

REPRESENTATION OF BLACK WOMEN
IN TRUE CRIME

A Thesis
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
MAJIYEBO YACIM
Dr. Cristina Mislán, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2022

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

REPRESENTATION OF BLACK
WOMEN IN TRUE CRIME

presented by Majiyebo Yacim,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Cristina Mislán

Professor Ryan Thomas

Professor Julie Elman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This master's program comprised two of the most challenging yet rewarding years of my life. I could not have finished without the support of many people both within and outside of the J-School. First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee chair Dr. Mislán, whose encouragement and support got me through not only my thesis, but the master's program at Mizzou. I would also like to thank my committee members Dr. Elman and Dr. Thomas. Taking Dr. Elman's *Feminist Media Studies* as an undergraduate education piqued my interest in this area of study, and Dr. Thomas's *Philosophy of Journalism* course, which shaped the way that I approached the following research. I would also like to thank those in the Journalism Library, specifically Sandy Schiefer, who supported me as I balanced both work at the library and graduate school. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their support throughout these two years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Theoretical Framework	
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
Theoretical Framework	
General Representation of Black Women	
History and Evolution of the True Crime Genre	
True Crime’s Relationship to Journalism, Documentary and “Infotainment”	
Sensationalism	
Why Does True Crime Matter?	
Common True Crime Portrayals	
Black Women and True Crime	
3. RESEACH QUESTIONS	23
4. FINDINGS	29
Societal/structural/systemic issues	
Description and Character Analysis By Expert Testimony	
Visual Depictions	
5. CONCLUSION	56
REFERENCES	63

ABSTRACT

REPRESENTATION OF BLACK
WOMEN IN TRUE CRIME

Majiyebo Yacim

Dr. Cristina Mislán, Thesis Supervisor

True crime is an increasingly popular and relevant genre in media. However, how certain groups, including Black women, are portrayed in this genre is understudied. The purpose of my research was to study the specific representations of Black women in true crime media and examine how these representations either adhered to or diverged from stereotypical depictions of Black women in media. My primary question was: “How are Black women portrayed in true crime media?” To answer this, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of select true crime television episodes, using black feminism as my theoretical framework. The study found that texts that featured Black women as perpetrators of crime utilized historically found stereotypes of Black women. Newer texts, which featured Black women as victims/survivors, mothers of victims and as expert voices, tended to humanize Black women.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the past few years, interest in true crime media has exploded. Programs such as *Tiger King* and *Making a Murderer* have generated a lot of buzz (Walters, 2021), and the true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* is one of the most popular and profitable podcasts on air, having earned \$15 million in 2019 (Shapiro, 2020). Explosive narratives splash their way across our screens and provide the soundtrack on our daily commute to work. But how are specific identity groups portrayed within these narratives?

The true crime genre has a long and storied history. Donovan (1998) defines true crime media as “...shows that either recreate or intervene in traumatic events that involve illegality, often involving the viewing audience and some aspect of a resolution” (p. 120). According to Cavender and Fishman (1998), there isn’t a fixed history for the true crime genre, at least in film and television (p. 8). Reality crime programs are difficult to classify because they often blur the line between news and entertainment, and fact and fiction. As a subset of reality programming, true crime falls into the category of infotainment – simply defined as a blending of information and entertainment (Surette & Otto, 2002). What defines these programs is their claim of representing reality and true events (Cavender & Fishman, 1998, p. 3).

True crime reflects how the concept of crime is created/manufactured/defined while shedding light on how the media is involved in societal constructions of crime. Significant are the social and ethical questions that are inherent to the genre. Scholars have analyzed true crime media through a social constructivist approach, finding that the depictions contribute to beliefs in viewers that contrast with the actual reality of crime, ultimately reinforcing hegemonic beliefs. Though the genre is evolving, especially with the advent of technological advances, these concerns remain the same (Donovan, 1998; Murle, 2008; Potter & Kappeler, 2012; Celeste,

2018; Garcia and Arkerson, 2018). The purpose of this thesis was to study the specific representations of Black women in true crime media, specifically in television, and examine how these portrayals in true crime television might reinforce or possibly destabilize how this population is perceived. My primary research question is, “How are Black women portrayed in true crime media?”

In order to answer this, I first examined the general representation of Black women in media. West (1995) names the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire as historical depictions of Black women in popular media, each with her own set of features and characteristics that reinforce stereotypes. Each depiction is difficult to alter, influential in power dynamics, and generally interpreted to be accurate. Generally put, the Mammy figure is maternal and subservient, the Jezebel is oversexualized, and the Sapphire is angry and forceful (West, 1995). In current depictions of Black women, there is an either/or binary (Boylorn, 2008). Black women are either extremely educated or high school dropouts, hypersexualized, or unattractive. Boylorn (2008) argues that these depictions have had a numbing effect that lets them go unquestioned. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) argues that particular representations might have faded away, but they’ve often been remade into modern images that are constructed upon the basis of these historical representations (p. 22). But how do these representations manifest in true crime?

While conducting initial research, I found that there was a lack of literature on the representation of Black women in true crime, so this study helps to fill a gap. In examining the texts and drawing upon relevant social, political and cultural contexts, I was able to gain insight into ways in which Black women are portrayed in true crime and how this both draws upon and diverges from historical representations. Even as I did my preliminary research, the disappearance and murder of Gabby Petito prompted renewed and widespread conversations on

“Missing White Woman Syndrome,” drawing attention to the lack of attention and resources devoted to missing people of color and further proving this to be a fruitful area of inquiry (Allsop, 2021; Graham, 2021; Kindelan, 2021; Rahman, 2021; Robertson, 2021; Robles, 2021, Staff, 2021).

In order to answer my research question, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of episodes from the following programs utilizing the theoretical framework of Black feminist theory:

Disappeared.

Disappeared is a documentary true crime show that focuses on missing people. Techniques used by the show include narration, reenactments, talking-head interviews with family, law enforcement, and media personnel, and archival images and videos of the missing people. The show is produced by Investigation Discovery, a channel dedicated to true crime and claims to be “the #1 network for women in all of cable” (*Discovery Press Web United States*). *Disappeared* is one of the programs that helped launch Investigation Discovery (Sage, 2016).

Snapped.

Snapped is a documentary true crime program centered on women who kill. The Peacock streaming page for *Snapped* describes the series as “True stories of women who lost control and committed murder, featuring interviews with loved ones, law-enforcement officials, attorneys, and others with firsthand knowledge of the victims and the accused” (*Snapped*). *Snapped* uses narration, reenactments, and talking-head interviews to illustrate the events in each episode. The show is produced by the Oxygen Channel, which describes itself as a “...multiplatform crime destination brand for women.” In 2017, it switched its main focus to true crime and counts the *Snapped* franchise as its flagship (*Oxygen: About*).

Deadly Women.

Deadly Women, a documentary true crime television program produced by Investigation Discovery, also focuses on women who kill. Each episode features three women, diving into salacious details about the crimes committed and using narration, extensive reenactments, and talking-head interviews by law enforcement, crime authors and reporters. The streaming page on Peacock describes the program as follows: “Crime experts explore the motives and modus operandi of female killers. While males are often driven by anger, impulse and destruction, women usually have more complex, long-term reasons to kill” (*Deadly Women*).

True Life: Crime.

True Life: Crime is a documentary true crime program created by MTV. According to the network, the series, “... follows award-winning journalist and MTV News host Dometi Pongo as he investigates shocking and haunting crimes committed against young people, daring to ask unanswered questions that expose the truth” (*MTV goes behind the controversial headlines with new investigative series “True life: Crime”*: MTV Press 2019). Each episode follows host Dometi Pongo as he investigates the stories of missing and murdered people, often from marginalized groups. He interviews friends, family members, media and law enforcement as he pieces together the details of the crimes and the societal issues that surround them. Pongo describes the series as part true crime and part social justice documentary (Moore, 2021).

Black and Missing.

HBO series *Black and Missing* sheds light on the founders of the Black and Missing Foundation – stepsisters Natalie Wilson and Derrica Wilson, the former a PR professional and the latter a former police officer. Over four episodes, the show highlights the duo’s work in advocating for missing Black people and their families, accentuating the ways that the two serve

as a bridge between families, law enforcement, and media while also trying to navigate their personal lives. The series also offers a critique of social inequalities that impedes the search and recovery of missing Black people by featuring testimony from the families of missing Black women, law enforcement, and media. *Black and Missing* was created by Geeta Gandbhir and Soledad O'Brien and was directed by Samantha Knowles, Nadia Hallgren, Geeta Gandbhir, and Yoruba Richen, all women of color (*Black and Missing*). The creators expressed a vested interest in portraying issues ignored by the mainstream media (Gonzales-Bazan, 2021).

Surviving R. Kelly.

Surviving R. Kelly sheds light on the numerous allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse that have followed musician R. Kelly for decades. Created amid the MeToo Movement and the campaign to #Mute RKelly, the series draws upon the voices of journalists, media personalities, musicians, and most importantly, his victims, to contextualize and expose the vast extent of harm. dream hampton, Tamra Simmons, and Brie Miranda Bryant, all Black women, were among the executive producers for the series.

Findings:

After watching and taking detailed notes on each episode, to organize and interpret the data, I used hybrid coding and was able to detect significant themes and patterns in each of the episodes. I found four main portrayal categories of Black women, and several common themes running through these portrayals. Black women were portrayed most often as 1) Victims/Survivors, 2) Black Mothers (or other family), 3) Perpetrators, and 4) Expert Voices. The themes within these representations included social inequities, technology and crime/deviance. After analyzing the episodes, I found that older texts focusing on perpetrators reflected traditional representations, while newer texts focusing on victims and survivors

challenged stereotypical representations of Black women. However, each text reinforced traditional ideals about the role of justice and the necessity of the criminal justice system. For Black women perpetrators, the shows highlighted the need to incarcerate them and remove them from the community. Through representations of Black women victims/survivors, mothers and expert voices, the shows emphasized that though societal institutions such as media and law enforcement were flawed, they were ultimately necessary in order to capture perpetrators. Also, even as newer series' attempted to alter negative portrayals of Black women, they featured technology as a way of subverting privacy and increasing surveillance (Browne, 2015). Ultimately, newer true crime series are transgressive works that disrupt narratives that legitimize the criminalization of Black women. Older texts reinforce this criminalization.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Before considering the representation of Black women in the true crime genre, I provide a synopsis of my theoretical framework, review the literature related to media representation of marginalized groups, and provide background on the true crime genre.

Theoretical Framework:

My theoretical framework is Black feminist theory. Bucholtz (2014) defines feminism as “a diverse and sometimes conflicting set of theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives that have in common a commitment to understanding and challenging social inequalities related to gender and sexuality” (p. 23). Though the word ‘feminism’ appears to be singular, it refers to a wide range of theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives. Despite these wide-ranging differences, these concepts are united in their goal of addressing social inequality (p. 23). In relating feminist theory back to media, race and gender can largely be defined by their visual representations (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21). Scholar Banet-Weiser (2018) defines the politics of visibility as the process of making a political category, such as gender or race, visible in places where it has historically been marginalized, including the institutions of media, law, policy, and so forth. Representation, or visibility, adopts a political significance. The ultimate end goal of pairing visibility and politics is to produce an effect, such as social change, that exceeds the visibility (p. 22).

Black feminism emerged as Black women were excluded from women’s movements that marginalized the issues of Black women and other women of color (Hamer & Neville, 1998). Smith (2000) defines Black feminist theory as a way of “reading inscriptions” of race, gender, and class in “modes of cultural production” (p. 370). Hamer and Neville (1998) find that one of the basic tenets of Black feminism calls for “an examination of the interlocking forms of

oppression (e.g., race, class, and gender) on women and men's lives" (p. 23-24). The study of these interlocking forms of oppression is known as intersectionality and was pioneered by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). According to Crenshaw (1989), Black women are left out of both antiracist politics and feminism because they are both built upon a set of experiences that don't fully reflect how race and gender interact with each other. Thus, intersectionality is a metric through which overlapping categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. can be analyzed.

Hamer and Neville (1998) also assert that one of the main goals of Black feminism is to challenge heterosexual, racial, and gender ideologies that regularly portray Black women as Jezebels, Mammies, and Sapphires, images that they argue reinforce existing power relations and encourage Black women's sexual, physical and emotional abuse and exploitation within this culture (p. 24). Collins (1989) argues that Black feminist thought has the potential to offer Black women an alternate view of themselves and their realities than what is offered by mainstream society. According to Bosch (2011), Black feminist media scholars focus on the following issues: the persistence of stereotypical images of Black women; the power of Black identity and self-definition; the relationships between work, family, and oppression; sexual politics; and Black political activism.

In applying Black feminism to visual and media studies, theories from scholars such as bell hooks are instrumental (Carter, 2006). In her work, hooks argues that white supremacist ideologies shape the cultural narratives around Blackness, and calls for the decolonization of Black imagery in popular media (Carter, 2006). In *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*, hooks (1992) articulates the gaze as a source of agency for Black viewers – Black people can interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, look at each other, and name

what is seen (p. 116). Since the advent of film in the U.S., representations of Black people have been minimal, so in response to this absence, Black viewers have had to develop what she defines as an oppositional gaze, which is a source of resistance for Black viewers. hooks (2015) builds upon these points in the essay *Eating the Other*, arguing that the portrayals of racialized Others are exploited to add an illicit enjoyment to mass entertainment in ways that maintain/reinforce the status quo, and again asserts that these depictions serve as a way in which the dominant groups in society can assert their power.

Black surveillance studies, a field shaped by scholar Simone Browne (2015), presents another helpful avenue. Surveillance studies are defined as an interdisciplinary field of study shaped by questions of the management of everyday and atypical life that scrutinizes personal data, security, privacy and terrorism (p. 12). Browne (2015) argues that surveillance is an ongoing process undergirded by racism and sustained by anti-Blackness (p. 8-9). Surveillance is defined as when organizations observe people, especially when the observation and recording is done by those in a position of power over those being observed (Browne, 2015, p. 18). In popular neoliberal feminism, visibility is equated to empowerment. However, visibility does not challenge structures that led to invisibility in the first place, and marginalized populations are subject to surveillance and are often punished when they are made visible (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Surveillance often highlights individuality by displaying individuals and making them hypervisible (Browne, 2015). There is a “picture-taking racial gaze” that secures Black subjects within a rigid, restricted range of representational opportunities. This gaze views Blackness through stereotypes and other means that impose limitations, especially in spaces shaped for whiteness (Browne, 2015, p. 20). However, Black surveillance studies highlight strategies that

challenge surveillance. bell hooks's "talking back" comprises strategies that seek to challenge the power of controlling images and racializing surveillance (p. 62).

