

Mental Images and Emotive Voices in True Crime Podcasts focused on Female Victims

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The rapid rise in true crime podcasts is a notable trend accompanying the widespread expansion of podcasting in the twenty-first century. As Tanya Horeck argues in *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era*, the growth of digital culture and technologies has intensified the rhetoric around “an involved and interactive true crime audience” (2019, p.14), with questions of gender and race central to the affective mechanics of true crime in this era. More narrowly, this chapter will consider the presentation of murdered or missing women in a range of podcast series, with reference to questions of voice and the ways in which, even in an audio medium, stories of violence against women can be sensationalist and emotive forms of infotainment. The podcasts chosen for discussion provide a range of production contexts and approaches to their presentation of female victims’ stories, including the American viral sensation *Serial* (2014), the Audible podcast *West Cork* (2018), which is set in Ireland and focuses on the unsolved murder of Frenchwoman Sophie Toscan du Plantier, and *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo* (2018), which was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and explores the disappearance of a young Indigenous girl.

As Lindsey Webb notes, true crime stories have existed for centuries, are largely focused on violence against white women, and “are intended to invoke feelings of horror and shock among their audiences and suggest specific methods - arrest, incarceration, or death of the perpetrator - by which social order may be restored” (2021, p.131). The mode of delivery for true crime stories is, as Lili Pâquet puts it, “increasingly moving from paperback to podcast” (2021, p.423). While podcasts as a media format and label (combining iPod and broadcast) emerged around 2004, the trends for these easily accessed audio files to be

mobilised into serialised forms of true crime storytelling is often attributed to the global success of *Serial*, which tells the story of the 1999 murder of Baltimore high-school student Hae Min Lee, whose ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, was convicted of the crime. The episodes were released weekly from October to December 2014 and featured phone conversations between the imprisoned Syed and the producer-narrator Sarah Koenig, as well as recordings of a range of people who knew the victim and/or alleged perpetrator and some contributions by legal professionals. By November 2014, *Serial* had achieved five million downloads in record time, and by Christmas it had been downloaded 40 million times (Roberts, 2015). Spurred by this impact, a wide range of true crime podcasts followed, both emerging from established news media outlets as well as streaming platforms such as Audible.

Critics and scholars of true crime podcasts are particularly interested in reconciling the predominantly female listenership of these podcasts with content that often focuses on female victims. For example, one online survey found that 73% of true crime podcast audiences are female (Boling and Hull, 2018, p.92). Women's sustained interest in true crime podcasts is perhaps best exemplified in the long-running popular American series, *My Favorite Murder* (2016-present), hosted by comedians Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. As reflected in the podcast's catchphrase of "stay sexy and don't get murdered," it initially appears to take an overly playful approach to violence through its dark comedy premise that we prefer some kinds of murders over others. And yet, as sound scholar Amanda Greer argues, *My Favorite Murder* reveals a relationship of care between the hosts and the victims whose stories they discuss: "Hardstark and Kilgariff often find themselves affectively overwhelmed by the narratives they impart, overwhelmed by the feeling of togetherness, of affection, with and for the story's victims" (Greer, 2018, p.162). As I discuss in further detail below, this kind of affective response - of being overwhelmed, of feeling affection for victims - may help to explain the appeal of such true crime podcasts to women. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly

given the audio medium, such expressive responses are generally conveyed vocally, through inflection and nonverbal as well as verbal utterances. After first considering how mental images of victims' bodies are presented verbally, I examine aspects of the use of the voice in true crime podcasts. This analysis addresses Danielle C. Slakoff's recommendation that "researchers should dive deeper into why certain voices are incorporated into [true crime] podcasts" (2021, p.16).

