"I Know What I Want Is Impossible": The Contemporary U.S. Murder Memoir and Protective Mechanisms in True Crime

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Abstract

A new form of life writing has emerged in the literary market within the last several years. Marketed as a higher-brow form of true crime memoir, these texts focus on the investigation of a murder. Running parallel to this investigation is an attempt by the author to interrogate their own trauma, usually from childhood. I call this genre the "murder memoir" in order to differentiate it from other forms of true crime memoir: for example, memoirs by serial killers' acquaintances, such as Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), or memoirs of catching a killer, such as Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter* (1974). It is important to note from the outset that the murder memoir is not entirely a "new" form—isolated examples of the genre from previous decades include Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart* (1994) and James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* (1996). However, the popularity of the genre amongst publishers has increased in recent years, with the publication of murder memoirs markedly increasing in the 21st century. In this article, I investigate the sudden increase in popularity of the murder memoir within the context of the so-called "true crime renaissance." I also show how the emergence of murder memoir demonstrates that contemporary true crime is more self-aware than ever, and is thus produced amid increasing anxiety about its own consumption and production. This results in the genre's demonstration of a structural and narrative phenomenon that I call the "protective mechanism." Whilst I contend that the protective mechanism is not a new feature of the true crime genre—indeed, I see it as a fundamental part of the structure of the genre itself—the introspective nature of the murder memoir throws the protective mechanism's workings into sharp relief.

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The True Crime Renaissance

True crime has always been an ethically complex genre. Whilst it has been accused of being a trashy, exploitative mode which draws profits from the misery and suffering of brutalized and murdered victims, studies of female true crime fans suggest that their reading of the genre can function as a kind of "healing" process—one which allows them to encounter and process their fears and anxieties about patriarchal violence (Sweeney 70; Browder 929). Throughout its history as a genre, true crime has therefore walked a perilous tightrope between the "trashy" and the "literary." Much of this tension stems from true crime's treatment of the corpse. In true crime, the corpse is often white, beautiful, and female. As a centrifugal force around which the true crime text turns, the corpse can be elevated towards the artistic and literary—Edgar Allan Poe once famously remarked that "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world"—but it can also be used to generate a voyeuristic thrill. This push and pull between the "literary" and the "trashy" is perhaps best demonstrated in Mark Seltzer's theorizing of true crime as typifying a particularly American "wound culture," which he describes as "a culture—or, at the least, cult—of commiseration" (*True Crime* 2). For Seltzer, true crime can read as a sympathetic mode—one in which art and culture can provide the space in which a fragmented society and culture can mourn. However, this

mourning centers around "the endless spectacle of a series of torn and opened bodies" (*True Crime* 14). This theorizing can be read as a fundamental struggle between the *internal* (commiseration, mourning) and the *external* (spectacle, voyeurism). This has important ramifications for true crime's relationship with both the "literary" and the "trashy." According to Pierre Bourdieu[1], the highbrow can be read as producing itself through internal, or autonomous, motivations. The "literary" text, Bourdieu argues, is concerned with artistry and creativity—in other words, the interior motivations of the author. Conversely, according to Bourdieu, the lowbrow is heteronomous, or caught up with the demands of an audience and a market which are, fundamentally, external to the text itself (319-20). As a result, Seltzer's conception of "wound culture" points to a struggle within the production of true crime itself as a popular mode; although consumption of true crime can indicate and investigate wider cultural concerns with patriarchal violence and the victimization of women, it also literally "opens up" these women to the male gaze and to the capitalist market. As a genre, true crime therefore walks a tightrope between good and bad taste.