Black feminist theory continues to evolve. In the inaugural edition of *Feminist Media Studies*, Opoku-Mensah (2001) argues that a feminist perspective is needed to contextualize current trends in media (p. 25). Means Coleman (2011) puts forth two challenges for feminist media scholars in the 21st century: making Black women a key part of feminist media studies research, and crafting research methodology that avoids issues of erasure.

Stuart Hall's concepts will also be influential. A trailblazing cultural studies scholar, Hall's work challenged "preferred meanings" of media texts, and noted that the cultural power of those meanings was referred to as the 'politics of signification' (Campbell, 2017, p. 11).

Representation refers to how mass media presents images, and this is significant because of the way that mass media re-presented images that have multiple meanings, especially about race and ethnicity. Through analysis, one interprets the dominant meanings that are ascribed to the representations, which contribute to the powerful within a society (Campbell, 2017, p. 11). Hall also asserted that "negotiated" readings of media texts recognize the dominant ideology present in these texts while still allowing for analysis that extends beyond what the producers of the content intended for (p. 12). Hall (1997) argues that media serves as a very influential source of ideas about race; it is a site in which these ideas are "articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated" (p. 20).

General Representation of Black Women in Media:

The history of media representations of Black women across media formats reveals interesting ideas about race. In traditional media representations, Black women have historically been portrayed as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels (West, 1995). The Mammy originated in

the American South and is a deeply entrenched representational figure. Mammies are typically depicted as obese and darker complexioned. This figure represents subordination, self-sacrifice, domesticity, and working long hours with little to no monetary compensation. Another key portrayal of Black women is the Sapphire. Serving as an antithesis of the Mammy figure, the Sapphire is portrayed as nagging, hostile, and contemptuous of Black men. Sapphires are commonly portrayed with larger features, though not obese, and typically have a darker complexion. She is loud, animated and relies on verbal outbursts and assaults to express herself. The figure of the Jezebel, or the bad Black girl, originated during slavery and is related to the ownership of Black women's sexuality by white slave owners. Physically, the Jezebel is portrayed as having lighter skin or as being mixed race with features that are stereotypically associated with Europeans. As a departure from the Mammy figure, the Jezebel is more in line with white standards of beauty and serves as the seductive hypersexual woman who exploits and takes advantage of men's weaknesses. This figure contrasts with white representations of morality and sexuality, acting in opposition to the demure representations of white women. West (1995) notes that these stereotypes are difficult to alter, are influential in power dynamics and are generally interpreted to be accurate. Warren (1990) argues that the stereotypes reinforced by these images are the result of the deliberate attempt to reinforce white hegemony.

Racialized imagery is ambivalent – particular representations might have faded away, but they've often been remade into modern images (Hall, 1995, p. 22). In current depictions of Black women, researchers have found an either/or binary. Black women are either extremely educated or high school dropouts, hypersexualized or unattractive. Ultimately, Black women who do not fulfill a stereotype don't make sense (Boylorn, 2008, p. 418). Additionally, the historical stereotypes have been updated to intermix the traits of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire

figures. The welfare queen and the Sista With Attitude are some more contemporary examples of how the original portrayals evolved. The welfare queen is an evolution of the Jezebel and is condemned for her sexuality and child-rearing, and the Sista With Attitude is often characterized as being hypersexual, materialistic, and hyper-independent (Boylorn, 2008). As a result of these depictions, Boylorn (2008) argues that audiences are increasingly numb to the implications of these figures.

History and evolution of the True Crime Genre:

According to Cecil (2020),

“True-crime stories have existed in one form or another for centuries, eventually transforming in recent times into what is considered to be a ‘low-brow’ form of entertainment depicting the salacious details of wives murdering husbands, men slaying the women they love, and serial killers living next door” (p. 1).

Cavender and Fishman (1998) argue that the decades before the emergence of reality crime programming are instructive in providing context to this genre’s rise. The 1960s criminal justice system, shaped by various civil rights movements, opposition to authority and resulting civil disobedience, took a more rehabilitative approach, uplifting the rights of the accused and prisoners and seeking to correct abuses in the criminal justice system. This changed during the 1970s when citizens and legislators alike grew more concerned with crime. Politicians such as Nixon campaigned and were elected on “law and order” platforms (Estep & Macdonald, 1983, p. 293), there was an increase in federal funding for state criminal justice systems, which culminated in the “war on crime,” and retribution overtook rehabilitation in the study of criminology. This continued into the 1980s and flourished under the rule of neoliberal politicians such as Ronald Reagan (Cavender & Fishman, p. 5-6).

True crime content has undergone a rapid revolution in recent years. Walters (2021) cites “streaming platforms that enabled their ‘binge’ consumption, a ravenous viewer appetite for tales of justice and criminality, and the online forums and social media that gave true crime fans a place to parse clues and swap theories” (p. 25). Webb (2021) notes that though shows that have been on the air for decades, such as *Forensic Files*, *America’s Most Wanted* and *Dateline* remain steadfast, newer offerings by platforms such as Netflix, HBO and Amazon Prime flourish. Furthermore, entire networks, such as Investigation Discovery and Oxygen, focus primarily on true crime programming. Even unexpected networks, such as the Weather Channel and ESPN, currently offer true crime content (p. 152). Walters (2021) points to the “sudden proliferation” of true crime content in 2014 and 2015 as a reemergence and legitimization of the genre – a fresher perspective of the genre was granted due to the critical discourse attached to the releases, a more legitimized documentary format for the programs and the prestigious networks that released the content (p. 25-26). With all of the new changes, however, some things remained the same. “As people’s anxieties changed, so too did the content of true-crime narratives; yet one thing remained consistent – a focus on murder” (Cecil, 2020, p. 14).

Biressi & Nunn (2003) argue that newer forms of true crime media have broadened the focus on crime and pursuit as a public exhibition (p. 278). Cecil (2020) also mentions that modern true crime contains the potential to “give voice” to underrepresented populations, present a more holistic look at crime, and teach people about the criminal justice system, even as it relies on stereotypes (p. 9-10). Missing person narratives feature more prominently in modern true crime, with a goal of sharing information and generating new leads in the featured cases while still following strategies intended to attract audience members and entertain them (p. 37-41). Horeck (2019) finds that it is impossible to discuss contemporary true crime separately from

digitality and online data flows, arguing that older true crime texts from the pre-digital era most often reinforced belief in the criminal justice system, while current series' raise more questions, prompting distrust in the system and encouraging viewer involvement (p. 130).

True Crime's Relationship to Journalism, Documentary and "Infotainment":

True crime, as a subset of reality programming, falls into the category of infotainment. Initially emerging as a concept in the late 1980s, infotainment is defined as a combination of informative content and entertainment (Thussu, 2015, p. 1). Notable in infotainment programming are stylistic techniques such as the use of music, speed, camera angles typically found in fictional films, and emphasis on action. Some link reality crime programming to tabloids and indeed note a wider spread integration of entertainment aspects to mainstream journalism (Cavender and Fishman, 1998, p. 12).

True crime television programs borrow from journalism (Cavender & Fishman, 1998). The audiences of these programs perceive them to be news, and interviewers are referred to as "reporters" and "correspondents." However, researchers note the departure from professionalized journalism practices – the use of film reconstructions, the cinematography from "subjective camera angles," and the use of music to increase tension, which can be interpreted as a departure from objectivity, a standard that many hold to within the journalism profession. True crime programming also departs from journalism in that it diverges from the watchdog role of the press in its frequent collaborations with law enforcement. In order to gain access to sources like the FBI and police departments, true crime programs often do not practice critical judgment of and independence from these organizations. Though newspaper and television reporters also have to cultivate and maintain relationships with law enforcement officials and agencies, more distance is emphasized in order to maintain some level of impartiality, and those who do not maintain this

distance (tabloids, for example), are perceived to be in a different circle (Cavender & Fishman, 1998, p. 10-12).

Webb (2021) also notes the boundaries between fact and fiction are vague in true crime (p. 142-143). Cecil (2020) states that though exact storytelling techniques differ from property to property, reenactments, cliff-hangers and plot twists increase the entertainment value beyond the simple facts, balancing the desires to entertain and inform; fictionalization and embellishment is key in distinguishing true crime from journalism.

Sensationalism:

The role of emotion in true crime and how this intertwines with sensationalism came up in several sources. The sensationalism of true crime relies on emotional resonance in order to captivate its audience (Wiltenburg, 2004). A key way of appealing to viewer emotions involves pitches for the victims of crimes including testimonials from victims or their relatives and friends and often use words such as innocent, talented, beautiful, friendly, and hardworking of local police (Donovan, 1998, p. 127). Webb (2021) states that true crime stories “call upon strong emotions: the desire to find answers to unresolved questions; the ‘strangely soothing’ promise that horrific crimes can be explained, or at least solved, through competent investigation and forensic science; the draw of dark and forbidden topics inherent to an interest in violence and its aftermath” (Webb, 2021, p. 146).

Why Does True Crime Matter?:

The media is the primary source of most people’s crime knowledge (Cavender, 1998, p. 19). However, research finds that the portrayal of crime in the media doesn't reflect crime in the real world, since violent crime and arrest rates are overrepresented (Oliver, 1998, p. 21-22). Studies have also found overrepresentations of white, middle-class, middle-aged people in both

suspect and victim roles in both crime news coverage (Estep & Macdonald, 1983) and true crime media (Surette & Gardiner-Bess, 2014). In one study, Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2010) found that the more nonfiction crime programming viewers consumed, the more frightened they were of being victimized. Their trust in the ability of the criminal justice system to reduce crime and protect citizens was also undermined (p. 48).

Donovan (1998) suggests that true crime television positions the capture and punishment of criminals as the primary solution to crime, ignoring the structural issues that undergird such actions. Celeste (2018) argues that media serves as a tool of legitimization of the current political system while cultivating distance for the television viewer at home (p. 114). An analysis of the Australian program *Border Security, Australia's Front Line* found that this program and others like it construct government officials as heroes who protect Australia from outside threats but also serve as a means of legitimizing governmental agendas, enlisting the show's viewers as helping to secure national security, and acknowledges the anxieties stemming from neoliberal globalization (Walsh, 2015).

Potter and Kappeler (2012) find that media representations of crime in both news and entertainment contexts have heightened fear of crime and increased support for punitive crime legislation. They argue that the mass media is instrumental in reinforcing hegemony, which they define as a social process that reinforces the values and actions of the powerful within a given society by presenting the powerful's solutions as the most reasonable course of action.

Garcia and Arkerson (2018) argue that crime and justice are concepts that are in part socially constructed by the media. Because we don't experience all facets of reality, we can make sense of it through previous interactions, information that others provide, and the media. Scholar Cecil (2020) argues that if creators of true crime say that their content is factual, most of

the audience will believe their claim (p. 5). In looking at how infotainment plays a factor in true crime, Surette and Gardiner-Bass (2014) argue that consuming infotainment feels a lot like learning real facts, but in actuality, it presents a narrow, stylized rendition of the world.

Murley (2008) argues that true crime portrayals reinforce problems such as racism in society. Sadistic crimes against young women and children are overrepresented, which serves to warp public perceptions concerning which populations are most impacted by homicide while also negatively impacting public policy decisions and the criminal justice system, ultimately marginalizing the most vulnerable populations (p. 112).

Even programs that position themselves as being critical of law enforcement arguably reinforce “law and order” narratives. Programs such as the recent Netflix documentary series, *Making a Murderer*, co-opt the premise that harsh punishment is justifiable to those that deserve it (LaChance & Kaplan, 2019). True crime programs can renegotiate approaches to privacy, especially concerning law enforcement. Celeste (2018) argues that the voyeuristic nature of these programs is found to be justified in law enforcement activities that are seen as relating to the pursuit of justice, as well as justifying state harassment and the violation of the right to privacy, which ultimately serves to mark the groups portrayed as “non-citizens” and “other” (p. 118). The popularity of these true crime programs demonstrates how Black death and pain may serve as a site of entertainment, profit, and pleasure (Celeste, 2018, p. 113).

Webb (2021) links true crime media to danger narratives and the effect that they’ve had on societal beliefs and institutions. She defines danger narratives as stories that white people told, both implicit and explicit, that reinforced the inherent criminality of people of color. Often featuring horrific crimes committed against white women by men of color, these narratives were often used to justify enslavement, mass incarceration, lynching, and other acts that upheld white

supremacy. Webb (2021) likens danger narratives to true crime in that these stories have existed for centuries, claim a basis in real crimes, and largely focus on violence committed against white women. Additionally, both are meant to prompt feelings of outrage and terror among their audiences and reinforce that specific measures, such as incarceration and the death penalty, will restore proper social order. However, true crime stories depart from danger narratives in that they focus primarily on white-on-white crime (p. 131).

Kohm (2009) argues that true crime portrayals, instead of reinforcing the power of the state, may expose the limitations of the criminal justice system and thus subvert its authority, contradicting some of the findings above. Additionally, Horeck (2019) argues that, though some claim that contemporary true crime programs such as *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* can potentially bring about sweeping, dramatic legal changes that impact broader society, there is no substantial evidence for this. Scholars also note ethical questions that the genre prompts.

Williamson (2021) questions the notion that outsiders can enter a community, particularly a marginalized one, in which horrific events took place and report the ‘truth’ of what happened. In examining films such as *Tales of the Grim Sleeper*, she questions whether true crime creators engage with any ethical considerations or a sense of accountability to the communities in which they work (p. 24-25). Questions of consent to being filmed arise as well with some programs (Celeste, 2018, p. 117). Rather than viewing true crime simply as a vessel of entertainment, the research detailed above notes the real-life implications that the genre holds, and the legitimacy lent to the genre in its associations with journalism and documentary.

Common True Crime Portrayals:

Missing person narratives heavily overrepresent white people and women; the term “Missing White Woman Syndrome” addresses this trend (Sommers, 2016; Cecil, 2020).

