

Killer Folklore Identity Issues in the True Crime Community

Naomie Barnes

Volume 41, numéro 1, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069850ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069850ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Barnes, N. (2019). Killer Folklore: Identity Issues in the True Crime Community. *Ethnologies*, 41(1), 153–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069850ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine le développement des identités au sein de la True Crime Community (TCC) et analyse la théorie de la contagion du crime entourant les meurtres de masse et en série aux États-Unis. La TCC est un groupe Tumblr en ligne qui partage des photos, des blagues, des légendes et d'autres récits entourant les tueurs de masse ou en série. Les membres de la TCC sont fréquemment accusés par des observateurs externes d'avoir créé des espaces où les tueurs acquièrent une célébrité, ce qui, en théorie, incite davantage de tueurs à passer à l'acte. Deux problématiques découlent de cette théorie de la contagion. La première est que les modes de participation avec les représentations du crime et la production de textes autour des ces crimes sont façonnés par la théorie de la contagion et les débats vernaculaires sur le *fandom*. Deuxièmement, la théorie de la contagion elle-même prête le flanc à une analyse critique interdisciplinaire où les folkloristes qui examinent les communautés qui participent à la (re)production de récits sur des crimes avérés, peuvent offrir des informations, des approches et des théories précieuses. De plus, comme l'ont noté les folkloristes travaillant sur les rumeurs et légendes contemporaines, ceux-ci peuvent aussi avoir un rôle à jouer dans l'interruption de ces cycles criminels.

KILLER FOLKLORE

Identity Issues in the True Crime Community

Naomie Barnes

Memorial University of Newfoundland

During Ted Bundy's 1979 murder trial in Miami, Florida, a "steady and unusual string of spectators" filled the courtroom and lined up outside ("Ted Bundy Groupies" 1979). News reels from the trial show that these spectators were young women around the same age as the two sorority sisters Bundy was accused of murdering the year before. Though some of the women admitted to being afraid or unnerved by Bundy, they also admitted that they were fascinated by him, even if they were unsure why. Similar cases of attraction to the spectacle surrounding serial and mass murderers shroud American killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, Richard Ramirez, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, Dennis Rader, Ed Gein, John Wayne Gacy, H. H. Holmes, and many others (Schmid 2005; Levin and Fox 1985; P. Jenkins 1994).¹ This same pattern of fascination—from both male and female spectators—continues in more recent trials for mass killers such as TJ Lane, Dylann Roof, James E. Holmes, and others.² As unlikely as it may seem,

1. Jeffrey Dahmer was convicted of killing 15 individuals from 1978-1991; Charles Manson was convicted of killing nine individuals in 1969; Richard Ramirez was convicted of killing 13 individuals from 1984-1985 (among other charges); Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 individuals and wounded 24 before committing suicide at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado on April 20, 1999; Dennis Rader was convicted of killing 10 individuals between 1974-1991; Ed Gein confessed to killing two women (though only convicted of one murder) and exhumed multiple corpses to create items out of skin and body parts; John Wayne Gacy was convicted of killing 33 boys and men between 1972-1978; H.H. Holmes was convicted of killing four individuals (though nine victims were confirmed), but it is believed the true number of victims could be close to 200 (Hickey 2010; Holmes and Holmes 2001).
2. TJ Lane was convicted of killing three students at Chardon High School in Chardon, Ohio on Feb. 27, 2012 (Gast and Pearson 2013); Dylann Roof was convicted and sentenced to death for killing nine individuals at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on January 11, 2017

“crime is no longer a bar to celebrity; indeed, it is as close to a guarantee of celebrity as one can find” (Schmid 2005: 10). Their infamous cases are followed by groups of people fascinated with these criminals, the victims, and court proceedings—even long after the criminal has been imprisoned or is deceased. The goal of this article is to examine public response to mass and serial murders by considering the development and performance of identity within the online True Crime Community (TCC) found on Tumblr.³ Those fascinated by these cases are often labeled as serial killer or mass murder “fans,” though many members of the TCC object to the idea that they belong to a fandom. By taking a closer look at participatory customs and self-identification within the community, we can not only examine reasons why groups like the TCC form and persist but explore how the objective study of such groups can assist in future research centered on stigma and contagion factors surrounding such crimes.

