5-2015

Killer Fandoms Crime-Tripping & Identity in the True Crime Community

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KILLER FANDOMS

CRIME-TRIPPING & IDENTITY IN THE TRUE CRIME COMMUNITY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

American Studies—Folklore

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Trigger Warning

This paper deals with the topic of serial killers and mass murderers. Though specific details of various crimes are not discussed at length, please take precautions as the subject matter may be disturbing to some.

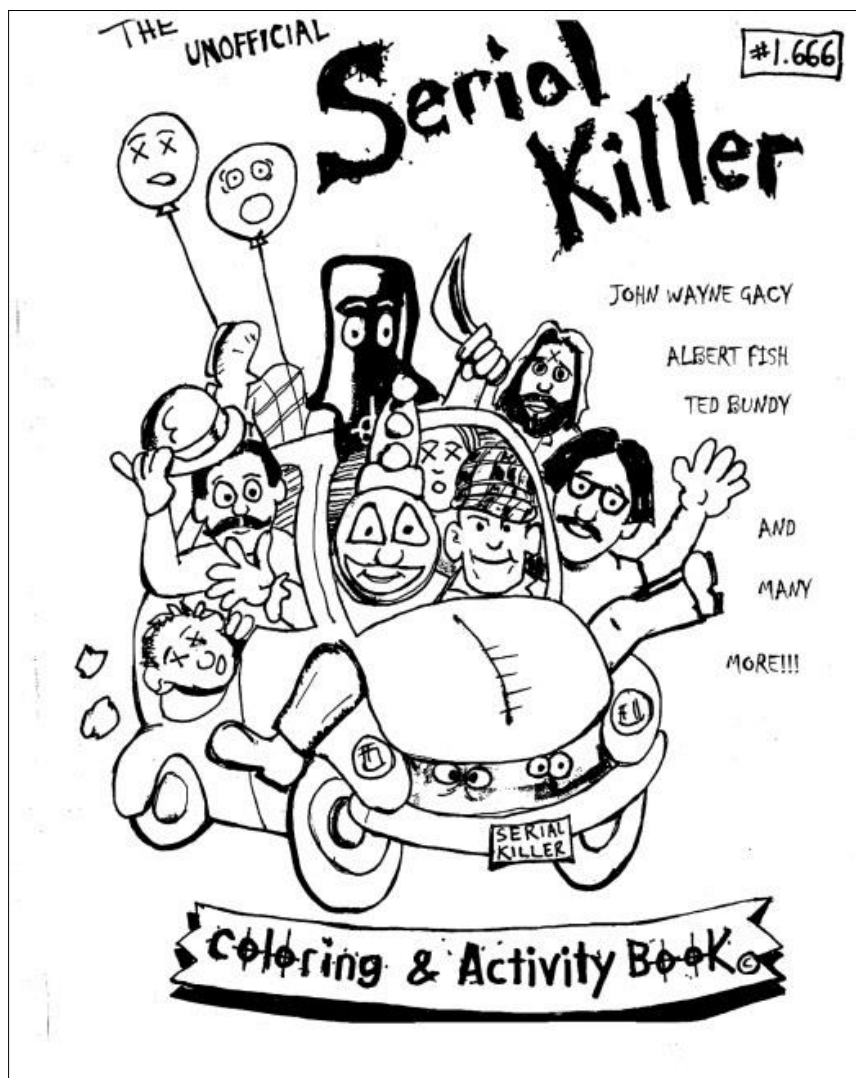Fig. 1. Image courtesy of Rich Hillen Jr. (*richhillenjr.wordpress.com*)

Most of us interested in the subject do not 'love serial killers' or intend on sensationalizing the subject. We are interested in the intellectual and psychological aspects of serial murderers. I approach it with sarcasm and humor in my art and writings.

– Rich Hillen Jr., creator of *The Unofficial Serial Killer Coloring & Activity Book*

Introduction

During Ted Bundy's 1979 murder trial in Miami, Florida, a "steady and unusual string of spectators" filled the courtroom and lined up outside ("Ted Bundy Groupies" 1979). News reels from the trial show that these spectators were young women around same age as the two sorority sisters Bundy was accused of murdering the year before. Though some of the women admitted to being afraid or unnerved by Bundy, they also admitted that they were fascinated by him, even if they were unsure as to why. Similar cases of attraction to the spectacle surrounding serial and mass murderers shroud killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, Richard Ramirez, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, Dennis Rader, Ed Gein, John Wayne Gacy, H. H. Holmes and many others throughout the centuries (Schmid 2005; Levin and Fox 1985; P. Jenkins 1994).[1]

This same pattern of fascination—from both male and female spectators—continues in more recent trials for mass killers such as TJ Lane, Dylann Roof, James E. Holmes, and others.[2] As unlikely as it may seem, "crime is no longer a bar to celebrity; indeed, it is as close to a guarantee of celebrity as on can find" (Schmid 2005, 10). Their infamous killings are followed by groups of people fascinated with these criminals, victims, and court cases—many times long after the criminal has been imprisoned or is deceased. Those who choose to follow the cases surrounding these murders are often labeled as serial killer or mass murder "fans."

