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Audible Killings: Capitalist Motivation, Character Construction, and the Effects of Representation in True Crime Podcasts

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Audible Killings: Capitalist Motivation, Character Construction, and the Effects of

Representation in True Crime Podcasts

An Honors Thesis presented by
Maia Hibbett
to the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 2018

Acknowledgements

The first and most essential thanks for this project go to Professor Rae Gaubinger, who bravely agreed to advise my thesis despite having never met me, and despite my project having nothing to do with her field. Hybrid experts in Victorianism and Modernism like Professor Gaubinger are rare to begin with, but I would bet that combined Victorian-and-Modernists who have advised true crime and new media projects are even rarer. Professor Gaubinger took a big risk by agreeing to advise my thesis before her time at Connecticut College had even officially begun, and she has been nothing but supportive, reliable, and helpful throughout the process.

I would also like to thank my readers, Professors Marie Ostby and Michelle Neely. I have taken several classes with Professor Ostby, and she has consistently encouraged me to push the boundaries of how I think about literature. She, especially, inspired me to pursue a project focused on new media. Professor Neely recommended that I pick up *The Executioner's Song*—which she warned me was long and terrible, as I ended up agreeing—and in doing so, heavily influenced my understanding of twentieth-century true crime. Both of them are kind and encouraging, and they have provided me with consistent reassurance and constructive ideas.

My major adviser, Blanche Boyd, had little interaction with this project, but has had a massive influence about how I think about narrative, both fictional and nonfictional, and has supported me immensely during my time at Connecticut College. She was also the one who suggested that Professor Gaubinger might make a good thesis adviser—about this, as with most things, she was right.

Beyond the English Department, I would like to thank my friends, my family, and the staff of *The College Voice,* all of whom listened to me ramble on about this project. They must have feigned interest a few times. For your listening, both intrigued and merely polite, thank you.

Table of Contents

"How could an apparently sane, avowedly pious man kill a blameless woman and her baby so viciously, without the barest flicker of emotion? Whence did he derive the moral justification? What filled him with such certitude? Any attempt to answer such questions must plumb those murky sectors of the heart and head that prompt most of us to believe in God— and compel an impassioned few, predictably, to carry that irrational belief to its logical end."

-Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*

Introduction

The way we consume information is changing. Everyone knows that.

It's not controversial to claim that the world's consumption of news and entertainment media is evolving. It always has been, and it always will be. Instead of unfolding newspapers, millions of users get their news stories—sometimes hard-hitting, factual, and investigative; sometimes fabricated and planted specifically for their demographic—from their Facebook feeds. Rather than becoming immersed in a novel, people consume fictional narratives through stylized television series, ranging from the reliable comfort of the sitcom to the dramatic grip of cinema-quality TV series. And after making the transition from traditional, leather-or-paper-bound media to new, mobile, digital media formats, the mode of consumption continues changing. You don't have to open your favorite publication's website in your browser; it'll send you a push notification. You don't have to wait, week by week, for the next episode of your favorite show to come out; you can binge it in one sitting on Netflix.

Even the style and tone of news headlines is changing. An increasing number of outlets have moved away from the succinct, conventional structure that strings together a subject, a present-tense predicate, and an object (e.g. "New Senate Bills Spurs Debate"), favoring instead a more conversational two-sentence format (e.g. "There's a New Bill in the Senate. Lawmakers Don't Agree on It."). While the latter style may seem to cheapen a news piece, as it was first embraced by oft-disparaged, youth culture-focused and internet-geared outlets like Buzzfeed and Huffington Post, it's now been picked up by media institutions as reputable and well-established as *The New York Times*. That results from no whim or frivolity: the *Times* conducts constant testing of their headlines' saliency, tracking how many clicks various headlines can get for the same story. If you visit the *Times* website three times in the same day, you might see three

different headlines on a single piece. By reflecting the success of the two-sentence headline, what their test results show is clear: before they so much as click on a link, audiences want a narrative.

While the public's desire for narrative is nothing new, the formats through which we consume narratives must innovate constantly to keep up with the public's changing demands. We still want stories, but we want them delivered to us in new ways, or we want them delivered to us in old ways that just *feel* new. Perhaps one of the strangest, most radical new media formats that exemplifies this latter thought is the podcast, a reinvention of the traditional radio show. Podcasts repackage a form of media communication that has been around for decades by offering episodic installments of thematic discussions or serialized narratives, combining new media's technologically innovative appeal with consumers' nostalgia for a medium moving toward obsoleteness. As the number of people who listen to radio programming decreased—with listeners choosing instead to play individually-selected audio through auxiliary hookups or Bluetooth speakers—some popular radio programs innovated to keep their listeners, rather than accepting irrelevancy. While the concept of the podcast is simple—they're just audio programs released online, playable by any person at any time—the medium has become a cultural phenomenon, appearing first through individual incarnations in the early 2000s and finding a collective home when Apple launched its podcast app in 2007. Among the most successful examples of a radio show that managed to make the podcast transition is NPR's *This American Life,* which rose to popularity after its radio release in 1995 and has been a consistent chart-topper since it joined Apple's podcasting platform fifteen years later, in 2010. And four years after that, the producers of *This American Life* debuted a crucial intervention in contemporary habits of narrative consumption: Sarah Koenig's iconic *Serial*.

Serial represents not just the prominence of the podcast, but the convergence of two trends: podcasting and true crime. Like the former trend, the latter sees success due to its ability to revamp narratives that consumers already loved, as readers and listeners alike have long been enthralled by terror and tragedy. The public's fervent obsession with real-life murder mystery has for years created a fertile market for lurid detail and insufferable suspense, leading to true crime's dismissal by literary purists who consider the genre tacky and unrefined. But, like the once-ridiculed two-sentence headline, true crime is now finding its place in a more respectable crowd.

With any surge in popularity comes, of course, a surge in popular criticism. While a Google search on true crime—as on any subject—will return results representing a variety of opinions, many online voices seem to be at a consensus: the current focus on true crime is a good thing. In October 2017, Quartz published an essay by Susan Simpson titled "The unlikely role of true crime podcasts in criminal justice reform," acclaiming the genre's potential to transform a system (Simpson). A year earlier, Kristin Hunt emphasized "9 True Crime Documentaries that Changed their Cases' Verdicts" for Thrillist; Tom Huddleston Jr. explained "How true crime series are exposing America's criminal justice system," and Lucy Tiven addressed "The Bizarre Way True Crime TV Is Shaping Jury Selection" on the popular condensed-news site "ATTN:" (Huddleston, Hunt, Tiven). These mark only a few examples of essays across the internet espousing true crime's real-life influence, and their arguments, though not identical, are closely linked: Simpson, the host of *Undisclosed,* argues that "listeners want to hear these stories—and then they want to take it a step further and act for justice," while Huddleston claims, "what's different about the latest flood of [true crime] movies, documentaries and podcasts is that the

focus is less on the gory details and more on what happens once the wheels of justice begin to spin" (Simpson, Huddleston). Hunt proves the influence of that emphasis by providing a list of "documentaries [that] were so eyebrow-raising, they freed innocent men and put killers behind bars," and Tiven acknowledges that "the popular true crime docu-series of today may transmit a vague distrust of the legal system in their viewers" (Hunt, Tiven). Referencing the "CSI Effect," Tiven even notes that in certain cases, consuming crime-focused entertainment media—both factual and fictional—can lead audiences to believe they have expertise they don't really possess, so much so that "Trial consultant Jo-Ellan Dimitrius…believes that future jury selection may even involve questions about specific true crime programs and fandom" (Tiven). If we accept the basis of these popular arguments—and these are only four, among many—it's clear, then, that contemporary true crime narratives can have serious influence. But is that influence as progressive and revolutionary as popular critics think?

Given the much-anticipated March 2018 announcement that Adnan Syed had been granted a new trial for all crimes including and related to the murder of Hae Min Lee, any critic would be hard-pressed to argue that *Serial* had no hand in offering Adnan a chance at absolution. While it's possible that the case would have been reopened on its own, and the verdict quietly changed, Koenig's podcast garnered attention for the prosecution's shortcomings on a massive scale, almost certainly putting pressure on the Maryland Court of Special Appeals to consider Adnan's case. Both Huddleston and Hunt include *Serial* near the top of their laudatory listicles, and Simpson and Tiven both cite it as exemplary of true-crime-to-real-change success. Where popular critics might have a logical lapse, however, lies in where they assign causation: as Simpson notes, "the podcasting industry is growing at a time that coincides with great social activism," and though she and her contemporaries attribute a current hunger for criminal justice

reform to audiences' appetites for and consumption of true crime, the relationship between the two is clearly reciprocal (Simpson). Moreover, Simpson is one of three hosts of the popular podcast *Undisclosed*, which "investigates wrongful convictions, and the U.S. criminal justice system, by taking a closer look at the perpetration of a crime…and finding new evidence that never made it to court" ("About *Undisclosed*"). While Simpson's own participation in true crime podcasting doesn't invalidate her perception of the genre's merits, she obviously has a stake in touting that the work of contemporary true crime is, in fact, good work.

As the arguments referenced above suggest, the merits of contemporary true crime hinge on the genre's seeming shift in focus from the gore of the slasher narrative to the necessary scrutiny of the criminal justice system. But while that shift does seem to have occurred, contemporary true crime isn't as different from its predecessors as it may seem. If we trace the origins of the genre—which date back all the way to early-modern England—we might find that true crime narratives, with their emphasis on fear as a motivating factor, always work on behalf of a greater, less tangible, institutional force. And in order to push that force's priorities, and instill in it a veneration, the narratives still need to be easy for audiences to consume; to do that, they must rely on recognizable tropes. Because tropes so easily slip into stereotype, and because true crime represents real people, this reliance makes the genre's work of representation tricky; and under close examination, it doesn't always do as well as we at first think. Beyond that, the use of tropes allows for the repeated affirmation of pre-conceived notions, supplementing the self-perpetuating nature of the genre's popularity. That ability for reproduction makes true crime the perfect capitalist product.

As I will prove by the end of this project, capitalism and the free market are the forces that true crime currently serves. My first chapter will argue that like so many other narrative

genres, true crime at its origin worked to instill its audiences with a fear of God; then, in the

twentieth century, it reaffirmed allegiance to the ordering power of the State. Now, true crime is

its own god and government: the narratives not only promote themselves and an array of

affiliated products, but also push one another, all acting as parts of a massive entertainment-

media machine. The aforementioned *Undisclosed* began, essentially, as an extension of *Serial,*

promising "a detailed examination of the State of Maryland's case against Adnan Syed" and

featuring Rabia Chaudry, a lawyer integral to *Serial's* premise ("About *Undisclosed"*). Along

with the popular Netflix docu-series *Making a Murderer, Serial* also sparked the inspiration for

Payne Lindsey's podcast *Up and Vanished,* as at the podcast's outset, Lindsey notes: "Like a lot

of people, I had been pretty obsessed with the podcast Serial, and the Netflix series Making a

Murderer, and I thought to myself, 'What if I made one of those?'" (Lindsey episode 1). The

shows lead to the creation of more shows, which, in turn, have shows about the shows.

Because true crime is, currently, such a prolific genre, to pursue a study of all

contemporary true crime narratives would either be an insurmountable task or result in a broad,

shallow project. To narrow my focus, then, I will only consider true crime narratives released

primarily in podcast form, excluding on-screen and written[1] narratives from my scope. To refine

the types of crime in my consideration, I will examine only narratives that detail suspected or

confirmed cases of domestic or intimate partner violence, which eliminates the second season of

Serial from my scope, but includes the podcast's first season. In addition to the first season of

Serial, I will analyze both seasons of Amber Hunt's *Accused,* Christopher Goffard's *Dirty John,*

and Payne Lindsey's *Up and Vanished*. When placed in comparison with one another, these four

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[1] Some of the podcasts in my consideration have published transcripts or released written supplements, but their primary format remains audio.

podcasts demonstrate clear service to the entertainment media market and a reliance on the repackaging of classic crime narrative tropes, as my second chapter will show. To address the effects of this repackaging, and its interaction with the capitalist forces established in my first chapter, my third chapter will demonstrate that while they clearly bring to light the need for reform in the criminal justice system and lend attention to questions of domestic violence, the narratives ultimately risk undermining efforts for broader change, instead focusing on individual victimization that ultimately results in the commodification of the victim and the perpetuation of the fear of the unknown.

Chapter 1: What is True Crime?

People have a hard time discerning the truth. Despite constant exposure to the notorious "24-hour news cycle"—or perhaps because of it—the public of the contemporary U.S. expresses frequent disagreement over what constitutes reality. Feeling more emotionally connected to satirists and propagandists than to their local newspapers, people tend to perform a conflation between news and entertainment media. Beyond indignant declarations of falsity and distrust, the public often remains ignorant of the theories, practices, and goals that underlie contemporary media productions. This chapter responds to that disparity. Considering true crime narratives as exemplary inhabitants of the liminal space between news and entertainment, in this chapter I will define the ambiguously understood jargon of "newsworthiness" and "new media," as these two concepts—and the many sub-concepts of which they consist—help clarify how journalistic works both garner popular interest and affect public impressions of the ordinary. I will then trace the evolution of the true crime genre in terms of service and purpose, as I contend that intentionally or not, true crime has historically served major societal institutions, starting with the church and moving to state authority. Both institutions rely on the public's desire to maintain an ordinary status quo in order to preserve their own supremacy, making true crime, with its ability to instill fear and anxiety, the perfect tool for maintaining their dominance. In the last section of this chapter, I will turn partially away from the church and the state in order to discuss the institution that contemporary true crime podcasts currently serve: with my key examples *Accused, Dirty John, Serial,* and *Up and Vanished,* I will ultimately prove that in contemporary society, true crime new media productions serve primarily to further the capitalist interests of the entertainment media market.

True Crime

Simply put, the genre known as "true crime" consists of narrations of real crimes, committed by real people, and publicized by others. The same could be said for crime news reporting, but purpose marks a key difference between the two: true crime is created for entertainment, whereas news reporting has the supposed purpose of informing the public. The difference in purpose naturally warrants a difference in form, allowing true crime more freedom in aesthetic and rhetorical approaches. At their best, true crime narratives are factually accurate and emotionally captivating; at their worst, they further the damage of the crime on which their narrative is based. Much of true crime's entertainment value and its potential for harm stem from the genre's inherent sensationalism, a term which historian Joy Wiltenburg defines, in the context of true crime narratives, as "the purveyance of emotionally charged content, mainly focused on violent crime, to a broad public" (Wiltenburg 1377). Because the writers and producers of true crime are theoretically bound to the truth, they are not at liberty to invent the most interesting storyline possible; instead, they must emphasize the factual elements that make the story most compelling for audiences. Considering three twentieth-century true crime novels—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood,* Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song,* and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story*—critic Leonora Flis prescribes: "[the writer] should not succumb to inventing, but selection and interpretation (emplotment) undoubtedly still take place," and these interpretative choices result in the genre's sensational appeal (Flis 71). Wiltenburg troubles the use of the term "sensationalism," however, claiming that in sensational works, the emphasis on emotion leads to an assumed lack of sophistication in the genre's narratives and audiences—i.e., its 'low-brow' appeal—which critics use to justify their dismissal of true crime literature. But, Wiltenburg asserts, sensationalism

nevertheless serves as a useful descriptor for true crime. She calls the term "the best means of expressing the [true crime] genre's most salient feature—its appeal to the emotions" (Wiltenburg 1379). By remaining open to the validity of sensationalism's appeal, Wiltenburg is able to consider a rhetorical approach that many of her contemporaries dismiss in ignorance. Working with narratives produced hundreds of years later, I intend to do the same as one part of this study.

Notably, one of the most sensational aspects of true crime is inherent to all of its narratives, to the point of being incorporated in the genre's very name: truth. Wiltenburg notes that "established newspapers do not bother to describe their contents explicitly as 'true,' while less respected publications may advertise 'true crime,'" commenting both on the presumed low-brow appeal of the genre and the reality that in the case of true crime narratives, the inherent nature of a story's truth is marketed as an attractive feature (Wiltenburg 1383). With this comment, she indicates the genre-crossing performed in true crime: as opposed to the "established newspapers" whose content is automatically assumed to be true, true crime narratives' entertainment-style approach puts their veracity into questionable territory. The inclusion of "true" as a qualifier enhances their shock factor—and by extension, their appeal—by assuring the audience that yes, this really happened. The same occurs when a piece of literature or cinema markets itself as "based on a true story," though the phrase "based on" allows for more flexibility in adherence to the truth than is granted to true crime. Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* exemplifies this category: despite being inspired by the kidnapping of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh's son, the novel's plot and characters—featuring the iconic fictional detective Hercule Poirot—do not capture the actual crime and ensuing investigation. A true crime account would, but the genre's embrace of literary technique complicates the veracity of its accounts, necessitating the distinction that Flis makes in terming Capote, Mailer, and

Berendt "documentary novelists": "like a (literary) journalist, a documentary novelist depends on documentary data, but simultaneously, he possesses greater narrative freedom and has the ability to manipulate the facts and thus gain control over the shock and scandal his writing depicts" (Flis 71). We see, then, that when a crime writer takes a creative literary approach, the simplistic categories of "true" and "not true" begin to fall short.

These considerations will prove essential to understanding my argument, especially in my second chapter, when I consider the role of literary characterization in true crime. Before examining the characters that make up a true crime narrative, however, it is important to understand the forces behind true crime and to define the journalistic/media studies terms "newsworthiness" and "new media," as I will employ them in my analysis and classification process. Most of these terms will appear in my second and third chapters, as they help us understand what makes a true crime narrative compelling, and a new media object consumable, both of which are necessary factors in the capital success of contemporary true crime.

Newsworthiness

Appearing as an introductory lesson in basic journalism courses, and almost nowhere else in popular discourse, is the concept of "newsworthiness," the standard qualifications that determine whether a news story is worth reporting. Scholars and theorists of journalism have long debated what qualifies a story as "newsworthy," but twelve basic elements determined by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge in 1965, termed "news values," have been widely referenced as defining factors of newsworthiness. The traditional news values are:

> 1. Frequency: Perhaps better understood now as "recency"—as theorist Nico Meissner recommends—the chronological closeness of an event to its reporting increases a story's salience (Meissner). To a reader, listener, or viewer, more recent events seem more relevant.

2.   Threshold: Stories with increased scale and/or intensity seem more important. The more people affected, the larger a territory covered, the more drastic a change—the more newsworthy a story.

3.   Unambiguity: Ease of interpretation and clarity of details instill trust in a story—and, necessarily, its teller.

4.   Meaningfulness: Consumers of stories want to know what the consequences on their own lives will be, so the degree to which a story affects a reader or viewer's own life, or the likelihood that there will be an effect, matters.

5.   Consonance: Stories that confirm preconceived notions, stereotypes, and predictions are more satisfying for their audiences and instill trust in the media.

6.   Unexpectedness: Conversely, people also like to be shocked.

7.   Continuity: Existing or ongoing stories attract audiences, as viewers want to further their knowledge of an established narrative.

8.   Composition: The style or type of story should engage its audience. This is a relational factor—as news stories do not exist isolation, differing compositional approaches compete for audiences.

9.   Reference to elite nations: Major controllers of capital, territory, political influence, etc. garner more interest in the media.

10. Reference to elite persons: The same rules that apply to nations, in this case, apply to people.

11. Personalization: The establishment or construction of identifiable characters make stories more engaging and easier to follow.

12. Negativity: Bad news is good news.

While the order and importance of these elements is debatable—as is the question of whether their prioritization makes for "good" journalism or simply "popular" journalism—their presence in news reporting is relatively easy to identify. These elements do not, however, necessarily determine what is or is not worthy of being featured in entertainment media. Instead, they prove useful when considering how true crime uses journalistic tactics to gain entertainment value. Referring to eight conditions of newsworthiness similar to Galtung and Ruge's—developed twelve years later by Steve Chibnall and including similar terms such as "immediacy," "dramatisation," and "novelty"—theorist Kay Boyle notes in *Media and Violence* that "crime—and crimes of violence in particular—fulfills many of Chibnall's criteria of newsworthiness" generally and automatically, simply by being crimes (Boyle 59). Linguist Ulrike Tabbert refines this assertion by considering the importance of the principles of newsworthiness to crime

reporting in "Crime Theories and the Media," in which he employs terminology adapted from Galtung and Ruge's news values to analyze crime reporting (Tabbert 23). Tabbert contends that in crime reporting, unexpectedness, negativity, and meaningfulness are essential, the last of which he breaks into two categories: "proximity" and "significan[ce of] dramatic impact" (Tabbert 23). The importance of unexpectedness and negativity in crime reporting is self-explanatory: as a legal transgression, a crime must by definition be "negative," and its interruption of expectation gives it shock value. "Proximity" Tabbert qualifies based on two categories: "spatial (geographical) and cultural (relevant) nearness of an event," both of which contribute to the perceived "significance of dramatic impact" by increasing perceptions of risk, which "leads to the conclusion that everybody is a potential victim of crime which in turn provokes a 'fear for personal safety'" (Tabbert 24).

While Boyle and Tabbert focus on crime reporting in the news rather than in entertainment media, I argue that these criteria can be transferred from crime news to crime media serving as entertainment. Though Boyle, Tabbert, and their contemporaries have derived multiple classifications by which we may interpret newsworthiness, and many of these prove useful for the study of contemporary true crime, due to limitations of time and space, I will adhere primarily to Galtung and Ruge's original twelve news values—because, as Meissner puts it, "Despite the follow-up studies, Galtung and Ruge's pioneering work remains the most influential study in the field" (Meissner). While Galtung and Ruge's news values are often taught to journalism students learning how to determine a story's ripeness for reporting, when applied to a literary lens and used for close reading, the terms help us identify how journalistic works construct meaning and impact public understanding.

New media

A second, essential term to define in discussions of contemporary true crime narratives is "new media," a concept which, beyond its applicability to true crime, affects much of how we consume the world in the twenty-first century. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich notes that "the popular understanding of new media identifies it with the use of a computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production," so a news story typed on a computer, printed, and distributed on paper exemplifies "old media," where a news story typed and posted to the Internet is "new media" (Manovich 19). Manovich calls this binary definition "too limiting," however, and adds: "today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication… the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication… it also affects all types of media—texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions" (Manovich 19).

