ABSTRACT

We Are What We Consume: True-Crime, Podcasts, and Storytelling in the 21st Century

Rachel J. Caldwell, M.A.

Mentor: Scott J. Varda, Ph.D.

Podcasts are an evolving technological phenomenon that promises consumers a level of narrative intimacy previously unseen in other forms of media. Their unique storytelling format presents an opportunity for individuals to access news and entertainment that rhetorically structures the world around them. True crime podcasts' accessibility and popularity imbue their narratives as a site for further social, aesthetic, and qualitative inquiry. Stories told on true crime podcasts restructure the public's understanding of crime and victimhood based on hegemonic ideologies and institutions of power. Despite podcasts' increasing saliency, few have paid critical attention to podcasts as agents of oppression and entropy. This thesis identifies harmful master narratives commonly weaponized by true crime podcasts to better understand the evolving definitions of crime and victimhood in the United States. In recognizing true crime podcasts' intrinsically rhetorical nature, I also identify examples of resistance that introduce new ways of understanding the true crime genre.

We Are What We Consume: True-Crime, Podcasts, and Storytelling in the 21st Century

by

Rachel J. Caldwell, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication

_____

David Schlueter, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

_____

Scott J. Varda, Ph.D., Chairperson

_____

Leslie A. Hahner, Ph.D.

_____

Kara Poe Alexander, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
August 2022

_____

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Page bearing signatures is kept on file in the Graduate School.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to my advisor and the members of my thesis committee for their invaluable guidance and patience. I could also not have undertaken this journey without the help of the Communication Department, my peers, and my coworkers, all of whom generously provided knowledge, feedback, and support. Additionally, I would be remiss in not mentioning my family, especially my parents, sister, and partner. Their belief in me has kept my motivation and drive high during this challenging process. I would also like to thank my pets for all the emotional support and entertainment.

DEDICATION

To my parents, who made this possible.

To my people, who are still here.

Wado.

CHAPTER ONE

The Fallacy of "True" Crime

Crime and victimhood are complex topics in modern Western society, primarily influenced by the narratives we receive through the media and often lacking a firm definition. Almost exclusively presented to the public through corporate media sources, fear of crimes, its pervasiveness, and the likelihood of being targeted by it are frequently embellished and exaggerated (Potter & Kappeler, 2012). Moreover, the hyperbolized crime narrative presented to Americans through mainstream media (often worsened via smaller, enclaved networks) largely centers on white Americans as neutral observers or victims of crime and Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples as perpetrators of those crimes (Punnett, 2017).

While Americans' sources of information about the world have become more fragmented, the majority continue to receive their understandings of society from outlets that highlight criminality as a central aspect of the events of the world (Näsi et al., 2021). Given the racialized nature of our global ideologies, marginalized communities are often constructed as little more than commodities for entertainment, control, and wealth-building. While critical and rhetorical scholars understand well the constructed nature of these media presentations, the public perceives these narrative accounts of the world (at least the ones from their preferred news source) as unbiased or at least as a reasonable approximation for the actual events of the world (Boling & Hull, 2019; Potter & Kappeler, 2012).

Mediated portrayals of crime shape notions of the world as well as the identities of people. For the past two centuries, news outlets have centered crime, especially violent crime, as an essential part of everyday life (Potter & Kappeler, 2012; Swanson, 2020). The centering of these crimes is achieved through master narratives of the world that not only offer audiences a supposedly "unvarnished" apprehension of the larger society but do so in a way that attempts to connect with their audiences (Horeck, 2019). In addition, these mediated portrayals of the world help construct identities of minoritized peoples. As such, portrayals of crime in the media have long helped shape both how public audiences understand the world and how people in the world understand themselves.

Like other official mediated news sources, true crime podcasts construct our understandings of the world. In addition to official news portrayals of the world, recent years have seen the metaphorical explosion of true crime podcasts (Sherrill, 2020). Likely spurred by the success of the 2014 podcast *Serial*, the modern true-crime podcast has extended what some say Truman Capote initiated when he functionally invented a new genre, the nonfiction novel (Sherrill, 2020; Voss, 2015). Like true-crime novels before them, the true-crime podcast draws its inspiration from media dating back as far as European murder pamphlets of the sixteenth century and later, in early America, of the penny press (Buozis, 2017). Their mediums may differ, but one thing all these "alternative" portrayals of crime have shared in common is their collective ability to help construct understandings of crime, victim, and identity more generally through their presentation of narratives.

Today, mainly through the true-crime podcast, these violent stories help society perpetuate understandings of crime and victimhood in a way that often attempts to

smooth over, retell, and ascribe new meaning to America's marginalized communities' violent and traumatic experiences (Sturken, 1997, p. 85). Moreover, these narratives often insist upon a single definition of truth, habitually at the expense of recognizing the interwoven and complicated relationships between race, class, sexuality, gender, and religion (Lindemann, 2020). It is this confluence of intersectional identity creation and maintenance that this thesis is particularly concerned with.

To my way of thinking, a failure to interrogate the intersectional nature of the power of these stories is uniquely dangerous as it allows stories to be repeated, circulated, and ultimately transformed into a social doctrine known as master narratives (Lindemann, 2020). Master narratives enable individuals to consume stories and objectify others, masquerading structural biases and oppression as gospel truth (Martinez, 2020). These narratives are best understood as "culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a 'good' member of a culture" (McLean & Syed, 2015). To embrace a master narrative is to neglect the overlapping dynamics of race, gender, and class (Cho et al., 2013). Master narratives allow single perspectives to be adopted as the monolith of experience for society (Martinez, 2020). Through reproduction and indoctrination, harmful master narratives involving crime perform as dictum, combining aspects of history, culture, and drama to subtly influence all who hear it (Sturken, 1997). As this is very much the case for contemporary American media, stories involving various aspects of crime and violence provide a valuable site for further social, aesthetic, and rhetorical investigation.

Considering the multifaceted nature of crime in the United States and the embeddedness of race, gender, and class in the likelihood of justice, this thesis finds it

valuable to begin from an explicitly intersectional perspective. Initially coined in the late 1980s, intersectionality is rooted in the legal and political movements of Black women, Chicana and Latina women, and other women of color (Carastathis, 2014; Cho et al., 2013). As a praxis, it aims to illuminate the multiple positionings that constitute everyday life and the power relations that oppress some individuals more than others (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). Intersectionality also identifies how individuals may hold simultaneous, complex, and inclusive truths, a term of art that help people better understand social structures and subjective experiences (Carastathis, 2014). Essentially, the term aids in identifying how systems of oppression reciprocally construct identities, especially through a gendered and sexualized idiom (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006).

With this perspective in mind, this thesis seeks to understand how true-crime podcasts and master narratives interact to further structure the public's understanding of crime, justice, and intersectionality within the United States. I first discuss the rhetorical history and socially structured nature of crime and victimhood in America, particularly as it relates to true-crime storytelling. I then combine content analyses, close textual analyses, and personal reflections to examine how true-crime podcasts structure modern understandings of crime, victimhood, and law enforcement. This investigation illustrates my assertion that modern true-crime podcasts participate in a long history of social structuration through racist, sexist, and classist storytelling. Ultimately though, my examinations of master narratives and true-crime podcasts aim to provide instruction on how to critically apply an intersectional perspective when discussing violence and justice in the United States. This application of intersectionality, I posit, illustrates how

counterstories in narrative and praxis work to counteract harmful and oppressive master narratives.

Understanding how podcasts conceptualize and define true crime requires special attention to the type of information perpetuated and how that information has become consecrated (Dowler et al., 2006). Consequently, the second chapter of this thesis is a literature review that pays particular attention to the development of true crime as a genre, commodified and traded since the early modern era (Boling, 2019). A cornerstone of this chapter is the actualization that sensationalized and commodified crime, no matter its intention, is layered in bias. Evidence notwithstanding, scholars and the media have focused on the potential educational benefits of true crime podcasts (Boling, 2019). I posit that this focus perpetuates the very violence that is trying to prevent; that true-crime storytelling is a conduit for a sinister hegemony to maintain power and status when left unchecked. In examining the historical and social foundations of the true-crime genre itself, I illustrate how much of the US's current understanding of crime and victimhood is inherently political and, thus, shifting, defined not by the victims but by disparate power distribution amongst individuals and cultures (Burger, 2016).

Additionally, by discussing how scholars currently study the true crime genre, I highlight the lack of literature focusing on true crime's rhetorical power of structuration and maintenance of oppressive and harmful master narratives. Upon identifying this gap in the literature, I adopt a critical intersectional perspective to analyze and explicate how true-crime podcasts perpetuate harmful master narratives. These narratives reinforce violent understandings of crime and victimhood, relying on stereotypes and emotion to fabricate a reality that further oppresses marginalized peoples.

5

The next chapter begins by noting the public's longitudinal narrative shift concerning cannabis, a plant more commonly known by its street name of marijuana. Highlighting the criminalization of cannabis exemplifies the reality of US conservative sociopolitical leanings and tendency to shift cultural standards based on perceived threats from minoritized people groups. The evolution from cannabis as a medicinal aid to marijuana, an active criminal agent, occurred during a time of major sociopolitical unrest and technological advancement. Illuminating this transition highlights the common denominator of criminal activity, an increase in intolerance around specific customs and actions, especially when those customs and actions are narratively associated with marginalized people groups and other violent criminal activities (Slaughter, 1988). Today, much of the public's understanding of marijuana has been influenced by fear-motivated narratives and the desire to maintain associations of criminal activity with marginalized people groups.

Acknowledging cannabis's significance in qualifying (and quantifying) criminal activity legitimizes this thesis's proposed questions concerning how true crime podcasts define crime. In examining the complicated history true crime has with storytelling, I recognize the power narratives possess to constitute a racially or religiously biased worldview, providing ammunition to individuals who wish to police culture and identity (Seltzer, 2008; Punnett, 2017). This recognition serves as a stepping stone to investigating how true-crime podcasts further tether aspects of crime and victimhood with concepts of justice and retribution. What stories are told concerning law enforcement? How do these stories reckon with the reality of victims being harmed at the hands of the government? Do modern true-crime podcasts invite listeners to consider a

different perspective? In answering these questions, I aim to illustrate how modern true-crime podcasts rely on narrative techniques that uphold notions of equitable law enforcement and criminal justice that actively harm minority people groups today.

I look to *Jensen and Holes: Murder Squad* to identify how modern crime storytelling exists to uphold biased notions of power and functionally define what criminal activity is, most often at the expense of minorities (Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022). My examinations combine content analyses of true-crime podcasts with close textual analyses of the *Murder Squad*'s episodes, identifying critical aesthetic choices such as music, tone, and vocabulary to understand the rhetorical situation constructed by the podcast. Throughout my analyses, I pay close attention to the positionality of the hosts to gauge the narrative's perceived saliency and relatability (Lee et al., 2016). This qualitative approach bolsters my critique that ignorance of intersectionality perpetuates more harmful stances of proclaimed impartiality or enlightenment.

Podcasts' assumption of objectivity implies assurance in the individual as judge and juror and in the systems that define the society in which individuals function (Parenti, 1993). It allows individuals to consume and objectify others at will, simultaneously masquerading structural bias and oppression as gospel truth while erasing the reality of violence many marginalized communities face in the United States (Parenti, 1993). Adopting a critical perspective enables me to identify which harmful master narratives are most often deployed to further link understandings of crime and victimhood with stereotypes regarding race, religion, or gender, distinct intersections of culture that make up an individual's identity.

The following chapter assumes a similar mode of analysis, focusing instead on the structurally constituted nature of law enforcement. I begin by tracing the foundations of the Texas Rangers and noting the continued violence committed against Native American people groups on behalf of government institutions. Acknowledging various government-sanctioned criminal activities committed against marginalized groups by institutions of power underscores the insidious association the US holds of law and justice in conjunction with a person's identity. Crime is not criminal if committed by individuals of a specific custom, as personified by the inhumane treatment of countless Native Americans, Mexicans, and Black people at the hands of the Texas Rangers (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020).

There is an unequal burden of crime and victimhood narratively assigned to the US's marginalized and poor populations (Harris & Kearney, 2014). Audiences are most often confronted with crime stories that exploit and culturally erase minority people groups (Hernandez, 2019; Dowler et al., 2016). The stories we tell functionally confine who or what may be considered a victim. Moreover, I posit that true-crime podcasts share stories that advance, alter, or efface the reality of violence committed and celebrated by institutions of power (Burke, 1989; Dowler et al., 2006).

To illustrate this, I examine *Serial Killers*, a modern true-crime podcast on the Parcast network (Pulcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). Again, I combine content analyses, close textual analyses, and personal reflections to examine the aesthetic and rhetorical techniques utilized to perpetuate harmful master narratives concerning crime and victimhood. Do true crime podcasts rely on harmful master narratives to incite fear? Which ones? How do they embellish upon the socially and historically situated nature of

a crime, and how do these understandings continue to enact harm on marginalized communities today? In answering these questions, I aim to identify familiar narrative tropes that benefit institutions of power in erasing the experience of marginalized victims. More importantly, I illustrate how these master narratives actively harm minority people groups today.

Stories that rely on sensationalism and commodification of violence and systemic injustice contribute to the larger issues of inequality and hegemonic power within the United States. The supply and demand for true crime podcasts demonstrate how much of American society has been poisoned by the need to dominate and control narratives about marginalized peoples. In recognizing true-crime storytelling's inherently insidious nature, one must also acknowledge the importance of resistance in offsetting the work of damaging master narratives (Lindemann, 2020). This subtle form of domination requires active resistance, though this resistance may look different depending on the podcast. The penultimate chapter of this thesis identifies resistance in the form of counterstories.

This chapter will serve as both an investigation and a demonstration, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality in story production and identifying necessary acts of resistance within the realm of true crime podcasts. I examine S*mall Town Murder* and *Black Girl Gone,* two podcasts I identified after conducting a network analysis of well-performing true-crime podcasts and consuming hundreds of hours of true-crime content. These podcasts utilize storytelling techniques that effectively transform their narratives into acts of resistance against the racist and often violent master narratives many listeners of the genre have become numb to today.

This chapter examines different personifications of resistance through an analysis of each podcasts' approach and execution to true-crime storytelling, paying specific attention to the intersections of sexuality, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and historical setting as they relate to the crime and the victim(s). They introduce and represent counterstories that challenge the status quo and uplift marginalized communities, subverting customs of power and authority with ones of tolerance and understanding (Martinez, 2020). This crux of this chapter's argument rests on the assertion that despite being considered a relatively new form of media, true-crime podcasts engage with a long tradition of storytelling that has historically shaped the public's understanding of what crime is and how individuals relate to it (Cecil, 2020; Punnett, 2017).

Podcasts utilize aspects of narrative and sound as tools for meaning production, enabling listeners to subconsciously manifest a perspective that aligns with majority reasoning (Donison, 2019). This understanding ultimately affects an individual's ability or inability to identify and empathize with victims, thus furthering the reach of government-sanctioned violence and structural racism. A central critique running throughout this thesis is that true-crime storytelling is over-saturated with white perspectives and hollow promises for change and activisim. The society most true-crime storytelling creates is one predicated on violence and fear to control understandings of race, gender, and class. The genre itself functionally upholds hegemonic and oppressive understandings of society, a perspective I, too, once clung to for comfort and position.

As a white-coded Cherokee woman and survivor of an abusive relationship, I felt justified in my consumption of true crime podcasts because they helped me. Having

discovered the world of true crime podcasts as an anxiety-ridden undergraduate student, I consumed them with the veracity of a studying nun to feel better informed and secure in myself. I was keenly aware of the presentation of women and black, brown, or disabled bodies (or lack thereof), but felt that I was justified because at least I was not physically hurting people. This justification, however, was a fallacy.

The final chapter of this thesis will surmise the bulk findings of my investigations into true-crime podcasts concerning how the stories they share socially construct our understandings of crime and victimhood. I review the most pervasive master narratives that true crime podcasts rely on and reiterate true crime's foundations of commodification and subjugation of minoritized people. Most importantly, my final chapter recognizes the significance and necessity for resistance through counterstories. I reflect on how true-crime lulls it's audience into false senses of security and privilege, and how conversations of intersectionality and resistance are entirely necessary to counteract oppressive understandings crime, victimhood, and justice. Crime and victimhood are continually defined and changed based on how society perceives various realities (Littlejohn et al., 2017). In providing examples of what resistance looks like and how they function, I illustrate the potential for true crime podcasts to be a tool of liberation for marginalized communities.