Robert Kozinets (2001) explains that "fans" are more than casual observers: they seek information about a subject, interact with each other to discuss interests in web forums, participate in activities influenced by their chosen interest, create fan art and fan fiction, and attend conventions. Fans who create groups dedicated to their interests are

typically referred to as "fandoms," which Henry Jenkins (2010) describes as having "social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties" (1). Some of the most recognizable fandoms focus on television shows such as *Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Doctor Who*; literary works such as the Sherlock Holmes short stories or *Lord of the Rings*; or on specific celebrities such as musicians, artists, or movie stars. Fandoms often meet online in chat rooms, participate in forums, create fanfiction or fan art, and sometimes meet in person at conventions as varied in theme as the groups themselves. In many ways, the subcultures of fandoms "represent the fallout from society that promotes handsome team-playing jock and Barbie images at the expense of…the different" (Kozinets 2001, 73), and give those who would be labeled as weird or socially awkward a place to feel welcome. The culture and traditions shared within each of these groups are often "othered" and stigmatized as deviant or abnormal by outsiders, though many times what a fandom shares reflects larger social anxieties and fears. One major fear or anxiety, of course, surrounds death and the taboo of murder.

According to the FBI's Serial Murder Symposium, *serial killings* are "The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events" (Morton and Hilts 2008, 9). Serial killers, then, are those who commit such killings, often in a series of events separated by cooling off periods. Mass murders, on the other hand, are "a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident" (8). In the past several decades, a seemingly apparent increase in these types of murders has

dominated the news, with emphasis placed on those that are more gruesome or shocking. This is all a matter of perception, however, as David Schmid (2005) points out that history has been rife with killers, as well as those who would use these criminals to comment on the state of society (13).

In order to understand why many believe serial and mass killings to be a new phenomenon, it is important to examine how information about these particular types of crimes is disseminated to the public. Schmid (2005) discusses how the FBI was initially uninterested in cases where multiple murders were committed by the same killer. The Bureau had certainly been aware of and studied serial murders, but prior to a press conference held on October 26, 1983 they never made a formal declaration of interest into these crimes (77). He also points out that until that time the general public wasn't necessarily aware of these types of serial killings; the term "serial killer" was not a part of the American vernacular. As such, the FBI was able to create the serial killer image it preferred: a sexually deviant male who roamed the United States looking for random victims (78-81). This exaggerated image, however, was "useful to federal law enforcement as the emphasis on mobility and sexual homicide [achieved] its goal of increased resources and power" (83). By taking over the world of serial killers, and by scaring the public into believing hundreds of serial killers were roaming the country, the FBI guaranteed its position of authority in such cases, and guaranteed federal funding would continue to flow into the Bureau. The greatest tool at their disposal was the news media.

News media outlets make money by "presenting news that attracts a large audience, which, in turn, attracts more advertising dollars" (Duwe 2000, 364).

Accordingly, increased public fear created by the FBI's newly established, roaming serial killers created a situation that not only benefitted the FBI, it also benefitted the news broadcast companies by creating a story that the public could not turn away from. The rise of the serial killer in the 1980s and 1990s therefore became a valuable source of income. Equally, as the rise of the serial killer created power and profits for the news media, so too did the rise of the mass murderer. Grant Duwe (2000) explains that "high-profile cases generate a great deal of interest and concern, providing reporters and sources…with an opportunity to make claims about new or recurring crime problems" (367-368). Again, reporting exaggerated details about violent mass murder is a way to keep the public involved in an ongoing story of death, which becomes "entertaining, and thus more appealing to consumers...because they are dramatic, tragic, and rare in occurrence" (365). In both instances (of serial and mass killings), news outlets profited by depicting the extreme violence of rare cases.

Mass shootings have become more prominent in the news since 1991, when five highly publicized mass shootings occurred between October and December of the same year (Duwe 2007, 1). This began the slow shift from serial killers to mass murderers, which again changed the opinions and vernacular of the American public (perhaps best demonstrated by the term "going postal" which emerged after the mass shootings by postal workers that occurred in the same 1991 time period). Though mass murders gained attention, and continue to fill the forefront of news accounts, it is again important to remember that it is the rare, exaggerated case that is most "news worthy" and profitable. The farther the media reaches, and the faster it can get information to the public, the more sensational stories can be pumped out via the Internet, 24-hour news channels, social

media, and other outlets. This constant flow of public information not only gives casual public observers access to shocking content, it provides an avenue by which those who intentionally seek further information into the murders can not only locate more horrific details of the crimes, but also find others who share in their fascination.