As the murder memoir emerges into the literary market, it draws many of its structures and concerns from true crime, which is often considered to be a "bad taste" genre that is read predominantly by women (Browder 929). It is therefore important to acknowledge that women's reading of popular genres in general—not simply their reading of true crime—has historically been accused of voyeurism and exploitation. Given this history, the "true crime renaissance," as it has been termed, has reinvigorated not only a contemporary discussion about the ethics and practices of producing true crime, but also introspection on the part of its (predominantly) female readers and writers. The true crime text most often heralded as the harbinger of the "true crime renaissance" of our age is Season One of National Public Radio (NPR)'s popular podcast *Serial* (2014). What was startling about *Serial* was not simply its sheer popularity, with contemporary reports that the series was averaging 1.5 million downloads per episode at the time of its release (Durrani, Gotkin, and Laughin 593), but that its popularity started amongst the middle-class, college-educated audience of NPR. With host Sarah Koenig as their guide, listeners hear the story of Adnan Syed, who was arrested, tried, and ultimately convicted for the murder of Hae Min Lee in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1999. Hae Min Lee, like most corpses in traditional true crime, disappears rather quickly from the narrative, at least in terms of her status as subject and not object; we hear that Hae "was Korean, she was smart, and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete" before the story quickly turns to the discovery of her strangled corpse, and then moves to focus almost totally on Syed himself and the question of his guilt. In *Serial*, Hae Min Lee becomes the catalyst for a narrative about her possible murderer. She features within the story as an autopsy, as a piece of evidence, but is never afforded the same kind of character development or nuanced treatment that is given to Syed. Netflix's documentary series *Making a Murderer* (2015-present) followed a similar trajectory, telling the story of an alleged miscarriage of justice in the case of Steven Avery, who was tried and convicted of the murder of 25-year-old Teresa Halbach in 2005. Like Hae Min Lee, the construction of Halbach as an individual tails off fairly early in the series, which is soon taken over by courtroom debate, crime scene

[1] Although many would argue that Bourdieu's work is now significantly dated—it would be hard to find a purely "autonomous" or "heteronomous" reader nowadays, for example—I reference him here because his work is still enlightening in the context of the assumptions that remain in a generalized, broad socio-cultural understanding of "good" versus "bad" taste.

analysis, and talking-head interviews with Avery's lawyers. *Serial* and *Making a Murderer* were water-cooler moments of the contemporary age, but criticism swiftly followed—criticism prompted, perhaps, by the sheer glut of true crime material being released, as well as the genre's new marketability to an educated, middle-class audience. Remarkably, this criticism has not only come from non-readers of the genre (although those non-readers have plenty of criticisms to make!) but has also stemmed from true crime readers themselves. The true crime renaissance has brought about some serious introspection on the part of its fans about their consumption of the genre.

Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* was published in 2018, combining elements of the memoir with critical observations of the treatment of the female corpse in contemporary American popular culture. Alongside a personal memoir concerning her move to Los Angeles in her early twenties, Bolin addresses and analyzes examples of the treatment of the "Dead Girl" in American pop culture, such as the unfortunate Laura Palmer in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and a litany of impoverished sex workers in Season One of television drama *True Detective* (2014). In doing so, Bolin aims to call attention to the ways in which the "beautiful," white, Dead Girl "[effaces] the death of leagues of non-white or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant or drug-addicted or gay or trans victims" (22-23). More recently, Rachel Monroe's *Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession* (2019) functions as a kind of "meta" exploration of true crime, focusing on women whose crimes were perpetrated thanks, at least in part, to an obsession with the genre. Monroe describes such women as "women who, like me, were susceptible to falling into a crime funk" (8). By aligning herself with the perpetrators of crime within her text, Monroe self-consciously highlights the inherent danger of true crime for its predominantly female fans. Despite being a true crime consumer herself, Monroe argues that the genre occupies dangerous territory, potentially glamorizing and exploiting the nuanced realities of crime. True crime is certainly a genre which often ignores or maligns "imperfect" victims, as Alice Bolin points out. Furthermore, true crime can sometimes work to glorify the victimizer as a mysterious "anti-hero" who is both ordinary and extraordinary in his crimes against his (usually white, usually female) victims (Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities* 215).