Even with its limited nature, the binary definition of "new media" allows us to see that podcasts, as digitally-produced and digitally-distributed audio communication, occupy the space of "new media" in its most basic terms. A more nuanced definition of new media, however, can help us in understanding the current role of true crime podcasts. Manovich identifies five key traits of new media objects, two of which prove particularly useful in understanding the role of true crime podcasts as consumable media:

1. Numerical representation: "All new media objects, whether created from scratch on computers or converted from analog media sources, are composed of digital code; they are numerical representations" (Manovich 27).
2. Modularity: "A new media object consists of independent parts, each of which consists of smaller independent parts," allowing for discrete modification of or updates to certain parts of the media object while leaving other parts intact (Manovich 31).
3. Automation: "The numerical coding of media (principle 1) and the modular structure of a media object (principle 2) allow for the automation of many operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access. Thus human intentionality can be removed from the creative process, at least in part" (Manovich 32).

4. Variability: "A new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (Manovich 36).

5. Transcoding: "While from one point of view, computerized media still displays structural organization that makes sense to its human users… from another point of view, its structure now follows the established conventions of the computer's organization of data" (Manovich 45).

Though all of these concepts would most likely apply to podcasts, were we to disassemble and analyze the digital code that makes them up, I will focus on the closely linked concepts of modularity and variability when considering true crime narratives as new media objects, as the fresh adaptability of podcasts contributes not only to their popular appeal, but also to their primary purpose: capital success.

Who (or what) is true crime serving?

With the definitions of true crime, newsworthiness, and new media established, I turn now to questions of narrative purpose. As a high school-level understanding of rhetoric tells us, all narratives need an author, an audience, and a purpose, and these factors are necessarily influenced, if not determined, by their time. As we trace true crime works' conventional evolution over time, it becomes clear that these works' intended effects on their audiences, like their narrative approaches, have changed. Their authorship, of course, is varied, and changes in literary purpose are to be expected with changing authors, but their readership (or listenership, in the case of podcasts) has stayed largely the same: the popular masses. True crime is not written, as I will prove in the ensuing paragraphs, to appeal to a highly educated or literary readership; instead, its lurid images and shocking revelations are designed to stir an emotional impact perceptible by any consumer. Like most journalism, true crime tends to be written in easily comprehensible language, avoiding the complexity that makes some literature less approachable. If we understand true crime's authorship as dynamic and its readership as relatively static, how,

then, do the genre's producers and consumers alter its purpose over time? In my reading, I have found that true crime narratives promote their various conceptions and views to the general public in three phases, each with the effect of furthering the project of a distinct force of power: first, the church; then, the state; lastly, and currently, the market.

Before delving into the three particular institutions that, according to my argument, true crime serves, it's worth exploring how the need to protect the ordinary roots itself in audiences' minds, regardless of era or generation. When we examine the historical context behind large surges in the popularity of true crime, a correlation between public anxiety over a declining society and the popularity of true crime literature emerges. Wiltenburg observes that in sixteenth-century England, "crime combined forces with comets, misbirths, and other ills to contribute to a widespread post-Reformation sense of crisis, one that fueled growing apocalyptic ideas as well" (Wiltenburg 1395). While many public fears have since been overcome—most of us don't fear comets anymore, at least—apocalyptic fears are thriving in the contemporary United States. Across the political spectrum, the public is in a panic over changing times—whether these manifest as xenophobic fears of other people and cultures, concerns over the rapid destruction of the environment, or constant trepidation due to increasingly violent threats to public safety. A visit to Twitter or Reddit—where much of media and entertainment fanaticism resides—will quickly show users that our current, massive online community considers, in various ways, that ours is a society in decline.

Beyond the public attitudes made easily recognizable by the internet and social media, Sara Ahmed points out that "the complexity of the spatial and bodily politics of fear has perhaps never been so apparent in the global economies of fear since September 11," and similarly, Norman Mailer claims of the mid-twentieth century: "Probably, we will never be able to

determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years" (Ahmed 128, Mailer 583). Though Ahmed and Mailer discuss a seemingly similar notion, the reader might notice a key distinction in their terminology: where Ahmed uses "fear," Mailer speaks of "anxiety." To clarify this discrepancy, Ahmed notes that "fear has often been contrasted with anxiety insofar as fear *has* an object" and argues that fear does not necessarily need a *present* object, but instead is informed and intensified by an object "passing by" and warranting a more extreme fear with its absence, whereas anxiety, by contrast, tends to jump between multiple, potentially imagined objects: "One thinks of more and more 'things' to be anxious about; the detachment from one given object allows anxiety to accumulate…Given this, anxiety becomes an approach to objects rather than, as with fear, being produced by an object's approach" (Ahmed 124-5). For the purposes of this argument, I accept Ahmed's definitions of fear and anxiety and contend that starting with post-Reformation true crime pamphlets, true crime increases in production and popularity largely as a response to a general state of anxiety, in which the public worries over multiple sources of potential societal decline, which sources are rooted in lasting fear of a past event (The Reformation of the Church, WWII, 9/11) that produced a multitude of other, smaller fears. True crime seizes on a particular fear—crime, and the criminals who commit it—and experiences the most popular success when its audience feels open to addressing that fear due to its existing anxiety. While this sense of anxiety remains pertinent across generations of true crime, at its root lies a moralistic prioritization established and perpetuated by the first of our institutions in question: organized religion.

The Church

People across nations, societies, and time have narrated accounts of crimes and other transgressions for as long as the necessary language and rules have existed, but every genre must start somewhere. Though it is problematic to declare any piece of writing "first"—as doing so risks ignoring contemporary or preceding narratives that may have been produced, but not popularized or otherwise made accessible—I contend that the earliest critically-recognized forms of true crime literature are exemplified by English pamphlets published during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Wiltenburg explains that before this period, "medieval chronicles record acts of mayhem and murder…[but] unlike the events recounted in later sensationalism, these violent clashes lacked an ordering authority to seal their significance," and goes on to note that "chronicles generally were not aimed at a wide audience but were used by ruling classes or individuals as a record of past events" (Wiltenburg 1381). For this reason, I begin my study of true crime after the Middle Ages.

Wiltenburg refers to the crime pamphlets she mentions by noting: "By the late fifteenth century, printers had begun publishing topical news reports, and from the mid-sixteenth century, they produced crime reports in increasing numbers" (Wiltenburg 1381). In "Crime News and the Pamphlet," Sandra Clark refers to these as "moralistic news pamphlets" and notes that "in the early modern period [the word pamphlet] is commonly used with the force of a diminutive…to refer to a printed publication that is ephemeral, occasional, and frivolous in nature," speaking to the low-brow or common sense that characterized crime news pamphlets (Clark 145). These pamphlets were not, however, assigned common appeal only because of "the rapidity and cheapness with which [they] could be produced," as Clark puts it, but also by their moral and

emotional appeal, making them viable methods for the self-promotion of the church and the furthering of religious values in general (Clark 145).

To state that society's moral guidelines are largely derived from religious systems is far from original, but religious appeals to common morality are linked to notions of crime deeply enough, I think, to warrant exploring. Wiltenburg asserts that "in the Western world, the modern concept of crime draws on older conceptions of sin but focuses expressly on acts that are forbidden and punishable by human authority," meaning that societal transgression is rooted in religious transgression (Wiltenburg 1381). Wiltenburg goes on to note that in early seventeenth-century crime accounts, "the killers' deeds, rendered inexorable by the known outcome, appeared as the result of their giving the devil an opening by prior sin: often drinking, gambling, greed, or anger" (Wiltenburg 1391). Wiltenburg tells us, then, that references to the sinful nature of crime necessarily implicated earlier, smaller sins as if they were symptomatic of greater criminal tendencies, associating all things morally reprehensible with major crime. This continues into the modern day, as current true crime narratives employ similar methods to demonize killers or suspected killers and laud the innocence of the victim. A moralistic approach appears clearly in *Up and Vanished*, for example, as host Payne Lindsey emphasizes killer Ryan Duke's depression and drug use and portrays accessory Bo Dukes as rude and a heavy drinker when presenting the characters (Lindsey episode 14). He contrasts these two with victim Tara, who he describes as, if not virginal, morally pure to a greater-than-average degree (Lindsey episode 14). I will develop these notions more thoroughly in the next chapter, but I establish them briefly now to recognize that though these sin-based explanations of crime may appear originally in church-sanctioned crime pamphlets, they have not disappeared in mainstream narrative culture.

Moralistic narrative tone is not necessarily crime-specific or exclusive, whether in contemporary or early-modern discussion of crime, as moral decline often appears as part of a greater societal diagnosis. Boyle explains, for example, that critiques of portrayals of violence in the media have largely condemned "video nasties" because, as determined in 1993 British legal proceedings, "Justice Morland suggested that 'exposure to violent videos' could provide a partial explanation for [two young boys'] crime," drawing an explanatory link between video nasties and pornography to a sense of moral decline in society (Boyle 2). She adds that "the stirrings of moral panic in the press were all too familiar to commentators," and Tabbert supports this by adding that "typical for a moral panic are exaggeration and distortion of the seriousness and extent of an event, prediction that this event will surely be followed by others and that those will be worse, and, finally, symbolisation"[2] (Boyle 4, Tabbert 21). Tabbert's understanding of moral panic, then, points to the ordering logic that can be derived—intentionally or otherwise—from moralistic fears, suggesting that the sense of panic and fear caused by crime narratives drives the public to adhere to the norms of established institutions: in the context of early modern England, the church.

The increasing perception of societal disarray not only makes audiences more receptive to narratives that capitalize on fear, but also warrants a desire to institute and fortify social order. Especially in their earlier forms, this is what true crime narratives do: remind us that crimes occur, that they are morally wrong, and that they will be or should be punished. Wiltenburg's key sentence, referenced earlier, illustrates this point by clarifying the difference between "crime" and "sin": the former is "punishable by human authority" while the latter is, theoretically, brought to justice only by a deity in the afterlife (Wiltenburg 1381). Wiltenburg

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[2] sic.

links the juridical process of crime and punishment to moral and emotional appeals by explaining

that "in early modern Germany, serious crimes were *peinlich*—that is, punishable by damage to

the body of the offender," creating a parallel between crime and punishment to Christian blood

sacrifice and elaborating that "these parallels worked constantly to shape the emotional structure

of crime narratives. The criminal reenacted both the fall of unaided humanity and the well-

deserved punishment that must ensue" (Wiltenburg 1385). Early true crime narratives, then,

made sin and its consequence concrete by providing documentation of the transgression's impact

on the body.

These narrative links possess an ordering nature, which manifests more clearly when we

consider the importance of the confession to sixteenth-century punishment. In her discussion of

the confession, Clark refers to a "mythologising" process by which, as she quotes Lincoln B.

Faller, "ideally [the pamphlet] would like to record [the criminal's] confession, contrition,

repentance, conversion, and finally, that he made of the gallows a pulpit" (Clark 151). Beyond

making the crime and punishment palpable, this observation suggests a key distinction between

sixteenth-century crime pamphlets and modern true crime narratives: as Clark later explains, "no

murder pamphlet ever concerns itself with a crime the perpetrator of which is not already known

to be guilty," marking a contrast to modern true crime podcasts which, at least in the cases of the

ones treated in this analysis, take an investigative approach with the supposed goal of unearthing

the truth in the true crime, though each work does this to a different extent (Clark 172). The most

polarized of my examples are *Up and Vanished* and *Dirty John,* the former of which begins with

an entirely unsolved case and seeks to solve it, the latter with a concluded case whose narrative

the host seeks to tease out. *Accused* and *Serial* occupy murkier territory: both seasons of *Accused*

and the first season of *Serial* start with a person who has been deemed a killer, and the

investigation aims to uncover whether or not that designation is accurate, and if not, who the real

killer is. With the exception of *Dirty John,* then, these contemporary works of true crime exhibit

a clear divergence from their seventeenth-century predecessors, as starting from a point of

known guilt provides early modern true crime narratives with a stage already ripe for moralistic

appeal, while dubious guilt necessitates a more complicated narrative, with its appeals to

morality interwoven.

      As Faller and Clark's quotations above demonstrate the moralizing mission of early

modern true crime, they also introduce the notion of a gallows speech, which brings the

moralistic recognition of sin into the context of state-ordered and executed punishment. While

sixteenth-century crime pamphlets promoted the views and morals instilled by the church,

encouraging adherence to religious norms and the social ordering in which they were based,

church interests are deeply interwoven with state interests, and as the two began to separate, true

crime narratives next turned to the service of the state.

The State

      Though implicitly religious in nature, the confession proves useful in furthering the

interests of state as well as church institutions. According to Michel Foucault in "The Spectacle

of the Scaffold," final words and speeches in public execution did much of the same work as

crime pamphlets, as "it was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the

truth of the crime that he had committed" (Foucault 43). Centuries after crime pamphlets

captivated early modern England, Truman Capote replicated the confessional scene in *In Cold

Blood,* the canonical true crime work that many scholars and critics consider emblematic of the

next surge in true crime in my consideration: the popular twentieth-century American novel.

After extensive interviewing of killers Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, Capote captures Perry's rumination on his crime and impending punishment: "The good people of Kansas want to murder me—and some hangman will be glad to get the work…If I'd really known [the Clutters], I guess I'd feel different. I don't think I could live with myself. But the way it was, it was like picking off targets in a shooting gallery," thus turning his book into a proxy for the scaffold that once facilitated execution as a public spectacle (Capote 291). This confessional scene, featuring both Perry's acknowledgement of culpability and his recognition of the fate that awaits him, reproduces a necessary quality that Foucault identifies in public torture and execution: "[the confession] pinned the public torture on to the crime itself; [confession, torture, and execution] established from one to the other a series of decipherable relations" (Foucault 44). This means, in essence, that a purpose of the confession was to draw a direct link between the crime being confessed and the punishment being inflicted, executing a restoration of state order by reminding subjects that their crimes will surely be punished. But in reinscribing power, Capote goes a step farther than merely capturing Perry's rumination, as critic David Guest notes: "Capote also writes that Smith apologized for his crimes just before mounting the scaffold. [Phillip] Tompkins interviewed Mrs. Meier and several people who witnessed the executions. He claims that all disputed Capote's version" (Guest 124). For Capote, the earlier, remorseless confessional scene was not enough, so he aestheticized by adding a second, purer one.

The restorative goal of the confession relates closely to another concept of Foucault's: panopticism, the notion of constant yet potentially undetectable surveillance. Critic Trenton Hickman finds panopticism prevalent in Capote's style of narration, explaining that *In Cold Blood* "positions the Clutters and their killers within a limited environment in which they are fated to meet and from which none can escape. Within, their movements are precisely observed

and cataloged," allowing Capote to hold a "supervisory gaze" over the subjects within his novel (Hickman 473). Following the work of Guest, who "illustrate[s] the American novel's participation in the reinscription of penal authority and the perpetuation of the judicial and police power," Hickman asserts that through the use of an omniscient narrator—whom he separates from Capote himself, treating Capote and "Capote's narrator" as distinct figures—Capote's narrative serves not only to reaffirm the supremacy of the state over its subjects, but also to parallel the terrifyingly all-knowing perspective of the state itself (Hickman 466).

Based on this reading, *In Cold Blood* evidences the prevalence of "the disciplinary society" that Foucault describes, but to accept one characterization of "the state" or "state power" and categorize works as either in support or in opposition would be too simplistic an approach to treat such a complex institutional process. According to critic David Garland, "Foucault's tendency to discuss the spread of discipline as if it were politically unopposed is a serious deficiency in his account…his use of terms like 'the disciplinary society' or 'the society of surveillance' give the definite impression that the disciplinary programme has become a reality in a process of unopposed and uncompromised implementation" (Garland 167). True crime narratives might support Garland's assertion that the disciplinary society does not go unchecked, as Foucault's theory is largely based on the inherent presence of power and its ability to operate unseen. This is exemplified by Foucault's discussion of some torture as necessarily occurring outside the public eye, charging the worst of torture's realities to the public imagination, as "secrecy" was used as a tactic "to show…that the 'sovereign power' from which the right to punish derived could in no case belong to the 'multitude'" (Foucault 36). By communicating the realities of the criminal justice system, wouldn't true crime, naturally, combat this secrecy?

The answer might be yes, in the context of the contemporary true crime narratives that I will discuss next, but in Capote's case, the exposure in his crime writing does not undermine the state's sovereign power. In his discussion of the "non-fiction novel," critic David S. Caudill suggests the opposite, writing: "Capote did not claim, as I do, that *In Cold Blood* is a critique of law and lawyers. Denying any thesis or message… he wanted his writing to remain detached, to reserve judgement, to disappear. To whatever degree he succeeded in this, however, he could not hide his disdain for the legal proceedings," citing as an example Capote's emphasis on Perry's mental health, which Hickman also finds out of the ordinary: "Capote offers eight pages of psychological exegesis that blame Perry's problems on the events and environment of his early years (296-302). Close reading reveals that none of this information is admitted into actual courtroom testimony" (Caudill, Hickman 471). While Caudill and Hickman note the same idiosyncrasy, they use it to different effects: in Caudill's case, to prove Capote's "disdain" for the legal proceedings, and in Hickman's, to highlight Capote's personal interest in Perry Smith. Setting aside Hickman's interpretation—which will reappear in chapter three—Caudill's reading of Capote's book as a critique of the state does not hold up. While Caudill calls *In Cold Blood* "a critique of law and lawyers," the examples he cites have to do with specific individuals rather than the nature of the system itself, as he opines that "Capote was obviously unimpressed with the local jury" and "Capote's account… suggests not only that the appointed lawyers were incompetent but also that they had deliberately neglected their duties" (Caudill). Though he claims otherwise, Caudill does not, in fact, argue that *In Cold Blood* critiques the law itself but instead the particular execution of the law in the Clutter case. In contrast, I contend that whether disdainful or not, Capote's account of the legal proceedings in *In Cold Blood* serves to reaffirm state power by virtue of Capote's presence at and recognition of juridical proceedings.

By being present at Dick and Perry's execution, Capote bears witness to a private legal ritual, and while his writing might expose the state's seemingly furtive proceedings, his witnessing and reporting expands the spectatorship of public confession and execution. According to Foucault, the exercising of disciplinary power in juridical contexts requires a combination of secrecy and publicity, as the withholding of some practices serves to instill the public's fear of the formidable state, and the displaying of others verifies the possibility of consequence. Despite Capote's comment that "in the disposition of capital cases in the United States, the median elapsed time between sentence and execution is approximately seventeen months" and ensuing explanation of the murky, bureaucratic process behind capital punishment, his narrative increases the publicity of death, which Foucault claims "took up once again the scene of the confession. It duplicated the forced proclamation of the *amende honorable* with a spontaneous, public acknowledgement" (Capote 330, Foucault 43). To clarify, the *amende honorable* was a state-mandated confession in which the guilty were required to repeat the explanation of their crimes, and when combined with the condemned's organic last words and the gore of death—both of which Capote captures in *In Cold Blood*—it participated in the sensational spectacle and logical meaning-making of the public execution. By narrating Dick and Perry's execution, Capote extends his role as witness to include his entire readership, thus reminding his audience of the reality of state power and its ability to punish crime in striking detail, for example: "Steps, noose, mask; but before the mask was adjusted, the prisoner spat his chewing gum into the chaplain's outstretched hand" (Capote 340). While Capote reinscribes state power in this instance, Garland argues that despite the reality of disciplinary exertions of power, "power is not a thing in itself… Power is instead a relational concept. It is the name we give to the capacity to realize a desired goal in a particular situation," but this negation of

power's individual force and replacement with relational value does not entirely undermine

Foucault's notions of state power in the context of crime (Garland 169). Garland rejects Foucault

for Émile Durkheim, noting that "Like Foucault, Durkheim sees discipline as a set of forces

which act upon individuals, constructing them as centered subjects and subjugating them to

social norms. But, for Durkheim, this process is not only a necessary one…it is also a *moral* one"

(Garland 175). Though Garland sets the two theorists up as binary opposites, their application to

contemporary true crime resists this compartmentalized approach.

Foucault and Durkheim diverge on the crucial point of viewing discipline as either the

logical exertion of power, for which Foucault argues, or as an emotional response, which

Durkheim embraces. Durkheim justifies the emotionality of discipline by linking the concept to

"vengeance" and claiming that "passion is the soul of punishment," and he considers, as Garland

paraphrases, that "the essence of punishment is irrational, unthinking emotion fixed by a sense of

the sacred and its violation" (Garland 31-32). Though the two ideas are clearly at odds, true

crime, interestingly enough, illustrates their convergence: while Foucault believes in a logically-

determined "disciplinary society," Durkheim discusses crime and punishment within the context

of "society's sacred moral order," hearkening back to the moralistic, religious notions made

apparent by older crime pamphlets (Garland 31). Whether rationally intentional or passionately

reactionary, both disciplinary society and moral order require maintenance in the form of

reminder, and true crime serves as said reminder by communicating the penal system's logical

ordering through emotional portrayals. In Capote's case, this manifests most clearly in *In Cold

Blood's* emotional concluding notes, when Capote reflects on the necessity of social order in a

moral narration of Dewey's visit to the Clutters' grave, "a gray stone inscribed with four names,

and the date of their death: November 15, 1959" (Capote 342). Not only is the scene cathartic,

but it is clearly purposeful, as Flis comments that "the scenes of the reconstruction of the murder, the confession, the trial, and of the execution…are carefully constructed…Moreover, Capote inserts a redemptive ending that imposes additional (and artificial) order on the narrative" (Flis 79). Like with Perry's confession, Capote takes the creative liberty not only to remind the reader of Smith and Hickock's moral transgression, but also to reinforce the victims' need for justice and the state's ability to mete it out.

Modern-day true crime podcasts largely diverge from *In Cold Blood* in this sense, as on the surface level, they tend to convey critiques of the state. *Accused* host Amber Hunt embraces this most emphatically, opening the first season of her podcast by noting: "The people who are usually front and center, trying to solve crimes, are strangely quiet on this one, and there seems to be a reason. As much as this tale is about murder, it's also about a system and officials that might've fingered the wrong guy, and even 37 years later seem determined to pretend there's no chance they made a mistake" (Hunt season 1, episode 1). Hunt reaches this point just over five minutes into her first episode, but in the second season, she cuts to the chase, jarring users almost immediately with the description: "It's a tale of sex and murder, crime and punishment, and if the word of one witness can be trusted, police corruption" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). With these declarations, Hunt sets herself up as being at odds with law enforcement, suggesting that her work will undermine listeners' faith in the system, and she uses this as a point of appeal for her podcast, as "police corruption," lumped in with "sex and murder, crime and punishment," makes up part of a list of succinct and sensational topics.