CHAPTER TWO

True Crime, A (Literature) Review

Storytelling as a practice has been closely tied to humanity ever since individuals

were first able to respond to the biological urge to communicate, explain, and enlighten

(Anderson, 2010). Ceremonial dances, poems, cave drawings, songs, and chants all

helped people construct meaning and make sense of their world (Lee et al., 2016;

Anderson, 2010). Despite the conception that true crime is a novel genre, storytelling

that features violence and victimhood has long been salient in societies around the

world. The biblical story of the Curse of Cain and the smoke and mirrors associated with

it is a prime example of this.

The United States' participation in symbolic world-building and social

construction via storytelling becomes keenly evident when tracing the nation's apparent

Judeo-Christian foundations. The biblical narrative of the Curse of Cain is a story that has

adopted great significance in Jewish, Christian, and American Folklore (Scruggs, 1972).

This story appears in the Christian Bible in Genesis, chapter four, and details the initial

commission of a violent crime when Cain murders his brother, Abel, in a murderous rage.

Whether or not the events that occurred in the story of Cain and Abel took place in lived

reality is of little significance or consideration today. Instead, what is significant is the

fact that for centuries the narrative of the Curse of Cain permeated the United States'

society as justification for the Transatlantic Slave Trade and continued violence

committed against Black people (Thursby, 2013; Outtara, 2021). Despite modern

attempts to critique and deconstruct this story, associating darker skin with various degrees of criminality still permeates US culture (Braude, 1997).

The proliferation of this harmful master narrative lives on because the vocabulary that we continue to utilize not only defines what we see, it also confines listeners to a specific interpretation process and predicates what would be considered an acceptable interaction with a story (Carter and Fuller, 2015; Elkins, 1996). Stories and stereotypes can feel suffocating, but no matter how dominating master narratives may be perceived, they are still, at their core, just stories that are subject to the cyclical nature of meaning-making. Harmful master narratives are continually defined and redefined by the stories told, meaning they are malleable and susceptible to resistance (Lee et al., 2016). Employing a counterstory or counter-narrative achieves this resistance. (Lindemann, 1996, 1997, 2001; Martinez, 291. 2020).

A counter-narrative is a tool that disrupts controlling tales of domination and oppression by bestowing more autonomy upon both the storyteller and the story-receiver (Harter et al., 2006). Counterstories and counter-narratives transform society's inclination for binaries by introducing an intersectional perspective through which one may understand reality (Martinez, 2020). They change the way individuals view, describe, and understand the world. This transformative power is primarily due to individuals' inherent ability to utilize stories as concrete evidence in challenging a "numbers only" approach to documenting inequity (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Cho, 2017). Counterstories emphasize the complexities of oppression and resistance by rejecting modern notions of objectivity and neutrality (Martinez, 2020).

Moreover, counterstories legitimize the experiential knowledge of minoritized people groups by introducing cultures and perspectives that diverge from the status quo (Martinez, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Storytellers engage consumers with these perspectives by facilitating critical reflections aimed at questioning unarticulated presumptions and biases (Cho, 2017; Martinez, 2020). In this way, a counterstory performs as both method and methodology (Martinez, 2020). It is the simultaneous act of telling a story and legitimizing it as a place of authority (Martinez, 2020).

Consider, for instance, the events that occurred in the Summerhill community in Atlanta, Georgia, on September 6, 1966. After police unlawfully shot a Black teenager for suspected car theft, nearly 500 Black Atlantans clashed with 1,000 police during what some would consider the peak of the Civil Rights Movement after what represented a culmination of years of systemic injustice and indifference committed by the Atlanta local government against the Black community (Russell and Nunley, 2020; *Time*, 1966). Despite acknowledging that there was no looting, no shooting, and no battles (Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta, 1966), the majority-white local government and media were quick in their attempts to villainize local civil rights leaders and condemn the display as a riot (SNCC Archive, Box 19, Folder 2, 1966; *Time*, 1966). This portrayal was intentional and harmful in that it aimed to assign the stereotype of criminal, disorganized Blackness to the exigencies many Black Atlantans were facing.

By framing the incidents at Summerhill (and other civil rights demonstrations) as riots, the media attempted to enforce an understanding of Blackness that incited crime and erased systemic violence and ongoing injustices many individuals faced (SNCC Archive, Box 19, Folder 2, 1966; Russell and Nunley, 2020). Stokely Carmichael and the

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, contrasted the riot perspective by introducing a counterstory of rebellion and critiquing the white press for its attempt at manipulating Black understandings of violence and political organizing (SNCC Archive, Box 19, Folder 2, 1966; Carmichael, 1967). Rebellion, in this instance, served as a unifying counterstory that aligned much more with the reality Black Atlantans were facing: an organized movement against an oppressive dominant authority (Russell and Nunley, 2020). Enacting this counter-narrative of rebellion allowed civil rights activists to call attention to dishonest media and illuminate Black dignity as a legitimate source of power, altering a violent story at work against their cause.

Nuanced and harmful master narratives, like that of dangerous and disorganized Blackness introduced above, are viciously powerful because, through the circulation of notions of crime and race, they begin to constitute a world that relies on unfounded biases. In this way, storytelling constructs and identifies reality, functionally diminishing and destroying narratives that do not fit the status quo (Lee et al., 2016). For instance, the awed crowd narrative dictates that you must stand and applaud during an ovation, while the classroom narrative makes it taboo if an individual were to leave the room without asking for permission. These powerful master narratives shape action and gain traction by making individuals believe that there is only one objective way of being, overwriting logic and reason to form polarizing and sometimes violent narratives (Lindemann, 2020; Martinez, 2020). As a corollary, the notion that Native Americans deserve what they get because they don't know how to handle their money. Women that visibly show anger are bitches; Black people are criminals. Poisonous narratives like these are socially shared to

the point where it feels that knowledge and understanding of their themes subtly permeate any social interaction (Lindemann, 2020).

Harmful master narratives, however benign they may initially appear, are repeated often and orient individuals' internal and external identities. They construct our understandings and limits, concerning themselves not necessarily with truth but rather with what is helpful to perpetuate a specific discourse or hidden agenda (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2017; Gergen, 2009). In this way, harmful master narratives profit from perpetuating stories that communicate racialized understandings of politics, histories, and ideologies (Martinez, 2020). Storytellers' disregard for fact capitalizes on the inherent virality that many harmful master narratives possess, allowing oppressive and hegemonic understandings of society to seep into the pores of various public, private, and social spheres. This seepage sustains cultural knowledge of specific harmful stereotypes and tropes as they relate to marginalized people groups. It allows power to be held in the hands of the storyteller exclusively, a distribution that becomes particularly influential when considering how stories involving crime and victimhood interact with and influence individuals' day-to-day lives.

To alter a controlling narrative and shift the locus of power, particularly as it relates to heavy topics such as crime and victimhood, one must employ what many critical race and communication scholars have termed as the counterstory or a counter-narrative (Martinez, 2020; Cho, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Lindemann 1996, 1997, 2001). A counterstory or counter-narrative is a tool that disrupts controlling tales of domination and oppression, bestowing autonomy on both the storyteller and the story-receiver (Harter et al., 2006; Martinez, 2020). Through counter-storytelling, harmful

16

narratives aimed at erasing and distorting epistemologies of people of color are diminished or eradicated (Martinez, 2020). It is both emancipatory and resistant in nature, legitimizing the voices and experiences of people of color while viewing majoritarian perspectives as just that, another perspective subject to influence (Martinez, 2019). In much the same way that Stokely Carmichael and the SNCC's distinction between riots and rebellions altered the understanding of what occurred at Summerhill in 1966 and reassigned power to Black Atlantans, counterstories alter the influence of majoritarian ideologies and foster social change over time as consuming them affects the way individuals view their identities, actions, and place in the world (Lindemann, 2020; Harter et al., 2006; Carmichael, 1967).

Participating in counterstory-telling provides marginalized people groups with the tools necessary to disrupt majoritarian perspectives and hegemonic power distributions within a culture (Martinez, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstory's practical uses become apparent when examining how counter-storytelling has evolved as praxis in critical race studies. Growing fields such as Black Feminist studies, Native American studies, and LatCrit studies have utilized the counterstory as a rhetorical methodology (Martinez, 2019, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling is not just creating a narrative; it challenges long-held wisdom and shared cultural understandings that persons in a dominant party bring to discussions of race (Solozarno & Yosso, 2001).

Counterstory's structuration ability has made it a powerful tool for many marginalized communities. Scholars across fields such as health care, education, disability, race, and sexuality have noted the importance of utilizing counter-storytelling to better address the lived exigencies of individuals belonging to marginalized

communities (Cho, 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Stinson, 2008; Hughes, 2008; Wargo, 2018). These counter-narratives translate well across multiliteracies because they are theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools for placing one's identity and social standing within larger systems of historic oppression (Hauber-Özer et al., 2021). The shared narratives do not open one's eyes to objective reality; instead, they reveal the subjective nature of power and its unique operations.

The use and significance of counterstories and counter-narratives are critical when attempting to understand the intersection that crime and victimhood have with individuals' identities and society writ large. How we discuss crime and victimhood impacts how we define those concepts, what is a crime, who can commit it, and who can fall victim to it. Surprisingly, few conversations consider the matter in a world where crime and victimhood disproportionately affect BIPOC and underserved communities (Hinton et al., 2018; Dowler, 2004).

Podcasts are a relatively new form of media that engage with a long tradition of true-crime storytelling that prescribes individuals to specific ways of being and understanding (Burke, 1989; Waldmann, 2020). Despite true-crime podcasts' increasing popularity and cultural significance, many scholars have chosen to focus on classifying evolving true crime standards, identifying motivations for consumption, or understanding the relationship between producer and audience (Vicary and Fraley, 2010; Seltzer, 2008; Boling and Hull, 2018; Punnett, 2017; Dowler et al., 2006). While necessary, these conversations have yet to examine the full emancipatory and world-building properties of true crime storytelling related to society as a whole. In a world ripe with violence and

overlapping systems of oppression, how can true-crime storytelling create positive change for the marginalized?

Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm proves a valuable perspective to adopt when attempting to understand the public's nuanced relationship with true crime and storytelling. Fisher's narrative paradigm posits human beings as *homo narrans*, or more simply, as inherently storytelling animals (1984). This assertion is influenced mainly by the assumption that individuals discover reason through symbolic action, discursive or non-discursive (Fisher, 1984; Burke, 1989). Essentially, this means that narration and storytelling are a universal mode of discourse that allows individuals to understand and challenge the concept of public and social knowledge (Fisher, 1984). People understand themselves and their world based on the stories they share. Stories enable individuals to muddle knowledge from the private and the public sphere, providing "a model for community life by proposing a progression from story to narrative" (Roberts, 2004), thus allowing individuals to make the mental leap from experience to doctrine.

From this perspective, society has likely participated in some form of true-crime storytelling since the dawn of storytelling itself. Attempting to pinpoint the genesis of this storytelling genre would likely prove fruitless as the denotation of the term *true crime* is still of significant consideration for scholars today (Punnett, 2017). True crime narratives habitually occupy the liminal space between news and entertainment, blurring the lines between what is fiction and reality (Bolin, 2019; Dowler et al., 2006). It mixes aspects of journalism, drama, and fictional realism to subtly engage the audience in self-reflection (Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006). This mixture produces stories subject to sensationalism and joint commiseration across various cultures and times (Seltzer, 2008).

The historical origins of the true-crime genre prove this saliency as much of its recognition is attributed to 16th-century newspapers and pamphlets produced throughout much of Western Europe, especially in England (Hibbett, 2018; Tinker, 2009; Cecil, 2020). While sensational texts such as magazines and newspapers may conjure images of packed bodega stands with colorful headlines, the reality is that historically these publications were not designed for mass consumption but rather to entertain the literate members of society with disposable income (Tinker, 2009; Wiltenburg, 2004). To consume these narratives was to assume a position of status and wealth, thus constituting a range of stereotypes and crimes against humanity as biblically and culturally sanctioned should if either the victim or "criminal" was considered deviant or poor (Thursby, 2013; Hibbett, 2018). Emotion-laden crime reports, execution summons, poetry ballads, and trial pamphlets became more widely circulated with the advent of the printing press, often being posted around cities and towns for those of the growing respectable, literate class to consume (Burger, 2016).

Publications involving crime often extrapolated evangelical definitions of sin and power into oppressive doctrines of control and public order (Wiltenburg, 2004). The public praised government-sanctioned killings on account of a perpetrator's perceived sinful nature (Burger, 2016). Many stories toed the line of moral ambiguity by emphasizing the emotional and psychological causes of a crime while encouraging the reader to sympathize with the various aspects of both the victim and the perpetrator (Burger, 2016; Cecil, 2020; Hibbett, 2018). Most of these narratives mixed concerns involving judicial proceedings, religion, and public order with images of murder and rape (Burger, 2016). Judicial reports, magazines, and pamphlets featured sex-related violence,

particularly bloody assaults and crimes committed by or against women (Burger, 2016; Tinker, 2018). Publications between the 16th and 18th centuries relied on this recipe, constructing a genre more closely associated with murder than any other type or definition of crime (Cecil, 2020; Hibbett, 2018; Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006).

These narratives restructured the public's understanding of crime based on the storyteller's innate ability to rouse emotions. Hindsight may display just how outlandish and gory these publications were; however, it is crucial to recognize that these stories were presented as objective truth and intended to be consumed with the utmost seriousness (Wiltenburg, 2004). Consumers were meant to feel shocked and frightened as it allowed groups to see "others" as active participants in criminal cultures (Dowler et al., 2006). This deliberate restructuring of the public's understanding of crime actively worked to erase systemic crime committed by ideologies of imperialism and institutions of power (e.g., stealing land or resources, financial crimes). The accessibility of these narratives, be it through printed pamphlets, illustrative woodcuts, or impassioned ballads, further legitimized crime as a site for extensive social, aesthetic, and scientific inquiry (Burger, 2016).

As literacy rates rose, cultural interests shifted, and accessibility to information grew, narratives that featured aspects of crime and victimhood spread across various written and oral traditions in the Western hemisphere (Cecil, 2020; Dowler et al., 2006; Murley, 2008). The proliferation of these narratives marked a long-term shift of sensationalist interest in the social and psychological causes of crime; however, this shift did little to advance cultural awareness of the systemic violence enacted against groups considered "other" (Wiltenburg, 2014; Burger, 2016). Moreover, the 17th and 18th

centuries' dramatization and fictionalization of criminal activity further affixed consumers' desire for information and entertainment in crime reporting (Cecil, 2020; Boling, 2019; Punnett, 2018).

While publications lengthened during the 18th and 19th centuries, reporting biased misinterpretations alongside lived experiences of violence became increasingly normal. (Tinker, 2018; Burger, 2016; Wiltenburg, 2014). Storytellers had a habit of entwining criminal accounts with an edifying Christian message, thus combining aspects of truth with appeals to the heart and spirit, as an avenue to further enact coercive control on marginalized communities (Wiltenburg, 2004). These style conventions served as "the prototype for many of the nonfiction murder narratives used in every aspect of the media today" (Punnett, 2017). By the mid-20th century, most news outlets had adopted true-crime storytelling as the primary mode of discourse (Cecil, 2020). In addition, narrative-focused crime tales seeped across mediums such as radio (e.g., *Gang Busters*), magazines (e.g., *True Detective*), television (e.g., *The Court of Last Resort*), and literature (e.g., *In Cold Blood*) (Cecil, 2020; Murley, 2008). In particular, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) signified a shift in the voyeuristic tendencies of the US public and a transition within the genre of true crime (Cecil, 2020; Linnemann, 2015).

Capote's novel transformed how the public conceptualized crime, law, and authority by establishing an intimacy between the reader, the perpetrator, and the victims (Cecil, 2020; Linnemann, 2015). This precedence positioned the public as the moral and legal judge, jury, and executioner. In describing the pair that committed the murder, Capote wrote of how the 'Brother in the breed of Cain' emerged from the darkness bearing the faces of men, verbally painting a picture of horrific violence while allowing

individuals to self-corroborate oppressive and religious understandings of crime and victimhood (Seltzer, 2008; Linnemann, 2015; Capote, 1993, 260). If the nature of understanding was already socially situated, Capote's *In Cold Blood* made sure that the public's sense of crime and victimhood became firmly defined by the intersections of position, power, and religion (Seltzer, 2008).

In Cold Blood is considered archetypal of the true-crime genre (Linnemann, 2015; Seltzer, 2008; Cecil, 2020). As true-crime narratives often do, this story honed in on the violence and terror of crime, enlivened by "the haunting power of human creation and indelibility of meaning… specters of remembrance that transmit and inherit across generations" (Linnemann, 2015). In addition to helping define the genre of true crime for generations to come, *In Cold Blood* set a rhetorical roadmap for the storytellers that followed, highlighting the power of politically-positioned, religiously-charged stories aimed at governing through fear and racial animus (Linnemann, 2015).

