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“May We Be Buried Alive Together”

TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST TRUE
CRIME PRAXIS

Alex White

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Gender & Women's Studies Program, Pomona College
2019-2020

Aimee Bahng, Ph.D
Roberto Sirvent, Ph.D, J.D.

I would like to take this space to acknowledge that this work was conceived of, written, and edited on the stolen Indigenous land of Turtle Island. Specifically, my thesis was developed primarily on Tongva and Duwamish lands.

Yaraarkomokre'e

I remember you

In Tongva, spoken by the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe.
(translation courtesy of Omniglot.com)

q̣ič čəxʷ

You matter

In Lushootseed, spoken by the Duwamish and other Coastal Salish tribes.
(translation courtesy of TulalipLushootseed.com)

I began this project in 2019, exactly 400 years after the first slave ship leaving from West Africa reached the shores of British colonies on the Eastern coast of Turtle Island. The afterlives of slavery continue to create conditions of anti-Black terror in the United States, and profoundly shape the very meanings of death, violence, and resilience.

“There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury.”

Harriet Jacobs, from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*

To those of us who have survived and those of us who haven't.

Άρις, ό,τι έκανα ποτέ ήταν για να σε κάνω περήφανο για μένα.

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“Why is True Crime So Blonde?”

An Introduction

“As I write these recollections of women who survived, I hope my readers are taking careful note of why they did. They screamed.

They fought. They slammed doors in a stranger's face. They ran. They doubted glib stories. They spotted flaws in those stories.”

Ann Rule, *The Stranger Beside Me*

MFM, #MMIW, and Me: A Critical Occasion

If you ask most women¹ true crime fans today about the most popular true crime media, they will likely mention the podcast *My Favorite Murder*. Hosted by comedians Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, *My Favorite Murder* (MFM) has come to represent the epicenter of all true crime-related controversy in the popular cultural imaginary. The hosts proudly locate their podcast at the intersection of comedy and true crime, telling stories of violence, death, and the macabre with a touch of humor.² Karen and Georgia have shared that they process their own traumas through both true crime and comedy, and therefore the storytelling combination is a natural pairing to both of them. Karen and Georgia identify themselves and their true crime podcast as feminist. Aligning their true crime storytelling with feminism has garnered criticism directed at the podcast from a range of groups. Misogynists dismiss the feminist community-building and invalidate patriarchal violence. On the other side of the spectrum, intersectional feminists problematize MFM's scopes of violence and victimhood as well as its white feminist bent.³ Yet, MFM has garnered a huge following of predominantly white, women "murderinos"⁴ and has regularly appeared in the top ten iTunes comedy podcast chart since its inception in 2016. Karen and Georgia have completed multiple international tours at sold out theaters.

¹ I use women here, of course, to name anyone who identifies as a woman. That being said, it is also true that the women listening to *My Favorite Murder* are primarily cis, as are the hosts.

² Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, *My Favorite Murder* (podcast). Exactly Right Media, <https://myfavoritemurder.com/>. (accessed April 17, 2020).

³ Ashley Duchemin, "The Death of 'My Favorite Murder,'" *Bitch Media*. Original publication August 8, 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/death-my-favorite-murder>. (accessed April 29, 2020).

⁴ "Murderinos" describes people who follow and consume true crime media. Though it does not originate from the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, many fans of the show refer to themselves as "murderinos." The origin of the term is unknown.

The podcast's success is emblematic of a crucial moment of popular culture where stories of death and violence are becoming increasingly mainstream, particularly to audiences of women. *MFM* best exemplifies the white feminist turn that true crime media has taken in the last decade.

I first discovered *My Favorite Murder* on a road trip from Seattle, WA (my home) to Claremont, CA (my college campus) in August 2016. Roughly three months after experiencing a personal trauma and facing a major life change, I searched iTunes podcast lists for something to soothe and engage me on the three-day trip to my new home. As the car sped along the U.S. 101, I skipped podcast after podcast until I saw *MFM*; I started it with curiosity. I immediately fell in love with the irreverent and vulnerable way in which Karen and Georgia faced death. Episode after episode, I felt my dark fascination validated and I even occasionally laughed out loud. I felt a kinship with Karen and Georgia's anxieties. As I hurtled south through the Redwood National Forest and onward, I eagerly listened to all the available *MFM* episodes. Yet, I never paused to consider the unseen violences that shaped the material and discursive landscape around me.

I have only recently gone back and researched whose land I was passing through without consciousness or invitation on that road trip, namely the stolen ancestral lands of the Duwamish, Nisqually, Chinook, Yamhill, Cow Creek Umpqua, Tolowa Dee-ni', Karuk, Yurok, Sinkyone, Northern Pomo, Southern Pomo, Ohlone, Yokuts, and Tongva (to name only a small handful of Indigenous nations on the

coastline).⁵ In recent years, the campaign for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (known as the #MMIW campaign) has gained greater online feminist attention, highlighting the staggering number of murdered and missing Native women within the territorial United States. The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women (CSVANW) notes on their website that “4 out of 5 of our Native women are affected by violence today”.⁶ The devastating and enraging statistics of violence against Indigenous women suggest that such acts of terror are on the rise. Upon reflecting on my road trip, the most exigent stories of murder and violence were passing by my window, left unmentioned in the audio of the podcast.

I thus situate my thesis as originating from the troubling simultaneity of invisibilized violence against Indigenous women, ongoing settler colonialism, the rise of “feminist”-identified true crime media, and personal healing. I start this project from a critical understanding of true crime as a vexed site of white feminism, erasure, voyeurism, and carceral feminist ideology. My object of analysis is the white feminist ascendancy within true crime that continues to omit the most targeted communities in the United States. My road trip helps demonstrate the harm of narratives (told from the position of a settler on Indigenous land) that neglect settler colonization and violence against Indigenous women. The occasion for my thesis is the tangled and, at times, contradictory relationship I have to true crime. My thesis puts in conversation my personal interest in the genre with my academic and political belief in feminist inquiry. Yet, I believe the stakes of my project exist beyond

⁵ “NativeLand.ca,” Native. <https://native-land.ca/>. (accessed December 7, 2019).

⁶ “#MMIW – Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women,” CSVANW *Coalition to STOP Violence Against Women*. <https://www.csvanw.org/mmiw/>. (accessed December 7, 2019)

personal interest and reconciliation. True crime stories always intersect important feminist fights, whether or not the narrators recognize so. The rise of true crime has brought into relief the feminist politics of grief, the visibility of violence, and critically caring for the dead. As women increasingly become narrators of the genre, the possibilities of feminist critique become more pressing and feminist world-remembering comes into view as an important site of resistance.

Welcome to the “Dead Girl Show”

Most mainstream true crime narratives revolve around a corpse. It is usually the body of a woman. The body is most often white. Not always, but in the cultural imaginary, she is blonde. She comes from a good family. She was a sweet girl. What *happened to her*? While this question haunts the general public, it also animates true crime communities as the victim becomes a symbol of innocence, a site of spectacular violence, and evidence of the incomprehensible extreme of human behavior. The question keeps anxious women awake at night, conscious of the creaks in their homes and the rustle of leaves outside their windows, wondering: *What could happen to me*? The question brings (primarily white, primarily cis) women true crime fans together in the name of fascination, fear, sorrow, rage, and justice -- or, what I refer to as white feminist true crime.

I define true crime as cultural productions that tell true stories of violence, death, and the macabre. White feminist true crime is a subset of true crime media; it has become the face of the entire genre in recent years, as true crime fandom has

become overwhelmingly comprised of middle-upper class, cis, white women. Indeed, in a 2010 study on true crime readership, researchers discovered that women are more drawn to true crime than men: 70% of reviews on true crime literature from Amazon.com are by women. The study reports further that women prefer true crime stories that feature women victims and enjoy stories that contain survival advice. The data led the study researchers to conclude that “women, more so than men, would have something to gain from reading these books, especially when the story features female victims.”⁷ Similarly, Spotify (a music and podcast streaming service) revealed that “true crime is a hot topic for female listeners specifically, with listening of the genre increasing by 16% among women in 2019 compared to 2018.”⁸ With more and more women fans of the genre, true crime cultural productions have increasingly become narrated and created by women themselves. What I call white feminist true crime is politically white feminist⁹ because it applies a critical look at gendered violence, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity as it attends to violence, death, and the macabre. However, it doesn’t employ intersectional analysis to understand how American violence is inflected by colonization, racialization, enslavement, Orientalism, war, capital’s demands, globalization, “resource” extraction, and other forms of invisibilized violence.

⁷ Amanda M. Vicary and R. Chris Fraley. “Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 85.

⁸ “Social Psychologist Amanda Vicary and Spotify Reveal Why Women Are So Obsessed with True Crime—And Share 4 New Podcasts Coming in 2020,” *For the Record*. Spotify, Originally publication January 29, 2020, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2020-01-29/social-psychologist-amanda-vicary-and-spotify-reveal-why-women-are-so-obsessed-with-true-crime-and-share-4-new-podcasts-coming-in-2020/> (accessed April 15, 2020).

⁹ White feminism is a self-identified branch of feminism that fails to understand how gender, sexism, and patriarchy are experienced across registers of difference such as race, ability, socio-economic status, nationality, etc. In erasing this nuance, white feminism reproduces hierarchies of difference.

By my observation, white feminist true crime is also defined by a focus on community-building, kinship with the dead, survival-making, and personal vulnerability. A white feminist true crime canon might include works by Ann Rule, the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, the *Crime Junkie* podcast, and Michelle McNamara's career and book *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, amongst others. Each of these cultural productions (all created by white women) critique the patriarchy and toxic masculinity, imbue true crime stories with personal vulnerability and memoir, generate a sense of community, mourn the life of the victims, and pursue justice fervently on behalf of those who have passed. In these examples of storytelling, the life of victims is equally celebrated and mourned. These women narrators repeatedly identify with the victims themselves, going as far as to generate a sense of kinship with survivors and the dead. Yet, white feminist true crime reproduces the hegemony of interpersonal, instantaneous, and spectacular violence. In doing so, the storytelling erases harm that occurs across scales and that is committed by states, structures, discourses, and corporations. Unfortunately, white feminist true crime has not escaped the sensational grip of the "dead girl show."

In her book *Dead Girls*, Alice Bolin writes critical essays about the phenomenon in fictional and true crime media about the narrative death of women characters which she terms the "dead girl show."¹⁰ Through the dead girl's death comes a spectacular narrative of the ultimate violence against the ultimate victim. Bolin elaborates that

¹⁰ Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*. (New York, NY: William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018).

the paradox of the perfect victim, effacing the deaths of leagues of nonwhite or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant or drug-addicted or gay or trans victims, encapsulates the combination of worshipful covetousness and violent rage that drives the Dead Girl Show. The white girl becomes the highest sacrifice, the virgin martyr, particularly to that most unholy idol of narrative.¹¹

The dead white girl is better understood here as a corpse -- she is not afforded a complex subjectivity in the narrative of the “dead girl show” and if she is given posthumous dimension, her annihilation is still her most defining characteristic. While true crime media has historically been complicit in reproducing this type of narrative, white feminist true crime seems intent on rendering women victims multidimensional through storytelling that, at times, politically resists the patriarchal impulses of the “dead girl show.” Yet, even white feminist true crime has yet to truly divorce itself from an obsession with the dead girl who remains the most legible victim in the genre. Victims who cannot embody the “virgin martyr” that Bolin describes experience violence and death that is not meant to be grieved, in true crime and beyond. The “dead girl show” and its public reception bring into relief how white femininity grants legible victimhood in the U.S. cultural stage.

The fascination with the “dead girl show” is propelled by the repeated narrative of destroyed white feminine innocence. Bolin illustrates the perverse American obsession with the (blonde) feminine corpse by gesturing at the dead body of Laura Palmer from the fictional show *Twin Peaks*. In *Twin Peaks*, the murder of Laura Palmer brings a small town to reflect on the horrors hidden within neat rows of two-story Craftsman. The two most famous images of Laura Palmer in the show are of her

¹¹ Ibid, 23.

washed up dead body and her framed prom portrait. In the first, Laura's frozen blue body appears naked and wrapped in plastic along a frigid, rocky shore. In the second, Laura's smiling face, pink cheeks, big eyes, perfect hair, and golden tiara gleam. The jarring juxtaposition of these images captures the essence of the "dead girl show." *What happened to her?* Palmer is the paragon of the dead girl precisely because she appears to be the paragon of white femininity -- they are one and the same. Immediately after her passing, Laura Palmer is portrayed by her community as having been pure, pacified, and pretty in life. However, even in death, Palmer doesn't let others pave over her unruly nature. As the darker parts of her life are revealed, Palmer is no longer a "virgin martyr" and the "dead girl show" narrative no longer fits. Even so, it seems that through the "dead girl show," Palmer is given the opportunity to better perform femininity, *posthumously*. In this sense, the transformation from prom queen to corpse is no transition at all. Rather, the dead girl is the staging ground for the construction of a perfect white femininity. As white feminists begin to critique the gendered narratives that condition the dead girl's death, white feminist true crime becomes a project of identifying with the dead girl in a way that undoes some of the patriarchy's hold of her but may reinstate whiteness as her marker of good, innocent, and grievable.

So, why do women want to consume true narratives of the "dead girl show"? A simple Google search of why true crime is an increasingly popular genre among women will generate a number of articles ranging from pieces about amateur detective online communities, fan's guilt, feminist delight, exploitative voyeurism,

and anxieties about a public more and more interested in murder. Many of the “pro”-true crime pieces authored by women frame the genre as a source of community healing where kinship is built on the sharing and overcoming of anxieties. A *Forge* piece by Laura Barcella even claims that true crime stories serve as a sort of “exposure therapy” for women¹²; hers is not the first article to suggest this. Yet, other mainstream news articles often fret about the *perceived* growing number of “serial killer lovers.” The *NY Daily News* features a 2019 story that confused the lines between true crime fans and people who love serial killers, writing “what was once a mere desire for understanding the serial killers becomes an attraction, and sometimes an obsession.”¹³ The same month, Johnny Oleksinski published an angry piece for the *New York Post* titled “Hollywood needs to stop glamorizing horrific serial killers.”¹⁴ In the article, Oleksinski argues that Hollywood “[treats] mass murder like it’s pumpkin-spice flavor in the fall, Hollywood is casting hotties to play them too.”¹⁵ Oleksinski’s greatest gripe is the depiction of serial killers as sex objects and the perceived public appetite for such portrayals. However, Oleksinski’s words reveal coded misogyny exemplified in his choice to highlight pumpkin-spice flavor (a culturally gendered trend) and so-called Hollywood “hotties” that are implicitly created for heterosexual women. Oleksinski’s piece reads as an indictment of both

¹² Laura Barcella, “Why Women Are Obsessed With True Crime,” *Forge*. Medium, Original publication December 5, 2019, <https://forge.medium.com/women-watch-tv-murders-for-anxiety-relief-aaf4173acc2f>. (accessed April 17, 2020).

¹³ Cassidy Varva, “Why people love to romanticize serial killers like Ted Bundy,” *New York Daily News*. Original publication April 10, 2019, <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/ny-news-ted-bundy-romanticized-serial-killers-20190214-story.html>. (accessed April 17, 2020).

¹⁴ Johnny Oleksinski, “Hollywood needs to stop glamorizing horrific serial killers,” *New York Post*. Post Digital Network, Original publication April 4, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/04/04/hollywood-needs-to-stop-glamorizing-horrific-serial-killers/>. (accessed on April 17, 2020).

¹⁵ Ibid.

Hollywood as a profit hungry, amoral machine and immoral women viewers who crave the debased content for superficial reasons.

Yet, true crime has also been hailed in the media as a site of amateur detective work in the fervent pursuit of justice, epitomized by the career of Michelle McNamara who aided the investigation of the Golden State Killer. McNamara gained notoriety in 2006 with the creation “True Crime Diary” which attracted fans (most of them women) to assist in her amateur detective work. However, the primary mainstream critique of true crime revolves around the ethics of consuming the pain, trauma, and death of others for pleasure and entertainment. A slew of articles on this topic fill a Google search page with titles like “True Crime's Ethical Dilemma,” “Should true crime even exist as a genre?,” and “Is True Crime as Entertainment Morally Defensible?” In this larger public conversation, the media doesn’t seem interested in nuance. Among skeptical friends and family, I often find myself easily slipping into a defensive position about what the genre means to me: kinship, shared vulnerability, rage, justice. However, among other true crime fans, I’m a voice of frustration at the genre’s white feminist bent and erasure. Evidently, true crime, let alone a “feminist” true crime, has become a personal, political, and cultural lightning rod in the last two decades.

Little scholarship has been written on the true crime genre. What does exist largely comes from the discipline of Psychology, such as the *Psychology Today* article “Why Are We Drawn To Criminals and Monsters?,” and tends to pathologize women fans. Even in critique of the spectacularization of death for entertainment, I am wary

of adopting a pathologization of women with dark interests and “savage appetites,” especially as it recalls diagnoses of female hysteria and the criminalization of women with deviant desires. Indeed, it seems that women’s fascination in stories of murder, violence, and the macabre are only understood in the mainstream media as pathological and/or frivolous (i.e. serial killer lover). It assumes a very thin line between women’s interests, fantasies, and anxieties. Current scholarship reflects a desire to understand the psychology of women true crime fans instead of critically examining the discursive conditions which create “victim,” “perpetrator,” and “violence,” and the stakes implicit in these categories for women and others.

At its best, true crime offers a feminist space to grieve and organize. At its worst, true crime reproduces narratives of death and trauma for the entertainment and pleasure of others. In her recent release, *Savage Appetites*, Rachel Monroe unravels and interrogates women’s complicated relationship with true crime and the question of *what happened to her*.¹⁶ Throughout the book, Monroe critically explores why stories of violent crime are appealing to women. *Savage Appetites* weaves together four stories of women and violence through the archetypes of “detective,” “victim,” “defender,” and “killer.” In each account, Monroe focuses on women who are implicated in stories of violence, either by their own will or without intent. Framing the chapters is Monroe’s own ambivalent relationship to true crime media, an engagement she calls a “crime funk,” or a period of obsessive consumption of true crime narratives.¹⁷ Monroe introduces the book with an anecdote about visiting the

¹⁶ Rachel Monroe, *Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession*. (New York, NY: Scribner, an Imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2019).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

Oxygen network's "CrimeCon" which occurs annually and draws crowds of mostly women. Monroe describes a wall full of post-it notes filled out by conference attendees about their reasons for attendance titled "What's YOUR Motive?".¹⁸ Some examples from the wall that Monroe includes are: "sick obsession," "face my fears and celebrate justice," "girls weekend," "the patriarchy," "to not get killed," "Fun!," and "seek truth."

Just as Monroe does, I reproduce these responses to paint the picture of the white feminist true crime moment that has marked a pivot in the genre primarily in the last decade. The tension between an interest in survival, kinship, entertainment, and vacation reflects the larger complexities within (mostly white) women's true crime spectatorship. That these urges coalesce in a genre about murder is disturbing and provocative. For Monroe and for myself, it generates questions about who is really getting murdered at high rates in this country and why there is a genre dedicated to the topic that dramatically recasts those bodies as affluent (blonde) white women. It is further perplexing given that the hegemonic, or "perfect,"¹⁹ victim of the "dead girl show" is also the predominant demographic of true crime media. The dead girl protagonist is tuning in to narratives of her own demise -- and calling it feminist.

"Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered"

¹⁸ Ibid, 7.

¹⁹ Bolin, *Dead Girls*, 23.

It's a rallying cry. It's an inside joke. It's a prayer. It's a lifeline. It's a promise of mutual aid. It's a commitment to co-survival. It's a dismissal of victim-blaming. It's a validation of feminine expressions and being. It's an extension of feminist kinship. It's a true crime adage. And, it's the catchphrase for the *My Favorite Murder* podcast and the name of the hosts' dual memoir.

The phrase "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered"²⁰ perfectly exemplifies the white feminist turn in true crime media. The slogan emphatically insists that listeners have the right to exist in the world in their chosen expression without facing the threat or reality of (homicidal) violence. As the idiom particularly validates a feminine-presenting person's right to "stay sexy" and not experience gendered violence, its use seems to pave over the most prevalent U.S. mechanisms of harm such as: the afterlives of slavery that include police brutality against Black people and other people of color; a capitalist system where people can die from financial barriers to insulin access; and, the generations upon generations of genocide, broken treaties, forced sterilization, pollution, extractivism, and continued settling of Native land and communities, to name a few. All this said, I believe the phrase "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" still holds some potential, particularly in its use as a sign-off, or goodbye, on the podcast. As a departing gesture, the phrase is an act of community as it wishes thriving, unapologetic self-expression, bodily autonomy, and safety upon other (namely feminine) true crime fans. As a microcosm of the larger feminist tensions within true crime storytelling and community, I argue that

²⁰ Kilgariff and Hardstark, *My Favorite Murder* (podcast).

reimagining the potential of “Stay Sexy and Don’t Get Murdered,” rather than discarding it entirely, opens up possibilities for intersectional praxis within the genre.

The white feminist bias of *My Favorite Murder* appears in Karen and Georgia’s dual memoir, *Stay Sexy & Don’t Get Murdered*.²¹ In a chapter titled, “Georgia’s Take on Red Flags and Riot Grrrl Courage,” Georgia writes about her own near-murder experience and how she summoned the strength to escape it by drawing on the empowering lyrics of Riot Grrrl music. Georgia explains how her ability to recognize a dangerous situation and fight for herself was hampered by the gendered, social concept of politeness. Polite, eager to placate, gentle, pacified, smiling -- it can be life-threatening for women and feminine-presenting folks to both be and not be these things. Georgia’s story appears within the larger section (and podcast catchphrase): “Fuck Politeness.” Georgia defines this phrase early on, writing: “Fuck the way we were socialized. Fuck the expectation that we always put other people’s needs first. And, while we’re at it, fuck the patriarchy!”²² Missing from Georgia’s feminist interrogation is an understanding of how the very “politeness” that she critiques is predicated on white supremacist constructions of gender and conditioned by the racialization of “Others.” In Georgia’s story, the narrative slippage between true crime stories, personal vulnerability, survival advice, and white feminist political critique help illustrate the signature of *My Favorite Murder* and the white feminist true crime niche.