As we can see from Bolin's and Monroe's criticisms of the genre, today's true crime fans are often very much aware of, and critically engaged with, the ethics of the pleasure they get from reading and consuming the genre. I therefore contend that the ethical criticisms made of true crime have frequently been tainted by an overall disdain for women's reading alongside these legitimate ethical concerns, and that this fear of "bad" women's reading has become necessarily embedded in the structures of true crime as a whole. Women's reading has been historically associated with the lowbrow, the sensational, and the bodily. In the context of true crime, which dabbles in the gruesome, the gory, and the visceral, this association is even stronger. Indeed, as Jean Murley has pointed out, true crime is often referred to as "crime porn" by its various critics (5), which marks the genre with an essential association with the taboo, with exploitation and, fundamentally, with the bodily. True crime is often described as dabbling in the "sensational," a term which "emphasizes bodily and nonrational reactions" (Wiltenburg 1378), and which thus implies a linking of the text itself to the bodily, to the fleshy, to the sensuous, and thus to external motivations—as opposed to the internal motivations of the

"artistic" or "creative" mind as we see in debates surrounding the "literary" versus the "popular."

All this concern with the bodily, with the sensational, with the bad reader, with the gory, with women consumers—where does it leave the murder memoir? The murder memoir is a text which presents and markets itself as a literary, more "acceptable" form of true crime, and whose very structure concerns a necessarily introspective approach towards the memoirist's relationship with violent crime. The murder memoir thereby functions as a victim-focused narrative whose popularity has expanded in an era wherein women readers are becoming more publicly contemplative about their relationship to the true crime genre. The murder memoir works with and against readers' expectations of true crime, and this is particularly important in the context of anxieties about whether women's reading of crime is "ethical" or not.

Garish Rubrics, Gory Reading

The murder memoir is marketed as a higher-brow form of true crime, which reflects the continuing trend of the "acceptability" of true crime for the educated and middle class. The marketing strategies of such texts often attempt to erase, or at the very least redefine, the murder memoirist's relationship with the genre. For example, on the cover of Cutter Wood's *Love and Death in the Sunshine State* (2018), Leslie Jamison writes that "Cutter Wood subverts all our expectations for the true crime genre." In order for this true crime text to become accepted in the "autonomous" literary sphere, then, Wood's text must subvert genre, and it therefore must move away from the "typical" elements of true crime that its critics loathe: gore, voyeurism, and exploitation. It is worth noting, though, that those elements are still present in Wood's text, albeit framed in more "literary" prose. This anxiety around genre permeates the murder memoir, both in terms of its production as a marketed text, and in terms of its fundamental structuring of its relationship to the true crime text.

A particularly striking example of the genre is Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* (2007), which is a text fundamentally concerned with the author's anxious self-awareness (and self-consciousness) concerning her relationship with violent crime, the "popular," and the body. Focusing on the trial of her aunt Jane Mixer's murderer, *The Red Parts* follows a typical murder memoir structure; whilst investigating the murder and attending the trial, Nelson also grapples with her mental health and her grief following the death of her father when she was a child. Early on within the text, Nelson finds a copy of Edward Keyes's *The Michigan Murders* (1976), which includes a study on the murder of her aunt Jane Mixer.[2] Nelson's disgust at the sheer materiality of the true crime text is palpable here. She writes,

> Then one afternoon . . . looking for a book in my mother's office, I spotted the spine of a book I'd never noticed before. Though nearly out of sight and reach, the garish, tabloid lettering, which read *The Michigan Murders*, stood out among the highbrow literary classics that my mother read and taught. I got up on a chair to pull the squat paperback down. (3)

[2] It is worth noting here that Jane Mixer was originally suspected to have been murdered by serial killer John Norman Chapman, the subject of *The Michigan Murders*; it is revealed in *The Red Parts* that the killer was actually retired nurse Gary Leiterman.

Nelson first notes the spine of the text, which separates it from the highbrow. Its letters are "garish" and "tabloid," again framing the text as something sensuous or "thrilling," and also exploitative—the tabloid being essentially associated with voyeurism, "bad" readers, and sensational journalism. Importantly, the true crime text physically stands out from the highbrow texts with which it shares shelf space; Nelson implies that she does not need to read its contents to know that this book will contain nasty and gruesome elements. Its very materiality is highlighted as cut-rate; it is "squat," a cheap paperback. Furthermore, the text is almost hidden on her mother's office shelf, suggesting a furtiveness to its placement; this is a "bad" text on a "good" shelf filled with highbrow, "literary" texts. Nelson's assumptions about the popular text define it on different terms than those through which a reader might approach a "literary" text—namely, the text's relationship to the physical, the bodily, and the sensuous.

