on multiple modes of delivery. True crime, for the purposes of the present discussion, is a genre that focuses on violence and crimes committed against real people, not fictionalized accounts of crimes, and can take the shape of any form of media (i.e. blogs, podcasts, television, film, etc.). To limit the scope of true crime to

books or film is to ignore the current varied incarnations of the genre and the sites upon which the discourse occurs. Though this genre is based on real events, there is still a speculative and fictional element to much of the content produced by the genre. Many crimes that are discussed are controversial or disputed which leaves room for creators of true crime media to embellish, alter, or emphasize certain facts or interpretations over others. Particularly, dramatic reenactments are a site of potential misinformation. No one is able to perfectly recreate what happened at a crime scene, even with detailed records and statements. This creates a dichotomy, as the genre is both composed of factual information and artistic liberty in how that information is delivered. The way that the discourse attempts to frame itself suggests that these artistic liberties do not exist. The name “true crime,” as well as the common definitions, suggests that the genre is composed of truth.

Because men are the overwhelming force dominating the writing and producing of true crime media, it is crucial to identify who is and who is not shaping the discourse. When discussing true crime, it is important to note who is in control of the narratives that compose the genre and who reinforces the discourse on women as victims of violence. Foucault outlines the way discourse is shaped by those in power, those who are in power are those that decide the discursive framework of society,

First question: who is speaking? Who among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who—alone—have the right, sanctioned

by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse? (Foucault 1442)

Whoever is afforded the power to speak molds language, and by extension shapes discourse. Men the majority in most aspects of media production across mediums and in true crime discourse. Popular shows often, both figuratively and literally, feature a male voice that conveys the plot of each episode. A marked lack of women work within the true crime genre; consequently, the stories produced show this gender gap in who creates the content. This is not to say there are no female producers, writers, or editors involved in the creation of true crime content, more so that their presence does not impact the structure and functioning of the discourse. The discourse continuously presents audiences with hypersexualized discussions of women's bodies, both before and after death. This is reflected, as mentioned earlier, through the prolonged and graphic visuals of women's corpses. These male dominated narratives often fall into patterns that reflect patriarchal rhetoric already present in American culture. The focus is primarily on aspects of the crimes, such as the woman's relationships, with whom she was romantically involved, if she had been sexually promiscuous, and if she at any point could have brought her demise on herself. These trends in the narratives show a lack of female influence in the discourse at a foundational level and affirm who shapes the way that death is talked about. For example, sex workers are often disregarded both in the criminal justice system and in true crime content. In an analysis of how sex workers are treated in American media, Lee and Reid found that sex workers are not treated like other victims. They state, "Their lives are not valued like the lives of missing middle-class white women like Natalee Holloway and Elizabeth Smart, both of whom became focal points for police

manhunts and TV shows about their tragic disappearances” (Lee and Reid 49). The treatment of sex workers shows a reinforcement of patriarchal norms within the discourse as a whole. The deaths of sex workers are not as highly valued as the deaths of other women, and this works to further objectify and strip agency from victims of brutal violence. There is prejudicial assumption, that reason violence befalls sex workers is because they choose to live a “high risk” lifestyle (Lee and Reid 50). Because of this assumption, this demographic of women are not given the type of public support and mourning that white middle class women receive habitually. While this logic is unfair, it is pervasive and shapes the way true crime presents, or rather ignores, violence against sex workers.

The language used to degrade and silence sex workers is a widespread issue, and subsequently impacts all women. With the lack of women able to participate in the discourse, the issue of the over sexualization of women permeates throughout true crime. The cultural result of this absence is an emphasis on the value of the body and traditional feminine aspects of American womanhood. Because the discourse has, in the past, discussed women in a violent manner, the discourse continues to reinforce this cycle. The repeated use of images of women who have been brutalized is repeated so often that it works in the Foucauldian sense of systems of truth:

There is nothing surprising about that, since, as psychoanalysis has shown, discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire—it is also the object of desire; and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized. (1461)



Foucault discusses history as something removed from the truth. History, as it is understood, is different across discourses because there is no actual telling of the truth of what occurred in the past. What occurred is unknowable and, therefore, subject to interpretation. Acts of violence operate in a similar way in true crime discourse. The events that are discussed constitute their own sort of history. Despite the name of the genre, none of the retellings of crimes can ever completely be true. The truth is unknowable, and this discrepancy is what allows for the grotesque misrepresentation of violence involving women. There can never be an exact retelling of what occurred with a particular murder or kidnapping, but the genre has situated itself to make audiences believe that these descriptions are indeed truthful and do not contain the discrepancy that is inherent in history and knowledge.

Inaccurate representations of female murder are not an abstract concept, rather these errors have manifestations in some of culture's most popular works. In *The Stranger Beside Me*, a text that will be referenced at several points in this research, Rule's problematic depictions of women go beyond simple labels, but, instead, conform to the discourse's treatment of the dead female body. Rule gives graphic depictions of the state of Lisa Levy's body after Ted Bundy broke into her sorority house and killed her. The narrative about Levy's death takes a specific focus on the horrible trauma done to her. Rule graphically describes bite marks, ruptured organs, and signs of sexual assault that Bundy inflicted on Levy (341). Rule goes as far at one point to describe the Clairol hair mist bottle that was used as a weapon and is covered in Levy's blood. In this moment the young woman, who Bundy violently attacked, is not a woman, but instead a body. These details do no work to bring her justice or to honor her memory. Rule describes

Levy's body in terms of the trauma that Bundy cruelly inflicted on her. Rule repeats this pattern throughout her novel, giving horrific details of the type of violence Bundy committed. True crime discourse favors gratuitous depictions of dead female bodies; the presence of a dead female body is a core tenet of the discourse's rhetoric on crime.

Victims, in Rule's novel and true crime generally, are reduced to sites of violence.

Rule goes on to reinforce another key issue of the male controlled discourse with her description of Bundy's one underage victim. Rule describes young Kimberly Leach's body after Florida police found her. Rule specifically compares her to Levy and the other victims of the Chi Omega sorority house murder, "Unlike the girls in Tallahassee, Kim had suffered no skull fractures, apparently no bludgeon blows at all" (395). Leach is not her own person, but instead, this discourse reduces her to one of Bundy's many victims and a description of her body. Rule also includes, in disturbing detail, the state of Leach's vaginal tissue after her trauma. (395). Rule's descriptions of Leach's body are not unique to *The Stranger Beside Me*, rather, similar depictions are central to the core of true crime discourse.

There is content that aims to create feminist responses to the discourse, some content trying to usurp the issues of the framework that it works within. However, these responses are still fraught with the problems within the discourse. The Netflix original series, *The Keepers* follows the murder of Sister Cathy Cesnick and the cover up of systems of sexual abuse within the Maryland Catholic Church in the late 1960s (Thompson). The intent of the show, explained in the first episode, is to bring justice to a murder that Catholic officials covered up and ignored for decades. The producer of the show explains that the women involved in the creation of the docuseries were satisfied

with the product, when he says, “All of the women I’ve worked with, all of the survivors that I became so close with, over the last three years, are proud of the product. They feel it is finally giving them a voice. Those are the people who matter the most. If there are other people being held to a flame in some way because of their failures, that’s what accountability is” (Thompson). While this show focuses on justice for women, it still conforms to the problematic mores of the discourse. The producer of the show, Ryan White, is male and, in some ways, continues to reinforce the masculine language structure of the discourse. While the women featured in this show are able to tell their own stories of the abuse they faced at the hands of the Catholic Church, there are still elements that focus on the female body. There are stylized reenactments of the young women walking into the offices of Catholic officials who ultimately abused them (“The Keepers”). While no abuse is shown, these images still fall into a grey area of the problematic depictions of the murdered female body. *The Keepers* could possibly be a starting point for a shift in the discourse, but it ultimately cannot escape the language and power structures that are already established within the genre. Foucault notes that even when something occurs that seems to work outside of the discourse, it informs the discourse and then expands it (1440). Hopefully, *The Keepers* signifies a shift toward giving women a voice in true crime narratives. However, it is key to understand that *The Keepers* is not the story of justice that the producer makes it out to be. True crime, at its core, sells women’s stories of pain and trauma. To feature women’s voices does not inherently center them or give them agency in a true crime narrative. Women’s voices only recount the horrible actions and abuses of men, who inevitably exist as the key shapers of the discussions of death in this specific portion of American culture.