²¹ Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. *Stay Sexy & Don't Get Murdered : The Definitive How-To Guide*. (New York, NY: Forge Book Published by Tom Doherty Associates, 2019).

²² Ibid, 29.

In addition to unwittingly promoting racializing logic, white feminist true crime has become heavily invested in personal protection and state punishment as a response to interpersonal violence. In true crime narratives, the prison becomes a far away, abstract location to house all evil. Police officers become figures of savior. Many true crime stories feature descriptions of the detectives and officers whose careers revolve around identifying murderers. When a murderer gets sentenced to life in prison or even the death penalty, self-identified feminist narrators rejoice. In this way, true crime narrators tend to align with carceral feminism -- a politics that expropriates feminist critique to validate carceral logic, punishment, incarceration, and the Prison Industrial Complex. Carceral feminism in true crime is evidence of the positionality of most true crime narrators: people whose lives, families, and communities have not been directly harmed by the Prison Industrial Complex. For many feminist reformists who remain skeptical of abolition, the most common misgiving arrives in question: *How do we handle all the murderers and rapists? What about the serial killers?* This anxiety is in part a product of proximity to criminality; many privileged white women believe that they are more likely to face interpersonal violence than to confront the true conditions of prisons. That said, the other problem lies in an inability to envision justice for gendered violence outside of state systems. Here, I turn to intersectional feminist critique, transformative justice models, and abolition theory -- pioneered by activists such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Dean Spade, Ejeris Dixon, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samariasinha -- that deconstruct the myth of the prison as a curative, rehabilitative site of protection. The

project of this thesis is to intervene in the white, carceral feminist hegemony in true crime media and insist instead on intersectional feminist true crime storytelling that transforms notions of death care, communal grief, vulnerability, memory, kinship, activism, and justice. As I critique the white feminist bias of true crime and trouble its representation of death, I also consider what true crime storytelling (or world-remembering) and community potentially offer intersectional feminism.

My thesis is guided, inspired, and instructed by intersectional feminist theory, particularly theory authored by women and trans scholars of color. Following Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's term and definition, I understand intersectionality as a call to understand material oppression, structures of power, and discursive violences as co-constructed across registers of difference.²³ Intersectional analysis requires the scholar to recognize that sites of violence are overlapping and colluding. Intersectional feminism apprehends the personal as political, recognizing that bodily and lived experiences give insight into the functions of settler colonial racial capitalism. In the position of "knowledge-producer" in this paper, I also turn to the framework of "situated knowledges" developed by Donna Haraway which lays out an intersectional feminist imperative to create scholarship outside of the binary of objectivism and relativism.²⁴ Haraway's scholarship guides me to attempt to recognize how my own biases, failures, and privileges inflect my analysis. Following the lead of these scholars and others, my critique of the white

²³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299. (accessed April 16, 2020.)

²⁴ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99. (accessed March 27, 2020).

feminist spectacularization of death is grounded in intersectional feminist analysis. Because one truth is clear: the “dead girl show” does not interrogate settler colonialism, violence against Indigenous women, anti-Blackness, the afterlives of slavery, transphobia and transmisogyny, environmental degradation, police violence, forms of “slow death,”²⁵ homicidal capitalism, or the Prison Industrial Complex. My thesis takes up the question: how does intersectional feminist critique problematize white feminist true crime? And, how can the act of true crime storytelling be reimagined?

True Crime is Sensational

Recuperating true crime requires understanding what it offers to feminist politics in the first place. In Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life*, she argues that feminist politics derive from the sensational, titling a chapter “Feminism is Sensational.”²⁶ In the chapter, Ahmed refers to experiences of sensations that provoke, that stick in the body or the mind, that move the faculties and stir the field of perception. Feminism comes into focus through the processes of sensing. Ahmed writes, “feminism can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is *not at ease in a world*” (emphasis mine).²⁷ Further, Ahmed contends that sensing the unjust or violent can often create the greatest impression, thus becoming a crucial pathway for feminist consciousness. Ahmed’s theory brings into relief the feminist position of true crime which arises from a survival interest in the way that patriarchal violence unfolds and

²⁵ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

²⁷ Ibid, 22.

breaks across feminine bodies. True crime is sensational because gendered violence is sensational.

True crime registers on a bodily level in the form of a corpse, the experience of grief at loss, and/or the anxiety of facing similar ends. True crime is a feeling, like being a woman (especially a trans woman) facing a dark walk home alone. True crime, like feminism, is sensational because it deals with spectacular harm and because it is sensed, understood physiologically before cognitively. Whereas people socialized as women are constantly taught to ignore their intuition about danger, white feminist true crime validates the instinctual insight of the body, the position of the woman or feminine-presenting person, and the real violence that occurs against some of us. Recognizing the ways in which true crime is *felt* and *sensed* also begins to reveal the connection feminists have to the dead, those who have not survived the violence we fear. Grief is sensational, and feminist grief allows organizing to access deeper levels of empathy and reservoirs of emotion that can, in turn, be directed towards justice. Thus, true crime highlights the need for feminist collective mourning, or world-remembering, on the path to creating a safer tomorrow.

Feminist World-Remembering Through Storytelling

As Walidah Imarisha puts it in the introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, "all organizing is science fiction."²⁸ Framing feminist politics as an exercise in speculative fiction brings into relief how intersectional, liberatory politics

²⁸ Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, eds., *Octavia's Brood* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 3.

necessarily involve imagining a world unlike the present. Speculative fiction, or feminist world-building, provides a lesson in stretching the feminist imagination outside of the disciplinary regimes we live under. In this thesis, however, I put forward a distinct and complementary counterpart to world-building that I have come to by way of true crime storytelling: feminist world-remembering. The modes of world-building and world-remembering both utilize creative storytelling towards political ends but do so by employing different strategies for activating listeners.

I offer world-remembering in this thesis, as opposed to world-building, as a form of critical mourning and an intervention into the politics of grief. Discourses of disposability mark some bodies for demise, some deaths ungrievable, and some violences illegible. In response, intersectional feminism must be concerned with how to recognize all bodies and lives as indispensable, all deaths as worthy of mourning, and all violences as unacceptable. World-remembering intervenes through storytelling to guide collective outrage, mourning, and justice. World-remembering, as the term suggests, calls on feminists to address and begin to account for the lives, ecosystems, languages, aspirations, and traditions that have been lost. The way in which feminists care for, remember, and discuss the dead has great political stakes. Thus, world-remembering reflects my belief that storytelling about violence can be just as storytelling about radical futures and utopian possibilities.

Just as the science fiction genre contains a mixed bag of intersectional masterpieces and problematic narratives, true crime media also yields a spectrum of cultural productions from revolutionary to problematic. Hence, the ultimate

potential of true crime storytelling is not found in existing true crime cultural productions but instead in the type of political work necessary to true crime storytelling. True crime storytelling serves as a site of witnessing, remembering, mourning, feeling outrage, building kinship, and seeking justice. For many true crime fans, particularly women and non-cismen, the storytelling is experienced on a gut level, intimately connected to lived experience, sensational.

The act of world-remembering through creative storytelling is an act of *re-membering* events, desires, and losses. Thus, true crime storytelling, as a creative endeavor of the imagination, must acknowledge that there is no one truth. Indeed, in the *The Color of Crime*, Katheryn Russell-Brown writes that

When it comes to historical memory, however, the truth of the matter is often fleeting, distorted, and incomplete. As it turns out, to tell the truth about the past is not so easy a task. Our collective memories are clouded in myths, in silences, and with a stubborn insistence to put on a happy face.²⁹

Re-membering worlds through the creation of narratives and remembering worlds through memories are both provocatively impossible tasks, but what remains after that acknowledgement is the generative pull of feminist imagination. True crime storytelling isn't about capturing one truth, *per se*, but more about creating a narrative through which to mourn and spark action towards justice.

World-remembering is less about facts and more about grief, less about objectivity and more about imagination, less an act of epistemic accuracy and more an act of feminist responsibility. World-remembering enacts a feminist wake space.

²⁹ Katheryn Russell-Brown, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Macroaggressions*, Second ed. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008), 1.

In **Chapter I**, “Black Deaths Matter,” I engage a variety of Black feminist scholarship which addresses the representation of anti-Black terror including work by Andrea Ritchie, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Robin Bernstein, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe. Considering Andrea Ritchie’s work in *Invisible No More* as well as Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors’ “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) activist framework reveals how true crime must take up state violence and racialized criminalization as sites of violence. My first chapter both deconstructs the current scope of true crime by problematizing representation and then makes the reconstructive gesture towards a true crime feminist politics that considers state violence within its purview. This chapter looks specifically at state violence that comes from the intersection of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and toxic masculinity. Andrea Ritchie’s part-theory, part-research account, in *Invisible No More*, intervenes in the one-dimensional visibilization of Black men victims of police brutality and the similarly one-dimensional focus on interpersonal (non-state affiliated) violence against all women. In both of these justice projects, the violence that Black women and women of color face, that largely occurs during police encounters, is ignored, which enacts a violence of its own. *Invisible No More* troubles the hegemonic true crime narrative of white serial killer and white blonde victim. My reconstructive provocation towards an intersectional feminist true crime follows the BLM activist model: being a voice for the victim and bringing attention to the violence in the service of generating rage and action against it. Thus, I argue that

there is justice work inherent in bearing witness to, sharing, and honoring the stories of victims. As Andrea Ritchie's book title suggests, the invisibilization of state violence against people of color (*primarily* Black Americans) is a violence unto itself that the true crime genre is culpable of perpetrating. I later engage the works of Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe to problematize mainstream methods of representation in the case of Black death which tend toward spectacular narratives that abstract Black being and obscure the mechanism of anti-Blackness. I end the chapter by exploring Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* as an existing example of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling. Therefore, the first chapter explores Black feminist approaches to attending to Black death and how they provoke change in current true crime storytelling practices.

In the body of **Chapter II**, or "Mourning the Unspectacular," I critically expand the spatial and temporal scales of violence in order to apprehend harm done to people, non-human animals, and ecosystems within the scope of true crime storytelling. I explore how environmentalists attempted to recruit the technology of the law, in the form of a "green criminology" framework, to address environmental degradation in the 1990s. As "green criminology" and true crime overlap, so does their attendant feminist critique. Thus, I look beyond legal frames as I argue that an intersectional feminist true crime *must* encompass the destruction of ecosystems, species, bodies, and land over time through settler colonialism, slavery, extractivism, globalization, and anthropogenic climate change. The primary text I consider is Rob

Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon argues for four major interventions: (1) a reconceptualization of the scales of violence to include non-human victims and slower-paced destruction; (2) the use of the term "slow violence" as a framework to acknowledge said scales; (3) a critique the hegemony of spectacle in the contemporary human attention span and news media cycle; and, (4) the formulation of the "writer-activist" whose liberatory potential is located in storytelling. Reading his work alongside my intellectual inquiries leads me to consider intergenerational environmental degradation as a form of violence that so-called true crime feminists must pay attention to alongside the spectacular nature of interpersonal violence or the politicized scandal of state violence. I also engage Lauren Berlant's notion of "slow death" to understand what a feminist recuperation of the dying body means for decolonial, anti-racist feminist critique. Specifically, I question what forms of violence we are meant to ignore and which we are meant to find appalling -- "we" being those influenced by the rhetoric of structural violence. Considering how poor, diabetic Americans dying from an inaccess to insulin are mourned differently from the victim of a serial killer reveals Berlant's concept in practice. This productive comparison demonstrates how structural violence and slow death work to demobilize critical grief and justice work on multiple levels. By thinking through asymmetrical life chances, disposability, and slow death, I shed light on how true crime ignores the stories of those *already* marked for death. Finally, I turn to the practice of Rob Nixon's "writer-activist" to outline a source of (feminist) action against slow violence and slow death that is akin to the

existing structure and work of true crime -- storytelling for the purpose of bearing witness and generating rage towards the injustice. Exploring Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry and critical mourning allows me to think through true crime storytelling in the face of illegible violence. My reconstructive move then is to turn to storytelling, critical environmental justice, and transformative justice as feminist pathways for addressing different scales of violence through true crime.

Chapter III, "The State is a Serial Killer," critiques the valorization of the Prison Industrial Complex and carceral feminist logic present in true crime communities. The chapter uses feminist, abolitionist theory to apprehend the prison as another site of violence, rather than one of healing or justice. As I deconstruct current avenues of justice in true crime communities, I also think through the generative pathways of a true crime feminism that engages restorative and transformative justice practices. I reference Dean Spade's introduction to *Normal Life* where he illuminates the limits of a trans justice movement that ideologically invests in the criminal justice system. Spade asks readers to relocate the aspirational site of justice, moving away from U.S. structures and systems that have always been rooted in racialized subjection. Spade proposes a new trans justice that is focused on community solutions like restorative and transformative justice methods. I also engage Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?* to contextualize the violence of U.S. prisons and develop the true crime feminist case against the Prison Industrial Complex. Angela Davis is an excellent source for deconstructing carceral feminist ideologies.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* also allows me to denaturalize the connection between prisons and violence prevention. As I attempt to institute an abolitionist pivot in my chapter, I turn to Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. The book is focused on feminist healing and action against violence through transformative justice practiced by communities. Importantly, it attends to the survival need that animates most feminist true crime community-building but does so outside of the criminal justice system that only serves to harm poor communities and communities of color.

In creating this thesis, I attempt to both provide an engagement with feminist scholarship to think through true crime storytelling on an academic level, and also to practice the framework I preach by exploring true crime storytelling myself. Interspersed between my chapters are short vignettes of real cases. In these vignettes, I present true crime writing about stories of violence that would not typically be considered true crime. Instead, the places these stories bump uncomfortably up against the hegemonic true crime narrative reveal the biases at play in the genre. The ways in which they stretch the genre of true crime are directly addressed in the chapter that follow them with intersectional feminist analysis. Included are the cases of Mya Hall, the Elwha River, and the Brothers of Attica. Together, these stories push the bounds of true crime content in different ways, complementing my theoretical chapters.

The vignettes represent an approximation of the feminist true crime storytelling praxis that I propose throughout the thesis, though they are by no means perfect. Indeed, all intersectional feminist work is, in some sense, aspirational, representing that which has yet to arrive. In each story, I experienced trial and error in capturing lost lives and ended worlds. I often felt underprepared to carry the burden of doing the stories justice. I even occasionally felt voyeuristic or that I was trespassing the boundaries of the victim's lives. Writing the vignettes was deeply humbling as it forced me to reckon with my own proposed strategies. In my efforts to narrativize these lives, I struggled to follow my own advice. What appears below are my best attempts. Even as the final versions might fail, the process did not. I felt a relation with the victims, lives, and communities affected by the violence I was writing about; I became entangled with the stories in a way I've never experienced before. I grieved for the worlds lost in the stories of violence.

Remembering



Mya Hall

(Image: Transgender Day of Remembrance Website)

Mya Hall chose her own first name. The “y” set her apart; it was an emphatic declaration of selfhood and evidence of her flair for the unique. Mya -- a Black trans woman -- was generous, sweet, and goofy. She relished in her femininity and was envied among her friends in the sex worker community of Old Goucher in Baltimore, MA.³⁰ Mya delighted in self-expression, often “dressing in skirts” and displaying the heart-shaped tears tattooed below her right eye.³¹ In these ways and other unknowable ones, Mya experimented with her appearance and defined herself anew in spite of the harsh background of housing insecurity, transphobia, anti-Blackness, and a precarious livelihood.

On March 30th, 2015, Mya Hall was murdered by the state. Having taken a wrong turn on the Fort Meade Parkway in Baltimore, Mya and her friend Brittany Fleming accidentally found themselves on the private property of a highly-secure National Security Agency (NSA) facility. Without any attempt to use non-lethal force, security agents immediately began shooting at the two unarmed women. Mya died at the scene and Brittany was seriously injured. Mya was only 27 years old at the time of her death.

The agents that murdered Mya faced no publicized repercussions. Although Mya’s case occurred just weeks before Freddie Gray’s highly-publicized death at the hands of police officers, her case did not rise to the same level of attention.³² Media

³⁰ Peter Hermann, “Baltimore’s transgender community mourns one of their own, slain by police,” *Washington Post*. Originally posted April 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/baltimores-transgender-community-mourns-one-of-their-own-slain-by-police/2015/04/03/2f657da4-d88f-11e4-8103-fa84725dbf9d_story.html?fbclid=IwAR2EqACx6qXgRmjXtW37VheOqp6U8FsoV8Y8uVfsjZKSKSpq91f4oSmW58A (accessed December 26, 2019).

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² “#SayHerName Brief,” AAPF. <http://aapf.org/sayhernamereport>. (accessed December 7, 2019).

silence about Mya's death invisibilized her life, the grieving community she left behind, and the state violence she suffered. There was no nationwide #JusticeforMyaHall campaign and few news outlets reported on the circumstances of her death.

In the few articles written about Mya's death, she is continuously mischaracterized as a crossdresser and referred to by her deadname and "he/him" pronouns. In describing the circumstances of Mya's death, the media coverage chose to focus on her criminal history rather than the fact that wrong turns into the NSA facility are commonplace and have never before resulted in the use of lethal force.³³ Mya's life mattered. Her pain, her struggle, and her hopes for the future all mattered. The circumstances of Mya's death mattered and should elicit feminist outrage, mourning, and justice-oriented action.

Mya's friends referred to themselves as "survivor sex workers": sex workers forced into the industry for lack of other economic opportunity rather than purely by voluntary intent.³⁴ When asked about Mya's death by a reporter, her friends Mykel, Shannen, Buttacup, and Esha shared their grief while reminiscing about Mya's vibrant presence in life. They remember Mya as someone "who let others stay in her motel room when she had one."³⁵ Even in times of struggle, Mya built community. Mya made efforts to create a life that was not only livable but filled with kindness

³³ Ben Weathers, "NSA exit has history of wrong turns," *Capital Gazette*, March 31, 2015, <https://www.capitalgazette.com/ph-ac-cn-fort-meade-folo-0401-20150331-story.html> (accessed December 26, 2019).

³⁴ Hermann, "Baltimore's transgender community mourns one of their own, slain by police," April 3, 2015.

³⁵ Ibid.

and optimism. She was generous with the good things in her life. According to Mya's friend and transgender advocate Bryanna Jenkins, "she just wanted to have a job, a life, a home. Just the simple things."³⁶

I found it hard to get to know the person Mya was in life from what's been written about her online. She clearly had a positive impact on those around her in her Old Goucher community, but I wonder what Mya's life was like before. What love and struggle brought Mya to Old Goucher? On Charles Street, Mykel, Shannen, Buttacup, and Esha have been forced to grieve alone, alienated from activism and other support. Mya's life deserves to be mourned just as her death deserves outrage. Mya's life -- like all life -- was precious and her death represents a profound loss. May she rest in power as we take up the fight for justice on her behalf and continue to say her (chosen) name: Mya with a "y."

³⁶ Ibid.

Black Deaths Matter

Representational Failures and State Violence in True Crime Storytelling

“You’re a bright young man. You’d have
made a good lawyer. I’d have loved to
have you practice in front of me.
But you went another way, partner.”

***Judge Edward D. Cowart to
Ted Bundy during his 1979 trial***

"I just wish they had an opportunity to
really know who Trayvon was and to put
that in context with what their decision was."

***Tracy Martin, Trayvon Martin’s father
after Zimmerman’s acquittal***

On July 22nd, 2018, Black teen Nia Wilson died by stabbing in front of her sister Lahtifa (also stabbed) at a BART Station in Oakland.³⁷ Nia's³⁸ family immediately doubted that local police could effectively and adequately pursue the investigation; their suspicion reflects the estranged relationship between Oakland's Black residents and the Oakland Police Department, which has been under federal investigation for racial bias for over 15 years.³⁹ Nia's case must be contextualized by the anti-Black prejudice of the police unit responsible for her case as well as histories of slave patrols and anti-Black police brutality throughout the United States. When a young white man on parole, John Lee Cowell, was later apprehended by police and charged for Nia's murder, the story of Nia's death became one about national race relations, even when Cowell was not found to be an active white supremacist. Nia's death became narratively abstracted from her life by the moniker #NiaWilson and was not mentioned in mainstream true crime.

In cases of interpersonal violence, Black victimhood is frequently rendered invisible in contemporary news cycles. Nia's case reveals how the "dead girl show,"⁴⁰ or what scholar Sarah Stillman alternatively names the "Missing White Girl Syndrome,"⁴¹ is only animated by white femininity. Nia's case was unintelligible as an

³⁷ Doreen St. Félix, "The Very American Killing of Nia Wilson," *The New Yorker*. Condé Nast, Original publication July 31, 2018, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-very-American-killing-of-nia-wilson>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

³⁸ I follow the lead here of most true crime to refer to the victim on a first name basis. This works to create a kinship between listener and victim and affords Nia a bit more personhood.

³⁹ Eric Westervelt, "In Oakland, More Data Hasn't Meant Less Racial Disparity During Police Stops," NPR. Original publication August 8, 2018, <http://www.npr.org/2018/08/08/636319870/in-oakland-more-data-hasnt-meant-less-racial-disparity-during-police-stops>. (accessed April 15, 2020).

⁴⁰ Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York, NY: William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018).

⁴¹ Sarah Stillman, "'The Missing White Girl Syndrome': Disappeared Women and Media Activism," *Gender and Development* 15, no. 3 (2007): 491-502. www.jstor.org/stable/20461232.

archetypal case of interpersonal “stranger danger” to true crime media,⁴² mainstream news, and the state. Although Nia’s case perfectly reflected this common true crime narrative, the true crime community was notably silent on her story. The lack of typical, public true crime empathy for Nia was precipitated by the media narrative about Cowell as a mentally-ill young man in need of state assistance -- or, in other words, a victim himself. Nia’s death was politicized in the media through an abstracted story about race relations and her killer was turned into a character of sympathy, thwarting the typical roles of innocent victim and evil perpetrator found in true crime. Although the details of Nia’s case fit hegemonic true crime narratives of interpersonal violence and stranger violence perfectly, her Blackness did not match the presumed whiteness of the “dead girl show” victim. The media’s politicization of Nia’s case and the true crime genre’s relative silence on it reveals that the logic of true crime has great stakes in *whiteness* and notions of both racialized criminality and innocence. Politicized metanarratives of racist violence eclipsed the interpersonal violence of Nia’s death, making her murder illegible even to so-called “feminists” in true crime.