According to Cecil (2020), in reality, half of missing children are boys and half are minorities (p. 83-84). However, regardless of race, missing women in news media tend to be framed through a patriarchal lens and are primarily referenced through their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, with a heightened focus on their appearances. Modern true crime follows in the footsteps of this news coverage (Cecil, 2020, p. 83-84). Research also finds that news and reality programming is more likely to portray African-American men as criminal suspects than real-life crime statistics represent, and these media representations imply that they are particularly threatening and violent (Oliver, 2003).

In researching the role of race in television news crime coverage, Bjornstrom et al. (2010) found that there wasn't a significant difference in the frequency of portrayals of Black and white perpetrators of crimes, suggesting that the portrayal of Black people is overrepresented. They also found that Hispanic perpetrators were underrepresented in television crime news. Additionally, minoritized populations were less likely to be portrayed as victims (Bjornstrom et al., 2010). However, Celeste (2018) notes that in some programs, there is a heavy presence of murdered Black bodies (p. 114). In examining gender, research has found that the overwhelming majority of homicides are committed by men (Whiteley, 2012; Cecil, 2020). There is little research on women who kill, but studies have shown that women who commit homicide do so in a domestic setting, with the majority of their victims being intimate partners and children. Whiteley (2012) argues that Western beliefs categorize women as being docile, passive, and nurturing, and thus, women who kill are generally considered more newsworthy. Studies found that there is less coverage of women of color who commit homicide, but the coverage that does exist is more negative than it is for white women. This holds in coverage situated in different countries, including Canada, Australia, and Israel. Women who commit homicide challenge

prevailing social norms regarding femininity, and the media struggle to reflect women who kill outside of the domestic space (Whiteley, 2012).

Black Women and True Crime:

There is a dearth of available research on how Black women are represented in true crime media, but there is a little more research on how Black women are portrayed in crime news. In a literature review covering how women and girls of color are portrayed in crime news, Slakoff (2019) notes that there is an abundance of research on media portrayals of white women as both victims and perpetrators of crime, but there isn't much research on women of color. In contrast to the depiction of white women offenders, women of color who offend are more likely to be portrayed as calculated and unreformable (p. 7-8). Slakoff (2019) posits that though there aren't many studies on women of color in crime news, the ones that exist demonstrate that harmful media stereotypes proliferate in coverage. This may be due to police officer bias when drafting crime reports, a tendency in news media to write crime stories that follow certain scripts and protocols, and subpar investigation by journalists and editors in gathering the details of these cases (p. 8).

In a study looking at how missing Black undergraduate women are portrayed in general crime news, Patton and Ward (2016) used critical race feminist theory to analyze media coverage and found that Black women's lives were rarely centered in discussions of missing people even though there are approximately 64,000 missing Black women. Their cases receive some degree of local press coverage but rarely receive national attention, and in most cases, the coverage was not substantial or personalized. Beauty standards, marital status, age, and parental status dictated who received more widespread media coverage. Also, the activities that the women were engaged in may have affected the portrayal of these women within the news media. They found

that media reports rarely mentioned the positive qualities of the missing Black women and that the narratives surrounding these women were brief unless there were sensationalized aspects involving crime, sex, or drugs. The authors ultimately argued the coverage reflects dominant white, patriarchal, hegemonic ideologies (Patton and Ward, 2016).

Neely (2015) argues that media renders Black women, especially victims of crimes, invisible, and this has two consequences: First, the lack of media response results in a lack of public outrage, which in turn does not instigate a greater police response that may help locate victims, and second, the media plays a role in making homicide victims' lives meaningful, so rendering Black women invisible deprives them of this touch of humanity. She notes that while overall crime rates in the U.S. are dropping and have been since 2005, the rates in urban communities are still significant. The scholar wrote that although African American women are 2.4 times more likely than white women to fall victim to homicide, their deaths don't receive the same news coverage, and in some cases, negative details about Black women victims were included in the reports (p. 11). Neely (2015) found that the families of Black women homicide victims commonly voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of media attention for their loved ones compared to white victims (p. 71).

Only one study thus far appears to have focused on the representation of Black women in true crime. Conducting a textual analysis of the program *The First 48*, Celeste (2018) identifies the "wailing Black woman." This figure is a complex one that draws upon past media representations of Black women, as well as the canonical grieving feminine figure that cuts across cultures. In true crime, this figure consists of a Black woman whose grief is made public, usually a mother figure. Celeste poses this representation as both a cautionary figure in the reality program and as a potential oppositional figure, both on the show and in other areas. In the

true crime depictions, the wailing woman functions as part of the problem – she needs to account for the victim, but also needs to be held responsible for the suspect, and is threatened by law enforcement to cooperate in the investigation of the crime. This figure may also serve as a counternarrative to those that normalize Black death. “Wailing Black women express sadness, but also anger and frustration. They speak of today’s issues while connecting them to historical moments” (Celeste, 2018, p. 126). Across history and cultures, the wailing woman calls on the powerful to be held responsible for suffering; they are the keepers of public memory. In particular true crime representations, she may serve as a means of consciousness-raising by shedding light on the systemic injustices that led to her pain (Celeste, 2018, p. 119).

Chapter 3: Research questions

In the previous sections, I found that there was an abundance of research examining the impact that true crime has on society; however, there wasn't much research that focused on Black women specifically within the true crime genre. Studying this topic would fill in a gap in existing scholarship.

Research Question:

My research question is: "How are Black women portrayed in true crime media?"

Methodology:

A textual analysis of specific true crime media is the most useful methodological approach for my research question. Atkinson (2017) defines textual analysis as a method involving gathering information about texts to gain insight into their role in communities or societies as a whole (p. 84). According to Brennan (2017), qualitative research uses language to understand concepts that are centered on people's experiences and attempts to create a sense of the wider realm of human relationships (p. 4). In contrast to quantitative research, "qualitative researchers consider the diversity of meanings and values created in the media. Rather than focusing on media effects or influences, they attempt to understand the many relationships that exist within media and society" (p. 5). Quantitative methodologies work on the assumption that there is a scientific truth discoverable through rigorous, strategic testing free from human bias. This outlook places importance on explanation, prediction, and control (p. 8). However, Brennan observes that critical theorists "consider reality and truth to be shaped by specific historical, cultural, racial, gender, political and economic conditions, values and structures; in their research, they critique racism, sexism, oppression, and inequality, and they press for fundamental and transformative social change" (p. 9). As I noted in the literature review, scholars have

detailed the various ways in which these factors shaped the formation of nonfiction crime programming, and how this programming influences and is influenced by society, making this a good fit for my intended area of study. Critical theory, along with other qualitative branches, such as Constructivism and Participatory/Cooperative Inquiry, do not seek out one truth. Rather, they seek out what Brennan (2017) refers to as little-“t” truth - the belief that there exists many constructed and competing notions of reality (p. 10).

Larsen (1991) states that text

“should not be regarded as a closed, segmented object with determinate, composite meanings, but rather as an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect. The task of the analyst is to bring out the whole range of possible meanings, not least the ‘hidden’ message of the text” (p. 123).

Furthermore, Brennan (2017) describes textual analysis as a methodology about language, what this language represents, and how we use it to understand our lives. The “text” in textual analysis does not only refer to actual texts, but to any medium from which we can make meaning. Texts reveal aspects of our socially constructed reality, with researchers studying words, ideas, themes, etc. within a particular cultural context (p. 192-193) -- the social context in which the text was produced (Brennan, 2017, p. 199).

In discussing genre analysis, Brennan (2017) informs that within specific genres, there are aesthetic and narrative conventions that “...reinforce a system of beliefs about our social reality” (p. 204). This resonates with the research that was discussed in the literature review about true crime (ex. Increased fear of crime and support for harsher crime legislation (Potter & Kappeler, (2012)). The researchers utilizing this method study other texts within the same genre and how they relate to their main topic of study and explore the different issues and concerns that

may stem from the text (p. 204-205). Ultimately, qualitative researchers use textual analysis to draw upon the cultural context of the topic of study, as well as their own knowledge of how the text is situated within the broader culture (p. 206). Based on Brennan's (2017) breakdown of this methodology, textual analysis as a methodology aligns with my research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Researchers Lester-Roushanzamir and Raman (1999) found that textual analysis is different from content analysis because it is an interpretive method that allows for researchers to take into account all of the aspects of content, including omissions, with latent meanings and discursive strategies emerging as the evidence that will be analyzed. The researcher is meant to consider the text within the relevant culture within which it exists. The "text to be considered in any given study is a 'unit of analysis defined by the researchers for theoretically based reasons'" (p. 702-703).

The texts that I analyzed included episodes from true crime series currently available to stream and purchase online. The texts that I examined included episodes of *Snapped*, *Deadly Women*, *Disappeared*, *True Crime Life*, *Surviving R. Kelly* and *Black and Missing*.

I used descriptive coding for my study. Saldana (2016) defines coding as a "researcher generated construct that symbolizes or 'translates' data and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes" (p. 4). More specifically, I utilized a hybrid coding approach that combined deductive coding, which uses codes stemming from knowledge of existing theory, and inductive coding, which uses data collected within a study to create codes (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) find that coding gives

researchers deeper insights into the data, makes the data more easily accessible and retrievable, sorts and structures the data, ensures transparency, and ensures the validity of the data.

I did not work directly with human subjects, so the ethical concerns that would stem from doing so are less of a concern in my study. However, I did have to practice reflexivity to make sure the findings of my research are credible. According to Brennan (2017), textual analysis doesn't provide researchers with knowledge that can be generalized or replicated within a wider population. Despite this, researchers using this method draw upon social, political, economic, and social contexts as well as their knowledge of the text and its place in broader culture to analyze the text being studied. She noted that textual analysis is not a "free-for-all," and that some interpretations of texts are more reasonable than others are (Brennan, 2017, p. 206-207). In studying the topic of true crime and the representations therein, I explored the historical and social forces that shape these representations and examined progressions of these depictions.

I kept my own personal biases in mind when analyzing the texts. In studying other textual analysis, I noted that the studies kept their content tightly framed within the theoretical frameworks that they utilized and I did the same. Brennan (2017) also highlights the importance of being open to discovering unknown possibilities that diverge from what researchers expect based on the chosen theoretical framework (p. 207); this also played a factor in my findings.

Sample

Disappeared.

The two episodes that I selected are "Lost in the Dark" (season 6, episode 1), featuring Mitrice Richardson, and "The Vanishing Hour," (season 9, episode 6), featuring Tyarra Williams. The first episode, "Lost in the Dark," is about Mitrice Richardson, a 24-year-old Black woman who goes missing and is later found dead. Mitrice's behavior before her disappearance

and her family's interactions with law enforcement are highlighted in this episode. The second episode, "The Vanishing Hour," focuses on Tyarra Williams, a 19-year-old girl who went missing in 2016, and her family's extensive efforts to locate her.

Snapped.

The two episodes of *Snapped* that were analyzed were "Kalila Taylor" (season 12, episode 2), and Sahara Fakhir (season 26, episode 25). The first episode covers the murder of Curtisha Morning, a local homecoming queen, and the investigation into her former friend Kalila Taylor. The second episode depicts the murder of family man Jerry Wheeler, and the investigation into and apprehension of Sahara Fakhir.

Deadly Women.

The two episodes analyzed are "Heart of Darkness" (season 2, episode 6), and "Heartless" (season 8, episode 9). The first episode, "Heart of Darkness," centered on murders driven by fatal attraction and featured two white women (Winnie Ruth Judd and Carolyn Warmus) and one Black woman (Daphne Wright). The second episode, "Heartless," features brutal murders that targeted the innocent. All three of the perpetrators (Angela Simpson, Kemi Adeyoo, and Latonia Bellamy) are Black women.

True Life: Crime.

The two episodes of *True Life: Crime* that I analyzed are "Are These Two Murders Connected?" (season 2, episode 6), and "Runaway Twin or Twin in Trouble?" (season 2, episode 4). The first episode, "Are These Two Murders Connected," depicts Muhlaysia Booker, a 22-year-old trans woman who went viral for being assaulted in a transphobic attack and was later found dead. Societal issues, technology, and sex work play a notable role in this episode, and host Dometi Pongo investigates whether the murder of another Black trans woman is connected

to her disappearance. The second episode, “Runaway Twin or Twin in Trouble,” focuses on the disappearance of Jholie Moussa and the subsequent investigation into her murder. This episode tackles several systemic issues – law enforcement and domestic violence.

Black and Missing.

Over four episodes, *Black and Missing* highlights Natalie and Derrica, the organization’s founders, as they advocate for missing Black people and their families. The series accentuates the ways that the two serve as a bridge between families, law enforcement, and media while also trying to navigate their personal lives. The series offers a critique of social inequalities that impedes the search and recovery of missing Black people by featuring testimony from the families of missing Black women, law enforcement, and media.

Surviving R. Kelly.

Surviving R. Kelly sheds light on the numerous allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse that have followed musician R. Kelly for decades. Over the course of the series, expert voices and survivors of Kelly’s misconduct provide context for Kelly’s rise to fame, his history of misconduct, the societal issues that allowed him to thrive for so long and attempts by the families of victims to free their loved ones from his grasp.

Chapter 4: Findings

The following section details three themes that were found across the analyzed programs – effect of social inequalities, character evaluation by expert voices, and visual depictions of Black women. Each subsection details how Black women are portrayed in true crime television as victims/survivors, mothers, perpetrators and expert voices. The themes exhibits how media representations of Black women have either stayed the same or evolved over time. Overall, Black women perpetrators adhered more closely to stereotypical representations that justified the necessity of their imprisonment. Representations of Black women victims/survivors tended to be more humanizing, which represents a departure from common media narratives that criminalize Black people. However, in efforts to humanize Black women victims, programs also utilized elements of respectability politics in order to establish them as worthy of compassion.

Societal/structural/systemic issues

Prior research noted that older texts predating our current digital era reinforced belief in the criminal justice system, while more contemporary programming aims to represent marginalized communities, educate about the justice system, and prompt viewer engagement – even while still relying on stereotypes (Horeck, 2019; Cecil, 2020). This preceding research aligned with my findings. In my study, I found that texts centering on perpetrators (*Snapped*, *Deadly Women*) tend to be older, longer-running series that only slightly brushed upon societal issues. The newer shows (*True Life: Crime, Black and Missing*, *Surviving R. Kelly*), focused more on victims, especially those in marginalized communities, and highlighted societal issues and ways that these issues can be addressed.