Like the critical contemporary reader, Nelson feels that *The Michigan Murders* is lowbrow, even before she approaches it on a textual level. Laura Browder has argued that "the plot of a true crime can easily be gleaned from a quick ruffle through the photo inset, or even a glance at the back cover" (931). The logic of Browder's statement is rather broad-ranging and limiting because not all true crime texts are so easily categorized, especially in this new era of true crime where true crime texts flit between multiple forms and defy easy categorization. However, this way of categorizing the true crime text as an easily identifiable, formulaic object certainly seems to ring true for Nelson's interaction with *The Michigan Murders*. Once the book is taken off the shelf, Nelson moves to examine its cover art, and again she feels the lowbrow-ness of the text:

> The cover of *The Michigan Murders* depicted a faux-photograph of a Farrah Fawcett-like model, half of her face peeling away to reveal an infrared negative. Its coloring and graphics, along with the furtiveness I felt in examining it, brought to mind a certain issue of *Playboy* I had spent a great deal of time studying as a child. (3-4)

The Michigan Murders is figured here as a profoundly material text—one which is linked inherently to the "thrilling" and results in both disgust and a pornographic fascination on the part of the author. The cover model's face is "peeling away" as she undergoes a kind of re-brutalization: one which reflects the victims' stories that are to be told and re-told within the pages of the text, and the pages of other texts like it (Jarvis 329). Nelson here reinforces the fundamental physicality of the true crime text, and thus its inherent status as a heteronomous, market-driven text; by describing its garish cover as reminiscent (to her) of pornography, she implicitly links the true crime genre to the fleshy, to the thrilling, and to the sensational. And Nelson certainly reacts to the text in a physical way: as the cover recalls a hidden issue of *Playboy*, so it conjures up feelings of childhood sexual curiosity and shame. Nelson references her father's issue of *Playboy,* which uncomfortably intertwines her own sexual curiosity with her late father's and lends a further taboo element to Nelson's uncovering of the true crime text. Nelson's link between the image of the corpse and *Playboy* illustrates a further taboo—that of a necrophilic and necrophagic engagement with the dead (and white and beautiful) woman's corpse.

It is clear, then, that writing a murder memoir is fraught with ethical issues. But, as I have been arguing so far, writing true crime (and true crime-influenced texts) is also

tied up with complex histories and anxieties surrounding women's consumption of sensational material. These anxieties haunt the true crime text and, when that true crime text is elevated to a higher cultural status—as it is in the murder memoir, and arguably in the "true crime renaissance" more generally—these anxieties are thrown into sharp relief as the texts produce mechanisms to "protect" the author and, by extension, the reader, from accusations of voyeurism, exploitation, and ghoulishness, which are fundamentally associated with the "lowbrow" and the reckless reader. These mechanisms are inherently tied to a figuring of the text as part of an attempt to deny what the true crime text is—to elevate the true crime text "out of" its own worst trappings as a genre. Ironically, these protective mechanisms thus come to form an integral part of identifying and defining the contemporary true crime text.

"I'm Not Writing True Crime!"