Sensationalized (mental) images

Writing on what she terms as a "feminist materialisation of amplified voice," Stacey Copeland argues that podcasting "offers a powerful platform for a listening experience that can challenge visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations by engaging with the listener through the affective use of sound" (2018, p.210). As related to the norms of true crime media, this could mean a move away from visual tropes of women's bodies as bearers of pain, including crime scene photos of bruised or bloodied victims, which are almost inherently sensationalist as they shock viewers with imagery of the damage inflicted during a given crime. Julia Hoydis is similarly optimistic that "the focus on disembodied voices, so central to podcasting, bears potential for feminist studies" to move beyond visualphilic tendencies (2020, p.7). Of course, Copeland and Hoydis are right that an audio medium *should* allow for traditional visual, or audiovisual, gendered representations and expectations to be challenged. Indeed, this is potentially the case with *My Favorite Murder* in which, as Greer notes, "the acousmatic female hosts counter crime film and television's reliance on images of degraded, violated and assaulted female bodies with purely aural recountings" (2017, p.153). But other scholarship and true crime podcasts reveal a more complex picture, one in which the sensationalist visual images of women's bodies are adapted into sensationalist *mental* images in true crime podcasts, as well as through the erotic presentation

of women's bodies in marketing campaigns by the streaming platform, Audible (Verma 2019).

For Slakoff (2021), mediated portrayals of intimate partner violence (IPV) in true crime podcasts frequently fixate on physical violence over other forms of IPV such as controlling behaviours. Slakoff coded transcripts from four true crime podcast series, with the primary code of "physical violence" subdivided into subcodes such as "hitting," "slapping," "strangulation" and the unexpected addition of "bruising" (2021, p.8). The transcription process led her to add the subcode of bruising relatively late, due to bruises being described viscerally across several podcasts. For example, in *The Teacher Pet*, a co-worker of the victim Lynette Dawson (thought to be murdered by her husband, Chris Dawson) describes a "messy" bruise: "It was a horrible blue-y dark blue-y purple bruise". Later in the same episode, her seamstress describes "the shape of fingers, of bruises, on her arms", and one of Lynette's friends recalls "a really large grapefruit-size bruise" on Lynette's thigh and bruising on her upper arm (2020, pp.9-10). Cognisant that emotional abuse is often ignored in media portrayals of IPV, Slakoff is concerned by what she terms the fetishization of noticeable bruising: "The detailed descriptions of noticeable bruises are problematic because they might insinuate to listeners that real abuse needs to leave physical marks or that the only outward signs of abuse to look for are bruises" (2021, p.14).

Slakoff's findings and process supports the importance of close analysis of podcast details (in this case entwined with Slakoff's coding of transcripts) rather than relying on more impressionistic accounts. Here, it helps to reveal how, despite being created in an audio medium, the podcasts are substituting for visual images of female victims' bodies by incorporating sustained descriptions of visible damage to their bodies. Through accounts of their position, shape, colour and size, the bruises are conjured mentally for podcast listeners in ways that align with more traditional portrayals of women's bodies in screen-based true

crime media. This sensationalised focus on descriptions of violence is unsurprising when considered in relation to what Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann term as podcasting's "full frontal" approach: "The podcast edit is racier and bolder, and podcasts often contain material most national broadcasting regulators would rarely sanction. Where radio might suggest and allude, podcasting is full frontal" (2019, p.69). In true crime podcasts centred around violence against women, such as *Serial* and *West Cork*, this boldness is evident in the decisions to grant substantial air time to the convicted murderer (Adnan Syed) or the main suspect (Ian Bailey). These decisions are justified by the podcast creators through a narrative focus on a questioning of their actual – as opposed to convicted or perceived – involvement in the woman's murder. And yet, both podcasts incorporate these figures in ways that are purposefully bold. In *Serial*, for example the repeated use of the automated female voice to tell us that the recording we are hearing is "a Global-Tel link prepaid call from Adnan Syed, an inmate at a Maryland Correctional facility" is repeatedly disconcerting for listeners unable to see Syed.

In *West Cork*, this approach is reflected in the purposeful structuring of material in episodes one and two, which leads to the twisting revelation that one of the locals who listeners have already heard discussing the range of international "blow-ins" living in this part of Ireland is, in fact, also the notorious prime suspect in Toscan du Plantier's murder. (In 2019, Bailey was convicted of her murder in absentia by a French court, though he is yet to be extradited from Ireland.) In many ways, this decision to purposefully withhold this information reflects a desire and expectation that the podcast will have an international audience, many of whom will know next to nothing about Toscan du Plantier's murder. For Irish listeners, very familiar with the murder and Bailey's subsequent notoriety in the national media, the decision to purposefully mislead the listeners as to his centrality to the story is

intriguing but disconcerting; an early reminder that, like Spinelli and Dann note, the podcast edit is racier and bolder than more traditional forms of audio broadcasting.