Two days before Nia was stabbed, true crime podcast host Tori Tefler wrote a piece for *Vulture* titled “Why is Ted Bundy Suddenly Everywhere?” which noted the proliferation of true crime media covering the infamous 1970s serial killer.⁴³ The

⁴² The fear of “stranger danger,” largely held by white women, is heavily promoted in true crime discourse. Yet, “stranger danger” -- or, interpersonal violence committed at the hands of an unfamiliar civilian -- is not the most common form of gendered violence.

⁴³ Tori Telfer, “Why Is Ted Bundy Suddenly Everywhere?,” *Vulture*. Original publication July 30, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2018/07/ted-bundy-is-suddenly-everywhere.html>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

article detailed Netflix's then-upcoming movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) starring Zac Efron, in addition to a slew of documentaries about Bundy, including *Theodore* directed by Celene Beth Calderon (the first woman to direct a film production on Bundy). True crime Facebook forums, group texts, and online message boards buzzed with discussion of the killer. Ted Bundy is a household name in the United States, unlike the names of the estimated 30 women he murdered.⁴⁴ He fits the *American Psycho* archetype: charming, successful, handsome, deadly. The seeming impossibility of Ted Bundy's guilt animates the true crime fascination with him. Just as the racialization of Black and Brown bodies has discursively marked those bodies as criminal, white bodies have been conversely constituted as innocent. It is specifically the *disbelief* that Bundy is the monster of the story that has propelled a national interest in him. In fact, one of the most widely read true crime narratives about Bundy, *The Stranger Beside Me*, was written by beloved true crime writer Ann Rule, who was a personal friend of Bundy during the investigation of the (then) unknown serial killer. In her narrative, as Bundy is eventually identified as the notorious killer, Rule details her own struggle to believe that her close friend was capable of the murders. The book documents Rule's (and the nation's) faith in Bundy as a law-abiding citizen, a do-gooder, and a friend. The unwillingness to believe that a charismatic and successful *white* man could be a danger reflects the racialized discourses of criminality and innocence that underlie coverage of Bundy's case. Even

⁴⁴ Ann Rule, *The Stranger Beside Me*. (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2009).

now, as true crime fans obsess over Bundy's case once again, an interrogation of whiteness and disbelief is still absent from the conversation.

When read together, Nia Wilson's murder and the portrayals of Ted Bundy point to the most obvious fault of contemporary true crime: a fundamental and *harmful* representational problem rooted in discursive processes of racialization. True crime allegedly takes up a diverse range of stories of violence; however, the cases that populate true crime media do not present the lived experiences of the most commonly-targeted and vulnerable victims. Instead, Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color writ large are rendered invisible in true crime media. Andrea Ritchie discusses the consequences of media invisibilization in her book *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. Ritchie exhaustively details how police violence is experienced by Black women and other women of color in cases that are not visible in social movements against police violence or feminist activism against gendered violence. Lost in these two campaigns is an understanding that Black women and women of color as a whole are at a particularly increased risk of experiencing violence that is at once both racialized and gendered. Nia's case, and the stories of the women in *Invisible No More*, point to the fact that a true crime feminism must necessarily be concerned with white supremacist terror that is perpetrated by individuals as well as the state. For implementation of this idea, I turn to the politics of Black Lives Matter, founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors, as a movement that seeks justice by bearing witness to, critically circulating, and honoring the stories of Black

life and death. White feminist true crime storytelling shares an interest in retelling stories of gendered violence towards justice and healing. Thus, as a politically engaged, Black feminist movement that indicts the state as a perpetrator of violence, the Black Lives Matter model further scaffolds an intersectional true crime feminist praxis in which Black death is an important story of mourning, outrage, and action that cannot remain invisible. In this chapter, I lean on the contributions of Andrea Ritchie's project of illuminating white supremacist terror against Black women and other women of color alongside the activist framework of the Black Lives Matter movement in order to both confront representational bias in contemporary true crime media and problematize a true crime scope that does not include state violence within its purview. I then critically explore the historical trap in which Black suffering has become a hypervisible spectacle in unproductive and harmful ways, referencing Black feminist scholarship by Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe. Thus, to affirm that Black deaths matter is not to reinstate the imagery of the dying Black body but to consciously create space for grief and rage about Black personhood and death in the true crime community.

Untangling Political Agency from Politicization

When discussing the death of Black Americans, the news media often disregard the personal and communal trauma that results from stories of anti-Black violence. Instead, even in cases of interpersonal violence, Black pain and death is often spun into larger, detached narratives about race in America. While this can be relevant and

important analysis, such critique can also pave over grief and mourning. To describe this effect, I posit that political resistance and politicization are distinct phenomena. Political agency describes voting, protesting, civil disobedience, daily resistance, and other political behavior -- an active and agential form of political engagement that engages personhood and autonomy. Politicization, however, is not a synonym for mobilization nor for agency. It is a process that happens to someone, as objectification does. For example, in the same way that breasts are objectified in the media, uterus are *politicized* in policy and legislation. Politicization is a violently reductionist action, particularly in cases of murder or trauma.

To say that Nia Wilson's death was politicized is to point to the detrimental consequences of understanding her death only in the context of a metanarrative about race relations in the United States. My intervention is to hold two truths together in a true crime feminist analysis of Nia's story: (1) Nia's killer was motivated by anti-Blackness⁴⁵ and young Black women are particularly vulnerable to violent expressions of white supremacist, toxic masculinity in the United States, and (2) Nia's death was experienced on a personal level, the same as other victims of homicide. The feminist claim that the personal is political does not erase or invalidate the fact that the political is also personal. My formulation and critique of politicization in Nia's case is reflected in Leigh Raiford's "Nia in Two Acts" article for *The New Inquiry* when she writes that "identifying [Nia's] murderer as a white supremacist lends her death a visibility that is also an erasure of her life."⁴⁶ Further,

⁴⁵ Leigh Raiford, "Nia in Two Acts," *The New Inquiry*. Original publication July 26, 2019. <https://thenewinquiry.com/nia-in-two-acts/>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Raiford distinguishes “between a spectacularly knowable white supremacy and the quotidianness of antiblackness” and argues that, since Cowell was not found to be an active white supremacist, Nia’s death is best described as a result of the conditions of white supremacy rather than at the hands of a white supremacist.⁴⁷ Untangling political agency from politicization in the media narrativization of Black death allows the recuperation of life and agency. In turn, the space for grief and true crime legibility become possible without the sacrifice of a political critique that grants feminists a better understanding of violence.

The harm inflicted by politicization is abundantly clear in the case of the 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina perpetrated by Dylann Roof. Roof murdered nine Black church members during a prayer session led by Pastor Pinckney.⁴⁸ Of those killed were the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, the Reverend Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor, the Reverend Daniel Simmons, and Myra Thompson.⁴⁹ The names of these community members are difficult to find -- much harder to find, in fact, than an analysis of Roof’s white supremacist memorabilia or his manifesto. *How quickly can you conjure an image of Dylann Roof in your head? How quickly can picture just one of the nine faces of the*

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Nick Corasaniti, Richard Pérez-Peña and Lizette Alvarez. “Church Massacre Suspect Held as Charleston Grieves,” *The New York Times*. Original publication June 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting.html?module=inline>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

⁴⁹ “The Victims: 9 Were Slain At Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church,” *NPR*. Original publication June 18, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/18/415539516/the-victims-9-were-slain-at-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

Black churchgoers he killed? Although it is impossible to discuss the Charleston shooting without implicating white supremacy, I am critical of the way in which narratively centering white supremacy often sacrifices an acknowledgement of the lives and loss of Clementa, Cynthia, Sharonda, Tywanza, Ethel, Susie, Depayne, Daniel, and Myra. A second violence is perpetrated through the media's invisibilization of the victims' lives in favor of a fascination with Roof's hate.

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah discusses this secondary violence in her renowned 2017 article "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof" featured in *GQ*.⁵⁰ Although Ghansah spends most of the piece detailing Roof's journey to the deadly expression of white supremacy at Mother Emanuel in June 2015, near the end she transitions to a meditation on Black resilience, writing:

I thought I needed stories of vengeance and street justice, but I was wrong. I didn't need them for what they told me about Roof. I needed them for what they said about us [the Black American community]. That in our rejection of that kind of hatred, we reveal how we are not battling our own obsolescence. How we resist. How we rise.⁵¹

Here, Ghansah gets at the missing elements in reporting and media narratives about Dylann Roof: Black *being* in the face of ongoing, white supremacist violence. She finishes her article:

And so where on that beach he wrote down hatred in the sand, I carved into it all nine of their names: Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Cynthia Hurd, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lance, Daniel Simmons, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Susie Jackson.⁵²

⁵⁰ Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof," *GQ*. Condé Nast, Originally published September 27, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/dylann-roof-making-of-an-american-terrorist>. (accessed April 15, 2020).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

As a Black feminist response to the one-dimensional narrative populating mainstream media, Ghansah is literally rewriting who the story of Charleston is about. The mainstream narrative of the Charleston shooting demonstrates how the hypervisibility of anti-Black violence and forced abstraction of Black death can exist simultaneously alongside the silencing of Black grief. News coverage since the Charleston shooting tends to detail Dylann Roof's sentencing, his time in prison, and how his family is coping with his death sentence. Articles that center the family or community members of those who were murdered are harder to find. Mainstream U.S. media seems to only ask: *where is Dylann Roof now?*, not *where is the Mother Emanuel community now?*

"Black deaths matter" insists that Black loss should not be politicized into reduction, abstraction, and invisibility. Instead, Black death must be attended to in deeply respectful, multidimensional ways that affirm Black grief, resilience, healing, anger, and justice. The politics of bearing witness, feminist critique, and communal mourning all have their place in an intersectional true crime feminism; they must be understood as separate from a media gaze that reinstates the hegemony of the perpetrator's political narrative. True crime cannot be a platform for perpetrators. In a sense, white feminist true crime media has already begun employing this general change: true crime has a way of speaking to the pain of loss and honoring victims' lives that differs from the mainstream media approach. Yet this progress lacks an intersectional feminist approach, continuing to leave out the lives and deaths of people like Nia Wilson. Thus, when Black deaths matter in true crime, a space opens

up that is not politicized but consciously and thoughtfully politically engaged, centering the subjectivity and dimensionality of those whose deaths we grieve.

Making Anti-Black Violence Legible in True Crime

True crime covers cases of murder, near death, abductions, mass death, and more; the genre seems more concerned with the subject of violence than a legal framework of harm. “Crime” is an insufficient term to describe harm in the United States because the logic of slavery and its afterlives understand Black freedom (and embodiment) as criminal; this framework has underpinned the construction of the United States’ entire legal infrastructure, including the authorship of the Constitution. For this reason, legal frames and systems themselves perpetrate violence, and thus cannot be seen as capable of naming and classifying what American violence looks like. The failure of “crime” as a label to discuss anti-Black violence is exemplified in the pattern of anti-Black police brutality cases that are systematically legitimized by grand juries and judges. Police violence committed against Black Americans has its roots in the structures of U.S. slavery; most notably, Antebellum slave patrol units served as the basis for the modern law enforcement system in the States.⁵³ U.S. policing is, and has been, a cornerstone of codified American white supremacy, shoring up racialized constructions of criminalization and innocence. Thus, as a genre concerned with contemporary and historical manifestations of violence, true crime must take up the police, the state, and

⁵³ Larry H. Spruill, “Slave Patrols, ‘Packs of Negro Dogs’ and Policing Black Communities,” *Phylon* (1960-) 53, no. 1 (2016): 42-66. www.jstor.org/stable/phylon1960.53.1.42.

discourses of criminality as perpetrators of anti-Black violence. This paradigmatic shift opens the door to understanding how #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName⁵⁴ implicate true crime media in their call to action to center Black women, other women of color, and the Black community writ large in conversations about American violence.

In *Invisible No More*, Andrea Ritchie examines the intersection of gendered and racialized vulnerability in police encounters that has led to countless cases of violence against Black women and other women of color.⁵⁵ *Invisible No More* intervenes in what Ritchie considers to be a mainstream narrative that women only face interpersonal violence and only men experience police violence, insisting that we #SayHerName. Throughout the book, Ritchie

seeks to undo this erasure; to deepen, broaden, and provide context to the discussion of Black women's experiences of policing and criminalization; to expand the frame to bring the experiences of Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and AMEMSA women into view; and to illuminate the historic and present-day role of policing of gender and sexuality in the criminalization of communities of color.⁵⁶

Invisible No More speaks to the intersections of colonization, enslavement, imperialism, and war, in order to situate the threat of violence that Black women and other women of color face in police encounters. Ritchie's work offers true crime feminism four major insights: (1) the research and storytelling of *Invisible No More* provides a devastating portrait of the failure of mainstream media to identify the

⁵⁴ #SayHerName is another hashtag typically used to call attention to police violence perpetrated against Black women. It often accompanies #BlackLivesMatter.

⁵⁵ Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017).

⁵⁶ Ibid, 11.

lived experiences of gendered violence; (2) the book centers the stories of Black women and women of color in general, celebrating their lives and mourning their deaths; (3) the title reveals the depth of harm that representational erasure in the media can cause; and (4) *Invisible No More* highlights existing, silenced intersectional feminist resistance that is paving the way towards justice and healing. For the purposes of this chapter, the book asks true crime what happens to a white feminist notion of gendered violence when one recognizes the prolific cases of police violence against Black women and other women of color. *How does a true crime feminism reorient calls for justice when we recognize the state as a major perpetrator of violence that is at once gendered and racialized?*

An important element of this recalibration is the acknowledgement of how racialized notions of criminalization and innocence have conditioned hegemonic perceptions of violence and victimhood in the United States, and in the archetypal true crime narrative specifically. Robin Bernstein theorizes the construction of whiteness as racialized innocence in her book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*.⁵⁷ Bernstein explains the process by which whiteness and innocence get stitched together when routed through the performance of childhood:

Childhood innocence--itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness--secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. (New York: New York University Press, 2011.)

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

Bernstein is not only making the case that innocence is “raced white” but also that this innocence becomes a synonym for ignorance or “holy obliviousness,” which in turn allows it to continue to translate to social power. Whiteness is figured then as the hegemonic racial category that sustains much of its power from operating as “unmarked” and default. Thinking back to the “dead girl show,” Bernstein’s interventions reveal the role of race and discourses of innocence to construct the idealized victim as the young, white girl. In *Racial Innocence*, Bernstein renders whiteness visible and reveals its strategy of disguise: its discursive signification of innocence.

Whiteness and innocence are so fused that, in cases of white violence against Black people, the U.S. media tends to portray the white perpetrator as more human than the Black victims. The humanity discursively bestowed upon the white perpetrator takes the form of sympathetic characterizations that mourn the lost white future, the potential victimhood of the perpetrator, and the pain felt by the perpetrator’s family. These media strategies are apparent in the cases of Nia Wilson and the shooting at Mother Emanuel. John Lee Cowell (Nia’s killer) and Dylann Roof were both cast as victims in media narratives; their whiteness invited the white public to forgive, seek excuses for, and humanize their actions; the presumed innocence associated with their whiteness tempered their real guilt in the public imaginary. The same generosity was not afforded to the *true* victims, as is often the case when the victims are not white. (Think of the almost immediate, racist reaction of most news media to search for culpability in cases of police shootings of unarmed

Black Americans.) In this way, the media either ignores the dimensionality of Black being or attempts to diminish the tragedy of Black loss by justifying violence against Black people and communities.

Racially motivated victim blaming shares similarities with the ways in which women are time-and-again blamed for the sexual or physical violence they suffer. However, the *specific* racialization of criminality, stemming from slavery and discursive constructions of childhood innocence, brings a dimension that differs from gendered victim-blaming. This is important to understand when discussing gendered sexual violence faced by Black women, as Andrea Ritchie discusses. Racialized victim blaming also explains why Black grief can be invisibilized at the same time as Black death is hypervisibilized. Thus, intersectional feminist justice demands that the loss of Black lives is not forgotten, ignored, and paved over in favor of spectacularized images of Black trauma and media narratives of white violence.

Invisible No More does the work of rendering visible silenced stories of anti-Black violence without reinstating spectacular imagery of the dying Black body. Ritchie offers tribute to the women of color that do and don't survive police violence; she bears witness to this loss in a way that illuminates the path for justice and better-mobilized coalitions against police violence. Ritchie articulates her desire to not "simply catalogue police violence against Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color" but rather to "examine [this violence] from all angles, look where we haven't before, and mobilize what we learn to deepen our analyses".⁵⁹ As a result,

⁵⁹ Ritchie, *Invisible No More*, 233.

Invisible No More necessarily sheds light on Black feminist and feminist of color resistance to police violence. Ritchie avoids presenting an exploitative, one-sided account of Black suffering by also illustrating Black resilience, organizing, and community healing. One of the central arguments of *Invisible No More* is that silence can be a form of violence itself. Only when police violence against Black women and women of color is made visible can the ongoing conditions of anti-Black patriarchy be most effectively addressed in feminist activism.

Ritchie's project of sitting with police violence, not to catalogue it but to learn from it in order to prevent it, is similar to the current white feminist aims of true crime. Yet, *Invisible No More* lays out the systematic targeting of Black women and women of color by state agents in such a way that rightfully and crucially brings into question current true crime alignment with the police, where officers are narratively figured as a protective force rather than as perpetrators of violence. Black feminist scholarship, such as Ritchie's, generatively pushes the boundaries of true crime beyond narratives of interpersonal violence and the police officer as savior. The collaborative potential of Ritchie's project and feminist true crime storytelling lies in the overlapping practices of mourning death, critically interrogating the conditions of their passing, and translating storytelling into productive avenues of seeking justice. Both projects aim to "say her name."

Orthographies of Black Subjection: Troubling Empathy, Spectacle, and Representation

An affirmation that Black deaths matter *must* take into account that the dying, suffering, injured Black body has *always* been the subject of spectacle in the history of the United States. The hypervisibility of Black death, from the transatlantic slave trade to today, is precisely what Saidiya Hartman names “the spectacular character of black suffering”⁶⁰ and what Christina Sharpe discusses as “the orthography of the wake.”⁶¹ Together, the vital works of Hartman and Sharpe offer Black feminist critique to an uncritical call for a greater representation of anti-Black violence in true crime and beyond. Both scholars trouble white empathy and the proliferation of narratives of Black trauma. Hartman’s and Sharpe’s contributions provoke the questions: *Is Black care work in the face of violence commensurable with true crime storytelling work? Can true crime visiblize Black death without causing more harm?*

In her influential work *Scenes of Subjection*, Black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman critically considers how the anti-Black violence of slavery is re-membered through history in ways that continuously reproduce an image of the dead/dying Black body, relegate slavery to a fixed and concluded historical period, and rely on sensationalized forms of anti-Black violence and white empathy in order to animate history and inspire justice work. Hartman troubles hegemonic representations of slavery, interrogating the project of representation as a possible site of further harm itself. In the chapter “Innocent Amusements,” Hartman writes, “what concerns me

⁶⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶¹ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

here is the spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle.”⁶² Here, Hartman names the power of spectacle to condition the way in which anti-Black violence is publicly received and remembered. The repeated representation of Black suffering normalizes the abjected Black body to U.S. audiences and invites white spectatorship in the terrorization. Thus, as in the case of Nia Wilson, Black subjection becomes an abstracted and hypervisible character in the historical or news media narrative that further entrenches the presentation of the Black body as a site of violence.

Hartman further argues that dominant means of speaking, writing, remembering, recognizing, and representing anti-Black terror are deeply entangled with white pleasure. She focuses on the dual meaning of “enjoy” -- as to possess and to be amused by -- in order to consider the relationship between scenes of Black subjection and white spectatorship. In the same chapter, Hartman asks, “Can the moral embrace of pain extricate itself from pleasures borne by subjection? [...] Is the act of ‘witnessing’ a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment?”⁶³ Inherent to this question is Hartman’s problematization of (white) empathy in response to anti-Black terror; a white embrace of Black pain, even in the name of justice, cannot be separated from other white spectatorship of Black subjection throughout history and in the contemporary. Hartman argues that sensationalizing Black suffering in the name of empathy is a failing project that reproduces a violent position of witness and even elicits pleasure.

⁶² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

On its face, Hartman's critique of representation, spectacle, and empathy seem to be in great conflict with the true crime feminism I advocate for (which appears narratively invested in representing spectacular violence). Hartman's scholarly contributions seem incommensurable with the politics of bearing witness and visibilization -- crucial elements of Andrea Ritchie's work, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement. Yet, I contend that these scholars do not, in fact, present an intellectual binary. Instead, there is a space between invisibilization and hypervisibilization that allows feminists to attend to Black death respectfully, in the name of social justice. The space in between is the location of grief, care, rage, and healing.

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* considers how the afterlives of slavery and the legacies of the wake (in its many meanings) inform a quotidian and continual experience of anti-Black terror and Black resilience in the African diaspora. *In the Wake* is concerned with both Black death and Black being. Sharpe's first chapter takes "wake" to simultaneously reference the enduring climate of the transatlantic slave trade, the trail left behind a ship, the state of increased consciousness, and the sacred observance of someone's death. Sharpe develops a notion of wake work as "a theory and praxis of Black being in diaspora."⁶⁴ Sharpe's wake work encompasses care practices that attend to Black death and Black being within the pervasive "weather" of anti-Blackness.⁶⁵ In other words, understanding slavery as a condition of

⁶⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

the present challenges the temporality of mourning that locates trauma in a discrete past; this recognition changes practices of observing death.