According to the FBI’s Serial Murder Symposium, *serial killings* are “The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events” (Morton and Hilts 2008: 9). In these cases, there is a cooling off period between the murders, ranging from several weeks to sometimes years and are likely to occur at different locations. *Mass murder*, on the other hand, is “a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident” (8). In the past several decades, a seemingly apparent increase in these types of murders has dominated the news, with emphasis placed on those that are more gruesome or shocking. This is all a matter of perception, as David Schmid (2005) points out, because history has been rife with killers, as well as prominent figures in the political world and media who use these criminals to comment on the state of society (13).

(Shah and McLaughlin 2017); James E. Holmes was convicted of killing 12 individuals and injuring 70 others at the Century 16 theater in Aurora, Colorado on July 20, 2012 (O’Neill 2015).

3. Tumblr was founded in February 2007 and contains roughly 462 million blogs with over 171.1 billion posts in 18 languages. Its users are encouraged to either post original content or “lurk if [they’re] feeling shy” (according to <https://www.tumblr.com/about>). All posts are archived by Tumblr, even after an account goes dormant (no use for more than a year). Users are able to create any user name, design their blog however they wish, and are encouraged to express themselves creatively and connect with others, so long as they abide with the Community Guidelines (<https://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/community>).

In order to understand why the general public believes serial and mass killings are a newer phenomenon, it is important to examine how information about these particular types of crimes is disseminated to the public. Schmid (2005) discusses how the FBI was initially uninterested in cases where multiple murders were committed by the same killer, instead leaving these cases to the local law enforcement officers and detectives. The Bureau had certainly been aware of and studied serial murders, but prior to a press conference held on October 26, 1983 they never made a formal declaration of interest into these crimes (77). Schmid also points out that until that time the public was not necessarily aware of these types of serial killings; thus, the term “serial killer” was not a part of the common vernacular. As such, the FBI was able to create the serial killer image it preferred: a sexually deviant male who roamed the United States looking for random victims (78-81). This exaggerated image was “useful to federal law enforcement as the emphasis on mobility and sexual homicide [achieved] its goal of increased resources and power” (83). Shortly after the FBI went public with this new terminology and profile, rumors began circulating that hundreds of serial killers were roaming the country. Because of this public perception, the FBI guaranteed its position of authority in such cases and guaranteed federal funding would continue to flow to the Bureau. The greatest tool at their disposal in this project was the news media.

News media outlets make money by “presenting news that attracts a large audience, which, in turn, attracts more advertising dollars” (Duwe 2000: 364). Accordingly, increased public fear created by the FBI’s newly established, roaming serial killers created a situation that not only benefitted the FBI, but also the news broadcast companies by creating an engaging story. The “rise” of the serial killer in the 1980s and 1990s, therefore became a valuable source of income for various news networks. As Grant Duwe (2000) explains, “high-profile cases generate a great deal of interest and concern, providing reporters and sources...with an opportunity to make claims about new or recurring crime problems” (367-368). This is especially true of high-profile stories surrounding killers, which can be seen as “entertaining, and thus more appealing to consumers...because they are dramatic, tragic, and rare in occurrence” (365). In essence, sensationalized murder is (and always has been) a lucrative business for news outlets. The heavy media coverage of serial killers was common during this time period and likely would have continued into the new millennium if not for a series of high-profile mass shootings that substantially changed the discourse surrounding these types of crimes.

Five highly publicized mass shootings occurred between October and December 1991, causing an increased interest in the phenomenon among news outlets (Duwe 2007: 1). This time period marked the slow shift away from the media focus on serial killers to mass murderers, which again changed public perceptions of the types of crime happening in the United States.⁴ In the decades since that initial coverage in 1991, highly publicized mass shootings helped create a culture where certain cities or places are now synonymous with mass murder: Columbine (1999), Virginia Tech (2007), Fort Hood (2009), Aurora (2012), Sandy Hook (2012), Charleston (2015), Orlando (2016), Las Vegas (2017), Parkland (2018), Tree of Life (2018).⁵ Though mass murders gained increasing attention (and continues to fill the forefront of news accounts) it is again important to remember that it is the rare, exaggerated case that is most “news worthy” and profitable. This is most obvious in the case of mass murder because the common perception is that shootings, bombings, and other forms of mass murder only happen in highly visible areas such as schools, businesses, theaters, concert venues, etc. However, these are simply the cases that gain the most media coverage because they are the most shocking. The majority of mass murders in the United States actually occur in home environments where domestic violence increases to the point of family annihilation (Towers *et al.* 2015: 2).