While *Accused* acknowledges the need to question the state most overtly, all four of the podcasts in consideration operate on the basis of state failure, as all of them, with the exception of *Dirty John,* concern cases that law enforcement was unable to adequately solve in the

podcaster's opinion. Therefore, the existence of each podcast implies doubt in the system, even in cases when the hosts do not explicitly state their skepticism. *Serial* is interested, as its premise, in the assessment of whether or not Adnan Syed received a fair trial in court, a question that puts the podcast's ability to question the state in a double bind: on one hand, it necessarily questions the state's adherence to justice; on the other, it assumes that a fair trial guarantees, or at least allows for, justice to be served, thus affirming assumed faith in the state. In this sense, Sarah Koenig's approach to questioning justice in *Serial* mirrors Capote's method in *In Cold Blood:* she critiques the individual proceedings, not the structure of the system itself. Koenig does not, however, invent any details—at least not to any critics' knowledge.

Dirty John at first seems to present the least in terms of criticism of the state, as the host, Christopher Goffard, opens the podcast by playing audio of a deep, soothing voice reading a gruesome autopsy report, then fades the gory details out and replaces them with his own voiceover: "I'm sitting in the office of a man who prosecutes murders for a living" (Goffard episode 1). As Goffard next moves to describe the qualifications and experience of the prosecutor, Matt Murphy, he conveys to the audience that they should trust the voice previously heard because in Murphy, "a veteran Assistant District Attorney who handles homicides out of Newport Beach, California," he has found a credible speaker (Goffard episode 1). He then explains why the prosecutor is reading the autopsy report, implying that a necessary procedure is being accurately followed, and offers the neat, legal definition of homicide as an introduction to the story: "a homicide is the killing of one human being by another…[Murphy] had to decide whether it was a crime" (Goffard episode 1). While *Dirty John* may begin with an appeal to state authority, the podcast later brings to light flaws in the system, noting in the fifth episode that the strict legal definitions of domestic violence barred Debra, the protagonist, and her children from

filing a restraining order against the dangerous, abusive, and parasitic John (Goffard episode 5). The podcast does not, however, explicitly condemn this reality as unjust; while it demonstrates that even when protocol is followed precisely, the system can still fail to protect the subjects it surveils, Goffard's particular message about state authority remains unclear, and will be discussed in greater depth in the third chapter, when I consider the cultural effects of contemporary true crime narratives.

Whether these podcasts represent a true subversion of state order or not, they do not accept and reinforce state authority in the same manner as *In Cold Blood*, complicating the assignation of an ordering forces that they, as pieces of language, serve. While it might be tempting to accept the altruistic notion that true crime podcasts exist purely to solve crimes—and maybe even to produce good journalism—it is rare to find popular media that does not, in some way, speak to or serve another purpose. In the case of true crime podcasts, the most prevalent of these purposes is the powerful, capitalist machine of the entertainment media market.

The Market

With its transformation from a serialized narrative made popular in *The New Yorker*, to a best-selling and critically-acclaimed novel, to a feature film with multi-millions in profits, Capote's *In Cold Blood* certainly qualifies as a capital success. The prominence of the "non-fiction novel" popularized true crime on a seemingly unprecedented scale, priming the U.S. popular culture market for the prolific crime writers who followed Capote's lead, including Vincent Bugliosi, Ann Rule, and Joe McGinnis, to name only a few. *In Cold Blood's* craze-inducing nature parallels that of the true crime podcasts that have taken its place in popular crime literature, as these podcasts too have seen astonishing popularity and marketing success.

Podcasts, like most interactive new media, generate revenue from advertisers, and a podcast's

ripeness for advertising is affected by its network support, or its lack thereof.

One of the phenomena that most clearly characterizes twenty-first century media is an

increasing ease of access to self-publication and distribution of work. From the ability to create a

free WordPress or Blogspot website to the paid option for self-publishing and selling a book

through Amazon, now more than ever, creators have the ability to disseminate the content they

produce without the aid of an agent, a publishing house, or even an editor. While these methods

guarantee neither success nor quality of the work produced, and socioeconomic barriers make

self-publication more accessible and more lucrative for some than for others, the current

openness of publication allows for the potential of a self-produced work to become a popular

success. This dynamic, like most that operate within capitalist structures, privileges media with

lower production costs, as they have a lesser difference to make up in order to turn a profit, and

this makes podcasts, with their relatively modest needs, a salient platform for self-produced

works.

The widespread accessibility of podcasts might go without saying, as it is well-

recognized in U.S. contemporary culture that thousands of ordinary people, many of them

without previous careers or training in communication and media, produce and distribute their

own podcasts. Payne Lindsey, creator and host of *Up and Vanished,* admits this candidly in the

introduction to his podcast:

> "Around six months ago, I was surfing the web. I was looking for cold cases and other
> unsolved mysteries. I'm actually a filmmaker, and I was kind of digging around for a
> cool idea for a documentary film. I think there's something about an unsolved case that
> intrigues everyone: this urge to solve the puzzle and reveal the truth, and this universal
> satisfaction when we catch the bad guy. We all want an answer, an explanation for the
> unexplained. Like a lot of people, I had been pretty obsessed with the podcast *Serial* and
> the Netflix series *Making a Murderer,* and I thought to myself: 'What if I made one of
> those?' So I literally just went to Google and started searching. I'm from Atlanta, and I

wanted to find a case that was local, that I could actually investigate. I eventually ended up on the website for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, and they have a top-ten list of unsolved crimes in Georgia. The first one I saw was a missing person's case. A girl named Tara Grinstead had been missing for over ten years now, and they had no suspects, and they had no leads" (Lindsey episode 1).

Lindsey's cavalier description of his introduction to the case points to the wave of popularity from which contemporary true crime benefits, as he notes that he, like many of the members of his presumed audience, was "obsessed" with *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*. But while *Serial's* host Sarah Koenig is a trained reporter, Lindsey's self-identification as a filmmaker admits that in order to pursue a podcast, he must work outside his medium. Though Koenig, like Lindsey, acknowledges her inexperience by commenting: "I am not a detective, or a private investigator. I'm not even a crime reporter," she is not an amateur on Lindsey's level, as she later elaborates that Rabia Chaudry, a friend of Adnan Syed, contacted her specifically to investigate the case:

"Rabia was writing to me because, way back when, I used to be a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun,* and she'd come across some stories I'd written about a well-known defense attorney in Baltimore who'd been disbarred for mishandling client money. That attorney was the same person who defended Adnan, her last major trial, in fact" (Koenig episode 1).

The difference between Koenig and Lindsey's rationales for taking these cases, as evidenced here, is striking. Koenig's expertise was specifically requested due to her familiarity with involved subjects as indicated by her prior journalistic work, while Lindsey, by contrast, was not only not asked to pursue his investigation, but also appears to have chosen his work at a surface level. Although both podcasters seem to recognize the value of their familiarity with their respective stories' settings—Lindsey with Georgia, Koenig with Baltimore—Lindsey offers little explanation as to why he selected the case beyond his territorial proximity to it, and the case he selected, number one on the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's "top-ten list," was the highest profile one in the state. Before *Up and Vanished,* the Tara Grinstead case was documented in a

January 2006 episode of CNN's popular series *Nancy Grace,* the 2008 episode "Stolen Beauty"

of the CBS series *48 Hours,* and the 2010 episode "The Beauty Queen" of Investigation

Discovery's series *Disappeared*. If Lindsey wanted an investigative challenge, why did he

choose such a thoroughly documented case? While it is plausible that Lindsey truly believed the

prior reporting work to have been insufficient, it is clear that he recognized the case's existing

popularity, guaranteeing an established audience already interested in learning what happened to

Tara Grinstead. Additionally, if we recall the news values "threshold" (a story's scale and/or

intensity of impact) and "continuity" (the perpetuation of a single narrative or topic across

multiple stories), it becomes even clearer why Lindsey's choice in case would provide salient

material for reporting, instantly increasing his work's potential popularity.

Lindsey is no stranger to popular media, as he evidences when explaining his choice in

medium. In his first episode, he tells his audience that he publicized his interest on the popular

forum "WebSleuths" and was subsequently contacted by investigator Maurice Godwin, a

recurring character on the podcast. Lindsey explains a shift in platform, noting:

> "It was time that I got my facts straight. Time to do some major research on this case to even know what to ask him. Dates, times, people's names—I had to know it all. I totally streamlined my plan for the documentary, and decided to make a podcast to document my investigation. Mind you, I am not a podcaster. And I'm definitely not an investigator. But I was determined to tell Tara's story. And most of all, I wanted to know what happened to her. I bought some audio equipment and I called the investigator" (Lindsey episode 1).

This elaboration seems contradictory, if not completely paradoxical. If Lindsey recognizes the

need to "get [his] facts straight" before proceeding, why does he feel compelled to accelerate the

distribution of his product? Rather than separating the acquisition and synthesis of information

from its distribution, Lindsey conflates the processes, apparently feeling a sense of urgency not

to tell "Tara's story," as he calls it, but his own. This urgency indicates that Lindsey is aware that

a podcast will be quicker to produce than a documentary, driving him to abandon his trained field for one that accelerates the transfer of content from producer to market. And, speaking to not only the time but also the cost of production, Lindsey's casual comment about purchasing audio equipment suggests that the cost was negligible. The lack of importance that Lindsey affords to the equipment's cost, of course, is not a concrete indicator of its monetary value, but according to Hayley Tsukayama for the *Washington Post,* Lindsey was "armed with his $100 recording setup and the result of his Google search for cold cases" (Tsukayama). Regardless of the equipment's actual price tag, its narrative portrayal deemphasizes the purchase as a whole, leading the listener to believe that the acquisition was made with little trouble. Lindsey's introduction, then, confirms what many listeners already know, or at least believe, about podcasts: they're hot, and they're cheap.

Up and Vanished is, perhaps, the single work out of the four in my consideration which most heavily relies on the ease and accessibility of creating a podcast, because it is the only one that lacks the support of a network or publication. As Koenig opens each episode of *Serial* with "From *This American Life* and WBEZ Chicago, it's *Serial,"* Hunt acknowledges the support of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in each episode of *Accused,* and Goffard does the same for the *Los Angeles Times* in *Dirty John*. Lindsey, however, embarks on a completely independent endeavor, meaning that he cannot rely on the resources provided by a major news outlet. Yet while this independence is largely made possible by the accessibility of his new media format, cheapness in production of true crime is not a new phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, Clark writes of the medium's post-Reformation predecessor that "the pamphlet had a special status in the print trade of the period on account of the rapidity and cheapness with which it could be produced," indicating that earlier popular literature, too, prioritized revenue in selecting its methods (Clark

145). Beyond their low production costs, pamphlets shared in podcasts' salience by marketing

the visceral nature of the crime, as Clark notes:

> "There is, of course, a strong element of sensationalism in the range of lurid epithets used on title-pages to describe the act of murder: horrible, cruel, unnatural, inhuman, barbarous, bloody, outrageous, detestable, strange, notorious. Such terms constitute an essential aspect of the marketing methods, which have been characterized as 'aggressive, even rude,' used by early modern news writers to attract readers. Early news feeds on the extraordinary, the bizarre, the prodigious" (Clark 150).

Clark's description reflects what Lindsey acknowledges when he narrates: "I think there's

something about an unsolved case that intrigues everyone" (Lindsey episode 1). By referencing

the unsolved crime as an outlier, Lindsey frames the Tara Grinstead case as extraordinary, and in

doing so he both explains to his listener why they should be interested and, in a subtler manner,

reaffirms the typical ordering power of the state: if an extraordinary case is an unsolved one, then

an ordinary case is solved, meaning that in most cases, the state does its job.

The assumption that the state will mete out justice effectively works hand-in-hand with

an emphasis on gory detail to make the cases in contemporary true crime narratives seem extra

exceptional. This relationship operates in *Accused,* for example, as Hunt explains in her first

episode: "I've told a lot of murder stories in my 20 years as a journalist and this one's different.

It's complicated and political and frustrating as hell. The people who are usually front and center

trying to solve crimes are strangely quiet on this one, and there seems to be a reason" (Hunt

season 1, episode 1). Like Lindsey, Hunt communicates that the system's failure in this case

marks its distinction, meaning that "the people who are usually front and center trying to solve

crimes" should, in most other cases, be trusted to do their jobs. She also engages—as do all four

hosts of the podcasts in question—in explicit, visceral description of the crime: "Naked, bound,

and bruised, Beth was murdered when she was just 23 years old. She was strangled first and then

stabbed – fourteen punctures in her chest and six more in her neck" (Hunt, season 1 episode 1).

This emphasis on the horrifying, explicit details of the crime, while potentially necessary for

describing what occurred, speaks to audiences' well-documented desires for lurid detail, which

also reaches back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Clark indicates:

> "It is not necessarily the case that the credibility of the text was a primary consideration; and though modern commentators on early modern news may write dismissively of the credulity of contemporary readers, it is as well to remember that there are still plenty of people who enjoy reading about sightings of UFOs, the arrival of aliens, [and] the continued existence of Elvis, alive and well in South America" (Clark 151).

Clark's comment here should not be read as equating accounts of crimes to those of myths and

legends, but rather as showing that when a story is marketed as "truth," the intended audience is

not intrigued solely by the veracity of the account, but also by its sensationalism, which borders

between extraordinariness and impossibility. Visceral sensationalism and emotionality work

hand-in-hand with the moralistic nature of crime pamphlets, as Wiltenburg adds that "the 'truth'

purveyed in [pamphlets] might have little to do with modern standards of literal truth; the deeper

moral truth took precedence over mere factual details" (Wiltenburg 1384). Speaking to a similar

search for moral meaning in *In Cold Blood,* Flis observes that "in essence, Capote was striving

for truth but facts got in the way" (Flis 75). Such assertions bring up questions of priority: though

journalism is often altruistically considered an "objective" field, storytellers of all kinds often

seek to identify and convey a moral message beyond the mere communication of fact.

Though the podcasters who pored over court records, interviewed countless subjects, and

clashed with law enforcement in search of facts would scorn suggestions that their work values

constructed meaning over fact, it is only logical that a greater a moral message will have a wider

appeal than logical minutiae, especially considering the inclusion of "meaningfulness" and

"consonance" in Galtung and Ruge's news values. Furthermore, the podcasters themselves often

admit to moral motivations when discussing their work. In keeping with his style, Lindsey does

this most blatantly, when he admits, in the twentieth episode of *Up and Vanished:* "The point of this podcast was to find out what happened to Tara Grinstead, and now that we've discovered that something evil and heinous has happened to Tara, by default, this podcast is now an advocate of justice for what happened to Tara" (Lindsey episode 20). By invoking the "evil and heinous" nature of the crime in question and considering it his responsibility, "by default," to seek justice, Lindsey characterizes his work according to ethical stakes, using a moralistic appeal to promote his own project.

While crime pamphlets and podcasts may share in their moralistic approaches, low production costs, and sensational marketing appeal, the former sacrificed the revenue that the latter reaps through a feature of the podcast's modularity: advertisements. Nearly every podcast distributed in the contemporary mainstream features commercials, but different podcasts feature different ads to different degrees. While the outlet-supported *Serial*, *Accused,* and *Dirty John* typically play only one or two advertisements at a time—always at the beginning and end of each episode, and often during a short commercial break in the middle—*Up and Vanished* advertises much more heavily, often breaking for commercials multiple times per episode and playing up to three or four advertisements per break. Additionally, while the other three podcasts use different speakers for their advertising segments, *Up and Vanished* privileges its advertisers by having Lindsey narrate the ads himself, creating the effect of a celebrity endorsement which should boost the ad's efficacy and, presumably, warrant the podcast's charging a higher premium for the airtime. The importance of Lindsey's celebrity, which I will discuss further in the next chapter, proves essential to the podcast's capitalist motivations.

Beyond frequency and speaker, the most notable distinctions between podcasts' advertising approaches are their particular advertising clients. *Up and Vanished,* for example,

plays advertisements for home security systems, suggesting that a person who listens to a murder podcast might feel a greater need for physical protection, because crime narratives instill fear, rational or otherwise. The salience of a home security ad makes flat, straightforward sense, but more interestingly, both *Up and Vanished* and *Dirty John* advertise a game called "Hunt a Killer," a paid role-playing subscription that allows users to investigate their own fictional case. By advertising "Hunt a Killer," the podcasts encourage their listeners to join the investigative community they consume as entertainment, allowing them to feel like their favorite podcasters. This can simultaneously bolster and detract from the potency of "websleuthing" as a phenomenon. On one hand, it increases consumption of detective work as entertainment, thus contributing to the necessary feedback loop that sustains any trend, but on the other, it has the potential to satisfy a player's "armchair detective" desires: by replacing an actual murder with a fabricated one, it could quell a player's urges to embark, as Lindsey did, on their own real-life investigation.

While "Hunt a Killer" might satisfy some amateur investigators' desires for grandeur, the perpetuation of the current obsession with crime is in the interest of any podcaster invested in their story's success. This appears most clearly in the partnership between *Up and Vanished* and *Murder on the Orient Express,* a new major motion picture based on the aforementioned Christie novel of the same title. The relationship between the two works begins, like with the game and the home security system, as an advertising venture: in the twenty-fourth episode of *Up and Vanished,* Lindsey promotes *Murder on the Orient Express* as a movie which "has it all— transcending gender, age, and race," an interesting description for a story whose characters are based on crude, essentialist stereotypes (Lindsey episode 24). Lindsey's advertising for *Murder on the Orient Express* exemplifies the importance of variability in new media, as variability

allows the discrete modules which compose new media objects to be modified individually, so

an editor or creator may alter or replace one part while leaving the rest intact. This permits

podcasts to effectively feature time-sensitive ads—like those for a new feature film—and

potentially return to replace them later, meaning that a second listen to any episode of a podcast

will not necessarily feature the same ads as were heard at the episode's initial release.

Lindsey employs modularity to advertise his podcast's live tour even on the very first

episode, whose release would have of course preceded the tour announcement, and it allows him

to have since replaced the original *Murder on the Orient Express* advertisement. But Lindsey

does not end his relationship with *Murder on the Orient Express* with that one endorsement, as

he later partners with the feature film in a promotional venture titled *The Suspects—Presented by*

Up and Vanished *and* Murder on the Orient Express, in which he interviews cast members about

the appeal of true crime both in his podcast and in their film. Lindsey and the *Murder on the*

Orient Express cast discuss *Serial, Making a Murderer,* and *Up and Vanished* in conjunction

with *Murder on the Orient Express,* performing a casual conflation of true crime with truth-

inspired crime fiction with no clear purpose beyond the film's promotion to true crime

audiences. Lindsey similarly markets his own podcast by advertising a live tour denoted by the

hashtag #UAVLive—whose advertisements can now be heard, thanks to modularity, even on the

podcast's very first episode—and therefore generates added revenue by selling tickets to his

most avid listeners. On this subject, well-known TV writer and creator Dan Harmon observes in

his podcast *Harmontown* that "we can make fun of [Lindsey] because the guy's probably a

billionaire now—it's like a hugely popular podcast…and the rest of the podcast is him

advertising a tour he's going on and doing interviews with people about his podcast" (Harmon).

With this jab, Harmon confirms what we all suspect: that a venture born out of only surface-level

investigation, whose medium appears to have been chosen based on convenience alone, turned an unknown filmmaker into a celebrity podcaster.

Harmon's criticism is harsh, but it accurately captures the importance of advertisements in true crime podcasts. Audio advertising is not, however, the only capital-driven pursuit in which contemporary true crime engages, as each of the podcasts makes creative use of paratext. Beyond the narratives themselves, each of the podcasts in question places its content on a beautiful, highly-stylized website. *Serial* and *Up and Vanished* get their own domains: "serialpodcast.org" and "upandvanished.com," both of which confront the viewer with captivating landing pages. In the case of the former, the user is offered two images and prompted to engage by clicking to select a season before accessing more information; in the case of the latter, the user is confronted by a pop-up advertising, to no surprise, the *Up and Vanished* live tour. Fans can select their preferred tour dates before even reading a synopsis of the podcast. But most impressively tasteless, it also now offers fans the options to purchase t-shirts reading: "If I vanish, call Payne Lindsey." The more modest *Accused* and *Dirty John* are housed online by their respective publications—"cincinnati.com/series/accused" and "latimes.com/projects/la-me-dirty-john"—but they make similarly bold choices in visual representation. *Accused* uses an old photo of the season-one victim, Beth Andes, as the background for the webpage, so that as users scroll through the episode selection guide, they must face the sweet smile of a long-dead woman. *Dirty John* makes an opposite, yet parallel, choice: its header image—which fills most computer screens—is a wet and shirtless John, the perpetrator, and his image gradually zooms in and out, creating the effect that John slowly approaches, then fades away. A visit to any of these websites proves to be an intriguing, disquieting, and, most importantly, memorable endeavor.

Though an extensive analysis of paratext in true crime could likely fill a chapter of its own, I will mention only one more for the purpose of this argument: theme music. The use of theme music naturally sets podcasts apart from print narratives as a genre, as while a book might have its own website, it cannot introduce each chapter with a repetitive, audible song. As the values of consonance (affirmation of preconceived notions) and continuity suggest, people latch onto the recognizable, as exemplified by our cultural love of repetitive rhythms. All four of the podcasts in question take advantage of this notion: *Accused* plays a melancholic piano interlude with each episode's introduction; *Dirty John* invites intrigue by using a quick beat, played on a variety of instruments, as the backdrop to Goffard's narrated opening; and *Up and Vanished* splices together sound clips relevant to the investigation over a feminine voice singing a disquieting "do-dum" tune. Most recognizable to most, however, is *Serial's* theme music, which uses a high tempo and high pitch to create an ominous and, now, iconic introduction. As a pioneer of contemporary true crime, *Serial's* successful use of musical paratext established a precedent that violent crimes and catchy jingles belong together. In all cases, paratexts prime the audience to be absorbed, to be unsettled, and to recognize the story as a brand.

Like a soundtrack, podcasts can travel with us, accompanying listeners through speakers and earbuds during their commutes to work, their trips to the gym, and their meal preparations. Perhaps that's why podcasts make such a useful medium for the interests of a capitalist market: even while the audience is consuming a narrative, they are not required to sacrifice productivity. Because of the medium's pervasive, efficient-to-consume nature, they are bound to have cultural effects, which are largely informed by their ability to communicate a comprehensible narrative featuring recognizable character tropes.

Chapter 2: Murdering Mary: Characterization in Contemporary True Crime Narratives

When a nonfiction writer begins to assemble a narrative, it seems as if most of the work of characterization is already done. A nonfiction writer does not have to imagine what kind of expressions a person makes, what type of shoes they wear, or whether they change their hairstyle at any point. There's no need to imbue the character with a careful mix of positive and negative traits to make sure they're likable, but still believable. Not even names need to be invented, unless a subject has requested that theirs be changed. These decisions are not the writer's to make; the details they determine belong inherently to the already-existent characters.