Alongside many of her murder memoir-writing contemporaries, such as Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich and James Ellroy, Nelson has clearly been welcomed into the highbrow fold; reviews in the UK's *Guardian* online newspaper celebrate her "always questioning, sometimes wonderfully lyrical, intelligence" (Feigel) and the way her work contains "messages of great wisdom and powerful beauty" (Francis). These descriptions of Nelson's work recall Ken Gelder's statement that "[l]iterature draws on the language of the art world when it ties its authors innately to notions of creativity" (Gelder 14). In the face of such praise, which describes her work as "creative" and "wise," Nelson is clearly separated—albeit by a form of folk classification—from the industrial, market-driven world of the "lowbrow," and thus her own forays into the world of true crime allow her work to be elevated "above" the gory, violent, "trashy" characteristics of the genre that have so often fallen under scrutiny. In the preface of the 2015 edition of *The Red Parts*, Nelson explains what she "always hoped *The Red Parts* would become: a peculiar, pressurized meditation on time's relation to violence, to grief, thankfully untethered from the garish rubrics of 'current events,' 'true crime,' or even 'memoir'" (xviii). Nelson's use of the term "untethered" is crucial here. Although she realizes that her text will be connected to the legacies and history of true crime writing, she also emphasizes that her work will not include the very worst of that genre—the violence, the voyeurism, and the ghoulishness. Such "garish rubrics" are for lesser true crime texts. Nelson, as a "literary" and self-aware writer, can elevate her text away from the bodily. By including this statement within a preface, Nelson literally frames her text with legitimacy. She issues a promise to her reader; she will not make the same mistakes that have befallen "lesser" true crime writers—writers motivated by the "lesser" motivations of the market, an audience, and capital gain. However, Nelson's preoccupation with removing herself from the ethical trappings of true crime reflects a wider concern in the true crime genre in general.

Nelson's focus on the physicality of the text—its garish cover and its juxtaposition with more acceptable, "highbrow" texts on the shelf upon which it is found—serves to further reinforce the true crime text's relationship to the taboo, the bodily, and the fleshy. As previously discussed, it is this relationship between the public, bodily space and the private mental space of the author and victim which drives true crime; the form appeals to a community of readers and takes the abject figure—the brutalized Dead (or dying) Girl—as a focal point for the reinvigoration of discussion around contemporary American

anxieties concerning violence and individualism. When Nelson introduces this extratextual narrative of Jane's murder, she then moves to separate herself from such physicality and, thus, the "lowbrow"; as she researches more into the Michigan murders, searching for information on the other victims of this serial killer, she describes the resources she finds as "barely readable" (5) in their thick descriptions of rape and murder. The inference is that Nelson will make her (crime and corpse-focused) text "readable"—that is, divorced from the sensational, the fleshy, and, ultimately, the "lowbrow." Nelson's reactions to such true crime texts are certainly focused on sensation, which is reminiscent of Wiltenburg's understanding of "nonrational reactions" linked to the reading of the sensational. Indeed, as she consumes more and more texts concerning violent crime, Nelson enters into an uncontrollable mental state, which she calls "murder mind":

> [A] smattering of sickening images of violent acts . . . Reprisals of the violence done unto Jane, unto the other Michigan Murder girls, unto my loved ones, unto myself, and sometimes, most horribly, done by me. These images coursed through my mind at random intervals, but always with the slapping, prehensile force of the return of the repressed. (5)

Like Rachel Monroe's aforementioned description of her own personal descent into "crime funk," the reading of the lowbrow text invokes uncontrollable mental violence, which both victimizes Nelson and, crucially, reorients her as victimizer.

This phenomenon of "murder mind" thereby functions, in the murder memoir, as both an examination of the ethical state of true crime and an introspective process that indicates an author's complicated complicity with the (re)production of crime. We can see a prime example of this anxiety about such complicity demonstrated in Claudia Rowe's *The Spider and the Fly* (2017). Rowe's murder memoir details her epistolary relationship with Kendall Francois, a serial killer who murdered eight women between 1996 and 1998 in Poughkeepsie, New York. Rowe, a young reporter, developed a relationship with Francois after his arrest, writing to him, speaking over the telephone, and eventually visiting him in prison. The memoir opens with Rowe's anxious physical encounter with Francois's letters to her:

> Shaking just a bit, I tore it open . . . I read the letter once standing in the back of the post office, then drove home, shoved it under a stack of books, and did not touch it again for two weeks. (4-5)

Here, Rowe's anxiety and shame about the production of the true crime text stems not from the genre itself, per se, but from the encounter with the materials of crime that she collects within the writing process. David Schmid has helpfully classified these types of materials as "murderabilia," pointing out that "the ongoing debate around the ethics of murderabilia shows just how difficult it is to draw a neat line between those who condemn and those who participate in that culture" (Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities* 3). As she stuffs the letter from a serial killer out of sight, Rowe seems to be exceedingly aware of her tightrope-walking along this line. *The Spider and the Fly* opens by pointedly and physically demonstrating the author's shame and disgust at the murderabilia she collects; the letter from the notorious serial killer is physically hidden from sight. Such a self-conscious response to the materials of crime signals to the reader that Rowe is a writer

who both participates in, and simultaneously disavows, both the language and economy of true crime.