The modern definition of true crime denotes a genre of writing, radio, and television that examines or portrays real crimes (Tinker, 2009). However, true crime's connotation has morphed into one that refuses to recognize the reality of certain crimes, criminals, and victims. Stories that rely on aspects of crime and victimhood to perpetuate a narrative blatantly establish a feedback loop that upholds racist and harmful stereotypes within individuals' sociopolitical lives, all while attempting to hide conservative biases behind a cloak of objectivity (Parenti, 1993, p. 14). A modern illustration is that Canada did not integrate the term Black as a racial category into its crime and victimization reporting until 1999 (Samuels-Wortley, 2021). This lack of recognition does not mean that Black Canadians were not victims of crime. Instead, it marks the sobering reality that

23

the government did not consider crimes involving Black people as defensible, that Black people were not eligible to be victims in the eyes of the justice system. Similar foundations of racism and conservatism reflect the deepest desires of US culture for comfortability and power.

Modern true-crime storytelling participates in social construction in much of the same way that its true-crime ancestors engaged. However, their narratives often work on behalf of more significant, albeit less tangible, institutional forces: to reinforce definitions of crime and victimhood that benefit systems of oppression, with stories often emphasizing heinous crimes perpetrated by or against low-income and marginalized communities. (Harris and Kearney, 2014; Hibbett, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the racial status of the victim proves to be one of the most critical elements in the presentation of crime stories, past and present (Dowler et al., 2006).

Consider the recent case of Gabby Petito, a young, cis, white, blonde woman who went missing in Wyoming while on a road trip with her fiancé, Brian Laundrie. A plethora of police forces, news outlets, and armchair detectives immediately began to devour the story, quickly reproducing and redistributing the tale, often including their own speculations on Laundrie's innocence and Petito's whereabouts. One was hard-pressed to find a news outlet, social media site, or podcast not speculating wildly about the 22-year-old blonde woman.

Despite the apparent tragedy, society's fascination with Gabby Petito proved to be a more extensive critique of popular culture within the United States. Audiences were furious at the injustices Petito suffered and took to the internet to express their frustrations, finding a community of individuals who affirmed their outrage but didn't

question their lack of curiosity. While there is no denying that the case did start more conversations about domestic violence and mental health, it also left the sour taste of systemic inequality in the mouths of those who recognized the injustice of silence continually committed against Indigenous and Native American women (Krakau, 2021). In the margins, many activists began to highlight that over 700 Indigenous women have gone missing from the same area as Petito, yet none received nearly the same amount of furor (Vlamis, 2021). Furthermore, coverage for minority and marginalized populations is sparse, if ever truthful, with social status and race being top contenders for attention and publication (Dowler et al., 2006).

Considering everything, one must separate true crime's denotative and connotative meanings to understand the depth of erasure and harm occurring within true-crime storytelling today. The *Oxford Dictionary* understands the term to mean a real crime, but connotatively, true crime is much more closely associated with the violence of murder, rape, robbery, and assault than anything else (Cecil, 2020; Hibbett, 2018; Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006; Durham et al., 1995). Scholars in fields like journalism, media, and political science also note the difference between true crime the act and true crime the genre (Durham et al., 1995, Parenti, 1993; Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006). True crime reporting and storytelling often misrepresent the pervasiveness of crime types and offender and victim characteristics (Dowler et al., 2016; Cecil, 2020).

The execution of a criminal act does not always precipitate coverage by the genre (Dowler et al., 2006). Indeed, true crime podcasts are reliant upon selling the same "*if it bleeds, it leads*" and "*sex sells*" narratives as their ancestors, in hopes of gaining notoriety (Seltzer, 2008; Cecil, 2020). Strict adherence to the genre's recipe actively erases violent

systemic and systematic crime experienced by marginalized communities. The strategic misrepresentation and lack of visibility surrounding certain crimes and victims is well documented across scholarship concerning news reporting and literature (Dowler et al., 2006; Seltzer, 2008; Durham et al., 1995; Burger, 2016; Willtenburg, 2014). Podcasts, nevertheless, have yet to receive the same critical attention from scholars of rhetoric and public address.

Primarily a 21st-century invention, the term podcasts was coined by Ben Hammersley to describe online radio practices standard in the early 2000s (Waldmann, 2020). What started as a niche phenomenon slowly grew in popularity, with nearly one-third of American adults listening to podcasts at least once a month in 2020 (Waldmann, 2020). As technological innovation and narrative practices advanced, the production quality of podcasts increased, and the gaps between the storyteller and the story-consumer lessened (Donison, 2019). The medium's steady increase in traction is emblematic of podcast production and consumption barriers or lack thereof.

Yes, podcasts find their ancestral lineage closely tied to public radio; however, their format introduces rhetorical situations distinctive from the long-form journalism traditionally associated with radio (Waldmann, 2020). Unencumbered by constraints such as programming timelines, distribution structure, or station censorship, podcasts allow users the power of how and when they consume content (Drew, 2017). In addition, the format's flexibility regarding connection and portability has led to never-before-seen levels of access to information and community for podcast consumers (Greer, 2017; Donison, 2019).

Categories of podcasts span from comedy to issues and intersections of identity, the news to long-form investigative journalism (Greer, 2017). Despite their relative infancy, podcasts have shown great promise for fields like healthcare and education. Narrative intimacy fostered through podcasts allows the producer to retroactively engage and motivate, enhancing the cognitive tools available to consumers (Drew, 2017). In this way, podcasts function pedagogically, as listeners focus more on the story than on attempted knowledge consolidation (Cross, 2014; Drew, 2017). This functionality allows podcasts to straddle the worlds of entertainment and news, simultaneously informing and influencing their listeners through storytelling (Dowler et al., 2006). They exist to argue, petitioning specific narratives and stereotypes, quietly affirming their audiences' imperceptible biases and preconceived notions surrounding a topic (Dowler et al., 2006; Burke, 1989).

The cycle of producing crime waves, igniting fears, and outcries for cultural policing reflects a significant gap in the public's understanding of crime and its control (Dowler et al., 2006). While the pernicious influences of crime news have been extensively studied across disciplines such as journalism, mass media, and literature, scholars have rarely approached true crime podcasts with the same critical, rhetorical perspective. Instead, scholarly efforts have primarily focused on elucidating crime podcasts' inherent usefulness in connecting audiences with concepts like security, justice, and citizenship (Tinker, 2018; Boling, 2018). Women's interactions with true crime podcasts have been particularly interesting for scholars to examine (Vicary and Fraley, 2010). In addition, the resurgence of interest in true crime content, especially by women, has been noted and primarily attributed to their fear of crime, despite the reality that men

are more likely to be victims (Vicary and Fraley, 2010). Other motivations for consumption include convenience, escapism, entertainment, and boredom (Boling and Hull, 2018).

Scholars have found that consumption of true crime lowers the fear of crime and provides specific "equipment for living" for marginalized people groups (Burke, 1989; Bailey, 2017; Browder, 2006; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). In addition, many of these publications examine the genre's emancipatory power and potential to enact criminal reform (Boling and Hull, 2018; Browder, 2006; Boling, 2019). Most literature exalts women and other would-be victims for their ability to consume content in the face of such horrendous criminality and inequality (Browder, 2006; Boling, 2018; Dowler et al., 2006). Few, if any, have critiqued the supply and demand for content explicitly designed to uphold images of power and victimization.

Taking political, historical, and sociocultural factors into account, true crime podcasts can be seen as active participants in the structuration of the United States' criminal justice system. While many scholars have noted the obvious biases adopted when reporting true crime news, few have paid critical attention to how podcasts contribute to the entropy associated with crime, victimhood, and justice. Just how emancipatory can true crime podcasts be when confronted with the reality of increased violence committed against black, brown, and disabled bodies? This thesis draws critical attention to true crime podcasts and the narrative discourses upon which they rely. This focus fills a gap in the literature by analyzing how true crime podcasts rhetorically construct the concepts of crime and victimhood, often from an oppressive white perspective.

Additionally, in identifying crime news as an inherently biased form of communication, this thesis seeks to identify examples of resistance that stand in contrast to the quintessentially biased mode of true crime storytelling most often used in today's media. In doing this, I seek not to demonize those who produce and consume true-crime content, rather, I recognize that systems of oppression often serve to mutually construct harmful narratives and stereotypes (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). This recognition encourages individuals to thoughtfully and critically consume true-crime content so that racist and sexualized narratives are no longer tolerated when discussing victimhood. Finally, in recognizing the structural and resistive power of true crime podcasts, this thesis will contribute to the rhetorical study of true crime, the narrative paradigm of discourse, and storytelling's persuasive and constitutive power

CHAPTER THREE

We Need (Your) Help

Definitions of crime and victimhood are constantly changing (Dowler et al., 2006; Seltzer, 2008; Vitiello, 2019). These definitions are inherently connected to society's interpretations of deviancy as determined by the nonmarginalized majority (Seltzer, 2008; Vitiello, 2019). Preconceptions of what a crime looks like and who a victim can be structure our interpretations of deviancy, establishing a conservative feedback loop aimed at policing the status quo (Seltzer, 2008). If a crime or its victims do not look and sound a specific way, it will simply not be acknowledged (Dowler et al., 2006; Wiltenburg, 2004).

When I began this thesis, I could only conceive of bias being impactful on the individual level. I think this interpretation largely stemmed from my consumption of true-crime content and understanding of the *Serial* effect (Boling & Hull, 2018). *Serial*, the definitive example of modern true-crime podcasting, set a precedent for future podcasts to shed light on an individual they believe to be innocent or bring attention to the United States criminal justice system's failings (Punnett, 2017; Boling, 2019). Unfortunately, I believe true-crime podcasts' prerogative of education perpetuates racist, classist, and sexist biases that subtly influence true-crime podcast listeners. (Burke, 1989; Fisher, 1984; McBurney, 1936).

Having consumed countless hours of true-crime podcasts for research and gone through my graduate program, I now recognize bias through true-crime storytelling in the

form of master narratives. These master narratives work to slowly confine individuals to a way of understanding that harms marginalized communities (Burke, 1989; Fisher, 1984; McBurney, 1936; Martinez, 2020). Educating the public on the pitfalls of the United States' justice system is undoubtedly a necessary endeavor. However, I wonder what happens when the stories we use to educate are inherently biased, fed to us by implicitly biased storytellers? Furthermore, even when intentions are good, if intersectionality and positionality are never recognized, do harmful master narratives persist?

Many true-crime scholars today praise podcasts for their accessibility and virality (Boling, 2019; Tinker, 2009; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Many also note podcasts' power to enact change and penchant for advocacy (Dowler et al., 2006; Boling, 2019; Hernandez, 2019). Even so, few have critiqued the genre's overarching bend toward conservative ideologies or examined true-crime podcasts as a site for social, aesthetic, and rhetorical investigation (White, 2020; Punnett, 2017). This chapter fills a gap in the literature by examining the social, aesthetic, and rhetorical storytelling techniques of *Jensen & Holes: Murder Squad*, a podcast presented by the *Exactly Right* network, and comparing them to the rhetorical construction of cannabis as a criminal agent (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022; Vitiello, 2019).

Cannabis proves to be a rich site for historical and social inquiry regarding the public's understanding and perception of true crime (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999). In examining the rhetorical history of cannabis, I seek to understand how podcasts' social, aesthetic, and rhetorical choices mimic historical true-crime storytelling and contribute to the public's acceptance of racist and classist master narratives (Burger, 2016; Cecil,

2020). In acknowledging that true-crime storytelling exists at the intersection of entertainment and news media, I posit that podcasts' decisions concerning music, language, and promotion style make subtle master narratives easier to accept and connect the audience to the story (Wenzel, 1992; Burke, 1989; Seltzer, 2008).

Conservative notions of society and justice are consistent when tracing the history of public true-crime storytelling in the United States (Hernandez, 2019; Cecil, 2020; Parenti, 1993). For example, anti-cannabis propagandists relied on the public's racial animus and true-crime storytelling to enact legislative change in the same way the Texas Rangers used them as an excuse for genocide (Gwynne, 2010; Vitiello, 2019). From newspapers to television networks, crime, a topic that began as hushed gossip, has proliferated into a genre that spans many popular mediums, with podcasts arguably experiencing their fifteen minutes of fame at the time of this thesis (Boling, 2018; Boling, 2019; Sherrill, 2020). This medium gives individuals immediate access to evocative content that inspires activism and change, as evident by the influx of self-identified web-sleuths (Hernandez, 2019; Cecil, 2020). This exact virality and accessibility necessitate a closer look at true-crime podcasts, their hosts, and the stories they perpetuate.

Cannabis and the Media

Despite the historical and cultural significance of cannabis, society's sentiments on the cultivation, distribution, and usage of the plant personifies the contradictory nature of crime within the United States. From medicinal aid to criminal agent, cannabis has experienced a narrative shift primarily attributed to the stories perpetuated through the media and political lobbyists (Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999;

Thompson, 2013). These stories overwrote public memory and culture to cement the idea that cannabis is the devil's lettuce, a plant that, should it fall into the wrong hands, could kill or produce insanity (Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019).

This master narrative was born from stories designed to persecute minority communities, applying aspects of fear and violence to control public sentiments and legislation (Galston & Dionne, 2013; Musto, 1991; Callahan, Bruner, and Giguere; 2021; Gieringer, 1999). If your culture is more likely to condone or practice the consumption of cannabis, you are more likely to be a criminal (Vitiello, 2019). Stories mentioning cannabis, minorities, and violence further cemented the public perception of crime, implying a causal link between crime and cannabis consumption (Gieringer, 1999; Thompson, 2013; Martinez, 2020). This link with crime allowed the conservative majority to exert and maintain power over the marginalized minority, policing identities and narratives alike (Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006; Cecil, 2020).

This understanding stands in stark contrast to the plant's historical use (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999). For example, medical practitioners in China have prescribed cannabis for thousands of years to combat ailments like convulsions, depression, and menstrual cramps (Vitiello, 2019). Likewise, the cultivation of cannabis dates back centuries in India and much of the Muslim world (2019). By 1524, cannabis grew wild in Virginia (Ransom, 1999). Various plant species provided fibers for products such as paper, rope, and clothing, establishing cannabis as a cash crop and a significant competitor of cotton (Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999; Gieringer, 1999). Colonial medical practitioners utilized the plant for its pain-relieving, antihistaminic, and anticonvulsive qualities well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999;

Gieringer, 1999). By 1937, United States doctors had as many as 28 prescriptions containing cannabis to treat various medical conditions, including opium addiction, rabies, and epilepsy (Vitiello, 1998; Ransom, 1999; Vitiello, 2019).

From a biblical perspective, the United States' initial understanding and use of cannabis seemed arguably righteous. Genesis Chapter 1 details the creation story, a narrative in which God calls all things into being and deems them good. The earth brought forth vegetation and seed-yielding plants, gifts to help sustain the communities that would inhabit the land (Chapter 1:9-31, NRSV). The early United States' production and utilization of cannabis followed this biblical charge, with individuals and communities thriving on the plant's medicinal, spiritual, and economic benefits (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999). From an Indigenous perspective, it seems fitting to cultivate a plant that is useful in its entirety, from seed to leaf to oil to fiber, with nothing left wasting. Unfortunately, cannabis's obvious therapeutic and capitalistic utility was no match for the United States' racist sentiments and profit-based legislature.

Much of the impetus to criminalize marijuana came from the influx of black and brown immigrants seen during the turn of the twentieth century (Vitiello, 2019). Money-hungry homesteaders hid racist sentiments behind their perceived prerogative to conquer the land and its potential wealth (Gieringer, 1999). Newspapers tapped into fears of violence and crime by creating lurid stories about crazed immigrants, particularly Mexicans, going "insane" and committing murder and rape while under the influence of marijuana (Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999).

The narrative of Empress Carlota represents this phenomenon well. The wife of Emporer Maximillian, Charlotte, later known by the Spanish Carlota, held the titles of

Princess of Belgium, Archduchess of Austria, and Emperor consort of Mexico in the late nineteenth century (Gieringer, 1999). Dispatched by Napoleon III to serve as a figurehead for the short-lived French Empire in Mexico, reports from the Pacific Drug Review (1909) and similar publications purport that the Empress "had her mind dethroned by drinking coffee in which marihuana leaves had been placed." This alleged poisoning rendered her an "incurable lunatic" with no hopes of recovery, supplying further ammunition for entities who claim that cannabis produces madness, violence, and death (1909; Gieringer, 1999).

Emotionally-charged tales like that of Empress Carlota quickly overwrite the public's shared understanding of drugs and who may use them (Martinez, 2020). By the early twentieth century, a master narrative of cannabis as a criminal agent was born through the continual retelling and inflating of the story of Empress Carlota and others (Vitiello, 2019; Thompson, 2013; Ransom, 1999).