These claims might make the nonfiction writer's work seem easy, but that is far from the case. It's true that nonfiction writers don't *have* to make factual decisions about their characters, but it's also true that they don't *get* to. Nonfiction writers are not afforded the creative liberty to imagine a person's shoes and, through a series of choices between suede or leather, flat or heeled, tied or untied, decide what they want those shoes to say. A nonfiction writer has to remember what the shoes looked like, whether they were tied or not, and go from there. Otherwise, they should sacrifice the detail.

This is not to say that a nonfiction writer has no right to characterization, but rather that in characterization, they are bound to the truth. An idealistic perspective might argue that nonfiction writers should represent their subjects exactly as they appear, but due to the limitations of time, word, and human subjectivity, to do so is impossible. Journalists strive to present not all the facts, but all the relevant ones, and the specific facts a journalist deems worthy or unworthy of representation are, of course, chosen at their—and their editors'—discretion. Characterization thus becomes an active and essential piece of nonfiction writing, and just as we see archetypes in fiction, in true crime we see the same tropes arise again and again.

In this chapter, I will consider the role of characterization in contemporary true crime narratives by discussing four character types that appear often in true crime: the reporter, who takes a rule-breaking approach to capitalize on audience appeal; the face of authority, which is really a town or setting; the murder victim, who is reduced and discussed in terms of feminine ideals; and the murderer, the figure simultaneously imbued with the most assumptions and afforded the most complexity. In my discussion, I will trace the appearance of these tropes in earlier true crime narratives, analyze the degree to which *Accused, Dirty John, Serial,* and *Up and Vanished* challenge or affirm common tropes of true crime, and argue that these tropes influence and necessitate one another.

The journalist, the renegade

The first type of character in question is the most essential, but may be the least obvious: the journalist. While written narratives allow the author to all but disappear from the text, as do Capote in *In Cold Blood* and Mailer in *The Executioner's Song,* journalists who report using audio must, at a minimum, self-identify at the beginning and end of each episode. Contemporary true crime narratives tend to go beyond this minimum requirement, however, as Goffard, Hunt, Koenig, and Lindsey all acknowledge their positionality and participation in the investigations throughout their podcasts. The degree to which the journalists foreground themselves in the narratives varies from podcast to podcast, and with it too changes the effect of the narrative and the type of journalist each work portrays. Regarding the journalist's level of involvement, *Dirty John* is the outlier: while Goffard does acknowledge his role in investigating and reporting the story of Debra Newell and John Meehan, the podcast focuses primarily on their relationship, rather than his investigation; Goffard himself rarely appears within the narrative. *Accused,*

Serial, and *Up and Vanished,* by contrast, tell the story of an investigation and use the reality being investigated as supporting evidence. By embracing the latter approach, twenty-first-century true crime narratives demonstrate a stylistic turn away from their twentieth-century predecessors, but twentieth-century tendencies carry over to influence contemporary characterization styles. In their self-characterizations, contemporary true crime podcasters make themselves out as renegades: rule-breakers who find their own way through their stories. My definition of the "renegade journalist" relies primarily on two influences: the rebellion characteristic of Norman Mailer's "hipster" and the innocence afforded by amateur status.

Mailer describes the hipster as a figure so affected by the "burning consciousness" of existentialism that they are disposed to wild, even psychopathic tendencies, and though such a figure may at first sound far from an innocent novice, the two figures are not mutually exclusive. This dualistic self-characterization complicates journalists' abilities to achieve unambiguity, or an absolute clarity and confidence in the details of a story, unaffected by human doubt. With the exception of Christopher Goffard's *Dirty John,* the focus on the amateur shifts the narrative's focus from a fixation on the crime alone to a bildungsroman-style telling in which a journalist learns as they progress throughout the narrative. The most extreme example of this shift in priority is Payne Lindsey's *Up and Vanished,* which is also the most willing to embrace twentieth-century narrative conventions and takes greater liberties with amateurism than do *Serial* or *Accused* due to a combination of professional training and gendered standards.

In order to unravel the choices and characterization of the twenty-first-century true crime journalist, we should first consider how contemporary true crime narratives sacrifice unambiguity by using a different narrative style than their twentieth-century predecessors. The more typical convention of the twentieth-century nonfiction or documentary novel—exemplified

by both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song*—features a seemingly omniscient narrator

who reports the events of the crime without acknowledging the investigative process. As

established in the previous chapter, the use of an omniscient narrator allows Capote to create a

panopticon effect, speaking from as authoritative a role as that of an all-knowing state, and this

seemingly unfettered access proves crucial to the reinforcement of a key news value:

unambiguity. Though this twentieth-century narrative approach is rare among contemporary

podcasters—who tend to acknowledge their own positionality and questions throughout the

narrative—interestingly, it is Lindsey, the podcaster who most focuses on himself as a character,

who makes the unique choice of employing an omniscient narrator. Rather than commencing

with Lindsey's self-explanation or the show's off-putting a capella theme song, as the podcast's

first episode begins, a deep, unidentified voice narrates:

> "Tara Grinstead was a 30-year-old former beauty queen and local high school teacher
> living in the small town of Ocilla, Georgia. She was a gorgeous brunette with a striking
> smile, and someone her students and peers looked up to. On Saturday, October 22nd,
> 2005, Tara went to a local beauty pageant during the day. After the pageant was over,
> Tara left at about 8 p.m. and hung out at a friend's barbecue just eight blocks away from
> her home. Around 11 p.m., Tara left the barbecue and went home to her house. On
> Monday morning, October 24th, Tara didn't show up for work at the school. Concerned
> students and teachers called the local police, and around 8:45 a.m., Ocilla P.D. was
> dispatched to Tara's house…To this day there has never been a confirmed sighting of
> Tara Grinstead. If you have any information about the disappearance of Tara Grinstead,
> please contact the Georgia Bureau of Investigation" (Lindsey, episode 1).

This narrative—whose particular introductory details will prove important later in this chapter—

sets up contextual information that the listener will presumably need in order to understand the

story. But it does more than just present context: although Lindsey credits the speaker's voice to

a "Rob"—with no last name provided—at the end of the episode, the voice is unidentified at the

time of its narration, and therefore it takes up the role of an omniscient narrator, one who

possesses unlimited information about a situation and may therefore present facts without

qualifying them. This practice fits with what Flis identifies as a characteristic of the documentary novel, which she defines in oppositional terms: "Documentary crime novels should not be equated with crime fiction that has no reference to real-life events. They differ from historical accounts as well, namely, in their application of novelistic techniques and clearly noticeable aesthetic emplotment," allowing for the fictionalization, noted earlier, that Capote employs in *In Cold Blood* and Mailer uses in *The Executioner's Song*[3] (Flis 70).

While the use of a supposedly-omniscient narrator might thus seem to detract from a work's credibility, it often has the opposite effect, as the seemingly all-knowing narrative approach establishes a sense of unambiguity. As Meissner notes, "an event that is easier to interpret will have a better chance to become news than an event with 'many and inconsistent implications,'" and Lindsey's anonymous narrator presents a complex event—on which, as we learn throughout the podcast, sources hold a diverse range of opinions—in a straightforward, easily-interpretable manner (Meissner). Although investigative work by multiple contributors, and several disagreements, went into establishing Tara's timeline and whereabouts, Lindsey does not initially recognize the complexity of the case, marking a stark contrast to Hunt's approach. She admits, at the beginning of *Accused:* "In some ways I feel like a stalker. For nearly a year, I've been tracking every waking moment, every conversation, every move of a woman named Elizabeth Wells Andes" (Hunt, season 1 episode 1). While Hunt's introduction does not differ too vastly from Lindsey's in content—as she goes on to engage in an aesthetic description of Elizabeth, or Beth—the acknowledgment of her research and resulting accountability as a speaker separates the two works.

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[3] "After claiming that the book 'does its best to be a factual account' ([Mailer] 1051) of Gilmore's activities between his release in April and his execution the following January, Mailer acknowledges that he has several times manipulated the facts" (Guest 155).

By embracing the omniscient narrator, Lindsey reflects the choices of his twentieth century predecessors, but evidence of their influences does not end there, as he presents himself in a style similar to Mailer's iconic "hipster." Honing his "hipster" persona, Mailer captures the appeal of the renegade journalist not by featuring himself directly in *The Executioner's Song*, but instead by capturing the sense of the "American existentialist" or, as he distastefully puts it, "the white negro."[4] In an essay named for the latter: "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," Mailer claims that the figure of the "hipster" results from a notion established in the previous chapter: "the [collective] psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb," which I earlier linked to what Wiltenburg calls "a widespread post-Reformation sense of crisis, one that fueled growing apocalyptic ideas as well" and the political instability, moral bankruptcy, and environmental catastrophe that worry much of the population of the United States—and the world—at present (Mailer 583, Wiltenburg 1395). The similarities between present-day societal anxiety and that of the mid-twentieth century become clearer as Mailer elaborates: "A totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands for the general anxiety is greater," driving the "hipster" figure to emerge as an existentialist outlier (Mailer 585). But Mailer's "hipster" does far more for our understanding of contemporary true crime than display a mere parallel in societal climate, as the hipster proves essential to my reading of the one character on whom the entire narrative depends: the journalist.

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[4] Mailer argues that the hipster who embodies existential anxiety is best characterized as the "white negro" due to the constant pressure imposed by systemic racism and the legacy of slavery: "it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy of two centuries," Mailer writes, leading to an inevitable "life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger" (Mailer 585-6). Still, I consider Mailer's reasoning reductive and antiquated, and his language racist, and will use "hipster" instead.

Though Mailer never explicitly self-identifies as the hipster, his writing gives such credit to and so admires the complexity of the figure that it seems as if Mailer considers himself adjacent to, if not a representative of, the type. As Mailer concludes his essay, he extends the web of the hipster to more various identifiable types, noting that "[the mystic's] inner experience of the possibilities within death is his logic. So, too, for the existentialist. And the psychopath. And the saint and the bullfighter and the lover. The common denominator for them all is their burning consciousness of the present," and Mailer's access to this "inner experience"—as demonstrated by his 9,000-word discussion of it—suggests that he shares the "burning consciousness" possessed by his laundry list of figures (Mailer 588). If this "burning consciousness" fuels anxiety, then anxiety fuels a search for truth and remembrance, as Mailer notes that the mass-deaths of the mid-twentieth century instilled a fear that "our death itself would be unknown, unhonored, and unremarked…our psyche was subjected itself to the intolerable anxiety that death being causeless, life was causeless as well" (Mailer 583).

Mailer uses existentialist anxiety as an explanation for psychopathic tendencies, but in the context of new media, it also contributes to the drive for self-expression and pursuit of truth. While Mailer claims that once a person has accepted the inevitability and meaninglessness of death, the only option is "to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self…whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself"—his assertion resonates with Majid Yar's discussion of the increasing instances of self-representation in new media, as "media have played an increasingly significant role as the channels through which the supposedly unique and highly differentiated self is asserted and displayed" (Mailer 584, Yar 250). According to Yar's reading, existentialism drives individuals' desire to be seen and understood as unique, which leads them to center themselves in self-

produced media. This theory falls in line with Sara Ahmed's as she puts the notion of perpetual anxiety over death into a more general and productive light: "the narratives that seek to preserve the present through working on anxieties of death as the necessary consequence of the demise of social forms also seek to locate that anxiety in some bodies, which then take on fetish qualities as objects of fear" (Ahmed 135). More simply put, the impulse to "preserve the present," or put off the decline that the anxious subject fears is approaching, requires an object if the anxiety is to be successfully communicated in a narrative pertaining to a specific fear. This logic also can also justify a relentless, insatiable search for truth. General anxiety dictates the need to identify, understand, and communicate the object of fear, and the existentialism of Mailer's hipster instills the rebellious energy of the renegade, who is resistant to regulation and will pursue their mission at all costs.

The trope of the hipster plays well as a character for a journalist not only because is it fitting for the present, but also because it sells. The renegade journalist is cool, and claims authority from said coolness. As Mailer puts it: "The unstated essence of Hip, its psychopathic brilliance, quivers with knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one's power for new kinds of perception," and thus it is the very resistance to rules and conventional ways of acting that allows access to knowledge not attainable by most (Mailer 584-5). Conveniently, this figure is appealing to audiences, and for a journalist to characterize themselves as such aids ratings and advertising success. Lindsey provides the clearest example of this capitalist motivation, as he not only boasts his inexperience, but grabs attention through increasingly daring claims as his podcast progresses. Perhaps the most egregious and least responsible of these occurs in a "Case Evidence" episode of *Up and Vanished*, when Lindsey interviews Bo Dukes, accessory after the fact to Tara Grinstead's murder, and asks: "How many times have you contemplated suicide?"

knowing based on testimony from Dukes's girlfriend that suicidal tendencies are a recurring

problem for him (Lindsey*: Case Evidence 07.10.2017)*. Not only is Lindsey's question

inappropriate, and potentially dangerous, but it emerges entirely unprompted: he poses the

question abruptly, with no lead-up, showing not only a lack of caution and sensitivity, but also a

lack of refinement in his interview skills as a whole. For his audience, however, the question is

likely attention-grabbing, and it shows that Lindsey will push beyond the conventional limits of

care and decency, making him a more controversial and compelling lead.

Lindsey's tactless treatment of suicide provides a useful point of entry for considering

what makes him stand out as a renegade journalist, as Lindsey seems more dedicated to his

personal convictions and less interested in fact than his contemporaries. After the release of the

identity of Tara Grinstead's killer, Ryan Duke, Lindsey becomes absorbed in anecdotal evidence

attesting to Duke's character and considers it reason not to accept the verdict, rather than

questioning the validity of actual evidence as Koenig and Hunt do in their considerations of guilt

and innocence. Lindsey's embrace of his own inclinations and his lack of understanding for the

seriousness of suicide coincide when he discovers, from an unnamed source "on the inside" of

the jail where Ryan Duke was detained after a drunk driving arrest, that Duke had been on

suicide watch. Lindsey reacts:

> "Ryan Duke was currently on suicide watch. Not only in 2017, but also back in 2010,
> when he was arrested for his DUI. I found that really strange. Was he paranoid of getting
> caught the first time? Surely they fingerprinted him when he was arrested. Was he scared
> of a match?" (Lindsey episode 15).

By voicing these speculations, Lindsey betrays his impulse to jump to conclusions, and he fails

to consider the potential complexity of Duke's mental health. Though Duke is a murderer and, as

such, has demonstrated a capability for human cruelty not shared by most, it is entirely possible,

if not plausible, that he would suffer from a disorder in his mental health. Lindsey's immediate

assumption that Duke only feared consequence, rather than being suicidal due to depression, extreme remorse, self-loathing, etc., conveys that his understanding of suicide is insufficient. Lindsey's treatment of suicide therefore betrays his combined recklessness and incompetence, illustrating the space where his hipster and amateur qualities converge.

While in *Up and Vanished,* the appeal of the amateur takes form as the outlaw to good practice and results in caution-to-the-wind style journalism, *Accused* and *Serial* embrace the renegade figure through a subtler approach. Lindsey's inability to adequately discuss suicide exemplifies his relationship to most evidence presented in the case and marks his divergence from Hunt and Koenig. While Lindsey prioritizes his own hunches rather than the more complicated and less sensational data, Hunt focuses on failures among the Newport Police Department in the second season of *Accused,* noting that "one officer spotted men's footprints in blood…on an otherwise clean tile on her bathroom floor. It had the potential to be crucial evidence…Someone—it's not clear which officer—snapped a photo, and that's it. That's not what should have happened," and goes on to explain that effective police proceedings would have removed the tile and preserved it as evidence, or, at the very least, placed another object in the photo to use as a comparative size reference (Hunt season 2, episode 3). Similarly, Koenig pores over call records from cell towers used in the State's case against Adnan and enters into an extensive discussion evaluating the validity of cell tower data. She explains: "I'm going to try very hard not to bore you right now, but I do want to talk about cell records for a sec, because I want to know whether the State used the call records accurately, and fairly at Adnan's trial," and critically engages "some recent reports about how cell phone evidence isn't as reliable as it was once cracked up to be" (Koenig episode 5). Koenig's tone is earnest, her vocabulary causal, and she recognizes that she might "bore" the audience with the complexity of the necessary details—

although she is doing her job thoroughly, she's trying to be cool. While Lindsey similarly puts on

an air of coolness, he tends to accept police accounts at face value, and then questions the

evidence based on personal suspicions rather than a qualification according to standard

proceedings. After arriving unannounced at the former home of Tara Grinstead, now occupied by

a private citizen,[5] Lindsey enters the front yard to look at the site where a glove examined for

evidence was found over a decade ago, noting:

> "From Ocilla Police Chief Billy Hancock's description, I knew precisely where that latex
> glove had been found in her yard…So we analyzed the area ourselves. The glove's
> placement just didn't make any sense. It seemed to be heading away from where any
> perpetrator would've parked their car, almost going into the neighbor's yard. If someone
> dropped it in a rush or an accident, this just didn't seem to be the likely place" (Lindsey
> episode 15).

Lindsey's reasoning behind the abnormality of the glove's placement, then, mirrors his lack of

understanding for Duke's suicidal tendencies: both are based almost entirely on personal feeling.

Lindsey's discussion of the glove also, in this instance, reflects his will to portray himself as a

hardened figure, as he comments, upon entry of Grinstead's old house: "This whole podcast, that

was the first time I was nervous," a claim which I find difficult to believe, given that it was

issued fifteen episodes into the investigation of a murder (*Lindsey* episode 15). Lindsey's

insistence on his own toughness also points to the gendering of the renegade journalist figure,

which in part permits Lindsey's amateurism.

  While Lindsey dedicates himself to the rule-breaking and way-making that supposedly

makes him cool, his casual, excitable persona does not exemplify the existentialist

disillusionment characteristic of Mailer's hipster. Goffard, Hunt, and Koenig, however, do to

varying degrees through their critiques of the state and their acceptance of responsibility over

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[5] "I'd driven by before, but this time, I decided to knock on the door. I had no idea what I thought would happen, but it seemed like something I should do—at least once" (Lindsey episode 15).

their cases. We see this approach right away in Hunt's framing of the Beth Andes murder case as

"complicated and political and frustrating as hell," an observation which crystallizes the attitude

that both she and Koenig put forth in their investigations relative to the state: vexed by the

failings of the legal system, they choose to take the cases into their own hands (Hunt season 1,

episode 1). Although, as established in the previous chapter, Hunt and Koenig's frustrations do

not question the state fundamentally, but rather hinge on the acceptance of how the state *should*

function, both journalists characterize themselves relative to the frustrating nature of their

investigations. Koenig, for example, begins *Serial* by remarking:

> "For the last year, I've spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school
> kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999…I just want to point out something I'd
> never really thought about before I started working on this story. And that is, it's really
> hard to account for your time, in a detailed way, I mean" (Koenig, episode 1).

In this instance, Koenig presents one of her core concerns with the case and relates to it not as an

objective fact, but a shared yet personal reality. Moreover, her comment recognizes the story as a

learning process, inviting the audience to understand that as they learn about the case through

Koenig's narrative, they will also see Koenig, as a character within the narrative, learn. This both

offers the audience a more dynamic character to track and demonstrates Koenig's approach to

ambiguity, which is the most radical of any journalist in my consideration. Rather than claiming

authoritative, all-knowing status, Koenig admits to her own vexations with the story and her own

potential distrust of the facts, and in this way, her narrative provides a clear example of how

unambiguity does not necessarily ensure factuality. Koenig's admission of the story's uncertain

nature combines with her acknowledgement of her amateurism to instill the audience with

greater trust in the narrative, so that through her candor, Koenig invites the audience to trust that

no part of her story is invented.

Koenig's claims to amateurism share some definite similarities with Hunt's approach, though Hunt seems less eager to embrace amateur status. Where Koenig has told us she is "not even a crime reporter," Hunt is, and though she too presents her doubts and frustrations in both the Beth Andes and Retha Welch cases, Hunt places emphasis on the amateurism characteristic of the field, not of her own reporting. Noting that the *Cincinnati Enquirer* originally considered the Retha Welch case low-stakes, and it assigned to a novice reporter, Hunt explains: "This standard practice in newsrooms nationwide. You give green reporters the most predictable beats that they're not likely to screw up too badly. In some newsrooms, a novice reporter might be given the crime beat" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Compared to the "green reporter," then, Hunt situates herself as a relative expert; as a crime reporter—at this point, one with the first season of *Accused* already under her belt—Hunt performs her duty by stepping in and taking control of the case. This is not exactly the typical work of a "renegade," but if we recall that Mailer's model hipster is characterized as possessing a "burning consciousness of the present," Hunt's ability to perceive an insufficiency—and her drive to work against it by acquiring knowledge—falls in line. Her assumption of personal responsibility for the investigation of unsolved murders affirms Mailer's assertion that: "There is a depth of desperation to the condition which enables one to remain in life only by engaging death, but the reward is their knowledge that what is happening at each instant of the electric present is good or bad for them, good or bad for their cause, their love, their action, their need," as Hunt's emotional explanation of how she chose the Retha Welch case demonstrates her dedication to her cause (Mailer 588). As she opens her second season, Hunt comments:

> "If you ever want a sense of how many unsolved or sloppily investigated murders there are out there, just pick one to examine, and go from there. After our podcast *Accused: The Unsolved Murder of Elizabeth Andes,* my producer Amanda Rossman and I were inundated with suggestions of other cases to examine…These emailed suggestions made

it clear that there are a lot of cases worth exploring, so we're going to do our best to help shine some light where we can. We wish we could tackle every case suggested to us; we hear how frustrated and heartbroken people are; how desperate they are to have anyone take just one more look…If you have an ounce of empathy, it's tough to take on one case while passing on another, so we started digging into several at once and decided whichever one came together first would be our next season, so here we are." (Hunt season 2, episode 1)

In this explanation, Hunt emphasizes her dedication not just to her particular case, but to her investigative work in general, and she uses emotional language to humanize herself and connect both to the listener and to those victimized in the cases that she studies. With her casual reference to "whichever [case] came together first," she acknowledges the somewhat hasty and/or coincidental nature of the project, similarly suggesting to the audience that because this an honest, somewhat experimental effort, they can trust it more than they might a more formalized investigation.

