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The Body as Evidence: A Cultural Approach to America's Fascination with Murder

The concept of *corpus delicti* is one the cornerstones of Western legal systems. In layman's terms, a certain body of a crime, sometimes only figurative, must be presented as proof that the crime was committed. In murder investigations the literal meaning of the phrase is an obvious, clear emphasis on the bodily aspect of the committed crime and the place where the narrative takes its form.

Broadly understood crime fiction remains one of the most popular fiction genres. The elements needed to construct stories about various misdeeds seem to be deceptively simple: there must always be a victim, a perpetrator, and a crime. Although over time the narratives have become anything but simple, these are some of the necessary building blocks. A great deal has been written on the topic of narrative structures and temporal ordering in crime fiction, but only some of it is relevant in the particular case relating to bodies. First and foremost, the appearance of a dead body constitutes the focal point of a mystery relating to someone's untimely demise. The search for the body and for the identity of the perpetrator accompanies and creates the resolution of a story, and as Charles Rzepka writes, "[t]he primary and constant feature of the narrative of detection is that its structure is always two-fold. As Todorov puts it, the reader of a story of detection encounters 'not one but two stories: the story of the crime

and the story of the investigation.'"[1] Thus, the discovery of a victim's body orders the narrative at a point where the two stories overlap and bifurcate; the existence of a corpse is the end of the crime and the beginning of an investigation. Conversely, this article is ordered in reverse: the discussion of the medium comes first, followed by case studies of two famous murderers and a comment on the overarching narrative, and finally we shall look at the corporeal aspect in greater detail.

Despite the introduction having referred to general crime fiction, the focus of this article is more specific due to length restrictions. It has to do with the true crime branch of crime fiction genre concerning murder, especially serial killings, and a particular medium in which these stories are presented, namely podcasting. While the true crime genre is not entirely new, the podcast scene proved fertile ground for its rapid development and popularization. The year 2014 saw the release of the investigative journalism podcast *Serial*, which spearheaded the growth of the genre in the podcast medium.

As of 2018, numerous ongoing productions relate crimes from different parts of the world, and a significant number of them focus on serial killers alone. Podcasts pertaining to serial killers tend to follow a very formulaic structure, and are usually ordered around the biography of the killer and their environment before and after the crime. The structure is often referred to as a way of "understanding" the deviant individual; however, by changing the focus from the victims to the perpetrator, the narrative undergoes a significant ideological change since time constraints often cause the creators to disregard the background of the victims. In an article published in 1991, Jack Miles wrote on the relationship between true crime writing and the victims of the crimes that were committed. He writes, "The focus, as in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which all but created the genre, is usually on the criminal. Even when attention shifts to the victims, direct or indirect, it is rarely attention that arrives at a time when they want or need it."[2] There is a lot to be said about the important issue of ethics in true crime reporting; however, I would like to focus on the narrative structure and gender interplay to underline the subversive potential possessed by the medium of podcasts. To discuss the cultural implications of the issue, I employ a theoretical framework of sociology of crime, gender studies focused on gendered violence, and celebrity studies. How and why do the stories of murdered women become the narratives of

[1] Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 18.

[2] Jack Miles, "Imagining Mayhem: Fictional Violence vs. True Crime," *The North American Review*, vol. 276, no. 4 (1991), p. 59.

men? Furthermore, where does the female fascination with serial killers and murders come from?

A Case Study

First, let us discuss one of those stories. Around 1974, first in Washington State, then in Oregon, young, college-aged women, often college students, started to disappear. The only information available to the police, after piecing witness accounts together, was the description of a handsome man with an arm in a sling, introducing himself as Ted, and asking for help with loading either a number of books or a sailboat onto his VW Beetle. Thousands of more or less valuable tips flooded the police tip line.[3] Below is a list of victims from the initial group of disappearances, which should be all the more alien to those not familiar with the description given above: Karen Sparks (18, survivor, referred to as Joni Lenz in fictionalized accounts), Lynda Ann Healy (21), Donna Gail Manson (19, body still missing), Susan Elaine Rancourt (18), Brenda Carol Ball (22), Georgann Hawkins (18), Janice Ann Ott (23), Denise Marie Naslund (19), Roberta Kathleen Parks (22). Three more victims remain unidentified.[4]