The ultimate symptom of a male dominated discourse is that it does not honor the intrinsic value of a woman's life. From a pop feminist perspective, many writers for major news publications have much to say on the harms of true crime. The female body is a particular cite of discussion, as it is most commonly the focus of true crime narratives. Typically, a victimized woman is not the center of her own story, but rather her corpse. In a *Guardian* article by Rebecca Nicholson, she outlines the unease that true crime's treatment of the female body creates in the reader. For Nicholson there is a mix of enticement and apprehension with true crime discourse.

Yet in our fascination with serial killers, in this new wave of crime as entertainment, we remember murders and murderers, but rarely count the victims as anything other than bodies. I loved *Serial*, but such was its success that it was parodied on *Saturday Night Live*, and it felt odd to laugh along at the podcast's quirks, while wondering how it must have felt for Hae Min Lee's family to have their daughter's murder become part of a joke. I enjoyed the bombastic tension of *Making a Murderer*, but, again, felt uncomfortable that the rape and murder of a young woman became a footnote in someone else's drama...But our increasingly ravenous obsession with true crime does make me wonder if it's not just the camera that lingers on those bodies for a little too long.

The examples of narratives that favor the male experience are extensive, but all fall into similar patterns. They regard the dead female body as inciting action for a story that pays little regard to the woman who was brutalized. Nicholson references the highly popular show *Making a Murderer*, which repeatedly poses the question "Who killed Teresa?" In reality this show is less concerned with who killed Teresa but instead the real question of

Steven Avery's guilt. While these questions might seem to be one in the same, there is a distinct difference in who is objectified in each of the narratives. There is the potential that season two of the series works to re-center Teresa as a subject, rather than an object in the narrative of her own death. However, the first episode of season two features long scenes where the defense attorney and a blood spatter expert manipulate and contort the mannequin in order to recreate the events that potentially occurred to Halbach's body ("Making a Murderer"). While the intent of these acts is to bring justice to her case, the rhetorical implications are different than the intended effect. As the audience watches the actions done to the mannequin, there is a divorced understanding that at one point that was a woman's body. An object stands in for Halbach's body, further objectifying her in the narrative of Avery's innocence. Whether or not the second part of the docuseries is successful in giving justice to Teresa's message, the second season is an afterthought to the original narrative. As Foucault advises us, it is critical to be aware of who is speaking and who is shaping the narrative (1142). Halbach, along with all the other female victims in true crime, are not allowed to speak for themselves. Though they are present in the narratives, they are not part of the hegemonic group in charge of the discourse. In the end, these stories share a core characteristic: they are the accounts of men's lives with a dead woman acting as background to the courtroom drama that ensues. Ultimately, the obscuring of narrative and truth allows for a patriarchal discussion of violence and women's bodies to flourish.

## Chapter 2

One of the key steps in discourse formation is determining the grids of specification. Foucault defines this process as, “the systems according to which the different ‘kinds of madness’ are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived as objects” (1437). In short, grids of specification act to define a discourse itself as well as aspects of a discourse that comprise the discourse itself. In order for something to be talked about, it must be labeled and defined. And one of the powerful ways to define something is to separate it from other things that seem adjacent or similar to the object being spoken about. In order for a discourse to exist, it has to define the specific objects that comprise it. Foucault explains how these grids of specification worked for mental illness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

These grids of differentiation were: the soul, as a group of hierarchized, related, and more or less interpenetrable faculties; the body, as a three-dimensional volume of organs linked together by networks of dependence and communication; the life and history of individuals, as a linear succession of phases, a tangle of traces, a group of potential reactivations, cyclical repetitions; the interplays of neuropsychological correlations as systems of reciprocal projections, and as a field of circular causality. (1437)

While true crime distinguishes itself from other forms of media, as discussed in previous chapters, it also limits what stories it tells. The genre that is the most similar to true crime is the crime drama. Crime dramas include shows such as the *CSI* and *Law and Order* franchises. Crime dramas concern themselves with shocking and violent crimes and take consumers through the process of solving the case. These shows take inspiration from

real stories of crime but have a repeating cast of fictional characters and an overarching plot that groups of writers construct. True crime stories also have a similar team that shape the presentation of the narrative. Editors and producers work to present a story in the way that will create the most emotional impact with the audience; however, the key difference from the crime drama is that the true crime content are the actual events of real people's lives. True crime delimits its content from the crime drama via its presentation in the documentary format which ultimately creates ethos. The issue with the crime drama is that the fictional element does not create ethos in the same way true crime's documentary style does. True crime content often gives consumers intimate access to credible figures involved with a crime, such as family and prosecutors. With the differences between the two similar genres considered, true crime excludes elements of storytelling that would denote fiction to the audience. Essentially, true crime relies on the ethos that comes from its alignment with the documentary and journalism genres. True crime also relies more heavily on ethos appeals than crime dramas, as most true crime media focuses on giving consumers as much detail as possible regarding a crime, while the crime drama has to focus on the development of a core cast of characters.

Because of the way true crime covers a wide array of crimes, *victim* is a particularly fraught term in the discourse. The word *victim* in the realm of law and criminal justice is a critical component in individuals receiving support and justice. In his article "Constructing the Victim: Theoretical Reflections and Empirical Examples," Rainer Strobl explains the importance of the term for people who have experienced crime. Strobl explains the idea that the term, and the acceptance or rejection of it comes with immense power by stating, "the crucial point of such a constructivist perspective is

that the term ‘victim’ – like the term ‘criminal’ – is conceived as a social status that is ascribed to a persona according to formal and informal rules. Without this status a person will not be regarded as a victim and in fact will not be a victim in the social world. He or she will not obtain emotional support from his/her family and friends or material support from compensation schemes” (295). Though Strobl refers to the structure of social relations in Europe in his research, the sentiment still applies to treatment of crime *victims* in the United States, particularly in true crime discourse. It is clear that the word *victim* holds much power in how a society treats and views individuals. Strobl goes on to explain that a person must align with, and perform, their role as *victim*, in accordance with social norms in order to be accepted in the role of *victim* (296).

The importance of this word victim cannot be over looked as this term transverses the barriers of victimology to the discourse of true crime. However, in true crime, *victim* is a label that comes with nuanced restrictions that has larger social implications. For true crime, the title of *victim* is not about what happened to a person, but rather about who they were before the horrendous act and what they could have been had the act never happened to them. There is a trend across the rhetoric of the genre that reveals key terms and phrases that typically accompany and further specify the meaning of *victim*. Mentions of dying young, having promise or potential, and being beautiful are all qualitative phrases commonly used when describing the death of women. As the term *victim* in a criminal justice sense, denotes an individual’s ability to be seen and recognized, so does true crime’s use of the word. The caveat with true crime’s categorization of *victims*, is that not all victims are given equal representation. This term



is more insidious than it seems on the surface. These descriptors are arbitrary on their own, they are vessels into which cultural significance and meaning are placed.