Sharpe considers and explores care practices in the wake -- both in the observance of Black death and the confrontation of slavery's historical and contemporary lives. She asks, "how might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable?"⁶⁶ Here, Sharpe names the complexity of grief when Black death and Black life are not discrete statuses experienced separately. Thus, wake work is adjacent to mourning but more consciously interrogates the unending nature of Black subjection. Wake work is not simply the work of caring for the dead, because the discursive and material climate of the wake continuously marks Black bodies as always already dead or dying. As Sharpe writes:

I'm interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, and despite Black death.⁶⁷

For Sharpe, attending to Black death is necessary, but must be accompanied by a nuanced recognition that anti-Black terror is not a spectacular event but rather an ongoing condition of Black life. Thus, wake work requires the conscious observance of Black being, breath, resistance, and care that occurs *in spite of* the weather of anti-Blackness.

Both wake work and true crime storytelling practices share an interest in critically caring for the dead. Storytelling, in comparison to the static nature of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 20.

installations, museums, or monuments, is a living tribute. As a community practice that attends to death through shared grief and rage, true crime storytelling offers a provocative alternative to the mourning and memorialization of violence that Sharpe troubles. More, true crime storytelling acknowledges that terror is a quotidian experience, opposing common narratives within mainstream news media. As a community practice of caring for the dead, true crime storytelling understands the storyteller, in life, to be intimately and inextricably linked with the dead. I am not suggesting here that Sharpe's concept of wake work is currently practiced in the predominantly white spaces of true crime storytelling. In fact, such spaces still often rely on sensational violence to animate the genre. Rather, I am compelled by the idea that true crime might be a site of wake, in the meaning to observe death. I want to consider what "Black deaths matter" invites in the form of care work and how that might productively involve storytelling. If an intersectional feminist true crime is possible, how does it practice caring for the dead? When considering the specific context of anti-Blackness, Sharpe's notion of wake work requires feminists to trouble spatial and temporal understandings of Black life, terror, and death.

Together, Hartman and Sharpe approach the complexity of representing and mourning Black deaths. In the context of true crime, their scholarship points to the feminist ethics of re/presenting stories of Black trauma and death. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman argues that the hypervisibilization of anti-Black violence (as opposed to Ritchie's notion of invisibilization) can perform a violence itself. Thus, the feminist true crime project of representation must take up a critical circulation

of stories of anti-Black violence in order to unveil the perpetrator(s) and honor the victim(s) in the service of justice. Christina Sharpe's notion of wake work in *In the Wake* complicates feminist projects of memory, grief, rage, and justice in the face of Black death. I believe that the work of intersectional true crime feminism is in thoughtfully considering the -- at times seemingly conflicting -- contributions of Hartman, Sharpe, Ritchie, and Black Lives Matter. An intersectional feminist true crime must seek to reconcile these various perspectives as it attends to Black death in caring and respectful ways that move feminists closer to justice and healing. I next turn to the Black Lives Matter movement as a potential Black feminist model for this work.

Black Deaths Matter

The critical intervention I hope to make in this chapter, reflected in the title, is a fervent avowal that Black deaths matter and are intimately relevant to true crime storytelling. My phrasing is a clear evocation of the Black Lives Matter movement, towards which I do not gesture lightly. I believe that Black Lives Matter, as a political movement, offers an organizing strategy that further expands true crime's feminist potential through the act of storytelling and justice work. Black Lives Matter and white feminist true crime storytelling already share much in common: both utilize the principles of bearing witness, honoring the lives of those who have passed, and seeking justice to attend to death. To me, invoking "Black Lives Matter" is demanding that true crime media mourn Black death alongside white death.

Black Lives Matter, the justice movement, was founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who murdered Black teen Trayvon Martin in broad daylight one year earlier. Black Lives Matter is known primarily for its unwavering activism in the face of anti-Black police violence. It is an intersectional Black feminist movement that seeks justice both outside and within state structures. In her 2014 article for *The Feminist Wire*, Alicia Garza described the movement as:

an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.⁶⁸

Generally speaking, the Black Lives Matter model emphatically declares that Black lives matter in response to anti-Black violence perpetrated by civilians, police officers, and other state agents. Black Lives Matter is ultimately a project of visibilization. Most often, Black Lives Matter organizing includes bringing light to the details of how a Black person has been killed without cause, circulating images of the victim in life, repeating their name, and directing grief and rage to the criminal justice system. Inherent to the Black Lives Matter model is the project of storytelling as a means to inspire direct action.

Black Lives Matter's critical narrativization of Black life and anti-Black violence is exemplified through the case of Sandra Bland and the #SayHerName sub-campaign. In July 2015, Sandra Bland was pulled over by a police officer for

⁶⁸ Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza," *The Feminist Wire*. Originally published October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>. (accessed on April 15, 2020).

changing lanes without using her signal.⁶⁹ Her encounter with the officer was recorded on the officer's dashcam. The video depicts the police officer physically abusing Bland before eventually arresting her violently. Three days after her arrest and subsequent incarceration in a Texas jail, Bland was found dead in her cell; her death was soon ruled a suicide by officials. The circulation of the details of both Bland's life and death offered important ground for mobilizing against the suspicious circumstances of her death and in honor of her memory. By sharing her story (not to be confused with the haunting and sensational images of her dead body), Black Lives Matter transformed Bland's death from an invisibilized act of state violence to a national occasion for outrage and action, all under the galvanizing call to #SayHerName. The imperative to literally "say her name" is inherently aligned with the act of storytelling. To say Sandra Bland's name prevents her death from passing unacknowledged, unatoned for, and without rightful anger. In fact, saying her name implies a responsibility to grieve her death, honor her life, and seek justice on behalf of Bland as well as other Black women murdered or harmed by police. Consciously and thoughtfully sharing Sandra Bland's story preceded the political organizing and justice work.

Declaring that Black deaths matter does very similar work to saying that Black lives matter. However, by naming Black deaths, the feminist connection between the true crime project of mourning death and the Movement for Black Lives is brought into relief. Encapsulated in the "matter" of "Black deaths matter" is the way in which

⁶⁹ "#SayHerName Brief."

we hold, mourn, grieve, narrate, and act on behalf of Black lives that have ended unjustly. Black Lives Matter is a political movement that exists in part online — evidenced by the fact that “Black Lives Matter” is often written as “#BlackLivesMatter.” In this way, the “matter” of “Black deaths matter” is also manifested across geographies, borders, time, and bodies, creating a wake for the dead that is held digitally and in the shared consciousness of those who hear and repeat the stories of Black life and anti-Black violence. This communal wake effect is what white feminist true crime circles have also already begun to create. In a white feminist true crime wake space, the opportunity to retell, sit with, and grieve the life and death of a person is created alongside the deployment of a feminist analysis of the conditions of their death. True crime storytelling is already enacting a political wake space.

I assert in this chapter that Black deaths matter in order to elucidate that attending to Black death is a feminist act that falls, provocatively, under the existing description of true crime work. Here, I turn to the founding of Black Lives Matter as recounted in Patrisse Khan-Cullors’ memoir co-authored with Asha Bandele, *When They Call You A Terrorist*.⁷⁰ As Khan-Cullors tells it, the phrase and resulting movement was born out of a Facebook post authored by Alicia Garza when she wrote:

Btw stop saying that we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will NEVER give up on us. NEVER.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist : A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2018).

⁷¹ Ibid, 180.

Out of this post, and specifically Khan-Cullors concise response to it, came “#BlackLivesMatter.” I am moved by this origin story where women sharing outrage, pain, and disgust in the face of violence generated a communal feminist response in the pursuit of justice. This political energy, cultivated through sharing in feminist spaces, is similar to the way in which true crime stories told by women have often led to the excavation of cold cases. The feminist potential in an ideological collaboration between true crime storytelling and the project of Black Lives Matter generates a compelling call to action. Looking at the two politics together, and in their existing overlap, creates the possibility for envisioning an intersectional feminist true crime praxis.

What Work Does “Black Deaths Matter” Do?: Reading Citizen as True Crime

True crime storytelling is the act of sharing a story of injustice; aspirationally, it makes any particular death an issue of community outrage and grief as well as an occasion to organize for justice. Yet, as I’ve argued, the genre currently disproportionately highlights white, cis, women victims, rarely discussing the death of Black men, women, and gender non-conforming folks. To say that Black deaths matter is to implicate true crime media in a critique of white silence and a call to action around the ongoing conditions of anti-Black terror, violence, and death that track through slavery and lynching. As true crime has become a genre increasingly authored, narrated, and listened-to by women, it has begun interrogating toxic masculinity in its storytelling, even offering avenues for action as it generates rage

against the unlivable conditions of patriarchy. However, true crime remains predominantly white in audience and authorship; the genre has yet to properly confront the experiences of interpersonal violence in the U.S. that stem from white supremacy, anti-Blackness, xenophobia, and transmisogyny.

By engaging Black feminist scholarship (namely the interventions of Andrea Ritchie, Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe) to analyze the cultural production and community-making of true crime, an intersectional feminist true crime emerges that can offer wake work in the face of Black death and anti-Black violence *without* reproducing the exhibition of Black pain in spectacularized form. Thus, affirming “Black deaths matter” simultaneously names a pressing issue of representation in true crime, calls on true crime consumers to extend conceptualizations of perpetrator beyond the “serial killer” or civilian, and illuminates a shared praxis between the Black feminist politics of #BlackLivesMatter and the practice of true crime storytelling.

On this note, I return to both Nia Wilson’s story and Leigh Raiford’s telling of it. In a section titled “#SayHerName,” Raiford describes Nia in life, noting that “Nia Wilson’s life was one of beauty and experimentation, one held in community, and sonorous with love. Sometimes in the telling, we forget that joy and trauma can and do live in the same place.”⁷² From the paradoxical simultaneity of life and death, of political and personal, and of invisible and hypervisible emerges the storytelling, wake space, and kinship of true crime feminism. Raiford animates Nia’s memory

⁷² Raiford, “Nia in Two Acts.”

while avoiding the reductionist “#NiaWilson” move, insisting that “we have to take seriously how [Nia] made herself anew with each selfie, with each filter applied, with each deep knee pose, with each angle hit and slice of light found.”⁷³ Raiford’s tribute to Nia resonates with me as an approximation of a feminist true crime storytelling in which Black deaths matter. The praxis element is located in how Raiford’s words call feminists to action in the face of anti-Blackness and toxic masculinity and in memory of Nia, herself.

I also turn to Claudia Rankine’s 2014 American lyric *Citizen* as an example of what Black feminist true crime storytelling might look like.⁷⁴ Rankine’s critically-acclaimed work explores the lived experiences within and against the pervasive “weather”⁷⁵ of anti-Blackness. In my reading, *Citizen* performs a sort of praxis to Hartman’s call to attend to quotidian and mundane experiences of anti-Black terror instead of reproducing a traumatized, dying Black body. Rankine frames the everyday lived experiences of anti-Blackness to make them visible and dramatically horrifying, in the most grave meaning of the word. *Citizen* is primarily comprised of interpersonal, quotidian stories ranging from conversations with white coworkers, prejudice in the grocery store checkout line, and the racial anxieties that shape public transport experiences; all of the stories are of seemingly unspectacular scenes of subjection experienced by Black narrators that may or may not be Rankine. By exhuming the depth of violence inherent in these encounters, Rankine reveals the terror of anti-Blackness as well as its permeating nature. Thus, *Citizen* is an act of

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.

feminist storytelling about violence, sharing format with feminist true crime's aspiration to generate outrage and inspire action.

One of the most compelling instances of Rankine's narrative style occurs at the outset of the lyric when Rankine narrates a memory of anti-Black racism from a childhood classmate. The fungible white girl character, "Mary? Catherine?" and "Mary Catherine," tells the narrator that "you smell good and have features more like a white person."⁷⁶ The narrator immediately understands that "Mary Catherine" intends the comment as a compliment. The very next page features a 2008 image by Michael David Murphy titled "Jim Crow Rd.," which presents a seemingly innocuous shot of a suburban street. Upon closer inspection, the American Dream, captured in the big white houses, neat driveways, paved road, and blue sky, is framed by the street name: "Jim Crow Rd." Given the narrator's previous attention to the anti-Blackness circulating in her conversation with "Mary Catherine" and in the conditions of her Catholic school, the terrors invoked by the street name in the domestic landscape of suburban America leap out of the page and even elicit a visceral reaction. All of the violence contained in the reference to Jim Crow anti-Blackness surfaces; the mundane nature of the scene is not discredited but itself called into being as a site of violence. In this way, and in others throughout the book, Rankine's anecdotes reveal the everyday nature of anti-Blackness and how it both constructs and manifests in the Black body. Further, Rankine masterfully renders the weather of anti-Blackness to be a spectacularly terrifying site of violence.

⁷⁶ Rankine, *Citizen*, 5.

Following the poetic logic of the book and the Black feminist frameworks of Hartman and Sharpe that I've explored earlier in the chapter, *Citizen* emerges as a possible example of true crime storytelling that consciously avoids reinstating the spectacularization of Black suffering. Instead, the accounts of anti-Blackness within *Citizen* allow for Black resilience at the same time that the Black body encounters violence and becomes "injured".⁷⁷ For Rankine, "injured" takes on a spectrum of meaning from physical pain to emotional turbulence to harm which cannot be named. Importantly, Rankine's project is grounded in the personal sharing of anecdotes, fragments, and stories that give shape to anti-Blackness and Black resilience.

I am interested in how the conversation around and within true crime would change if *Citizen* were recognized as a work of true crime. Its inclusion necessarily reframes the meanings of "victim," "perpetrator," and "violence" (or "injury") while troubling the hegemonic true crime narrative of spectacular interpersonal violence. When understood as a work of true crime, *Citizen* pushes the existing boundaries of the genre along the Black feminist theoretical lines I have discussed. In its essence, *Citizen* is an act of storytelling about U.S. violence. Rankine sensitively negotiates the portrayal of Black suffering to unmask the workings of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and racist microaggressions. *Citizen* practices an intersectional feminist true crime storytelling by attending to Black subjection in its unspectacular iterations. The lyric centers personal experience through storytelling and highlights

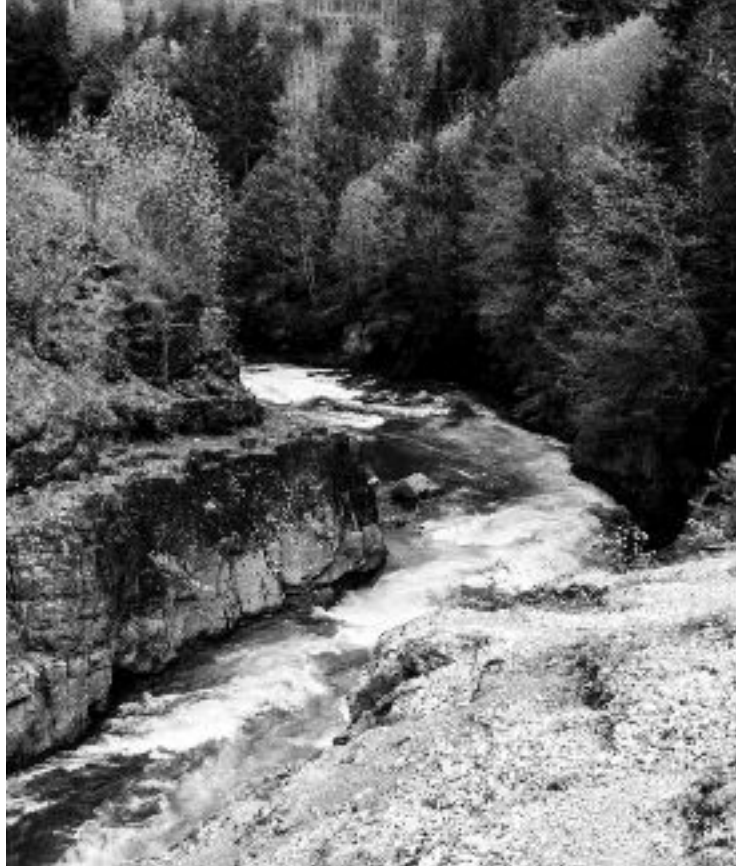
⁷⁷ Ibid, 145.

lives lived in resistance to and within (at times unsurvivable) environments such as anti-Blackness.

As a provocation to imagine intersectional feminist true crime praxis, Rankine's *Citizen* demonstrates the complicated terrain of narrativizing trauma, death, subjection, and violence. The tangled business of representing Black death in the United States is informed by the continuing histories of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation and chattel slavery, lynching, police brutality, minstrel shows, and the Prison Industrial Complex. Through these registers, Black death has been a contested site of invisibility and hypervisibility, both of which create their own environment of anti-Blackness especially through the trap of white apathy or white enjoyment. If true crime hopes to be a space for anti-racist, intersectional feminist community, it must first address its hand in reproducing biased accounts of Black death -- either in the form of spectacular narrative or absent narrative.

Commemorating Nia's selfie angles is an act of true crime storytelling and of feminism. Reflecting on Black resiliency and being in the face of the Mother Emanuel shooting is an act of true crime and of feminism. And, recognizing the violent anti-Blackness of the American mundane through Rankine's narratives in *Citizen* is an act of true crime and of feminism. Together with the work of Black Lives Matter, these moments gesture at a Black feminist approach to the work of true crime storytelling. In the pursuit of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling, so-called true crime feminists must emphatically insist through words and actions that Black deaths matter.

Remembering



the Elwha River

(Image: *The Planet Magazine*)

Today, on the banks of the Elwha River, a slug slowly glides across a vibrant patch of soft green moss. Forest mice make homes out of the dry, driftwood logs that perch themselves along the rushing river. Giant, jewel-toned dungeness crabs inch across the sand of the nearshore where the River meets the Strait. American dippers hatch more generations than ever before, as the aquatic songbirds feast on salmon in the River. Roosevelt elk frequent former lake beds, dining on the newly revived stretches of greenery. Otters explore reaches of the River that they have never seen before, tracing the movement of salmon populations downstream. Spotted sandpipers bounce along former lake beds. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe rejoices in the revitalized life of the River, stepping into a greater role in decision-making about the ecosystem's future. And, Elwha chinook salmon, the River's giants, cruise past the former dam sites that once disrupted their native runs.⁷⁸

The interspecies flourishing described above is the long-awaited moment of justice following generations of violence, languishing, and destruction caused by two state dams that harmed the Elwha River and its inhabitants for a century. The Elwha River Dam and the Glines Canyon Dam were commissioned and built by the United States government in 1910 and 1925, respectively.⁷⁹ Upon construction of the dams, the Lower Elwha Klallam were prevented from fishing, a right supposedly guaranteed by the Treaty of Point No Point.⁸⁰ By 1992, the cost of dam repairs and the risk to

⁷⁸ Lynda V. Mapes, "Elwha: Roaring Back to Life," *The Seattle Times*. The Seattle Times Company, Original publication February 13 2016, <https://projects.seattletimes.com/2016/elwha/>. (accessed on April 17, 2020).

⁷⁹ "Elwha Klallam Historical Timeline," *Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe*. Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, <https://www.elwha.org/culture-history/elwha-klallam-historical-timeline/>. (accessed on April 17, 2020).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

salmon populations caused the federal government to pass the “Elwha River Ecosystem and Fisheries Restoration Act” which was signed into law by President Bush.⁸¹ Over 20 years later, both the Elwha and Glines Canyon Dams have finally been removed, constituting the largest dam removal projects in United States history.⁸²

The laundry list of harm caused by the settler colonial dam projects extends across time, scales, and species. The river is a crucial space of fishing, feeding, migration, and social gatherings for many species. A stretch of the riverbank is the sacred site of the Elwha Klallam’s origin story. According to young tribal member, Cameron Macias, who carries out River restoration work,

on that lakebed is a creation site, an area where the Klallam people believe that the creator made them from stone and that’s where the whole tribe began. When I came here as a little kid, [...] I had no idea that something so culturally important, so significant and sacred to the tribe, was buried under the lake.⁸³

The dams stood as a marker of genocide, settlement, broken treaties, stolen sacred spaces, extinction of animal species, and a threat to the River itself. These violences signal the ending of multiple worlds, but most generally the thriving, dynamic world of the River ecosystem. As Chinook salmon populations dwindled and the River ecosystem slowly died, the Lower Elwha Klallam bore witness, mourned, and sought justice.

⁸¹ “History of the Elwha,” *National Parks Service*. U.S. Department of the Interior, Original publication October 2 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/olym/learn/nature/history-of-the-elwha.htm>. (accessed April 17, 2020).

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Cameron Macias, “How the Elwha River Was Saved - Issue 57: Communities,” *Nautilus*. NautilusThink Inc, Original publication February 8 2018, <http://tlas.nautil.us/video/291/how-the-elwha-river-was-saved>, 5:32-5:43. (accessed April 17, 2020).

Klallam voices led the way for dam removal, and remain crucial in the restoration effort. Former Lower Elwha Klallam Tribal Chairperson Dennis Sullivan, originally quoted in Charles Wilkinson's book *The Olympic Peninsula's Elwha River*, declared that "we are protectors of the salmon. Salmon and us are like family to each other. We need each other."⁸⁴ Guided by this responsibility for interspecies care, Klallam have overseen the Elwha River become repopulated with Chinook Salmon, among other salmon and essential species. Restoration of the Elwha continues, carried out by environmental protection agencies, environmental scientists, and Klallam tribal members under the direction of the Lower Elwha Klallam. Following a restorative justice frame, healing in the Elwha Valley will require material reparations to the Lower Elwha Klallam and the Chinook salmon whose native runs were disrupted for 100 years as well as greater public accountability on the part of the U.S. government.

Justice has begun. The Lower Elwha Klallam, "its leaders and members, [have always] cared for the River, lived from the river, and brought the River's voice to every audience that could be found."⁸⁵ The Klallam have paved the way by demonstrating the reciprocity, stewardship, and interspecies care that must be centered in all restoration efforts. The Klallam practice of witness, exemplified in the tribe's politicized mourning of the Elwha, was a crucial starting point for justice for the River. Now, the effects of that grief work have arrived in the form of a raging Elwha

⁸⁴ Julia Guarino, "Tribal Advocacy and the Art of Dam Removal: the Lower Elwha Klallam and the Elwha Dams," *American Indian Law Journal*, II, no. I, 2013, 127.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 140.

Original quote by Senator Bill Bradley during his keynote address at a dinner hosted by the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe in 2011.