In highlighting how systemic inequalities affected Black women victims/survivors, true crime episodes regularly highlighted how misogyny, racism, and transphobia shaped how they

were viewed and critiqued the institutions that reinforced these views. One of the issues highlighted in the texts was transphobia. *True Life: Crime* episode “Are These Two Murders Connected?” centers on the murder of trans woman Muylahsia Booker. Shauntae Houston, Muhlaysia’s mother, is depicted as emotional and caring, and her interview humanizes her daughter. When describing her initial reaction to Muhlaysia being trans, she grew emotional and a tight shot of the camera revealed tears in her eyes as she said, “...it was just a lot of stuff I didn’t want her to have to experience and go through. You know, this world is just evil.” Friends noted the societal barriers that Muhlaysia faced, especially when seeking work. Jaz, a trans friend of Muhlaysia’s, describes the Block, located in Dallas, as a place where people came to have sex with trans women. Sex work is depicted in this episode as a societal structural issue, one that ultimately led to Muhlaysia’s death at the hands of a customer. Jessica, another friend of Muhlaysia’s, says that she was killed because of structural issues: “...right before she had passed, she can’t leave the hotel room, she can’t even make any money. I think that’s why my best friend died that night because she was trying to make money.” The host of the program, Dometi Pongo, notes:

“When I’m thinking about this whole issue, it’s a bit of a conundrum. You know, in a lot of ways, trans people are so marginalized that they can’t find employment. But the employment that they do find is predicated on them selling their bodies. So it’s like, you’ve got a society that doesn’t want to eff with you, but they want to eff you.”

After outlining some systemic issues facing trans women, he offers a solution:

“One thing that’s so sad to me about this whole thing is how many trans women end up in sex work, how that ends up turning into a violent situation. A lot of trans murders go unsolved, and people in the trans community will tell you, ‘We are invisible. People

don't care about us. They don't care about our lives...I think I understand that when it comes to trans women of color, they aren't only seeking justice. They want change. This isn't an isolated case or an issue that just plagues Dallas. It's a systemic issue that results in the widespread discrimination of trans people, especially in the workplace, that leads them to take desperate measures to make money. But I see change on the horizon.

President Biden, on day one of his terms, signed an executive order to prevent gender identity discrimination. What that means is, the federal government reasserted that they will vigorously pursue any school, health care facility, and landlord who discriminates against transgender people. This doesn't necessarily mean equality in the real world, but it's a start."

In the above quotes, Dometi attempts to shift focus from stigma attached to sex work to the underlying structures that lead to it, framing Muhlaysia as a worthy victim; her death was due to factors outside of her control. Dometi also elaborates on his efforts to humanize Muhlaysia throughout the program – he claims that it is the media's responsibility in covering issues facing marginalized groups and cites his approach when doing investigative work – seeking out those who have been covering marginalized communities; in this case, David Taffet of the Dallas Voice, an LGBTQ news outlet. Also, in a rare twist, unlike in other texts, no adversarial relationship with the police was depicted in this episode – they were not depicted as the societal/structural barrier in this episode; instead, transphobia was.

Law enforcement is an often-cited barrier in true crime programs regarding victims. In *True Life: Crime* episode "Runaway Twin or Twin in Trouble?", societal/structural issues were identified from the offset. Dometi provided some critiques. At the beginning of the episode, Dometi says, "Too often, missing Black teenage girls are quick to be judged by police as

runaways, and their disappearances aren't given the proper attention." Furthermore, several texts present arguments that Black women victims/survivors are failed by law enforcement when they are disabled. In *Black and Missing*, youth/naivety is also tied to disability. The first episode of the series featured Kennedy High, an autistic teenager who chatted with strangers online and eventually went missing after one of these strangers picked her up at her school. Her mother, Brandi Stallings, describes Kennedy's vulnerability: "Her brain just operates a little different than ours. She does not look at anyone as being a bad person, which is hard because I'm afraid of her being taken advantage of." Because Kennedy had reached the age of consent in Maryland, law enforcement did not step in. As a result, Brandi reached out to the Black and Missing Foundation who, with help from the Black press, located Kennedy safely.

This is also demonstrated in the *Disappeared* episode "Lost in the Dark." On the evening of her disappearance, narration and reenactments show that victim Mitrice Richardson was behaving unusually – she went to a restaurant, struck up a conversation with a group of people who found her behavior amusing and tried to leave without paying her bill. After staff placed a call to the police, Mitrice was arrested and taken into custody. After her release from the police station, she disappeared and was later found dead. In the wake of Mitrice going missing, family and friends began comparing notes and found that her behavior had been strange in the weeks leading up to her disappearance – she had left an odd note on her aunt's car, and she had also been posting strange messages on social media around the clock. Later, a state psychiatrist concluded that she possibly had bipolar disorder. Mitrice's family questioned why, despite her odd behavior, Mitrice was not put on a psychiatric hold by police for her own protection, something that they believe could have prevented her death.

Black Mothers

Black mothers were often depicted challenging and rectifying structural failings by law enforcement and mainstream media. They also serve as advocates, spreading awareness for causes and issues. In the HBO series *Black and Missing*, Natalie Wilson and Derrica Wilson, founders of the Black and Missing Foundation, are depicted balancing their work with the organization with their roles as mothers, and in particular, their battles with systemic issues concerning their kids. The footage depicts the two navigating domestic life with their children as they work on missing person cases. Natalie describes the imprisonment of her son, the fight to exonerate him, and the emotional toll that this takes on her. In one episode, Derrica describes how an officer's description of her young Black son brought her face to face with structural issues in law enforcement.

In another *Black and Missing* portrayal of Black motherhood, Annie Hall, mother of missing and trafficked teen Amaria, represents the Black mother as being caring and as an investigator. Observational footage depicts Annie in her home, looking at family photographs and leaving a Christmas tree up year-round because it is her daughter's favorite holiday and she wants Amaria to see it when she comes home. When it is revealed that Amaria may have been trafficked, Annie is depicted as an avid investigator, battling assertions by law enforcement that Amaria is a runaway, driving around Detroit looking for her daughter, enlisting the help of Black and Missing, and compiling detailed records to present to law enforcement to aid their search. Eventually, Amaria was recovered safely.

Circling back to the *Disappeared* episode "Lost in the Dark," Latice Sutton, victim Mitrice's mother, had to take on the role of investigator when Mitrice initially went missing, and then as her and the family's encounters with police became more negative. Law enforcement is depicted in the episode as an adversarial force to Mitrice and her friends and family. Latice

argues that law enforcement negligence endangered her daughter. Mitrice had been acting oddly, and instead of putting her on a psychiatric hold, law enforcement released Mitrice from jail in the middle of the night without her car, money or phone. Mitrice's skeletal remains are later found, and the narration reveals that law enforcement moved her body despite instructions not to do so. As a result of these actions, Latice holds press conferences, hires an independent forensic anthropologist, and files 6 claims against the L.A. County sheriff's department, including negligence and wrongful death. When discussing how the police treated Mitrice, Latice says, with tears in her eyes, "On their vehicles, it says, 'To serve and protect.' There was nothing protecting her when they allowed her to walk out that door."

Finally, Michelle Kramer, one of the mothers featured in *Surviving R. Kelly*, details how her daughter Dominique, then 17, got involved with R. Kelly. When she sought help from police, she was told that since Dominique met the legal age of consent in Illinois, there was nothing that they could do. Michelle convinces show producers in episode 5 to help her track down her daughter in Los Angeles after seeing her on TMZ. Upon arriving at a location she believes contains her daughter, says, "I didn't get to be a mother all this long not to be a detective." Observational footage shows her tracking down the hotel, speaking to hotel employees, tracking Dominique to her room, and ultimately bringing her home.

Mothers and family members were also shown to be advocates for social causes. In the endings of the analyzed *True Life: Crime* episodes, the information for organizations that the families started were displayed on screen. In the episode, "Are These Two Murders Connected?" Muhlaysia's mother Shauntae started the Muhlaysia Booker Foundation to provide resources and education for trans people and their families, and in the episode "Runaway Teen or Teen in

Trouble,” Jholie’s family started the organization Not A Runaway in order to advocate for missing teens who might otherwise be labeled as runaways.

However, not all of the episodes centering Black women victims/survivors of crime provided critiques of structures within society. *Disappeared* episode “The Vanishing Hour” featured Detective L.D. Farrar, a Black law enforcement official that worked with the Crimes Against Persons Squad. Farrar served as a dedicated representation of law enforcement that was committed to finding Tyarra. Outside of her talking head interview segments, she is shown driving in front of the apartment complex where Tyarra went missing and saying that whenever she drives by the location, she is on the lookout for clues. She also acknowledges at the end of the episode that the family is relying on her. A tight shot of her face reveals tears in her eyes before she says, “I mean, that’s something you live with. You just don’t want to let them down.” In the episode, law enforcement as an institution was not critiqued. At one point, she mentioned her gratitude that Tyarra’s grandfather Darryl was conducting his own investigation and that he was visiting strip clubs, motels, and nightclubs – places that Farrar noted that she wouldn’t be welcomed in as a police officer.

Black Women Expert Voices

Throughout the true crime episodes, Black women serve as expert voices that give voice to the societal issues that fail Black women when they go missing or are victimized. Their testimony establishes the vulnerability of victims, which serves as a way of humanizing them. One such representation involves Black women who were formerly law enforcement. In *Black and Missing*, foundation co-founder Derrica Wilson and Dr. Renee Murrell, a former FBI Victim Specialist, expand upon the structural issues involved in police work. Derrica uses this knowledge in her work with Black and Missing. In episode one, she describes her history as the

first Black woman officer in her police department, elaborating on the lack of attention paid to missing Black people, and says, “I don’t want these cases to be handled sloppy because our community matters. These men and women that are going missing look like my siblings, or look like my parents, and my grandparents. They matter.” Dr. Murrell provides a critique of law enforcement and how they handle trafficking; in particular, she critiques the record-keeping practices that make it hard to gather data on trafficked girls.

Black women expert voices also critique media. The series *Black and Missing* provides a detailed critique of media coverage of missing Black people by featuring the voices of Black women expert voices. Natalie, a PR professional and one of the co-founders of Black and Missing, notes during an interview that upon forming Black and Missing, one of the first things that the foundation did was come up with a media strategy. At first, the organization had to fight for every bit of coverage, but the Black press was present from the start. Deborah Mathis, journalist, and author, discusses the term “Missing White Woman Syndrome,” which was coined by her friend Gwen Ifill, and defines it for the viewer: “Missing white woman syndrome is the tendency to engage in national panic when a white woman, especially when lovely to look at, goes missing. The country has a conniption.” Deborah also mentions that as a Black woman and journalist, she feels an obligation to bring stories of missing Black people to the forefront and cover things that mainstream outlets might miss or misunderstand, a sentiment echoed by journalists Allison Seymour and Jennifer Donelan. Another prominent portrayal of a Black woman in media is PR professional Rebkah Howard, whose niece Tamika went missing in 2004. In the second episode of the series, she describes her fight to get her niece Tamika a fraction of the coverage that Natalie Holloway, who went missing around the same time, received.

In *Surviving R. Kelly*, Black women's expert voices provided an extensive critique of the structural issues within society that enabled the musician's abuses. Black women journalists and media experts, in particular, contextualized the cultural climates in which the abuses took place, and provided opinions and commentary. Mary Mitchell, a Black journalist, describes the publication of allegations against R. Kelly in the Chicago press in 2000. In episode 3, she recounts when journalists first learned about R. Kelly's infamous underage sex tape. Mary then describes viewing it and says, "I got to tell you, as a mother and as a grandmother and as a Black woman, I was sickened by what I saw." In citing the cultural context at that time, she notes that there was now evidence of Kelly having sex with children, but ultimately, no one cared. Another journalist, Kathy Chaney, gave insight into Kelly's childhood, gave commentary describing why she thought he was interested in high school girls, detailed the events of R. Kelly's 2008 child pornography trial, and offered insight into what she and other journalists were thinking at the time – mostly, that they were appalled at his behavior at the trial, during which he continued reaching out to young girls who had come to support him at the courthouse. Writer and cultural critic Jamilah Lemieux talks about the culture that enabled Kelly for so long, describes her feelings about his relationship with Aaliyah, and notes the systemic structures protecting Kelly, as well as the lack of outrage in the Black community about Kelly's actions. In providing commentary on society's silence she says,

"...it feels like they're taking a stance against Black girls. It feels like they're taking a stance to say, 'Protecting Robert Kelly and his ability to make music and entertain fans means more than what he did in his private life with these little girls.'"

Black women's expert voices also include activists. In *Surviving R. Kelly*, the role of activism in bringing awareness to R. Kelly's actions is brought forth, and with this, the voices of

activists such as Tarana Burke, founder of the MeToo movement, and Oronike Odeleye, co-founder of #MuteRKelly. Throughout the series, these two voices explore the systemic issues that allowed R. Kelly to thrive for so long. In the series, Tarana Burke says,

“The way that we in society talk about and think about sexual violence, a lot of times, it puts the onus on the victim. People are brainwashed into thinking that they have some complicity in their own abuse. And so they don’t come forward because of the deep shame, the fear of being ostracized in their community. There are all these different factors that allow people to stay silent.”