In order for a *victim* to be seen as having worth, they need to fit into the specified parameters that uphold the status quo of the discourse. The most prevalent side effect of this specification is the hierarchization of *victims*. Sarah Stillman refers to this categorization based on criteria of worth as “female disposability” (493). This term encompasses the reality of what crime stories do to women, which is implement language in order to dispose of stories that do not fit inside of the grids of specification. Stillman gives the example of watching news coverage of the disappearance of Jessica Lunsford. During the search for Lunsford, another body was recovered from a Florida lake. Stillman recounts the language the news used to inform the public of the discovery in the following quotation:

But as I sat with my eyes glued to the Fox News coverage of the case, a different body suddenly captured my attention, a corpse mentioned only for a brief instant in a ticker-tape scroll that crawled along the bottom of the screen: ‘Body found in lake was not Jessica’s’. The headline grabbed me not for the tragic loss that it intended to document, but rather for the loss that it blatantly erased. Whose dead body was floating in the lake, if not Jessica’s? Did this body have a name? Did this body have a gender, a race, a story, a family awash in fear or grief? (493)

The erasure of the unidentified body speaks to the way a discourse specifies who is and who is not disposable. This is not the action of a singular entity, person, or group; rather, it is a collective response operating within a pre-established discourse to convey whose body matters and the subsequent story concerning that body. Later in her article, Stillman

presents ways to combat the rhetorical issues that arose when the victim's body was given the designation "not Jessica's" (493). Stillman finds power in the act of naming as a solution to the issue of all other women whose stories are erased. She goes on to explain that giving names to victims and violence allows for public discussion and response (494). If there is no name for a body or an act of violence, there cannot be a critical discussion of true crime discourse. By distinguishing worthy from unworthy *victims*, true crime filters the narratives it features to a set standard that the genre only occasionally deviates from. The terms associated with *victims* allows the discourse to categorize women by using three main criteria: age, race, and socioeconomic status. This chapter will work to explain the fraught dynamic that is at play with the term *victim* and the categories that fall under that term. This language helps to signal what demographics of people are worthy of inclusion in the discourse.

True crime as a discourse works to define *victims* in narrow and distinct categories. As established in previous chapters, women are depicted as victims more often than men in true crime. While cisgender women are the established standard regarding *victim* identity, there are other components that weigh heavily on the term and its parameters. In addition to gender, race plays an integral role in the defining and specification of victimhood. Though not reflective of all true crime, media is most likely to focus on the deaths of white middle class women. There are few women of color featured in podcasts, television series, or books which renders their stories invisible to the general public. The deaths of white women are often paired with the phrases mentioned about beauty and worth, such as the loss of beauty, womanhood, and the woman's ability to contribute to society, which are lamented heavily in many true crime narratives. This

notable trend is seen in the podcast *My Favorite Murder* with the phrase “sweet baby angel,” a phrase used to refer to women who have died (“My Favorite Murder”). The podcast is known for primarily focusing on the deaths of white women and ignoring issues of violence against other marginalized communities. When phrases such as “sweet baby angel” are most often being paired with stories of white women, it reinforces the concept that white bodies have more worth within the discourse and ultimately within society at large. Subsequently, the lack of women of color in true crime narratives sends the reverse message, that there is little to lament, and nothing is lost when a woman of color dies. The absence of Women of Color (WOC) representation in narratives says as much about the discourse as the distinct presence of white women. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, African American teenage women are one of the most at risk demographics to be the victims of violent crimes, “94 per 1,000 for teenage black females” (“Violent Crime”). Black women make up 9% of all murder victims, while white women make up 12% (“Violent Crime”). This statistic, on the surface, seems to suggest that white women are more likely to be the victims of murder and explains their prevalence in the true crime discourse; however, the Justice Bureau notes in the same study that for black women between the ages of 15-24, homicide is the leading cause of death, this statistic accounts for all potential causes of death, not just violent crime (“Data Collection”). In more recent statistics by the CDC, homicide has dropped to the second leading cause of death for young African American women and teens, yet this information still contrasts the statistics for white women (“Leading Causes of Death”). Unintentional injury and suicide are the two highest causes of death for white women, and homicide is the fourth most likely way a young white woman or teen will die

(“Leading Causes of Death”). If young African American women are most likely to experience homicide, then their absence from true crime narratives is a product of tools of the discourse based in exclusion and censorship. The racial component of the term *victim* creates a false dichotomy of what it means to be *victimized*. The lack of representation in the genre has far-reaching impact. Without presence in the genre, violence against an entire population of women goes ignored by those who consume podcasts and TV shows. The discourse uses this unsettling cultural construction to create parameters for its content. Specifically, repetition reinforces discursive norms, and every time the white female body is paired with the term *victim* all other stories of violence are erased. The term *victim* only allows for images of white bodies and ignores issues of violence that directly impact people of color.

In connection with the term *victim*, the death of JonBenet exemplifies the cultural obsession with dead white females. The murder of Ramsey is one of true crime’s biggest obsessions and reveals nuances about the discourse, such as a preference for Eurocentric beauty standards. Ramsey was murdered in her family’s Colorado home, and much of what happened to her became fodder for true crime media for decades after her death (Bardach). While many theories and years of investigation have tried to pin various members of her family and the community as her murderer, no definitive answer has been found. Ramsey’s story has garnered hundreds of hours of media attention over the past two decades. In stark contrast, in 2017 social media was flooded with a movement to bring awareness to the concerning number of African American girls who disappeared in the Washington D.C. area. The driving force behind the social media movement was the lack of national media attention these girls received, and many of their cases are still

unsolved (Todd). America has not come very far in the two decades since Ramsey's death; the nation still systematically ignores violence that reveals deeper issue regarding race. Laura Ellen Joyce analyzes the dichotomy between Ramsey and an African American girl who was brutally attacked in 1996 in her article, "Writing Violence: JonBenet Ramsey and the Legal, Moral and Aesthetic Implications of Creative Non-Fiction." She explains the case of Girl X, who was brutally raped and left for dead in Chicago but did not receive the level of media attention that Ramsey did. This lack of media exposure left Girl X's story invisible to the American public (203). She emphasizes the importance of questioning this dichotomy by stating:

The danger [true crime consumers] face in continuing to repeat our obsessions with the missing white women, is that we give vicarious glory to those who abduct, violate and kill these women. But what then, as Foltyn and Giroux enquire, of the missing women and children of colour? Why are there so many more images of missing white women in the media? I would suggest that the response the media had to the death of JonBenet feeds into *Missing White Women Syndrome*, the compelling fascination towards the image of murdered white women in Britain and North America is voyeuristic, sadistic and dangerous. This obsession is dangerous for the women of colour who are excised, disregarded and ignored, and also for the white women on whom this fierce sadistic light shines too. (Joyce 204)

Society's treatment of Ramsey and Girl X creates boundaries and criteria for exclusion, and, thereby, paints Ramsey's death as more important than the attack on Girl X. According to Foucault, the reason that all women are not discussed within this genre

relates to the idea of who is and who is not allowed to shape the rules of language. Foucault explains the requirements for one to be able to interact with and participate in the shaping of a discourse are as follows: “There is a rarefaction, this time, of the speaking subjects; none shall enter the discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so” (1467). Foucault goes on to note that some discourses are more open to allowing new speakers to enter and some are strict on who is allowed to help shape the conversation (1467). Whiteness is key to the discourse’s structure, and as a result, Women of Color are often not represented. There are other conversations, communities, and genres that allow for discussion of violence against women of color; however, true crime as a discursive community does not allow for these particular discussions or speakers, true crime favors white women as victims, because it reinforces the white power structure created by those who overwhelmingly tell the stories of murdered women. The exclusion renders women of color invisible and reinforces the notion that white women are to be the main focus of the discussion of violence. There is not one standard treatment for all women within the genre, for to treat all women, despite gender, class would imply that all women are inherently equal. True crime discourse is not built to convey the fact that all women are equal and continues to propagate the inflated prevalence of white women’s deaths and render all other women invisible.

While part of the allure of the genre is the sensationalized and graphic nature of the content, there is also an element of hypersexualization and degradation that occurs in the way that the narratives are framed for the audience. The genre acts as a substantial example of Foucault’s notions of power, as the discussion revolves around violence,

which, in essence, is the act of power that is shaped and reshaped based on how it is discussed and who is discussing it. It is important to remember there are countless Girl Xs in America who are forgotten by media. The issues with true crime discourse is that it renders all of these young women invisible and ultimately results in acts of injustice. Young girls who are the victims of heinous crimes, because of the discourse's restricted definition of *victim*, are not given the kind of screen time afforded to white women or girls from suburban areas.