We can therefore observe this process of self-conscious anxieties about the production of the true crime text as becoming multiplied within the murder memoir, and again I turn to *The Red Parts* to demonstrate this point. By constructing her own text that revisits the murder of Jane Mixer, and by including true crime texts as intertextual literary devices, Maggie Nelson implies that, at least in some sense, she joins a litany of "lowbrow" texts that victimize the dead woman—albeit as a writer who is "self-aware" and recognizes how problematic this is, with the ultimate implication that she can "rise above" the violent elements of true crime. Within the historical context of the materiality and processing of the genre text, this uncontrollable state that Nelson describes entering is decidedly gendered. As Browder observes,

> True crime, with its focus on rough sex and violent crime, is often perceived by nonreaders of the genre as "warping" women who read it . . . Indeed, to those who do not love the genre, true crime can easily appear to be nothing more than a form of pornography—a repetition of violence, and of sexualized violence, that heightens the senses. (933)

Nelson consciously situates herself as a non-reader of true crime—she certainly doesn't make a habit of reading material like *The Michigan Murders*, unless it is part of her research process—and positions the true crime text as adjacent to, if not directly related to, pornography and the bodily. In addition, Nelson feels her reading of the text producing physical sensations. She is sickened, she is violated (slapped); indeed, she is warped. In this sense, then, it might be helpful to think of the process of genre in the murder memoir as in a state of flux; by including the true crime text in her own work (which, she insists, is decidedly not a true crime text), Nelson both recognizes the specter of the "lowbrow" text as a physical force within her writing process, and simultaneously demonstrates her disgust and fear at such reactions, relegating the popular text to the world of the "other," as her own text approaches such topics with intellectualism or "seriousness." Therefore, Nelson both recognizes and disavows her own relationship to the popular text in all of its fleshy, gendered sensationalism. However, by "protecting" her text from accusations of voyeurism and ethical suspicion, Nelson also disavows her relationship to the histories and practices of a genre from which she is learning and borrowing. A passionate statement that one is not writing true crime thus becomes part of one's writing of true crime.

Laboriousness and the "Noble Cause"

If the true crime writer must at least concede that they are writing about crime, they often move to frame their text as "noble" in order to counteract accusations that their work itself is exploitative. Texts might frame the author within the text as morally upstanding or otherwise justified in their writing. For example, John Douglas's bestselling *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* (1995)—recently adapted into a popular Netflix series—tells the gruesome and shocking stories of America's most notorious serial killers, but is crucially told by a figure in law enforcement who is researching their psychology. The implication is that Douglas is writing about his research, albeit for a general audience; the reader can thus be assumed to be reading his

book at least partly for "educational" purposes. But one does not have to be a part of the criminal justice system itself to legitimize one's writing; one merely has to emphasize the essential integrity of one's research, and thus the educational value of one's text. In her classic bestselling true crime text *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980)—an account of Ann Rule's friendship with serial killer Ted Bundy, and her slow realization of his criminal activities—Rule emphasizes her role as a researcher who is obligated to pursue the cause of writing in order to find justice for victims:

> I hoped that the work I did might somehow save other victims, might warn them of the danger. I never wanted . . . to seek out the sensational and the gory . . . I have met parents of victims, cried with them, and yet I have somehow felt guilty — because I make my living from other people's tragedies . . . they put their arms around me and said, "No. Keep on writing. Let the public know how it is for us. Let them know how we hurt." (76)

We can see this pattern of victim-exploitation-as-victim-advocacy play out in the contemporary true crime age; the tension between examining crime and profiting from crime is an ever-present issue. Therefore, one of true crime's protective mechanisms follows on from the disavowing of the gory and the bodily by emphasizing the lack of thrill associated with the writing of the true crime text. Rule structures her text with this protective mechanism; she frames her production of her true crime text as "noble" and part of a grueling process. Similarly, the murder memoir writer must consciously situate her work against the exploitative, reinforcing its nature as principled and "ethical." In this sense, the murder memoir frequently emphasizes the laboriousness of research, thus consciously locating the process of writing against the exploitative writing of the "sensational."