Here is a second story, provided for comparison, and one that should be far more recognizable. In 1888, a wave of violent murders in and around the London district of Whitechapel shocked England. Sex workers were mutilated in the streets, yet their killer was never apprehended. The publicity around this serial killer has been so great that the five confirmed victims are referred to as "canonical," and should be recognizable: Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly.[5] These are the names of the victims of Jack the Ripper, and even those not familiar with the victims themselves are certainly familiar with the pseudonym of their killer. By contrast, the names of the women from the first list may not be familiar at all, albeit the name of the man convicted for their murders, Theodore Robert Bundy, should be somewhat recognizable through his infamy.

The strong presence in popular culture of both Jack the Ripper and Ted Bundy results from the weird fame, or rather infamy, of those

[3] "Episode 64: The Ted Murders," *True Crime Garage*, December 4, 2016, accessed November 22, 2018, https://truecrimegarage.com/podcast/blog/the-ted-murders-64.

[4] Ann Rule, *The Stranger Beside Me* (New York: New American Library, 1980).

[5] "Episode 254: Jack the Ripper Part I – Cockney Yoga," *Last Podcast on the Left*, 2017, accessed November 22, 2018, https://lastpodcastontheleftreadinglistcom.wordpress.com/2017/06/05/jack-the-ripper/.

murderers. The figure of Jack the Ripper can easily be found in hundreds of adaptations ranging from multiple podcast discussions, graphic novels, such as Alan Moore's *From Hell*, through TV shows such as *Whitechapel* and *Ripper Street*, films of various titles, video games, boardgames, and even a wax figure. This is an effect of more than a century of presence in popular consciousness; however, there does not seem to be a lull in the serial killer fascination, since a film adaptation titled rather ludicrously *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and starring teenage heartthrob Zac Efron is in the works at time of writing.

A narrative which, through its point of view, chooses to focus on the story of the victims and on the investigation rather than on the perpetrator causes a sense of defamiliarization in the reader. Anyone sufficiently immersed in popular culture is able to explain who Jack the Ripper was, or at least where the pseudonym comes from, even if the names of the victims without any further background information do nothing but baffle. References to the Ripper's victims are scattered throughout the mass media landscape, yet a keen eye is needed to recognize them for what they are.

Serial Killer Celebrity

Thus, part of the erosion of the victim-oriented narrative stems from the idea of serial killer celebrity. As Daniel Boorstin puts it, "the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. […] He is the human pseudo-event. […] He is made by all of us who willingly read about him […]."[6] The process of producing and re-producing accounts of serial murder contributes to the growing popularity of the so-called human pseudo-events, i.e. celebrities.

The idea of celebrities and their continued presence in public consciousness has a discernible effect on popular culture and its consumers. Celebrities are used to facilitate trends both in lifestyle and fashion, and, more often than not, to reinforce existing norms for gender and status. Despite numerous attempts to turn the role of the celebrity in the public sphere into a more productive one, people known only for who they are remain firmly attached to the pedestals they have been placed on by society. There are no signs of celebrity culture coming to an end. Moreover, the passing of the public's favorites often fuels the fans' love. Such is the case of many serial killers, and especially of Ted Bundy, whose death did nothing to stop his popularity. In the words of Philip Jenkins, "even death could

[6] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 11.

not prevent Bundy from achieving a high degree of postmortem celebrity [sic]."[7] To complicate matters further, while Ted Bundy is a near-perfect example of the human pseudo-event described above, the phenomenon that is Jack the Ripper remains equivocal.