Much like many cases concerning the brutal deaths of white women, there is a distinct focus on Ramsey's appearance and body when her murder is discussed. The commonly used images of her that are featured in television specials show Ramsey in full pageant regalia, oversexualized by those who tell her story. Ramsey was a promising pageant star, and those are the primary images that true crime chooses to use in order to paint the image of who she was. Ramsey is not shown as an average child from Colorado, but instead in full makeup in what is a mock attempt at womanhood. These images fit with the use of the words beautiful and potential in tandem with the word *victim*. True crime discourse chooses to fetishize these details, and to a larger extent, Ramsey, because she so easily fits into the restraints of the term *victim*.

This obsession with her death, and the overt sexualization of her body, is part of a larger issue within the discourse. White women and girls are made, via language, to be model victims, as these bodies help to reinforce the dominant narrative of violence and sex; therefore, "the cultural currency of the beautiful, young, white, female corpse is high, and is often used to reinforce patriarchal norms, or to justify excessive use of surveillance and enforcement. Conversely, dead women of color are excised from the

media, and often rendered invisible. JonBenet gained notoriety as a baby beauty queen, and A-List celebrity when she was dead” (Joyce 203). To be dead and white is, in the most gruesome sense, to have value in American culture. Ramsey’s celebrity status has led to years of magazine articles, podcasts, and true crime specials. All of these types of media lament the same facts, that she was beautiful, which is at the root of why her death is tragic. Though these narratives do not explicitly state this fact, it is implied through repeated mentions of how her pageant career came to an untimely end before she could reach her full potential. As Joyce explains above, the value in lamenting Ramsey for over two decades in such a way goes to reinforce patriarchal norms, from which true crime greatly benefits. There has been substantial monetary gain for those who have created and sold media related to Ramsey’s death. To talk about Ramsey only in terms of her beauty, and the trauma inflicted on her body, is the easiest way to sell her story because it treats her as an object rather than a person. Joyce goes on to explain what type of victim the media made Ramsey into, “She [Ramsey] is the ultimate subject, subjugated and without agency” (203). The language used to talk about *victims* has created an unfortunate reality, victims are victimized both by those who killed them, and a second time by the language American culture uses to speak about them.

As a result, there is a great amount of gatekeeping that goes into maintaining this status order around the word *victim*. In an article addressing true crime fan culture, Ashley Duchemin discusses that true crime is a white space that does not value the lives of People of Color (POC) or bring to light the harsh traumas and violence that constantly threaten POC. Duchemin explains the landscape of the fan community for the popular true crime podcast, *My Favorite Murder*. She explains that the type of privilege present



amongst white fans is all too familiar for POC in the following quotation: “But while the podcast and Facebook group proved safe spaces for some of the *MFM* community, others were faced with navigating the same systems of oppression they casually discuss that render murder victims of color and the queer and trans community invisible”

(Duchemin). The fan communities reflect the grids of specification, white women are welcome to the horror show while Women of Color find no justice within the discourse. If an entire group of individuals is rendered invisible, it follows that the power of the word *victim* that Strobl refers to is unable to transfer to POC.

Whether it be gender, race, or class status, true crime has distinct parameters that ultimately shape people’s perception of violence. In addition to the word *victim*, the word *tragedy* is a key component in the way that true crime discusses and shapes the perception of violence. While violence against women is the real American *tragedy*, for true crime it is a non-factor in the discussion of violence. Those who, even in the most violent, and twisted sense are reflected in the discourse are visible to the public. This selection is not arbitrary or accidental. The preference for stories about the deaths of white women is a documented cultural phenomenon. The effects of the phenomenon are delineated in the following quotation: “These messages are powerful: they position certain sub-groups of women - often white, wealthy, and conventionally attractive - as deserving of our collective resources, while making the marginalization and victimization of other groups of women, such as low-income women of colour, seem natural” (Stillman 491). The repetition of the same narrative of white women, missing or killed, is anything but natural. Instead it is a tool of specification that the discourse implements in order to create the boundaries around what is worthy of discussion. True crime, via repetitive

images of white victims, creates its own truth. True crime then, denotes that *tragedy*, is only for white bodies.

These depictions of dead white women create a foundational issue that seeps into various areas of the discourse. White women are known to uphold the patriarchy because they benefit from the racism inherent in the oppressive system, which dominates American culture. The repetitive depiction of white women paired with descriptive language such as tragic, beautiful, in her prime, etc. reinforces the white female consumer's sense of importance and validation in the genre and the discourse at large. This dynamic has proven to be financially successful for the true crime genre. Further reinforcing this assertion is that *Making a Murder*, *The Staircase*, *The Innocent Man*, and *The Keepers* are all Netflix programs that focus on cases involving the deaths of white women. This is not to say these victims' stories are not worthwhile; instead, the issue lies in that these are the only stories that the discourse tells. The purpose of these stories is to uphold a male dominated culture that does not accurately depict violence against women.

### Chapter 3

When someone turns on a true crime documentary there are specific assumptions made about the validity of that program. A major television network like NBC or Netflix in theory would not put out a show that was factually untrue for fear of legal ramifications. There is, however, a grey area in a genre that promises that all of its content is true and factual. One of the key components of true crime discourse is the ways in which it reinforces and creates truth. The name of the genre seems explanatory; it is a factual presentation of the events related to a criminal act. The surface level purpose of this media is to provide consumers with the historical and legal facts of a criminal case from crime to trial. Despite the surface level, intentions of the genre to educate the public on topics related to the criminal justice system, knowledge is highly variable and constructed. The presence of the word ‘true’ connotes that everything presented is completely honest and factual, when, in actuality, the way that information is presented to consumers presents possible complications. Through a high degree of ambiguity and the genre expectations of infotainment, true crime molds its own reality. It is critical to examine this grey area and the potential harm that it might cause. In his piece *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault explains the need to look critically at what a discourse may hold under the surface, “I think a good many people have a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to be on the other side of discourse from the outset, without having to consider from the outside what might be strange, frightening, and perhaps maleficent about it” (Foucault 1460). Foucault explains that, for most people, looking at the inner workings of a discourse is an undesirable act. Insiders of a discourse are often unable to see what is troubling or problematic about it. Foucault’s words

suggest to us that becoming critically aware of a discourse's issues is not an innate part of human understanding. The passive consumption of true crime during what is the genre's renaissance is arguably dangerous. Particularly, in an era where so much of true crime is available on the Internet, the vastness and potential of digital storytelling to construct an obscured reality is higher than ever. Truth and power are inextricable concepts as they reinforce the existence of one another in any discourse.

Foucault explains that truth is relative to the discourse as well as what is reinforced as true when he says, "In the inaugural conference of his 1981 Louvain's series of lectures, 'Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling,' Foucault refers to the famous scene in which French psychiatrist Francois Leuret forces – through repeated freezing showers – one of his patients to confess his own mental illness and thus cures him (Foucault, 2014a: 11-12). Even if 'to make someone suffering from mental illness recognize that he is mad is a very ancient procedure', based on the idea of the incompatibility between madness and recognition of madness" (qtd. in Lorenzini and Tazzioli 73). The dichotomy that exists between the medical establishment and the patient is similar to the structure of the relationship between true crime media and the women who consume it. The genre disproportionately displays women as victims of violence. Women, in order to partake in the consumption of the genre, have to accept that they are likely to experience the type of violence that the genre depicts; like the relationship between the doctor and patient, the relationship between female consumers and true crime is a construct. Statistically, women are not the majority of murder victims. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, men are more likely to be the victims of violent crime than women ("Data Collection"). True crime, despite this statistic, depicts women as victims more often than

men. The discourse fetishizes images of women being brutalized and harmed through its descriptions of these events, repeated use of graphic crime scene images, and even fictional reenactments of crimes. Through these means, the discourse, like the doctor, is able to convince an audience that these images are truth and have not been posed or altered in a way that upholds systems of masculine power. The aforementioned statistics, provided by the US Government, show Americans a factual reality. It is a measurable fact that more men die every year than women do (“Data Collection”). True crime, in twisting this reality, makes women think that they are more likely to die than men, and fear is a powerful tool of oppression. True crime creates and feeds off women’s fear of death, a reality that true crime constructed. This fear allows for policing of women’s behaviors that benefits the patriarchy. This policing can come in the forms such as women being told not to go anywhere alone, or being encouraged to rely on one or two men who are romantic partners or family for protection. This manipulation of reality places women at the mercy of men while simultaneously making them dependent on protection from them.