West Cork includes a wide range of voices, including locals in the rural town where the murder took place, journalists who covered the case, and recordings of Toscan du Plantier's son in discussion with the podcast producers. It opens with the disclaimer, spoken by co-host and producer Jennifer Forde, that "the following series contains some graphic images and is intended for a mature audience". This kind of warning is a familiar precursor to much news media and documentary series of a sensitive nature, but it functions differently at the beginning of a podcast series. It immediately sets up an apparent contradiction – how are there graphic images in an audio medium? – and implies the kind of sensationalist treatment of violence that Slakoff identifies in her study: these images may be mental, but they will be described in such ways that they will still cause disturbance to listeners. The revelation that Bailey, who is casually introduced in episode one, is not the only element of the story that is drawn out (postponed, even) for dramatic effect in the early episodes of the podcast. Hearing the details of what happened to Toscan du Plantier, her violent death, is also positioned as something of a cliff-hanger to encourage listeners to proceed past episode one. Her death is teased at and gestured toward in ways that align with victims' bodies serving as a kind of structuring absence in true crime podcasts.

Excerpts from recordings with locals and other figures involved in the case are integrated for dramatic effect, positioned in ways that force us to imagine the female victim who we cannot see or hear. Episode one ends with bar owner Billy O'Sullivan describing the last sighting of Toscan du Plantier having tea in his bar, his heavily accented voice slowly laments how "She was found the next morning, battered to death on the road" before the atmospheric background music rises and flows into the credits. Other vague but ominous references to her body are dotted throughout the episode. In the introduction, we hear an

unidentified woman explain how, due to the lack of resolution into the murder, “it’s like the casket can’t be closed”. We hear this excerpt again near the end of the episode. She is described by another woman as a kind of “phantom” who passed in and out of the small town, and with the intangibility of her body further invoked by discussion that, on the day that she was murdered, Toscan du Plantier had been “spooked” by something that she saw at the remote cliffs of Three Castle Head, a space that is supposedly haunted by the “White Lady” whose appearance is thought to signal imminent death to those who see her.

O’Sullivan’s closing description of Toscan du Plantier being found “battered to death on the road” is thus more than just a dramatic cliff-hanger and motivator to listen to the next episode. It is a graphic description of a woman who was not “a phantom”, though she may have become one, a woman whose casket we have been told (twice) can’t be closed due to a lack of closure over the details of her murder. As in other true crime podcasts focused on violence against women, Toscan du Plantier’s body is simultaneously a structuring absence and something unseen but all too real. Her violent death at the presumed hands of a man is sensationalised, and the specific dynamics of the audio podcast medium seems to be used to exploit it.

We can connect this suspenseful revealing of information to the kind of “risqué aesthetic” which Neil Verma notes in selected podcasts and audiobooks produced by the streaming service, Audible, the creator of *West Cork*. Verma identifies a trend for producers of Audible podcasts to focus “on themes of privacy and the risqué, and their relation to perceived women’s desires and experiences” (2019, p.273), including with podcasts like *The Butterfly Effect* (2017), focused on Pornhub, and *Breasts Unbound* (2016), which explores breasts from a wide range of perspectives. While the subject matter of *West Cork* was less risqué, and might be considered more as Audible’s successful attempt to create some content aligned with the popularity of true crime podcasts, in other ways it reflects the trend that

Verma identifies. The series engages in a kind of narrative striptease, slowly revealing bits of information in a way that is designed to build suspense and keep the listener holding out for more.