River. Yet, harm remains unaddressed -- how can justice for the Elwha be complete while Klallam land is still settled without permission by the United States and its non-Native residents? How can the Elwha thrive when corporate greed and government negligence have allowed the current climate crisis that threatens all earthbound life? How can healing continue when the United States does not follow restoration with reparations and decolonization for all life of the Elwha Valley? As the Elwha roars back to life, so does the fight for justice flow on.

Mourning the Unspectacular

Structural Violence, Scales of Harm, and Slow Death

“It may have already occurred to you that we are in the midst of the most terrible slow-motion disaster in history, as the natural environment is utterly laid to waste and the diversity of human experience is steamrolled into the monoculture of capitalism. In such a disaster, you can't cook out of the books your ancestors developed for more peaceful times.”

From Recipes for a Disaster by CrimethInc.

Environmentalism, intersectional feminism, and true crime media all share one subject in common: violence. The violence discussed in each occurs on different scales, such as anthropogenic climate change, police brutality, and interpersonal harm respectively. In turn, all three have created their own politics and approaches to attending to violence and death. As the lines between these disciplines have blurred (into the threads of ecofeminism, white feminist true crime, and green criminology), the representation of violence has been brought into relief as a politics in and of itself that bears real consequences for justice and harm reduction strategies. This thesis explores the potential of an intersectional feminist true crime praxis to address the gaps created by these separate approaches to violence. In response, the practice of intersectional feminist true crime aspirationally brings these disciplines together, using storytelling to bear witness, critically mourn, form kinship, and pursue justice in the face of *all* forms and scales of violence.

In this chapter, I turn to environmental humanities scholarship, Gender Studies work, and poetry in order to critically expand the scopes of “victim,” “perpetrator,” and “violence,” moving away from the hegemonic true crime story of interpersonal harm committed against a blonde, white feminine victim by a serial killer. As I apprehend structural and environmental harm as sites of violence that pertain to an intersectional feminist true crime genre, I turn to the interdisciplinary environmental studies work of Rob Nixon who theorizes problems of legibility with the violence of climate change and environmental degradation. I also engage David Pellow and his conceptualization of a “critical environmental justice” which bridges

social justice and academic approaches to climate change. Along with my larger methodology for this thesis, I engage Gender Studies scholarship in this chapter to think about the feminist stakes of climate change and “slow violence” (violence that occurs over time in an unspectacular fashion), bringing Lauren Berlant into conversation. Finally, I read Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetry, specifically her piece “Anointed,” as a possible example of existing feminist true crime storytelling about environmental degradation. Jetñil-Kijiner’s attention to mourning and loss on multiple scales supports the theoretical and political interventions made by the other scholarship in the chapter. Together, the voices I engage throw hegemonic notions of “victim,” “perpetrator,” and “violence” into crisis, complementing each other and helping to shape intersectional feminist true crime storytelling.

I interrogate the bias towards spectacular, interpersonal violence in true crime media by exploring how slow violence (in the form of environmental crisis) and structural violence (in the form of homicidal capitalism) necessarily concern the genre of true crime as well as intersectional feminist fights for justice. Currently, stories of violence that are not instantaneous, sensational, and human-scale are not even assumed to interrogate the same concepts as true crime. (Consider how a serial killer documentary and a climate change documentary are differently categorized.) An essential component of the intersectional true crime feminism approach is the role of Rob Nixon’s “writer-activist,” whose responsibility it is to critically narrativize, and thus make legible, slow violence in order to generate community action and care. Through Nixon’s framework, the (over)emphasis on *white, cis, women* victims can

be redirected towards an equally emphatic advocacy for victims of all positionalities suffering harm of all scales. I, therefore, hail structural violence and “slow death” as other forms of violence that are unintelligible to a hegemonic true crime gaze yet deeply relevant to an intersectional feminist true crime conversation. My chapter not only reconceptualizes the scope of violence but also explores possible examples of storytelling of and against such violence that moves us towards an intersectional feminist true crime praxis.

The precedent for bringing environmental harm and true crime into conversation is under the auspices of criminology and the law. Their overlap is in the state’s frame of “crime” and the criminal justice response it facilitates. As a term, “green criminology” describes the mapping of legal frames onto the problem of environmental harm. Its invention in the 1990s was an attempt to recruit the technology of the state’s criminal justice apparatus to address environmental degradation, pursue accountability, and shape justice. In this way, environmentalist scholarship has already made a connection between interpersonal harm and environmental degradation under the banner of “crime.” Green criminology is a move that parallels that of white feminist true crime alliances with the state and its actors. Both green criminology and white feminist true crime reinstate the criminal justice system, the police, and the Prison Industrial Complex as protective forces, rather than recognizing them as perpetrators and sites of violence.

Green criminology emerged in the 90s in response to environmental disasters

that caused human death due to “negligent and even criminal behavior”.⁸⁶ The harm inflicted was perceived as akin to other forms of criminal behavior and was thus packaged neatly into a legal framework of criminology. Importantly though, green criminology was always intended to address violence committed against “human” bodies, first and foremost, and to do so within the power of the state. In Michael J. Lynch, Michael A. Long, Paul B. Stretesky, and Kimberly L. Barrett’s book *Green Criminology: Crime, Justice, and the Environment*, the scholars trace the discourse of green criminology to “a time when public concern for the environment was at an all-time high.”⁸⁷ Hence, as ecological disaster emerged as a legible, sensational, and existential threat to human life, scholars in the field turned to criminology as a means to address the violence of environmental crisis. In other words, it was specifically instantaneous and large-scale disasters that motivated the public to action.

Yet, green criminology has always remained a limited framework in the face of environmental harm and climate change violence precisely for its attention to only spectacular and large-scale harm. Eventually, the paradigm of environmental justice arrived as an intervention into the failing frame of green criminology in order to better address the root causes of ecological violence outside of the state parameters of “crime.” Similarly, within feminist movements, carceral ideologies have been addressed by intersectional critiqued and replaced by restorative and transformative justice approaches. In this way, intersectional feminism has also rejected the legal

⁸⁶ Michael J. Lynch, Michael A. Long, Paul B. Stretesky, and Kimberly L. Barrett, *Green Criminology: Crime, Justice, and the Environment* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 2.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

frame of crime, instead focusing on accountability, community healing, and prevention to attend to violence. However, white feminist true crime still remains carceral and highly invested in the law, the police, and the prison. Thus, by the same means that green criminology and white feminist true crime first paralleled, they must also coincide with their shifts to alternative justice models in order to come closer to an intersectional feminist true crime praxis that attends to environmental harm.

Tracing the rise of and shift away from “green criminology” makes clear the parallel paths of true crime and environmental justice as well as their common stakes. In particular, an intersectional feminist true crime and a critical environmental justice share a goal of making different scales of violence legible to a mainstream gaze. As feminist true crime learns about alternative scales of violence from environmental scholarship, environmental justice can take note of how to narrativize critical mourning from true crime storytelling. More, conversation so “slow violence” opens the true crime conversation to other unspectacular tragedies. The workings of “slow death” and structural violence are also important to the conversation about scales of harm and narrativizing ungrieved loss. Storytelling plays an important role in this visibilizing work. Together the disciplines of environmental humanities and Gender Studies allow for a multiscalar project of world-remembering and a more energized and expansive fight for a safer tomorrow.

Scales of Violence in the True Crime Narrative

Instantaneous, spectacular, and human-scale violence is the most legible harm to the public as a result of representational bias. As news media and true crime media take up certain stories that gain greater viewership and therefore support the demands of capital, the media platforms also create erasures and silences. As I have interrogated in previous chapters, the hegemony of spectacular violence within a US media gaze has largely shaped whose stories and deaths the public mourns. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon proposes the framework of “slow violence” to describe the harm which occurs over time causing cumulative rather than instantaneous damage.⁸⁸ Nixon argues that slow violence is often unspectacular and is thus overlooked in mainstream news media cycles.

Nixon’s intervention calls into question the temporal and spatial scales of violence in order to provoke a consideration of violence beyond both the human body and the span of instantaneous harm. Nixon critiques the media’s representational bias in favor of the spectacular, writing that

falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match.⁸⁹

True crime media is largely based on stories of Nixon’s spectacular description above, and is therefore a site which needs to evaluate the erasures caused by its bias against stories of state, structural, and slow violence. The “eye-catching and page-turning power” that Nixon identifies is similarly present in true crime media

⁸⁸ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁸⁹ Ibid, 2.

where the serial killer archetype, cannibalism, child death, and other extenuating circumstances of murder often gain increased circulation and attention.⁹⁰ Through Rob Nixon's frame, environmental degradation caused by settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and war come into focus within (eco)feminist discourses of violence. Thus, Nixon's intervention into the public rendering of violence complements the work of intersectional feminist true crime through its attention to exhuming loss that is made ungrievable by a colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist gaze.

In the mythologized true crime capital of the United States: the Pacific Northwest, stories of serial killers and interpersonal harm have overshadowed centuries of environmental harm and settler colonization. Here, I turn to the Washington State stories of both the Green River Killer (aka Gary Ridgeway) and the former Elwha River dams. While Ridgeway was murdering young sex workers in the 1980s on the west side of the Puget Sound,⁹¹ the Elwha River dams were continuing to wreak havoc on the east side of the Sound by destroying their ecosystem which includes the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe and Chinook Salmon.⁹² These two distinct harms -- interpersonal, sensationalized violence by a stranger in the night and slow violence caused by the extractive dams -- occurred simultaneously and in the same landscape that figures prominently in the cultural imaginary of true crime. Yet, these violences were differently intelligible to the news media, the public, and the true

⁹⁰ I believe this is related to the animating effect of disbelief within true crime particularly as the disbelief of culpability tracks through race, gender, and socio-economic status.

⁹¹ Ann Rule, *Green River, Running Red: The Real Story of the Green River Killer ... America's Deadliest Serial Murderer* (Pocket Star Books Premium ed. New York: Pocket Star Books, 2005).

⁹² Macias, "How the Elwha River Was Saved."

crime genre due to the politics of representation that Nixon discusses. In fact, a crucial reason that the dams were able to inflict so much harm over the course of a century was their ability to remain unrecognized as a source of violence. This is undoubtedly because they primarily harmed Indigenous communities while shoring up state power.

True crime storytelling *must* take up cases of slow violence if it is to become an intersectional feminist space. Nixon's critique of the media's fixation on spectacular narratives *also* applies to the scope of "violence" in true crime media which is currently limited to the interpersonal. Instead, an intersectional feminist true crime storytelling must go beyond state violence and even structural violence to include harm that falls within the purview of slow violence. As a result, the cumulative effects of the Elwha River dams on the surrounding land, human communities, and non-human habitats will then become legible as a story of violence that concerns the genre of true crime, alongside such stories as that of the Green River Killer. The continuing experiences of factory run-off, high cancer rates, wildfires, species extinction, and rising sea levels exemplify the stakes of excluding cases of slow violence from critical public attention. Instead, by attending to violences of all scales, *both* Gary Ridgeway and the United States government (in the case of the Elwha River dams) can be properly identified as perpetrators, thus allowing the more important visibility of their victims and paving the way for justice.

Slow Death, Homicidal Capitalism, and Disease

Environmental degradation is not the only form of slow violence. Nixon's notion of slow violence describes multiscalar forms of harm that occur over time, often unfolding in unspectacular ways. Outside of environmentalism, slow violence brings to mind discourses of disposability which allow non-instantaneous violence against surplus populations (or, populations of future laborers who are subject to state discourses of expendability⁹³). The frame of "slow death," termed by Gender Studies scholar Lauren Berlant, refers to the "physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence."⁹⁴ As a scholarly framework, slow death complements slow violence in that they both attend to slow-moving harm that is not legible in a hegemonic media gaze, in true crime and beyond. Berlant writes that "while death is usually deemed an event in contrast to life's extensivity, in this domain dying and the ordinary reproduction of life are coextensive."⁹⁵ In other words, Berlant is speaking of "imperiled bodies,"⁹⁶ or those surplus populations who are discursively marked as expendable, for whom death is a condition of life. Berlant writes about slow death in the context of obesity and the orientation of healthcare. Yet, slow death challenges all affective discussions of life and death, challenging the very stakes of such conversations and who they discursively imply. Many people in the United States experience slow death, even through Berlant's example of the biopolitical,

⁹³ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

⁹⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 95.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 102.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 101.

medicalized quest for longevity amidst the rhetoric and lived experience of “chronic condition.” Though slow death overlaps with slow violences, it is more of an acknowledgment about how certain bodies are discursively marked for death allowing for the material degradation of their health and well-being. Slow death reveals how death becomes an entangled, mundane condition of life for some.

In the United States, a 10ml vial of insulin can cost anywhere from \$92 to over \$1000, according to 2019 data from GoodRx.⁹⁷ Upon analysis, Benita Lee, MPH, who conducts research for GoodRx, notes that “manufacturers are still raising insulin prices, and costs now vary by as much as 10 times depending on which insulin you take.”⁹⁸ For people living with diabetes, insulin is a life-sustaining resource, like food, water, and oxygen. People living with diabetes in the United States are debilitated by the privatization of medical care that has led to unaffordable treatment and the skyrocketing price of insulin over the last twenty years. Increasingly, diabetes patients in the U.S. healthcare system are forced to ration their insulin supply, using fewer dosages at a time than is healthy, in order to continue to afford the medication. A study conducted by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that one in four people living with diabetes in the United States ration their insulin. The lack of affordable insulin, due to a profit-driven medical industry and a neoliberal government in the pocket of Big Pharma, is *killing* people, slowly.

On June 28th, 2019, Jesimya David Scherer-Radcliff -- a 21-year-old Minnesota

⁹⁷ Benita Lee, “How Much Does Insulin Cost? Here’s How 23 Brands Compare,” GoodRx. Original publication August 23, 2019, <https://www.goodrx.com/blog/how-much-does-insulin-cost-compare-brands/>. (accessed April 12, 2020).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

resident -- died of diabetic ketoacidosis caused by rationing insulin.⁹⁹ Jesy wasn't the first diabetes patient to die from rationing, nor the youngest. Nicole Smith-Holt, another Minnesota resident, lost her son Alec to diabetic ketoacidosis "less than a month after he aged out of his parents' insurance plan."¹⁰⁰ Smith-Holt attended Jesy's funeral and later told a local news channel, KARE 11, that "My son [Alec] and Jesy, they were murdered. They were killed by big Pharma. The cause of death should actually be on their death certificates, corporate greed...I want justice for all of their deaths."¹⁰¹ The privatized healthcare system, the neoliberal state, and Big Pharma interests together facilitate the slow death of poor, uninsured diabetes patients, like Jesy and Alec. In the logic of the capitalist state, poor, diseased bodies are marked for death. Corporate greed in the insulin market -- that a "market" for a life-sustaining medication even exists -- is evidence of how unfettered capitalism becomes homicidal. More, the discourse around diabetes allows for this form of slow death to continue on, unregistered as a deadly crisis or a form of violence. Smith-Holt's comments represent a productive departure from hegemonic thinking about ketoacidosis as a tragic but blameless affliction of an individual body. Yes, diabetes causes ketoacidosis but how is diabetes caused? Who is most likely to suffer ketoacidosis and die from it? These are the inquiries that intersectional feminist true crime praxis provokes.

Intersectional feminist true crime storytelling observes crisis, mourns the

⁹⁹ Sarah Jones, "Another Person Has Died After Rationing Insulin," *Intelligencer*. Vox Media, Original publication July 15, 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/07/another-person-has-died-from-rationing-insulin.html>. (accessed April 12, 2020).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

dead, leverages political critique, and brings community to action in pursuit of justice and harm-prevention. In the case of insulin rationing and the healthcare system, the problems go far beyond insulin manufacturers and a lack of government regulation to which Smith-Holt calls attention. Intersectional feminist true crime critique allows us to attend to deadly crisis and slow death from an intersectional feminist vantage, acknowledging how systems of subjection make certain populations more vulnerable to death than others. Indeed, the question of diabetes, insulin access, and ketoacidosis is deeply imbricated in problems of food justice, worker's rights, the insurance industry, the fraught relationship between the racist medical establishment and communities of color, to name a few. A 2019 article from *The Guardian* by Mona Chalabi traces how Black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans are both more likely to get diabetes and more likely to be uninsured.¹⁰² This puts diabetic people of color in the life-threatening, and sometimes deadly, position of choosing whether to skimp on insulin, food, rent, or other daily necessities. To think through this in true crime terms: death by diabetic ketoacidosis, in many cases in the U.S., is murder without justice for the victims. Thinking through slow violence reveals that ketoacidosis can be an instance of ableist, white supremacist, homicidal capitalism. It can have a perpetrator and a victim. And, as a result, justice and prevention can be imagined in response to it.

Following the lead of Nicole Smith-Holt, intersectional feminist true crime storytelling begins with thinking critically and creatively about how to narratively

¹⁰² Mona Chalabi, "Insulin costs are rising – and diabetic Americans of color are hit hardest," *The Guardian*. Original publication July 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/datablog/2019/jul/14/Diabetes-insulin-mona-chalabi-data-blog>. (accessed April 12, 2020).

frame the U.S. privatized healthcare system and the pharmaceutical industry as perpetrators of widespread harm. Important to this project is the recognition that not everyone with diabetes dies as instantaneous and shocking a death as those of Alex and Jesy. Sometimes murder by Big Pharma and U.S. healthcare is slow, occurring due to decades of inaccess to health.¹⁰³ In this way, it often takes the form of absence rather than presence. Thus, it requires the combined perspective of intersectional feminist analysis and true crime storytelling to apprehend slow death (the mundane operations of violent subjection) and slow violence (multiscalar and unspectacular violence) in the neoliberal medical establishment. Berlant's notion of slow death facilitates a better understanding of Alec and Jesy's deaths but Nicole Smith-Holt's true crime framing generates outrage to promote action. As intersectional feminist critique reveals the political stakes of violence and death, true crime storytelling solicits and builds a community response towards justice.

Critical Storytelling as Feminist True Crime Methodology

An essential element of the white feminist turn within true crime is the political intention to pursue justice through the act of storytelling about violence. This often manifests as attention to cold cases, directing true crime consumers to nonprofits that do justice work, and generating public outrage at cases where there was no "justice." Just as true crime media has wielded the power to invisibilize stories of

¹⁰³ Health is a broad and contentious term. Here, I use it to mean a bodily, emotional, mental, and spiritual position from which people can thrive. This notion of health consists of access to nutritious food, community safety, living wages, mental health resources, and much more. One cannot be healthy, in this sense, within a settler colonial, ableist, racial capitalist state because health would necessitate the end of occupation, subjection, exploitation, oppression, and violence.

slow violence, it also offers the potential platform to shine a light on them in the pursuit of justice. In my read, white feminist true crime storytelling differs from the news media narrativization of death because of its focus on recognizing the conditions of patriarchy, creating wake space for victims, and fervently seeking justice. For this reason and the shared subject of violence, true crime offers a productive space to interrogate instances of slow violence, structural violence, and slow death. Departing from the white feminist true crime model that emphasizes interpersonal harm and state-sanctioned “justice,” intersectional feminist true crime storytelling emerges as a compelling site to address violence of all scales committed against all bodies (including environmental bodies like ecosystems, animals, plants, etc).

Alongside the framework of slow violence, Rob Nixon also puts forward a conceptualization of the “writer-activist” who seeks justice in the face of slow violence through the act of critical storytelling. In Nixon’s words, the writer-activist has “a desire to give life and dimension to the strategies -- oppositional, affirmative, and yes, often disparate and fractured -- that emerge from those who bear the brunt of the planet’s ecological crises.”¹⁰⁴ When expanded to include all forms of violence occurring on all scales and against all bodies, the role of the writer-activist becomes relevant to the work of intersectional feminist true crime. Indeed, as I have argued above, the outline of this work is already being practiced in the platform of white feminist true crime. Thus, the expansion of the category of violence within true crime

¹⁰⁴ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 23.

yields a praxis similar to Nixon's call to action; the writer-activist and the true crime storyteller overlap in nearly all ways. Like the writer-activist, the true crime storyteller bears witness to violence, critically circulates its story, and mobilizes justice-oriented action to address it.

Further, the writer-activist/true crime storyteller offers a new path towards justice that bypasses, and often necessarily opposes, the U.S. criminal justice system. In this way, the storyteller can better leverage critiques of the root causes of harm which often include the state and its agents as perpetrators. In this paradigm, activism generated to address all scales of harm is also compatible with transformative and restorative justice models that disinvest from the Prison Industrial Complex. Consequently, just as the writer-activist who focuses distinctly on ecological disaster can benefit from some characteristics of white feminist true crime storytelling, so too must true crime expand to practice critical storytelling of myriad scales of violence outside of state legal frames of harm. It therefore *must* be a priority of the true crime storyteller to challenge and dismantle the hegemony of instantaneous and spectacular interpersonal violence within the genre.

Reading Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's "Anointed" as True Crime Storytelling

One example of a contemporary writer-activist is Marshallese poet and climate justice activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner. As an Indigenous Pacific-Islander woman, Jetñil-Kijiner writes from an intimate understanding of colonialism, toxicity, patriarchy, imperialism, and environmental harm. She often weaves these threads

together in her work. Further, Jetñil-Kijiner's work is focused on Marshallese mourning practices in the face of death -- be it the death of a person or an island. Her poem "Anointed" best exemplifies Jetñil-Kijiner's activist grief work. In a few lines of the poem, Jetñil-Kijiner writes, "Who remembers you beyond your death? Who would have us forget that you were once green globes of fruit, pandanus roots, and whispers of canoes? Who knows the stories of the life you led before?"¹⁰⁵ Here, the "you" that Jetñil-Kijiner addresses is the Runit Dome, a nuclear waste site in the Marshall Islands where the United States has collected and entombed waste from the US nuclear testing in the 1950s. "Anointed" importantly does two things: first, it tells a story of slow, often unseen, violence caused by colonialism and anthropogenic climate change. Second, the poem practices an activist grief work to attend to the death of an island. As Jetñil-Kijiner mourns the absence of island that the Runit Dome now marks, she narrativizes the violence of the US imperialism, war, militarism, technology, extractive capitalism, and erasure.