Black Women Perpetrators

When portraying Black women perpetrators in true crime television, structural issues in society, such as poverty and disability, were addressed, but for the most part negated by virtue of the perpetrator’s violent actions. Disability is referenced in several of these episodes. In the *Snapped* episode “Kalila Taylor,” her defense attorney John Loturco positions Kalila’s imprisonment as a societal/structural issue, citing mental health issues that indicated that she shouldn’t have been criminally tried. However, another expert voice in the episode, prosecutor Vincent Stephan, said that “Hopefully the parole board will see that this woman is a very violent and dangerous girl and will keep her in prison for a very long time.” *Deadly Women* episode “Heartless” also referenced structural factors, including disability. In the first segment of the episode, which centered on Angela Simpson, expert voices and narration reference how Angela’s working-class background and childhood experience with foster care and abuse may have contributed to her worldview and her subsequent actions, which involved imprisonment and torture of a man. This episode also notes the disability of both her victim, Terry, who used a wheelchair, and Angela, who expert voices note has a history of mental illness. Right after this,

experts, including criminal profiler Candice DeLong, mention that Angela did not want people to use her mental illness to excuse her actions. Another *Deadly Women* episode, “Hearts of Darkness,” described the effect that being deaf had on the subject Daphne Wright’s life – particularly, isolation. Due in part to issues stemming from her lifelong struggles, Candice DeLong says that, “I think Daphne was on a path to explode one day on someone.” One of the expert voices, a law enforcement official, mentioned that after killing her victim, Daphne waited a few days to dispose of her body because she was waiting to get her disability check to afford a chainsaw for dismemberment; here, her disability was implicitly connected to her crime. Other episodes featuring Black women perpetrators completely negate any role that structural inequality may have had in their actions or lives. In the *Deadly Women* episode “Heartless,” expert testimony cites Kemi Adeyoola’s wealthy background. In describing her actions, which involved killing an elderly woman, law enforcement official Morris denies any structural factors that may have contributed to Kemi’s behavior, stating that “Nothing in her background should be used as an excuse or a rationale.” In the “Sahara Fakhir” episode of *Snapped*, expert testimony also negated societal/structural reasons that might have led to murdering her neighbor elderly neighbor – district attorney Ryan Leonard says, “I mean, it was not a self-defense, it was not in reaction or response to anything that he did, so it was unwarranted, unsolicited, whatever her motive was, was completely in her mind and a product of her mind.”

Interestingly, though societal issues were not overly emphasized in the portrayals of Black women in the true crime texts, this was highlighted in one of the episodes in a segment about a white woman. In *Deadly Women* episode “Hearts of Darkness,” the first segment focused on Winnie Ruth Judd and contrasted the gruesome nature of a double homicide and attempted body disposal with the possibility of her innocence. In this segment, author Jana Bommersbach,

criminal profiler Candice DeLong and forensic pathologist Janis Amatuzio presented arguments and evidence that societal/structural issues may have been at play in her case. Additionally, there is use of passive language to describe the killings. When presenting a theory for Winnie's possible innocence, Candice DeLong says,

“In the 1930s, women didn't have much in the way of power, even in this country. They had rights, but they didn't have the power, they didn't have the authority, and they didn't have the influence. And it's easy to see how a young woman who had been involved with a married man and ended up on the wrong side of a gun with both her friends dead could be easily framed and sent away.”

This segment correlates with prior research indicating that media coverage is more likely to excuse or minimize the actions of white women perpetrators (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019).

These portrayals also serve as a reinforcement of media narratives that criminalize Black people.

Description and Character Analysis By Expert Testimony

The use of language is key in the portrayal of Black women in true crime. This language often came from expert voices, family, and victims/survivors themselves. Though the programs borrow from journalism, they depart from professional journalism practices and standards, such as objectivity (Cavender & Fishman, 1998). The use of language by expert voices when describing these women exemplifies this. These voices gave context into the history of victims/survivors, provided insight into a given community and cultural contexts surrounding the events in the series, and provided their thoughts and opinions on the people and events that took place in each episode. Expert voices often differentiated between right and wrong, described the characters of victims and perpetrators, and oftentimes assigned thoughts and motivations to perpetrators in particular.

Research finds that audiences tend to believe that infotainment, such as true crime, accurately portrays reality (Surette & Gardiner-Bass, 2014; Cecil, 2020). In *Deadly Women* and *Snapped*, the expert voices (both Black and non-Black) do a lot of speaking on behalf of the women portrayed. Law enforcement expert voices were usually involved in the investigations or prosecutions; they gave insight into the legal process and explained why it was important to keep these women off of the streets. Other expert voices, such as journalists, authors, and criminal profilers, gave insight into the thoughts and mindsets of the perpetrators in each episode. Their expertise was implied, and there seemed to be an implicit agreement that the viewer should trust their insights, a trend that was acknowledged in prior research (Cecil, 2020, p. 5). What was not explicitly revealed was how these insights into the perpetrators' minds were gleaned. This characterization from experts (both Black women and groups outside of this) within the episodes tended to use their commentary to humanize Black women victims/survivors, and rebuke Black women perpetrators.

Black Women Victims

Scholars have noted the impact that crime coverage has in rendering victims visible, both in order to instigate a greater police response and to humanize victims (Neely, 2015; Patton & Ward, 2016). Shows that counted Black women among the creators and executive producers (*Black and Missing*, *Surviving R. Kelly*) did a lot of work to humanize Black women within the true crime genre and expose the societal failings that leave Black women vulnerable. *Black and Missing* was created by Geeta Gandbhir and Soledad O'Brien and was directed by Samantha Knowles, Nadia Hallgren, Geeta Gandbhir, and Yoruba Richen, all women of color (*Black and Missing*). In an interview, when asked about their interest in creating the series, Gandbhir and Knowles said,

“We’ve both been drawn to social justice issues throughout our careers, especially those that disproportionately affect Black people and people of color, so when Soledad O’Brien and her team approached us about a series on Derrica and Natalie, and how widespread and underreported this issue is for Black people especially, it was a no-brainer. We knew that a documentary series on a platform like HBO would be a great way to generate attention for an issue that the mainstream media regularly ignores” (Gonzales-Bazan, 2021).

In the texts where the victims are either deceased or missing, family, friends, narration and expert testimony emphasize the positive traits of the girls and women through descriptions of their personalities, intelligence, looks, education, and intended life goals. In the *Disappeared* episode “Lost in the Dark,” victim Mitrice is described by her family, as well as expert voice journalist Mike Kessler, as someone to be proud of – a former beauty queen, dancer and recent college graduate with plans to pursue graduate study. Archival photos and videos of Mitrice are shown, and positive music plays through this segment. Her aunt Lauren notes that Mitrice had recently come out to her family as a lesbian and had family support, and Kessler mentions Mitrice’s job as a go-go dancer at an LGBT club, taking care to note that she was not a stripper. Her aunt Lauren says, “She was smart. She was articulate. She was talented in so many different ways. But most of all, she was a very loving child, and she grew up to be a very loving young woman.”

Similarly, in *Snapped* episode Kalila Taylor, the victim Curtisha was described as a smart, popular homecoming queen with a bright future. Officer Vincent Stephan of the Suffolk County Police Department stated that “She was a great student, a great kid, had ambitions to go on to college.” Also, in the *Disappeared* episode “The Vanishing Hour”, Tyarra, the missing

woman, is described by her family and the narration as a caring, social girl who was ready to enroll in college and earn a degree in early childhood development. Danielle Williams, her mother, says that “Her head was in a good space. She had a game plan and she was sticking to the game plan as much as possible, and Tyarra was ready to bust the world wide open at this point.”

However, in one of the texts, survivors were able to use their own voices – a key factor in *Surviving R. Kelly* is the fact that most of the victims/survivors are given space to tell their stories. At the beginning of the series, an interviewer asks why the women are choosing to tell their stories. Survivor Kitti Jones says, “I felt like my silence allowed it to continue. A part of me always felt like maybe I did something, but when I found out that it wasn’t just me, and it just kept going and going and going, it just made me furious.”

Expert testimony often placed emphasis on Black victims’/survivors’ youth and naivety in attempts to humanize them. In *Surviving R. Kelly*, this was particularly notable. Clinical psychiatrists contextualize the behavior and mindsets of the girls and women who were victimized and educate the audience on cycles of abuse. Additionally, many of the participants talked about Kelly’s presence at a Chicago high school and his conduct with teenage girls, repeatedly emphasizing the youth of his victims. In the first episode of the series, journalist Kathy Chaney stated that teen girls were more impressionable and easy to influence. This viewpoint was corroborated by Kelly’s former backup singer Jovante Cunningham, who said that the teenage girls who worked with Kelly would hear things about his behavior, but didn’t initially think much of it. In describing their mindsets, Jovante says, “We were so stupid. Just so...naive.” Expert voices also mentioned the career ambitions of most of Kelly’s victims – a lot of them wanted a way into the music industry. Oronike Odeleye, the co-founder of #MuteRKelly

stated in the second episode that many girls who wanted to work with Kelly had heard of his behavior, but didn't believe the rumors and still wanted to work with him. Later in the same episode, survivor Lisa Van Allen recounted her first sexual encounter with Kelly and said that she wanted to say no to his advances but didn't want to upset him because she was young.

In the fourth episode of *Surviving R. Kelly*, in-between clips of testimony from Jerhonda Pace, another of Kelly's victims/survivors, Dr. Candice Norcott, a clinical psychiatrist, says that the long-term planning portion of teenage brains hasn't fully developed yet, which makes it easy for adults to take advantage of them. Another clinical psychologist, Dr. Jody Adewale, notes in the same episode that society blames women for not leaving abuse and describes the psychological blocks that prevent victims/survivors from leaving their abusers. Another text features the same trend. In *Disappeared* episode "The Vanishing Hour", Tyarra's youth and naivety were emphasized when it came to relationships – her grandfather Darryl and mother Danielle noted her involvement with young men who they felt were not right for her, that she was too forgiving, and implied that one of her ex-boyfriends might be responsible for her disappearance.

Black Women Perpetrators

Narration and expert voices are used to provide insight and commentary into the thoughts and motivations of these perpetrators, often using condemnatory language. In the analyzed texts *Deadly Women* and *Snapped*, reenactments are used to portray the often violent murders as narration and commentary from experts such as journalists and law enforcement describe the events. The featured women are often depicted as having an adversarial relationship with police and histories of violence and criminal activity. At several points, they also note that attacks by Black women perpetrators were so vicious that they initially believed that men were the killers.

These expert voices emphasize the evil nature of the perpetrators and highlight the importance of these women being incarcerated (Donovan, 1998).

In the *Deadly Women* episode “Hearts of Darkness,” narration and expert testimony describe Daphne’s character through an emphasis on her jealous nature and seething rage. Though her guilt is established from the start of her segment of the episode, the perpetrator, Daphne Wright, is provided some brief background – narration and experts detail her difficult upbringing while growing up deaf and describe her initially happy relationship with her girlfriend, Sallie. However, Daphne is quickly established as a controlling girlfriend with anger issues. Expert voice Jackie Chesmore, Daphne’s landlord, starts off the segment by warning viewers: “I just want to advise to other people – beware. You cannot trust people. They may look innocent, they may have a smile, but check their behaviors, their references, because there’s a lot of bad people out there and they may be living in your home.” The episode builds upon Daphne’s anger – when describing Daphne’s jealousy, the narration states, “Sallie gets a glimpse into her lover’s dark heart. She doesn’t like what lurks there.” These voices then describe Daphne’s descent to murder and dismemberment. Expert voice, criminal profiler Candice DeLong, chimes in to state that chainsaws are rarely used in dismemberment cases and are more popular in Hollywood films, and when we do see it in real life, it makes big headlines “...and paints the murderer as particularly evil and gruesome.” At the conclusion of the episode, Candice says that Daphne, “...had a very dark and dangerous rage growing inside her probably for a long, long time.”

Another *Deadly Women* episode follows a similar path. The first woman depicted in the episode “Heartless” is Angela Simpson. At first, Angela is described by an expert source, prosecutor Vince Imbordino, as being odd but pleasant. Things change, however, and the

program's narrator notes that she has a dark side: "She funds a drug habit by turning tricks. In her mind, she doesn't just walk these streets, she owns them." The episode's narration and expert testimony provide insight into Angela's mindset by extensively referring to her moral code, which intersects heavily with a criminal past, which includes instances of holding several people, including a local sex offender, hostage. Criminal profiler Candice DeLong says that "Angela may see herself as the only sane person in an insane world." Mike Watkiss, a local journalist, describes her mindset when she takes credit for torturing and killing her victim: "I don't think that Angela Simpson would even want to share credit with God and say that 'God told me to do it,' as so many killers do. This was her stage, and nobody better step on it." When analyzing her character, expert voices expand upon the horror that is Angela's violent torture and murder of her victim, a man named Terry. Candice DeLong states that "Angela is a truly, truly evil woman." Vince Imbordino builds upon this by saying, "You wouldn't want her in your neighborhood. You wouldn't want her in your town. You wouldn't want her around anybody that you knew. She's very, very dangerous."

The same episode of *Deadly Women* features teenage Kemi Adeyoola. Expert testimony reveals that she has an extensive criminal history – physically assaulting her neighbors and calling them racial slurs, shoplifting, and returning the stolen items for a profit. Candice DeLong says that her attack on her neighbors "...was a very good predictor of future bad acts. Kemi wanted to be bad." At several points in the episode, Kemi is described as being obsessed with money. Throughout the episode, she is portrayed as an unreformable criminal, which supports findings from earlier research that found that Black women and other women of color who commit crimes are often portrayed as repeat offenders and as unreformable (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019). When covering her release from juvenile detention, the narration says that

“...they let her back into the community” and that “Authorities have no idea what they’ve done.” The narrator of the episode notes that despite her father’s best efforts, Kemi's criminal behavior is getting worse. Similar to Angela Simpson, Kemi is depicted doing sex work, which experts tie to her general criminal nature. Profiler DeLong says that “Kemi liked the high life but she didn’t want to live the straight and narrow life to get to it. So she started working as a call girl.” When Kemi moves to murder, expert voices contextualize the severity of her crimes. Forensic pathologist Janis Amatuzio says that Kemi “...became a predator, and she started looking for prey.” Janis also describes the frailty of Kemi’s victim: “Annie Mendel would have been no stronger than a young child. It would have been easy for Kemi to overpower Anne Mendel. On top of that, Kemi had the element of surprise.” Furthermore, the narrator notes that the attack is so vicious that law enforcement initially believes that it was a man who committed the murder. In describing her character, law enforcement official Morris says that “She is just a thoroughly evil person.”

In *Snapped* episode “Sahara Fakhir,” her extensive criminal history and hatred of law enforcement is described by narration and law enforcement. At the beginning of the episode, when law enforcement was investigating the murder of her neighbor, she gave a false name to police. Expert testimony mentions that law enforcement was initially looking for a big man since the victim, Jerry, was a large man himself. Michelle, Jerry's daughter, later notes her surprise that her father’s murderer was a woman, stating that, “I couldn’t believe that [the killer] was a lady, you know?” There are numerous references to Sahara’s size throughout the episode from journalists and law enforcement – Ryan Leonard, a district attorney, mentioned that she weighed around 400 pounds and stood out because of her size. In describing her arrest, Leonard says,

“She was a very large woman. They couldn’t use traditional handcuffs, they had to use the plastic cuffs. She was able to break out of the plastic cuffs, which, to law enforcement, was an ominous thing, and they hadn’t seen that done before.”