Fictional anecdotes involving black, brown, and female bodies proliferated, their contents becoming increasingly graphic (Vitiello, 2019; Thompson, 2013; Ransom, 1999). Cannabis, a plant previously respected for its rich medicinal and cultural properties, slowly became a weapon through which the United States further subjugated marginalized communities. Cannabis was no longer cannabis. Instead, it became known as hash, locoweed, pot, reefer, marijuana, the devil's lettuce, and various other racially or religiously charged terms (Thompson, 2013; Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999). Cannabis's transformation from medicinal aid and cash crop to active criminal agent included strategic etymological and social reform (Thompson, 2013).

The media throughout North America played a central role in achieving this reform. For example, a report from the *Mexican Herald* published in the *LA Times* refers to individuals who smoke cannabis as lower class, wild beasts, and devils (Gieringer, 1999). Similar stories published in *The Pacific Drug Review* claimed cannabis to be a more life-altering drug than opium or cocaine, causing the user to lose their mind, become a raving lunatic, and suddenly die (Gieringer, 1999). Unsurprisingly, marijuana (or marihuana or mariahuana) is a word primarily attributed to anti-Mexican and anti-Chinese sentiments, its philological origin lost to history (Thompson, 2013; Vitiello, 2019). The Spanish-sounding locoweed accompanied the "violent" Mexican immigrants in the South, whereas hashish partnered with any "Turks, Arabs, Armenians" or other Middle Eastern immigrants (Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999).

By the turn of the twentieth century, racist and classist sentiments in the United States witnessed the shift from hemp and cannabis to marijuana and weed in the everyday vernacular (Thompson, 2013; Vitiello, 2019). Cannabis and its associated customs had a new identity in 'marijuana,' a persona assigned to it by institutions such as the Church, the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and the Pacific Drug Review (Gieringer, 1999; Ransom, 1999; Thompson, 2013). Immigrants, racial minorities, individuals in poverty, and others considered on the outskirts of society were often targets of colorful newspaper and magazine features whose violence often rivaled the dime-store murder-mystery novel (Vitiello, 2019; Cecil, 2020; Ransom, 1999; Linnemann, 2015).

Political heavy-hitter Harry Anslinger and newspaper pundit William Randolf Hearst tapped into fears of crime and violence to further cement racism and bigotry directed toward marginalized communities (Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999; Gierienger,

1999). Quotes attributed to Anslinger show comically apparent appeals to the readers' conservative religious and patriotic ideals (Vitiello, 2019). "There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the US, and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos, and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz, and swing result from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and any others (Vitiello, 2019)." The havoc these sentiments wreaked in the twentieth century canonized a harmful master narrative within the modern United States: if you consume cannabis, you are a violent criminal (Vitiello, 2019; Thompson, 2013).

By 1937, the United States had passed its first marijuana prohibition laws (Ransom, 1999; Thompson, 2013; Vitiello, 2019). From there, conservative public manipulation established a cycle of passing laws and further policing minority communities' sociopolitical lives (Parenti, 1993; Thompson, 2013; Ransom, 1999). The more I studied the criminalization of cannabis, the more apparent it was that these stories told in magazines, through radios, and across televisions played crucial roles in generating the negative public attitudes toward cannabis necessary to enable federal change (Cecil, 2020; Ransom, 1999). This realization accompanied the emerging understanding that racist and classist associations the public have of marginal groups and crime work to cement biased understandings of what crime is and who victims may be (Ransom, 1999; Vitiello, 2019; Dowler et al., 2006).

While crime stories and anti-marijuana sentiments perpetuated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century were less overtly racist, their motivations were still apparent: suppress and assimilate marginalized people and cultures (Cecil, 2020; Dowler et al., 2006). In addition to widespread interest in "law and order," the Satanic Panic of

the late nineties allowed the public to demonize minority communities with vibrant

imagery of violence and corruption (Vitiello, 2019; Harris & Kearney, 2014). Again, the

media's campaign to demonize cannabis was almost entirely predicated on racist and

classist themes (Vitiello, 2019; Thompson, 2013). Exaggerated stories featuring personas

like the Welfare Queen and drug-addicted babies were commonly exchanged to

antagonize conservative voters into action (Vitiello, 2019).

Today, cannabis, more commonly referred to as marijuana, is a federal dog

whistle for a nation eager to police its black, brown, and minority communities (Vitiello,

2019; Thompson, 2013). The American Civil Liberties Union notes in a 2020 analysis

that Black people in the United States get arrested for violating marijuana possession

laws at nearly four times the rates of their white counterparts, despite both ethnicities

consuming roughly the same rate of cannabis (ACLU). States that have legalized

recreational marijuana have seen an increase in racial disparity among marijuana arrests

(Vitiello, 2019). Convictions for marijuana users often carry direct and collateral

consequences that can destroy families and communities (Vitiello, 2019). The fear of

violence and murder associated with marijuana users took root and sprouted, leaving

minority communities victims of unjust policing and legislature.

Modern true-crime storytelling relies on many of the same techniques anti-

Marijuana proponents used to instill racist and classist understandings of violence and

crime (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999). In the same way that nineteenth and twentieth-

century crime stories worked on behalf of the nonmarginalized's classist and racial

animus to structure society, modern true-crime storytellers cement certain understandings

of race, class, and crime (Seltzer, 2008; Punnett, 2017; Vitiello, 2019). These

perspectives not only confine crime to a specific definition but also conceal crime should it misalign their expectations and understandings (Martinez, 2020; Seltzer, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006).

My point here is not to accuse true-crime podcasts of demonizing cannabis. Instead, my critique rests on the fundamental argument that crime and victimhood are never objective and that our understanding of justice is always societally situated (Burke, 1989; Fisher, 1984). Our media, especially our crime media, serves institutions of position and power at the expense of the marginalized (Parenti, 1993; Vitiello, 2019). Having illustrated this argument by examining cannabis's rhetorical history within the United States, I will now demonstrate how even a well-received, well-meaning podcast utilizes the same racist, classist, and religiously motivated storytelling techniques as their propagandist predecessors.

Jensen and Holes: Murder Squad, an Exactly Right Production

As I commence my investigation, I cannot help but feel the urge to critique *Jensen & Holes: Murder Squad*, a show on the Exactly Right podcast network (Exactly Right, Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). The elevation of the show's primary storytellers is what first planted the seed of uneasiness in my mind. Hosted by Paul Holes, a retired California cold-case detective, and Billy Jensen, an investigative journalist with connections to true-crime household names, the pair put their experience and connections to the test as they discuss a new cold case each week (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). The hosts' past involvement with criminal cases and detective work provides the bulk

qualifications necessary for a true-crime podcast host, though their statuses as straight white men in the United States are also contributing factors.

Socially, *Jensen and Holes: Murder Squad* entered the post-*Serial* true-crime podcast environment with an obvious advantage over other freshmen podcasts. The show appeared to me as if it naturally manifested itself from the success that followed the capture of the Golden State Killer and the posthumous release of Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. Connections with the Exactly Right network and collaborations with true-crime superstars Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark of *My Favorite Murder* fame ensured the show's success before the first episode was even published. I recall when my friends and I had tickets to see *My Favorite Murder* live in 2019, where Karen and Georgia gave a special shout-out to the show amidst cheers and applause. I also recall a rather extensive discussion concerning the upcoming podcast centering on Paul Holes and Billy Jensen's physical attractiveness.

Shortly after the premiere of the first season of the *Murder Squad*, Billy Jensen joined our Dallas Murderinos Facebook group to promote his newest book *Chase Darkness with Me* (2019). I say "our" because, at the time, I was an active member of that Facebook, engaging with others through posts and memes. I saw Jensen's posts and felt only slightly starstruck. He was our connection to the real world of true crime, our connection to Karen and Georgia. So, being a good murderino, I decided to give his book a chance.

Looking back, Jensen's leveraging of status and digital accessibility to increase his book sales borders flamboyancy. Unfortunately, I do not remember many details from the book, only that it did not soothe my growing unease with the *Murder Squad* side of

the true-crime community. Despite my trepidation, I decided to listen to the podcast. When the show finally premiered, I pressed play with anticipation.

Footsteps in a hallway followed by the closing of a door flash scenes of interrogation rooms and two-way mirrors in my head (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022). The theme song is familiar but not in an immediately identifiable way. Another listen conjures memories of *Forensic Files* and *Law & Order SVU,* their introduction sounding like a score from the movie. This aesthetic alliance with familiar true-crime content plays on my feelings of nostalgia. When I first started consuming true-crime podcasts, I felt almost inspired, thinking that all of the crimes featured on those shows were solvable, justice within reach, and the law always within its ethical boundaries. The *Murder Squad*'s theme song plays on this hope, harkening back to a time when this master narrative of protection and safety was assumed (Holes and Jensen, 2019-2022).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, most white United States citizens did not have a reason to question their safety or mistrust the institutions sworn to protect them (Parenti, 1993). Post 9/11 media glossed over controversial policy and contributed to the master narrative that the United States is the safest, strongest, and most free country in the world (Eisman, 2003). The *Murder Squad* theme song plays on these associations, forming an unconscious connection to other dramatic, results-driven crime content designed to entertain and satisfy (Jensen & Holes, 1999-2022; McBurney, 1936). Additionally, it encourages the audience to equate the show and its hosts with familiar and respected true-crime characters, solidifying their authority and status within the true-crime genre (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022; Seltzer, 2008). In mimicking the aesthetic of their true-crime predecessors, the *Murder Squad*'s credibility creeps its way alongside

41

public figures like Keith Morrison, John Walsh, and Mariska Hargitay, proverbial prophets of the true-crime genre.

The *Murder Squad* theme song forms an enthymematic link between the stories told on this podcast and the stories consumed through other familiar true-crime shows (Jensen & Holes, 1999-2022; McBurney, 1936). It prepares the listener for what to expect from each coming episode, guaranteeing an experience that engages but does not take too much from the audience (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022; McBurney, 1936; Dowler et al., 2006). In this way, *Murder Squad* subtly promises stories that shock while maintaining the dignity of the listener (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022; Seltzer, 2008). Using a theme song in the same tone and style as shows like *Forensic Files* and *Law & Order* strategically positions *Murder Squad* between the safety of fictional crime stories and the excitement of solved crimes (McBurney, 1936; Selzter, 2008; Dowler et al., 2006).

Ultimately, My point in highlighting this similarity is not to condemn the *Murder Squad*'s use of music; instead, it is to critique how their storytelling choices further confine crime to a specific understanding or perspective for their audience (Burke, 1989; Dowler et al., 2006). Furthermore, aligning themselves with familiar content and characters enables the *Murder Squad* to operate unquestioned while implying a specific reporting style that habitually leaves out black, brown, poor, and disabled voices (Dowler et al., 2006; Wiltenburg, 2004). This implication contributes to the master narrative that only crimes of a specific caliber deserve recognition and further erases crimes that does not fit the narrative (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022; Dowler et al., 2006).

Performative recognition and activism are central to the *Murder Squad*'s dynamic and public persona (Jensen & Holes). In each episode, the hosts ask their audience to join

them on an investigation, ushering in a wave of citizen detectives eager to solve a crime (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). Listeners immediately feel legitimized by the hosts, two white men with investigative experience, as they willingly invite their predominantly female audience to adopt a role inherently steeped in power and privilege (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). The hosts do not question the listener's positionality; instead, they admonish their audience with praises for their perceived experience and investigatory prowess (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). This ignorance of intersectionality mimics many of the anti-cannabis crusaders' tactics utilized during the demonization of cannabis (Ransom, 1999; Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019).

> "That is why you're here today with the Murder Squad. You've been listening to stories about violent crimes and investigations for years. Now is the time to put all of that knowledge and wits to good use, and actually help solve a crime. We will be sending you out into the world after the story to help (Jensen & Holes, 2019, Episode 1)."

Here, the *Murder Squad* simultaneously galvanizes the listeners while quelling any questions or doubts they may have about the justice system. This sentiment, repeated throughout the series, heavily relies on social understandings of crime and criminal offenders (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022; Dowler et al., 2006). The hosts invite listeners to join them on a case, celebrating the audiences' experience and consumption (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). However well-intended the invitation may be, citizen mobilization concerning crime and justice has historically and systemically served the conservative majority, allowing racist and classist sentiments to further influence society (Parenti, 1993; Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019).

For example, sweeping "anti-marijuana" legislation was primarily achieved through lobbying individuals with significant social status and power to perform the

criminal justice system's bidding (Ransom, 1999). In addition, vivid first-person

language inflamed the public's already heightened emotions to cement the master

narrative of a causal link between criminality and cannabis consumption (Vitiello, 2019;

Ransom, 1999; Thompson, 2013; Gieringer, 1999). Likewise, graphic storytelling and

explicit calls to action mimic the rhetorical techniques of anti-cannabis propagandists like

Harry Anslinger, William Randolph Hearst, and Colonel Richmond Hobson (Ransom,

1999; Gieringer, 1999). From this perspective, the Murder Squad's storytelling functions

to galvanize and distract.

> "You may have heard of the Golden State Killer or the East Area Rapist… We
> need your assistance to connect all the dots, to get the most complete picture on
> where this man was, when he was there, and if any other crimes have been
> committed for which he is responsible for (Jensen & Holes, 2019, Episode 4)."

While expressions such as "we need your help" and "we've seen bad guys like this

before" are prominent examples of calls for action, dog whistles throughout the *Murder*

Squad's episodes beckon listeners to accept a position of power and erase doubts about

the criminal justice system (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). The hosts' examination of the

Golden State Killer case personifies this.

Episode four of *Murder Squad* focuses on the case(s) concerning Joseph

DeAngelo, an already incarcerated offender guilty and convicted of a myriad of violent

criminal offenses committed decades earlier (Jensen & Holes, 2019, Episode 4). With

impending convictions and multiple charges brought against the seventy-four-year-old, I

knew there was likely no way DeAngelo would see the light of day again (Jensen &

Holes, 2019, Episode 4). I am sure I approached the podcast with similar questions to

other listeners at the time, wondering how DeAngelo got away with it and stayed

undetected for decades. How much did the police know? The episode was released nearly

a year after DeAngelo's arrest, but anticipation for the episode was palpable (Jensen &

Holes, 2019, Episode 4).

When I first listened to the *Murder Squad* in 2019, I barely detected the dog

whistles. I assumed the hosts' invitations were benign. However, my rhetoric studies have

taught me that the argument is often more implicit than the questions asked (Wenzel,

1992; Burke, 1989). Subtle messages specifically designed for a particular group to

understand, dog whistles are rampant throughout the hosts' conversations in the form of

crime-related name drops and strategically placed anecdotes establishing credibility

(Vitiello, 2019). References to well-known killers such as Rodney Alcala, Ted Bundy,

and Richard Ramirez connect the hosts with the concept of celebrity while establishing

the listeners' credibility (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022).

Like President Nixon's "law and order" campaign and the anti-cannabis

movement, dog whistles reinforce racist and classist connotations of crime (Vitiello,

2019; Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). Moreover, these dog whistles further fuel the master

narrative that recognition or knowledge is commensurate to position and power. This

narrative convinces listeners that not only are the hosts of a higher status in the world of

criminal justice but so is the audience, all because of their ability to place a name or

reference (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022; Seltzer, 2008; Punnett, 2017).

Besides galvanizing the audience, dog whistles and calls to action like these also

contribute to the erasure of other nontypical crimes and victims (Martinez, 2020; Vitiello,

2019). The first episode of *Jensen and Holes: Murder Squad*, focusing on serial killer

Bill Bradford, exemplifies this phenomenon (2019). When discussing the police and

criminal justice system's lack of tentativeness towards Bradford, the hosts report that

"In this day and age, you would never see a guy be able to post bail for a crime like that. It'd be either no bail or it would be set so high that someone who committed that type of crime wouldn't be let back out. But when is this? This is in… the early eighties. You know that just shows how far we've come with the way that they look at sexual assault (Jensen & Holes, 2019, Episode 1)."

While the hosts recognize a few ways that the United States criminal justice system has failed its citizens, they fail to demand justice for modern victims of governmental negligence. Despite the reality that hundreds of thousands of rape kits are sitting untested in police departments across the country, Jensen and Holes reiterate the master narrative that our justice system is designed to protect and serve, not police the marginalized (2019-2022). Refusing to recognize how the justice system continues to fail United States citizens does not mean institutional wrongdoing does not happen. Instead, it attempts to distract and erase the existence of marginalized crime and victims from public narratives (Martinez, 2020).