Though Hunt, Koenig, and Lindsey all foreground themselves and the processes by which they acquire knowledge in their narratives, Hunt and Koenig take approaches more similar to each other's than to Lindsey's. A clear explanation for this appears in their respective outlets—as established earlier, Koenig reports for NPR, Hunt for the *Cincinnati Enquirer,* and Lindsey for a popular media sensation of his own design—but is also rooted in gender. Lindsey emphasizes his own evolution and learning process to a greater degree than Hunt and Koenig do, which he exemplifies in a particularly self-congratulatory fashion by proclaiming:

"I feel like I'm a part of this. Not just because of the podcast, I personally feel like I'm part of this…That's what's different about it; it's not what it started out to be. I was just trying to tell a story in the beginning, but now I'm trying to seek justice beyond just finding out what happened to Tara, and that's for personal reasons, and that's what's crazy about this whole story." (Lindsey episode 15)

Like Hunt, Lindsey recognizes his emotional investment in the case, but he locates the source of the emotion at a different source. For Hunt, the cases are what is "worth exploring" due to how

frustrated, heartbroken, and desperate those affected are, and this is recognizable to anyone with

"an ounce of empathy," but for Lindsey, "what's crazy about this whole story" is not the case

itself, but Lindsey's involvement in it and the impact that his presence had. Though this

distinction is rooted in Lindsey's comparative lack of training and tact, I also propose that he

gets away with his overt amateurism because of his gender, both within the investigation and as

he conveys it in the narrative.

In the narrative, the figure who continues learning as they go is made more approachable

due to their ability to relate, but for a female speaker like Hunt or Koenig, their claims should

still be checked with careful evidence and their authority qualified with credentials, while

Lindsey, a male speaker, embraces his own evolution with wide-eyed wonder and enamors his

audience to his persona by offering details about his personal life—most notably, his

grandmother. While Lindsey's grandmother appears first as a loosely-relevant source—"That's

my grandma, but she's lived in Tifton, which is only a half hour from Ocilla, for nearly half her

life. Maybe she knew something"—she appears a few times throughout the podcast to offer her

takes on Tifton and her vague connection to people related in the case, but mostly to make

Lindsey appear endearing (Lindsey episode 1). Her most lengthy contribution appears in the

podcast's last episode:

> Payne Lindsey: "Most of my previous conversations with my grandma had been about
> how proud of me she was, or how many cowboy cookies she needed to make for me, or
> someone, or anyone for that matter, but I had never really sat down with her to discuss
> the case. After all, she only lives 15 minutes from Ocilla and her best friend Melba was at
> the beauty pageant and talked to Tara on the night she went missing. I sat down to talk
> with her, to have a real conversation about things, and the first thing she said was:"
> Grandma Lindsey[6]: "I'll just have to brag on my grandson here. You really got it going
> again." (Lindsey episode 24, part 1).

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[6] Payne Lindsey never actually states his grandmother's name; she appears only as "Grandma Lindsey" on the *Up and Vanished* website.

Not only does Lindsey's grandmother serve to characterize her grandson using sweet personal details, but she also reinforces notions of Lindsey's centrality to the case, acting as a proxy for Lindsey's self-congratulation. I argue that this decision is gendered because the same choice, if made by a female journalist, would likely make her seem infantile and would undermine her credibility, as she would be presumed to have less of it in the first place. By contrast, Hunt and Koenig's most-referenced figures—the people they thank for their support, partnership, etc.—are their respective producers, Amanda Rossman and Dana Chivvis.

Lindsey's gender almost certainly also affects his ability to investigate the case, as while he proceeds with his investigation without any press credentials or relevant authority, civilians, attorneys, police officers, forensic experts, and even fellow journalists repeatedly make the decision to take him seriously and even commend his investigation. Although he does at times encounter resistance, as any journalist does, his female contemporaries experience it on a more significant scale. While all of the podcasters in question make narrative choices regarding which hindrances to their investigations they do or do not present, Hunt highlights some particularly gendered challenges. She notes that Richard Walter, "a world renowned profiling expert" with a professional investigative organization called the Vidocq Society, refers to her as a "silly woman" and tells her: "you're spinning your hair and playing coquettish and getting nothing…So you're playing detective, then?" (Hunt season 1, episode 3). Another example arises when Hunt tells Buzz, the former employer of murder victim Beth Andes, "The family's lawyer reached out, said it might be an interesting case to look at. And it is. Mostly because-" and Buzz cuts her off by remarking: "'Interesting' is not a word I would use for a murder, ma'am" (Hunt season 1, episode 5). Hunt concedes that Buzz is "probably right," but he continues to interrupt her, calling her "ma'am" intermittently and eventually requesting that she put him in contact with her boss,

so that he could confirm that she actually works for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Because Hunt is

required not only to offer, but to corroborate her employment at a newspaper, the exchange

demonstrates her need to qualify her authority in order to ensure the validity of her inquiry, a

request which independent investigator Lindsey does not face and could not fulfill. The instances

in which Hunt needs to self-validate, then, demonstrate an overlap between differences in gender

and differences in profession, which are best communicated in Walter's comment: "[Hunt's

question] is kind of like me trying to tell you how to write a story. Allegedly you have skill that

can do a good job. Otherwise you wouldn't be employed. But well, that's not true, but anyway"

(Hunt season 1, episode 3). Though this comment has no sexist implications on its own, Walter

issues it in a condescending tone, following his references to Hunt as silly and coquettish; but

more generally, it alludes to a distrust of journalists. Lindsey, because he's not a journalist, is

neither held to the same standards nor faced with the same presuppositions as a professional

journalist like Hunt, which solidifies the appeal of his gendered status as a renegade.

The face of authority

Despite the appeal of the lawless, amateur character, consumers of true crime don't really

want an unchecked account. Integral to all narratives that depict real events is the verification by

an authority beyond the teller, and like most aspects of true crime narratives, the figure of

authority has changed over time. In the seventeenth century, it was simple: God. In the twentieth

century, falling in line with the appeal to the state, there was the constant presence of a state

authority figure in the narrative—in the case of *In Cold Blood*, for example, it was Alvin Dewey,

the Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent whom Capote paints in a favorable light[7] and through

whom much of the narrative is focalized. But for twenty-first century new media crime

narratives, the appeal to authority is more complicated. Some sort of agent of the state is still

there, to varying degrees depending on the podcast, but the figures imbued with the most

authority are often civilians. Due to the changing nature of new media production, the voice of

authority belongs to a collective: the figures who make up the city or town where the murder has

taken place, creating the effect that the real authority is not a person, but a setting.

As noted in my first chapter, Goffard opens *Dirty John* with an audio recording of

Assistant District Attorney Matt Murphy, and in doing so begins to tell the story literally through

the voice of the state. But, as I observed, though Goffard starts with Murphy, a majority of the

testimonials in *Dirty John* are given by family members and similar character witnesses

connected to Debra Newell and John Meehan; Murphy is consulted periodically for his expert

opinion. Goffard's presentation of Murphy appears almost as an inverse to Capote's use of

Dewey: while the former appears early in the narrative, then fades into the role of a commentator

on the side, the latter does not appear until a majority of the crime's narration has concluded, but

"acts as the central intelligence, guiding the reader's integration of plot elements," throughout

most of the book, as Leonora Flis argues (Flis 78). Flis derives this conclusion from John

Hollowell, who interprets the ordering of events in *In Cold Blood* as "drawn to a large degree

from detective Dewey's verbal world, because it strategically offers an explanatory framework

for understanding the murders" (Flis 78). In contemporary, investigative true crime narratives,

however, podcasters Hunt, Koenig, and Lindsey present an insufficiency in the existing detective

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[7] "The Bureau's Garden City representative, and the agent responsible for a sizable portion of western Kansas, is lean and handsome fourth-generation Kansan of forty-seven name Alvin Adams Dewey" (Capote 80).

work as the motive behind each of their investigations, meaning that foregrounding a *state*

authority would make little sense. That doesn't stop Lindsey from situating a private detective—

Maurice Godwin, a gruff, frank, Southern man, who self-identifies: "I worked this case from

March of '06 to over past 2009 for her family, and probably other than the GBI, there's no one

who knows more about the Tara Grinstead case than myself"—at the center of his investigation

(Lindsey episode 1). Not only does Lindsey feature Godwin in nearly every regular episode of

the podcast, but he also brings Godwin and a defense attorney named Philip Holloway on

frequently for bonus "Case Evidence" and "Q&A" episodes in which, respectively, Lindsey and

the featured "expert" (either Godwin or Holloway) review details of the case or answer listener

questions.

Like Capote's, Lindsey's approach falls in line with a classic style of journalism that has

explanatory roots in Galtung and Ruge's news values. Regina G. Lawrence characterizes the

approach as "the 'official dominance' model of the news," claiming that according to decades

worth of research on communication and news media, "journalists rely heavily on institutionally

positioned officials for the raw materials of news, and these elites act as 'authorized knowers'

that are considered by journalists to be the most legitimate sources of news" (Lawrence 5). The

reasoning behind this notion is straightforward enough: people with training and titles are

generally perceived to be more credible and knowledgeable than people without, which bolsters

the newsworthiness of a story because the presence of an expert's opinion reduces ambiguity,

allows the story to reference an "elite person," and can also increase consonance (the affirmation

of preconceived notions or stereotypes), as I will prove in the next chapter. As Yar points out,

however, adhering to the "official dominance" model is more difficult now than ever due to

"*new* media forms in which social subjects significantly reconstituted as *the primary producers*

of self-generated media representations" (Yar 248). Yar's argument focuses on the use of media in criminological studies, but her points remain relevant, as she claims that the increased accessibility of new media forms undermines the "'few-to-many model of communication—a small number of media producers disseminate discourses to a mass audience…[and] media are organised into 'one way' channels—communication flows unidirectionally from producers to consumers, but seldom in any other direction," which is integral to preserving the authority of the "authorized knowers" in the official dominance model (Yar 249). It makes sense, then, why an increase in podcasts' essentiality as purveyors of non-fiction would coincide with a move away from the "official dominance" model—which *Accused, Dirty John, Serial,* and even *Up and Vanished* have made.

  While Goffard and Lindsey consult Murphy and Godwin before anyone else, both Hunt and Koenig launch into their podcasts with testimony not from an appointed authority figure, but from a character witness: someone close to the victim or suspected killer who can offer a personal, rather than a legal or official, account. For Hunt in the first season of *Accused,* it's Sue Parmlee, "one of Beth's best friends," who says: "I remember [Beth] certainly having really been pretty happy, smiling, laughing, calm, having a good time," followed by Rich Micali, "a college friend who married one of Beth's roommates," who notes that "[for Beth] to be brutalized this way was very hard to see and to deal with" (Hunt season 1, episode 1). In season two, we first hear from victim Retha Welch's friend Wanda von Holly, who describes Welch as "wonderful, vivacious, full of life, happy, successful" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Though Sue Parmlee reappears a few times, none of these figures end up being central to the case, showing that their primary purpose is to vouch for the good character of the victim. The first expert cited in *Serial,* however, is a sort of hybrid: "a woman named Rabia Chaudry. Rabia knows Adnan pretty well.

Her younger brother Saad is Adnan's best friend. And they believe he's innocent," Koenig says

by way of introduction, soon adding that "Rabia is a lawyer herself. [But] she mostly does

immigration stuff" (Koenig episode 1). Koenig briefly offers Rabia's professional opinion—"she

thought the attorney botched the case—not just botched it, actually, but threw the case on

purpose so she could get more money for the appeal"—but the point of Rabia's testimony is her

description of Adnan Syed:

> "He was like the community's golden child…an honor roll student, volunteer EMT. He was on the football team. He was a star runner on the track team. He was the homecoming king. He led prayers at the mosque. Everybody knew Adnan to be somebody who was going to do something really big" (Koenig episode 1).

Koenig fact-checks and tempers Rabia's description, but ultimately concludes: "you get the

picture. He was an incredibly likable and well-liked kid," and after her conversation with Rabia,

she goes on to speak to Rabia's brother Saad, Adnan's mother, his high school friends and

teachers—all people who can speak to Adnan's character. Goffard takes a similar approach in

Dirty John, as he consults the family members of Debra Newell more than anyone else, and as

we have already seen, Lindsey is eager to emphasize personality over factual evidence.

Hunt and Koenig do not, of course, consult character witnesses alone, and they do feature

figures who reside in official positions of authority in their investigations. When Hunt and

Koenig speak to "authorized knowers," it often serves to cement their own self-characterization

as relatable and accessibly due to their still-learning status, as Hunt does when describing former

Oxford Police Chief Joseph Statum:

> "Statum was really interesting. He kept saying, 'Well, this was 37 years ago. I don't remember everything.' He would kinda be cute about it. 'You were just a glimmer in your daddy's eye.' But the truth is he remembered a lot about it. He kept surprising me with how much he actually retained after all these years." (Hunt season 1, episode 1)

and Koenig does especially with Deirdre Enright, a lawyer with the Innocence Project at University of Virginia School of Law, who Koenig admires in a state of near-awe:

> "A conversation with [Deirdre] never seems to begin exactly. It's already there, ongoing, her thoughts churning, and you just kinda join in when you're ready and hope that you can keep up. She is not a small talker or a beater around of bushes. You discuss *whatever* it is you came to discuss full-on, looking it squarely in the face. She has no time for bullshit. Not because she's above it or anything but because she actually has no time. She's one of the busiest and most curious people I've ever met." (Koenig episode 7)

These figures are consulted for factual evidence and explanatory interpretation, but the adoring tone in which Hunt and Koenig describe them humanizes both authority figure and teller, cultivating a sense of trust based on earnestness and goodwill rather than an authoritative position. The underlying message is simple: we believe these people because we like them, not because we *have* to believe them.

If, due to the move away from the "official dominance" model, the authority imbued by credentials and training is de-centered, then who is left to vouch for how a society or reality should be? Who determines what is normal? Carolyn Kitch's analysis of breaking-news journalism provides part of an answer. Kitch argues that in episodes of public trauma or destruction (including acts of terrorism, natural disasters, and gruesome murders), "it is not the dead but the typical people of the community, and by extension the grieving nation, who become the main characters; their behaviour…becomes the main plot" (Kitch 34). Though in true crime, unlike in breaking news, civilians' grief process comes far from comprising the "main plot," Kitch's assertion about the centrality of the "typical people of the community" resonates with the true crime narratives in question. The multiple character references that Goffard, Hunt, Koenig, and Lindsey all consult make up a chorus of civilian testimonies, and they frequently reference these testimonies as being indicative of the community at large. The standard of normalcy—the descriptor of how things "should be"—is rooted in the description of the city or town where the

crime occurred. In *Accused* season one, it comes after the comments from Sue Parmlee and Rich

Micali:

> "The city is Oxford, Ohio, a college town about 45 minutes north of Cincinnati. It's home to Miami University, where Beth Andes studied for four and a half years. This is the type of town that transforms over summer and winter breaks, when the 15,000-plus students flee back home and the city's left with fewer than 20,000 full-time residents.
> "Generally speaking, this place is the definition of safe. This is a town that had three reported rapes, six robberies, and 12 aggravated assaults in all of 1978, according to FBI crime statistics." (Hunt season 1, episode 1).

In *Serial,* it follows Rabia Chaudry into the narrative:

> "[Rabia's office is] in this little strip mall. Across the parking lot, there's a new Pakistani restaurant, an African evangelical church, an Indian clothing shop, a convenience store. On the sidewalk outside, I found a teeny weeny bag of marijuana.
> "Baltimore County is like this, at least on the west side. It's where a lot of middle class and working class people go, many immigrants included, to get their kids out of the badass city. Though the badass city is close by." (Koenig episode 1)

In *Dirty John,* the description is tied to Matt Murphy:

> "If you're from somewhere else and have a mental picture of Orange County, about an hour south of LA, Newport Beach is probably part of that image. It's the side of the county that the tourist guides want you to see. Pacific Coast Highway runs through it, luxury shopping, piers and surf shops and plastic surgeons, yachts and cliffside mansions. I used to cover this city as a crime reporter for a local newspaper. There weren't a lot of murders, maybe one a year, two or three in a very bad year. Greed or lust figured prominently in the most memorable ones.
> "These days, if you're one of the rare people who meet a violent death in Newport Beach, Matt Murphy is the prosecutor who will hear about it. The homicide case that landed on his desk in the summer of 2016 was particularly violent and it was unique in his experience." (Goffard episode 1)

And in *Up and Vanished,* it's all about the supposed secrecy of the town:

> "This small town in South Georgia had become this impenetrable community that just refused to rehash the old wounds, or just plain too scared to talk." (Lindsey episode 1).

The second season of *Accused* offers a historicized, standout description, but a characterization

of the town nonetheless:

> "In the twenties and thirties, the streets were run by the mob. Old-time gangsters made millions off casinos and bootlegging. Homes and restaurants hid illegal speakeasies

during the prohibition days, and city cops were known to pocket bribes in exchange for looking the other way. Corruption back in the day ran deep, and it reached all levels of the police department." (Hunt season 2, episode 1).

With the exception of the characterization of Newport, Kentucky offered in the second season of *Accused,* all of these descriptions paint a relatively innocent picture of the towns they capture, and in all cases, they convey the status quo, communicating what life should be when it goes undisturbed. Rather than allowing a singular authority figure to determine what is normal or correct, then, contemporary true crime narratives center a town and its people as the primary "knowers" in the case, which provides an appropriate backdrop for the construction of its idealized victim.

The virginal victim

As Kitch's assertion suggests, the importance of characterizing an appropriate setting is not unique to true crime, nor did it begin with contemporary true crime podcasts. Capote's canonical *In Cold Blood* again provides a useful point of reference for the discussion of this phenomenon, as Capote presents: "The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'" (Capote 3). Theorist Donald Pizer notes that this characterization allows Capote to present Holcomb as the victim along with the Clutter family, as he comments that, "Holcomb and Garden City are almost exactly in the middle of the United States, and they are proud of their neighborliness and life free from the sins of the city. After the murders, however, they become centers of distrust and fear" (Pizer 117). Pizer's assessment of the towns' transformation mirrors Lindsey's description of Ocilla, Georgia as pained by old wounds or "too scared to talk," and it introduces a key distinction between the characterization of town-as-victim versus town-as-authority. Because Capote focalizes his

portrayal of Holcomb largely through Alvin Dewey, Dewey occupies not only the role of state authority, but also a member of the victimized town, as shown when his wife asks: "Do you think we'll ever have a normal life again?" (Capote 105). The positing of a collective as a victim is suitable to the narration of the Clutter murders, because the victims did themselves compose a collective (a family of four). Contemporary true crime, however, seems to have recognized what Pizer observes when he claims: "Only Nancy Clutter, the Becky Thatcher of her school play, is entirely appealing and only her death is permanently moving" (Pizer 117). What Pizer means, with this assertion, is that Nancy Clutter's is the most tragic death because she is the least flawed, most effeminate, and supposedly virginal—in Capote's words, "the town darling" (Capote 7).

In contemporary true crime, the degree to which podcasters adhere to the characterization of victims as "darlings" varies relative to the town that acts as setting and authority. Tara Grinstead of *Up and Vanished* and Beth Andes of *Accused* are the clearest town darlings, as the omniscient narrator[8] in *Up and Vanished* first describes Tara: "Tara Grinstead was a 30-year-old former beauty queen, and local high school teacher living in the small town of Ocilla, Georgia. She was a gorgeous brunette with a striking smile, and someone her students and peers looked up to," and Hunt remarks:

> "My favorite photo of [Beth] looks like it was shot in someone's backyard. She's looking at the camera and flashing this engaging smile, the type that makes you smile right back, even though you're only looking at a picture. Even though we've never talked, I feel like I know her. I think I would have liked her, which makes the other photos I have of Beth even harder to look at." (Hunt season 1 episode 1)

In both cases, the podcasts offer descriptions of the murder victims as sweet, ideal women who are clear treasures to their respective towns. These innocent portrayals would seem to make them

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[8] Identified as "Rob" on upandvanished.com

fit into the "virgin" category of Kay Boyle's dichotomous "virgins and vamps," as Boyle notes

that "when a sex crime victim is labelled as attractive, she usually receives less

sympathy…descriptions of her physical appearance invoke the myth that she provoked [her

assault]…Sexual history functions similarly: Thus, if a woman has previously consented to sex

with this man or a similar man, then her charge is weakened" (Boyle 76). Boyle's assertion

cannot be applied wholly to the victims in contemporary true crime podcasts for reasons of

simple context—she discusses victims of sexual assault, not (necessarily) murder, and she mostly

analyzes stories from the 1990s, dating them prior to the past two decades' worth of social

progress—but her framing still proves useful for considering how victim characterization has and

has not evolved. Rather than categorizing victims as "virgins" or "vamps" who either did or did

not deserve their fate, contemporary true crime narratives offer more nuanced descriptions which

allow for more diversity in victim type, but still ultimately ascribe to traditional standards of

feminine purity.

  While insensitive, dehumanizing, and misogynistic, the rationalization of victim-blaming

due to feminine beauty continues to occur in narratives of sexual assault, but in the context of

murder becomes more complicated because the beautiful woman is considered more valued and,

therefore, more worthy of mourning and being immortalized in a narrative. Still, Hunt and

Lindsey temper their descriptions of Beth and Tara's beauty by assuring the audiences that even

if the women were not virginal, they were at least redeemable. Both women were rumored to

have had multiple boyfriends, and both podcasts hinge the victims' morality on disproving those

rumors. Hunt, for example, quotes Sue Parmlee on the topic:

> "[Beth] was very happy with Bob, loved him very much… I mean a lot of guys liked
> Beth. Beth's very attractive, and pretty together, very independent, and a lot of guys had
> crushes on her. But she was always pretty straight and narrow with staying with Bob, and
> I think they had a pretty solid relationship." (Hunt season 1 episode 2)

Hunt introduces this evidence in conjunction with a theorization about Beth's former boss, Buzz, as a potential suspect and rumored past lover of Beth's. Her choice to include Sue's qualification of Beth's relationship allows her to assuage the audience's unstated concerns about Beth's character. Because Sue testifies that Beth was beautiful, and men were interested in her, her reassurance that Beth remained faithful to Bob solidifies her moral virtue.