Jetñil-Kijiner described later in a blog post that, "the poem I wrote, written to Runit, was essentially a mourning poem - mourning the land that Runit was before it became a nuclear waste site."¹⁰⁶ This grief work, which is also a form of writer-activism/storytelling, represents an important element of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling. I argue that in her attention to a violence,

¹⁰⁵ Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, "DOME POEM PART III: 'ANOINTED' FINAL POEM AND VIDEO," *Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner*. 16 April, 2018, <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/dome-poem-iii-anointed-final-poem-and-video/>. (accessed December 10, 2019).

¹⁰⁶ Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, "BULLDOZED REEFS AND BLASTED SANDS: RITUALS FOR ARTIFICIAL ISLANDS," *Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner*. 7 February, 2019, <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/bulldozed-reefs-and-blasted-sands-rituals-for-artificial-islands/>. (accessed December 10, 2019).

particularly one that occurs against racialized bodies and exoticized ecosystems, Jetñil-Kijiner is practicing an intersectional feminist true crime storytelling. Grief is political and some deaths aren't allowed to be grieved -- namely the death of racialized bodies, of disabled bodies, of bodies overseas from the perpetrator, of deviant bodies, of non-human bodies, and of bodies already conceived of as dying. As an act of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling, Jetñil-Kijiner's "Anointed" gestures at the political importance of grief work in the retelling of stories about death. In the current moment of rising sea levels that threaten Marshallese communities as well as the integrity of the Runit Dome structure, Jetñil-Kijiner's voice calls on all of us to join her in mourning, outrage, and the pursuit of justice.

Bridging Critical Environmental Justice and True Crime Harm Reduction

Slow violence and slow death work to call out the ways in which affective scale and criminalization collude to make certain violences legible and addressable only through state punishment systems. This leaves non-sensational forms of violence and violence committed against surplus populations out of media narrativization, exempt from mainstream public outrage. While green criminology and carceral feminist true crime represent knee jerk reactions that seek long-awaited justice in the form of hegemonic mainstream attention and state action, critical environmental justice and transformative justice provide feminist alternatives to state-sanctioned responses. More, these justice frameworks employ intersectional analysis to properly address who experiences harm on the greatest levels in the

cases of interpersonal harm, state violence, structural violence, and slow violence. In his book, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, environmental scholar David Pellow introduces the term “critical environmental justice” to refer to a new scholarly and activist framework that approaches environmental issues from a social justice standpoint.¹⁰⁷ Pellow’s “critical environmental justice” in conversation with a feminist true crime that includes slow violence reveals the need for anti-statist, anti-racist responses to violence that move towards justice rather than rights.

Critical environmental justice looks expansively at environmental injustice and slow violence in order to take into account the intersectional and interdisciplinary mechanisms of subjection, degradation, and death. Pellow elaborates that “environmental justice struggles reveal how power flows through the multi-species relationships that make up life on Earth, often resulting in violence and marginalization for many and environmental privileges for the few.”¹⁰⁸ In the cases of slow violence that I explore in this chapter -- including climate change, the Elwha river dams, the price of insulin, and U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall islands, creative and critical storytelling holds the potential to reframe mourning, organizing, and justice. Reimagined through true crime, the above instances of slow violence gain visibility and momentum towards justice by way of the unique storytelling edge that feminist true crime writing-activism offers. In recognizing and mourning these deaths, criminal environmental justice paves the way towards the larger true crime project of justice and harm reduction.

¹⁰⁷ David N. Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 11.

Complementary to Pellow's anti-statist, anti-racist frame is that of an "anarchist criminology." Jeff Ferrell differentiates the approach of anarchist criminology from other feminist criminologies in his chapter "Against the Law: Anarchist Criminology," writing "anarchist criminology also incorporates a relatively complex critique of state law and legality which begins to explain why we might benefit from defying authority, or standing 'against the law'."¹⁰⁹ Acting through this political framework necessitates that critical environmental justice not only seek alternative forms of justice and accountability, but that it also stands *against* the state, law, and the carceral system. A feminist, anti-racist, anti-violence approach to safety, sustainability, and climate justice requires active resistance to systems and discourses of "law and order." Slow violence isn't just overlooked by the technology of law, but it is also *perpetrated* by state carceral systems. Intersectional justice work requires thinking outside and against state punishment logic.

An intersectional feminist true crime storytelling *must* include slow violence within its purview as it pursues justice and grieves loss; in doing so, it will attend to harm in a way that reconciles the best of environmentalism, intersectional feminism, and true crime media. The call to practice an intersectional feminist true crime storytelling across scales of harm must involve thinking beyond the human and critically confronting what Mel Chen terms the "animacy hierarchy."¹¹⁰ As demonstrated by the turn from green criminology to critical environmental justice,

¹⁰⁹ Jeff Ferrell, "Against the Law: Anarchist Criminology," in *Contemporary Anarchist Criminology: Against Authoritarianism and Punishment*, eds. Anthony J. Nocella II, Mark Seis, and Jeff Shantz (New York, NY: Peter Lang Inc, 2018).

¹¹⁰ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

true crime must also disinvest from the United States' justice system and Prison Industrial Complex which causes many forms of slow violence itself. Instead, by following transformative justice, restorative justice, and critical environmental justice, true crime storytelling can mourn victims, demand accountability, and prevent harm of all scales.

Remembering



Attica

[Image: *The Intercept*]

D-block is buzzing. Men are gathering in the yard, the sun shining on their skin and justice pumping through their veins. Liberation seems within reach, and the energy is palpable. As Richard Clark steps through the doorway into the yard, he enters “into another world.”¹¹¹ Yet, this unfettered euphoria does not last -- in fact, it ends in the death of 43 people and the injury of over 80 more.

The “other world” that Clark describes is the D-block yard at the Attica Correctional Facility, a New York state prison, at the precise beginning of the Attica prison uprising on September 9th, 1971. The excitement, “warmth,” and “sense of freedom” that characterized D-block was felt acutely by the mass of imprisoned men who had lived in some of the nation’s most horrific prison conditions.¹¹² D-block yard on that September 9th reflected the apex of the Attica prison uprising when those incarcerated men insisted on self-determination in the face of institutional caging, surveillance, policing, and abuse. As Clark joined the wide open D-block yard, he recognized that the Attica uprising would be unlike any past prison revolt that the modern state had seen.

On September 9th, men imprisoned at Attica overthrew the correctional officers in command and took citizen hostages as leverage to open a dialogue with the state about Attica’s unlivable conditions.¹¹³ In the days following the initiation of the revolt, leaders of the rebellion elected representatives, drafted a list of demands, created the guidelines for negotiation, and allowed citizen observers to facilitate a

¹¹¹ Richard X. Clark, *The Brothers of Attica* (Links, 1973).

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ “Timeline of Events of the Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Subsequent Legal Actions,” New York State Archives. <http://www.archives.nysed.gov/research/oag/attica-timeline> (accessed April 16, 2020).

conversation with the state. It seemed that men who had been harmed by Attica were finally being heard, and finally gaining a “seat at the table.” Yet, the men in Attica were attempting to negotiate with the Governor of New York Nelson Rockefeller and the newly-appointed Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald and -- two state officials who were staunchly against prison uprisings, and had little interest in improving life behind bars.¹¹⁴ As time passed and demands were not met, hope of reaching a peaceful solution began to fade. It became increasingly clear by September 12th that the state was more interested in punishing those uprising at Attica in an attempt to quell future prison revolts than they were committed to preserving life (that of the hostages and the incarcerated men holding them).

Finally, four days after Richard Clark first observed the charged energy of D-Block yard and dreamed of freedom, Commissioner Oswald declared that the incarcerated men had one hour to release the hostages and turn themselves over to correctional control, following a decision that came from Governor Rockefeller.¹¹⁵ It was this fateful order that turned the Attica Uprising into the Attica Massacre, perpetrated by state troopers by state command. When the leaders of the rebellion rejected the state request to end the protest without commitments to change Attica living standards and/or protect the men involved in the revolt, Governor Rockefeller ordered tear gas to be dropped on D-Block (afflicting protesters, civilian hostages, and correctional officer hostages alike) and then sent state troopers in to violently regain control over the facility.

¹¹⁴ Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, A Division of Penguin Random House, 2017).

¹¹⁵ “Timeline of Events of the Attica Prison Uprising.”

These state troopers had been forced to wait to act for days and were known to be agitated, hateful, and merciless even before Governor Rockefeller ordered them to enter the prison.¹¹⁶ Upon entering Attica on the express mission to retake control of the facility -- ostensibly in order to protect the lives of the hostages -- state troopers began shooting indiscriminately. When all was said and done, the state murdered 29 incarcerated men and ten hostages during the attack, wounding many more.¹¹⁷ In comparison, the protesting men of Attica were only responsible for four deaths, three of which were deaths of other men imprisoned at Attica, and one of which was the death of a correctional officer who had succumbed to wounds inflicted during the initial uprising.¹¹⁸ State troopers under Commissioner Oswald and Governor Rockefeller's command murdered ten times the number of citizen hostages as the protestors did.

Though the state initially made an effort to claim that incarcerated men had taken the lives of a number of dead hostages, evidence came out the following day that proved, with total clarity, that all but one of the hostages had died by state trooper fire.¹¹⁹ The troubling truth -- that the Commissioner and the Governor prioritized state control above civilians', correctional officers', and incarcerated men's lives -- became obvious. Further, it seemed increasingly likely that negotiations with the men at Attica would have led to the least amount of bloodshed, and by far the most amount of harm reduction. When the true story became clear to

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Blood in the Water*.

¹¹⁷ "Timeline of Events of the Attica Prison Uprising."

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the public, it was evident that the 43 who lost their lives during the Attica massacre had the state to blame.

The Attica Uprising was led by incarcerated Black and Brown men who educated themselves on their rights and organized for more survivable living conditions. The rebellion stood against the rampant anti-Blackness of correctional officers, the exploited labor of incarcerated men, the lack of medical services, the frequency of guard abuse, the consequences of overcrowding, the quality of prison food, and many more violences that permeated daily life at Attica. Incarcerated men, non-incarcerated civilian visitors, and correctional officers lost their lives so that the state could protect “law and order” and carceral power. Archived tapes between Governor Rockefeller and President Richard Nixon reveal Nixon complimenting Rockefeller’s handling of the uprising, even praising Rockefeller’s “courage.”¹²⁰ As for the many deaths, Gov. Rockefeller is heard telling the President “that’s life.”¹²¹ Nelson Rockefeller went on to serve as President Gerald Ford’s vice president when President Nixon resigned. The massacre allowed the powerful to stay powerful.

Despite the public revelations about the state’s actions at Attica, the question of justice has still remained largely unaddressed. Justice for Attica at the minimum requires: (1) state recognition that the events perpetrated by the state on September 13th constituted a massacre, (2) a public “wake” for *all* the lives lost at Attica, including those of men incarcerated there before, during, and after the massacre,

¹²⁰ Francis X. Clines, “Postscripts to the Attica Story,” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, Original publication September 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/opinion/Postscripts-to-the-attica-story.html>. (accessed April 16, 2020).

¹²¹ Ibid.

and (3) a campaign to actually attend to the interventions laid out in the revolt's manifesto. There can be no justice for Attica until the violent and deadly conditions that prompted the initial uprising are addressed in prisons everywhere in the U.S. When we remember the violence of Attica's prison conditions and the massacre of September 13th, we remember the importance of listening to currently and formerly incarcerated communities. We also remember that prisons are not sites of justice and that the state serves to shore up its own power rather than the safety of others. We remember that D-Block was once filled with the possibility of liberation, justice, and state accountability because of the labor and lost lives of the "Attica Brothers."¹²²

¹²² Clark, *The Brothers of Attica*.

The State is a Serial Killer

Carceral Feminism and Alternative Justice in True Crime Communities

“Those guys’ were psychopaths, serial killers, monsters. Whatever you called them, the conventional wisdom was that extremely violent serial offenders didn’t stop killing until they were forced to by death, disability, or imprisonment.”

Michelle McNamara, *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark*

“Unfortunately, he died of cancer in a prison hospital, instead of being fried,”¹²³

Karen Kilgariff relates to her co-host, Georgia Hardstark, on an episode of the *My Favorite Murder* (MFM) podcast. Karen’s tone conveys frustration and anger as she recounts the circumstances of prolific child rapist and killer Larry Singleton’s death. MFM often employs this affective response to narrate the moment when a perpetrator is jailed, imprisoned, and/or sentenced to death and to signal plot resolution. Whether framed as a moment of outright celebration or long-awaited satisfaction, the narrative point when the perpetrator must confront carceral punishment is savored by Karen, Georgia, their fans, and the majority of the white feminist true crime consumers. It is easy to understand why: Nobody wants a serial killer to remain unaccountable and free to commit more harm. The flaw in this logic from an intersectional feminist perspective lies in the belief that the prison system can serve justice, keep communities safe, and reduce harm. In fact, the notion circulated in true crime that the prison system leads to less violence is a misconception that has led to the unfortunate alignment of white feminist true crime and carceral ideologies.

The prison haunts the true crime story. It remains named but unseen, entrusted but unknown. The prison narratively signifies a void where killers go to stop harming people. The logic is: once the perpetrator is behind bars, the violence ends. The true crime story constructs the prison, and even the death penalty, as that

¹²³ Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, “Investigate18 Discovery” *My Favorite Murder* (podcast), *Sticher*. Originally publication May 27, 2016, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/exactly-right/my-favorite-murder/e/45613035>. (accessed March 3, 2020).

which actively contains evil. Thus, in true crime, the prison not only figures as a solution to interpersonal violence, but the world outside of the prison is presented as safer as a result. The narrative tropes of carceral feminist true crime are: the 9-1-1 call as savior, the detective as hero, and imprisonment/death as justice. Further, carceral feminist true crime emphasizes the safety of one individual in relation to another, rather than exploring violences of greater scales (including against whole communities and across generations). Feminists employing intersectional critiques recognize that the state cannot properly grant justice, especially in cases outside of interpersonal harm, because it is a perpetrator of harm of many scales (including enslavement, genocide, and war). Carceral feminism is inherently anti-Black and is, by no means, actually feminist. In this chapter, I take on the specter of the prison in true crime discourse so as to leverage an abolitionist critique of carceral feminist true crime.

Intervening in the collusion between “feminist” true crime and carceral logic requires attention to the fact that the state is not a trustworthy or neutral arbiter of justice, but a violent agent of harm; it requires confronting the fact that prisons are not simply a failing mechanism with which to address harm, but themselves sites of violence that successfully carry out their original intent. How tangled does the true crime narrative get when the resolution -- the administration of the death penalty -- is reframed as murder itself? How can the true crime narrator reconcile an adamant anti-murder stance with a recognition of the state as a serial killer? These questions represent the beginning of an intersectional feminist reckoning with the true crime’s

attachment to state-sanctioned “justice” and the prison system. Ultimately, an intersectional feminist true crime storytelling must be informed by abolition work that renders the state a perpetrator of violence as naturally as it renders a figure like Ted Bundy a perpetrator. This chapter serves to denaturalize “feminist” true crime’s reliance on the state’s criminal justice system in order to reveal the productive potential for violence prevention, accountability, healing, and safety that lies *outside* state carceral punishment and *within* true crime communities.

Detectives, Daddies, and the Death Penalty: Carceral Paternalism in True Crime

As carceral punishment goes, the death penalty has become a lightning rod political issue where disagreement over the state’s reach plays out; it seems to be the least publically accepted mechanism of the U.S. criminal justice system. Yet, for a topic that has long been considered highly controversial to center-lefts and openly admonished by progressives, the death penalty is largely celebrated in true crime. Indeed, Karen and Georgia of *My Favorite Murder* represent a niche that emphatically endorses the death penalty while still positioning themselves as feminists. Further, for Karen and Georgia, being pro- death penalty and pro- carceral punishment becomes framed as a “feminist” stance, termed generally “carceral feminism.” Carceral feminism finds a perfect home in white feminist true crime. Narrators of the sub-genre are instilled with a sense that there is a longstanding debt when it comes to justice for women victims and public accountability for violent toxic masculinity. As a result, so-called feminists like Karen and Georgia are inclined to aspire for

perpetrators to face extreme state punishment (particularly, in cases of gendered violence) in order to feel that patriarchal violence is not tolerated.

In the case of Larry Singleton's life, Karen's belief in the death penalty as the ultimate and only justice solution is accentuated by her outright remorse at Singleton's evasion of the sentence by dying of natural causes before the state could act. In this thinking, death is not punishment enough; rather, the state must carry out an execution for justice to be served. Karen's use of the term "fried" conveys the hosts' disdain for murderers and people who commit harm, while also exemplifying the hypocrisy of her support of state murder. The cavalier, even comedic, characterization of the machinery of state murder, through the terminology of "frying," makes light of the violence it perpetrates. As a predominant voice in the white feminist true crime community, *My Favorite Murder* presents opinions that take hold in a growing fandom of (mostly) white women. Karen and Georgia call on their listeners to lament Larry Singleton's early passing *with them*, even imploring listeners to cheer for the death penalty during some of their live shows. The rhetoric of *My Favorite Murder* signals how carceral feminism has become a hegemonic belief system within white feminist true crime that propels the narrative of state discipline and carceral punishment as justice in the case of interpersonal harm. In particular, the "detective" is an important character in the true crime narrative as a surrogate for the benevolent, paternalistic state justice apparatus.

In *Dead Girls*, Alice Bolin calls attention to the role of the detective in the “dead girl show.”¹²⁴ Even in the case of *Twin Peaks*, to borrow one of Bolin’s objects of analysis, the show narratively relies on the dead body of Laura Palmer even though the show’s protagonist is actually Agent Dale Cooper. Laura Palmer’s death only serves to allow Agent Cooper to explore his own sense of self. In other words, Palmer’s feminine corpse becomes the staging ground for the identity formation of devastated fathers, demonic male killers, and -- *importantly* -- heroic, masculine police officers. Her dead body serves as a plot device that shores up the discourse of good and evil in masculinist terms, specifically characterizing the law and the state as decidedly *good* through Agent Cooper’s tireless pursuit of justice.

The Agent Cooper archetype is ubiquitous in the “dead girl show,” iterated across both fictional stories and non-fiction true crime accounts. Recently, California detective Paul Holes has become the exemplar of how this narrative strategy operates within “true” crime. Detective Holes has acquired national fame, particularly from women true crime fans, for his detective work on the Golden State Killer case. In her *Sacramento Bee* profile of the detective, Molly Sullivan traces Holes’ notoriety, writing that “Holes developed a fan base after he was mentioned in Michelle McNamara’s book, ‘I’ll Be Gone in the Dark,’ about the case. A fan in Atlanta developed the hashtag #HotforHoles, which took off on social media.”¹²⁵ In the reddit r/EARONS group which is focused on the Golden State Killer case (also known as East Area

¹²⁴ Bolin, *Dead Girls*.

¹²⁵ Molly Sullivan, “East Area Rapist investigator Paul Holes’ new cold case show premieres on Oxygen,” *The Sacramento Bee*. Original publication October 11, 2019, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/Article236038293.html>. (accessed on April 16, 2020).

Rapist, Original NightStalker or EARONS), a user known as denaethetorgy replied to a thread titled “Am I alone in thinking Paul Holes is a babe?,” commenting “Daddy af is probably my favorite way to describe him 😂.”¹²⁶



Figure 1. (Screenshot taken on March 11th, 2020 at 9:50am PST)

Holes’ supposed attractiveness, masculine stoicism, and heroic determination to uncover a serial killer make him both “Daddy af” and an appealing surrogate for ideological investments in state-sanctioned justice. That desire for Detective Holes is understood in paternalistic domination terms is particularly useful in unraveling the role that the detective plays in the true crime imaginary.

In her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, Juana María Rodríguez discusses disciplinary paternalism as it gets routed through the sexual figure of the “Daddy.” Specifically, Rodríguez analyzes the power relations that are imbued in the figure of the “daddy,” writing that

in the metaphoric collapsing of the state as Daddy who is authorized to dispense ‘fatherly discipline,’ the power, privilege, and authority of both roles is unmasked as aligned not just with masculinity but also whiteness. [...] And, Daddy’s citizen-children are rewarded and punished in accordance with their proximity to the white masculine ideal.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ “Am I alone in thinking Paul Holes is a babe?,” reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/EARONS/comments/8f92ow/am_i_alone_in_thinking_paul_holes_is_a_babe/. (accessed March 11th, 2020).

¹²⁷ Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 59.

As a cultural iteration of this “Daddy,” Detective Holes emerges simultaneously as a disciplinarian and a knight in shining armor. Holes -- a caricature of the white masculine ideal -- provides an opportunity for true crime fans to literally *desire* the state’s protection and authority. The co-configuration of the “Daddy” figure and the Detective bring into relief the deployment of carceral ideologies in the true crime community, demonstrating how state punishment becomes naturalized as synonymous with justice. More, the Detective “Daddy” entices true crime fans to perform an idealized citizenship as “Daddy’s citizen-children.” The character Agent Cooper and the celebrity Detective Paul Holes are evidence of the “dead girl show”’s need for a surrogate for state power that bestows safety and justice. It is through the construction of the Detective in the true crime narrative that the identity of the state as a benevolent, protective force congeals. The hegemonic true crime narrative tells the U.S. public that the state is the caretaker for the tragic dead girl, and the only hope for future dead girls. There is no carceral propaganda imbued with more affective potential than the true crime narrative.

The Specter of the Prison

Capital punishment is the legal instrument that grants the state the right to kill. Since the 1970s, the United States has *legally* murdered 1,516 people by exercising the death penalty.¹²⁸ Of this number, Black and Brown men are grossly overrepresented due to anti-Black, white supremacist discourse around criminality

¹²⁸ Death Penalty Information Center: Executions Overview, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/executions-overview> (accessed March 3, 2020).

that contours the U.S. criminal justice system and inflects all conversations about crime, notably decisions by juries. Though the intersectional case against capital punishment is a well-rehearsed one, I want to emphasize clearly that enacting the death penalty materially means that the state *murders*. That so-called feminists would rally around state execution as the moral response to homicide is worth unpacking as it signals a stronghold of pro-punishment rhetoric in the true crime imaginary. To favor carceral *punishment* is to believe that prisons exist not just as a practical means to keep communities safe and/or to rehabilitate *but also* to exact harm against those who have committed unlawful harm. Though abolitionists argue that the prison structure and Prison Industrial Complex are inherently and structurally violent institutions unto themselves, the tone of carceral feminist true crime suggests a belief that prison *should*, in fact, be punitive.