With the emergence and now ubiquity of the Internet, the faster the media can get information, the more these sensational stories can be transmitted via the Internet, whether through 24-hour news channels’ own Internet sites or via social media, and other Internet-based environments. This constant flow of information not only gives casual public observers access to shocking content, it provides an avenue for true crime⁶ enthusiasts to find detailed information about the events, criminals, and victims. It is

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4. The public interest in mass shootings is perhaps best demonstrated by the term “going postal,” which initially emerged after the 1986 Edmond Post Office Massacre that took place in Edmond, Oklahoma. The term gained more traction as a series of fifteen shooting incidents took place in post offices around the United States, occurring between 1986 and 1999 (Everett, n.d.). “Going postal” was initially synonymous with workplace violence but eventually became a vernacular expression for being angry, often over something inconsequential.
 5. For a more detailed list of mass shootings, see: “US Mass Shootings, 1982-2019: Data from Mother Jones’ Investigation,” <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data>.
 6. The term “true crime” theoretically describes any type of crime that occurs in real life. However, the “true crime” label is now most often associated with crimes involving murder and other extreme violent acts.

important to note that the Internet provides access points where individuals can find communities and groups where this information can be shared and spread at remarkable rates, allowing personal theories and interpretations of events to flow and shift as new details emerge. A prevailing concern surrounding this constant, easy access to violent images and content is the idea that the more someone views this content, the more likely they will commit similar acts of violence. It is a common argument, and similar to public perceptions of other types of violent media (video games, movies, television shows, etc.), especially because some serial and mass murderers claim to be influenced by notorious killers of the past. These copycat incidents are not difficult to link together, and it is easy to fall into the trap that viewing violent content causes violent acts. It is possible, though, that this hypothesis is not entirely true.

In a study, conducted in 2015, Sherry Towers et al. tested the theory that media reports and coverage of homicides (including mass shootings) “subsequently increase the incidence of similar incidents in the community...similar to the patterns seen in the spread of infectious disease” (2). The researchers gathered information regarding these incidents from around the United States, including: number of victims per incident, cases of mental illness per state, and suicide rates of the killers involved (whether by self-inflicted wounds or “suicide by cop”). If their work discovered that media coverage induces a contagion effect, their study would support the idea that news outlets should reduce the airtime given to such stories. It would also suggest that groups such as the True Crime Community—who spend hours creating and consuming violent, graphic material—may be more likely to commit such crimes, as contagion would be more likely due to the larger amount of content consumed. However, the researchers found:

While our analysis was initially inspired by the hypothesis that mass media attention given to sensational violent events may promote ideation in vulnerable individuals, in practice what our analysis tests is whether or not temporal patterns in the data indicate evidence for contagion, by whatever means. In truth, and especially because so many perpetrators of these acts commit suicide, we likely may never know on a case-by-case basis who was inspired by similar prior acts, particularly since the ideation may have been subconscious. (9)

Not only did the researchers find little clarity as to the exact means of contagion, they found there was a complete lack of necessary data to even establish a correlational analysis. It is also important to note that information found on the Internet is accessible worldwide, not just in

the United States. If consumption of this information was the cause of copycat killers, we would likely see an increased rate of similar killings throughout the world. However, the United States “makes up less than 5% of the world’s population, but holds 31% of global mass shooters” (Fox and Pettersson 2018). Clearly consumption of violent images/narratives is not the only factor in the spread of extraordinary violence within the United States. Given that even contemporary research on this topic is colored by contagion theories from the 1980s and 90s, my own study attempts to avoid these *a priori* hypotheses by beginning within an ethnographic framework of grounded theory to approach the True Crime community.

In order to take a closer look at the participatory customs of the True Crime Community, I spent the better part of a year (2015 and 2016) observing members of the TCC through their public posts on Tumblr. In addition to these observations, I created and posted two surveys using the #TCC hashtag and asking community members to take and share the survey. Over 300 participants responded to questions regarding their interest in true crime, what type of activities they participated in (i.e. going to true crime locations), why they were interested in the subject, and their perceptions on whether or not they would consider themselves “fans” of serial or mass murderers. According to the collected demographics, the respondents were predominantly females between the ages of 18-35 (more than 80% in each category).⁷ While I did not specifically ask for nationality, most participants indicated they were interested in American killers with a few notable exceptions like Jack the Ripper (London, England) and Ivan Milat (New South Wales, Australia). At the end of each survey, I asked participants if they would like to be contacted with further questions via email. Several individuals provided their email addresses and their responses are discussed in detail below. While I give specific examples of public information found on Tumblr, all survey participants have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