In the previous section, I described how Black women expert voices contextualized structural issues in society. Here, I discuss how Black women expert voices featured in true crime discussed the characters of Black women victims/survivors, and Black women perpetrators of crime. Francesca Amiker, a journalist and Black woman expert voice, also describes Sahara’s arrest – “She was absolutely resisting arrest, she had no restraint over her emotions, and she reacted violently.” Francesca also provides insight into Sahara’s thoughts and motivations, using terms such as “gluttony” and “excess” to describe Sahara and her actions, tying these concepts to her crime – a brutal stabbing of a 66-year-old man, Jerry Wheeler. Here, Francesca’s voice operates similarly to the expert testimony from non-Black women. Ultimately, the characterizations of Black women perpetrators draw upon elements of the stereotypical Sapphire and Jezebel figures (West, 1995), portraying the women as violent, immoral, sexual, and masculine . In drawing upon these portrayals, these texts attempt to reinforce the fears of the audience and justify criminalization of those deemed immoral and irredeemable (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019; Riisman, 2020).

Visual Depictions

Notable in the depiction of Black women in true crime is how they are visually portrayed on screen. Common throughout the texts were talking-head interviews, reenactments, as well as archival photographs and videos of the subjects of the true crime episodes.

Black Women Victims

For Black women victims/survivors, portrayals tended to use archival videos and photos of the person in their youth. For living victims, like the ones in *Surviving R. Kelly*, cinematography and editing were used to portray the emotional impact on survivors as they provided testimony of what they endured. Physical depictions highlight their humanity and dramatize the mystery and tragic circumstances of their disappearance. The visual depictions build upon the character traits described by the expert testimony, and are ultimately utilized to humanize the women – this gives them a background and often highlights their educational experiences (yearbook and graduation photos). *Snapped* episode “Kalila Taylor” shows victim Curtisha Morning’s high school yearbook photograph at several points during the episode, and *Disappeared* episode “Lost in the Dark” does the same with victim Mitrice Richardson’s college graduation photograph. The physical depictions also serve to highlight the victims’/survivors’ youth and innocence. *Surviving R. Kelly* heavily used archival images of the women as teenage girls serve to highlight their youth/naivety when they first met R. Kelly and emphasize the damage that he wrought on his survivors at such a young age. Talking-head interviews used tight shots to highlight emotion on their faces as they talked about their difficult experiences.

Black Women as Mothers

Visually, Black mothers are portrayed in talking-head interviews as strong, caring, and emotional, and tight shots and camera angles are used to portray emotion – tears fill their eyes when they talk about the impact of losing their daughters. These depictions in the true crime episodes depict both Black women victims/survivors and mothers as a representation of the “wailing Black woman” – here, the presence of this figure serves as an indictment of societal structures that normalize Black death and pain (Celeste, 2018). Though their displays of grief are

not overly dramaticized, the women are depicted with tears in their eyes as they discuss the impacts of criminal activity in their lives.

Depictions of direct gazes by both victims/survivors and mothers in the episodes appeared to be an attempt by producers of the series to exemplify hooks' concept of "talking back" in the face of structural injustices (Browne, 2015). The direct gazes of the victims/survivors were an important part of their portrayal. In the first minute of the first episode, the women sit with a greenscreen backdrop and stare directly at the camera head-on. In episode 4, Andrea Kelly, R. Kelly's ex-wife, stares directly into the camera and speaks to him:

"Robert, you know what you did. You know the turmoil you brought into my kids' life. You destroyed Christmases, birthdays, graduations. It's because of you, Robert, that my children were told they can't sit at the lunch table. 'Cause your daddy rapes little girls.' You can deny all you want to. And for that, you can go to hell."

Black Women Perpetrators

On the other hand, true crime television uses visuals to depict Black women perpetrators negatively. Reenactments, mugshot photos, and police interview videos often pair with narration and expert testimony to illustrate the women's guilt, violent tendencies, and excess physicality. Reenactments were especially notable in demonstrating the violence and brutality of the killings, most of which involved sharp instruments. In *Deadly Women*, in particular, an often-utilized stylistic choice is having the (reenacted) perpetrator gaze menacingly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall.

Though there was a small sample size of white women perpetrators in my study, there were some distinctions in how the white women were visually portrayed. Researchers (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019) found that media coverage of women who kill tended to be worse for

women of color than for white women. Studies found that Black female offenders were often described as “hyper-sexed, welfare queens, and aggressive,” (Whiteley, 2012, p. 99) and that tonally, coverage of white women perpetrators tended to be more favorable than in coverage of Black and Latina perpetrators. Additionally, crimes committed by white women were minimized in coverage more often than they were for women of color (Whiteley, 2012, p. 99). Black women are also often portrayed as repeat offenders, sex workers, angry, masculine and as deserving of harsh punishment (Slakoff, 2019, p. 3). Elements of this were present in my findings. The *Deadly Women* episode “Hearts of Darkness” featured two white women, Winnie Ruth Judd and Carolyn Warmus, and one Black woman, Daphne Wright. In Winnie Ruth Judd’s portrayal, her innocence was presented as a credible possibility. Furthermore, the two white women were portrayed as physically attractive (though Carolyn Warmus’s segment was fairly condemnatory of her sexy style of dressing). In contrast, when Black women perpetrators’ bodies were portrayed, it was in terms of their physicality and deviance from the norm (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019).

The physical depictions of Black women’s violence recall elements of the excessive, violent Sapphire figure (West, 1995). When depicting Daphne Wright, the focus was on her traits of jealousy and anger, and how this manifested in the physically brutal nature of her crime. In the first two segments of her episode, which feature white women, narration and expert voices repeatedly emphasized the looks of the women, whereas, in Daphne Wright’s segments, her looks were never mentioned. In contrast to the two white women featured in her episode, in Daphne’s reenactments, she was dressed in frumpy clothes, wasn’t skinny, and did not wear makeup. Later reenactments depict Daphne attacking her victim Darlene, putting her body in a large plastic bag, and dismembering her with a chainsaw. While doing this, Daphne is depicted

with a grimace on her face as blood flew everywhere. A similar portrayal can be found in the *Snapped* episode, “Sahara Fakhir.” Visually, she is depicted in reenactments as a large Black woman with natural hair. Representations of Sahara zeroed in on her physicality – archival images depicted her smiling mugshot numerous times, and in a reenactment, a candy wrapper falls from Sahara’s hand as she spies on her eventual victim through her bedroom window before the murder, highlighting her excessive corporeality.

In a similar vein, *Deadly Women* episode “Heartless”, Angela Simpson’s penchant for violence is depicted in reenactments, which show her torturing her victim Terry at length and disposing of his body in a barrel, which she then uses a cigarette to light on fire. As verbal expert testimony describes her occupation as a sex worker, she is visually depicted in a dark alley smoking a cigarette, wearing a dark leather jacket and seducing men on the street. In the same episode in another segment, Kemi Adelooya’s violent and criminal tendencies are also visually spotlighted. Reenactments establish her as violent and duplicitous. At the start of her part of the episode, she is depicted physically assaulting her neighbors and calling them racial slurs, shoplifting, and committing fraud. When she gets caught shoplifting and is put in juvenile detention, she is shown writing a violent document in a journal – a manual on how to rob and kill old people. After getting released from juvenile detention, in other reenactments, she is shown to be conniving, smiling in her father’s face one minute and letting her face fall again as soon as he can’t see it. Later on, Kemi is depicted stabbing Annie repeatedly and covering her body with coats before leaving. Similar to Angela Simpson, Kemi is depicted doing sex work, and for the first time in the episode, we see her wearing makeup and a sleeveless dress. In this scene, she leads a white man to a private area and asks him for extra money. Along with highlighting

Sapphire tendencies, these visual depictions of sex work are used to recall portrayals of the hypersexual, immoral Jezebel figure (West, 1995).

Role of Technology

Notably, technology played a notable part in the visual portrayals – it was often used to depict the behavior of the subjects of the episodes, and ultimately tied into themes of surveillance (Browne, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018). In studying the role of privacy in true crime, researchers found law enforcement commonly justified violations of privacy, which served to mark targeted groups as “other” and “non-citizens” (Celeste, 2018, p. 113). In my findings, privacy was deemphasized in favor of investigating the whereabouts of victims and tracking down potential killers. Victims’ phones and social media sites were accessed by their families and law enforcement in order to track who they were in communication with, where they might be located, and later as a way to apprehend their killers. Technology was also portrayed as a source of danger that led to victimization. In relation to perpetrators, technology was used visually to display recordings from police interviews and security footage, which served to emphasize the criminal natures of those portrayed.

For Black victims/survivors, technology is often justified as a necessary investigation tool by those investigating their disappearances and murders – social media and cell phones were often depicted as ways to surveil victims’ last communications in order to narrow down suspects, and cell phone tracking data was used for the same purpose. Reenactments often showed victims communicating with a mysterious figure on their phones or computers, and suspicious messages and social media postings were frequently shown on screen. In the *Disappeared* episode “The Vanishing Hour,” technology was depicted as a way to track Tyarra by both her mother and law enforcement. Danielle, Tyarra’s mother, brought up that she had access to her daughter’s

Facebook page before her disappearance and after she went missing, remembered the password, and was depicted looking at her daughter's messages to see who she was in contact with. Police expert voices also spotlight the importance of using cell phone towers to track down missing people. Expert voice Mike Richey, a police officer, stated that cell phones are modern-day fingerprints and are often the most important part of an investigation. Likewise, In *Surviving R. Kelly*: Michelle Kramer, the mother of R. Kelly survivor Dominique Gardner, lost contact with her daughter after years of being in R. Kelly's sex cult. After seeing Dominique in a TMZ clip, tense footage depicts her narrowing her daughter's location down to Los Angeles, and with the help of the *Surviving R. Kelly* producers, tracking down her daughter.

For victims/survivors, technology was also presented as a source of danger. In *Surviving R. Kelly*, the musician used his phone in order to contact and then control his victims'/survivors' access to information. In *True Life: Crime* episode "Runaway Twin or Twin in Trouble?", cell phone use and social media were named as a key factor that contributed to Jholie Moussa's disappearance – Jholie was in contact with her ex-boyfriend and eventual killer, and he later used her phone to post a fake Snapchat to her account, which served as a red herring in investigating her disappearance. Series *Black and Missing's* Dr. Renee Murrell, a former FBI victim specialist, delineates how technology plays a role in trafficking:

"Most young people on social media, they're telling their stories on YouTube or whoever listens, and some predator is out there thinking of ways in which he can lure this person. And this is also an age where they're trying to break away from home. So, they having these little spats with their parents about being independent and doing things, and then you have someone who's sympathetic to it, saying, 'I understand. I know. It's kind of exciting. I've seen that often, where some older guy will come in to kind of save the day

for these young people, and they think it's that easy, that someone is gonna take me away from this life that is overwhelming, and I don't know what to do."

Technology served as a way of establishing the criminality of Black women perpetrators, mostly through depictions of police interviews and security footage (Browne, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018). In *Deadly Women* "Heartless", reenactment security footage was used to track Kemi Adeyoola's thefts, which led to her arrest. When police were investigating the murder of her victim Anne Mendel, her fingerprints, which were stored in a police database, were used to identify her as Anne Mendel's killer. *Snapped* episode "Sahara Fakhir" depicts police interviews in which she denies involvement in the murder of her neighbor Jerry, and is used to demonstrate her remorselessness for the murder and her possible lack of mental fitness to stand trial.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study attempted to fill a gap in existing literature and used textual analysis to analyze how Black women are portrayed in true crime television. Black feminism as a theoretical framework proved instrumental in providing background into the way that Black women have traditionally been represented in media and was helpful in contextualizing current media trends (West, 1995; Boylorn, 2008; Opoku-Mensah, 2001; Smith, 2000). Overall, I found that some texts reinforced traditional representations of Black women, whereas other texts attempted to subvert these stereotypical representations.

More specifically, representations of Black women as perpetrators of crime adhered to traditional representational figures such as the Sapphire and Jezebel (West, 1995). Expert testimony described their history of criminal behavior, establishing them as repeat offenders (Whiteley, 2012; Slakoff, 2019), emphasized their physicality through language, and argued that the women needed to be imprisoned in order to maintain public safety. Visual representations reinforced this – reenactments often depicted graphic torture and murders. On the other hand, representations of Black women victims/survivors, mothers and expert voices have evolved somewhat, due in part to the growing prestige of the true crime genre and a focus on critiquing societal issues (Horeck, 2019; Cecil, 2020; Walters, 2021; Webb, 2021). Black women victims/survivors were humanized visually through archival images that showcased their youth and education. Verbal testimony described their kindness, intelligence, ambition and youth. Survivors were able to speak for themselves and describe the impact of injustices committed against them. Archival video and photographs, as well as talking-head interviews showed these women to be intelligent, emotional and youthful. Black women as expert testimony were often

showcased as experts in their field and in talking-head interviews, provided knowledge and context about both victims and perpetrators in each episode. Black mothers and family members were depicted as caring, emotional figures who often challenged entities such as media and law enforcement in order to fight for justice for their missing or deceased loved ones.

In looking at how victims/survivors are portrayed in true crime media, we can look to respectability politics, a term coined by scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992). Scholar Paisley Harris (2003) defines respectability politics as a construct that

“generally tended to reinforce status distinctions within the African American community. These distinctions were about class, but they were defined primarily in behavioral, not economic, terms. By linking worthiness to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness, respectability served a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral ‘entrance fee,’ to the right to respect and the right to full citizenship” (p. 213).

Respectability politics first came about in the 19th century as a way for Black Americans to resist images of themselves in popular culture as lazy, stupid and immoral. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Black leaders of the time maintained that “proper” behavior would prove that Black people were worthy of civil rights, whereas nonconformity was regarded as a source of racial inequality. Many Black women associated sexual conduct, domestic duties, dress codes and public behavior with the individual and group success of Black people (Higginbotham, 1992). Rather than challenging structural oppression, such as racism, sexism and poverty, respectability politics focused on individual behavior (Griffin, 2000).