The *Murder Squad* continually mentions the unprecedented opportunities present with the genre's growing popularity and online community of support (Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). Scholars, too, pontificate on the genre's potential to liberate and educate (Boling, 2019; Tinker, 2009; Seltzer, 2008). Yet, however inspiring their optimism may be, the podcast's inability to honestly critique the police sets a scene that does little to encourage the listeners to acknowledge how the United States' criminal justice system continually victimizes minority communities. In the same way that anti-cannabis crusaders relied on the precedence of protection, safety, and power, the *Murder Squad* operates from the impetus that justice is unquestioned and equitably distributed (Holes & Jensen, 2019-2022; Ransom, 1999). As a result, realities of corruption and oppression become hidden behind false praises of progress and good intentions.

In summation, it is true-crime storytelling's tendency to disguise harmful master narratives and the ugly truths of reality behind personas of progression and education that I believe is dangerous (Seltzer, 2008; Hernandez, 2019; Parenti, 1993). In the post-*Serial* storytelling environment, podcasts serve as judge, jury, and executioner without much regard to the care with which narrators craft their stories as long as they look and sound a certain way (The Serial Effect, Cecil, 2020; Boling & Hull, 2019; Hernandez, 2019). Through my investigation into the rhetorical history of cannabis's criminalization and close analysis of Jense and Holes: Murder Squad, I illustrated that modern true-crime podcasts rely on the same storytelling techniques and play on the same fears that anti-cannabis propagandists have for the past two centuries in the United States (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999; Jensen & Holes, 2019-2022). Even when the intention is to liberate and educate, if intersectionality and positionality are not recognized, true-crime storytelling upholds perceptions of crime steeped in racist and classist understandings of public order (Parenti, 1993; Gieringer, 1999; Hernandez, 2019).

CHAPTER FOUR

We're (Not) Experts

I grew up with a broad understanding of crime and a small vocabulary to describe it as such. Being Cherokee, my family shared the good and bad stories of our past, sagas rife with government-sanctioned betrayal and harm. My family knew what happened to our people was criminal; however, as a child in the United States, I lacked the lexicon to describe it this way. I understood crime to be violent vignettes into the minds of evil people, not systems the United States government put in place against marginalized groups. Master narratives of criminality and victimhood convinced me that crime could only look like what I consumed through the media.

True-crime storytelling participates in a long tradition of social construction within the United States (Cecil, 2020; Dowler et al., 2006; Burger, 2016). This storytelling style positions itself between salacious news and informative entertainment by playing on the public's racist, classist, and sexist inclinations (Dowler et al., 2006; Tinker, 2009). This journalistic dichotomy encourages empathy and fear simultaneously through subtle appeals to emotions and conservative notions of criminality (Punnett, 2017; Dowler et al., 2006). Much of modern true-crime podcasts' impetus for action and awareness originates from the consumption of crime as a product, most often at the expense of BIPOC, females, the disabled, and other marginalized bodies (Dowler et al., 2006).

True-crime stories, likely since their first appearance in this country, can help

serve an insidious role in upholding racist, sexist, and classist ideologies in the United

States (Seltzer, 2008; Cecil, 2020; Burke, 1989). While the creation of media from within

our raced, classed, and gendered society makes any mainstream media susceptible to such

a criticism, true-crime is particularly able to help construct nefarious understandings of

the social given its framing as a presumed less biased source of information, as well as its

affective appeal for the audience (Horeck, 2019; Boling & Hull, 2019). Podcasts serve a

unique role in this structuration by allowing individuals to rapidly consume violent

stories that are vividly lifelike and diagrammatic all at once (Seltzer, 2008; Cecil, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite scholarly attention on true-crime podcasts' ability to educate and

encourage reform, few investigations into podcasts' sociocultural, historical, and

rhetorical placement within the true crime genre have been conducted (Boling, 2018;

Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Punnett, 2017; Boling & Hull, 2019). This lack of attention

allows harmful master narratives to continually overwrite realities of violence and crime

within the United States (Martinez, 2020; Chavez, 2015).

This chapter fills a gap in the literature by examining the social, aesthetic, and

rhetorical storytelling techniques of true-crime podcasts and placing them within the

more extensive history of the true-crime genre within the United States. By briefly

retracing the origins and perceptions of the Texas Rangers in the nineteenth century, I

highlight how subtle racist, sexist, and classist master narratives present in true-crime

storytelling cement unjust understandings of criminality in the United States. By

illustrating the continued historical erasure of systematic crime committed against Native

Americans in the United States, I highlight the continued bias of the true-crime genre to benefit the nonmarginalized majority (Parenti, 1993; Hibbett, 2018).

This bias, I posit, provides the foundation for true-crime podcasts' aesthetic, social, and rhetorical decisions. The music, language, and promotion style a true-crime podcast utilizes make subtle master narratives easier to accept and entwine the audience's opinions with the biased majority (Wenzel, 1992; Burke, 1989; Seltzer, 2008). I elucidate this by examining *Serial Killers*, a podcast on the Parcast network, to understand how modern storytelling upholds corrupt understandings of crime, victimhood, and the United States justice system. By combining content analyses, close textual analyses, and personal reflections on the podcast, I advance the idea that true-crime storytelling is inherently socially situated, orienting individuals to oppressive distributions of position and power (Burger, 2016; Cecil, 2020; Wiltenburg, 2014).

The Texas Rangers and Genocidal Violence

Disparate representations of murder and violence have historically been used to subtly police what and who the public views as criminal (Burger, 2016; Dowler et al., 2006). By mythologizing crime and marginal culture, true crime drives the public to adhere to establish institutional norms (Hibbett, 2018). To achieve this manipulation, true-crime storytelling seizes on the public's fear of violence and potential societal decline (Hibbett, 2018; Burger, 2016). The institution known as the Texas Rangers is a prime example of this.

While the Texas Rangers are still an active organization within the Texas Department of Public Safety, the focus of this chapter will be on the Rangers during their

genesis and heyday. I say this to acknowledge that the modern perception of the Texas

Rangers is highly influenced by the media's penchant for Westerns and cowboys

(Swanson, 2020; Blanton, 2020). However, this portrayal is not the focus of this chapter.

Instead, I examine how the true-crime stories contemporarily associated with the Rangers

worked to lionize their positions and redefine their criminal actions.

From the mid-eighteen-twenties to the early eighteen-nineties, the Texas Rangers

stretched from the coast south into Mexico, west into the Llano Estacado, and north into

parts of modern-day Oklahoma and Colorado (Gwynne, 2010; Blanton, 2020; Shaw,

1987). The origins of Texas Ranger violence and the subsequent celebration of their

institution align with the arrival of Stephen F. Austin and his colonists (Blanton, 2020;

Swanson, 2020). Founded in 1823, while Texas was still part of Mexico, the master

narrative surrounding the Texas Rangers depicts anglo law enforcement officers and

settlers as mythical wild-west heroes (Blanton, 2020; Gwynne, 2010).

The Texas Rangers were celebrated throughout the nineteenth century as the last

line of defense against renegades, bandits, rioters, and other assorted enemies, most often

people of color (Blanton, 2020). While the purported bedrock of the Rangers is protection

and safety, the realities of their escapades often involved taking the law into their own

hands at the expense of these marginalized communities (Gwynne, 2010). Native

Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans became mythologized through

true-crime storytelling that emphasized violence and deviancy while playing into the

fears of the nonmarginalized public (Gwynne, 2010). Stories perpetuated through

newspapers, telegraphs, government proclamations, and gossip mills circulated images of

racist, classist, and sexist people eager to commit violent acts of crime (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020; Punnett, 2017).

By the mid-eighteen-forties, the anglo-Texan mixed sentiments of fear and hatred to cement an understanding of the nation that viewed half its population as "thieves in prison and the other half are thieves uncaught (Swanson, 2020)." Racist sentiments concerning marginalized people groups perpetuated the conviction that kindness to the marginalized was cruelty and violence to themselves (Swanson, 2020; Gwynne, 2010). This understanding leads to the complete othering of deviant appearances and cultural practices, convincing the public that order and safety are only achieved if those that are different are heavily policed and regulated. Native Americans, Mexicans, and Black folk were no longer people, they were sources of crime and violence needing extermination (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). Fear, in the form of true crime, convinced the public that these communities were not victims and that the government's actions were not criminal.

To properly situate the historical understanding of the Rangers, it is important to understand what exactly the Rangers did that required such a propagandistic effort to rhetorically massage their legacy. Unmentioned in the Texas Rangers' museum, housed within blocks of where this thesis was written, is their legacy of what Carmen Herrara Lawrence rightly calls the perpetuation of "genocidal violence" (Lawrence, 2022). As Lawrence well explains, the Ranger's very founding was premised in racist violence as they were fashioned to "exterminate Native Americans…hunt…runaway slaves and…murder…ethnic Mexicans" (Lawrence, 2022). Designed as "runaway" slave catchers, the Rangers' legacy may have been cemented in pulp magazines and the silver

screen but was forged in the blood of dozens of massacres of Mexican and Tejano civilians (Burrough, Tomlinson, & Stanford, 2022).

The historical environment in which these true-crime stories took place was one which required explanation and rhetorical justification for these acts. As Native American tribes like the Comanche, Tonkawa, and Lipan Apache responded to the depletion of sacred food sources and seizure of sacred land, the anglo-Texans reacted to a perceived demonic and uncivilized threat (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). Both countered their fear and terror with increased violence (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). My point in highlighting this is not to equitably distribute blame; instead, it is to point out that the master narrative which continued was the one of the majority party. That even today, our understanding of the atrocities committed by the Texas Rangers against marginal communities is shrouded in the lore of white male heroism.

The fear of violence and crime combined with an urge to conquer the land and its people worked to secure the master narrative that law enforcement is to be admired and mythologized while deviancy is to be policed and demonized (Blanton, 2020: Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). Unsurprisingly, many contemporary authors continue to describe the Rangers as "not unlike the knights of old who rode without fear and without reproach to destroy evil and redress wrong" (Swanson, 2020). Other news sources touted the machismo and prowess displayed during battle and peace times, unsurprisingly directed against communities of color (Swanson, 2020; Gwynne, 2010). Together, these stories establish the Texas Ranger as a character that's the stuff of legends, able to commit acts of barbaric and macabre violence under the guise of wild-west protection (Blanton, 2020; Swanson, 2020).

Many stories of the Texas Rangers weaponized fear and bigotry to encourage support (Gwynne, 2010). Government officials legitimized the Rangers by claiming protection against robbery, incarceration, murder, and being hunted like wild beasts amongst other monstrosities (Swanson, 2020). Indictments of barbarity and incivility commonly constituted increasingly violent acts (Swanson, 2020; Gwynne, 2010). As is valid throughout the recorded history of true-crime storytelling, strategic accusations of criminality directed at marginalized and deviant communities worked to uphold privileged understandings of the Rangers and their positions within society (Punnett, 2017; Swanson, 2020).

The glorification of Texas Rangers as heroic and honorable lawmen celebrates and encourages prejudiced policing of minority cultures while erasing the violence it takes to do such policing. Through true-crime storytelling, the brutality of the Rangers became masked behind narratives of bravery, adventure, and horsemanship (Blanton, 2020; Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). Commemorated Texas Rangers William "Big-Foot" Wallace and Leander McNelly are known for their skill in battle, not the torturing, pillaging, and killing that came along with it (Blanton, 2020). In manipulating the characters and environment, these stories, circulated under the guise of news and entertainment, have erased violence committed against minority communities for centuries (Swanson, 2020; Blanton, 2020; Wiltenburg, 2004).

While the worst excesses of the Rangers' awful history might be over, efforts to propagandize the Rangers' heroism certainly are not. These efforts include standard fare copaganda—unnecessarily praising the Rangers—but they also include true-crime podcasts concerning real and entirely fictionalized characters and events. For example,

podcasts like the Apple-sponsored *True Crime Reporter* with Robert Riggs consider how

the heroism of the Rangers saves 13-year-old girls from bullets, flames, and kidnappers

(Riggs, 2021). Elsewhere, Riggs and company imagine fictionalized superheroes,

including the "fictional Texas Ranger superhero named Creed True, inspired by real-life

cases" (Riggs, 2022). However, these podcasts are not the focus of the rest of this

chapter. Rather, these podcasts, and the constructed true-crime storytelling that has long

justified the Rangers, serve as an example of how law enforcement institutions like the

Rangers can be propagandized to the fullest. Perhaps *more* concerning, however, is when

true-crime podcasts engage in the construction of criminality and pathologization of

minority peoples *without* the need to defend institutions like the Rangers.

Serial Killers, a Parcast Network Production

Modern true-crime storytelling distracts its audience from crimes committed

against minority communities and instills a sense of trust in law enforcement in much the

same way that stories about the Texas Rangers solidified their lore (Swanson, 2020;

Punnett, 2017). In particular, true-crime podcasts have experienced unprecedented

consumption in the past two decades (Bolin, 2019). Despite claims of objectivity and

justice, these podcasts rely on the same narrative tools that true-crime storytellers did

when establishing discourse surrounding the Texas Rangers by appealing to fears of

violence, deviance, and loss of power (Hibbett, 2018; Gwynne, 2010; Boling, 2018).

Serial Killers, a podcast on the Parcast network, is a prime example of this.

Socially, this podcast entered the true-crime scene right on the cusp of what I

would call the genre's explosion in the world of podcasting. *Serial*, the genre-defining

true-crime podcast by Sarah Koenig, quickly became a worldwide phenomenon in 2014 and sparked the *Serial* effect, a general increase in creation, expansion, and investment in podcasts across all genres (Boling & Hull, 2019). From 2015-2020, true-crime podcasts grew in prevalence and legitimacy, securing a spot within the true-crime storytelling social hierarchy (Boling & Hull, 2019; Sherrill, 2020). *Serial Killers,* a bi-weekly podcast hosted by Greg Polcyn and Vanessa Richardson, began in early 2017 and was quickly added to my podcast rotation (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present).

I remember this time in true-crime podcasting fondly. Being a college student at the time, I inhaled shows like *Serial Killers* and *My Favorite Murder*, gaining both confidence and a sense of superiority the more I consumed. *Serial Killers* mimics other successful true-crime podcasts in both style and form, combining aspects of narrative development, sound, and reliable hosts to bring the audience experientially closer to a case (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). In addition, the name aligns the show with the archetypal *Serial* while playing on the audience's familiarity with commonly used criminal conceptions and terms for violent offenders (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present; Punnett, 2017).

The precedence for violence begins each episode with trigger warnings of murder, torture, and assault dependent on the case (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). From the first minute of the podcast, exposition detailing presumed emotions and situations followed by a just-modern-enough theme song invites the audience to indulge and listen (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). The audience is thrust into a narrative that layers music, sound effects, and third-person narrators, setting a scene that harkens back to true-crime and macabre fan favorites like *Forensic Files*, *America's Most Wanted*, and *X-Files*

(Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). The podcast's narration style further implies this association, as the hosts promise to "dive deep into the minds and madness of serial killers" for every episode (Richardson & Polcyn, 2017-present).

I mention the associations I make between *Serial Killers* and shows like *Forensic Files*, *America's Most Wanted*, and *X-Files* to point out how their similarities infer that the content in the show is entertainment, not a reality with victims. My critique is not in the show's episodic nature or choice of theme music; instead, it is in how subtle similarities to other fantastical true-crime content further align *Serial Killers* with entertainment. These similarities distance the audience from the realities of violence and victimhood and further mythologize the criminal justice system's role in the United States.

This distance is further encouraged through the hosts' theatrical accounts of serial killers and their victims throughout the podcast (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). I remember noticing the ambient background music and sound effects incorporated throughout each story, feeling simultaneously transported and anxious to be so close to the action. Tires screech when an assailant flees the scene, and if an actor spills their coffee, dripping and splashing noises sound to enhance the experience (Polcyn & Richardson, 2022). This combination of emotionally-laden language and subtle background musical-key changes prepare listeners for a story that frightens and appalls while maintaining a sense of security (Boling, 2019; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Punnett, 2017).

Serial Killers' episode on Matthew "Chilly" Macon typifies this well when the narrators introduce Jackie, a woman who stumbled upon one of Macon's victims. I am

left unsure whether the details of this situation were even reality, the validity of Jackie's experience never being expounded upon by the hosts (Polcyn & Richardson, 2022). Having stumbled upon a gory murder scene, the hosts posit that "it almost looked like she [the victim] had been attacked by a wild animal. But as she screamed for help, Jackie knew in her gut that only a human could have done this - one who was out for blood."