As with many folklore studies, this paper is concerned with how a community of interest understands itself as a community, articulates and creates that shared understanding and enacts cultural practices that other community members find satisfying. Emerging within our discussion of contagion theory, TCC remains deeply problematic, and much of the

7. While there is little doubt that gender plays a role in how survey participants experience and contribute to the True Crime Community, it was not the focus within this paper. Other fields (e.g. psychology and criminology) have thoroughly delved this subject and my future research will look at gender issues from a folklore perspective.

tensions are expressed within and outside the community through debates over the term “fandom.” I discovered this when I used the term to describe the community and received immediate criticism. TCCers let me know that, without question, they were *not* a fandom. For example, bundyofjoy stated:

A fandom is a community of people who enjoy the same things - they write fan fiction, create videos and fan art, they create OTPs, etc. Basically fandoms refer more to people who enjoy TV shows, movies, music artists...

If the true crime community were to do those things and consider ourselves a fandom we would be glorifying murderers and thats [sic] not what we do. Sure, there are people who find themselves connected to a serial killer or a mass shooter, but they are not fans of them. A majority of the true crime community has made it well known that they do not condone the actions of the people they blog about.

I think the best thing to call us is a community because we're basically just a bunch of people who share the same interest in true crime.

bundyofjoy is clearly doing what sociologist Michele Lamont calls “boundary work” (1992, 2000). Within folkloristics, boundary work has been approached partially in our shifting definitions of folk groups (Dundes 1965; Noyes 1995). Despite Alan Dundes’ expansive definition that “any group of people whatsoever who share at least on common factor” (Dundes 1965, 2) groups themselves are principally constructed through boundary creation based upon differential identity construction (Bauman 1971). Part of my argument in this section is that the TCC self-definition is the result of a series of creative tensions between proxemic communities and practices. For example, as one member of the community, David, draws a clear distinction between the “normal” consumption of violent crime and the TCC community—the fact that he uses second order esoteric rhetoric makes this more complicated but not opaque (Jansen 1959):

I do get confused that I am singled out for having an interest in serial killers (and natural disasters and death and so on), because everyone must have somewhat of an interest in them, because why would they be plastered all over the media? Why are their names mentioned in songs? Why are their lives made into movies? Perhaps everyone has some degree of interest in killers, but people in the TCC are willing to openly admit it while others prefer to uphold social norms.

The “others” upholding social norms that David is talking about are literally everyone outside TCC, but more importantly David makes clear

that the boundary between the two groups is not about consumption of violent crime but about the honest and open expression of that interest. Here, of course, he expresses the positive folk group ethic of honesty and denigrates the out-group as, if not hypocrites than, at least, dishonest individuals. Moreover, he notes that the social stigma of expressing this interest and creating a community around this shared interest is socially isolating. The construction of a stigmatized community built around a shared interest brings us back to the problematic relationship between TCC and fandom.

Fan studies is now a well-established multidisciplinary field. Broadly, fans and the larger folk groups they create (fandom) are defined as individuals who seek information about a subject, interact with each other to discuss interests in web forums (McNeill 2009: 83), participate in activities influenced by their chosen interest, create fan art and fan fiction, and attend conventions (Kozinets 2001; Jenkins 2010). Some of the most recognizable fandoms include television shows (*Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Doctor Who*); literature (*Sherlock Holmes*, *Lord of the Rings*); or celebrities, musicians, artists, or movie stars. As I have noted, fandom and TCC share similar social categories of social and cultural isolation. As Jenkins' and other have argued a fan "constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire...whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality" (1992, 15). His analysis concludes that "The fan, whose cultural preferences and interpretive practices seem so antithetical to dominant aesthetic logic, must be represented as 'other,' must be held at a distance so that fannish taste does not pollute sanctioned culture" (19).

In order to create and support a marginalized folk group and culture, TCC participants have turned to social media and, despite bundyofjoy and David's argument otherwise, participants utilize many of the basic techniques of Internet-based fandom. To understand the group itself we must first understand the communication environment specific to Tumblr. As a social media outlet, Tumblr creates an interactive space that allows users to either generate original posts or reblog posts they like. Users can add comments to reblogged posts that can, in turn, be reblogged and added to again and again. Though individual blogs are not directly linked to each other, users can add hashtags within their posts that allow others to find them. Some hashtags eventually become standardized and help those who hold similar interests create informal groups. For example, members of the

True Crime Community often use the #TCC hashtag on their posts to give others quick access to true crime information. By choosing to participate in informal cultural exchange, these fandoms constitute folk groups and create communal group identities. Though these interactions take place in non-physical spaces, they have, “an inherent base in the real world. The fact remains that there is a human behind everything that takes place online” (Blank 2009: 11).⁸ In many ways, then, virtual interactions are just as important as those that happen in everyday, physical existence—especially for members of groups that participate in socially taboo discussions, such as the True Crime Community on Tumblr—members of the TCC have found an online space where they are able to discuss topics that are not necessarily acceptable in the real world.