Of particular interest to my discussion is Verma's analysis of an erotically charged Audible advertisement featuring a close-up of a young, white blonde woman wearing headphones, and his related argument that Audible went beyond podcasts' general use of "sensationalistic content," with "creators [who] seem to have framed their sensationalism around situations of private experiences, particularly women's experiences, amenable to (and intensified by) individuated listening practices" (2019, p.274). The greyscale image in the ad shows only the bottom of a woman's face and is highly suggestive of the kind of sensationalised or salacious content one could listen to on Audible around this time: "The figure grazes her lip with her fingers in a gesture associated with erotica. What is she listening to that makes her touch her lip in a seemingly involuntary, unconscious way?" (p.275). The image is accompanied by the tagline "From the narrator's lips, to yours. The feeling is audible". The advertisement feels like a sharp rejoinder to Copeland, Greer and other scholars' optimism that podcasting "can challenge visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations by engaging with the listener through the affective use of sound" (Copeland, 2018, p.210). Instead, that same affective use of sound is being funnelled back into a marketing campaign that reinforces traditional gendered expectations via visual imagery wherein even the female podcast listener is presented in a semi-abstract but sexualised and idealised form.

As a marketing strategy for an audio platform, the implied message seems clear and disheartening. Even though Audible content will not provide any such visual representations of women, they still believe that an erotically charged image of a woman will signal the risqué nature of their audio content and will thus help expand their listenership. This is not

dissimilar, then, to the sensationalised descriptions of violence done to women's bodies in true crime podcasts that Slakoff identifies or implied by *West Cork's* opening warning about the graphic images. The take home point is that audio platforms and true crime podcasts in particular often trade on the (mental) imagery of women's bodies, despite their apparent distance from the gendered conventions of visual media. That said, psychologist Amanda Vicary reasons that true crime stories can provide "a mental dress rehearsal of sorts, a way of unpacking and understanding dangerous situations that haven't yet happened to them" (Barcella, 2019). Audio podcasts which also provide some detailed visual descriptions could potentially prove more beneficial than audiovisual true crime media in that it becomes easier for the listener to mentally place themselves in the scene. Even if this is one benefit to podcasts that include detailed descriptions that allow for mental imagery, it must be considered alongside the exploitative aspect of including visual descriptions of violence against victims.

Emotive voices

There are some potentially redeeming dimensions to the graphically-embodied nature of true crime podcast content focused on women's bodies, wherein the expressive dimensions of the voice are harnessed to capture the lingering impact of the damage done to victims on those who knew them. Moreover, I think it is worth considering this affective use of surrogate female voices in relation to the conventions of melodrama, a media genre traditionally associated with female audiences, tragedy, pathos and emotional "excess". Melodrama has traditionally been categorised as a "body genre" for its tendency to stimulate a bodily response (tears) in audience members, and what Linda Williams terms as their "naked displays of emotion" (1991, p.3). In screen studies, melodrama is grouped alongside horror and porn, genres where the desired impact on the audience takes the form of fear (screams,

jump scares, elevated heart rate) and arousal, respectively. Indeed, if we return to Verma's analysis of Audible's risqué audio content and marketing, he notes how podcasts belong to "what we might call an emerging cycle of 'body radio' programs that include sonic explorations of the sounds of the wide and sometimes musical repertoire of visceral bodily functions ordinarily excised from terrestrial broadcast" (2019, p.291). But while Verma refers to a variety of sexual sounds, the sounds of crying and sob-filled speech are equally fitting. In relation to true crime podcasts, moments from *Serial* and *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo* can help reveal how audible traces of a sorrow-filled body can balance out the sensationalised mental images of victims' bodies. Recorded voices can provide a rare kind of sonic space for lingering grief and trauma to be materialised, amplified and heard.

Focused on the mysterious disappearance of an indigenous girl from Saskatchewan who was adopted in the United States in the 1970s, the *Finding Cleo* podcast has been praised for departing from the overwhelming focus of true crime podcasts on white women, a trend which disregards how women of colour and indigenous women are disproportionately victims of violence. The podcast is hosted by Connie Walker, who is also indigenous, and foregrounds Cleo's siblings, as they struggle to find answers to what happened to their sister amidst rumours that she was raped and murdered while trying to hitchhike back to Saskatchewan from the United States after she was displaced from their family home by child welfare workers in the 1970s. Copeland and Lauren Knight position *Finding Cleo* as an anti-colonial soundtrack focused on "the promise of truth" to heal what they conceptualize as "wounded vibrations" in reference to the affective weight of trauma that goes back generations for First Nation peoples, and remains present in "the voices of grandparents, of sisters and mothers [which] echo through the land" (2019, p.102). Though Copeland and Knight use the term "melancholic" to refer to the affective voice of Cleo's sister, Christine Cameron (p.112), I would argue that the impact of her emotive tone and cries also aligns well

with the vocal conventions of melodrama as unapologetically excessive and moving for an audience.