In comparison with the undoubtedly most famous serial killer of all time, Bundy bears some similarities to the mythic figure of Jack the Ripper. The noticeable differences stem from the fact that Bundy is known to the public in his actual identity, and not a pseudonym given to him by the media. In fact, Ted Bundy remains one of the few serial murderers known by his name instead of a pseudonym. Thus, he is known to the public through his factual identity, and belongs rather to the abovementioned category of celebrity than that of mythic hero, as described by Jane Caputi, a scholar writing about representation of crime in fiction and author of the book *The Age of Sex Crime*. David Schmid comments on Jane Caputi's idea of a mythic hero, and her uncovering the underlying gendered interrelation between the victims and the perpetrator. He writes:

> Jane Caputi, for example, recognizes the fact that the serial killer has become a celebrity, but prefers to think of such killers as mythic, archetypal figures, as her analysis of Jack the Ripper indicates: "patriarchal culture has enshrined 'Jack the Ripper' as a mythic hero; he commonly appears as an immortal figure in literature, film, television, jokes and other cultural products. Such mythicization terrorizes women, empowers and inspires men, even to the point where some choose to emulate him, and participates in a cultural propagation of frequently lethal misogyny" ("American" 101). Caputi's focus on the importance of gender in understanding representations of serial murder has been invaluable, especially in the context of a mainstream understanding of serial murder that sees nothing significant about the fact that the vast majority of serial killers are men and the vast majority of their victims are women.[8]

Shortly thereafter, Schmid dismisses Caputi's argument by accusing her of gender-based reductivism, despite acknowledging that, in fact, the majority of serial killer victims are women. It seems that in his pursuit to define the particulars of a serial killer celebrity, Schmid discredits arguments which focus on it as something tangential. Mark Seltzer's theory is discussed in a similar vein:

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[7] Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1994), p. 55.

[8] David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 4; cf. Jane Caputi, "American Psychos: The Serial Killer in Contemporary Fiction." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1993), p. 101.

> After this single tantalizing reference, however, Seltzer does little to develop the implications of the serial killer's celebrity, partly because of his skepticism about whether the serial killer is truly motivated by the desire for fame (135). Revealingly, Seltzer argues that if the serial killer achieves celebrity at all, it is "a celebrity in anonymity: the most wanted man who is also a type of nonperson" (130). […] I think this is an accurate way to describe the fame of a killer like Jack the Ripper who was never apprehended, but more recent serial killers have a far more specific, individuated form of celebrity that enhances the figure's ability to do the cultural work that is required of it.[9]

Thus, Jack the Ripper's characteristic as a celebrity is double-layered: firstly, he is known for his crimes while simultaneously being anonymous; consequently, he is known for his persona and not his person. He is, then, an infamous nonperson, as Seltzer describes him, while in his infamy Bundy certainly lends himself as a paragon of lethal male empowerment. The Ripper is somewhat incorporeal, and the lasting evidence of his existence consists only of the bodies of the victims he left behind. The physical focus must then, in this case, remain with the victims whose bodies were and are the only ones available for inspection. There are, of course, many theories regarding the identity of the Leather Apron, as Jack the Ripper was referred to at the time, but the corporeal fascination with the persona must always begin and end with his victims, since no physical attributes can be attached to the killer. Therefore the women who fell victim to Jack the Ripper are better known than those who died at the hands of Ted Bundy. As a celebrity, Bundy is a part of a greater narrative of serial killers, filling a starring role in a narrative of their own making.

While the public's feelings towards celebrities can be described as ambivalent, the reasons for serial killers becoming celebrities seem to be even more complicated. The reasons for the widespread knowledge of and fascination with people whose often singular talent in life is for murder are unclear. On this topic, Schmid writes:

> [T]he serial killer makes a particularly appropriate (even emblematic) celebrity because both figures inspire feelings of attraction and repulsion, admiration and condemnation. Even though the "normal" celebrity […] seems to be a wholly loved and admired figure, in fact the public's relation to the celebrity is also characterized by resentment, even violent hatred.