The goal of this paper is to examine public response to mass- and serial killings by means of legend trip performances specifically related to crime, and to consider the development and performance of identity within the online True Crime Community found on Tumblr. By taking a closer look at participatory customs and self-identification, it is my intention to explain not only why these groups form and persist, but also explore the purpose these groups serve for members and why the study of such activities is necessary for future research in folkloristics and other fields.

Crime-Tripping

Imagine driving down a long road in Salt Lake City, Utah, heading east through the city before skirting the southern edge of the University of Utah campus. Students rush from parking lots to department buildings and back again—a typical college environment full of life and vitality. Turning left a little further up the road, a sign for Utah's Hogle Zoo appears on the right, while This Is the Place Heritage Park emerges on the left. Everything is beautiful on this early spring day: fresh air, trees just starting to bud, yellow grasses with hints of green, and a feeling of winter having truly passed. Even the name of the road, Sunnyside Avenue, speaks of happy times ahead. However less than a mile away, tucked away in a grove of trees on Emigration Canyon Road, lies the foundation of a small cabin associated with one of America's most infamous serial killers: Ted Bundy.

The cabin, long empty, was torn down in 2006 and all that remains is a rough outline of a foundation and an entry to a small cellar. Approaching the structure, beer cans and trash litter the brush and dirt of the hollow. There's a small area where fallen trees, set as benches, surround the remains of a large fire. Mere footsteps away stands the cellar entrance. Its missing the door, but the walls of the structure are covered in graffiti—marks of previous visitors. At the bottom of the structure is a very small, concrete room where detritus gathers around a long-rusted water heater. Suddenly there is a rustle in the bushes, and ghostly echoes of a male voice float through the thicket, making an already eerie setting even more terrifying. Though it is daylight, and talk of ghosts and hauntings normally gets brushed off as somewhat foolish, the stories of Bundy's killings and the possibility that maybe—just maybe—bodies are still buried underneath the water tank causes an immediate reaction; suddenly nothing is more important than leaving this place. Immediately. Reaching the car, embarrassment sets in and the idea of being afraid of an abandoned water tank, imaginary graves, and the occasional breeze feels somewhat childish.

Fig. 2-3: Stairwell into cellar of Ted Bundy's cabin in Emigration Canyon, Salt Lake City, Utah (photos by author)

Fig. 4-5: Remnants of Ted Bundy's cabin in Emigration Canyon, Salt Lake City, Utah (photos by author)

This type of experience is not unique in the world of folklore. Thousands of teenagers participate in these types of legend-trips every year, seeking the thrill of the unexpected and unexplained. The more familiar legend trips surround belief and supernatural experiences: ghosts, hauntings, possessions, severed hands, vanishing hitchhikers, mysterious objects or visions, "spooky" places, or similar encounters. Jan Brunvand (1996) describes the legend trip as a ritual among teenagers that involves a three-part structure. First is the initial travel to a specific location, usually far from the teenagers' homes. During this traveling process, the teenagers tell stories about previous visits which can be personal experiences or experiences that happened to a friend or foaf. Second, after the arrival at the location, the participants will dare each other to act out the legend; the results of the ritual actions can be positive or negative. Finally, as they leave or immediately after, the teenagers share their interpretation of the events they experienced, which often leads to further visits to the site (Brunvand 1996, 437-438). These types of activities frequently happen at night, enhancing the eerie atmosphere and adding to the mystery and fright expected and experienced by participants.

Along with the performance of ritual, the location of a legend site plays an equal role in the legend trip experience. Many legend trips happen in cemeteries, run-down buildings, wooded areas, or any space tucked into the darker corners of the local landscape. This type of environment allows legend trippers to have a sense of "ambivalence and [creates a] special atmosphere of exhilaration and fear" (Bird 1994, 200). While legends can be told at any time or place, given the right context the legend trip provides a time-out-of-place or liminal moment where beliefs and practices are held in suspension. Michael Kinsella (2011) explains further, stating that "just as a car allows teens to explore places that were previously inaccessible, so do legend-tripping locales provide for experiences generally inaccessible in everyday life" (30). Because of the liminality of the place, participants do or say things they would normally eschew in the brighter hours of the day, and in the safety of their natural environment. Trippers challenge the legend (and challenge their belief of the legend) in a brief, suspended moment where anything can happen.