It is not a matter of a single content creator that creates this false sense of knowledge and truth within the discourse. For this type of “knowing” to occur, an entire system of power must be in place, “This will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, rests on an institutional support; it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices, such as books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past and laboratories now. But it is also renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the ways in which knowledge is put to work, valorized, distributed, and, in a sense, attributed, in a society” (Foucault 1463). The issue is not contained simply to one television program or one podcast being particularly problematic in its depictions of women. The issue is the system

that reinforces the language concerning violence. The preexisting systems of publication such as newspapers and books created the initial language structure that validated the discourse. However, as the discourse has moved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century new institutional systems have come forward to reinforce the “truth” of the discourse. This discourse does not exist in random pockets or niche areas. There are entire networks dedicated to telling these stories. The validity that comes with the creation of something as large as a separate TV channel acts to establish the power of these narratives. The discussion of “who done it?” is not part of some outside of proper society conspiracy theory culture. Instead, it is accessible and part of mainstream culture. *Dateline*, one of America’s most popular true crime television shows is housed not only on the Investigation Discovery Channel, but its main home is with major cable powerhouse, NBC. The show is given a weekly prime time slot and has been a staple of the network’s programming since 1992 (“Dateline”). While other programs have come and gone from NBC’s rotation, *Dateline* has remained a constant staple for the network for over twenty years. Foucault’s idea that discourses are given power in part by the institutions that reinforce them is clearly displayed within the true crime genre and NBC’s relationship to said genre. The backing of major networks is what allows for true crime to create and revalidate its narratives of violence against women without questioning of the discourse. The stamp of approval from large media conglomerates suggests to the audiences of this content that the way these subjects are being discussed align with the truth and do not need to be questioned or further examined. This system of institutional power is not limited to television—even podcasts, which most consumers consider a more independent form of media, are influenced and validated by these intuitions of power. *Crimetown*, a popular up and coming true crime

podcast has a production team that includes the creator of one of HBO's most popular true crime shows, *Jinx* ("About the Show"). The power that comes from these media institutions upholds the discourse, allowing it to continue to formulate the "truth" about violence against women. While the stories that are given to the public are skewed, the systems behind the shows and podcasts uphold the discourse as unquestionable truth.

The genre focuses on women in order to generate fear but also to create intrigue in the product it yields. This illustrates that the discourse reinforces the idea that women are weak and validates the audience's desire for the hierarchy that is already well-established and known in American culture. The emphasis on violence against women reinforces the lie that women are the victims of crime more often than men. This focus also ignores the types of violence that women are likely to face, such as violence from a romantic partner. These narratives are taken as truth, that women are more often the victims of violence than men. Foucault explains, "But there is more; there is more no doubt, in order for there to be less: a discipline is not the sum of all that can be truthfully said about something; it is not even the set of all that can be accepted about the same data in virtue of some principle of coherence or systematically. Medicine is not constituted by the total of what can be truthfully said about illness" (1466). True crime, as a discourse, is not composed of all of the factual information of the crimes that it discusses. True crime attempts to position itself as the source of truth regarding content that is often ambiguous or unclear. The crimes featured in this content sometimes are unsolved or have highly debated outcomes. Just as medicine is not the totality of knowledge on illness, true crime, despite its attempts to make itself seem so, is not the entirety of truth about violence.

There is debate among scholars as to how truthful true crime is in depicting events and circumstances. Some, argue that it misleads the public's perceptions on basic statistics, such as which demographics are most likely to be the victims of crime and the rates at which violent crimes occur. Moreover, as scholar Foltyn notes, most Americans have never seen a dead body in person and are far removed from the realities of death (Foltyn 101). With these two realities acting in tandem, a lack of exposure to death and a lack of knowledge about the proceedings of the criminal justice systems, the public is left with true crime to inform their understanding of how crime functions and whom it affects.

One of the pieces of true crime discourse that partakes in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge is the podcast, *Serial*, which gained public attention as it chronicled the story of Adnan Syed, a man accused and convicted for the murder of his girlfriend. The podcast works to paint the picture of Syed's innocence through interviews with the accused. The podcast's official synopsis explains the work of the journalist as a harrowing attempt to reach the truth:

Sarah Koenig sorted through thousands of documents, listened to trial testimony and police interrogations, and talked to everyone she could find who remembered what happened between Adnan Syed and Hae Min Lee. She discovered that the trial covered up a far more complicated story than the jury—or the public—ever got to hear. The high school scene, the shifting statements to police, the prejudices, the sketchy alibis, the scant forensic evidence—all of it leads back to the most basic questions: How can you know a person's character? How can you tell what they're capable of? In Season One of *Serial*, she looks for answers.



Buioz argues that the podcast and journalism hybridity of *Serial* as a project allows for a shift from traditional acceptance of knowledge to new knowledge construction. He explains that there is significant tension in *Serial's* attempt to challenge the institution: “The tension between reality and representation in the conventions of true crime has allowed recent projects like *Serial* to retain aspects of criminal biography, but to shift focus to critique the criminal justice system by placing the voice of the accused in a prominent textual space, allowing narrative room for questions of innocence” (258). Through this epistemological reading of true crime, *Serial* becomes a tool for dismantling the accepted framework of a true crime narrative. In the official synopsis for season one of the podcast, quoted above, the reporter central to the project is given a high degree of ethos in her ability to construct new knowledge.

Despite the argument that the podcast engages in construction of new knowledge, it reinforces problematic notions that pervade true crime content. No matter how deeply Koenig researched the case she cannot recreate the truth for consumers because the truth of exactly what happened in 1999 is unknowable. The victim is deceased and those who are alive and involved are limited by their own subject position. There is a progression in most stories from the criminal act, an arrest, a trial, and a conviction. *Serial* does work to challenge this mode of understanding but, at the same time, reinforces harmful ideas about violence and the authority of the criminal justice system. Buioz also notes the ways that Koenig constructed that narrative of *Serial* to center the voice of the accused rather than those who accused him: “Thus the voices of those institutional sources are at a remove from the “reality” of the narrative because it is their context—the interrogation, the testimony—that is “out there,” not their individual voices. Beyond the criminal justice

context, the amplification of Syed's voice may counteract the already amplified media voices that constitute the structure that surrounds Syed as a subject" (262). It is important to note that Buioz situates Syed as the subject in the narrative of a woman's murder. This is not an uncommon, but problematic occurrence across true crime productions. The accused is the subject, and the victim is reduced to an object. Megan Boorsma opens her argument on the construction of truth in true crime narratives with the following blunt statement: "If you find yourself rooting for Adan Syed or Steven Avery, you may also find yourself questioning the criminal justice system as a whole" (Boorsma 209). There is a construct of truth that renders the real issues with criminal justice invisible. Buioz talks about giving the "accused" a voice, which is not a wide spread convention of the discourse. This challenging of institutional knowledge does not address greater issues within the criminal justice system. Boorsma goes on to state in her argument, "With the rise of modern crime documentaries, series, and podcasts, growing doubt is being cast on the criminal justice system through the portrayal of injustice. On the surface, this may be a noble means of identifying flaws in the system, yet the big picture may not always be the actual focus" (210). Media focuses on the controversial innocence or guilt of a suspect, and, as a result, centers on sensationalism rather than legitimate issue of justice for a victim and the victim's community. True crime does not take on the larger issue of criminal justice reform but instead, according to Boorsma, relies on pathetic appeals to create distrust between true crime consumers and the criminal justice system. She states, "Since feelings alter perceptions and actions in unpredictable ways, the perception of our criminal justice system is under unprecedented scrutiny. Emotionally motivated perceptions of the system are in stark contrast to the intended objective nature of the law,

which is another indication that the system is being misperceived” (218). While *Serial* gives a voice to an accused man, and programs such as *The Staircase* and *Making a Murder* display similar narratives, it is a complicated dynamic that does not account for the ways the criminal justice systems has oppressed marginalized groups for centuries in America. True crime narratives attempt to rewrite the criminal justice experience of the accused. There are, however, unfortunate repercussions to this aspect of the discourse. It is also important to note not just how the knowledge is created, but as Foucault’s words point out, the way the knowledge is put to work. True crime is used, for many people, as their main source of information on death and violence against women and is taken for granted as wholly true which can prove to be dangerous and filled with misinformation. The pairing of institutional reinforcement of truth and the implementation of created knowledge, in the case of true crime, works to benefit the hegemonic culture that produced the discourse.