[9] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 5; cf. Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

> Similarly (although it is the similarity of a mirror image: identical but inverted) the serial killer seems to inspire only condemnation and hatred.[10]

Whereas the feelings of condemnation and hatred certainly play a role in the public's relationship with criminals, something has to be said for the horrific appeal due to which the narratives of murderers survive long after they have died. One of the reasons for the prevalence of this fascination might be the need for stories of encounters with violent death, another—the need for a narrative of the monstrous, where the monster is no longer a fantastic Other, but instead an evil that effortlessly permeates the society under the guise of a functional member of that society.

"The Wound Culture"

As mentioned above, the true crime genre spans multiple media, but it recently achieved an interesting and very particular kind of success in the podcast format. The ubiquity of crime narratives, especially those focused on serial crime, stems from various sources which cannot be discussed at length here; however, particularly the idea of mythicizing can be traced back to the media's fear rhetoric.

In *Natural Born Celebrities*, Schmid cites the words of Ray Surette to comment on the personified and ever-present fear that this kind of reporting has reinforced. He claims that

> [t]he combination of tabloidization, the overrepresentation of violent interpersonal crime, and a preference for the grotesque in the construction of crime myths has led to the rise of a media icon that Ray Surette has described as the "faceless predator criminal" ("Predator" 135), a figure who represents the American public's attempt to embody the seemingly omnipresent and anonymous threat of violent crime.[11]

Therefore, the media essentially placed the cornerstones for serial killer celebrity by establishing a pervasive fear of the unknown criminal, alleviated only by equally massive coverage of captured criminals. Obviously, the latter, productive kind of news ages far quicker than the first and rapidly loses its value, consequently allowing true crime to continue the rhetoric of fear.

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[10] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 6.

[11] Ibid., p. 14; cf. Ray Surette, "Predator Criminals as Media Icons," in *Media, Process, and the Social Construction of Crime: Studies in Newsmaking Criminology*, ed. Gregg Barak (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 135.

It has been often pointed out that the development of the 24-hours news cycle brought about an age of news recycled excessively, with little or no substance, and with a certain fascination for scandals, sex, and gore, often also repeating messages that are objectively untrue. In addition to that, violent crime is often over-reported. Out of this style of news coverage race grew something Mark Seltzer calls "the wound culture." He describes it as follows:

> [t]he convening of the public around scenes of violence—the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact—has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.[12]

This description of people gathered around the scene of an accident is not unlike that of J. G. Ballard's *Crash*. The sensationalism and enthrallment surrounding violent car crash deaths depicted in the book is portrayed in a manner strongly resembling the convening around brutal murder scenes. A feedback loop of mimesis and anti-mimesis eventually forces the society to meet with extreme violence in more or less sanitized conditions.

Furthermore, texts which perform a social function similar to Ballard's *Crash* are not uncommon. As a matter of fact, according to Seltzer, the true crime genre took over the role of the Western as a genre of violence. The Western, once upon a time the genre of interest when it came to alleviating anxiety about gruesome death, has now been replaced. Seltzer writes that "[s]erial murder and its representations have by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our culture [...] the Western was really about serial killing all along."[13] Stories about violent death are necessary in a culture where medicine has improved significantly; currently, death is largely experienced only by proxy and in sanitized conditions. Thus, consumption of texts regarding violent death in a controlled environment allows the reader to normalize the phenomenon and manage the fear associated with it. However, before the narratives of violence are ready for mass consumption, they must be couched in a language of metaphor.

Dichotomous systems are often used in order to make the source text more approachable for the reader. The discourse based on binary oppositions significantly simplifies very complex moral quandaries,

[12] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 5; cf. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*.

[13] Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 1.

allowing compartmentalization of gruesome events. Gothic rhetoric has been adopted by the media for that purpose, and, as Karen Halttunen describes, to allow an expression of "the incomprehensibility of murder within the rational Enlightenment social order."[14] The binary oppositions of the monster and the human, as well as the Other juxtaposed against the individual or the society as a whole, allows one to rationalize the deviant acts performed by those deemed outsiders.