Copeland and Knight identify several moments where “Christine is open with her conveying of emotion and trauma as tears,” with “a sorrowful voice” heard in a series of different moments in throughout the series (2019, p.112). This includes in the first episode when she calls Social Services Saskatchewan to request information about Cleo:

Christine begins to cry, ‘For 20 years you’ve told me nothing’, ‘I know’ the operator replies with a sinking tone in her voice. ‘This is my sister – her body’s in the States you know – Do you have a sister?’ Christine asks. ‘I do’ replies the worker. ‘Well then maybe think about how I feel’ Christine responds through her tears. ‘I will call you tomorrow at the latest to tell you where I’m at’ the worker replies. You can tell from their voice that Christine’s emotion has resonated with the social services worker (2019, p.112).

Christine speaks through tears again in the final episode, explaining that although she doesn’t look happy she is, due to finding resolution with what exactly happened to her sister: in this case, Cleo appears to have taken her own life, aged thirteen, as a result of her increasingly difficult circumstances.

Finding Cleo’s use of Christine’s voice is notably in line with Jacob Smith’s interpretation of the microphoned voice’s significance to melodrama in radio and film. Comparing Barbara Stanwyck’s radio and film performances of *Stella Dallas* (Lux Radio Theater, 1937; King Vidor, 1947), Smith argues “the expressive lighting and lonely silhouette of the film are replaced by Stanwyck’s choked sobs” (Smith, 2008, p.103). *Finding Cleo* makes an expressive feature of the kind of vocal expressions of emotion that Smith identifies in relation to radio melodrama. Christine’s close mic-ed setup allows us to hear what Smith and others have termed “the sob in the throat” (2008, p.101).

Serial also taps into the expressive power and revelatory nature of the (female) emotive voice. The producer-narrator Sarah Koenig seems aware that it is not just what people say,

but the way that they say it. In episode eight, she plays what she describes as her favourite piece of tape from the entire season. The segment features Laura, a friend of both the imprisoned Syed and another suspect, Jay, as she reflects on her feeling that neither of them was involved with Hae Min Lee's murder: "Well then who the fuck did it? Like, why would— it doesn't make sense. Why would— (*stuttering*) Hae was— I can't— I'm probably just as confused as you are." This may seem like an odd moment for Koenig to select as her favourite recording, since it certainly isn't revelatory. But, listening to Laura start and restart sentences as she struggles to find the words to reconcile things, we sense her frustrated confusion that it is still unclear who killed Lee, something to which Koenig and many listeners can relate. In *Serial*, *Finding Cleo*, and other true crime podcasts, it tends to be female voices that are the most emotive and the closest to audibly sobbing. Indeed, as I have explored previously in relation to film podcast host Karina Longworth, this willingness to be heard crying while being recorded for a podcast goes beyond the true crime genre (O'Meara, 2022, p.140-142).

I want to return to Slakoff's suggestion that more critical attention should be paid to precisely whose voices are being heard in true crime podcasts, a factor which potentially impacts a range of factors including audience response, the possibility of victim blaming, and descriptions of the victims. For while Pâquet notes of certain Australian true crime podcasts that at least they "privilege victim's stories" the same cannot necessarily be said of other podcasts considered here (2021, p.428). As noted, both *Serial* and *West Cork* pay considerable attention to the men who were formally or informally considered to have murdered Lee and Toscan du Plantier. Aside from the podcast hosts, it is their voices who are heard at the greatest length, over the course of many episodes. In *West Cork*, there is also a jarring vocal and professional alignment between the podcast producers and Bailey, the main suspect: all three speak with English accents, which mark them out from many of the other

contributors with regional Irish accents, and Bailey is also a former journalist. With *Serial*, the New York-based host Sarah Koenig's voice can also mark her as an outsider from contributors from the Baltimore, Maryland community where Lee was murdered. As she explains to listeners, the school and community where Lee and Syed lived includes a large Black population, as well as many first-generation immigrant families. With *Finding Cleo*, there is a less of an insider-outsider distinction between the podcast host and the main vocal contributors, since Connie Walker is also Cree and grew up in a First Nation community in Saskatchewan, just like the podcast's subject.