By contrast to Hunt, Lindsey presents Tara's relationship status as a conjecture whose outcome seriously impacts the stakes of her case. When he consults "missing persons expert" Thomas Roth, Roth poses: "Did [Tara] have multiple boyfriends? One of them got jealous? And she let them in the apartment for some reason, to talk probably, and their intent was different from what she obviously expected," and then directs the episode into an examination of Tara's relationships with her last serious boyfriend, Marcus Harper, and a former student, Anthony Vickers (Lindsey episode 3). Lindsey engages in speculation regarding Tara's relationship with a "family friend" and police chief named Heath Dykes, as he notes:

> "Shortly after Tara went missing, rumors ran wild about an affair she may have been having Heath Dykes. Some people painted him as an innocent family friend—the guy who went to go check on her and left his business card—but some people claim that they were in a heated affair and that there's much more to this story. Like I've said before, to solve this we need all the facts no matter how small, insignificant or uncomfortable they might be. So far this idea that Tara and Heath Dykes were having an affair, has just been hearsay. If there was any truth to it, it would definitely change things." (Lindsey episode 7)

While Lindsey is right in noting that a "heated" relationship between Tara and Dykes would carry weighted implications regarding Dykes' status as a suspect in the case, Lindsey never actually resolves this possibility: he sets the hypothetical relationship up as an option to be considered, but he never determines its veracity, as Dykes does not end up being Tara's killer. More importantly, he notes that in an earlier incident, "Tara didn't want to tell Sergeant Fletcher

[that Dykes had been at her house] because she knew he was friends with her ex boyfriend, Marcus Harper, and was afraid he would tell him," and goes on to pose: "The question is, why did Tara want to keep that a secret?" (Lindsey episode 7). As Lindsey communicates by referring to Marcus Harper, at the time, as Tara's "ex boyfriend," the two were not in a relationship when Dykes was at Tara's house, but Lindsey still chooses to use the language of an "affair," suggesting adultery, to describe the potential relationship Tara had with Dykes. Rather than presenting Tara as a complex adult who, like most people, may have had multiple romantic relationships, Lindsey's language dramatizes Tara's potential relationships, which implies that her willingness to engage in them or not should alter how we perceive her as a victim.

Although cheating and other forms of betrayal within a relationship can be assessed in terms of morality without religion, the language with which we discuss adultery is all-but inextricable from religious implication. As it is explicitly condemned in the Ten Commandments, adultery is considered sinful in Christian tradition, and as such, inquiries regarding women's chastity are typically steeped in the moralistic language of sin. The tradition of women's policing via Church-determined morality means that even completely secular depictions of women's behavior carry moralizing power behind them, and if we keep this in mind when examining descriptions of the other three victim characters in question, it becomes clear that women's virtue is nearly always at stake:

> "Almost 15 years ago, on January 13, 1999, a girl named Hae Min Lee disappeared. She was a senior at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore County in Maryland. She was Korean. She was smart, and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete. She played field hockey and lacrosse. And she was responsible." (Koenig episode 1)

> "Debra Newell has hazel eyes and high cheekbones and wavy blond hair. When she was in her 30s, a man threw himself on the hood of her car begging for a date.
> "For years, attracting men had been as easy as walking into a room. Now she was 59, married and divorced four times, her four kids were grown and she had a flourishing

interior design business. She wanted a man to travel with and share her success with. She worried that she was too old for another chance at love." (Goffard episode 1)

"Retha Welch had stumbled a few times in her life. At fifty-four years old, she had battled drug addiction and alcoholism. She'd been married once, to the father of her children, but her demons helped destroy her marriage, and caused her to lose custody of her kids. And then Retha found God." (Hunt season 2, episode 1)

I should note, at this moment, that Debra Newell represents a deviation from the other four women being considered in my analysis, as the crime at the heart of *Dirty John* is not murder but abuse, and Debra remains alive by the podcast's end. Her characterization, however, uses similar parameters that we see in descriptions of other victims. If we consider these three descriptions with the earlier presented introductions of Tara and Beth, we can note that only Retha Welch is not described right away as physically beautiful. The lack of emphasis on Retha's beauty marks one of several ways in which she represents the most radical deviation from normal practices in victim characterization, but before I analyze those differences, I consider it worth discussing how Koenig, Goffard, and Hunt all subject these victims to qualification in similar moral light.

After describing Hae Min Lee in terms of race, physical beauty, and intelligence, Koenig makes the key statement that Hae was "responsible." The comment allows Koenig to absolve Hae of any presumed culpability in her own death: if Hae was responsible, then she was unlikely to have put herself in personal danger, and therefore is less worthy of blame. Questions of female responsibility again speak to the language of sin and the ideal behavior of women, which Hunt recognizes more overtly by absolving Retha of her presented "stumbles" by assuring the audience that Retha had "found God," implying that Retha had become morally pure and therefore worthy of mourning before her death. Goffard, however, takes a different approach to garnering sympathy for his victim: rather than calling Debra responsible or pious, he speaks to Debra's lost beauty as a source of her virtuousness. Goffard invites the audience to become

interested in Debra because of her "high cheekbones and wavy blond hair"—clear markers of conventional, Anglocentric beauty—but then invites the audience to feel for her because she no longer has the same ease in attracting men that she once did. By de-sexing her through her age, Goffard not only assures us that Debra is not a whore, but also invites us to feel pity for her.

Goffard's choice to use Debra's age as an avenue for garnering the audience's sympathy is interesting, because while the appeal does support the moralizing standards imposed upon female victims, it also represents a deviation from the norm in victim characterization. To make sense of this claim, I return to Hickman's framing of Nancy Clutter as the ideal victim, in which Hickman argues that "considering the panoptic gaze controlling this text as more specifically cinematic, it is not surprising that the two Clutter women suffer a particular, voyeuristic violation," but Nancy is under more constant male supervision—by her father, Herb Clutter, and her boyfriend, Bobby Rupp—than her depressed, middle-aged mother (Hickman 468). As a younger figure, Nancy receives more male attention within the narrative's world, and she is also more emphasized by Capote, leading Hickman to note: "if *In Cold Blood* makes Bonnie Clutter the object of multiple male gazes, it subjects her daughter Nancy not only to more intense manifestations of these same gaze[s] but to the reader's gaze as well" (Hickman 468). Hickman's argument falls in line with a well-known phenomenon that captures how patriarchal power structures oppress younger and older women differently: younger women are more controlled, more sexualized, and therefore more noticed; older women are more likely to be erased or forgotten. For this reason, Goffard and Hunt's choices to focus on middle-aged female victims are somewhat radical, as women of Debra or Retha's age are less likely to be recognized in media portrayals of female victimhood than women of Hae, Beth, or even Tara's age.

Although Goffard and Hunt both make the unusual choice to foreground middle-aged women in their narratives, their choices in victim are not as radical as they could be. This applies especially to Goffard's case, because as he goes on to describe Debra at her first meeting with John: "She lived in Irvine, about an hour south of Los Angeles. They met at her penthouse. She grabbed her Chanel bag and they walked down the block…Debra wore black Gucci stiletto heels and designer jeans; John seemed to care almost nothing about his clothes," he conveys to the audience, through references to Debra's extravagant place of residence and designer clothing, that she is wealthy (Goffard episode 1). The emphasis on Debra's wealth provides a clue as to why her story is considered worthy of telling; if we recall Galtung and Ruge's news values, "references to elite persons or nations" aid a story's perceived significance. In fact, while Debra is the most conspicuously wealthy of the victims in question, only Retha is notably poor. Tara, Beth, and Hae are all described as being middle-class, which falls in line with their rural or suburban settings; Debra's excessive wealth is appropriate for extravagant Newport Beach, California; and Retha's struggles with poverty—the cause for her "stumbles" into drug and alcohol addiction—are fit for gritty Newport, Kentucky. The victims in contemporary true crime narratives thus seem to be clear products of their settings, which supports a reciprocal relationship between the figure of the victim and the figure of the authority: if victims are appropriate representatives of their towns, then the towns are appropriate sources of information on the victims. Additionally, this relationship further supports true crime podcasts' ability to achieve consonance, as each victim's characterization affirms the audience's existing understanding of their setting.

Focusing on one of these well-matched pairs, Retha's socioeconomic status and her story's rough setting mark the second season of *Accused* as the clearest deviation from the

typical approach to narrating violent crimes. As Kitch notes, typical crime narratives seek to portray peaceful, relatively affluent locations and victims alike in their reporting, as "certainly, we don't learn much about violent crimes that happen in depressed urban areas, crimes that are not regarded as inexplicable and whose victims and their families are not portrayed in the news as symbolic of the nation" (Kitch 34). The other four crimes in question corroborate this notion, and in doing so reinforce the binary construction that separates the places where crime is remarkable from where it is not. Although the binary separation makes the stories of Beth, Debra, Hae, and Tara more typical, it is supported by the news value of "unexpectedness," because audiences don't *expect* crime to occur in the places where the four victims lived, nor for it to happen to the victims, as ideal representatives of such respectable places. The younger three women are even more typical because, as Kitch notes, audiences are accustomed to seeing "girls and young women as symbols of loss," and the notion of lost youth or innocence exacerbates the sense of tragedy and relies on the earlier-established qualifications of virtue established earlier (Kitch 36). The presumption of innocence based on a victim's age, chastity, and conformity with a setting is also inextricable from what conventional portrayals of victimhood say about race. These contemporary true crime narratives follow a dominant tendency to foreground whiteness as, with the exception of Korean-American Hae Min Lee, all of the victims in question are white.

Just as crimes that occur in "depressed urban areas" are afforded less attention in mainstream media, so too are crimes perpetuated against non-white people, especially members of Black and Latinx populations. The centering of whiteness in victimhood supports Ahmed's notion about the essentiality of establishing an "ordinary" in order to instill emotional significance in a victim's death, as Ahmed argues that "the ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilization of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to

love," or, in other words, to position a white subject as ordinary and come to love that ordinary,

we employ the energy of hating that which has destroyed the ordinary, as "the emotion of hate

works to animate the ordinary subject…precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the

ordinary person as the real victim" (Ahmed 118). Although Goffard, Hunt, Koenig, and Lindsey

make some attempts to update their victim portrayals in accordance with twenty-first century

progressive standards, they end up supporting existing patterns, and thus furthering the love of

the ordinary. Interestingly, Hunt almost acknowledges the complicity of the news cycle in

sanctioning "expected" deaths as part of her characterization of Beth, when she notes:

> "There are some people in your life who, if you're honest with yourself, you'd have to
> admit seem a likelier target for something bad, something violent, to happen to than the
> rest of your friends. It's not PC to say it, and it certainly doesn't mean anyone ever
> deserves being targeted, but there are risk factors: selling drugs, being a hothead, prone to
> fistfights. Beth was none of those things." (Hunt season 1 episode 1)

While Hunt cedes that "it's not PC to say" that some violent deaths are met with less shock than

others, she makes the case anyway, and she does so without acknowledging any of the

demographic factors that contribute to this perception. By focusing her description on the

individual actions, rather than the external and systemic circumstances, that could make a person

more prone to meeting a violent death, Hunt engages in victim-blaming not of *her* victim, but all

the rest. Implicit in her characterization of Beth as lovable and ordinary is the opposite—those

who engage in "risk factors"—and Hunt, as Ahmed suggests, mobilizes the audience's

disapproval of deviation from the ordinary to set up an oppositional love for Beth. When Hunt

uses this set-up to argue that Beth's death is more remarkable—that because she never engaged

in these other, more sinful activities, we have more reason to care about her story—what she fails

to recognize is that in the context of true crime murder narratives, a victim like Beth Andes is the

most typical of them all.

The mysterious murderer

If the ideal victim is made ideal by her conformity with her background, preservation of traditional virtue, and general recognizability, then her ideal killer should embody the opposite of those traits. Of course, true crime narratives cannot imagine and construct the perfect or most expected perpetrator for the crime; they are ultimately bound to the truth, and as such have an obligation to represent whichever perpetrator the truth gives them. Goffard seems to embrace this restriction, constructing John as a seemingly factual, but wholly unlikable guy; the only catch is that he's not a murderer. Lindsey has a harder time with the tension between reality and idealism: though all the evidence points to Ryan Duke, he cannot let go of Bo Dukes as a possibility. He is barred from the privilege that Koenig and Hunt share in the combined three seasons of their podcasts: because the killer remains unknown in *Serial* and both seasons of *Accused,* the character is left completely up for construction in the imaginary sphere. Koenig and Hunt have figures of serious interest—men previously thought to be the killers by state authorities, whose real participation in the victims' deaths remains unclear—against or in the likeness of which to construct the specter of the murderer, but no confirmed murderer himself. Combined with Goffard and Lindsey's discussions of the confirmed perpetrators, their framings of the imaginary killer illustrate how contemporary true crime narratives capitalize on the unknown to portray the ideal killer. Just as we continue to venerate sameness in victims, we still demonize difference among killers, and in order to explain the unknowable difference, new media producers engage in an updated version of what David Guest calls the "criminal biography" approach, which serves to undermine the association of killers with being cool in the style of Norman Mailer's hipster.

If we accept Ahmed's notion that subjects affected by anxiety seek to locate fear in an object, and that a love of the ordinary is driven by a hate of an other, it starts to become clear why an unknown or unknowable murderer would better serve a narrative than a known killer. Referring to the production of hate for the other in the context of white nationalism, Ahmed notes that "others" deemed worthy of hatred "come to embody the threat of loss: lost jobs, lost money, lost land. They signify the danger of impurity, or the mixing or taking of blood. They threaten to violate the pure bodies; such bodies can only be imagined as pure by the perpetual restaging of this fantasy of violation" (Ahmed 118). Ahmed, in this case, speaks of a perceived violation—racial mixing—rather than a real one, like murder or abuse, but the more solid and legitimate "threat of loss" present in true crime narratives only strengthens the need to imagine an object for fear and to differentiate that object from the violated "ordinary." This allows for the translatable nature of hate and fear, which Ahmed explains:

> "My account of hate as an affective economy shows that emotions do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing, meaning that "the subject" is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination. This is extremely important: it suggests that the sideways and backward movement of emotions such as hate is not contained within the contours of a subject. The unconscious is hence not the unconscious of a subject, but the failure of presence—or the failure to be present—that constitutes the relationality of subjects and objects." (Ahmed 121)

Such an approach allows us to understand how Hunt and Koenig provide their audiences with a potential object for fear without ever actually defining the killer: though they seek to humanize Bob, Virgil, and Adnan, the latent possibility that any of these men killed the podcasts' victims remains present. If we accept that they are innocent, they become figures against which to contrast the real killer: their innocence would extend the web of victimhood, as not only were the lives of the three murdered women ended, but the lives of the three suspected men were interrupted, by the real, spectral murderer. If we believe them to be guilty, the lack of clarity or

definition to their guilt—i.e. the absence of conclusive evidence—makes their threat all the more

fearsome, as we cannot concretely locate the reason for fear in an object. In either case, the fear

and hatred the audience feels for the killer is translatable, and the podcasts' ever-changing

narrative structure allows emotion to slip between subjects as Ahmed describes.

  The potential or suspected killers featured in *Serial* and *Accused* represent what I will call

"could-be" killers, borrowing the phrase from Ahmed's theory. Referencing the reductive

characterization of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim populations—or anyone who physically

resembles a member of one of those groups—following September 11, Ahmed notes: "the

recognition of such groups of people as 'could be terrorists' depends on stereotypes already in

place, at the same time as it generates a distinct category of the 'fearsome' in the present"

(Ahmed 131). Considering the notion of stereotype as the primary fodder for constructing fear of

the unknown, it seems at first as if Hunt and Koenig are purposely resistant to this approach to

characterization. Koenig, for example, problematizes the state's case through use of stereotypes,

as she paraphrases the state's argument: "as a good Muslim [Adnan] was not supposed to be

dating and so he was sacrificing his religion and lying to his family all just so he could be with

her and it twisted him up inside" (Koenig episode 2). Koenig voices this paraphrase in a dry,

almost mocking tone, implicitly referencing what she has already established for the audience:

that Adnan wasn't really all that devout or "twisted up," but rather, "even though Adnan and

Saad and their buddies were Muslims, they were also, shall we say, healthy American teenagers

who were going to do what teenagers do" (Koenig episode 1). Though Koenig's framing seeks to

normalize Adnan's behavior in the audience's eyes by linking his experience to that of other

"healthy American teenagers"—a concept that she presents with a casual expectation of

familiarity, knowing that her audience will understand—Koenig's framing still relies on a binary

distinction between the ideal American teenager and the ideal Muslim. She is especially conscious of stereotype when she frames how Adnan's case looks "on paper": "like a Shakespearean mashup—young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched, the villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge" (Koenig episode 1). As she moves away from this stereotypical, essentialist characterization of Adnan by likening him to a regular American teenager, Koenig keeps the specter of the other, darker, more dangerous villain alive.

Like *Serial*, the second season of *Accused* is notably aware of the role of stereotype in the case of William Virgil. Hunt notes, in the season's first episode: "Retha Welch was white. The man accused of killing her was black. In northern Kentucky, in 1987, these were significant details" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Though the observation might be read as implying that now, the racial difference between Virgil and Retha would no longer be "significant"—while in reality, racist prejudice would likely still plague the same case today—the logic behind the seeming oversight still makes sense, because while racial bias persists as a rampant societal problem, the language and nuance with which we understand race has progressed in the thirty years since Retha's death, and because Hunt's presentation of the two figures offers richer material for constructing the "could-be" killer. Like Koenig, Hunt problematizes the version of events put forward by state authorities: "The story police told the press was unfathomably vicious. God-fearing Retha Welch, a woman so devoted to her faith that she counseled prisoners to save their souls, was assaulted and killed by one of the men she was trying to help," but her own framing is not so different (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Before introducing the potential for racial bias in the case, Hunt frames Retha in religious terms:

> "Retha was bubbly, enthusiastic. She would start talking about scripture and find it tough to stop. Pastor Straud saw a missionary in her, and welcomed her to join a program to

> spread the word of God within Ohio's prisons. Retha decided it was her calling to help as many prisoners as she could. Most of them were just like she had been, she reasoned: they were down-and-out drug abusers and alcoholics whose addictions led to legal problems. There, but for the grace of God, go I." (Hunt season 2, episode 1)

Before mentioning Virgil's name, she focuses on the same detail that the state used to characterize him in the context of Retha's murder: "one of the prisoners [Retha] had counseled was tried and convicted, and it seemed like the case was over" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Given that these characterizations precede Hunt's acknowledgement of racial difference between Virgil and Retha—and the discussion of the jury's potential bias[9] that follows—Hunt, like Koenig, embraces the construction of a fearsome "other" when introducing the suspected murderer, thus capitalizing on the fear-driven impulse to protect the ordinary. As a result, the methods of constructing murderer and victim enter into a clearly reciprocal relationship.

　　While appeals to feminine purity may usually take place as implicit, the religious nature of Hunt's characterization of Retha is overt. Hunt goes as far as to conclude her description with "there, but for the grace of God, go I," a saying widely attributed to the Evangelical preacher and martyr John Bradford, who according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* was said to have uttered the phrase upon seeing "a Malefactor pass to Execution" ("grace of God, n."). Hunt's allusion only strengthens the presented link between Retha's piety and her connection to criminal justice, as Hunt's note that Retha perceived prisoners as being "just like she had been" moves the sanctioned work of attempting to reform criminals into the sphere of the ordinary, which positions the killer who interrupted that work as a distant "other." Because Hunt has established Retha's familiarity and importance, her framing lends weight to the assertion: "either [Newport Police are] too stubborn to admit they convicted the wrong guy, or William Virgil is a cold-

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[9] Robert Patton, Virgil's defense lawyer, notes: "Jurors—you figure they're ten or fifteen years behind the times, most of the time. You don't get hip young people on a jury. You get a lot of middle-aged, business folks, and old retired folks" (Hunt season 2, episode 1).

blooded killer walking free among us now" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). This assertion clearly situates Virgil as a "could-be" killer without detracting from the salience of the unknown "other" possibility: in either case, a cold-blooded killer *does* exist; the figure's location can be translated onto or away from Virgil depending on the direction of the audience's fear.

The same bind that posits Retha as a holy figure allows her to serve as a representative of racial equality despite being white. Before introducing Retha's prison work, Hunt notes that "Stroud, who's black, created the Word of Truth ministries with a specific goal in mind: He was tired of seeing black churches and white churches. He wanted to lead a congregation that was truly desegregated. Retha Welch was fully on board with his vision" (Hunt season 2, episode 1). Not only is Retha dedicated to criminal justice, then, but she's also in favor of racial equality, and we learn this about her, as qualified by her acceptance from a black pastor, before knowing the race of the man who was originally convicted of killing her. If we recall that whiteness is integral to establishing the "ordinary" in the victim, this appeal seems to be Hunt's attempt at escaping that bind: in Retha, we get a sacrificial representative of racial equality, yet we get to keep the victim white. Retha's dedication to collective, social justice-driven causes further embeds her memory in the fabric of the community, reminding the audience that her loss is our loss. Her situation parallels Kitch's presentation of the shooting of ten Amish girls, as Kitch notes that "with no access to the grieving families and no apparent motive for the killings, journalists still faced the question of how to provide narrative closure. The answer was the theme of 'grace,' a journalistic focus on, and celebration of, the kindness of the victims' families toward the gunman's family, and their statement that they forgave him for his sins" (Kitch 33). Kitch's observation demonstrates that a lack of closure—as occurs when the killer remains unknown—drives an emphasis on the characterization of victim and community, illustrating the

reciprocity in the relationship between the three. This construction permits a deeper embrace of the hatred that we are supposed to feel for her unknown killer, who can be demonized for hindering racial equality regardless of their race.

Notably, Hunt's presentation of "could-be" killer Virgil differs vastly from her portrayal of Bob Young, as her portrayal of Bob more closely resembles Koenig's presentation of Adnan, but without the establishment of binary difference. Hunt introduces Bob almost as soon as she introduces Beth, saying: "Beth started college in the fall of 1974. Soon, she met a guy on campus, a quiet geology major and football player named Bob Young. They met their freshman year and became a full-fledged couple the next" (Hunt season 1, episode 1). Not only does she present Bob as ordinary by describing him in terms of plain, recognizable qualifications—his major, his sport—but she instantly legitimizes his proximity to Beth by calling them a "full-fledged couple," which differs starkly from Virgil's framing as "one of the prisoners [Retha] had counseled." While it makes sense to present the relationships on different grounds—they were, of course, different relationships—Retha and Virgil *did* have a romantic and sexual relationship, positioning Virgil closer to Retha's hallowed sphere of the ordinary than his being "one of the prisoners" would suggest. Moreover, missing from the characterization of Bob is any acknowledgement of his whiteness and resulting privilege. The erasure of Bob's whiteness appears as a point of contrast to what Boyle observes in characterizations of male sexual deviants: "as the 'sex beast' is irrevocably 'other'…the casting of black and minority ethnic men in this role should not be surprising…the perpetrators were not presented as individuals—and as men—but as representatives of their racial or ethnic group" (Boyle 69). Boyle relates the foregrounding of racial and ethnic difference in rape narratives to the erasure of gender among perpetrators, as she argues that because the masculinity of offenders in rape and sexual abuse

cases is so often assumed, perpetrators are essentially "genderless"—while victims, usually

white women, are heavily sexualized but presented without race—resulting in "the failure to

consider the intersectionality of gender and race in the experience of rape" (Boyle 70). When the

vagueness and selective detailing that Boyle observes in narratives of rape appears in true crime

narratives, it creates space for the speculative possibility that constructs the fearsome, spectral

killer.