However, rationalization is not necessarily the main function of the gothic rhetoric. Schmid writes:

> Comparisons of serial killers to a host of gothic monsters, including vampires, werewolves, and, of course, Frankenstein's monster, are legion and come not only from members of the public and critics (Judith Halberstam's work is especially notable here) but also from the killers themselves. [...] As Edward Ingebretsen points out in his invaluable study, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*, the purpose of the gothic is to produce fear, not only through the motifs of werewolf, vampire, and the like, but also by "the mythicizing of slashers, terrorists, lurking child abusers, and unnatural mothers" (22). Nicola Nixon suggests the particular form this gothic mythicizing takes with respect to serial murder when she details how extensively contemporary true-crime narratives draw upon the language of gothic monstrosity. In doing so, Nixon argues, true crime is symptomatic of a larger cultural tendency in the contemporary United States to turn serial killers into "real" gothic monsters: "That America thought it had horrifyingly 'real' monsters instead of fictional demons is unquestionably reflected in the emergence and stunning efflorescence of eighties 'true-crime' books like Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* [...] and scores of other books about the so-called superstar killers."[15]

Thus, through the language of the gothic, serial killers are made monstrous in order for the American society to "make sense" of them. The prevailing dichotomy of human and monstrous in true crime narratives allows the serial killer to become the Other, a liminal figure blending together humanity and monstrosity. The serial murderer is the epitome of the cultural predator, ready to undermine the societal laws due to perverse wants that go further than transgressive sexual practices, which in such individuals are usually intrinsically linked with the need for violence.

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[14] Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 48.

[15] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 7.; cf. Edward Ingebretsen, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 22; Nicola Nixon, "Making Monsters, or Serializing Killers," in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), p. 220.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that apart from being an object of fear, the monster is also a figure of attraction:

> The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic [...] . We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.
>
> Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture. When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality.[16]

Cohen puts strong emphasis on the bodily aspects which are merged in true crime narratives, that of being attracted to something, and that of being frightened; both can evoke a strong physical reaction. For Cohen, the fascination with the monster stems from its liminal position. Similarly, for Schmid, this simultaneous attraction and repulsion finds its culmination in the figure of the celebrity serial killer:

> Just as the monster is a strongly ambivalent figure, an "othered" being who seems strangely familiar, the same can be said about celebrities. [...] The famous serial killer combines the roles of monster and celebrity in a particularly economical and charged way, and this is why famous serial killers are such a visible part of the contemporary American cultural landscape.[17]

The celebrity and monster meet at an intersection in the person of the serial killer. To return to an earlier comparison, in Jack the Ripper, this intersection is additionally mythicized by his anonymity, whereas Ted Bundy constitutes a perfect example of what Cohen is describing.

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[16] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in: *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 16–17.

[17] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 8.

The emphasis on the monstrous aspects is often rooted in the appearance. Frankenstein's monster is emblematic in a way which is inaccessible to most monsters of the true crime genre; however, the language used to describe serial murderers is often such that they seem to gain additional features, turning them into lurking stalkers who are almost shadow-like in their appearance. Other times, large men who have committed gruesome murders are described as looming giants. In narration, they seem to grow or shrink depending on the particulars of the story, but there is one element which always seems to be the deciding factor when it comes to the monster: the eyes. Following the age-old adage that eyes are the window to the soul, true crime seems to have a peculiar obsession with the eyes of the people involved. In addition, if the perpetrator happens to be handsome, it is always noted, even when completely irrelevant to the events of the story.

The Corporeal

Having given an overview of the noteworthy presence that serial killer narratives have in popular culture, it is important to discuss the results such a presence bears upon the other side of this narrative, for no doubt the story of the victim is somewhat contrary to that of the perpetrator. The body of the criminal, incredibly important in the judicial process, is often omitted in later accounts, unless the man is attractive, like Bundy was; or unless the mystery is unresolved, as the Ripper's is. Thus, one must ask, once again, what is the place of corporeality, and how violence towards the body is presented in murder stories, especially those of serial murderers.