These virtual communities allow participants the freedom to explore different aspects of their personality and create a sense of self that might not exist offline. Satya Mohanty (2003) reinforces this point stating, “Whether we inherit an identity...or we actively choose one...our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences” (398). In essence, the identity we choose to present helps us understand and negotiate our place in the world, corresponding to the idea that we change the things we say and do based on the folk group in which we find ourselves. In addition, Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) argues that “establishing [personal] identity in a group is a matter of compromises, and of varying emphases...based on the facet of the structure that is most important to [the individual]” (23). Though her study referenced the various types of participatory methods within the *Star Trek* fandom, Bacon-Smith’s idea that individual identity within a group relies on specific, individual interests follows a similar development in the True Crime Community. For example, identity construction is often evident on the stylistic choice of a user’s homepage on Tumblr. Banners running across the top of a TCCers homepage often display certain traits: an image of a killer used as a “userpic”, insider references to the crime or criminal, and a message that the blogger does not condone the actions of the criminal.

Though these commonalities are almost universal within the community, individual differentiation is created through the use of color (ranging from pastels to gothic), images (pentagrams abound, but so do florals), and bio descriptions that range from extremely dark and morbid to simply showcasing other interests. Because Tumblr users can edit the

8. For more information regarding digital folklore, see works by: Trevor J. Blank, Lynne S. McNeill, Elizabeth Bird, Timothy Tangherlini, Simon J. Bronner, and Henry Jenkins.

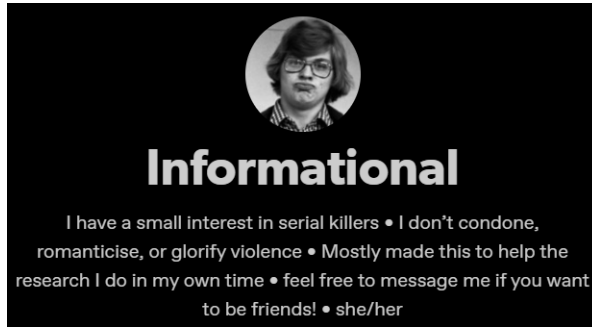


Figure 1. Banner for user, jeffdahmersglasses

appearance of their blog with relative ease, TCCers can change their “instanced identity” as often as their interests change; and while the appearances of blogs frequently change, usernames usually do not. It is important to note that it is rather simple to change the username on a Tumblr blog, but this change is far less likely to occur because it is a way for users to anchor one aspect of their identity and provides an easily recognizable signifier for others who might be looking for likeminded bloggers. Thus, TCC members often choose usernames that are directly linked to certain killers or crimes, which allows for: one, identification as a member of TCC; two, a subtle sub-group identification within the larger TCC community since there are subdivisions within the community itself.

Some usernames are explicit references to certain killers or crimes, such as: *mycolumbineobsession*, *bundyofjoy*, *mrsjeffreylioneldahmer*, *richardramirez*, and *dylannstormroofies*.⁹ Others are less explicit, and someone would need to know details about the killer or crime before the reference becomes clear. Examples include *ripbowlcut* (a reference to Dylann Roof’s haircut at the time of his arrest), or *vodkaismyhomie*, *reboptions*, and *natvr-al-selection* which all reference the Columbine killings.¹⁰ Whether explicitly stated or more subtle, these types of usernames let others know the specific crime or killer the individual TCC member is most likely interested in; however, it is common and accepted in the

9. Usernames and statements from Tumblr are taken from public access areas. While pseudonyms are used to protect identities in personal correspondence between myself and participants, anything showing on public access areas is attributed to the accurate username.
10. “VoDkA” and “Reb” were Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris’ nicknames, respectively. Harris wore a t-shirt with the words “Natural Selection” across the chest at the time of the shootings (the use of “v” in the username *natvr-al-selection* is a stylistic choice by the user).