The "could-be" killer is troubling, even terrifying, to audiences for reasons of potential,

but the figure's construction does not rely solely upon speculation of the unknown. The emphasis

on Virgil's past criminality, for example, positions him as instantly more suspect than Bob or

Adnan—neither of whom have any criminal record—but the shift in emphasis from past to

potential nevertheless indicates a change in the genre's approach. Returning to Capote's *In Cold

Blood*, Guest argues that Capote engages in "criminal biography," which Guest defines as "less a

means of determining who the offender is than of constructing the offender as juridical subject,"

and as a result of this characterization, "the criminal act is depicted as a manifestation of a

criminal personality that lurked beneath the surface all along" (Guest 108). Guest applies this to

Capote's careful examination of Dick and Perry's respective criminal pasts and personalities,

arguing that Capote's emphasis on the individual-as-criminal serves to absolve the state from

forming criminals as products of the system. I accept Guest's analysis of Capote's process and its

results, and in turn argue that contemporary true crime narratives have adapted this process into

more speculative modes.

Of the contemporary true crime narratives in question, the one that most closely embraces

the convention of a criminal biography is *Dirty John*. Goffard clarifies that the podcast's

eponymous perpetrator fit precisely with his nickname: "along with Dirty John, [his college

acquaintances] called him a Filthy John. Sometimes they just called him Filthy," and

emphasizes, through testimony from his sisters Donna and Karen, John's family history of crime

involvement:

> "[Donna] says the family was related to Albert Anastasia, the East Coast mobster who
> ran Murder Inc. This is a name you know if you have even a passing interest in mafia
> history. Reporters called him the Mad Hatter and The Lord High Executioner and he was
> famous for eliminating potential witnesses. He died in 1957, riddled with bullets, in a
> New York City barbershop. You might have seen the photo. John and Karen's
> grandmother did have the surname Anastasi, but I couldn't find a conclusive genealogical
> link to the mob family. What matters is that John grew up with this as the family lore and,
> in the way others boast about forebears who were on the Mayflower, John bragged about
> this supposed mafia pedigree" (Goffard episode 3).

From this account, it seems clear that *Dirty John* presents John's criminality as inherent, rather

than produced, and established, rather than potential. The podcast does move to discuss John's

struggles with drug addiction and his attempts to reintegrate in society after his past releases

from prison, but it ultimately returns to the notion that "some people are just born bad," as Matt

Murphy claims (Goffard episode 6). Like *Accused* and *Serial*, however, *Dirty John* includes

more criminality—specifically, murder—as a spectral possibility, which Goffard addresses by

noting, at the end of his first episode:

> "There's something else you should know about the Newell family. A homicide, more
> than three decades old, that haunts the subtext of this story in ways large and small. In
> 1984, Debra's older sister, Cindi, had been trying to escape a bad marriage. She told
> people her husband was controlling and possessive. One afternoon, he pressed a handgun
> against the back of her neck and killed her with a single bullet. It was the reason Debra
> hated guns. It was the reason she refused to have a gun around, long after people began
> warning her that she needed one." (Goffard episode 1)

The story is necessary for contextualizing the Newell family, but the manner in which Goffard

structures the narrative—bringing the background murder periodically in and out of focus, and

not revealing until the final episode that only John dies at the end—keeps the unnamed, "could-

be" killer alive in the story, despite the fact that in this one, no cold-blooded murder occurs[10].

While Goffard uses criminal biography to frame John rather clearly, Lindsey engages in a

similar process using more a convoluted, hunch-driven approach. Lindsey weighs past criminal

convictions heavily; he first uses the fact that prior to his arrest for the murder of Tara Grinstead,

Ryan Duke had no criminal record—whereas Bo Dukes did—as reasoning to support his

theorization that Bo Dukes is the real killer. He adds emphasis to this line of thought when he

proceeds by noting: "I knew that unlike his buddy Bo Dukes, Ryan did not have a criminal

record. But what about any other run-ins with the law? Over the course of twelve years, did he

have any at all? Well, turns out he did," and then has the menacing, throaty, seemingly

omniscient Rob explain:

> "On the night of February 20th, 2010, Ocilla Police pulled over a vehicle on the Tifton
> highway. The driver was Ryan Duke. He was speeding and driving without a license. When
> the officer proceeded to talk to Duke, he noticed his slurred speech and the smell of alcohol
> on his breath. Duke denied drinking but failed the breathalyzer test. He was subsequently
> charged for a DUI but was released on bond to his mother. At 2:35 a.m., approximately 3
> hours before the DUI incident, Ryan Duke's mother called the Ocilla Police with an unusual
> request. She insisted that she wanted to come off the bond for Mr. Duke and have the police
> pick up her son immediately. Deputies picked up Duke and returned him to jail. The reason
> for Duke's mother's change of heart is unknown. The family declined to comment. Other
> than Tara Grinstead's murder, this is Duke's only other arrest." (Lindsey episode 15)

The fact that Lindsey presents this evidence via Rob, who operates as a sort of special effect,

gives it more weight than most elements of the narrative presented, emphasizing the value that

Lindsey places in past criminal activity. Lindsey then uses this line in Ryan Duke's "criminal

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[10] I consider the "background murder" in *Dirty John*—Billy Vickers's murder of his wife, and Debra's sister, Cindi—more extensively in the next chapter. Though Vickers can certainly be read as a threat or antagonist in *Dirty John*, he is not immediately relevant to the narrative in the way that Terra Newell is as a proxy-victim, and Goffard's treatment of his story proves more useful for considering how true crime narratives affect public perceptions of domestic violence than for performing a reading of character construction, as Goffard limits his characterization of Vickers.

biography" to introduce the previously-established fact that Ryan was on suicide watch, which leads him into his frequently-consulted speculation: "[Everyone] just [is] so surprised that it's Ryan being charged with the murder, and Bo as an accessory, after the fact. That is just so puzzling to everybody. I'm trying to figure out if that's because there was a side of Ryan that nobody knew, that was capable of doing this, or if he wasn't the person who did this" (Lindsey episode 15). Lindsey's transition out of Ryan's criminal biography and into speculation regarding "a side of Ryan that no one knew" leads us to the most current form of explanatory reasoning in contemporary true crime narratives: an emphasis on mental health and capacity.

Lindsey's attempts to understand and/or absolve Ryan Duke resemble what Boyle identifies in the treatment of men termed "confused casualties." Still focusing her argument on rape, Boyle notes that often, "'normal' men find themselves accused of 'date' rape, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse. These 'normal' men are represented not as conscious violent and sexual agents, but as confused casualties of the sex war, disorientated by changing gender roles and societal expectations" (Boyle 74). Her assertion falls in line with Ahmed's reasoning about the love of the ordinary, as well as the examples that Hunt and Koenig offer of how we differentiate the familiar figure from the unknown "other": those who we consider "normal," as Lindsey seems inclined to do with Ryan Duke, drive a desire to understand how "normal" can be disrupted and morph into deviancy. Lindsey presents Ryan most clearly as a confused casualty through a testimony from Ryan's anonymous friend, who notes:

> "From what I know of Ryan, I can't believe that he did all this and orchestrated it
> himself. 'Cuz as good a guy as he was, like he's not that smart of a person to one, commit
> the crime; two, cover it up; and three, convince somebody to be an accessory with him
> after the fact. That doesn't fit Ryan at all. He's not manipulative, he's very
> straightforward. There's no hidden doors with Ryan" (Lindsey episode 15).

Lindsey frequently returns to testimonies that identify Ryan as stupid, easily swayed, and easily confused, using the killer's ignorance as grounds for his absolution. But beyond that approach, when Lindsey does engage with the possibility that Ryan was, in fact, the killer, he frames it in relation to Ryan's suicidal thoughts as representative of a potential "darker side." Kitch captures this tendency when she reflects on multiple mass tragedies and notes: "these cases suggest some consistent themes: isolation, entitlement, bullying, and very angry young men with guns and knives" (Kitch 36). Kitch's claim likely resonates with most contemporary readers who have lived through repeated and increasingly frequent media cycles covering mass killings, and it helps to illustrate a turning point in how we characterize a killer.

Beyond explanatory claims linking murder to mental health and isolation, popular media has increasingly attempted to shame killers for their actions. Goffard does this most clearly—as we see even from his title, he paints John in decidedly negative light—but all podcasters convey their disapproval of the murderers rather clearly through their shock and disgust over the mutilation of victims' bodies and the overall destruction caused by their deaths. As established earlier, however, the existential desire to be seen drives self-representation in new media, and as such, the foregrounding of a killer in a narrative runs the risk of turning them into a kind of celebrity, as Mailer does with his image of the cool, hipster, psychopath. Relating Mailer's figure of the hipster to both Mailer himself and killer Gary Gilmore, Guest notes that "for both Mailer and Gilmore, being a 'good convict' depends on unflinching defiance of carceral power," but contemporary true crime narratives seem resistant to accepting this hardman approach (Guest 134). Instead, contemporary true crime narratives frame killers and "could-be" killers alike as we have seen throughout this chapter: in pathetic, even sympathetic terms; as products of inherited criminality, drug addiction, confusion, and mental health issues. The "could-be" killers who have

been imprisoned are submissive in the system, which Koenig exemplifies by quoting at length

from a letter written by Adnan:

> "'As I look back now,' he wrote, 'I realize there was only three things I wanted after I was convicted. To stay close to my family, prove my innocence and to be seen as a person again. Not a monster.' The third one he says he's managed, inside prison. 'People in here know me as a stand-up guy. Guards, inmates, staff, people I've been around for fifteen years have seen me every day, recognize me as someone whose word can be trusted. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I was able to find the peace of mind in prison that I lost at my trial.'" (Koenig episode 11)

Likewise, hindrances to the system of justice are shamed, as Lindsey demonstrates most

overtly—in his usual, self-congratulatory style—by declaring:

> "If you think that these facts are wrong, then by all means come tell the world what the real story is. And if you can't do that, then in my eyes, you're exactly the reason this case took twelve years to solve.
> "You choose to sit back, hiding under a rock, while rumors and speculation ran wild. And now, a decade later, I choose to spend two years of my life, dedicated to finding the truth in this case. And then you emerge from the woodworks, ready to sling mud and try to paint me as the problem.
> "So here's my message to all of you; don't be a coward. Your measly efforts at trying to stop me from finding the truth aren't working." (Lindsey episode 22)

Lindsey's self-congratulation further solidifies him as the wild, stop-at-nothing renegade figure,

but he does not, as Mailer does, posit this figure as being at odds with the state. Gone is the

adoration of the renegade in psychopathy.

The move away from glamorizing murder and crime as tough or rebellious seems to be

done in the public interest, as the glorification of crime in Mailer's style can contribute to

dangerous trends. After *Rolling Stone* put Dzhohkar Tsarnaev on their cover, for example, the

public erupted in an outcry that the magazine had made a killer look like a "rock star." It seems,

then, that repeated attempts to shame a murderer—to paint them and their accomplices as

pathetic, cowardly, disgusting, etc.—are attempts to discourage the act of killing. In a world

where mass killings have become a regular occurrence, and where the people charged with

international peacemaking and war-waging are unqualified at best, the shaming and knocking-down of killers reads like a desperate attempt to preserve the status quo. When a killer—the source of fear, the object of hate—is unknown and ever-threatening, disparaging comments about personality and theorizations of mental illness become one of the only viable sources for defense. Fearing the unknown and loving the ordinary prove easy, then, and the constant consumption of narratives that reinforce those complementary impulses come naturally to listeners who want to get a break from their reality, or that of the world at large, by learning about someone else's. Rather than pointing out a systemic problem in the hopes of inciting change—as much journalism does—true crime offers consumers a chance to hear of horror with the relief of knowing that it's out of their hands.

Chapter 3: The Cultural Effects of Crime and Capital

So we see, now, that true crime is salient; so we understand that it is lucrative. We get

that it became a pervasive social force at first because it affirmed faith in God, then the State, and

now the sweet, perpetual comforts of the free market. We recognize that the best-selling

journalist figure is one who breaks the rules, who talks in a casual register and poses general,

hunch-based questions. We get that in an authority figure, we want a collective body that shows

us life as it should be, and we want a sweet, white, sexually conservative victim to match. We

know that for a murderer, we want none: we want him to be a spectral concept, a fiction within

the truth.

As true crime narratives reinforce our notions of the ordinary and our allegiance to a

governing force, how might these narratives impact particular and tangible societal problems? In

this chapter, I seek to answer that question through the specific example of domestic violence. I

will first contend that although it is essential to narrative comprehensiveness to foreground a

single murderer/victim pairing in true crime, a focus on the victimization of one character

detracts from the discussion of the systemic problem of domestic violence and its prevention. As

a result, narratives that do not address these issues directly end up being partially complicit in

domestic violence as a greater problem, despite concerning themselves with specific instances.

This complicity further serves true crime's capitalist motivations, as marketing a true story

through stereotypes and tropes ascribes to the capitalist emphasis on the individual over the

collective and leads to the commodification of crime, its victims, and the fear of its perpetrators.

In the previous chapter, I claimed that in the main narrative of Christopher Goffard's

Dirty John, no actual murder occurs. I maintain that assertion as truth: in the narrative that

Goffard offers, the main perpetrator, John Meehan, never kills Debra Newell, the victim in

question. But although the story of "Dirty John" himself contains no murders committed "in cold blood," per se, there are, in fact, two deaths in the story: the first, which happened more than three decades before the central narrative in *Dirty John*, when Debra's sister, Cindi, was killed by her husband, Billy Vickers; the second, when Debra's youngest daughter, Terra Newell, kills John out of self-defense. While both deaths prove essential to the story that Goffard tells, they operate to different effects: the former serves as explanatory matter, background material used to illustrate the Newell family's past trauma; the latter marks the story's climax, allowing *Dirty John* to strike a dramatic, conclusive final note. Goffard makes these figures' inclusion work naturally with his unusual choice to disappear within the story, and his choice to focus on Debra and John instead aids him in his ability to construct a clear, comprehensive narrative. But while this structure may serve *Dirty John's* narrative presentation, it ultimately undermines Goffard's ability to grapple with domestic violence, causing the podcast to remain complicit with the problem.

In terms of narrative construction overall, the choice to focus primarily on Debra and John makes sense. Stories, and their audiences, are best served when they have a clear protagonist and antagonist, and a couple like Debra and John offer the perfect pairing to fill these roles. The two other killers in *Dirty John*, Billy Vickers and Terra Newell, get unique supporting roles in the story, the latter as a proxy victim and the former as an additional specter of the murderer. As a proxy victim, Terra has every quality of the ideal victim that her mother lacks: while Debra is an unusual choice for a victim because of her age, Goffard characterizes Terra as the picture of youth and innocence:

> "Terra Newell was 25. Descriptions of her almost always included the word sweet. Her voice was so soft that waiters had to lean in and ask her to repeat her order. As a kid, she was usually the smallest one on the recess yard and so uncompetitive in softball games that she didn't even bother swinging at pitches." (Goffard episode 6)

This description of Terra makes it immediately clear that Goffard wants to present her not only as childlike, but as powerless: she is so sweet, quiet, and innocent, Goffard implies, that she is not able to execute a simple task like placing an order at a restaurant on the first try. It makes sense for Goffard to want to set up Terra's helplessness in this case, because later in the episode, Terra kills John out of self-defense, bringing her innocence into question. In case her lack of aggression wasn't enough to absolve her, Goffard also assures us of Terra's innocence in religious terms, noting: "Terra was a child of affluent Orange County suburbs, but she adored country music and she liked the songs about drinking beer, having a good time, and still loving God," thus emphasizing a theme which appears repeatedly in *Dirty John* (Goffard episode 6). Like in *Accused* and *Up and Vanished,* Christianity is a prominent feature in the podcast, but its use takes on a unique role in *Dirty John* because the idea of godliness is linked not only to the victims, but also to the secondary figure of the murderer.

Billy Vickers killed his wife, Cindi, with a gunshot to the neck because he was worried that she would leave him, and yet he is not treated as the perpetrator in *Dirty John*. Instead, Goffard uses Vickers as explanatory matter. He brings the murder up briefly at the end of *Dirty John's* first episode, noting: "There's something else you should know about the Newell family. A homicide, more than three decades old, that haunts the subtext of this story in ways large and small," and Goffard introduces the full story when he narrates how and why Debra took John back, opening: "I kept going back to what had happened to Debra's older sister, Cindi, in 1984, and what had happened to her killer and what it said about Debra's family" (Goffard episode 1, episode 4). Goffard links the trauma of Cindi's death to Debra's behavior, noting that Debra and Cindi's mother, Arlene Hart, forgave Billy for her daughter's death on religious grounds: "I still loved Billy and everyone cannot believe that I loved Billy. I didn't love him for what he did. I

hated what he did, but I still loved Billy and I forgave him," and though Thomas Avdeef, the

prosecutor against Billy in Cindi's death, considers that Arlene "threw [Cindi] under the bus,"

Goffard notes that while Debra does not herself forgive Billy, "Debra disagrees with the

prosecutor's interpretation of her mom's testimony…[Debra's parents] believed that none of

God's children was irredeemable and enough love could work wonders," and goes on to add that

Billy Vickers served only two years and nine months for killing his wife, and that he remained in

Orange County, remarried, and still sees an uncomfortable but cordial Debra from time to time in

his daily life (Goffard episode 4). As a result, the spectral murderer is more literally present in

Dirty John than in any other podcast: rather than being an unidentified, fearsome figure who

might strike again, he is a known killer whose case is solved, but results in ongoing trauma.

Goffard facilitates his explanatory treatment of Billy Vickers with his narrative approach,

as his greater distance from the story allows him to more easily slip between characters. The

three other journalists in question identify most strongly with one figure—either the victim or the

suspected murderer—to move through the narrative, and their attachment to a single figure

allows for less fluidity than Goddard uses. This dynamic is clearest in *Serial,* in which Koenig

notes, "I talk to Adnan regularly, and he just doesn't seem like a murderer," and often enters the

story from his point of view, whereas *Accused* and *Up and Vanished* bring the narrative into

focus from the victims' perspectives, focusing more on the lives of Beth Andes, Tara Grinstead,

and Retha Welch than on those of their killers or suspected killers (Koenig episode 1). If we

recall Hickman's observation that "Capote offers eight pages of psychological exegesis [on Perry

Smith]…[none of which] is admitted into actual courtroom testimony," we see that the writer's

identification with a single figure in the narrative is not new, but rather, has a longstanding

precedent (Hickman 471). In this sense, *Dirty John* represents simultaneously the most radical

turn and the closest representation to Capote's omniscient style: while Goffard does acknowledge his presence more than Capote does, he remains almost entirely removed from the narrative, allowing him to slip between characters and to focus especially on Terra's perspective in the last episode, thus situating her as a proxy victim figure. Unlike Capote, however, who according to Hickman used his seeming omniscience to shed more light on the psyche of Perry Smith than an official narrative would have provided, Goffard chooses not to present any dissatisfactions he may have with the state's approach.

Goffard's removed, seemingly objective mode also facilitates his treatment of the Billy Vickers story, as it allows Goffard to present Vickers's killing of his wife and relative lack of consequence afterward without making his own comment. Because Goffard is not himself a character within the story, he is able to present the reality of Cindi's death as just that—reality— without passing judgement on it or condemning the judicial system for failing to treat her killer more harshly. Perhaps to Goffard's credit, in one of the rare instances when he does reveal himself in the podcast, he notes: "I tried to get [Vickers] to talk to me, but he didn't return my messages," proving that he at least attempted to bring more nuanced attention to the story (Goffard episode 4). Getting Vickers's side still would not, however, constitute a meaningful critique of domestic violence, and Goffard similarly ignores a shortcoming of the justice system again when he notes that Debra failed to get a restraining order against John: "Because she had seen John, because she had actually spent the night at the Henderson house, her lawyer knew no judge would grant the restraining order. How scared could she be if she saw him voluntarily?" (Goffard episode 5). Here again, Goffard highlights a flaw in the legal system's ability to protect women from domestic violence, but his removed narrative mode allows him to resist commenting on the stakes of the situation.

By neglecting to comment on the failings of the legal system and treating Cindi Newell's murder as explanatory matter, Goffard is complicit in the problem of domestic violence, and instead of providing commentary, he chooses to focus on the story's narrative rather than its stakes. Kay Boyle examines similar limitations in British magazine *The Sun's* coverage of a domestic violence case, noting that *The Sun*, "a notoriously misogynistic paper," emphasizes victimization and charity efforts—"wear a ribbon, send a donation"—rather than examining the societal factors that allow for the problem to persist, and she stresses that "the focus on serious physical injury and murder in the collected stories of domestic violence underlies the difference between 'normal' men (*The Sun* readers) and abusers (murderous others)" (Boyle 89). We see the same binary reflected in true crime's construction of murderers, but in the case of *Dirty John* and Goffard's treatment of Billy Vickers, the distinction is not so clear: while we recall that Goffard presents John as evidence that "some people are just born bad," he does not put Vickers in the same category, stressing instead the religious nature of the family's forgiveness (Goffard episode 6). Vickers, then, allows Goffard to resist the good/evil binary in one figure, offering a point of contrast which ultimately reinforces the binary in another. Though Vickers, then, presents a problem and makes its reality known, his narrative does little to combat it, and instead, he serves mostly for enriching narrative complexity.

Just as Vickers serves primarily to complicate the story's narrative and make it unique, so too does Terra, whose killing of John at the end of the podcast represents the ultimate triumph of the individual. Goffard explains that when John attacked Terra with a knife, she kicked to defend herself and knocked the knife out of his hand, then quotes Terra saying, of a stab wound she left in John's eye, "I guess that was my zombie kill" (Goffard episode 6). The comment is an allusion to *The Walking Dead*, which first appears earlier in the episode when Goffard notes:

"[Terra] studied television violence with uncommon intensity. *The Walking Dead* was a reservoir of survival techniques" (Goffard episode 6). As a detail, Terra's love of *The Walking Dead* serves to individualize her story and add character, but more interestingly, it reinforces *Dirty John's* participation in the self-perpetuating cycle of new media production and proliferation. Terra reminds us not only of the triumph of the individual, but also that she, a small, innocent, otherwise defenseless girl, earned her remarkable abilities in the same way as the armchair detective: by consuming popular media.