Bundy chose young, predominantly white middle-class women for his victims, a "type" very different from that of most serial killers' victims, which Steven Egger describes as "the less-dead":

> Egger argues that there is an increased incidence of social encouragement to kill a type of person who, when murdered, is "less-dead" than other categories of homicide victims. Prostitutes, cruising homosexuals, homeless transients, runaway youths, senior citizens, and inner-city poor, according to Egger, are perceived by our society as "less-dead" than a white college girl from a middle-class suburb.[18]

[18] Peter Vronsky, *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 37; cf. Steven A. Egger, *The Killers among Us; An Examination of Serial Murder and Its Investigation* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998).

This classification only falters when the type of the victim chosen is like that of Ted Bundy: young Caucasian women, mostly from well-to-do families, and attending college. Thus, as noted previously, it is not only the gender of the victim that matters. Race and class also play an important role in the corporeal identity of the victim, which in turn may determine how quickly an investigation gets underway. The notion of the less-dead is thus important to the victim's narrative or lack thereof, often allowing the numbers of victims to grow. The identity of a victim, strongly tied to their ethnicity and social standing, becomes a body politic of each and every one of the victims.

Further,

> Egger explains: The victims of serial killers, viewed when alive as a devalued strata of humanity, become 'less-dead' (since for many they were less-alive before their death and now they become the 'never-were') and their demise becomes the elimination of sores or blemishes cleansed by those who dare to wash away these undesirable elements [...].[19]

This idea marks a very dangerous turn when it comes to motive and motivation of the serial killers. Similarly to what Caputi noted before, the idea of washing away the disagreeable parts of society, in the eyes of a serial murderer, can lead to a perverted fantasy of male empowerment. One could argue that it begins before the act of murder is committed, with the classification and segregation of society into parts and bodies which are more or less desirable. Moreover, from the moment of death at the hands of a serial killer, the objectification of the victims never ceases, further reinforcing a narrative of misogyny. In serial killers and narratives about serial killing, selfhood and murder become unified, and the victims and their bodies are a byproduct of a twisted male fantasy and the chase after a deviant self-fulfillment.

Consequently, one could propose a threefold reading of serial killer narratives and the corporeal presence of victims, especially women, in those narratives. Firstly, there is the initial objectification of belonging to a certain type of prey: segregation through gender, race, social standing. Secondly, there is the post-mortem objectification of becoming solely a material and corporeal presence: the injured party for the benefit of those partaking in the wound culture. Crime scene photos would belong to this stage once released in any way to the public or leaked to be posted on the Internet. And thirdly, there is the judicial objectification, the

[19] Vronsky, *Serial Killers*, p. 37; cf. Eggers, *The Killers*.

aforementioned *corpus delicti*, where the victim becomes part of the body of evidence, dissected and photographed for the purposes of a criminal investigation. Perhaps the stages deserve to be named more aptly, or with greater care for legal terminology; however, the focus lies more in the tiers of the bodily presence of the victim and less in the nomenclature. Moreover, perhaps another stage should be added, one accounting for the life of the body and the victim after their death, pertaining especially to the gravesites, odd memorabilia, and reenactments in podcasts and other true crime narratives, where the body becomes metaphorical and turning over the old stone of someone's death never ends.

Nevertheless, the retellings of murder narratives through the medium of podcasts are largely immaterial and designed predominantly for the niche of hobbyists. The repurposing of those stories for the "big Hollywood screen" has more monetary potential to revitalize the serial killer industry, which, in the end, leads to the very material idea of possessing items relating to murders and murderers. Those items are called "murderabilia."

> *Collectors* [a show about the murderabilia industry] is distributed by a small company named, appropriately enough, Abject Films, and on their Web site the film's director, Julian P. Hobbs, discusses some of the multiple connections between serial killing and consumerism. Hobbs points out that the serial killer is connected with consumerism in the most basic sense in that he has become a commodity, "a merchandising phenomenon that rivals Mickey Mouse. From movies to television, books to on-line, serial killers are packaged and consumed en-masse" (Abject Films). But as Hobbs goes on to argue, serial killers themselves can be seen as consumers, which implicates any representations of them in the same consumerist logic: "Serial killers come into being by fetishizing and collecting artifacts—usually body parts—in turn, the dedicated collector gathers scraps connected with the actual events and so, too, a documentary a collection of images" (Abject Films).[20]