Figure 2. Banner for user, gotkillerquotes



Figure 3. Banner for user, true-crime-whore

TCC community that blogs do not always revolve around a single killer, and may engage in discussions that range across the true crime spectrum.

Creating usernames that reference famous (or infamous) people is common across the Internet on all social platforms. Seeing someone reference a famous person, film, television show, or other media is an indication that the user is associating themselves as a fan of that topic. Because TCCers also use esoteric references to killers as their online identity marker—an act that suggests obscure knowledge acquired only through a similar intense shared participation commonly found in fandom (i.e. justindrewbelieber or cumberbatchaddicted)¹¹ it is difficult to reconcile both the community’s rejection of the label “fan” as a socio-performance practice, as well as how the use of these names connoted a positive identification with the killers themselves. The common disclaimers, “I do not condone” at the top of a blog seems disingenuous when a user takes a killer’s name as their own.

Along with individual expressions of identity for each TCC member, the discussion surrounding the “fandom” label, as I have noted, is a key mechanism used to construct and show membership in the group’s identity. As I have mentioned, most members of the TCC vehemently fight against the idea that they constitute a typical fandom. Returning to David, he explains:

To me a fandom is when you are a fan of someone. You like what they do, you like their acting abilities or their catchy music. If you are a fan of someone, you like them and enjoy what they do. If you are a fan of a killer, then, to me, you are saying that you like what they’ve done, which is kill people. The TCC, in my opinion, represents a common interest among a certain group of people. You are not necessarily approving of

11. These names indicate the user belongs to the Justin Bieber and Benedict Cumberbatch fandoms.

the killer, you are just interested in their behavior and what drove them to do what they did.

My research found many variations of this responses that were frequently repeated. The rhetorical power of the argument is that it shifts the argument from interest and identification with killers (a kind of shared reflexivity and worldview) to one of psychological inquiry and taking the stance of a researcher and reporter. TCC participants seem to instinctively understand Bacon-Smith's (1992) thesis in her work with Star Trek fans that "An interest in the performer is almost always secondary to an interest in the character he portrays" (37). Complicating this paradigm, TCCers interest that the material acts (the person as "killer") is often equal to the importance of the individual (themselves irreducible to their role as murderer). Yes, the cases are discussed, details of crime scenes and trials pass from person to person, but more often than not interest in who the killers are during the act is on par with who the killers are (or were) in a normal environment. TCCers typically indicate that they want to dig into the childhood, the familial relationships, religion, schooling, sexuality, psychology, and thoughts of the killer; they are searching for motivation, and clues. Those who are solely members of the True Crime Community are more likely to take offense at the "fandom" label, as they choose to focus on details of the cases and tend to avoid sharing posts that contain user-created materials that include the more "fannish" elements.

While these explanations are reassuring, they remain confusing and troublesome because my research revealed that the *stuff* that fans do—the art, fanfiction, jokes, memes, etc. is, contrary to assertions from bundyofjoy and David, present on the blogs of those who were part of the TCC. For example, the *stuff* shared on TCC blogs follows digital trends surrounding other celebrities: pictures of killers appear with flower crowns on their heads; there are fictive or speculative sketches of killers (sometimes nude) which mimic the styles used in other fandoms; users write about being attracted to certain murderers and leave notes stating they wish they could comfort the criminals before they go to trial. The TCC art is often used to emphasize different aspects of the crime and frequently includes insider jokes about the cases, the victims, or killers themselves.

This insider information is also a common feature in fanfiction (stories written by fans about their particular popular culture interest). One member of TCC, Emily, won an online true crime fanfiction award for her story involving Jeffrey Dahmer. The act of sharing these types of user-created material appears as one of the most common trends within the community

and works against the idea that TCC members do not constitute a fandom. However, some members, in order to insulate themselves from the fandom designation draw a third boundary (first with normal people; second with general fandom; and now) between themselves and what my research participants called, Killer Fandom (KF). While many KF members are members of the TCC, not all members of the TCC are members of KFs. Thus, the Killer Fandom member follows the actions of typical fandoms—creating and sharing the above noted folklore—while those who identify solely as TCCers typically only discuss the cases without practicing the celebrity worship aspect of the KF. Those who belong to various Killer Fandoms, on the other hand, tend to express a desire to feel closer to the killer on a personal level, obsessing over the minutiae of a killer's life in the same manner a Belieber would obsess over Justin Bieber's daily routine. While they do discuss case details and interact with members of the TCC, more often their focus is on physical attributes of the killers and they frequently express desires to either comfort the killers or engage in sexual encounters. This is not to say that these fans condone the crimes or are unaware of the emotional toll on the victims' families, but they are engaged in a different form of play than TCCers, the frame of which allows them a socio-emotional distance from the mundane horrors of the killer's acts, their consequences, and the KF's various play activities (Fine and Mechling 1991). For example, Jennifer, a survey participant, best described the difference between strictly True Crime Community members and Killer Fans:

Many people who consider themselves part of this crime community do not consider themselves fans of crime or criminals. They have an interest in crime and criminals and like to discuss it and share photos amongst themselves. Undoubtedly, there are some people who consider themselves part of the crime community who truly are fans of certain criminals. There is a gray line between interest and obsession that many people seem to have crossed. At the point of making shrines to dead criminals (which I have seen), it is more than an interest, in my opinion.

This sentiment was echoed by Bailey, another survey participant and member of the TCC, who made an interesting observation about age. As she explains, those who tend to fall into the fandom categories are younger members usually under the age of 16. She says:

They tend to do things like write fan fiction about the perpetrators and sometimes actually base their fashion on murderers for example I've seen a few people wearing the "natural selection" and "wrath" tops that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wore on April the 20th. They also tend

to glorify and condone murderers, when most of us in the true crime community never disrespect the victims or say we condone it. We always remember the loss of lives, and don't fantasize about the murderers.

That there is a difference in how older members of the TCC act compared to the younger members of Killer Fandoms, coincides with Elizabeth Bird's observations about age and telling legends (1994). She explains that "[d]ifferent people tell different stories, and there seems to be some correspondence between age and themes" (195). In a way, the connection between sharing stories (whether they are fanfiction or legend) becomes autobiographical. Again, Bailey's observations about the younger group members explains why they may act more along the lines of a fandom: "I've noticed that the most popular fandoms tend to be for school shooters rather than serial killers as well, and i think this is because they tend to associate maybe with some of their experiences." Her interpretation of this type of reaction comes from the time she has spent interacting with a variety of members throughout the community who tend to express a connectedness to their own emotional experiences. These experiences tend to be ones of otherness—of being outcasts of society, misunderstood, and struggling to make sense of a world where violence is played out and spread across social media outlets. Young members interacting with narratives involving school shootings could also be trying to deal with the anxiety and fear students feel while attending school. This anxiety is heightened in American schools, as most schools now hold drills to teach students what to do during active shooter situations. It is possible that by sharing narratives about previous events (both about the criminals and victims), these legends provide a type of catharsis for those who fear the worst will occur in their own lives.

As Tangherlini has argued, legends are more than scary stories: "Legend tries to reconstruct reality in a believable fashion. Legend narrative is linked to outer reality, opposed to the inner reality of folktale" (1990: 372). Among several genres, TCC and KF communities share legends about serial killers and mass murderers, partially, to make sense of the outer reality of contemporary, everyday life, that is confusing and/or terrifying. However, the process of "making sense" is, according to Bill Ellis, partially predicated on legend telling's role in "the communal exploration of social boundaries" (2001: 11). The social construction of what is real, unreal, acceptable, or unacceptable within their community occurs within an through legend which "acts as a symbolic representation of collective experiences and beliefs, expressing fears and desires associated with the

common environmental and social factors affecting both the active and passive traditional bearers” (Tangherlini 1990: 381). For example, stories about school shootings are most frequently shared by younger members who are still in school (whether grade school or college). They often share stories of the perpetrator’s home lives or possible bullying circumstances. Stories of survivors are also passed from person to person. These stories can include miraculous events that saved lives (such as, “They always sat in the same place but for some reason they didn’t that day”) or stories about teachers and students who saved others. Whether or not these stories are supernatural or non-supernatural, it helps the students deal with the very real fear of attending school and finding themselves caught in a similar situation. Fear of death, especially violent death, is likely a contributing factor for those who share details about true crime; and participating in acts of virtual play provides a way to navigate through societal fears of death, gratuitous violence, and loss of innocence—especially in a society like the United States, where reports of mass shootings appear on a regular basis. It is understandable how outsiders to the community, especially those influenced by contagion theories, might question how the avid discussion of violent crimes can ease anxieties, and choose instead to continue to label TCC and various Killer Fandoms as deviants. While some survey results and interview participants responded with what many people would consider disturbing answers (such as writing erotic fanfiction or saying they are in love with certain killers), overall the TCC and various Killer Fandoms were full of people like Rose, who once participated in a Jack the Ripper tour:

After the Jack the Ripper tour, I realized that...in the abstract, they’re really interesting, but when faced with the actual reality of their crimes (such as looking at the building where someone murdered Mary Kelly in a really horrific way), it makes me feel deeply disturbed.