Subtle musical cues accentuate their words, immersing the audience in a scene rife with disgust and horror (Polcyn & Richardson, 2022). This language directly reflects descriptions used throughout the establishment of the Texas Rangers (Swanson, 2020). Embellished fictions of beasts, savages, animals, and bandits play on the fears of the public and test the resolve of law enforcement today in much the same way it did during the nineteenth century (Swanson, 2020; Gwynne, 2010). This cycle of discovering crime waves, igniting fears, and increasing widespread demands for harsher policing and laws repeats throughout the history of true-crime storytelling in the United States (Swanson, 2020; Dowler et al., 2006). Podcasts utilizing vivid language detailing harm and death evoke visceral reactions from the public, perpetuating this cycle (Dowler et al., 2006).

Serial Killers prefaces each episode with these violent vignettes, utilizing a familiar true-crime recipe by shocking the audience into consuming more of the story (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). Listeners are comforted and intrigued by the hosts' strategic sprinkling of psychological assurance despite no proper credentials to back up their claims (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). The hosts note that neither "are licensed psychologists or psychiatrists, but we have done a lot of research," asserting that their claims are legitimate due to their personal experience (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-

58

present). These claims of authority are enhanced by vivid storytelling and fear appeals, woven together to tell a story rather than report a crime.

For instance, the episode *"The Bayou Serial Killer" - Ronald Joseph Dominique* begins with the hosts detailing how "the moon rises over rural Louisiana, its light gleams on the murky swamp water and spills onto dirt roads. On one of these roads, a young drifter pedals an old bike. For a while, he's completely alone. Eventually, a lone car rattles down the road behind him (Polcyn & Richardson, 2019)." This description constructs a vivid scene not unlike the fertile landscape reported by the Texas Rangers during their hunt for the Comanche (Polcyn & Richardson, 2019; Swanson, 2020). As with rural Texas, this environment practically begs for law enforcement and government intervention to prevent any insidious wrongdoings (Polcyn & Richardson, 2019; Swanson, 2020).

Serial Killers' tendency to reinforce a master narrative imbued with subtle law enforcement propaganda does not stop with its worldbuilding (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). Many of the show's recountings praise law enforcement with little acknowledgment of how the criminal justice system is complicit in perpetually victimizing marginal communities. Case in point, when discussing how law enforcement harassed a sex worker after serial killer Charles Albright assaulted her and murdered her friend, the hosts excuse the police's failure to seek justice, stating

> For one thing, they didn't yet know about Mary's murder, so the whole thing sounded like an exaggeration. And for another, Veronica likely had brain damage from her history of heavy drug use. Listening to her wild stories was something they were used to, and this one sounded especially far-fetched, so they assumed she made the whole thing up (Polcyn & Richardson, 2022).

This discussion does little to hold the justice system and law enforcement accountable for the ways they failed the community's most vulnerable citizens. Instead, Similar conversations throughout the show's tenure vindicate law enforcement's enactment of justice or lack thereof (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present).

The propensity to subtly celebrate and reinforce law enforcement was not something I actively noticed during the first few years I consumed podcasts; however, the more I listened with a critical perspective, the more obvious it became. Moreover, this propensity is incongruent with true-crime scholars' claims that podcasts work for education and reform (Boling, 2019; Browder, 2006; Boling, 2018). As was true throughout the heroization of the Texas Rangers during the nineteenth century, *Serial Killers* depicts the police as justified extensions of the government without recognizing how law enforcement's bias continually harms marginalized people groups. This neglect encourages complacency, a side effect I was guilty of before thoroughly examining what a critical perspective on true crime really was and meant.

Cliffhanger introductions previewing the episode's gruesome contents hook the listener, mimicking violent anecdotes found across newspapers and magazines of true crime's past (Punnett, 2017; Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). These conversations tease the listener with lurid and violent vocabulary, providing insight into the coming episode (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). The expositions are immediately followed by breaks in the story for pre-recorded advertisements, further mimicking the entertainment style of mass-produced episodic true-crime shows (Punnett, 2017). The more I listened to *Serial Killers*, the more I was overcome with just how leisurely the show itself is. Each episode is around forty minutes with advertisements, and cases

60

covering individual killers generally span two or three episodes (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present). The length and narrative fluency made *Serial Killers* an ideal podcast for my undergraduate self, consuming podcasts as I prepared for the day, commuted, and studied for school. Furthermore, as I previously mentioned, this ease of consumption encourages complacency, allowing oppressive master narratives to surreptitiously influence the audience's thoughts and opinions (Martinez, 2019).

One of the main critiques of this chapter is the ease with which listeners can mindlessly consume true-crime content. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you the number of hours I spent listening to this podcast in college, nor could I recall specific details about most of the cases I consumed. However, now that I understand that language continually shapes reality and that the stories we consume continually mold our opinions and biases, I can tell you that these narratives clandestinely shaped my understanding of the world (Burke, 1989; Fisher, 1984). Overt appeals to racist, sexist, and classist sentiments may have stayed behind in history with the marauding Texas Rangers; nonetheless, implicit conservative notions of justice and criminality are alive and well in *Serial Killers* (Punnett, 2017; Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present).

Ultimately, I posit that Serial Killers' propensity for entertainment is what makes it so implicitly dangerous to listeners. For centuries, true-crime storytelling has enabled government agencies to seize power and title, assuming authority over marginal communities to police practices outside of the status quo (Punnett, 2017; Burger, 2016). Lurid stories utilizing graphic and emotional language grips the hearts and minds of the public, many of whom demand answers and action from the government (Swanson, 2020; Wiltenburg, 2004). The genesis of the Texas Rangers to protect and effectively

exterminate anyone or thing that stood in the way of anglo-Texans during the nineteenth century illustrates this tendency well (Swanson, 2020; Blanton, 2020; Gwynne, 2010).

In the same way that true-crime storytelling constituted the creation and subsequent actions of the Texas Rangers, modern true-crime podcasts perpetuate master narratives about criminality, victimhood, and the criminal justice system. Storytellers taking narrative liberties, appealing to emotions, and utilizing well-placed sound cues immerse listeners into the liminal space between entertainment and news media (Boling, 2019; Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present, Dowler et al., 2006). *Serial Killers*, a podcast that's enjoyed popularity since its creation in 2017, relies on these same techniques to entertain and placate listeners into not questioning law enforcement or the criminal justice system (Polcyn & Richardson, 2017-present).

I make these critiques not to condemn true-crime podcasts or call for the eradication of true-crime podcasts. On the contrary, I think that true-crime storytelling existed long before the advent of podcasts and that even if we were to eliminate podcasts entirely, a new medium would form to carry on much of society's sexist, classist, and racist tendencies. Such is the nature of media to uphold and regulate the nonmarginalized's notions of society (Parenti, 1993). In fact, even after my eye-opening research into critical true-crime storytelling, I still like podcasts, and I agree that they can educate and incite criminal justice reform (Boling, 2019). My point is to call for accountability and intersectionality.

The nature of the United States criminal justice system is exceptionally nuanced and founded on racist concepts of policing (Swanson, 2020). When podcasts like *Serial Killers* rely on inflammatory language and fear tactics to maintain and entertain their

audiences, they perpetuate master narratives that further complicate understandings of criminality and harm marginalized communities. Without acknowledging the role the United States has had in constructing modern notions of crime and victimhood and without acknowledging how true-crime podcasts contribute to these notions, we run the risk of perpetuating this harm.

CHAPTER FIVE

We're Assholes, Not Scumbags

A fallacy of objectivity permeates from within American media (Parenti, 1993). While many of us understand that true objectivity is impossible, it remains a goal to be striven toward in various storytelling practices. The rhetorical construction of this notion is undeniable, just as the multifaceted sources reifying this concept are. True-crime media participates in the general construction of the ideal of objectivity while also explicitly engaging in markers that offer the illusion of objectivity. The documentary style, voice-over placements, and the narrator's tone all contribute to the audience's understanding that what they hear from true-crime podcasts is the "Truth" (Bruzzi, 2016).

The clear reality of true-crime storytelling, as I unfortunately discovered while writing this thesis, is how many of these podcasts, and perhaps the genre as a whole, seize on the fear of crime and the criminals who commit it to construct a reality founded on intolerance (Hibbett, 2018; Parenti, 1993). True-crime podcasts operate from an assumed position of objectivity when in reality, the genre as a whole "is inescapably prone to subjectivity" (Chestnut, 2018). As Janet Malcolm explained in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), evidence never speaks for itself, as "If you start out with a presumption of [their] guilt, you read the documents one way, and another way if you presume [their] innocence" (127). In short, bias masquerades behind self-constructed exigencies involving race, sex, and class to cement further oppressive social master narratives (Seltzer, 2008). Having once referred to myself as a murderino (the shorthand

nickname for fans of true-crime and the *My Favorite Murder* podcast), the realization that crime media constructs and confines our social reality was somewhat earth-shattering (Parenti, 1993; Seltzer, 2008; Hibbett, 2018; Punnett, 2017).

Intersectionality is a funny thing. Before my graduate studies, I was unable to conceptualize the privilege I benefitted from as a white-passing Cherokee woman. True-crime podcasts made me feel safe and secure, like there was a criminal justice system designed to protect me, and crime was a preventable, solvable occurrence. This affective dimension of true crime explained most clearly in a previous chapter through Tanya Horeck's work, is perhaps one of the most insidious aspects of the genre (Horeck, 2019). It was not enough that true crime rhetorically contoured understandings of the world (like all mediated representations have the power to); it was the manner in which the emotions I already possessed were activated through the genre's sensibilities.

The immersive nature of the stories, the invitation to participate and self-actualization that I was somehow helping to solve the crime, and the drawing in of "knowing" the supposed "truth" of what happened, all contribute to the genre of true-crime podcasts constituting knowledge in absurdly effective, and frankly scary kinds of ways (Horeck, 2019). I now recognize that true-crime storytelling positions public violence and mass death as a theatre for the living (Seltzer, 2008; Parenti, 1993). The genre's tendency to serve as judge, jury, and executioner without acknowledging the bias and privilege necessary to perform as such establishes a conservative feedback loop that perpetuates more harm than good. In some ways, my perhaps naïve fandom of the genre has rendered my judgment perhaps harsher than otherwise might be, as I feel betrayed by what I once found comforting.

Many modern true-crime storytellers pride themselves on their narratives'
potential to educate, solve a crime, and encourage legislative change (Cecil, 2020;
Boling, 2019). However, they rarely question the positions that allow them to function
from such elevated perspectives. Consequently, the thrust of scholarly research
concerning true-crime podcasts today focuses on the emancipatory qualities of their
narratives and storytelling techniques, celebrating the intent behind their execution as
opposed to the reality of the institutions they are reinforcing (Boling, 2018; Cecil, 2020).
From this perspective, true-crime podcasts are liberators, not tools to uphold racist,
classist, and sexist social standards.

The previous chapters of this thesis demonstrated how modern true-crime
podcasts subtly reinforce standards founded on various social biases. This chapter
juxtaposes my previous inquiries into the history of true-crime storytelling and true-crime
podcasts' rhetorical techniques by positing that though true-crime podcasts uphold
harmful master narratives concerning the marginalized within the United States, they are
not beyond redemption, and some hold resistant possibilities. I briefly examine two
podcasts, *Small Town Murder* and *Black Girl Gone*, to investigate how they resist
oppressive master narratives and challenge the audience to question true-crime
representation.

The crux of these podcasts is their challenges to the social, aesthetic, and
rhetorical standards that have evolved within the true-crime genre (Punnett, 2017).
Having been indoctrinated into a cult of patriotic trust in the justice system, these
storytellers provide alternative perspectives in a world saturated with crime media and
opinion. In examining these podcasts, I bolster the argument that counterstories are

necessary to inspire change and combat oppressive master narratives within the United States (Martinez, 2020).

Small Town Murder, a Comedy Podcast

Small Town Murder is a comedy podcast found on streaming platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and "wherever you get your podcasts (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present)." Having begun my thesis at this point, I found this podcast when I was becoming increasingly disenfranchised with true-crime storytelling. This show stuck out to me as it utilizes a more long-form narrative style for its episodes, paying specific attention to how the overlapping dynamics of class, gender, and race impact the town, the victims, and the justice they receive (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Additionally, this podcast provides powerful counterstories that disrupt the peaceful small-town America master narrative, challenging the audience to think critically about their perceptions of crime in both the United States and their own hometown.

True-crime in the United States is steeped in privilege. The likelihood of recognition and justice for crimes committed against marginalized victims is highly limited on account of race, sex, and socioeconomic status (Dowler et al., 2006; Wiltenburg, 2004; Hibbett; 2018). There is a misconception that crime and justice are prerequisites to modern society and that these issues need addressing by the predominantly white governing body (Cecil, 2020). Crime is something the poor, deviant, and uncivilized participate in, the policing and conversations of crime are things the privileged, educated, and influential participate in (Hibbett, 2018; Punnett, 2017; Burger,

2016). *Small Town Murder* and *Black Girl Gone* turn this narrative on its head through subtle social, aesthetic, and rhetorical resistance.

  Small Town Murder is a unique example of resistance because, in my opinion, they represent the least podcasters can do to make the world of true-crime storytelling more equitable. A closer critical analysis of the podcast reveals that many of the same rhetorical techniques used throughout the history of the true-crime genre are also present in the hosts' conversations. For example, hosts James Pietragallo and Jimmie Whisman invite their audience each week to proclaim, "shut up and give me murder," a humorous battle cry intended to prepare their audiences for the ensuing graphic conversation (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This proclamation leaves a sour taste in my mouth, its contents reflecting true-crime consumers' tendency to commodify and produce cycles of violence for entertainment purposes (Punnett, 2017; Dowler et al., 2006). It also encourages the kind of affective attachment Horeck describes by encouraging binging and immersion in the program.

  Before moving to the next analytic point regarding *Small Town Murder*, a reminder that true-crime storytelling is inherently socially situated and that the positionality of that programming often occurs at the expense of marginalized peoples and groups. Furthermore, discussions of crime and victimhood are intrinsically biased on account of the various intersecting layers of oppression and violence present throughout United States history. Looking back, I am somewhat ashamed at how I was unknowingly complicit in perpetuating racist, sexist, and classist harmful master narratives. Now, I recognize that these master narratives are inevitable when discussing the state of crime and victimhood in the United States. However, I also recognize that resistance and

counterstories are necessary to adjust the locus of power and call attention to hidden legacies of violence.

Small Town Murder exemplifies the potential for resistance through its ability to demystify criminality in small-town America and its intersectional approach to storytelling (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present), even as it recreates problematic aspects of American culture. As previous chapters made clear, few true-crime podcasts are consciously aware, or at least appear consciously aware, of their complicity in reconstructing cis-white, classist patriarchal conceptions of normative power relations. This podcast, however, is hyper-critical of small-town law enforcement and criminals that perpetuate legacies of ignorance and violence in America. Here, each episode focuses on instances of violent crime occurring in towns across the United States with a population of thirty thousand or less (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This focus positions cruelty and violence as a uniquely American experience, as does the hosts' catchphrase that "murder, rape, robbery, and assault are the Mount Rushmore of crime (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present)." As a Cherokee, this idiom eye-rolling-ly calls attention to many trauma points in my understanding of criminality and the United States.

There is also something to be said about how these men compare abhorrently violent acts and Mount Rushmore, a decidedly American monument irreverently placed on Sioux land in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Within the use of this phrase is an implicit challenge to recognize how the United States is complicit in violence that does not fit society's standards of a sensational murder. Nevertheless, this phrase also represents an irreverent forgetting of the genocidal violence preceding the "acquisition"

of the Black Hills and the space and place for which the Six Grandfathers was stolen and transformed into Mount Rushmore. Racist comments made by one or the other host are met with a casual, "calm down Andrew Jackson (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Problematic idioms aside, the program does enact subtle, similar invitations to adopt a critical perspective by sprinkling critical points throughout *Small Town Murder* (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

James Pietragallo and Jimmie Whisman host the podcast, with Pietragallo doing the bulk of the research and storytelling while Whisman provides commentary and the occasional humorous anecdote (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). While both hosts are white men in the United States, their recognition of positionality and privilege starkly contrasts other male-fronted true-crime podcasts (Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022; Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). For instance, neither of the *Small Town Murder* hosts has a college degree, with Pietragallo candidly reflecting on his struggles for success and security despite not graduating from high school throughout the show's tenure (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This recognition is critical in the podcast's approach to discussing the realities of crime and violence in the United States.

Whereas other popular true-crime podcasts stake claims of validity and objectivity in the hosts' assertions of experience and impartiality, *Small Town Murder* explicitly recognizes the hosts' positionality as white men in America (Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022; Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This acknowledgment of hierarchy associated with crime, victimhood, and justice provides the foundation for critique present throughout the podcast (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). The conversations and opinions discussed on the podcast are just that, conversations and opinions based on

information gathered from court documents, newspaper articles, and other rhetorical texts (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

> "This is a comedy show, we are comedians. Unfortunately, the information and cases on this show are 100% real, we do not embellish for comedic effect or anything crazy like that… We go out of our way not to make fun of the victim or the victim's family. Why? Because we're assholes, we're not scumbugs (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2019)."