There are no clear instructions, so to say, about what exactly constitutes murderabilia. Anything material to do with a serial killer can be sold at a price in a way which resembles the famed trophies collected by serial killers for mementos. It is hard to say which is more disturbing, the status of celebrity achieved by some murderers for often unspeakably violent crimes, and with that a vicious circle of remembering, or forgetting the victims as individuals. To a wider public, the notion of the true crime

[20] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, p. 21.

industry seems to remain a distasteful affair. On the unethical side of true crime genre, Jack Miles writes:

> The victims of the crimes that "true crime" writers put on display rarely have their opinion about these works solicited. But their situation is worth a moment's thought; for if these works have any social utility, they ought to have it first and foremost for those most directly affected by the crimes in question. And "true crime" continues to be a boom area in American publishing.[21]

Both the serial killer and true crime industry are thriving, seemingly disregarding the victims and the victims' families. However, as evidenced by Andrea Marks in her 2017 article, "How a True-Crime Podcast Became a Mental-Health Support Group," an overwhelming number of true crime fans are female.[22] Podcasts such as *RedHanded* or *My Favorite Murder* and others offer a feminist take on the murder narratives. While the hosts' reporting needs to be taken with a grain of salt, the podcast heavily relies on returning the control back to the victims and empowering women, evidenced in their catchphrase, "stay sexy and don't get murdered." *My Favorite Murder*, which is a comedy podcast, focuses on battling the fear that comes with true crime narratives through doing away with the gothic rhetoric and replacing it with another visceral and cathartic reaction: laughter.

Conclusions

The respectful reaffirmation of the victims, despite their lifestyle, class, and ethnic and racial background, reverses the narrative of the "less-dead." Podcasts hosted by women mitigate the objectification of the victims and attempt to subvert the narrative around the culture from within, where they are firmly placed. In a society where violence against women, and, in America, especially towards women of color and other "less-dead," continues to be ubiquitous, it is difficult to talk about an unambiguous end of serial killer celebrity, or even the end of serial killers. True crime is undoubtedly a genre of extreme bodily violence, of infamous monsters and their prey; nevertheless, as evidenced above, it still offers subversive potential.

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[21] Miles, "Imagining Mayhem," p. 58.

[22] Andrea Marks, "How a True-Crime Podcast Became a Mental-Health Support Group," *The Atlantic*, February 21, 2017, accessed November 22, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/02/the-true-crime-podcast-turned-mental-health-support-group/517200/.

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The Body as Evidence: A Cultural Approach to America's Fascination with Murder

American culture is rich in "popular" murder cases and virtually all serial killers have been elevated to a celebrity status. Serial killer industry selling murderabilia is booming, and the popularity of true-crime shows, podcasts, and books is at an all-time high. This paper aims at the analysis of the cultural trend of serial killer celebrities, treatment of the media coverage surrounding their victims as well as the victims' bodies before and after death, and the overarching narratives concerning murder in American history and culture.

Serial killers – celebrities, monsters, anti-heroes of American culture – fuel their own industry, established in postmodern times as the self-referential nightmare of commodified death. Both serial murderers and their victims are the object of said industry. However, the bodies of victims are objectified threefold: as the victims of the crime, as elements of the murder industry, and as the evidence of the crime itself. Additionally, the socioeconomic background of some of the victims, often referred to as the "less-dead" victims according to Steven Egger's theory, reinforces the narrative in which they are merely objects of the crime, not individuals. Together, all these factors constitute what Mark Seltzer calls "wound culture," a culture gathered around the bodily trauma. Thus, the paper will consider the role serial killer victims' bodies have on the cultural perception of narratives surrounding death, violence, and the cult of the perpetrator.

Keywords: serial killers, crime, podcast, true crime, cultural studies
Słowa klucze: seryjni mordercy, zbrodnia, podcast, prawdziwa zbrodnia, studia kulturowe