All stories, of course, need individualized details in order to form an interesting and cohesive narrative, but the emphasis on the exceptional can prove dangerous. As Kitsch notes of the coverage that focuses on the grieving families and towns following instances of mass death: "[the coverage] presents violent crimes and deadly accidents as unanticipated exceptions rather than foreseeable consequences of chronic social and political problems" (Kitsch 36). While Goffard presents John Meehan's deviancy as foreseeable, he does so through criminal biography rather than an examination of broader social dynamics, and the exception of Billy Vickers only further exemplifies this emphasis. Kitch's assertion falls in line with David Guest's argument that an emphasis on delinquency as exceptional furthers state power, as "carceral narratives promote an image of normalcy under siege, depicting idealized domestic settings as the favored targets of murderous young psychopaths" (Guest 127). Goffard's framing, then, complicates this binary: rather than simply presenting a killer as a deviant in contrast to normal society under state power, Goffard normalizes a killer while demonizing a "could-be" killer. Beyond that, Goffard depicts John not only as a violent, abusive threat, but also a financial one. Goffard calls John "a veteran con man, a grifter smooth and calculating enough to insinuated way into so many women's lives," and notes that he had taken advantage of other wealthy women before

Debra, eventually implicating John's thievery in the stakes of Debra's life by commenting that "Debra had cut John out of her will months back for fear that he might kill her," and that when Debra filed for divorce, "he wanted money and promised to bleed her dry through the divorce courts if she fought him" (Goffard episode 2, episode 6). While Debra's physical wellbeing is undeniably in Goffard's consideration, then, her victimhood is linked to her monetary value, and John's status as a perpetrator is linked to his pursuit of capital gain. When Goffard puts John, as a threat to capital, in contrast with the normalized murderer Billy Vickers, his dispersal of normalcy not only furthers the typical characterization of the victim but also complements his emphasis on the Newell family as authority figures, allowing the narrative to lend itself well to new media approaches to framing the news.

According to critical framings of traditional approaches to the news, journalists' tendencies to remain complicit with existing societal problems are problematic because of the news media's ability to establish norms for society. In order to understand how true crime informs popular understanding of systemic problems, it proves useful to consider framings of traditional news media as "institutionally-driven" or "event-driven," using the terms of critic Regina Lawrence, and to seek true crime's classification between or beyond Lawrence's framings. In Lawrence's reading of the news "as an arena of problem construction," news construction is a process in which "problems are defined (or ignored), claims-makers are empowered (or marginalized), and some realities win authority and legitimacy over others" (Lawrence 4). Lawrence attributes this process to news that fits an "official dominance" model— which, as we have seen, contemporary true crime narratives revolutionize by treating a place, rather than an officer of the state, as the story's main authority—but within her analysis, she sets up a contrast that proves useful for examining the roles of true crime narratives in shaping

popular opinion. Lawrence considers the "official-dominance" model "institutionally-driven," as it is "curated by official activities in official arenas…For example, issues that Congress is currently debating are more likely to be in the news than are issues not on the Congressional agenda," and in contrast to this model presents "event-driven news," which is "cued by the appearance of dramatic news events and the 'story cues' for reporters that arise out of those events" (Lawrence 8-9). Lawrence presents "official-dominance" and "event-driven" news in binary opposition, noting: "In institutionally-driven news, political institutions set the agendas of the news organizations; in contrast, as event-driven news gathers momentum, officials and institutions often respond to the news agenda rather than set it" (Lawrence 9). Accepting Lawrence's definitions, it would seem that true crime falls more easily into the "event-driven" news category than "official-dominance," but the nature of how investigators go about finding and reporting their stories complicates this classification.

The podcasts in my consideration adhere to institutional or event-related drivers to varying degrees, and their variations can help us see a progression in the representational approaches used in new media. Of all the podcasts in question, *Up and Vanished* most closely resembles an "event-driven" story because, at the time of its occurrence, Tara Grinstead's disappearance was a story of major public interest, which Payne Lindsey followed in selecting the story for his investigation. As Lindsey notes in explaining his selection process, the story was at the top of the GBI's list of unsolved cases, proving the ability of the event's popularity to direct state officials' priorities, as Lawrence argues that "event-driven" news does (Lindsey episode 1). In this sense, perhaps the Beth Andes case in *Accused* season one comes the next closest, as Hunt offers that "as much as this tale is about murder, it's also about a system and officials that might have fingered the wrong guy, and even 37 years later seem determined to

pretend there's no chance they made a mistake," suggesting that the "event" motivating her story

is not just a murder, but a topic that seems particularly hot in the present: a judicial failure (Hunt

episode 1). *Accused* season two and *Serial* start on similar grounds, but with a modification: their

investigations are bidden by third parties, an approach which lends itself more to the "official-

dominance" model in which a primary source has their belief in a story's newsworthiness

validated by the journalist's embrace of the topic. This participatory aspect to the story's

formation falls in line with Yar's reading of new media's role in contemporary society, as Yar

asserts that "through the course of the 20th century (and into the 21st), media have played an

increasingly significant role as the channels through which the supposedly unique and highly

differentiated self is asserted and displayed," suggesting that new media is not only motivated or

determined by either an "event" or an "institution," but instead has a third, motivating factor: the

individual self (Yar 250). As we saw in the previous chapter, Yar's argument about new media's

will to represent the self helps explain the foregrounding of the journalist in contemporary true

crime podcasts, but beyond that, it also illustrates the podcasts' self-perpetuating prominence as

a popular entertainment genre.

  The cold-blooded killings typically featured in true crime narratives do not precisely fit

the institutionally-driven model that Lawrence presents—to use her example, Congress seldom

votes on legislation considering the legality of murder committed by civilians—but because most

of these narratives pertain to cold cases dug up by the journalists, they don't result from

immediate response in the manner of "event-driven" news. More than the events of the

individual murders themselves, it seems that the event to which contemporary true crime

podcasts respond is the preeminence of their own genre. As Lindsey explains in the first episode

of *Up and Vanished,* he was inspired by *Serial* and *Making a Murderer,* and, as *Accused* and

Dirty John were released after the current true crime boom had already begun—and are produced by the same podcast distributor, Wondery—*Serial* is the only show of the three that does not seem to be following a surge in the true crime trend—because, largely, it started it. As such, true crime podcasts' self-perpetuating nature support Yar's suggestion about the emphasis on the negative in self-representation, as she argues that while we typically think of self-representation as striving for positive perceptions, "claims for attention and recognition can be organised around *breaches* of agreed social norms and values as well as around conformity or excellence," driving users of new media to represent their own deviancy (Yar 251). This does not directly parallel the project of true crime—as true crime reporters highlight deviancy in another, not in themselves, but it does reflect the danger of representing deviancy in popular media, as Yar notes that a "yearning for participation in the mediasphere that increasingly confers social standing to those who achieve visibility or celebrity," might encourage self-representation via offense (Yar 253). Though it's possible that, following this logic, the ongoing production of true crime media might encourage more killers to offend with fame in mind, I instead apply this effect to the constant production of more true crime podcasts; the potentially dangerous effect in an increasing impression that we are paying attention to cases of murder and failures of justice without engaging in a thorough, critical interrogation of the criminal justice system.

New media's existentialist mode effectively complements the use of the "could-be" killer, as Ahmed's theory about the unknown object of hate and fear emerges clearly in true crime narratives. The emphasis on the unknown lends itself well to self-representation; as Payne Lindsey most clearly shows, contemporary true crime podcasts' narrative style allows investigators to present their own hunches and theorizations along with their narratives, and as such, they are not limited to reporting concrete evidence. When considered in conjunction with

Ahmed's theory about how a general sense of anxiety shifts into fear of an approaching object, it becomes clear how these hunches relate to the concept of hate: because the killer is unknown, the audience can locate fear in any potential attack on the ordinary. Ahmed writes that "the emotion of hate works to animate the ordinary subject…precisely by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim" (Ahmed 118). Ahmed considers hate the catalyst that activates fear from anxiety, but following the considerations that she presents, it also becomes clear that fear can foster a culture of hate. In a narrative centered around the possibility of a "could-be" killer, as Ahmed notes, "the possibility that we might not be able to tell the difference [between a threatening and a non-threatening body] swiftly converts into the possibility that any of those incoming bodies may be bogus," and under this assumption, the perpetuation of fear that the recognition of the "could-be" killer supports serves to validate stereotyping, which allows for the unjustified assignation of more fear to more bodies (Ahmed 122). Not only does this encourage consumers of true crime to fear those around them as murderers, but it also tells them that instead of looking to a state authority to ensure safety and order, they, like the journalists whose narratives they consume, should trust their instincts when determining guilt and innocence. As such, economies of hate and fear in Ahmed's terms encourage not only the production of more true crime narratives, but also their consumption, supporting the capitalist drive that motivates the genre. Just as we can read true crime as event-driven, with the event being the popularity of true crime itself, then, we can also read it as institutionally-driven, with the institution being not the government, but the entertainment media industry. Like in the case of producer Wondery, media companies identify what is popular, and what will earn them a large audience, to determine what their outlets should produce. In the present, that ideal product is the true crime narrative.

Not only does the capital-driven nature of contemporary true crime respond well to the motivation provided by the spectral killer, but it also relates to the idealization and resulting commodification of the victim. These two processes work together to increase the crime's salience, proving the reliance on tropes established in the previous chapter essential to the capital promotion of true crime. Amira Jarmakani examines this bind in war narratives that exoticize Iraq—and more specifically, Iraqi women—as she scrutinizes two works of popular nonfiction whose effects, according to Jarmakani's interpretation, parallel those in my consideration. Jarmakani's juxtaposition of the documentary novel *Thieves of Baghdad* by Matthew Bogdanos with the blog-turned-book *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* by "an Iraqi woman who has called herself Riverbend" makes an argument in many ways similar to my reading of contemporary true crime narratives, and as a result provides a useful parallel for this study, given that Jarmakani's argument does not itself address what we think of as "true crime" (Jarmakani 32). Jarmakani contends that while the former work engages in more obvious, easily-condemnable embrace of stereotypes, the latter represents a failed attempt at counter-narrative, claiming that in the case of Bogdanos, "the real authority of the narrative…functions through Bogdanos's simultaneous reiteration and creation of predominant frameworks of knowledge through which many U.S. audiences understand the Iraq war and the Arab world"—in other words, his consonance with existing presuppositions—but in Riverbend's case, "the book is largely marketed as an insider perspective on the real status of Iraqi women…[but] because [Riverbend's] blog entries are organised and framed as a set of reversals,[11] her counter-narrative engages in a dichotomous logic that ultimately reifies the very categories she wishes to

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[11] Riverbend presents a stereotype or misconception at the beginning of each entry, then devotes the entry to disproving it.

dismantle" (Jarmakani 36, 42). The same process of self-undermining subversion can be found in contemporary true crime narratives in the framing of both the victim and murderer sides: the construction of Beth Andes as someone who is not "a likelier target for something bad" and the similar distancing of Tara Grinstead, Hae Min Lee, and Debra Newell from corruption and vice remain complicit in their perpetuation of stereotype, while the presentation of Retha Welch and her "stumbles" exemplifies a means of reinforcing stereotype through its rejection. As Jarmakani claims of true war narratives, I maintain with true crime: the presence of stereotype, whether sanctioned or condemned, adds to the narrative's ripeness for consumption.

Whether purporting to undermine or reinforce stereotypes, the reference to an audience's presupposition offers a manageable point of entry, providing consonance, and the notion of truth itself offers salience, altogether helping prove the newsworthiness of the particular narrative being presented. Jarmakani argues that these two aspects combine to put the narrative in a corrective mode, which is easily marketable, noting: "the narrative thrust of both *Baghdad Burning* and *Thieves of Baghdad* depend on a particular deployment of truth, whereby the reader is offered an allegedly accurate corrective to the story of the Iraq war as told by the U.S. popular media" (Jarmakani 33). Hunt and Koenig similarly enter a corrective mode in their approaches to the murderer figure, as Adnan Syed's characterization as "not a Moor, but a Muslim all the same" and William Virgil's consideration as an example of what happens when a black man is tried by a white jury similarly acknowledge, critique, and reify prejudice. In both instances, Hunt and Koenig reference the stereotypes that have affected Virgil and Adnan's experiences, recognize them as being damaging and incomplete representations of the men's characters, and satisfy the audience's desire for their preconceived notions to be reflected in the narrative. Beyond offering a corrective in its responses to stereotypes, true crime also engages in a

corrective in its treatment of the state, as the contemporary shift away from affirming and toward questioning the power of the state allows the truth being "deployed" to say: "this is what the state got wrong." In the context of contemporary true crime narratives, a potential goal is not only to correct the audience's perception of the situation, but actually to correct the situation itself, as podcasters strive to do when attempting to solve the previously unsolved cases that they investigate.

In the cases of *Serial* and *Accused*, the podcasts seek to correct instances of mismanaged criminal justice and encourage more critical scrutiny of the system, garnering praise for the genre and, in the case of *Serial,* making what appears to be an honest difference. As *The New York Times* broke on March 29, 2018, the Maryland Court of Special Appeals granted Adnan Syed a new trial on all charges, stating that because Adnan's lawyer Christina Gutierrez failed to call Asia McClane as a witness during the original trial, "Syed's murder conviction must be vacated, and because Syed's convictions for kidnapping, robbery, and false imprisonment are predicated on his commission of Hae's murder, these convictions must be vacated as well" (Stack). According to Adnan's lawyer, Justin Brown, "*Serial* kind of shook the trees… [It] has also helped build this groundswell of support for us and for Adnan and for the case, and that has fueled these efforts and helped us to fight on as we have," suggesting that it was the attention garnered by the podcast's popularity, more than the investigation itself, that helped earn Adnan a new trial (Stack). Reflecting on *Serial's* success and the potential for true crime to affect change, Susan Simpson notes that "*[Serial]* effectively calls upon the audience to question fairness in the criminal justice process, opening the door for questions of biases, witness manipulation, prosecutorial misconduct, ineffective assistance of counsel, and questionable evidence," and Hunt's examination of Bob Young and William Virgil's cases does the same, especially in the

case of the latter (Simpson). As I've noted, however, Virgil's case had already been overturned before the podcast's beginning, allowing Hunt's discussion of his absolution to simultaneously address the systemic and personal instances of racial injustice that got him convicted in the first place and keep his potential criminality alive in listeners' minds—as she notes that Virgil, like Vickers, could still be a killer walking free. Thus the corrective mode that encourages rational scrutiny of the criminal justice system does not eliminate the ability to perpetuate fear of a spectral killer, and while encouraging audiences to critique the criminal justice system may be productive, the move can also vindicate audiences in their impulses to locate fear and hate in unknown bodies based on a personal hunch.

Beyond engaging in the corrective mode, true crime narratives further commodify information in order to increase web traffic and sell tickets for live tours, as established in the first chapter. Not all of the podcasts in question engage in the latter medium—only *Up and Vanished* and *Dirty John* have live tours, while *Serial* and *Accused* do not—but they, along with the websites, contribute to the marketing of certain material as "exclusive." While this "exclusive" marketing strategy is perhaps nothing new, in terms of media promotion, it makes clear the increasingly exploitative nature of new media marketing, even when the content being marketed purports to address a problem responsibly. This marketing strategy perpetuates a new kind of "voyeuristic violation," as Hickman calls it in *In Cold Blood,* of the female victims, and its efficacy relies upon the complementary relationship of the narratives' emphases on the virtuous nature of the victim and the marketing strategies' focus on access. This becomes evident in the *LA Times'* promotional language of the *Dirty John* live tour, for example, as the *Times* advertises "never-before-heard audio and previously unseen material" and notes that Goffard and live moderator Carolina A. Miranda will "examine the mind of a sociopath, the psychology of

coercive control and the lasting effects of domestic abuse" ("Go behind the scenes of Dirty John: Live at the Theatre at the Ace Hotel"). *Up and Vanished* similarly calls its live tour "an exclusive audio and video experience," and notes, upon releasing audio from the tour's first installment: "If you're wondering why you didn't know about this, it's because we only announced it on our Twitter and Instagram. We had limited seating" (Lindsey bonus episode: "UAV Live Tour," bonus episode: "LIVE in Atlanta"). The latter comment precedes Lindsey's fervent promotion of the live tour—it appears as he first begins to advertise the live performances—and serves to establish an "in crowd" of *Up and Vanished* fans, resultantly promoting the podcast further to the "out crowd," who will feel encouraged to follow *Up and Vanished* on Twitter and Instagram to avoid missing out again. This exclusionary language used to divide and incentivize the fan base clues us in to the true purpose of the live tours, and with it, their exploitation of the murder victims' bodies and the perpetuation of social norms that allow for domestic violence.

In podcasts that feature live tours, surely the information essential to understanding the case has been presented in the podcasts themselves, so what is the purpose of accessing this new material? One explanation lies in the journalist's celebrity: because the journalist becomes a character themselves—and, in the cases of all but Goffard, one intentionally presented as cool, accessible, and relatable—it is likely that fans desire to put a face to the name they've come to know so well. But more interestingly, if we understand that the live tours create a division among the fan base and instill a desire in those who do not have access to "exclusive" content to gain access, we can see that this mode strengthens the appeal of the "virginal" victim figure. The appeal of the virgin is, itself, about access: virgins are valued, in antiquated, traditional religious practice, for having restricted access to their bodies, driving potential partners' desire to be the first to come in contact. The appeal is, in essence, about conquering uncharted territory, and it is

paralleled in the language of promoting "exclusive" or "never-before-seen" content to a restricted group: the material, like the ideal woman, is untouched. In a broader sense, a similar mentality operates to drive the search for truth, as we understand that through a true crime narrative, the consumer can gain exclusive access to knowledge and a reality that others do not have; and in the case of a live tour, that drive can be used to sell tickets.

The marketing language of *Dirty John's* live tour also contributes to the danger of individualizing domestic violence narratives. Though the *Times'* promotional language recognizes that domestic violence has "lasting effects," the phrase is vague, teasing that more information remains undisclosed and will become available only to tour attendees. As such, the appeal of the domestic violence narrative relies on the podcast's ability to individualize the story rather than address a systemic problem; if the *Times* were interested in engaging a larger scope, rather than an individual case, it would be faced with greater pressure to provide clear information up front. The emphasis on the narrative's salience again suggests that the situation is exceptional, falling further into the bind against which Boyle warns in her discussion of the *Sun's* coverage. Domestic violence in this context, it says, is not a public issue; it is individual, salacious, and exclusive.

While sensationalism in true crime has existed for centuries, as we have seen, its current incarnation exemplifies the particular abilities of new media. Rather than merely advertising a flashy headline or an attention-grabbing image, new media's modularity—or its composition of independently editable parts—enables another message or medium to intervene at any moment during consumption, prompting a reader or listener to pay more money or demonstrate greater engagement with the content. New media allows, for example, paywalls to break a page and ask a reader to purchase a subscription to continue, or the pop-ups that prompt consumers to rate the

content before proceeding. With the prominence of this dynamic marketing model, it only makes sense for contemporary true crime podcasts to focus on an individual story and commodify literal and figurative entry to it, and though an individualized approach has the potential to distract from a problem's pervasive nature and the potential for reform, narrative storytelling as a whole relies on the study of complex, individual characters and their relationships. To question the validity and potential damage of true crime, then, truly requires us to question the process of storytelling itself. While the genre's potential damages can be tempered or worsened depending on its narrative approach, its project raises ethical questions that prove worthwhile for storytellers of all genres. The key difference is that the stakes increase when the story in question considers the death of a real person, and massive audiences pay attention because of that person's reality.

"So this strange tale about Humphery[12] & Vegas was not especially *newsworthy*, by my standards. Its only real value, in fact, was the rare flash of contrast it provided to the insane tedium of the surface campaign… A useless story, no doubt, but it sure beat the hell out of getting back on that goddamn press bus and being hauled out to some shopping center in Gardena and watching McGovern shake hands for two hours with lumpy housewives."

-Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*

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[12] sic.

Conclusion

While at times, this project may have read like a reproach of evolving narrative forms, with it I in no way intend to condemn new modes of storytelling or discourage the pursuit of truth. Though I have launched many criticisms—from minute particulars to broad considerations—of contemporary true crime podcasts, I recognize the genre's merits, and even enjoy its consumption. Any noteworthy form of storytelling has to take risks, and most narratives will, inevitably, privilege the individual over the collective. Although I maintain that true crime's main interest is its own capital-driven proliferation, that's not as wild a claim as it may sound. Narratives that don't sell barely get told, after all—and much less do they get heard.

The number of examples I could pull in of other noteworthy producers of true crime and true-crime-related media is staggering, even exhausting—which seems to corroborate my insistence on the genre's relentless self-perpetuation. Truman Capote and Norman Mailer are far from the only twentieth century true crime novelists worth mentioning: Anne Rule for *The Stranger Beside Me*, John Krakauer for *Under the Banner of Heaven*, and the disgraced Joe McInnis for his downfall, *Fatal Vision*, all nearly made it into this study. As I developed my portrayal of the renegade journalist, I was tempted to drag Hunter S. Thompson up on stage—but his only significant murder coverage was engrained in patent activism, and the Gonzo style itself offers so much room for debate over the representation of fact and fiction, it would've added unnecessary pages to this project. And among the current generation of true crime media, so many narratives had to be excluded: the TV shows *American Crime Story: The People vs. OJ Simpson*, *The Jinx*, and *Making a Murderer;* among podcasts, *Serial's* elaboration platform *Undisclosed, Up and Vanished's* sequel *Atlanta Monster,* and the giggly commentary show *My Favorite Murder*. Nearly included—during the early stages of this work—was Brian Reed's

well-known *S-Town*, but I cut it at first because it was just *too* revolutionary, given that it doesn't end up being a crime show.

What I have learned, while pursuing this study, is that storytelling—true or false, crime-related or otherwise—can't save us. It might make us feel worse or better, but it won't ward off the impending danger whose approach we fear. It's important to recognize, however, that it can participate, at least to a degree, in that project of saving, because when we need to combat a problem, the first crucial steps are its identification and exposure. While it's tempting to pursue them with haste, those processes must be done carefully, so we shouldn't stop evolving our narrative storytelling methods. We should keep improving them.

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