The history of this concept is instructive in looking at how Black women are portrayed as worthy victims within true crime narratives. Visual depictions and character descriptions by expert voices portray the women as being youthful, educated, innocent and kind. Prior studies

(Patton & Ward, 2016; Slakoff, 2019) find that crime news portrays Black women victims in a way that dehumanizes them and emphasizes deviance. In a departure from this, the true crime texts that I studied highlight the positive aspects of Black women victims, but in doing so, reinforces that in order to be worthy of empathy, a victim or survivor needs to possess positive character traits. True crime programs either deemphasized the sexuality of the victims/survivors, or situated their sexuality as a site of victimization in an effort to avoid the specter of the Jezebel figure. On the other hand, true crime shows tended to showcase the sexuality of Black women perpetrators, which contained echoes of the Jezebel figure.

Most existing research about Black women and media crime portrayals look at how Black women are represented in crime news coverage (Patton & Ward, 2016, Slakoff, 2019). Patton and Ward (2016) found that in news coverage of missing Black undergraduate women, their positive qualities were rarely mentioned and there was a sustained focus on crime, sex or drugs in their coverage. However, I found that true crime portrayals featuring missing and murdered Black women within this age group tended to be humanized, with the more sensational details about their lives either downplayed or contextualized through social issues. In a study about Black women in true crime, Celeste (2018) crafted the figure of the “wailing Black woman” as a mother figure who appears in true crime media; my study found that this also applies to Black women survivors in the genre as well. In the analyzed texts, the wailing Black woman served as an oppositional figure that challenged societal structures that allowed for or excused harm done to Black women (Celeste, 2018). Visually, their tears depicted the impact of crime on them, and their testimony throughout the texts indicted structural issues that led to mistreatment. Though true crime television, especially newer series, prompted distrust in the current institutions (Horeck, 2019), the texts also heavily drew upon expert voices in law

enforcement; both *Black and Missing* and *True Life: Crime* critiqued institutions such as media and law enforcement, but depicted them as a necessary element in finding missing Black women and seeking justice for murders.

Historically, the social context of the area shaped how true crime television developed. Earlier true crime television was shaped by the law and order political climate of the 1970s and '80s (Riisman del, 2020). True crime television of this era was both shaped by and contributed to a climate of suburban fear and led to increased surveillance and crime legislation, the influence of which still resonates today. In particular, the 1981 abduction and murder of 6-year-old Adam Walsh and subsequent media coverage (including his father John Walsh's program, *America's Most Wanted*) reinforced the idea that suburban life was increasingly dangerous and bolstered an exaggerated fear of crime. During the 1980s, news media often reported that fifty thousand to two million children were abducted by strangers per year, though in reality, according to federal statistics, the number was approximately seventy-five children per year. News media and true crime portrayals of this era also framed crime prevention as an individual solution rather than something that could be solved by law enforcement. As media representations of crime reinforced fears, they also suggested that suburban residents take action in order to protect themselves and their communities. Residents of the suburbs were encouraged to install alarms and security systems and form neighborhood patrols. Meanwhile, due to the "tough on crime" mentality of the era and relentless crime coverage in media, increasingly conservative courts and lawmakers passed the 1994 federal crime bill and various Stand Your Ground laws, which allowed for the use of deadly force during a home invasion. In direct opposition to these largely white suburbs, urban people of color were on the receiving end of surveillance by law

enforcement and government entities, which greatly contributed to mass incarceration and the new Jim Crow (Riisman, 2020).

Progression in the genre can be partially explained by some shifting in who is producing the texts. The shows that counted Black women and other women of color among the producers and creators of the texts (*Surviving R. Kelly*, *Black and Missing*) tended to highlight issues of social justice and centered the voices of Black women within the episodes. In an interview, when asked about their interest in creating the series *Black and Missing*, Gandbhir and Knowles said,

“We’ve both been drawn to social justice issues throughout our careers, especially those that disproportionately affect Black people and people of color, so when Soledad O’Brien and her team approached us about a series on Derrica and Natalie, and how widespread and underreported this issue is for Black people especially, it was a no-brainer. We knew that a documentary series on a platform like HBO would be a great way to generate attention for an issue that the mainstream media regularly ignores” (Gonzales-Bazan, 2021).

After examining the sociopolitical climate in which true crime television formed, I find that the social context in which the texts that I chose were created explains my findings. The Black Lives Matter, MeToo movements and the campaign to Mute R. Kelly shaped the political climate in which newer shows were produced. Texts such as *True Life: Crime* and *Surviving R. Kelly* utilizes expert voices to explicitly reference social movements that affect the shows’ victims. Additionally, the production values of the true crime texts also improved in the newer series, which utilized cleaner cinematography and less reliance on reenactments, which points to attempts by series’ creators to lend their shows more credibility and prestige.

Black feminist thought seeks to provide Black women with a different view of themselves and their realities than those traditionally found in mainstream society (Collins, 1989; Hamer and Neville, 1998). Newer programs utilized tenets of Black feminist thought in order to challenge traditional representations of Black women. Here, they embrace the politics of signification (Banet-Weiser, 2018) in order to advance social change. They embraced elements of bell hooks's theories of "talking back," using camera angles to confront viewers with the direct gazes of Black women and humanize their struggles (Browne, 2015). This reflects the concept of media as a place where ideas about race are communicated and transformed (Hall, 1997). However, even in attempts to challenge stereotypes and reframe how Black women are seen, these productions also feature and endorse renegotiation of privacy and increased surveillance by way of technology, citing it as a necessary factor in order to achieve justice (Browne, 2015). Research has found that true crime media is growing in popularity (Walters, 2021), and has been legitimized in recent years (Walters, 2021). This, paired with the fact that people generally find both media representations of Black women (West, 1995), and content that they see in true crime media (Cecil, 2020) to be accurate, showcase the significance of the findings. Though scholars have argued that there isn't substantial evidence of true crime generating legal changes that impact society (Horeck, 2019), the renewed attention on R. Kelly by law enforcement after the broadcast of *Surviving R. Kelly* proved otherwise (Grady, 2019; Izadi, 2019; Harris, Fortin, & Times, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Wheeler, 2020).

In some ways, the newer, victim-focused texts that I analyzed could be considered Black feminist texts. In bringing Black women to the forefront of the programs, the texts fight back against the exclusion and erasure of Black women. They also attempt to counter representations of Black women that draw from the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire figures, instead seeking to

highlight Black women's humanity (Collins, 1989; Hamer & Neville, 1998). Furthermore, the producers of newer programs would definitely consider the shows to be Black feminist texts. *Surviving R. Kelly* makes an effort to center the voices of the women that he victimized and brings in a lot of expert voices to contextualize the factors that led to their victimization in an effort to humanize them. On the other hand, the texts' upholding of respectability politics establishes a narrow mold regarding who is considered a worthy victim.

A fruitful area for further research would be looking at how audiences perceive and interact with these portrayals. What do they see when they watch these episodes, and how does it affect their views of the people portrayed, as well as the institutions that are depicted and critiqued in these series'? Other interesting areas include looking at portrayals of disability, and how Black men are portrayed in the genre as well.

References

- A&E Television Networks, LLC. (2019, December 11). *The Explosive Story Continues – Surviving R. Kelly Part II: The Reckoning Debuts As a Three-Night Event Beginning January 2 on Lifetime*. News | A+E Networks. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.aenetworks.com/article/the-explosive-story-continues-surviving-r-kelly-part-ii-the-reckoning-debuts-as-a-three-night-event-beginning-january-2-on-lifetime>
- Aliyu, A. A. (2015). Proceedings of The Academic Conference: Mediterranean Publications & Research International on New Direction and Uncommon . In *ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND AXIOLOGY IN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: ELUCIDATION OF THE RESEARCH PHILOSOPHICAL MISCONCEPTION* (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 1–27). Ogun State, Nigeria.
- Allsop, J. (2021, October 14). *The circular reckoning over 'missing white woman syndrome'*. Columbia Journalism Review. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/gabby_petito_missing_white_woman_syndrome.php
- Amoah, J. (1997). Narrative: The road to Black feminist theory. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal*, 12(1), 84-102.
- Atkinson, J. D. (2017). Qualitative Methods. In *Journey Into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches* (pp. 65–98). essay, Fordham University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

- Bekoe. (2021, December 1). *Vocalo Radio 91.1FM Dometi Pongo talks MTV's True Life Crime and his Chicago roots*. Vocalo Radio 91.1FM. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://vocalo.org/dometi-pongo/>
- Brennen, B. (2017). Getting Started. In *Qualitative research methods for media studies* (pp. 1-25). Routledge.
- Brennen, B. (2017). Textual Analysis. In *Qualitative research methods for media studies* (pp. 192-231). Routledge.
- Biressi, A., & Nunn, H. (2003). Crimes of Violence in Social/Media Space. *Space & Culture*, 6(3), 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331203251659>
- Biressi, A. (2004). Inside/out: Private trauma and public knowledge in true crime documentary. *Screen*, 45(4), 401-412. doi:10.1093/screen/45.4.401
- Bjornstrom, E. E., Kaufman, R. L., Peterson, R. D., & Slater, M. D. (2010). Race and ethnic representations of lawbreakers and victims in crime news: A national study of television coverage. *Social Problems*, 57(2), 269–293. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.2.269>
- Boakye, O. (2020, April 24). *'Surviving R. Kelly' producers: Meet the Women who made the series*. InStyle. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.instyle.com/celebrity/surviving-r-kelly-docuseries-producers-interview>
- Boylorn, R. (2008). As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality Television. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25(4), 413-433. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802327758>
- Bosch, T. (2011). African Feminist Media Studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.537021>

- Browne, S. (2015). *Dark matters on the surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.
- Bruzzi, S. (2016). Making a genre: The case of the Contemporary True Crime Documentary. *Law and Humanities*, 10(2), 249–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2016.1233741>
- Bucholtz, M. (2014). The Feminist Foundations of Language, Gender, and Sexuality Research. In S. Ehrlich, M. Meyerhoff, & J. Holmes (Eds.), *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (2nd ed., pp. 23–47). essay, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Campbell, C. P. (2017). Representation: Stuart Hall and the “Politics of Signification.” In C. P. Campbell (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Race* (pp. 11–18). essay, Routledge.
- Carter, C. (2006). The Transformative Power Of Cultural Criticism: bell hooks's Radical Media Analysis. In D. Berry & J. Theobald (Eds.), *Radical mass media criticism: A cultural genealogy* (pp. 212–233). essay, Black Rose Books.
- Cavender, G., & Cavender, G. (n.d.). In "The Shadow of Shadows": Television Reality Crime Programming. In M. Fishman (Ed.), *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (pp. 79-94). Somerset: Taylor and Francis.
- Cecil, D. K. (2020). *Fear, justice & modern true crime*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Celeste, M. (2018). Close-Up: Black Images Matter - "What Now?": The Wailing Black Woman, Grief, and Difference. *Black Camera*, 9(2), 110-131.
- Cheers, I. M. (2019). *The evolution of Black women in television: Mammies, matriarchs and mistresses*. Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group.
- Collins, P. H. (1989). The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(4), 745–773. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494543>

- Collins, P. H. (2000). Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images. In *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed., pp. 69–96). essay, Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1996). What's in a name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond. *The Black Scholar*, 26(1), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1996.11430765>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *u. Chi. Legal f.*, 139.
- Creswell, J. (2013) Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Frameworks. In *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (pp. 15-41). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Deadly Women*. Investigationdiscovery.com. (n.d.). Retrieved April 12, 2022, from <https://www.investigationdiscovery.com/show/deadly-women-investigation-discovery>
- Deggans, E. (2019, January 3). *Making 'Surviving R. Kelly': A conversation with executive producer Dream Hampton*. NPR. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/03/681851521/lifetimes-series-about-r-kelly-depicts-a-darker-side-to-the-singer>
- Disappeared*. TVGuide.com. (1970, January 1). Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/disappeared/cast/1030073383/>
- Discovery Press Web United States*. Investigation Discovery Info: Discovery Press Web. (n.d.). Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://press.discovery.com/us/id/info/>
- Donovan, P., & Cavender, G. (n.d.). Armed With the Power of Television: Reality Crime Programming and the Reconstruction of Law and Order in the United States. In M. Fishman

- (Ed.), *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (pp. 117-140). Somerset: Taylor and Francis.
- Estep, R., & Macdonald, P. T. (1983). How prime time crime evolved on TV, 1976–1981. *Journalism Quarterly*, 60(2), 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769908306000213>
- Fishman, M., & Cavender, G. (1998). Introduction: Television Reality Crime Programs: Context and History. In *Entertaining Crime Television Reality Programs* (pp. 1-15). Somerset: Taylor and Francis.
- Fishman, M., & Cavender, G. (n.d.). Ratings and Realty: The Persistence of the Reality Crime Drama. In M. Fishman (Ed.), *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (pp. 59-78). Somerset: Taylor and Francis.
- Garcia, V., & Arkerson, S. G. (2018). *Crime, media, and reality: Examining mixed messages about crime and justice in Popular Media*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gee, C. (2015). Reality-Based Television Versus the Civil Right to Privacy: A Battle of Access. *Journal of Film and Video*, 67(3-4), 79-93.
- Gonzales-Bazan, M. (2021, November 16). *Doc NYC 2021 women directors: Meet Geeta Gandbhir and Samantha Knowles – "Black and missing"*. Women and Hollywood. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://womenandhollywood.com/doc-nyc-2021-women-directors-meet-geeta-gandbhir-and-samantha-knowles-Black-and-missing/>
- Grady, C. (2019, January 30). *Lifetime's Surviving R. Kelly and its explosive reception, explained*. Vox. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/1/30/18192932/lifetime-surviving-r-kelly-documentary-sexual-abuse>

- Graham, J. (2021, September 21). *Is it fair to blame 'missing white woman syndrome' for the gabby petito news coverage?* Deseret News. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://www.deseret.com/2021/9/21/22686285/gabby-petito-news-coverage-brian-laundrie-missing-white-woman-syndrome>.
- GRIFFIN, F. J. (2000). Black feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, protection, and beyond. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568(1), 28–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716200568001004>
- Hall, S., & Humez, J. M. (1995). The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media. In G. Dines (Ed.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media* (pp. 18-22). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Hall, S. (1997). Representation, Meaning, and Language. In *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (pp. 15-69). London: SAGE Publ.
- Hall, S. (2003). The Spectacle of the 'Other'. In S. Hall, J. Evans, & S. Nixon (Eds.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 225–290). essay, Sage etc.
- Hamer, J., & Neville, H. (1998). Revolutionary Black feminism: Toward a theory of unity and liberation. *The Black Scholar*, 28(3-4), 22–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1998.11430924>
- Han, A. (2021, November 24). *HBO's 'Black and Missing': TV review*. The Hollywood Reporter. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/hbo-Black-and-missing-tv-review-1235052487/>
- Harris, E. A., Fortin, J., & Times, T. N. Y. (2020, January 2). *The 'surviving R. Kelly' documentary had a big impact. so they made a sequel*. thestar.com. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/television/2020/01/02/the-surviving-r-kelly-documentary-had-a-big-impact-so-they-made-a-sequel.html>

Harris, P. J. (2003). Gatekeeping and remaking: The politics of respectability in African American Women's history and black feminism. *Journal of Women's History*, 15(1), 212–220.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0025>

Higginbotham, E. B. (1992). African-American Women's history and the metalanguage of Race. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17(2), 251–274.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/494730>

hooks, bell. (2015). Eating the Other. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (pp. 44–72). essay, Routledge.

hooks, B. (1992). The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (pp. 115–131). essay, South End Press.