Pietragallo and Whisman approach their conversations not with prerogatives of authority or power based on experience but from a comedic perspective aimed at calling attention to the legacies of violence and injustice in the United States (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Their ability to critique the justice system does not come from title or institution but from the mistakes and actions made by the criminal justice system and individuals who become complacent with power (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This approach to critique resists the narrative that only individuals of position or status may contribute to the commentary on the government.

Similar nods to resistance are evident in the hosts' dynamics and the show's expositional structure. In providing the setting for each of their cases, *Small Town Murder* performs a deep dive into the towns' historical, social, and economic background (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). For instance, the show's recognition of indigenous peoples' presence during the founding of most, if not all, of the featured towns provides a sobering reminder of the crime and violence necessitated by settler colonialization (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). In addition, a demographic breakdown further illustrates the consequences of the United States' eradication campaign and racial distribution, with the bulk of the featured towns boasting a majority white population (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

Small Town Murder makes a pointed effort to represent the social reality of each of the towns they discuss, as depicted by the hosts' consideration of religion, age, and gender distribution (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). The hosts' expression that "Baptists are the Catholics of the South" draws attention to how Christianity structures the social environments in many cases (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present; Punnett, 2017). Reports on the area's income levels compared to national averages encourage listeners to consider how socioeconomic status influences the quality of life for individuals and the town as a whole (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

Most episodes are narratively driven, relying on conversations rather than music or sound effects to inform the listener of what to think. However, energetic news-report-style music is comically added behind a segment the hosts call their real estate report (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-Present). This report consists of Pietragallo breaking down the housing options available in the episode, covering rentals to larger single-family homes (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-Present). The music humorously connects the hosts' conversations with the content found in modern news reports, an ironic association when I consider true-crime occupying the liminal space between entertainment and fact-based news (Dowler et al., 2006; Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Discussing the public's income alongside the available housing juxtaposes the reality of perceived crime with quality of life, calling attention to strained definitions of justice and violence (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). This mixing of unexpected yet funny candor with hard facts makes *Small Town Murder* an example of resistance in practice (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

The hosts draw attention to the intersecting realities of low income, lack of housing, religiously-inclined moral standards, and racialized policing, setting an example for true-crime storytellers to follow (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Acknowledging how various aspects of history, accessibility, and identity impact a story of violence and justice enables *Small Town Murder* to counteract master narratives that assume causal links between crime and culture (Martinez, 2020; Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). In less explicit terms, the show tells its audience that the United States justice system deserves to be questioned and critiqued, especially when justice is disproportionately distributed (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

Small Town Murder's willingness to both recognize and call out corrupt displays of privilege and power, especially as they relate to violence and the criminal justice system, makes this podcast an example of resistance in the world of true-crime storytelling and podcasting (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present). Moreover, the hosts' critical approach to assembling true-crime narratives supplies the audience with the tools necessary to construct a more informed understanding of crime and victimhood. Despite some problematic replication of settler ideology, I posit that the audience leaves better equipped to conceptualize the situated nature of authority and justice as it relates to the marginalized. In this way, the information shared on Small Town Murder provides the audience with vital counterstories imperative to restrain and redefine violent and oppressive master narratives of crime in the United States. By applying a critical, intersectional approach to podcasting, Small Town Murder transforms into a show of resistance and reform (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present).

Black Girl Gone, a True-Crime Podcast

Whereas *Small Town Murder* operates on inferred resistance, *Black Girl Gone* implicitly and explicitly questions the United States' understanding of justice and the government's structuration of crime (Pietragallo & Whisman, 2017-present; Cofer, 2021-present). *Black Girl Gone* is the brainchild of host and executive producer Amara Cofer, a member of the true-crime community and Black woman in the United States. Cofer began the podcast in 2021 upon noticing the trend of citizen detectives calling for accountability from the government and the media's under-representation of women of color in true-crime storytelling (Cofer, 2021; Cofer, 2021-present). However, Amara Colfer's Blackness and the show's focus on Black female victims are not the only things that make this podcast an example of resistance.

Black Girl Gone's ability to balance true-crime podcasting's genre style with straightforward questions and critiques of the United States justice system makes it an excellent example of resistance within the world of true-crime storytelling (Cofer, 2021-present). For instance, the podcast relies on a similar storytelling recipe to other true-crime podcasts, utilizing content-appropriate theme music, subtle appeals to emotions, and an easily-consumed episodic nature (Boling, 2018; Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022; Cofer, 2021-present). These similarities grant *Black Girl Gone* validity, giving listeners credence to file this show next to other true-crime fan-favorites like *Crime Junkie* and *Forensic Files* (Cofer, 2021-present).

Cofer's utilization of familiar podcast structures like theme music and emotional appeals made *Black Girl Gone* slip easily into my rotation of true-crime podcasts. Each episode lasts thirty to forty minutes, making it the ideal listen for getting ready or short

car rides (Cofer, 2021-present). At least, that was my opinion when the podcast

premiered around the start of my graduate studies. Admittedly I paid little attention to

what Cofer's conversations about crime were communicating until I began my thesis

work and started genuinely paying attention. Once I took notice, I began to realize that

while the critique of complacency applies to most of the true-crime genre, in this

instance, *Black Girl Gone*'s ability to disguise actual critiques of the criminal justice

system within their storytelling is powerfully resistant.

Consider the episode *SUSPICIOUS DEATH: The Death of Mikeona Johnson*, in

which Cofer discusses the murder of a young Black woman who went missing in Los

Angeles on September 9, 2020 (Cofer, 2021). Mikeona Johnson's body was found

partially nude in the back of her vehicle a week after her disappearance, and the cause of

her murder is still unknown. The introduction of this episode notes that the coroner ruled

Mikeona's cause of death as undetermined and that the LAPD closed the investigation

into her death six months after she was found (Cofer, 2021). The episode's introduction is

accompanied by a morose piano backing track, preparing the audience for a tragic

mystery not unlike those found on Dateline.

The narrative structure *Black Girl Gone* utilizes to share Mikeona's case is

not unlike the murder-mystery popular across the true-crime genre today (Punnett, 2017).

Cofer introduces the central characters, scene, and setting in a familiar way, informing

the listener that the contents of the episode are of equal importance and severity to those

covered on similar true-crime podcasts (Cofer, 2021). Beneath this familiarity, though,

are important questions aimed at holding law enforcement accountable for the continued

indifference and injustice showed towards marginalized communities (Cofer, 2021-present).

> For almost two years, Mikeona's family has been demanding answers and asking for the investigation to be reopened. They believe that Mikeona was murdered… When a perfectly healthy 23-year-old goes missing and then ends up dead in the back of her own car, you would think that local police department would do all that they could to find out why. However, in the case of Mikeona Johnson, her family says they have not gotten a thorough investigation. In fact, they haven't really gotten any investigation at all (2021).

Similar admonishments of inattention and questions of justice exist throughout this episode and the totality of the podcast's tenure (Cofer, 2021-present). *Black Girl Gone* discusses assaults, missing persons, murders, and a litany of other genre-canonized crimes in a way that critiques and questions the institutions meant to protect and serve us (Cofer, 2021-present). Essentially, I am arguing that Cofer's adoption of familiar true-crime storytelling techniques allows the podcast to effectively resist oppressive master narratives concerning crime and victimhood in the United States (Cofer, 2021-present; Martinez, 2020).

The podcast's storytelling style lets listeners tune in for familiar conversations about crime and leave the episode prompted with questions about the legacies of violence and ignorance in the criminal justice system (Cofer, 2021-present). As a result, an unexpected light is shown on the police's lack of initiative in cases concerning minority women (Cofer, 2021-present). Moreover, conversations detailing realities of disproportional violence in the United States are told through a familiar avenue for the nonmarginalized majority, making *Black Girl Gone*'s content palatable for a broader audience (Cofer, 2021-present). For instance, Cofer does not shy away from questioning law enforcement's motivations and movements when covering cases of women still

considered missing. Why were search parties not immediately formed for Parris Hopson or Taveta Hobbs? Why are the police not helping the FBI locate Ka'Rena McClerkin? Why does the media give these cases attention?

Additionally, the podcast often cites victims' families' frustrations with the police, speaking candidly about how law enforcement's racist, classist, and sexist sentiments impact whether or not a case will be taken seriously (Cofer, 2021-present). Mothers lament the lack of attention and coverage paid to their daughters, communities the loss of a valued member of their society. Their emotions are shared almost as a subtle question, asking where the humanity and care for these victims are? In asking these questions, *Black Girl Gone* negates the master narrative that law enforcement is equitable and just or that crime in the United States is solvable.

In a genre saturated by whiteness, Cofer's perspective provides the public with counterstories of crime that draw attention to the continued neglect and indifference marginalized communities face from the United States criminal justice system (Cofer, 2021-present; Martinez, 2020; Cecil, 2020). Each week the podcast "tells the stories of missing and murdered Black women and women of color in America" to fill this hole in the true-crime genre's representation of violence (Cofer, 2021-present). This focus directly opposes the genre's proclivity to sensationalize white women and their confined definitions of femity (Hernandez, 2019). In diversifying which victims the true-crime genre reports on, *Black Girl Gone* encourages the audience to expand their understanding of what a victim of crime can look like by introducing empathetic counterstories of marginalized women (Cofer, 2021-present).

Furthermore, I argue that these portrayals broaden the scope of American femininity to include more than just one version of womanhood. Throughout the podcast, Cofer tells the stories of Black women and other women of color, chronicling their lives and decisions with humanity and sympathy (Cofer, 2021-present). The victims have families and dreams and communities that care about them. *Black Girl Gone* portrays the lives of sex workers, single mothers, and housing-insecure individuals with the same dignity as victims covered in predominately white crime narratives (Cofer, 2021-present). In a country that confines femininity to performances of fragility and reliance on men, this podcast widens the definition of womanhood to include individuals outside societal norms (Cofer, 2021-present). This attention to diversity tells a counterstory that everyone deserves justice, not just the young, beautiful, or rich.

Together, *Black Girl Gone* and *Small Town Murder* offer examples of potentially resistant modes of storytelling. Of course, there are numerous other examples available in the podcasting universe. *Sick Sad World*, *This Land*, and *In the Dark* all represent potentially transgressive modes of storytelling in the true-crime podcast universe (Uterish, 2019). While these are not the only examples, the podcasts considered in this chapter represent divergences from the traditional mode of storytelling, particularly as it relates to the true-crime genre.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Storytelling is a natural human tendency that empowers individuals to provide coherence and meaning to their lived realities (Lee et al., 2015; Fisher, 1984). Narratives give individuals the authority to interpret society and make sense of the structures that situate their identities (Cho et al., Fisher, 1984). While beneficial, stories can also enact behavioral change and subtly work to negatively influence an individual's identity (Lindemann, 202; Lee et al., 2015). Master narratives distort and silence the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce (Martinez, 2020).

Reality has long been understood to be poorly represented through media portrayals. Central to the poor representation of reality are any understandings that are perceived as outside the typical or mainstream. While corporate desire to appeal to the largest number might explain some this, it is nonetheless the case that nearly all media depictions recreate dominant understandings. As such, mediated and hyperbolized depictions of minorities alongside gruesome stories detailing violence and crime saturate much of today's media (Potter & Kappeler, 2012; Näsi et al., 2021). Crime is causally linked to any culture, practice, or person considered deviant, pitched to the audience as a central part of everyday life (Potter & Kappeler, 2012; Swanson, 2020). These stories often attempt to depict a supposedly objective perspective of the larger society while

existing within the liminal space between news and entertainment (Horeck, 2019; Dowler et al., 2006).

The rhetorical construction of violence and oppression, as well as its relationship to American law enforcement and the criminal justice system, is as historically relevant to today's true-crime genre, and its mode of delivery, as it ever was. Humans have participated in true-crime storytelling worldwide for thousands of years. However, its presence in the United States as a profitable genre has proven particularly insidious over the past two centuries. As this thesis discussed, biblical extrapolations of sin and power have long influenced what a crime is and who is constituted as a victim. Various publications and oral histories centering on social deviancy as villain long constructed these notions (Wiltenburg, 2004), but podcast delivery of this narratives both increases consumer choice of narratives, but also speeds delivery of this content. As chapter four demonstrated, the rhetorical history of the Texas Rangers and the narrative shift concerning cannabis illustrates this tendency well.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, cannabis, a plant used for centuries as a cash crop and medicinal aid, became demonized and eventually criminalized due to the raced, classed, and gendered stories spread by biased media (Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999). Similarly, reports of Native American, Mexican, and Black individuals' uncivilization and savagery led to widespread calls for action (Gwynne, 2010). The combination of emotional imagery and emotional galvanization was partially responsible for the creation of the Texas Rangers, a law enforcement agency still in place today (Swanson, 2020). Similar instances of criminalization and the further victimization

of marginalized groups are largely perpetuated through the media's use and contribution to widespread master narratives (Martinez, 2020).

Beginning in the early twentieth century, cannabis, a plant used for centuries as a cash crop and medicinal aid, became demonized and eventually criminalized due to the raced, classed, and gendered stories spread by biased media (Gieringer, 1999; Vitiello, 2019; Ransom, 1999). Similarly, reports of Native American, Mexican, and Black individuals' uncivilization and savagery led to widespread calls for action (Gwynne, 2010). The combination of emotional imagery and emotional galvanization ultimately lead to the creation of the Texas Rangers, a law enforcement agency still in place today (Swanson, 2020). Similar instances of criminalization and the further victimization of marginalized groups are largely perpetuated through the media's use and contribution to widespread master narratives (Martinez, 2020).

Podcasts are an increasingly popular form of media that offer consumers advantages over previous media forms, though still functioning rhetorically. Recent data suggests that almost two-thirds of Americans routinely listen to podcasts (Statistica, 2022). While podcasts are an evolving technological phenomenon that promises to provide consumers with a level of narrative intimacy previously unseen in other forms of media, their unique storytelling format is potentially problematic. The delivery of content through podcasts presents opportunities for individuals to access news and entertainment in a way previously impossible as individual programs, rather than individual channels, are now accessible. The ability of the consumer to pick and choose content offers incredible agency while still delivering communicative acts that function rhetorically—in that the world is still structured by that content. As Horeck (2019) explains, the consumer

81

choice of programmatic selection and the potential for immersion in these communicative acts partially explain the affective connection audiences possess with podcast-based content.

Podcasts are an accessible, narrative-based medium that finds their roots in public radio, unencumbered by many of the restraints of past long-from journalism mediums (Waldmann, 2020; Drew, 2017). Unfortunately, this form of media, particularly the stories that utilize aspects of crime and violence, actively contribute to harmful master narratives concerning law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and victimhood in the United States. True-crime podcasts have seen a rise in production and consumption over the past decade, however, few have paid critical attention to the stereotypes and ideologies that these podcasts functionally uphold. This thesis fills this gap by critically examining true-crime storytelling's social, historical, and rhetorical foundations and critiquing popular true-crime podcasts.

In examining the rhetorical and historical foundations of true-crime storytelling, I have traced the subtle raced, classed, and gendered biases that have influenced the United States law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Master narratives depicting law enforcement as an unbiased, ever equitable institution and victims as deviant vagrants that need policing have saturated United States media for centuries. Lurid stories utilizing emotional language transformed cannabis from a medicinal aid and cash crop into a criminal agent (Vitiello, 2019; Gieringer, 1999; Ransom, 1999). Fear-based calls to action and condemnation of anything considered "uncivilized" led to the formation of the Texas Rangers and the further persecution of the land and its native inhabitants (Gwynne, 2010; Swanson, 2020). These narratives, albeit less obviously, influence the public to

82

uphold oppressive understandings of what crime is and who victims can be, thus perpetuating further harm to marginalized communities.

Today, modern true-crime podcasts participate in the structuration of crime and victimhood in much the same ways that true-crime media in the past has done. Representatives of institutions created to police society tell stories discouraging critical reflection on the realities of law enforcement's failures (Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022). Master narratives about criminality communicate to an already privileged and biased audience that justice may be taken into the hands of the community without questioning the harm this authority can bring (Jensen & Holes, 2017-2022). Similar sentiments establish violence, crime, and the marginalized as theater for the living, consumable stories made for easing or entertaining the audience with no conception of how these stories impact the victim or their communities (Pulcyn & Richardson, 2017-2022).