Rose’s response is a realization that, while groups interested in violent crimes participate in fandom-like activities (like her legend trip to the murder sites in Whitechapel), they find, when confronted that the reality of the crimes are quite different than their expectations. Unlike legends’ ability to articulate the shape of social anxieties, when TCC and KF engage in other forms of cultural production or play these groups are using the taboo subject of murder to participate in a time-out-of-place environment that tourists and pilgrims (along with many others) utilize in order to break from everyday life.

Continued research and observation of groups like the True Crime Community is necessary, in conjunction with ongoing research regarding

the cause and spread of mass and serial murder. Gun violence is of particular concern within the United States where, “On average, mass killings involving firearms occur approximately every two weeks...while school shootings occur on average monthly” (Towers et al. 2015: 1). Much of the public reaction and discussion about these events circulates the argument that constant media coverage leads to contagion. Because this is a prevalent reaction to these shootings, it is important to discuss the possibility that recirculating information in groups like the TCC keeps the images fresh and helps foster an environment where a contagion factor affects the number of such incidents. Blame not only falls on media coverage (with people calling for journalists to leave perpetrators unnamed), but we also see blame placed on video games, movies, and mental health issues. It is understandable that people search for answers after these events occur, especially when they appear on news feeds with more frequency. The general argument, however, seems to focus on correlations rather than causation. My argument here is that there is little, if any, doubt that a contagion effect exists but it is not currently possible to make claims about the *cause* of the contagion. Moreover, to say mass murder or serial killings are modern occurrences is dangerous and misguided. As I have argued, mass and serial murder occurred prior to the Internet, movies, television, and video games. Equally important, it is vital to recognize that contemporary true crime enthusiasts existed alongside those past murders. For example, we see cases like the Lawson family murder in Germanton, North Carolina. On 24 December 1929, a tobacco farmer named Charlie Lawson murdered his wife and six children before taking his own life. The murders were gruesome and shocking, and details of the crime gained nearly instant nation-wide newspaper coverage. Within days of the murders, thousands of community members, reporters, and tourists began visiting the blood-soaked farmhouse scene, even making souvenirs out of the raisins in the family’s Christmas cake, which was left on the kitchen table (Spear 2019). This case, and the public reaction, is not unique—we find similar cases littered throughout the past. It is vital to recognize this history of true crime enthusiasm because if thanatourism and a general fascination with the macabre is not new, it is clearly not caused or bound by the constraints of modern technology. It is therefore unrealistic to claim that modern consumption practices are the cause of the contagion. It is also unreasonable to blame contagion on groups like the True Crime Community because mass and serial killings take place more often in United States than other developed countries. Because TCC members exist around the world and these crimes do not happen at the same frequency worldwide, clearly there are other factors or

practices within the US population that contribute to the spread of this type of violence.

Unfortunately, for my American colleagues, “Studies into the prevention of such tragedies are...hampered by the freeze on federal funding for research into gun violence in the United States, put in place by Congress in 1997” (Towers *et al.* 2015: 9). Despite a presidential memorandum issued by President Obama in 2013, many Congressional members continue to block federal funding to resume studies previously started to research gun violence. In July 2018, Congress voted 32-20 rejecting a bill that would provide \$10 million to the Center for Disease Control, which would have funded research surrounding gun violence prevention (Howard 2018). This is particularly hazardous because the only link Towers *et. al* (2015) were able to connect to gun violence was that a significant number of mass shootings occur in areas where guns are more readily available (8). Again, though, they concluded that this might just be another correlation and that more research is necessary to prove causation. It is short-sighted for researchers to look at groups like the TCC and claim that their conversations about crime spread the commission of said crimes. Future gun violence studies must include deeper analyses of the cultural practices in these groups in order to better understand where and how contagion works. This can lead to better practices in preventing future killings instead of allowing the contagion to continue. Unfortunately, the current US administration has shown no effort to change regulations and restrictions on these studies. As of the writing of this paper, nothing has changed and the killings persist. Without funded studies, performed and reviewed by experts, we will likely never discover why mass and serial murders within the United States occur at such an alarming rate, and we will likely never find a cure.

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