In her book *Dead Girls: Essays Surviving an American Obsession*, Alice Bolin provides an alternate reading of the narrative structure and social impacts of *Serial*. In Bolin’s argument, *Serial* does not challenge institutional knowledge, but rather reinforces patriarchal norms around the ideas of violence against women. She critically examines and problematizes that narrative structure of the popular podcast,

Honor killings, as it turns out, are as American as apple pie. *Serial* is ultimately frustrating because it conflates a mistrust in unfair legal narratives with a mistrust in patterns that are all too real, namely ‘the most time-worn explanation for a [a woman’s] disappearance: the boyfriends, current and former.’ Skepticism about

whether the husband did it shows a weird, classically American disdain for both authority and the powerless. (Bolin 55)

While Buoz sees *Serial* as a challenge to authoritarian structures the podcast, and media like it, are more sinister in their impact. *Dead Girls* fits into Foucault's idea that how knowledge is implemented in society has its own distinct impacts on a discourse. As Bolin points out, neither party wins when true crime narratives privilege male voices and render women silent. America is left with a discourse that misinforms and manipulates information while playing to deep and long-running issues concerning the legal system. While *Serial* is not representative of all true crime, its popularity does speak to the acceptance of its narrative structure. When *Serial*, and programs like it, stands in as a piece of truth and meaning making for the state of the American justice system, it misinforms the American public. As a result, women are victimized a second time by narratives that try to instill power in men rather than enact justice.

Three things are in conflict in regard to true crime's construction of truth: who is shaping the discourse, who is victimized by the discourse, and who is consuming the subsequent media. The fabrication and manipulation of truth might seem harmless in a genre made to entertain people; however, the creation of the discourse's truth has concerning consequences. Part of the overarching false reality that true crime creates is the message that it sends women regarding personal safety. True crime promotes the message that by consuming the genre, women can learn how to protect themselves from a potential attacker. This message is nothing new; true crime texts have been delivering this message for years to consumers who want to protect themselves from potential danger. In short, true crime tells women that they are going to die, and as a result they need to

believe the truth that the discourse puts forward. With Bolin's criticisms in mind, this evocation of fear is patriarchal in nature and reflects the larger structures and institutions that hold up true crime discourse.

The message that women could be murdered at any moment is central to many of the genre's canonical and popular works. As a result, this message has been reinforced through the sheer popularity of these works. The message that an attacker could be lurking anywhere is central in Anne Rule's book *The Stranger Beside Me*. Rule is crowned as one of the major pioneers of true crime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considered one of the genre's most notable works, *The Stranger Beside Me* chronicles Rule's personal and professional relationship with the infamous serial killer, Ted Bundy. She historicizes Bundy's life and the crimes he committed while integrating her personal relationship with him. Rule's novel, published in 1980, and has been updated by the publisher several times and had several new editions released, including one in 2017 (Rule ii). The book has steadily remained popular since its release almost forty years ago. There is clearly something intriguing and captivating to audiences about the way Rule discusses a killer who has risen to the status of a popular culture icon, which in itself is a reality propagated and heavily influenced by true crime discourse. The issues of Bundy's popularity as well as the popularity of Rule's novel are an entangled issue. One does not exist without an understanding of the other. While there are many texts in true crime that perform the same rhetorical functions that Rule's work does, her novel lends to a substantive close reading as she was exceptionally public in her interactions with her fan base and her reflections on the implications of her work on American culture. She contributed greatly to constructing knowledge and a cultural understanding of serial killers.

Rule's novel is not an attempt to bring justice to women, but rather is an attempt to create a mythos that benefits Bundy and the true crime discourse at large. Rule admits that she contributed to Bundy's celebrity which occurred in the years after his execution: "Some of the information I added to my original book turned out to be untrue – folktales and rumor that most of the Bundy experts believed – and I want to correct those. The single executioner who pulled down the arm that activated the electric chair in Starke, Florida, wore no mask, nor did he have thick, mascaraed eyelashes. That was part of the legend of Ted" (Rule xi). It is important to note that this confession of putting factually inaccurate information in her book came years after the book had already ascended to popularity and contributed to the lore of American serial killers. Rule creates a mythos around Bundy that is not entirely correct, but nonetheless influenced thousands of people's perceptions of who he was and how they should perceive his violent crimes. This directly mirrors how true crime works at its most foundational level: the misrepresentation of facts. True crime discourse is not concerned with the truth but rather its own incarnation of the truth. Narratives mold events to fit the framework that the discourse deems acceptable. By making men like Bundy celebrities, the discourse makes the subject of masculine violence nameable and creates parameters for what this violence looks like. By giving serial killers celebrity status, and thereby making them an object of discourse, the issue of violence against women as a widespread problem is ignored and instead centers on the man's narrative of violent behavior. Focusing on the rare cases of serial killers renders issues of domestic violence or toxic masculinity marginalized in the discourse. Depictions like Rule's help to create the serial killer as subject and object of discourse, while the women who die in these narratives are relegated to the status of

object. When the serial killer is no longer viewed as a singular human who committed violence but instead considered an objective category, parameters and systems of exclusion are constructed. The issue comes into play when the serial killer transcends the status of object and is also subject, allowing the narratives of violent men to warrant sympathy and notoriety. Certain types of violence, like the acts Bundy committed, become worthy of discussion and remembrance. This goes beyond the justice system's definition of what constitutes someone as a serial killer. True crime's language allows killers rise to the level of celebrity and receive a twisted version of praise. Rule's language in her novel, as she feared in her 2008 preface, helped add to the accepted truth of true crime.

Though *The Stranger Beside Me* is the creation of a female author, it does not mean that she is in charge of shaping truth in the discourse. Moreover, even though Rule has added to the folklore surrounding Bundy, her writing already defaults to a cultural understanding of men who commit violence. Discourses have rules that govern who may speak, who may participate, and what may be said at any one time. Truth is not allowed to be formed by just anyone. Foucault in his work *The Order of Discourse* explains the system through which these rules are defined and manifested:

Here is the hypothesis which I would like to put forward tonight in order to fix the terrain—or perhaps the very provisional theatre—of the work I am doing: that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. In a society like ours, the procedures of

exclusion are well known. The most obvious and familiar is the prohibition. We know quite well that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever.

(1461)

*The Stranger Beside Me* operates in the specific rules and boundaries of the true crime discourse. Rule, though she is the author of the novel, is not the one who controls the discourse. She participates in it by reinforcing the value system already in place, and as a result, the discourse privileges male voices over female voices. Rule's novel, and true crime discourse at large, favors male murderers over the lives of female victims. In the 2008 preface to *The Stranger Beside Me*, Rule reflects on the potential damage her novel has done. She voices her fear that part of Ted Bundy's reputation is deeply connected to her work:

Maybe part of it was my fault: Did I describe the 'good' side of Ted, the one I saw in the first three years I knew him, too well? He appeared to be kind, considerate, and honest then, and I didn't recognize the danger—not to me, but to pretty young women who fit his victim profile. I wanted to warn the reader that evil sometimes comes in handsome packages. I wanted to save them from the sadistic sociopaths who still roam, looking for victims. (xiii-xiv)

Rule reinforces the discourse in both her description of Bundy and his victims. Here, a dichotomy is created: on one side is Bundy who is powerful, and on the other, there are the women who, because of how they looked, had no chance of surviving. Even in her attempt to rectify, her impact on true crime discourse, Rule is still caught in the patriarchal framework which she has woven into her work. Though this novel is created



by a woman, the true crime discourse is patriarchal and male in nature. She upholds the discourse that values male over female life. Rule portrays Bundy as sexy predator and the women are valued and qualified on the basis of their appearance. Rule's reflections show a degree of awareness that she has impacted this discourse on Bundy, but she grants little acknowledgement to how she has contributes to the larger discourse on serial killers. By continuing to refer to the women as "pretty" and "young," they are reduced only to the characteristics by which patriarchy values their bodies. They are not stories or humans who had lives; they are the images of womanhood that are most desirable in a patriarchal discourse on violence. Rule positions herself as having more power in the rhetorical situation than the women Bundy killed. Rule labels these women based on their appearances as an act of reinforcing male power. These women, by default, had no autonomy because they were regulated to the category of beautiful and young.