Ultimately, in identifying these master narratives, this thesis posits that true-crime storytelling in the United States is inherently biased and, if left unchecked, serves to uphold racist and oppressive understandings of crime, victimhood, and justice. However, in recognizing the sometimes insidious nature of true-crime, it is also crucial to recognize the power of counterstories to negate and rewrite these narratives. Counterstories empower the minoritized by resisting majoritarian methodologies and perspectives, offering a dynamic source of resistance for individuals who exist outside of the norm (Martinez, 2020). Resistance is potentially powerful, and resistance in true-crime podcasting can take many different forms.

In examining *Small Town Murder* and *Black Girl Gone*, this thesis offers examples of what counterstories and resistance may look like in the face of overpowering

83

and oppressive master narratives. Furthermore, this thesis recognizes that intersectionality is essential in discussing the intricacies of crime, victimhood, and justice within the United States. Unfortunately, the genre of true-crime storytelling, both from entertainment and news sources, is almost entirely white-washed. From the hosts to the opinions and perspectives shared on most true-crime podcasts, the United States' understanding of crime is often predicated on a straight white male's perspective. This thesis is a challenge to the true-crime genre that in order to be genuinely transformative and liberating, we must start telling the stories of marginalized peoples. *Black Girl Gone* stands as an example for true-crime podcasts moving forward as to how to discuss the reality of crime in America and how to uplift the voices of marginalized people speaking for themselves.

Following the work of this thesis also suggests some future directions in a similar vein. For instance, a further examination into how even in resistant podcasts, true-crime storytellers propagate settler colonialism through the use of subtle master narratives would likely prove fruitful. Similarly, a critical eye for how Christian master narratives would contribute to understanding how religion continually shapes the United States' understanding of punitive justice.

At root, what this thesis has sought to demonstrate, however, is the power, the promise, and the peril of true-crime as delivered via the ubiquity of the podcast. Like all rhetorical forms, the true-crime podcast can shape and reinforce harmful mater narratives. In so doing, the genre can reinforce negative stereotypes regarding racial and ethnic minorities while also absolving the white supremacist ideologies in which we inhabit of culpability. Simultaneously, this thesis has also analyzed the power of storytelling and its resistance

84

relative to counter-storytelling. Through efforts like *Black Girl Gone*, true crime podcasts need not necessarily reinforce oppressive rhetorical structures but can stutter the dominant discourse and offer audiences an alternative understanding of the world. Given the ubiquity of podcasts, especially the true crime stories told in this format, it is crucial that we continue to interrogate how resistant narratives are constructed, and where they might be located. Our future apprehension of the world may depend on it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

21st Century Challenges for Corporate Governance. (2020). *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, *28*(1), 88–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/corg.12309

A SLAVE TALE: CLOSING AN ANCIENT ANATHEMA - ProQuest. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2022, from https://www.proquest.com/docview/1498460617?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true

Abate, K. S. (2013). The Effect of Podcast Lectures on Nursing Students' Knowledge Retention and Application. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, *34*(3), 182–185.

Adams, S. (2005). Review of The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery [Review of *Review of The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, by D. M. Goldenberg & S. R. Haynes]. *Brigham Young University Studies*, *44*(1), 157–169.

Anderson, K. E. (2022). *Storytelling* [Application/pdf,application/pdf]. https://doi.org/10.7282/T35T3HSK

Atlanta: Stokely's Spark. (1966, September 16). *Time*. http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,836360-2,00.html

Badgett, M. V. L., Choi, S. K., & Wilson, B. D. M. (2020). LGBT Poverty in the United States. In J. A. Reich (Ed.), *The State of Families* (1st ed., pp. 385–387). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429397868-75

Baffoe, M., Asimeng-Boahene, L., & Ogbuagu, B. C. (2014). Their Way or No Way: "Whiteness" as Agent for Marginalizing and Silencing Minority Voices in Academic Research and Publication. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, *3*(1), 13–32. https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2014.v3n1p13

Bartrop, P. R. (2007). Episodes from the Genocide of the Native Americans: A Review Essay. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, *2*(2), 183–190. https://doi.org/10.3138/gsp.2.2.183

Boling, K. S., & Hull, K. (2018a). *Undisclosed* Information— *Serial* Is *My Favorite Murder*: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, *25*(1), 92–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2017.1370714

Boling, K. S., & Hull, K. (2018b). *Undisclosed* Information— *Serial* Is *My Favorite Murder*: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, *25*(1), 92–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2017.1370714

Burger, P. (2016, August 24). *The Bloody History of the True Crime Genre*. JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/bloody-history-of-true-crime-genre/

Carden, M. P. (2018). "The Unkillable Mother": Sovereignty and Survivance in Louise Erdrich's The Round House. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *30*(1), 94–116. https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.30.1.0094

Carter, M., & Fuller, C. (2015). Symbolic Interactionism. *Sociopedia.Isa*. https://doi.org/10.1177/205684601561

Chávez, M. S. (2012). Autoethnography, a Chicana's Methodological Research Tool: The Role of Storytelling for Those Who Have No Choice but to do Critical Race Theory. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *45*(2), 334–348. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.669196

Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity. (n.d.). 30.

Cho, H. (2017). Racism and linguicism: Engaging language minority pre-service teachers in counter-storytelling. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *20*(5), 666–680. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1150827

Curtis, B. (n.d.). *What is "New Age" Religion, and Why Can't Christians Get on Board?* Crosswalk.Com. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-is-new-age-religion-and-why-cant-christians-get-on-board-11573681.html

Daniulaityte, R., Lamy, F. R., Smith, G. A., Nahhas, R. W., Carlson, R. G., Thirunarayan, K., Martins, S. S., Boyer, E. W., & Sheth, A. (2017). "Retweet to Pass the Blunt": Analyzing Geographic and Content Features of Cannabis-Related Tweeting Across the United States. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, *78*(6), 910–915. https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2017.78.910

Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau, C. K. (2005). And we are still not saved: Critical race theory in education ten years later. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000340971

Doi:10.1016/j.tate.2007.08.002 | Elsevier Enhanced Reader. (n.d.). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.08.002

Dreon, O., Kerper, R. M., & Landis, J. (2011). Digital Storytelling: A Tool for Teaching and Learning in the YouTube Generation. *Middle School Journal*, *42*(5), 4–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2011.11461777

Durham, A. M., Elrod, H. P., & Kinkade, P. T. (1995a). Images of crime and justice: Murder and the "true crime" genre. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *23*(2), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(95)00002-8

Durham, A. M., Elrod, H. P., & Kinkade, P. T. (1995b). Images of crime and justice: Murder and the "true crime" genre. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *23*(2), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(95)00002-8

Educational Video Group. (2009, October 13). *Stokely Carmichael "We Ain't Going" Speech*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKP5_qyGs8c

Edwards, F., Lee, H., & Esposito, M. (2019). Risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States by age, race–ethnicity, and sex. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *116*(34), 16793–16798. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1821204116

Eisman, A. (n.d.). *The media of manipulation: Patriotism and propaganda – mainstream news in the United States in the weeks following September 1*. 19.

Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the ... - S. C. Gwynne—Google Books. (n.d.). Retrieved July 9, 2022, from https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=YBnqAgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=empire+of+the+summer+moon&ots=Gu32LfamSP&sig=JpSLbqgVKgpS1TRFnQ3mr3LkLuo#v=onepage&q=empire%20of%20the%20summer%20moon&f=false

Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press.

Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, *51*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390180

Fisher, W. R. (1985). The narrative paradigm: An elaboration. *Communication Monographs*, *52*(4), 347–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758509376117

Fisher, W. R., & Brockriede, W. (1984). Kenneth Burke's realism. *Central States Speech Journal*, *35*(1), 35–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978409368158

Galston, W. A., & Jr, E. J. D. (n.d.). *The New Politics of Marijuana Legalization:* 17.

Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, P. K. J. (1999). *An Invitation to Social Construction*. SAGE.

Gnimbin A. Ouattara. (2021). Portugal and the Curse of Cain: The Birth of the
    Transatlantic Slave "Trade", 1421-1441. *Journal of Cultural and Religious
    Studies*, *9*(4). https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2177/2021.04.001

Goldenberg, D. M. (2003). The Curse of Cain. In *The curse of Ham: Race and slavery in
    early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2nd printing.). Princeton University Press.

Goldenberg, D. M. (2009). The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism,
    Christianity, and Islam. In *The Curse of Ham*. Princeton University Press.
    https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828548

Hanska, J. (2012). *Reagan's Mythical America: Storytelling as Political Leadership*.
    Springer.

Hernandez, M. A. (2019a). *True Injustice: Cultures of Violence and Stories of Resistance
    in the New True Crime*. 14.

Hernandez, M. A. (2019b). *True Injustice: Cultures of Violence and Stories of Resistance
    in the New True Crime*. 14.

Hinton, E., & Reed, C. (n.d.). *An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black
    Americans in the Criminal Justice System*. 20.

Hoffman, D. (1997). Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans,
    African Americans, and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western. *MELUS*,
    22(2), 45–59. https://doi.org/10.2307/468134

Holy Smokes: Why Do Catholics Use Incense? - Good Catholic^{TM}. (2021, January 4).
    https://www.goodcatholic.com/holy-smokes-why-do-catholics-use-incense/

Hughes, S. A. (2008). *A Black Professor and a White Urban School Teacher Connect
    Autoethnography to Critical Race Pedagogy*. 23.

Junior, N. (2020). The Mark of Cain and White Violence. *Journal of Biblical Literature*,
    139(4), 661–673. https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1394.2020.2

Kearney, B. H. H. and M. S. (1 C.E., November 30). The Unequal Burden of Crime and
    Incarceration on America's Poor. *Brookings*. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-
    front/2014/04/28/the-unequal-burden-of-crime-and-incarceration-on-americas-
    poor/

Knerr, K. (2012). *Men of Word and Deed: Whiteness, Masculinity, and Popular Culture
    Productions of the Texas Rangers*.
    https://repository.wellesley.edu/islandora/object/ir%3A373/

Krakau, L. (2021, September 25). *Gabby Petito's death shares the importance of domestic violence help centers*. WEAR. https://weartv.com/news/local/gabby-petitos-death-shares-the-importance-of-domestic-violence-help-centers

Lancaster, S. B. (n.d.). *There's Something in the Air: Effect of a Narrative-Account Podcast on Empathy and Client-Centeredness Among Occupational Therapy Students* [Ed.D., The University of Memphis]. Retrieved December 6, 2021, from https://www.proquest.com/docview/2267898930/abstract/55F98209C01F4708PQ/1

Lee, H., Fawcett, J., & DeMarco, R. (2016). Storytelling/narrative theory to address health communication with minority populations. *Applied Nursing Research*, *30*, 58–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2015.09.004

Linnemann, T. (2015). Capote's Ghosts: Violence, Media and the Spectre of Suspicion. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(3), 514–533. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu098

Maguire-Jack, K., Lanier, P., Johnson-Motoyama, M., Welch, H., & Dineen, M. (2015). Geographic variation in racial disparities in child maltreatment: The influence of county poverty and population density. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *47*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.05.020

McKenzie-Mohr, S., & Lafrance, M. N. (2017). Narrative resistance in social work research and practice: Counter-storying in the pursuit of social justice. *Qualitative Social Work*, *16*(2), 189–205. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016657866

Merhi, M. I. (2015). Factors influencing higher education students to adopt podcast: An empirical study. *Computers & Education*, *83*, 32–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2014.12.014

Murley, J. (2008). *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture*. ABC-CLIO.

N, P, & R. (2003a, December 15). "The Curse of Ham": Slavery and the Old Testament. In *The Tavis Smiley Show*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2003/12/15/1548811/the-curse-of-ham-slavery-and-the-old-testament

Opinion | Native Americans and the Violence Against Women Act—The New York Times. (n.d.). Retrieved December 7, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/opinion/native-americans-and-the-violence-against-women-act.html

Opinion: Christians Should Reject The "New Age" Movement. (2021, April 19). *The Liberty Champion*. https://www.liberty.edu/champion/2021/04/opinion-christians-should-reject-the-new-age-movement/

Pacula, R. L., Chriqui, J. F., & King, J. (2003). *Marijuana Decriminalization: What does it mean in the United States?* (Working Paper No. 9690; Working Paper Series). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w9690

Pâquet, L. (2018). Literary forensic rhetoric: Maps, emotional assent, and rhetorical space in *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*. *Law and Humanities*, *12*(1), 71–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2018.1457243

Phoenix, A., & Pattynama, P. (2006). Intersectionality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *13*(3), 187–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065751

Potter, G. W., & Kappeler, V. E. (n.d.). Introduction: Media, Crime, and Hegemony. In *The Harms of Crime M*.

Robin, B. R. (n.d.). *Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling*. Retrieved December 7, 2021, from https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/page.cfm?id=27&cid=27&sublinkid=31

Russell, H., & Nunley, A. (n.d.). *SUMMERHILL: RIOT OR REBELLION?* 15.

Sacred Tobacco Use in Ojibwe Communities—Roxanne Struthers, Felicia S. Hodge, 2004. (n.d.). Retrieved May 30, 2022, from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0898010104266735

Samuels-Wortley, K. (2021). To Serve and Protect Whom? Using Composite Counter-Storytelling to Explore Black and Indigenous Youth Experiences and Perceptions of the Police in Canada. *Crime & Delinquency*, *67*(8), 1137–1164. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128721989077

Scruggs, C. W. (1972). The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane. *American Literature*, *44*(2), 276–291. https://doi.org/10.2307/2924510

Seltzer, M. (2008). Murder/Media/Modernity. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, *38*(1), 11–41. https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.38.1.11

Sexual Assault. (n.d.). VAWnet.Org. Retrieved December 7, 2021, from https://vawnet.org/sc/gender-based-violence-and-intersecting-challenges-impacting-native-american-alaskan-village-1

Slaughter, J. B. (1987). Marijuana Prohibition in the United States: History and Analysis of a Failed Policy. *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, *21*(4), 417–474.

SNCC, Black Power, and the Atlanta Rebellion · The Summerhill Riot or the Atlanta Rebellion?: Uprising and Inequity in the "City Too Busy To Hate" · Ivan Allen Digital Archive. (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2022, from http://allenarchive.iac.gatech.edu/exhibits/show/summerhill-riots/sncc--black-power--atlanta-reb

Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *14*(4), 471–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390110063365

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103

Stern, B. B., Thompson, C. J., & Arnould, E. J. (1998). Narrative analysis of a marketing relationship: The consumer's perspective. *Psychology & Marketing*, *15*(3), 195–214. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6793(199805)15:3<195::AID-MAR1>3.0.CO;2-5

Stinson, D. W. (2008). Negotiating Sociocultural Discourses: The Counter-Storytelling of Academically (and Mathematically) Successful African American Male Students. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*(4), 975–1010. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208319723

Swanson, D. J. (2021). *Cult of Glory: The Bold and Brutal History of the Texas Rangers*. Penguin.

The Cumulative Prevalence of Termination of Parental Rights for U.S. Children, 2000–2016—Christopher Wildeman, Frank R. Edwards, Sara Wakefield, 2020. (n.d.). Retrieved December 1, 2021, from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077559519848499

The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods on JSTOR. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2022, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/2953314?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Thompson, M. (2013, July 22). The Mysterious History Of "Marijuana." *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/07/14/201981025/the-mysterious-history-of-marijuana

"Thou Shalt not Smoke" Religion and smoking in a natural experiment of history | Elsevier Enhanced Reader. (n.d.). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100412

Thursby, J. S. (2013). A Slave Tale: Closing an Ancient Anathema. *NAAAS Conference Proceedings*, 1226–1242. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1498460617/abstract/13554BEB5C0D41D8PQ/1

Trent, B. (1985). Medicine versus crime. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *133*(5), 498–505.

Vicary, A. M., & Fraley, R. C. (2010). Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers? *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *1*(1), 81–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550609355486

Vitiello, M. (1998). Proposition 215: De Facto Legalization of Pot and the Shortcomings of Direct Democracy. *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, *31*(3), 707–776.

Vitiello, M. (2019). Marijuana Legalization, Racial Disparity, and the Hope for Reform Marijuana Symposium. *Lewis & Clark Law Review*, *23*(3), 789–822.

Wargo, J. M. (2018). #SoundingOutMySilence: Reading a LGBTQ Youth's Sonic Cartography as Multimodal (Counter)Storytelling. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *62*(1), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.752

White, A. (n.d.). *"May We Be Buried Alive Together": Towards an Intersectional Feminist True Crime Praxis*. 154.

Wiltenburg, J. (2004). True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism. *The American Historical Review*, *109*(5), 1377–1404. https://doi.org/10.1086/530930

Winfrey, D. H. (1955). Mirabeau H. Lamar and Texas Nationalism. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, *59*(2), 184–205.