I do not mean to suggest that the dissociation from the true crime text is totally performative here—that authors secretly revel in the "thrill" of murder whilst publicly remaining stoic. Rather, I contend that the murder memoir's treatment of the corpse is fundamentally and intricately bound up with personal trauma, and that this genre—which occupies a liminal space between the already impermanent categories of "highbrow" and "lowbrow"—can thus demonstrate the ethical issues that accompany reading personal trauma into public crime. Sarah Perry's *After the Eclipse* (2017) details the murder of Perry's mother, Crystal, when the author was only twelve years old. The author's trauma is intricately bound up with the murder of her mother, not least because of her proximity to the crime: on the night of the murder, Perry heard through her bedroom wall her mother being stabbed to death. In the preface to *After the Eclipse*, Perry affectively details the tensions between their personal trauma and the public crime as she travels to the Maine State Police headquarters to view her mother's case file. Again, we see the murder memoirist demonstrate the dissociation from the self that comes with encountering the materials of crime:

> I watch this hand move of its own accord, and as the photo flips, I think, *I can take it. It'll be fine.* But it's the worst one, a horrifying picture of my mother's body. A close-up. And I am instantly angry with myself. I am tired of this impulse to wound myself so that I can prove that I'll heal. (xii-xiii)

Again, we see a research process figured similarly to Nelson's "murder mind," wherein Perry explicitly marks her research as a damaging process that is intricately and inextricably bound up with personal trauma. The research into her mother's murder must be done, but carries with it both a healing and a wounding potential. As Perry's work demonstrates, the murder memoir writer cannot entirely emotionally distance herself from the corpse, given that the murdered body is the focal point upon which the murder memoir turns. The corpse marks the introspective processes of mediating and negotiating private trauma, whilst also maintaining its position as an emblem of the public crime.

In the murder memoir, therefore, the corpse is the mediation point for a personal trauma, but is also tied up with complex ethical issues of public voyeurism and exploitation. When Nelson insists in the preface to the 2015 edition of *The Red Parts* that the book has become "untethered" (xviii) from the true crime, memoir, and journalism genres, she correspondingly cites her own work as different, as intellectually (and, by extension, culturally) superior to the formulaic, neoliberal, profit-driven genres of true crime. Although her work might circle around such genres, she argues, her work is "untethered" from the worst of those genres; the exploitation, the senseless gore, the pornographic gazing upon the eviscerated body. As we have already seen, Nelson's own encounters with sensational feelings are paradoxically used to bolster an argument that her text is not sensational. In doing so, Nelson both echoes countless other genre writers who have insisted on how distant their work is from "the generic" and enters into a long tradition of true crime denying itself to be what it is. Towards the conclusion of *The Red Parts*, Nelson writes,

> I know what I want is impossible. If I can make my language flat enough, exact enough, if I can rinse each sentence clean enough . . . if I can find the right perch or crevice from which to record everything, if I can give myself enough white space, maybe I could do it. I could tell you this story while walking out of this story. I could—it all could—just disappear. (157)

Nelson here recognizes the impossibility of a true separation from the personal within the writing of the murder memoir. In order to "walk out" of her narrative—in order to achieve a writerly distance from the bodily aspect of the text—Nelson needs to adopt an entirely impersonal standpoint in relation to her writing of the murder memoir. However, given the centrality of the suffering and dead body within the murder memoir, as well as the very function of the text as memoir, she recognizes that a total separation from the personal (and the sensuous and the bodily) is impossible. Nancy K. Miller has demonstrated that reading the memoir functions as a process of both identification and disidentification with the text—that, "[p]aradoxically, identification can also mean the desire to rediscover yourself across the body or under the skin of other selves, people who are nothing—seem nothing—like yourself" (11-12). Within the context of the murder memoir, this process of identification and disidentification is rendered more complex; as much as the murder memoirist might read and rediscover her own traumatic experience across the body of the murdered woman, she must also disavow the reality of that body in order to distance her text from the "sensational," bodily, and distinctly un-literary "popular" text.