In much of true crime, there is a clear power dynamic that is reinforced across types of media and networks. Foucault explains in his piece, "The Subject and Power," the nuance of struggles that are typically viewed as simple power dynamics such men's dominance over women in western culture. Foucault establishes the need to look at these relations critically and to understand who the enemy is:

It is not enough to say that these are anti-authority struggles; we must try to define more precisely what they have in common... These are "immediate" struggles for two reasons. In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the "chief enemy" but for the immediate enemy. Nor do they expect to find a solution to their problem at a future date (that is, liberations, revolutions, end of

class struggle). In comparison with a theoretical scale of explanations or a revolutionary order which polarizes the historian, they are anarchistic struggles. (Foucault 780)

For true crime, there is a clear delineation of who the closest enemy is and who the victims are. In *The Stranger Beside Me*, it is clear that young women are at risk, and Bundy is the closest threat. However, there is an antagonistic force that is not as immediate as Bundy. Rule works to distance herself from the women that Bundy victimized. In doing this, she is committing a rhetorical act of violence against the women she writes about. The novel works to pose Rule as someone who is exempt from the type of violence she features in her work. For example, she mentions her time working at a crisis hotline with Bundy. Rule gives detailed accounts of how she formed a friendship with Bundy, as well as her fondness for him (28). She also notes in detail how he helped her through a marital issue she was having at the time (30). Rule takes care to depict herself as someone close to Bundy and, therefore, is exempt from being a potential victim of violence. Rule is entrapped in one of the critical issues of the discourse.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, men are more likely to be the victims of violent crime than women (“Victims”). Despite what true crime would like consumers to believe, women are not the majority of murder victims. Rule, holding the false belief that all women are at risk of being attacked by men like Bundy, does as much as possible to protect herself via her framing of the situation and language choices. She notes that she did not meet his victim profile and that he posed no real danger to her (xii). The “chief enemy” to these women and their power struggle are authors and creators like Rule who skew and manipulate narratives for profit (Rule xiv). While murderous men seem to be

the problem the real issue and the core enemy is a discourse that accepts, promotes, and allows violence against women.

While being aware and educated about safety risks is important, what true crime does is reinforced that women are always under a threat of violence. As Vicary and Fraley outlines in their study, one of the potential reasons women watch true crime is to learn how to protect themselves from violence (85). True crime uses language and visual signifiers to signal to women that they should be afraid of violence and that violence is inescapable part of existence. Christine Atkins explains in her article. “This is What You Deserve,” her experience of seeing signs at her university from a campus safety group that read “Don’t Walk Alone” (433). She relates this common visual staple of university culture experience to Sharon Marcus’s concept of rape scripts:

The campus-safety group, with its foreboding sign, is just one example of what Sharon Marcus refers to as ‘cultural rape scripts,’ which naturalizes sexual violence against women, making access to women’s bodies a male right. Rape scripts are defined as ‘prejudicial, stereotypes, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists’ (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 705). Rape scripts are problematic because they serve to justify and/or deny male sexual aggression toward women through the perpetuation of false beliefs about rape. They suggest that rape is inevitable, that women like, desire, or deserve rape, and construct women as always already victims or victimized. (Atkins 433)

The concept of rape scripts as a tool of truth making and reinforcement is not limited to signs on a college campus, it can be seen widely across the true crime discourse.

Rape scripts are not limited to 20<sup>th</sup> century works, such as those of Anne Rule, but are still present in the methods of truth reinforcement in 21<sup>st</sup> century true crime content. One of the genre's most influential podcasts in the discourse at the moment is *My Favorite Murder (MFM)*. Hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, the podcast attempts to put a comedic spin on the tradition of true crime storytelling. The podcast has many catchphrases that hosts use and fans view as central to identifying as a true crime fan. The idea of the rape scripts applies to the phrase "stay sexy, don't get murdered" as it is a piece of discourse that signals to women that violence is unavoidable and an accepted part of culture. This slogan acts in the same way that the campus "Don't walk alone" signs do. These phrases act as signals to women that rape is an inevitable and accepted part of the culture they live in. There is an acceptance of this phrase that violence is normal, and a woman's job is to prevent such violence from occurring to themselves or other women. The phrases affirm the privilege violence maintains and the way in which women are positioned as default victims, as if it is an inevitable event in the female experience. Fans of the podcast make everything from laptop stickers to cross stitches with the slogan on it. Other individuals purchase these items as a means of showing they are part of this group and are engaging in a form of female empowerment. However, I argue that these items act as physical representations of women accepting rape scripts, and by extension, buying into the patriarchal rhetoric of the true crime genre. The presence and visibility of these items, both online and in the physical world, signals to women that they are primarily responsible for protecting themselves. This also creates a system of women who feel responsible for protecting each other. Like the signs urging female students to walk in pairs, products with these logos act as a marker of those

participating in the same discourse community. The signs are reinforcing a message that the discourse upholds: women are not safe on their own. The merchandise that fans of *MFM* produce reinforces the core messages of the true crime discourse; women are not safe and ultimately die horrible deaths.

In the way that Rule signals that men like Bundy are an unavoidable part of life for women, *MFM* signals to their viewers a similar message. The podcast's catchphrases are an iconic part of the hosts' banter with their viewers, and the language holds value for the fan community. "Stay Sexy Don't Get Murdered" is not the podcast's only catchphrase that holds significant weight, many other phrases help viewers understand what they should fear. The show's catchphrases are key to fans' understanding of crime and violence at large. In her article, "On Staying Sexy and Not Getting Murdered," Cammila Collar discusses the importance of the catchphrases in *MFM* fan culture:

One of the many catchphrases from My Favorite Murder that quickly caught on with listeners is "fuck politeness," a cheeky aphorism inspired by the exploits of killers like Ted Bundy, who lured women into his grasp through feigned injuries and faux requests for directions, exploiting his female victims' conditioning to always be polite. Judging by the sheer girth of heartfelt crafting that the phrase has inspired, this new tidbit of common sense shouldn't be underestimated. If we soon see a downtick in the number of women getting cajoled into vans, at least partial credit should definitely go to the murderinos. ("On Staying Sexy")

Foucault's idea of the immediate enemy in power struggles is exemplified in the phrase "fuck politeness." It is easiest for the *MFM* podcast to focus on the threat that seems closer in proximity: the murderous man that aims to harm women, and so, the

catchphrases work to attack the antagonistic force that seems closest. These phrases do not address, as Foucault's theory upholds, the larger societal issues that the discourse on violence upholds. The phrase "fuck politeness" seems to do this by suggesting fans are tackling a larger social norm, women are often expected to be kind in spite of their own safety. The phrase does not address issues such as violence targeting specific ethnic groups, domestic violence, or attacks against sex workers. The phrase acknowledges only one type of power struggle, which reinforces white patriarchal norms regarding violence. However, the phrase is not saying to not be polite to the larger systems of power that create legislation or media regarding women's bodies. Instead, the phrase asks women to identify the "closer" threat: the strangers that they meet on the street. By creating this phrase and the fan base's use of it, the discourse on violence is reaffirmed. The phrase continues to normalize violent transgressions that the cultural discourses has deemed appropriate by misidentifying where the root of the power struggle is located. In some ways "fuck politeness" is a way of attempting to reframe the rhetorical structure that paints women as helpless victims. Women can actively protect themselves and each other from harm by avoiding the types of behaviors that lured in Bundy's victims. This statement still poses issues in its rhetorical implications. There is an idea that violence is something that women can prevent from happening to them and bring upon themselves via certain types of behaviors. While there are active steps women can do to avoid violence, there is no certain way that women can definitively prevent violence from occurring to them. This ignores the statistical reality that women are at high risk to experience domestic violence.