Dean Spade writes, “prisons aren’t places to put serial rapists and murderers, they *are* the serial rapists and murderers.”¹²⁹ Executing, inflicting trauma, and caging are not feminist acts, particularly when wielded as state instruments of a white supremacist patriarchy targeting Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color, harming trans people, and disciplining genders norms. The prison is a discursive site that has long allowed the U.S. state to define its national identity, its citizens, and the bounds of its power. The central work of the prison abolition movement has been to demonstrate that the prison and the criminal justice system exact harm *by design*. Prison abolition, a movement led by Black feminists like Angela

¹²⁹ Dean Spade, “Their Laws Will Never Make Us Safer,” in *Against Equality: Prisons Will Not Protect You* ed. Ryan Conrad (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), 6.

Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, calls specific attention to the way in which the prison functions as a site of settler colonial racial capitalism aimed at the project of gender discipline and white patriarchy to manage surplus populations. Myriad feminist issues coalesce in the prison and Prison Industrial Complex, and few of them can be solved by way of reform. Prison abolition, instead, apprehends the entire system as a modern buttress to the settler colonial racial capitalist state that has maintained power through genocide, enslavement, and war.

Indeed, policing, criminalization, captivity, and incarceration work through a discourse of disposability and a logic of elimination. The state, through its carceral technologies, manages surplus populations in order to maintain pools of exploitable labor. This works through the logic of “mass elimination,”¹³⁰ the large-scale disappearance of members of society into distant facilities. Kelly Lytle Hernández also describes the phenomenon in *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles*, arguing that Los Angeles became the carceral capital as early as the 1950s.¹³¹ Before then, the practice of caging in the land of the Los Angeles Basin began during settlement, colonization, and genocide when Spanish conquistadores imprisoned Indigenous community members primarily from the Gabrielino-Tongva Tribe.¹³² Hernández argues that racial capitalism in the form of enslavement and its afterlives works *collaboratively* with genocide and settler colonialism to create a logic of elimination that shapes the contemporary carceral

¹³⁰ Kelly Lytle Hernández, "Introduction: Conquest and Incarceration," in *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1-15. (accessed April 17, 2020).

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹³² *Ibid*, 4.

state. Recognizing the discourse and experience of elimination employed by the settler state through its carceral technologies brings into relief the stakes of prison abolition in conversation with the #MMIW Campaign.¹³³ Criminalization and carcerality work to simultaneously invisibilize and hypervisibilize certain bodies of color in order to uphold settler colonial, racial capitalist state power. Disavowing criminalization, policing, and caging is the only viable option for redressing these continuing harms.

As I discuss in Chapter I, the state and the criminal justice system are descendents of the institution of slavery, codified anti-Blackness, the genocide of the Indigenous people of Turtle Island, and the ongoing settler colonization of the land over which the United States claims governance. This lineage demonstrates unequivocally that the criminal justice system is not built to address all forms of harm, but instead to legitimize and uphold the settler colonial racial capitalist state. To contextualize the legal justice structures in the United States in their violent origins brings into relief how the construction of criminality has always been an anti-Black and anti-feminist project wholly disconnected from lived experiences of violence. Rather, by propping up enslavement, genocide, and the continued theft of lands, the legal infrastructure of the United States has always allowed certain forms of violence to prevail, outside of the “criminal.” Slaveholders weren’t imprisoned for the murder, rape, assault, theft of labor, or kidnapping of enslaved Black people, all of which were common forms of harm on plantations. White people who lynched or

¹³³ “#MMIW” refers to the campaign calling attention to Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women.

attended lynchings of Black Americans were not legally held responsible. Along with abolitionist scholars, I read these instances not as *failures* of the law but as evidence of its intended effect. The criminal justice system is a system of codified anti-Black violence that has persevered through the liberal discourse of individual criminal responsibility which distracts from the historical and contemporary operations of the system. Feminists concerned with interpersonal, state, structural, and slow violence will not find resolutions within the U.S. criminal justice apparatus. Instead, we must follow the lead of Black feminists to recognize the state as a perpetrator. The carceral state and the Prison Industrial Complex are emblematic of a collusion between state and corporate interests to profit from the criminalization of surplus populations. The prison system is not a state effort to materially reduce harm, which in good faith would have to reckon with the state's own role in perpetrating violence.

Carceral ideologies rest upon a masculinist binary of crime and lawfulness that has historically been disconnected from lived experiences of violence. In her famous work *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, feminist abolitionist Angela Davis exposes the workings of the Prison Industrial Complex and the U.S. criminal justice system to demonstrate its vehemently white supremacist, patriarchal design. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* lays out the feminist case for prison abolition, highlighting the gendered violence and anti-Blackness of the carceral state. Specifically, Davis argues that “the prevailing justification for the supermax is that the horrors it creates are the perfect complement for the horrifying personalities deemed the worst of the worst by the

prison system.”¹³⁴ The carceral punishment logic that Davis critically highlights is precisely the rhetoric that white feminist true crime takes up, propogates, and defends because true crime centrally deals with stories of, as Davis puts it, “the worst of the worst.” As Davis notes, whereas the regular prison is imagined as a neutral vessel for the containment of violence, the value of the supermax is actually in its ability to inflict retributive punishment against those locked inside of it. This is the sort of logic that appeals to carceral feminist true crime fans who believe that justice is rooted in the punishment that only the state can enact. The state has effectively infiltrated the white feminist true crime imagination, casting the prison and criminal justice as the only thinkable solutions to the most violent expressions of human behavior.

Abolitionist, Black feminist, and critical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore discusses the dramatic expansion of the California State prison system since 1982 in her famous book, *Golden Gulag*. In the moment of expansion, Gilmore notes a shift in the state carceral rhetoric, from a rehabilitative defense to an argument for punishment and incapacitation hinging on an ideological investment in a “tough on crime,” paternalist state position. *Golden Gulag* identifies the “moral, not (necessarily) legal, panic” about “rampant deviant behavior” as a public motivation for prison expansion in California after 1982.¹³⁵ Gilmore argues that the state captured this “panic” and directed it towards the project of mass incarceration, explaining that “the political rhetoric, produced and reproduced in the media, concentrated on the

¹³⁴ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 50.

¹³⁵ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 18.

need for laws and prisons to control violence. ‘Crime’ and ‘violence’ seemed to be identical.”¹³⁶ As the Californian public grew increasingly fearful of an abstract “violence” iterated in media productions like the news and true crime stories, the state implemented carceral logic to conflate the growth of prisons with an increase in personal safety. 1982, the pivotal year in which Gilmore notices this carceral rhetoric gaining traction with the Californian public and translating to material prison expansion, was coincidentally eight years into the Golden State Killer’s reign as a serial killer and rapist across the state of California. The Golden State Killer terrorized suburban California for a 12 year period before dropping off the map. The “panic” to which Gilmore attends in her analysis of carceral logic is intimately tied to the proliferation of news and true crime media that documents the *extremely* rare instances of spectacular interpersonal violence, such as that of the Golden State Killer. California state prison expansion was clearly not the result of the Golden State Killer’s raging violence, but the overlap of their narrativization calls into question the influence of “true” stories to shape public perception of prisons and give a platform to carceral logic.

There is only a very small chance that the news coverage of the Golden State Killer made any tangible impact on public support for California’s prison expansion in the early 1980s. However, it’s harder to dismiss the effects of such narratives on the storytellers and community members who constantly immerse themselves in true crime content. When people consciously surround themselves with real

¹³⁶ Ibid, 112.

narratives of violence, it is all too easy for panic to grip listeners and translate into carceral ideologies. Gilmore's exploration of the particular case of California demonstrates that the relationship between the growth of prison systems and the state imperative to validate public fears of "deviant" and violent "crime" is only relevant in the arena of image and reception. *Golden Gulag* identifies economic surplus and crisis as the legitimate catalysts for state prison expansion, not a demonstrated rise in violence. "Violence" becomes a politically-vested narrative device that the state uses to defend the expansion of the carceral system. As the state utilizes prisons to manage surplus populations, it employs public fear and panic in the face of (mostly rare) violence in order to morally defend prison expansion; the hegemonic true crime narrative makes this job easier.

A moral argument for carceral systems is always dependent on constructions of innocence and criminality that are steeped in violent histories of marginalization. In her chapter "Awful Acts and the Trouble with Normal" from the collection *Captive Genders*, Erica R. Meiners traces how the rhetoric of good, bad, and innocent get mapped onto queer and trans bodies in the conversation around "sex offenders" and registries. Meiners' own relationship to registries mirrors that of many true crime fans: an apprehension about what sort of people could appear on them and be part of one's community. Yet, Meiners confronts this thinking, noting that "there are no registries for the officials and employers who routinely implement policies that actively damage all people, including or even *particularly* children."¹³⁷ By allowing

¹³⁷ Erica R. Meiners, "Awful Acts and the Trouble with Normal," in *Captive Genders*, eds. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015), 139.

consideration for what registries literally fail to *register* as threats, Meiners challenges faith in the comprehensiveness or usefulness of sex offender registries. Further, Meiners' quote even targets the assumption that sex offenders are the primary threat to a child's life, pointing instead to the lack of welfare policies that reduce children's life chances and their opportunity to thrive.¹³⁸ Meiners' intervention takes true crime feminists a step closer to considering the stakes of solely understanding violence on an interpersonal level. Registries don't represent a comprehensive list of people who commit harm, they represent a list of people who were apprehended by the state for "deviant," criminal behavior. It bears remembering that many sex offenders are people in positions of social and/or state power -- in some cases the very people with the power to articulate what legally constitutes "predatory" sexual acts.

If true crime feminists realize the imperative to end sexual violence, where can such advocates turn if not registries? Abolitionists, like Davis and Gilmore, confront carceral logic with the provocation to imagine harm reduction, accountability, justice, and healing outside of the prison system. The success of the carceral state is in a public failure to imagine otherwise often exemplified in the question: *But what do we do with all the serial killers and rapists?* which is particularly relevant to justice-oriented true crime spaces. In *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, Angela Davis calls on people concerned with harm reduction to reorient their action toward preventative thinking. Taking patriarchal violence into consideration, Davis asks

¹³⁸ I would further emphasize that family separation caused by incarceration and detention can be particularly damaging to children's thriving.

If we're thinking about someone who has committed acts of violence, why is that kind of violence possible? Why do men engage in such violent behavior against women? The very existence of the prison forecloses the kinds of discussions that we need in order to imagine the possibility of eradicating these behaviors.¹³⁹

Davis' questions undo the assumptions that shape public faith in the prison system, provoking "feminist" true crime fans to think instead about the nuance of toxic masculinity, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, transphobia, and other conditions of interpersonal violence. Instead of looking to a sex offender registry, true crime feminists might ask what sort of discourses, media representations, and patriarchal demands shape a desire to assault others, particularly women and/or children. If the beginnings of an answer cannot be addressed by prisons, as abolitions argue, then what's the use of a sex offender registry? Rather than to cancel the use of registries altogether, intersectional feminist true crime might consider how registries currently both prevent critical inquiry into the conditions that allow sexual violence and actively obscure other contexts of sexual violence.¹⁴⁰ Currently, as white feminist true crime fans identify with, and advocate for, the victim, their kinship with the dead is channeled into a retributive line of thinking, marking a severe failure in feminist imagination. Carceral feminist true crime fans must reckon with the ways in which their implicit and explicit pro-prison stance leads to more harm, both in and out of the prison system.

¹³⁹ Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, (New York: Haymarket Books, 2016), 22.

¹⁴⁰ In her book *Invisible No More*, Andrea Ritchie intervenes in the assumption that all women face the same circumstances of sexual violence. Instead, Ritchie demonstrates that Black women and other women of color are often survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by police officers and/or at the hands of state agents. I discuss this more at length in my first chapter.

Apprehending the Ear Hustle Podcast as True Crime Storytelling

Prisons of all sizes inflict harm on physical, emotional, and psychic levels every day. Sometimes the violence of incarceration is spectacular and sometimes it is mundane. Mainstream media portrays the prisons as violent supposedly because of the people inside them, rather than “a place that is violent because people are locked in cages for more hours than they are not, denied basic human rights, and forcibly removed from their communities.”¹⁴¹ Yet, if true crime feminists take seriously the interventions of abolitionists and accounts of folks with incarceration experience, we must recognize the prison itself as a perpetrator. Therefore, in an expansive intersectional feminist true crime genre, storytelling about any and all experiences of violence are relevant, including accounts of life during and after incarceration.

The podcast *Ear Hustle* covers life inside of San Quentin State Prison, a supermax correctional facility located in Northern California. San Quentin holds an important space in the cultural imaginary of incarcerated life as the oldest California prison and the only prison in the state with a death row. *Ear Hustle*, narrated by Nigel Poor (“a Bay Area visual artist”) and Earlonne Woods (“formerly incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison”), produces episodes that feature first-person accounts of everything from finding a cell roommate, seeking love during and after incarceration, the complicated relationship between incarcerated folks and correctional officers,

¹⁴¹ Damien M. Sojoyner, “Incarceration” in *Keywords for African American Studies*, eds. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 97.

and music-making inside prison.¹⁴² While the podcast's express purpose is not to expose prisons as perpetrators of violence, the daily harm inflicted by the institution is laid bare within the stories of severed relationships, lost dreams, confinement, harassment, and the degradation of health that people experience in and after San Quentin. In this way, *Ear Hustle* provides a lived account of violence, a story of true crime.

Importantly, *Ear Hustle* also traces the creation of joy, pleasure, and survival within the conditions of imprisonment. Those imprisoned at San Quentin gain a platform on which to reflect on their experiences: the bad and the pockets of good. The podcast is often an exercise in cultivating kinship and allyship. Built to be a window into life during and after incarceration, *Ear Hustle* pitches itself as a podcast that is, at least in part, concerned with reaching people who haven't been exposed to the workings of the prison system. This is also clear in how narrators Nigel and Earlonne speak to each other -- Earlonne was incarcerated and then released from San Quentin during the creation of the podcast and Nigel defers to his experiential expertise. Thus, the podcast does some of the work of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling by attending to violence, but also by acknowledging how survival can be a creative community endeavour.

To understand *Ear Hustle* as a project of true crime storytelling requires a radical expansion of "victim," "perpetrator," and "violence" in the true crime grammar and a divestment from state justice apparatuses. The storytelling in the podcast

¹⁴² Earlonne Woods and Nigel Poor, *Ear Hustle* (podcast). Radiotopia, <https://www.earhustlesq.com/>. (accessed April 17, 2020).

pushes current white feminist true crime narrators to recognize the prison as a daily harmful reality for some rather than an abstract site of justice. By giving a platform to those incarcerated at San Quentin, the podcast challenges the silencing apparatus of prisons and the carceral state. People living on death row have a chance to speak back to *MFM* host Karen's belief in "frying" those convicted of murder¹⁴³ and people without knowledge of life behind prison are able to gain a sense (albeit incomplete) of the grim reality of human caging. *Ear Hustle* unravels the allure of a paternalist, carceral state by encouraging a listener to relate to and affiliate with those inside of prisons instead of state discourse.

It is particularly provocative to consider *Ear Hustle* part of the true crime genre because of its national popularity in the world of podcasts. *Ear Hustle* shares a platform with many "canonical," contemporary true crime productions like *My Favorite Murder*, *Serial*, and *Crime Junkie*. As the genre has found a home in the serialized, audio format, podcast platforms like iTunes have adopted the role of gate-keeping the genre, placing *Ear Hustle* outside of the true crime category. Bringing *MFM* and *Ear Hustle* into conversation and under the same podcast category changes the conversation of what true crime is and can be. More, the two podcasts foster a greater potential for community engagement through the intimacy of the audio, the conversational tone, and the way it allows the narrative to become part of the listener's intimate, quotidian parts of life -- such as cooking, driving to work, walking the dog, etc. Like *MFM* and *Crime Junkie*, *Ear Hustle* is conversational and informal in

¹⁴³ Both Karen and Georgia, hosts of *My Favorite Murder*, have both encouraged their fans to listen to *Ear Hustle* on multiple occasions. The *MFM* hosts openly critique mass incarceration and the anti-Blackness of the prison system on their platform, aligning themselves with prison reform efforts.

tone. Hence, tracing *Ear Hustle* as a part of the legacy of true crime podcasting brings into relief the biases within the hegemonic true crime narrative while introducing a new set of stories through which to think about harm.

“But What Do We Do With All The Rapists and Murderers?”

For many feminists, and indeed for the hosts of *My Favorite Murder*, it is not so difficult to acknowledge that people behind bars face undue harm and that mass incarceration is the result of anti-Black, racial capitalism. The work of many Black activists, scholars, and creators -- such as Michelle Alexander, Bryan Stevenson, Angela Davis, Van Jones, and Ava Duvernay, to name a few -- has brought mass incarceration (as a racial justice issue) to mainstream attention over the past decade. Yet, the tension between reformists and abolitionists endures largely because of an ideological disagreement as to whether the problems wrought by the carceral state reflect a broken system or a system *intentionally* designed to disproportionately inflict harm and target Black and Brown communities. Even with this nuanced discussion at play, the reformist/abolitionist debate is often hung on the question, “but what do we do with all the rapists and murderers?” For many reformists, the question of “violent offenders” represents a major contention with the complete eradication of prisons, policing, incarceration/caging, and the PIC. It seems that the types of perpetrators that primarily populate true crime represent the limits of a reformist imagination where carceral logic cannot be successfully challenged or wholly disavowed. This chapter began with the concession that it’s understandable

that people, especially feminists, do not want serial killers to remain unaccountable and free to commit more harm. However, abolition asks the question: *Do prisons and the carceral system really prevent interpersonal harm from taking place?* Intersectional feminist true crime storytelling must be interested in attending to the deeper causes of violence in order to truly prevent it.

True crime fans know potentially better than anyone that many rapists, murderers, and serial killers escape accountability during their lives, unmasked after death or never. The #MeToo movement¹⁴⁴ has demonstrated more clearly than ever that perpetrators of sexual violence hold some of the most power in the world, let alone simply evade the reach of the law. Abolitionist and trans justice advocate Dean Spade points out that “trans people’s lives are so devalued by police and prosecutors that trans murders are not investigated or trans people’s murderers are given less punishment than is typical in murder sentencing.”¹⁴⁵ This indicates that the problem of rapists and serial killers is not resolved by the presence of prisons, imprisonment, or the death penalty. Rather, the examples above prompt feminists and others concerned with (patriarchal) violence to critically reimagine what it would take to meaningfully address interpersonal harm, to actually bring people who harm others to account.

The first step in this process is articulating safety, liberation, and justice outside of state-sanctioned approaches. In his book *Normal Life*, Dean Spade explores the pitfalls of a trans rights movement that looks to state protection, reform, and

¹⁴⁴ In 2006, Black activist Tarana Burke coined the term #MeToo. Burke started the campaign to bring to light the painfully common experience of sexual violence as a strategy to address it.

¹⁴⁵ Dean Spade, *Normal Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 39.

policy in order to address transphobic violence. Spade disavows a rights-based approach and argues that a trans politics that appeals to the state might be turning to a transphobic perpetrator as a supposed ally. Spade is concerned with the “limits of the law” to prevent transphobic violence and provide justice on a road to healing and liberation. Spade concludes that “the fruitlessness of ‘victories’ in which trans identity is called upon to legitimize the exile logic of criminalization and the ‘equal opportunity’ logic of anti-discrimination opens many key strategy questions for our resistance.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, the failure of an allyship with state justice apparatuses is an occasion for anti-violence movements (in Spade’s case a trans justice and/or liberation movement) to reconsider what harm prevention, accountability, justice, and healing might really look like.

Spade’s contributions represent a lesson that the carceral feminist true crime community must learn in order to more effectively imagine (and begin to create) a world without violence. *Normal Life*’s emphasis on the “limits of the law” to grant safety, wellbeing, and/or liberation are particularly relevant in conversation with the approach of true crime feminists to pass laws in order “protect” future victims. Indeed, a common narrative resolution in true crime stories is the passing of a law, often in the name of the victim and resulting from the actions of bereaved family members that expands the power and/or reach of the carceral state. One of the most affectively charged examples of this is the passing of the Adam Walsh Child Protection And Safety Act which was signed into law in 2006 by President George W.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 137.

Bush. The law was named after Adam Walsh who, at the age of six, was abducted and murdered. On the day of its signing, President Bush said

Our society has a duty to protect our children from exploitation and danger. By enacting this law we're sending a clear message across the country: those who prey on our children will be caught, prosecuted and punished to the fullest extent of the law.¹⁴⁷

The Act provides a number of expansions of policing and surveillance in the name of protecting children. Most notably, the law creates the formation of a National Child Abuse Registry where state data is aggregated and shared by all law enforcement, nationwide. The Adam Walsh Child Protection And Safety Act was passed as a result of Adam's family's strong advocacy paired with a state interest in expanding carceral power. At the beginning of the 2006 press conference, Adam's father John Walsh characterized the law as "S.W.A.T. team for kids" to which President Bush responded, "Yes, it is, S.W.A.T. team for kids."¹⁴⁸ The exchange brings into relief how the affective political deployment of a victim, especially one imagined as a white child, facilitates the legal expansion of state surveillance and the use of paramilitary forces in the name of protection. Yet, Adam Walsh is still dead and other children continue to be abused, separated from their families, and even murdered today despite the law in his name -- one only needs to think of ICE and detention facilities to recognize the state's own role in this harm. The law is limited in its capacity to abate violence, and highly efficient at reproducing it through the growth of prisons, policing, and other caging systems.