As a result, Nelson struggles with "cleansing" the sensational from her text while at the same time using methods common to the popular true crime text. She begins the

memoir with a quote from the Michigan State Police: "*We have every reason to believe this case is moving swiftly towards a successful conclusion*" (1). By opening her text with the voice of law enforcement, Nelson separates the personal from the factual: by utilizing the voice of patriarchal American "justice," Jane Mixer transforms from a messy, complicated "body" into a "case." The "successful conclusion" of that case is the solution of her murder on the legal stage, rather than in any emotional or personal form. In this way, Nelson positions her memoir as factual first and personal second; the language of American justice substitutes for the complex emotions surrounding whether any truly "successful conclusion" has been achieved within the case of Jane Mixer. In Rowe's *The Spider and the Fly*, the link between the language of justice and the language of the memoir is made even more explicit, as Rowe links her writing process to the actions of police officers in the line of duty. Towards the closing of her memoir, she quotes a police officer: "'As a cop, you walk a tightrope . . . Everything you do as a police officer is judgement calls.' Like journalism" (273). Rowe consciously aligns herself with the language and performance of justice as she closes her memoir; she reconfigures her role as "writer" into a role as executor of the law. In doing so, Rowe cannily avoids having to answer for any ethical improprieties in her role as memoirist; instead, she makes explicit her role as dispassionate researcher, as judgement-call maker. The facts do not lie.

Thus, as the murder memoir draws from the protective mechanisms of true crime, it is framed by a language that disavows emotional, bodily, sensational, and messy complexity. This framing is not without its problems. As Mark Seltzer notes,

> [I]f the avoidance of death equals the avoidance of *the sight* of dying, then it is scarcely possible to arrange death and representation, the matter of the body and its images or mediations, simply in the form of an opposition such that each holds the other at bay. (*Serial Killers* 37)

Authors' anxiety surrounding the construction of the body demonstrates Seltzer's point; they must distance the messy and chaotic reality of death from its representation on the page in order to protect themselves against accusations of exploitation. In other words, by adopting the clinical language of law enforcement as a protective mechanism, the murder memoirist avoids the sight, and indeed the site, of victims' deaths. "Cases" come to "satisfactory conclusions." In this way, she struggles between the wish to distance her text from the "garish rubrics" of the "lowbrow"—the violence, the voyeurism, the exploitation—and the necessity of naming the motivation for the text itself—the violent, the voyeuristic, and the focus on the exploited body. In doing so, the construction of the corpse within the murder memoir becomes caught up in anxieties regarding its construction, meaning that it is never fully "realized" as either object or subject—the protective mechanisms of the murder memoir pull these representations in opposite directions, and the center cannot hold.

Conclusion

When the murder memoirist specifies that she is writing to "untether" herself from the "garish rubrics" of genre, she joins a long history (and vast litany) of true crime writers who have attempted to do the same thing and have, ironically, only served to reinforce these rubrics as part of an historical mode of writing memoir and true crime. The framing

of the text with a sense of "legitimacy"—concerning her artistic integrity and formal experimentation—echoes other genre writers' attempts to distance themselves from any readers with questionable motivations for reading. This attempt at a literary "distancing" from the suffering and mutilated body ultimately muddles any cohesive narrative by which we might understand the body's representation on the page. Indeed, the popular text itself becomes a kind of brutal and brutalizing "body." The murder memoir's narrative orbits around the body—the suffering body, the murdered body, and the spaces and processes between the realizations of those states. However, the threat of the popular—the fleshy, the bodily, the sensuous—intrudes upon the murder memoir. This results in the production of protective mechanisms, which serve to "protect" the author and, by extension, the true crime reader, from accusations of exploitation and moral suspicion. Genre might be in flux within this new era of the true crime renaissance. However, within the context of the murder memoir's protective mechanisms, this flux is a threat to the "literary" text's appearance as artistic and "highbrow."

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