Furthermore, for the female victims to be heard is not inherently a good thing. In *Serial* it means hearing Koenig reading aloud excerpts from Lee's diary, which were entered into evidence as part of the trial. These segments give listeners a sense of Lee's voice while alive, and yet including them can feel inappropriate; both because Lee is expressing herself in a candid but private teenaged way, and because her family wanted no involvement with the podcast series, and so almost certainly would not want their deceased daughter's diary turned into infotainment.

In *Finding Cleo*, excerpts from Cleo's letters to family members are incorporated at points throughout. Although she is obviously unable to give consent to this, the excerpts are used judiciously, read aloud by her sister (reflecting the fact that her family members were willing to be involved in the podcast), and seem less invasive to share than those of a private diary. Pâquet also highlights issues of consent with regard to incorporating pre-existing records by a female victim in *The Teacher's Pet* podcast, in this case those of the former student alluded to sensationally in the podcast title. As Pâquet observes, by broadcasting taped police interviews, seemingly without the woman's consent, the male podcast host Hedley Thomas "replicates the power imbalances that have plagued victim-survivors in the

formal justice system” and raises ethical questions around the intersection of law and media (2021, p.432-433).

Finally, what is missing from most true crime podcasts focused on female victims, including *Serial* and *West Cork*, is contributions from experts in gender-based violence (GBV). While such podcasts can seek expert opinions from a range of professionals, including police investigators and legal experts, they rarely attempt to contextualise the crimes in relation to GBV. The tendency to focus on one crime in-depth creates a narrative focus that may appeal to producers and listeners, but can lead to missed opportunities to establish the crimes as just one of many in what is a much more widespread trend.

Concluding remarks

Despite some of the complexities of true crime podcasts considered here, they can be valuable in giving sonic space to the voices of victims and those close to them. They can also offer female victims and their families alternatives to seeking justice beyond formal systems (Pâquet, 2021, p.421), as well as helping survivors to talk about abuse with their loved ones, and providing educators in related areas with teaching tools (Slakoff, 2021, p.18). At the same time, I remain sceptical that the majority of true crime podcasts offer a radical and progressive departure from trends for true crime stories of violence against women to provide sensationalist forms of infotainment that often trades in the shock factor of the damage done to their bodies and lives. Of those considered here, *Finding Cleo* appears to offer the best example of how to sensitively engage with stories of female victims, particularly those from minority groups, and this is potentially due to supportive involvement by the victim’s family.

Alternative sides of crime and gender are also being productively explored in more niche podcasts, such as *Strict Scrutiny* (2019-present), a series focused on the homogeneity of the US Supreme Court that is hosted by three law scholars with the aim of “highlight[ing] the voices of women and people of color, to celebrate the expertise and skill of lawyers who work on behalf of the less powerful, and to challenge prevailing views about what a Supreme Court expert looks and sounds like” (Litman, Murray and Shaw, 2021, p.72). Given that the existing analysis of true crime podcasts often highlights their entwinement with both formal justice systems and intersectional identity politics – due to the over-representation of white women as subjects and white people as podcast hosts – then podcasts focused on legal culture as it relates to minorities are potentially more valuable than more narrative based true crime accounts of victimization. Indeed, *Finding Cleo* and *Strict Scrutiny* align with Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann’s optimism that podcasts provide much greater sonic space for “traditionally-oppressed voices” (2017, p.118). Furthermore, comparing women’s voices on podcasts to those in traditional radio broadcasting, they note how journalism courses train reporters and radio hosts to “speak with little emotion,” in sharp contrast to their discussion of feminist podcasting where “embracing one’s ‘authentic voice’ is a defining and foundational trend.” (p.117) As I have shown, this move towards an emotive delivery can clearly be heard in some true crime podcasts, with the creative decision to retain the sounds of women’s sobs and vocal breaks offering some hope that, outside of sensationalized verbal imagery of female victims, the expressive potential of the voice can affect listeners differently.

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