Horeck, T. (2014). ‘A film that will rock you to your core’: Emotion and affect in Dear Zachary and the real crime documentary. *Crime Media Culture*, 10(2), 151-167.
 doi:10.1177/1741659014540293

Horeck, T. (2019). *Justice On Demand: True Crime in the digital streaming era*. Wayne State U.P.

IMDb.com. (n.d.). *Surviving R. Kelly*. IMDb. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8385496/fullcredits>

Investigation Discovery Revives Viewer-favorite Series Disappeared for a Seventh Season, Giving Hope to a New Group of Families Still Searching for Their Missing Loved Ones. Discovery Inc. (2016, October 10). Retrieved April 5, 2022, from

<https://corporate.discovery.com/discovery-newsroom/investigation-discovery-revives-viewer-favorite-series-disappeared-for-a-seventh-season-giving-hope-to-a-new-group-of-families-still-searching-for-their-missing-loved-ones/>

Izadi, E. (2019, January 10). *In the aftermath of 'surviving R. Kelly,' prosecutors seek any witnesses or victims*. The Washington Post. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/01/09/aftermath-surviving-r-kelly-prosecutors-seek-any-witness-or-victims/>

Jensen, K. B., Jankowski, N., & Larsen, P. (1991). Textual Analysis of Fictional Media Content. In *A Handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research*. essay, Routledge.

Johnson, L. (2015). From the Anti-Slavery Movement to Now: (Re) Examining the Relationship Between Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. *Race, Gender & Class*, 22(3-4), 227–243.

Kindelan, K. (2021, September 22). *Gabby Petito case example of 'missing white woman syndrome,' experts say*. ABC News. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/gabby-petito-case-missing-white-woman-syndrome-experts/story?id=80144611>.

King, J. P. (2021, August 27). *MTV 'True life crime' host reinvents genre*. Los Angeles Blade: LGBTQ News, Rights, Politics, Entertainment. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.losangelesblade.com/2021/08/20/mtv-true-life-crime-host-reinvents-genre/>

Kohm, S. A. (2009). Naming, shaming and criminal justice: Mass-mediated humiliation as entertainment and punishment. *Crime Media Culture*, 5(2), 188-205.

- Kort-Butler, L. A., & Hartshorn, K. J. (2011). Watching the detectives: Crime Programming, fear of crime, and attitudes about the criminal justice system. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52(1), 36–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2010.01191.x>
- LaChance, D., & Kaplan, P. (2019). Criminal justice in the middlebrow imagination: The punitive dimensions of Making a Murderer. *Crime Media Culture*, 16(1), 81-96.
- Lester-Roushanzamir, E. P., & Raman, U. (1999). The Global Village in Atlanta: A Textual Analysis of Olympic News Coverage for Children in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76(4), 699–712. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909907600407>
- Lindsey, T. B. (2015). A love letter to Black feminism. *The Black Scholar*, 45(4), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080911>
- Linneberg, M. S., & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 19(3), 259-270. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012>
- Marshall, C., & hooks, bell. (1997). Theory as Liberatory Practice. In *Feminist critical policy analysis* (pp. 59–74). essay, Falmer Press.
- Means Coleman, R. (2011). “Roll up your sleeves!”: Black women, Black feminism in Feminist Media Studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.537023>
- Mitchell, G. (2021, September 30). *R. Kelly Verdict ends '30-year journey of shouting into the wind,' say 'Surviving' producers*. Billboard. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/surviving-r-kelly-verdict-producers-interview-9637792/>

Moore, E. F. (2021, August 16). *MTV 'True life crime' host Dometi Pongo aims to bring context to victims' stories*. Times. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/movies-and-tv/2021/8/16/22619099/dometi-pongo-true-life-crime-mtv-south-side-journalism-chicago-kenneka-jenkins>

Murley, J. (2008). *Rise of true crime: Twentieth Century murder and American popular culture*. Praeger Publishers.

NBCUniversal. (n.d.). *Oxygen: About*. NBCUniversal Media Village. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.nbcumv.com/mediavillage/interactive/2929fed4187b40648b79a9839e70e91fpro duct169208/index.html#/brand/55a76b19-8ad6-49a8-a4f2-007fe1a09756/about>

Neely, C. L. (2015). *You're dead---so what?: Media, police, and the invisibility of Black women as victims of homicide*. Michigan State University Press.

Norwood, C. (2021, December 16). *On HBO, a look at how quickly missing Black women are discounted*. The 19th. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://19thnews.org/2021/12/soledad-obrien-Black-missing-documentary/>

Obenson, T. (2021, November 17). *'Black and Missing' review: HBO series can't make up for the media's failure, but it's a start*. IndieWire. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.indiewire.com/2021/11/Black-and-missing-review-hbo-1234678233/>

Oliver, M. B. (2003). African American Men as "Criminal and Dangerous": Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the "Criminalization" of African American Men. *Journal of African American Studies*, 7(2), 3-18.

- Oliver, M. B., Armstrong, G. B., & G. (n.d.). The Color of Crime: Perceptions of Caucasians' and African-Americans' Involvement in Crime. In M. Fishman (Ed.), *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (pp. 19-36). Somerset: Taylor and Francis.
- Opoku-Mensah, A. (2001). Marching on: African Feminist Media Studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1(1), 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770120042792>
- Ott, B. L., & Mack, R. L. (2014). Introducing Critical Media Studies. In *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed., pp. 1–20). essay, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Patton, L. D., & Ward, L. W. W. (2016). Missing Black undergraduate women and the politics of disposability: A critical race feminist perspective. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 330–349. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0330>
- Potter, G. W., & Kappeler, V. E. (2012). Introduction: Media, Crime and Hegemony. In D. L. Bissler & J. L. Connors (Eds.), *The harms of crime media: Essays on the perpetuation of racism, sexism and class stereotypes* (pp. 3–15). essay, McFarland.
- Rahman, K. (2021, September 26). *TV anchor suspended after dispute over Gabby Petito Coverage: Report*. Newsweek. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://www.newsweek.com/tv-anchor-suspended-after-dispute-over-gabby-petito-coverage-report-1632777>.
- RED VENTURES. (1970, January 1). *Black and missing*. TVGuide.com. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/Black-and-missing/cast/1000986005/>
- RED VENTURES. (1970, January 1). *Deadly women*. TVGuide.com. Retrieved April 12, 2022, from <https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/deadly-women/cast/1030347799/>
- RED VENTURES. (1970, January 1). *Snapped*. TVGuide.com. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/snapped/cast/1030112313/>

- RED VENTURES. (1970, January 1). *True life crime*. TVGuide.com. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/true-life-crime/cast/1030758197/>
- Riisman del, K. (2020). *Neighborhood of fear: The suburban crisis in American culture, 1975-2001*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Roach, S. (2020). On the Uses of Black Feminism: Notes on Black Feminism as Sexuality Study. *Feminist Formations*, 32(1), 180–188. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0015>
- Robertson, K. (2021, September 22). *News media can't shake 'missing white woman syndrome,' critics say*. The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/22/business/media/gabby-petito-missing-white-woman-syndrome.html>.
- Robinson, S. (2021, November 18). *HBO's Black and missing gives a powerful voice to the vulnerable*. The A.V. Club. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.avclub.com/hbo-s-Black-and-missing-gives-a-powerful-voice-to-the-v-1848006179>
- Robles, F. (2021, September 30). *Authorities searched exhaustively for Gabrielle Petito. What about others?* The New York Times. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/us/missing-girls-women-Black-latina-indigenous.html>.
- Sacco, V. F. (1995). Media Constructions of Crime. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 539, 141–154.
- Sage, A. (2016, March 17). *Investigation discovery reviving missing persons series 'disappeared' (exclusive)*. Variety. Retrieved April 12, 2022, from <https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/investigation-discovery-disappeared-revival-1201731990/>

- Saldana, J. (2016). An Introduction to Codes and Coding. In *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed., pp. 1–42). essay, Los Angeles: Sage.
- Sarachan, R. (2021, December 10). *'Black and missing' HBO docuseries explores foundation dedicated to locating missing people of color*. Forbes. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/risasarachan/2021/12/07/Black-and-missing-hbo-docuseries-explores-foundation-dedicated-to-locating-missing-people-of-color/?sh=49b0adabbd15>
- Seltzer, M. (2008). Murder/Media/ Modernity. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 38(1), 11-41.
- Snapped*. Peacock. (n.d.). Retrieved April 5, 2022, from https://www.peacocktv.com/watch/asset/tv/snapped/7569022312246115112?orig_ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.oxygen.com%2F
- Sommers, Z. (2016). MISSING WHITE WOMAN SYNDROME: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF RACE AND GENDER DISPARITIES IN ONLINE NEWS COVERAGE OF MISSING PERSONS. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 106(2), 275-314.
- Shapiro, A. (2020, February 3). *Crime does pay: 'my favorite murder' stars join Joe Rogan as nation's highest-earning podcasters*. Forbes. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielshapiro/2020/02/03/crime-does-pay-my-favorite-murder-stars-join-joe-rogan-as-highest-earning-podcasters/?sh=49d0e7821377>.
- Slakoff, D. C. (2019). The representation of women and girls of color in United States Crime News. *Sociology Compass*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12741>
- Smith, V. (2000). Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the "Other". In W. Napier (Ed.), *African American Literary Theory: A reader* (pp. 369–384). essay, New York University Press.

- Sommers, Z. (2016). MISSING WHITE WOMAN SYNDROME: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF RACE AND GENDER DISPARITIES IN ONLINE NEWS COVERAGE OF MISSING PERSONS. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 106(2), 275-314.
- Stabile, C. A. (2005). 'The most disgusting objects of both sexes'. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 6(4), 403-421. doi:10.1177/1464884905056812
- Stoneman, E., & Packer, J. (2020). Reel cruelty: Voyeurism and extra-judicial punishment in true-crime documentaries. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 174165902095359. doi:10.1177/1741659020953596
- Staff, G. B. (2021, September 24). *Gabby Petito, 'missing white woman syndrome' and the role of the Media*. News. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://www.wgbh.org/news/national-news/2021/09/24/gabby-petito-missing-white-woman-syndrome-and-the-role-of-the-media>.
- Surette, R. (2015). Thought bite: A case study of the social construction of a crime and justice concept. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 11(2), 105-135. doi:10.1177/1741659015588401
- Surette, R., & Gardiner-Bess, R. (2014). Media, entertainment and crime: Prospects and Concerns. In B. A. Arrigo & H. Y. Bersot (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of International Crime and Justice Studies* (pp. 373–396). essay, Routledge.
- Surette, R., & Otto, C. (2002). A test of a crime and justice infotainment measure. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 30(5), 443–453. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0047-2352\(02\)00147-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0047-2352(02)00147-2)
- Taylor, U. Y. (1998). Making waves: The theory and practice of Black Feminism. *The Black Scholar*, 28(2), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1998.11430912>

- Thussu, D. K. (2015). Infotainment. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc152>
- Viacom International Inc. (2019, December 20). *MTV goes behind the controversial headlines with new investigative series "true life crime": MTV Press*. MTVPress. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.mtvpress.com/press-releases/2019/12/20/mtv-goes-behind-the-controversial-headlines-with-new-investigative-series-true-life-crime>
- Walsh, J. P. (2015). Border theatre and security spectacles: Surveillance, mobility and reality-based television. *Crime Media Culture*, 11(2), 201-221. doi:10.1177/1741659015588405
- Walters, E. (2021). Netflix originals: The evolution of true crime television. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 88, 25–37. <https://doi.org/10.7560/vlt8803>
- Warren, N. (1990). Mammies, Jemimas, Bitches and Broads: Black Women in Film and Television. *Griot*, 9(2), 55–59.
- Webb, L. (2021). True crime and danger narratives: Reflections of stories of violence, race, and (in)justice. *Journal of Gender, Race & Justice*, 24(1), 131-170.
- Watkins, S. C., & Emerson, R. A. (2000). Feminist Media Criticism and Feminist Media Practices. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 571, 151–166.
- Wheeler, A. (2020, January 8). *Surviving R Kelly producers: 'We wanted to explain why you shouldn't blame survivors'*. The Guardian. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jan/08/surviving-r-kelly-directors-interview>
- Whiteley, K. (2012). Monstrous, Demonic and Evil: Media Constructions of Women Who Kill. In D. L. Bissler & J. L. Connors (Eds.), *The harms of crime media: Essays on the perpetuation of racism, sexism and class stereotypes* (pp. 91–110). essay, McFarland & Co.

- Williamson, T. L. (2021). Of serial murder and true crime: Some preliminary thoughts on Black Feminist Research Praxis and the implications of settler colonialism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 39(1), 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775821991070>
- Wiltenburg, J. (2004). True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism. *The American Historical Review*, 109(5), 1377-1404. doi:10.1086/ahr/109.5.1377
- Xu, W., & Zammit, K. (2020). Applying thematic analysis to education: A hybrid approach to interpreting data in practitioner research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 160940692091881. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920918810>