¹⁴⁷ "President Signs H.R. 4472, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006," The White House: George W. Bush Archive. Original publication July 27, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060727-6.html>. (accessed April 16, 2020).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

In *Normal Life*, Spade puts life and thriving at the center of his trans politics but works towards those ends outside of the state and the law. His contributions are deeply relevant to the type of questions at stake in carceral feminist critique within true crime, and should prompt true crime “feminists” to consider the limits imposed by state-sanctioned pathways to the world they seek to create. Existing feminist true crime storytelling is doing good work to build community and strategize collective survival but has yet to grapple with what an intersectional feminist true crime *justice* looks like. If intersectional feminist true crime storytelling creates the space of world-remembering, kinship with the dead, and holding victims in wake, justice must be on a path of healing that brings us closer to a world without violence.

Prison abolition is the only viable politics from an intersectional feminist, anti-violence perspective. To think about how this aligns with feminist politics and true crime activism in the name of harm reduction, I turn to a Fred Moten quote:

What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.¹⁴⁹

In Moten’s framing, preventing harm and building safer communities is the project to completely reimagine relations, power, and culture. Prison abolition is when feminists and organizers take it upon ourselves to reimagine safety, justice, accountability, and healing for our own communities through means that do not produce more harm. The abolition of prisons is a part of the abolition of violence. As Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade remind us, “abolition is not some

¹⁴⁹ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 114.

distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends. [...] If it is not clear already, we are all in this together.”¹⁵⁰

Abolition is care and kinship in the face of violence.

Imagining True Crime Harm Prevention, Accountability, and Healing Beyond Survival

“Justice” in white feminist true crime has long been attached to the criminal justice system and retroactive, retributive action. When feminist true crime fans mourn a victim’s life, the impulse is often to expand the reach of the carceral state as a means of prevention and punishment. However, this chapter tracks how ineffective prisons and policing are at *reducing* harm, and how often carceral systems cause more violence committed against Black and Brown communities, trans people, and women. Further, Angela Davis invites feminists to consider how seeking state justice, especially in the case of patriarchal violence, forecloses more nuanced discussions about how to materially prevent harm, leverage accountability, and facilitate healing. Indeed, the criminal justice system responds to violence in a “one-size-fits-all” model with a legal process that is essentially the same for all,¹⁵¹ rather than an approach that evaluates the needs of everyone involved. Black and Brown, poor, disabled, and survivor communities have been creating alternatives to state criminal justice for

¹⁵⁰ Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, “Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got,” in *Captive Genders*, eds. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015), 42.

¹⁵¹ Though legal processes are hypothetically the same for all residents, marginalized people have always had experiences with the state that are inflected by bias and the legacies of oppression.

decades, namely restorative and transformative justice approaches. Consequently, I argue that intersectional feminist true crime communities must adopt prison abolition and transformative justice (TJ) in the place of carceral punishment in order to address harm of all forms at its roots.

At the heart of transformative justice are the values of harm reduction, accountability, and healing. In their book *Beyond Survival*, co-editors Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a disability justice scholar, and Ejeris Dixon, a grassroots organizer, explore histories and futures of transformative justice, collecting strategies for community thriving. Writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs' unpacks the book's title in her foreword, writing that "survival already means to live beyond. Beyond what? Beyond disasters, systemic and interpersonal. Beyond the halted breathing of our ancestors. Beyond yesterday. And five minutes ago."¹⁵² The title of the book, along with its creative and exigent content, reframes conversations about what it means to live past violence. White feminist true crime is frequently a space where survival advice is dispensed -- carry pepper spray, lock your door at night, "fuck politeness," for example. Most often, this advice essentially only applies to an individual interested in protecting themselves. TJ and the strategies laid out in *Beyond Survival* call on community collaboration in the project of safety-making and communal thriving. TJ is an intervention into an unsafe world and a state criminal justice response, enacting and imagining the way to a safer tomorrow beyond survival.

¹⁵² Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Foreword," in *Beyond Survival*, eds. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2020), 1.

Though all chapters of *Beyond Survival* are essential to intersectional feminist true crime praxis, Audrey Huntley's chapter "From Breaking Silence to Community Control" deeply resonates with an intersectional feminist true crime project. Huntley, a creative storyteller and advocate of Anishnawbe ancestry, explores her work with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls, trans and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S) network within the settler context of Canada. Huntley opens the chapter by discussing how the No More Silence campaign -- the labor of generations of Indigenous women to publicly grieve Indigenous victims of violent death -- is a crucial form of resistance that continues today. Huntley declares that "public mourning is a powerful act that flies in the face of the societal indifference that has surrounded MMIWG2S for too long."¹⁵³ The No More Silence campaign exemplifies the role of critical mourning in fights for justice. Further, the MMIWG2S organizers have taken it upon themselves and their community to investigate the murders and disappearances of Indigenous community members given Canadian law enforcement's financial disinvestment and material inaction. Huntley participated in a number of murder investigations, recovering and grieving the loss of worlds while bypassing failing police "efforts." In cases where justice was found, Huntley credits the role of outrage and grief, writing that "the importance of public vigils to create media presence cannot be understated."¹⁵⁴ Huntley's chapter explores the myriad ways in which the state does not actively seek justice for murdered and missing Indigenous folks, of whom women, girls, trans and Two-Spirit community members

¹⁵³ Audrey Huntley, "From Breaking Silence to Community Control," in *Beyond Survival*, eds. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2020), 56.

¹⁵⁴ Huntley, "From Breaking Silence to Community Control," 65.

are especially targeted. She lays out a deeply personal experience with taking community grief, healing, and accountability into her own hands, echoing the aspirational work of all feminist true crime.

A few years into *My Favorite Murder*, a story emerged on the podcast Facebook page of which I was a part of at the time. Though the entire group has since been disbanded, I remember clearly reading the account of a listener who claimed to have been walking back to her car in a parking lot when another woman called to her and began a conversation. The original poster did not know the other woman but when they could speak discreetly, the woman confessed that she had seen a man tampering with the original poster's car and pacing nearby. The two women approached the car together, causing the man to scatter and they discovered some damage that would have caused the original poster to have to stick around alone surveying the problem. Once the car was sorted, the woman headed out, casually saying "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" (the podcast catchphrase) to the original poster as she left. Sure enough, this second woman who was observant and intervened in a potentially dangerous situation was a fellow fan of *MFM* and even another member of the FB group. This is a familiar story: women identifying when others are seemingly unsafe in public and concocting reasons to discreetly check on them. In the case of the *MFM* community story, I am taken with how the woman who intervened attached the podcast catchphrase to her actions, as though she understood her actions as connected to the true crime community even if the woman she "saved" would not understand the reference. This sort of community care

and kinship is not isolated to true crime but is cultivated within feminist communities at large. It is a powerful and important alternative to calling the police while still intervening when the gut senses danger. What the *MFM* fan did for the woman approaching her car was true crime transformative justice in action. Books like *Beyond Survival* and other resources on the TJ movement have already been written; the work is well underway. It is time for true crime communities to tune into those strategies and join the larger fight led by queer and trans, poor, disabled, Black and Indigenous people of color.

In her chapter “Building Community Safety”, Ejeris Dixon poses four essential questions: “What is the world that we want? How will we define safety? How do we build the skills to address harm and violence? How do we create the trust needed for communities to rely on each other for mutual support?”¹⁵⁵ These questions are deeply relevant to true crime communities while provoking feminist imagination and transformative justice creative thinking. If true crime spaces seriously consider these questions, from a recognition that the current state justice model does not work, an intersectional feminist true crime justice might be possible and the radical potential of true crime kinship might be harnessed to make the world safer for everyone.

¹⁵⁵ Ejeris Dixon, “Building Community Safety,” in *Beyond Survival*, eds. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2020), 17.

“May We Be Buried Alive Together”

A Conclusion

Writing from a Pandemic

As I sought to finish up this year-long Gender Studies thesis, my world and the world around me came to a halt as a result of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. I found myself trying to write about grieving, storytelling, and feminist kinship in the face of violence during a time of unprecedented panic, isolation, and death. COVID-19 has been disruptive in complex ways. Already, the pandemic has reframed discourse around the bounds of the body, governmental responsibility, co-survival, new and alternative kinships, mutual aid networks, learning and work accommodations, public health, ableism and eugenics, worker's rights, food access, late-stage capitalism, and the healthcare system. Exigent feminist issues are coming into national and global consciousness on a scale never seen before. Yet, many people are dying, in some cases as the direct result of other peoples' selfish behavior. COVID has profoundly impacted feminist conversations about death, community, care, and grief.

Yet, true crime communities interpret the everyday conditions of the world (outside of a pandemic) as a state of crisis. True crime communities are typically generated online, and usually live primarily on the Internet. True crime communities deal with grief, healing, and care work on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. True crime communities are interested in a communal project of survival that takes into account a shared societal landscape that is deeply violent for some. True crime communities recognize the imperative to sit with pain and loss. True crime communities acknowledge the place for rage and anger in the face of violence and

injustice. True crime communities are born out of death. True crime communities represent a kinship based on anxiety, fear, and panic and a desire to direct that energy into imagining a safer world. As I reflect on the subject of my thesis during a deadly pandemic, I can't help but feel as though feminist true crime has something deeply meaningful to offer at this moment.

Danger and death are happening around us constantly and how we attend to the dying matters just as much as how we imagine a better future. True crime teaches us this. Returning to this thesis as I shelter in place, I feel that the stakes of feminist attention to deadly crisis have never been more clear. Moreover, COVID-19 and true crime both reveal the essential pairing of critical theory *alongside* care and kinship in a feminist confrontation of violence. Caring for the dead is political.

Keyword: Death/care

In 21st century U.S. life, death care has become an industry dependent on advanced degrees, supply chains, management, fees, and profit margins. Many Americans only come in contact with the \$16-billion-dollar¹⁵⁶ industry when a loved one has passed. The industry receives little critical public attention because the work of morticians, funeral directors, and casket manufacturers represents a type of care that can be painful, triggering, and dark. In many Western societies, and the modern U.S. cultural landscape in particular, mundane or unspectacular conversations about death are relatively taboo. Death care has become a highly sanitized business endeavor rather

¹⁵⁶ Tessa Love, "Women Are Revolutionizing the Death Industry," *Dame Magazine*. Original publication July 31, 2017, <https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/07/31/women-are-revolutionizing-death-industry/>. (accessed April 9, 2020).

than an intimate labor. Yet, in an industry as profit-driven and emotionally detached as U.S. death care has become, the labor of caring for the departed is still sacred and it carries gendered stakes.

Indeed, across countless cultures and generations, it has always been women, Two-Spirit, and queer community members who have taken on death care labor. Deborah A. Miranda, a scholar of Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation and Chumash ascent, discusses the “gendercide” of Chumash *’aqi* and how the systematic genocide of those genderqueer Chumash community members affected the death rituals for which they were responsible. In Chumash culture, *’aqi* (who Miranda groups under the label “Two-Spirit”) were entrusted with bridging the realm of the living and the realm of the dead because of their masculine-feminine balance. Miranda writes that “the journey to the afterlife was known to be a prescribed series of experiences with both male and female supernatural entities, and the *’aqi*, with their male-female liminality, were the only people who could mediate these experiences.”¹⁵⁷ *’Aqi* performed the labor and sacred rituals to aid deceased Chumash community members to properly pass on. As religious colonialism fueled the gendercide of these Two-Spirit community members, Chumash death care rituals were thrown into crisis.

Across a land mass and an ocean, Akan women play a major role in socio-cultural death rites in Ghana. Osei-Mensah Aborampah details how women in Akan culture perform important death care work such as preparing bodies of the deceased for “lying in wait,” caring for widows, and even becoming “the channel or

¹⁵⁷ Deborah A. Miranda, “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 266.

medium of communication for the deceased” during funeral celebrations.¹⁵⁸ In particular, Akan women are tasked with the emotional labor of wailing and shedding tears for the deceased. Though loud crying and other displays of sorrow are culturally expected at funerals, Akan men are not meant to “shed tears in public.”¹⁵⁹ And so, the literal labor of mourning falls to women. For Akan women, the dead are a responsibility that involves emotional, physical, and spiritual labor.

Victorian societal norms in early U.S. settlements also left death care in the hands of women in the domestic sphere. Death typically occurred in the home and matriarchs were expected to handle the bodies, the wakes, and the emotional labor of caring for others after a family member passed.¹⁶⁰ In her 2017 article for *Dame Magazine*, “Women Are Revolutionizing the Death Industry,” Tessa Loves traces the transition of death care from women’s domestic labor to a men-dominated industry following the Civil War. The War wrought the invention and mass production of embalming solution which required a medical license to administer, bringing much of death care work into the professional, public sphere. Love writes that “what started as an ill substitute became a business: Embalmers set up shop near battlegrounds and sold soldiers their own corporeal afterlives. Death became a commodity, and more men wanted in on it.”¹⁶¹ The new business endeavor required “expertise” and care became an industrialized trade. From domestic work to business and intimate

¹⁵⁸ Osei-Mensah Aborampah, “Women's Roles in the Mourning Rituals of the Akan of Ghana,” *Ethnology* 38, no. 3 (1999): 262.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁶⁰ Love, “Women Are Revolutionizing the Death Industry.”

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

labor to masculine industry, death care in the U.S. transformed radically, pushing women out of its bounds.

Today in the United States, however, women are increasingly becoming the face of death care yet again. Ted Shaffrey's 2018 *Associated Press* article, "Death becomes her: Women make inroads in the funeral industry" notes the pointed rise of women in various death industry careers. Shaffrey cites a 2017 statistic from the American Board of Funeral Service Education which tracks that nearly 65 percent of graduates from funeral director programs in the United States "were female."¹⁶² The State University of New York Canton's training program for morticians and undergraduates recently graduated a class that was made up of 80% women.¹⁶³ In 2015, the Funeralwise blog "Digital Dying" reported that 57% of all U.S. mortuary students were women.¹⁶⁴ These statistics suggest that, increasingly, women living in the U.S. are seeing a role for themselves in the death care industry.

More than that, Tessa Love argues in her article that women are *changing* the industry in an effort to destigmatize, desanitize, and even deindustrialize the societal response to death and death care. The death positivity movement is credited to mortician Caitlin Doughty who founded the "Order of the Good Death," a "collective [of] 80 percent women, all of whom are building a revolution of death awareness

¹⁶² Ted Shaffrey, "Death becomes her: Women make inroads in the funeral industry," *The Associated Press*. Original publication November 27, 2018, <https://apnews.com/80d5b988f9ac4f279ee60b4fb51a79f4>. (accessed April 9, 2020).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ "Number of Female Funeral Directors Continues to Increase," *Digital Dying*. Funeralwise, Original publication August 24, 2015, <https://www.funeralwise.com/digital-dying/number-of-female-funeral-directors-continues-to-increase/>. (accessed April 9, 2020).

through activism, science, entrepreneurship, art and feminism.”¹⁶⁵ Death positivity, voiced by women, calls on all of Western society to sit honestly with the topic of death in order to demystify it. Death positivity works to allow people to make decisions about their passing that are not unnecessarily ignorant because of the fear and stigma that surround death in Western cultures. The Order of Good Death is currently run by “Death & the Maiden” blogger Sarah Chavez who writes that “for many of us, working with death is an act of resistance. It is our way of reclaiming our space, our bodies, our lives and ourselves.”¹⁶⁶ Funeral Divas Inc., a social collective of women in the funeral services, was started by Muneerah Warner in 2010 in order to cultivate stronger community between women in the death care industry; in a matter of a year, 300 women joined the Funeral Divas group.¹⁶⁷ Aside from being led by and made up of women, these platforms align death care work with feminist causes and the lived experiences of non-cisgender. They recognize the space for kinship in the face of death. The death positivity movement simultaneously recognizes the imperative for feminist recuperation of death care from a masculinized, capitalist industry model and the deep, historical connection of women and death.

Death care is an important feminist consideration, though it is not widely discussed in scholarship. In all of the beloved NYU Press *Keywords* anthologies commonly referenced in Gender Studies, “death” never appears. Mourning, grief, and wake are absent as well. Yet, surely the repeated keywords “Empire,” “Militarism,” and

¹⁶⁵ Love, “Women Are Revolutionizing the Death Industry.”

¹⁶⁶ Sarah Chavez, *Death & the Maiden*, <https://deadmaidens.com/> (accessed April 9, 2020).

¹⁶⁷ Vinnie Rotondaro, “Funeral Divas,” *Slate*. Original publication March 25, 2011, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2011/03/women-funeral-directors-starting-to-dominate-the-death-care-industry.html> (accessed April 10, 2020).

“Genocide” suggest that intersectional feminist academia and its associated fields are deeply imbricated with a political exploration and lived experience of death. Historians and archives themselves remind us that death care has always been a site of gendered labor and social power. Feminists and true crime fans alike are forced to practice a form of death positivity because they must face death on a practical, mundane level. Death positivity is compatible with outrage at white supremacist, patriarchal violence because the nature of intersectional feminist fights for justice tie political organizing and death care. Grief work, critical mourning, and death care generate a worldview. I argue throughout this thesis that true crime’s and feminism’s shared attention to violence and death align them with this perspective, which I term world-remembering. When a feminist relates a story of a woman’s death to another feminist, death care is practiced on personal and political levels. Few are more familiar with speaking about death on personal, political, and narrative levels simultaneously than the feminist true crime fan. I am interested in how death care, death positivity, and intersectional feminist true crime storytelling converge in the feminist practice of world-remembering.

“May We Be Buried Alive Together”

World-remembering is an act of kinship, across generations and the lines of life and death. In the final line of Jairus Grove’s introduction to *Savage Ecology*, Grove writes, “May we all be buried alive together.”¹⁶⁸ Grove’s dark portrayal of impending human

¹⁶⁸ Jairus Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 28.

doom in the face of anthropogenic climate change comes to a close with the haunting provocation that we will all meet our ends, and all we can hope for is to meet them together as the world implodes around us. Upon first reading, Grove's words inexplicably and immediately brought my mind to the work of intersectional feminist true crime storytelling. In conversation with this thesis, Grove's words exemplify the at times paradoxical relationship between feminist critique, the environment, kinship, violence, and the dead. Grove's concept of being buried alive gets at the experience of death through life, life through death, and their simultaneity. In this way, the temporality of life and death are thrown into crisis in provocative and generative ways for feminist inquiry. By rejecting the discrete status of life and death, more lived experiences come into the fold of feminist politics.

Thus, along the lines of Grove's provocation, attending to the deadly conditions of life allows intersectional feminist true crime to pursue kinship with the dead *and* amongst the living in the face of death. It resonates with the feminist death positivity movement and an expansive notion of death care. True crime community is about looking to the dead and the traumatized to fight for a safer, more just world. The essence of Grove's "together" is illustrated in the kinship networks that develop among the living and the dead in existing true crime communities. Part of the white feminist true crime turn has involved an understanding of the interconnectedness of the living and the dead; white feminism does this by calling attention to the unlivable conditions of the patriarchy and toxic masculinity of which some of us survive and some of us don't. Thus, "may we be buried alive together" is the

intersectional feminist true crime provocation: *How do we mourn when death is a condition of life for some of us and when life and death are not discrete statuses but overlap in painful and complex ways?* “May we be buried alive” attests to the importance of feminist kinship in the face of harm, violence, and death.

Towards World-Remembering

As I have discussed above, true crime holds the space of a wake and offers death care work through its storytelling. The act of true crime storytelling, of giving dimension to victims’ lives and generating outrage at their death, enacts a feminist care practice that has the potential to lead to political action. True crime kinship and community-building is a distinct and essential component of the genre’s storytelling, creating care networks. True crime invites collective vulnerability and a communal pursuit of healing. Struggles of the dead and the living are blurred in true crime storytelling and, in that way, those who have passed are remembered and honored. True crime therefore offers a contemporary, politically-engaged site for care and healing in the face of violence and death. Tending to the dead -- particularly when the conditions of said death result from white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy -- is a feminist act. World-remembering is the beginning of a feminist death care praxis.

When feminists remember Mya Hall, the Elwha River, and the lives lost in the Attica massacre, they are engaging in an act of imagination. It takes a creative, imaginative effort to re-member Mya’s community presence, the Elwha’s flourishing

Chinook salmon population, and the fleeting taste of freedom that permeated Attica's D-Block yard on that monumental September day. Each of these worlds, small and large scale, deserves to be mourned. Indeed, mourning, grief work, and imaginative re-membering fly in the face of genocide, the middle passage and chattel enslavement, settler colonialism, extinction, and incarceration.

World-remembering is generative and critical mourning; it is feminist organizing and death care.

In this thesis, I have laid out the case for a true crime storytelling that expands the categories of "victim," "perpetrator," and "violence" in conversation with intersectional feminist organizing and scholarship. In doing so, I see great potential for true crime to become a space of feminist organizing and kinship that takes up the labor of world-remembering, re-membering past worlds in the stories we tell about them, the way we mourn them, and in our fights for justice on behalf of them. By thinking critically about the discourses that shape the hegemonic true crime narrative, feminists can begin to imagine intersectional true crime storytelling instead. In my chapters, I argue that Claudia Rankine's lyric *Citizen*, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poem "Anointed," and Nigel Poor and Earlonne Woods' podcast *Ear Hustle* are all examples of what this storytelling might look like. I also maintain that certain aspects of white feminist true crime are important to an intersectional true crime storytelling such as the generation of outrage, the cultivation of kinship with the dead, and the project of building community action towards a safer tomorrow.

However, this thesis only *begins* to critique existing true crime and imagine a feminist path for it.

As future feminist scholarship grapples with true crime cultural productions and “feminist” community, many more questions will arise that this thesis does not address. Important work needs to be done in thinking through the unsettling collusion between true crime cultural productions and the rise of the home security market. Scholarship must attend to the complex question of whether storytelling in the media is always fraught with the violent push to spectacularize. Feminists and true crime fans alike must sit with the disturbing truth that much of true crime media today is a business that commodifies the trauma of others. These inquiries are generative in that, through critique, they provoke the feminist imagination. Through future scholarship, hopefully world-remembering will remain an element of true crime storytelling as the imperative to mourn, to critique, to organize, and to imagine. In doing this work, may we cultivate coalitions across oceans and bodies to open up possibilities for a less toxic and violent tomorrow. May we grieve, fight, and care for one another through life, death, and justice.

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