In addition to the catchphrases, the podcast includes a segment called “correction corner” in every episode. During this time, Kilgariff and Hardstark reinforce the idea that true crime, in many ways, can take liberties in the portrayal of details. The events of a crime, exactly as they happened, is completely unknowable to us. True crime takes these liberties regularly, as reenactment scenes are a major convention of true crime television programs. Often, what happened at a crime scene will be reenacted with actors to questionable degrees of accuracy. The point of these scenes is to recreate the truth so that the audience might get a glimpse into the horror of a crime. *MFM* falls into the same trap with its correction segment. The podcast puts potentially inaccurate information out and does not correct it until after consumers have absorbed the misinformation. Observers have remarked that the host’s tone during this portion of this show can come across flippant depending on what topic they are addressing. There is not a care taken to be factually correct and as a result, the construction and creation of truth needs to be questioned. *MFM* has a large enough fan base that they receive criticism for not being factual; however, they are also large enough that missteps and a flippant attitude are not enough to cause an ethos deficit or to call the validity of their work into question.

All of these examples come down to, as Boorsma notes, the use of emotion to create altered perceptions of the criminal justice system (214). The impending fear of death is an intense and undeniable fear that cannot be understated. While women consume true crime for different reasons, one of the most commonly discussed and substantial is based on the desire to learn to cope and protect oneself from future trauma. Truth is not at the center of these narratives, but rather a constructed and pervasive reality

that consuming stories of death will lead to protection from the violent consequences of the of white heteronormative patriarchy.

Consumers must ask themselves the following questions: Who is painted to be the hero? Who is painted as the villain? Often women are the villains of their own stories of assault and murder—they are the figures who brought about their own demise. There is care taken in language to give humanity to all but the woman who once inhabited the body that is now so sexualized. Foucault explains why it is important to take notices of the inner workings of a discourse: “What then, is so perilous in the fact that people speak, and their discourse proliferates to infinity? Where is the danger in that?” (1461). True crime contributes to the larger cultural discourse on violence against women. It seems unassuming to watch the next Netflix special or tune in to *Dateline* one evening; however, these small choices reinforce the discourse. The overarching message that true crime sends to all its viewers is that women will die violently and we will all collectively watch it happen.



## Conclusion

True crime will continue making stories about dead white women and girls, and many consumers will be perfectly content with this cycle. After someone turns off a podcast or a Netflix special and continues on with their life, there is still a dead woman. Her story has been exploited for money and entertainment, and there is no justice. The lure and promise of justice is part of what is so appealing about true crime. It promises that over the course of a few hours, a complicated and gruesome crime will be wrapped up nicely. All motives for watching true crime considered, including well-meaning desire to learn about crimes in order to advocate for justice, true crime is a consumable good and a product of our capitalistic society. Providing intimate access into some of the most horrific acts humanity can commit is what has kept consumers intrigued and coming back for centuries.

Women's bodies are the consumable product that true crime sells frequently and in large quantities. New books, podcasts, and shows are coming out every single day, and with each of those releases, another woman's life is put on display as a spectacle for consumption. Ideally, true crime discourse will eventually shift and treat the issue of violence against women differently. This sort of discursive shift would involve true crime would no longer exploiting stories of violence, or images of brutalized bodies. Even so, a boycott of all true crime media is not a sustainable or practical action. What this research asks of readers is to consider the ways in which their passive consumption of true crime might be more complex than they originally thought. While this research may not deter anyone from watching the next Netflix special, hopefully it will give viewers pause the next time a female corpse is graphically featured on screen. Dead

bodies should be disturbing images, instead of the basis for one of the most popular genres of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The images and narratives featured in true crime are disturbing, and to categorize them as anything else is a misrepresentation of the intent of true crime. Social justice's purpose is to make marginalized people's lives better and to remove the injustices that strip away basic human rights. True crime does not fulfill this function and thereby gives consumers lurid tales of the worst aspects of humanity. Hopefully, these narratives inspire some individuals to participate in movements that aim to bring justice to victims and the wrongly incarcerated.

The method of dissemination of these narratives does not encourage this response. True crime is delivered, for the most part, in digital formats that are quickly consumed and not revisited. True crime content is released at such a rate that consumers are encouraged to ingest the content quickly and then move on to the next new piece of entertainment. This model of rapid consumption is part of what allows for the issues mentioned in this research to continue with criticism mainly from academic scholars and pop feminism columnists, rather than avid fans or regular consumers of true crime. It would be easiest not to consider the motives of true crime. However, considering the ways in which the plethora of true crime narratives might be problematic is an important step in reshaping the discourse.

Even with all of the horrific implications mentioned in the research considered, reshaping true crime discourse will ultimately be a challenge. True crime dates back to the 1600s and while some things have changes, much of the content we see today is as grotesque and violent, if not more so than original true crime media. With the long

running history of true crime, it seems to be a fair assessment that altering such a discourse will take a substantial amount of time. This change is deeply entangled with other issues such as racism and sexism. Systematic oppression are not simple issues to solve, and as a result, true crime's progression toward a more inclusive discourse will be slow. This is not to say it is not worth it for consumers to be critical and ask for true crime creators to make necessary changes to the content. Consumers directly influence the success of true crime because it is what they demand. If we desire truth and ethical care of these women's narratives then we will be one step closer to justice.

One aspect, above all, is the most crucial in moving forward from where true crime discourse is now. America, collectively, needs to address *why* it enjoys tales of violence against women. This research only focused on true crime, but this issues permeates all forms of media. The reality that women watch shows, read books, and listen to podcasts about other women dying is unsettling. For this reason it is important to critically examine the role of consumerism in hindering change in the discourse. Blind consumption will only reinforce the problems present in the discourse.

This research is not exhaustive on true crime as a genre, but should be viewed as a starting point for a rhetorical method of viewing true crime as a discourse. Issues of gender, race, and sexuality are all complex and intersectional. The diverse aspects of identity constitute their own intensive research projects as they pertain to the true crime discourse. The purpose of this project is to provide a framework for further exploring the implications of this particular moment in popular culture. True crime is currently in its most visible and recognized pop culture moment since its creation, it is important that more scholars take note of what this mass popularity means for American culture. All

language conveys meaning, and all language is motivated. True crime is a growing and widely consumed genre that is effectively shaping the discussion on acts of gendered violence. The power dynamics of the discourse must be examined in order to understand why content produced mainly by men depicting violence against women is so widely consumed by women. Popular culture is one of the most powerful forces in shaping American and global perceptions of important issues regarding violence. If popular culture did not have this much sway on the global community, controversial media would not cause uproars and protests in the ways it often does.

In line with Foucault's notions of power and discourse, the way that women are discussed in the genre is not new. This research does not aim to state that these issues are new, only that they are relevant in this specific cultural moment. Those who are controlling the discourse are acting within a framework that emerged from years of patriarchal power structures framing language about gender and the phenomenon of violence. This type of media is not simply entertainment; true crime does inform the way society talks about and interacts with violence. This creates space for the discourse to eventually shift, and change the conversation about violence against women. The discourse has the potential to change, but only if the genre becomes aware of the larger social issues it reinforces. The first and final lines from Ander Monson's creative piece, "To Reduce Your Likelihood of Murder," summarizes what true crime asks its female consumers to believe and what it asks American culture to accept as fact. Monson opens the piece with the line "Do not go outside" and one of the final lines of the story states, "Still you will be killed". These two lines encapsulate what true crime asks us to think, believe, and buy in order for the discourse to continue. Consuming true crime means we

must simultaneously acknowledge the reality that death is both inevitable and preventable.

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