Bill Ellis (2001) asked the question of what people actually *do* when they tell legends. "From experience, we can see that people gather to share information about happenings that they accept both as significant and as actually, allegedly, or potentially part of the real-life world they inhabit" (11). In this way, while liminality allows the legend tripper to suspend belief or disbelief, the actual legend being told is neither random nor happenstance. Its importance and specifications are "subject to communal composition and performance" (9), which relies entirely upon the group telling the legend. Those who are local will tell the legend according to the issues of identity and beliefs most important to them, while outsiders may emphasize different aspects of the

legend that are more important to their own group. In other words, "the specific interests of one group, which determine to a large extent the text being narrated, may have little in common with the interests of other groups" (Ellis 2001, 9). Consider the legend of El Cucuy told to Latino children all over the world. This legendary monster is most similar to the bogeyman, in that the creature is said to harm children who misbehave. While the basics of the legend remain the same, the reason for childen to fear El Cucuy is dependent on group, location, and situation. It may be that El Cucuy will terrorize children who walk into a certain dangerous area (important only to those who live nearby), or El Cucuy will come after children who don't clean their room, if that is a current issue within a family group (Melissa Veloz, pers. comm.). The details, then, depend on the "specific interests" of the person telling the legend, and what their desired outcome will be as "the narrative is variated to fit the needs of the culture and its tradition" (Tangherlini 1990, 378). For the child, the possibility of El Cucuy being real is the key factor. It creates a liminal time and place of challenging the belief of the child, thus the experience follows the legend trip model.

What, then, happens when sharing legends or participating in legend-tripping focuses on a taboo subject such as serial killers and mass murderers? One could argue that these types of participatory experiences are modern developments or fads (speaking to the fear that sensibilities towards death and gore are being dulled) but this particular fascination with the crime of murder is anything but new. As Linda Dégh (2001) points out, criminally based legends and trips have roots that go back to at least the eighteenth- and nineteen-century (437), though this timeline likely does not go back far enough. For

the purposes of this study it is enough to suggest that, as serial and mass murders are not

"modern" concepts, groups who follow such killings are neither modern nor a fad.

Jack the Ripper, the serial killer who terrorized the Whitechapel district of

London in 1888, is arguably the most infamous killer of all time. This particular killing

spree "inspired and motivated travel and tourism industry activity both at the time of the

crimes and ever since" (Gibson 2006, 52). These tours are a major draw to the area and

bring in serious revenue for local business owners. This tourism is financially beneficial

today, but also boosted the local economy *while* the killings were happening. Dirk

Gibson (2006) explains that the murders were ghastly but so compelling that they

attracted attention to what was a normally avoided area of London. When the public

realized several gruesome killings were connected, people became fascinated with the

newspaper articles full of vivid details and the brutality of the murders. During the

investigations, sightseers visited many of the murder sites and often disturbed the crimes

scenes so completely that much of the hope in finding evidence was lost. "Those lucky

enough to have a view from one of the many buildings surrounding the sites sold window

seats, and there was no lack of customers. The streets leading to the murder sites were

literally choked with thousands of people" (Gordon 2001, 116). The locals cashed in on

the situation and, in some instances, "visitors were offered a seamless package including

lodging, entertainment, dining, and even mementos of their visit" (Gibson 2006, 55). The

fascination with the identity of the mysterious killer never really ended. A brief search on

the Internet shows the abundance of walking tours, ghost tours, pub crawls, maps for self-

guided tours, and pages of articles dedicated to the new, and much contested, Jack the

Ripper Museum in London's East End. The legends and rumors surrounding his identity

are still circulating—even when the latest DNA practices used in recent attempts to name him (Bolton 2015; Mosbergen 2014) do not offer the expected results.

Unknown killers such as Jack the Ripper continue to fascinate us. Performing personal legend-trips or taking commercial tours to sites related to bygone killers, especially Jack the Ripper, are no longer thought to be perverse or weird. As Jeannie Thomas (2015) points out, "Once they have taken hold in an area, invasive narratives take root. They don't go away, they are not always easy to deal with, and they usually require that locals grapple with them in one way or another" (51). For instance, tourists who travel to London will likely want to hear stories about Jack the Ripper and quite possibly take one of the many available tours based on his murder spree. Instead of being weird, it's expected, so much so that locals in these areas are often left dealing with the situation either by cashing in or complaining. Gibson (2006) explains that locals not only respond negatively to those who participate in murder-related tourism but also to those neighbors who provide such tourist attractions. He states:

> Proprietors of such venues are accused of making money from the suffering of their neighbors…such tourism sites are almost always attacked as opportunistic and morbid money-making methods. Because of the typical local disapproval, serial murder-induced tourism is frequently shut down and/or banned. Quite often such sites were demolished. (58)

In some instances, though, serial murder becomes quite lucrative for locals. Jack the Ripper's crime scenes have become so commercial and sterilized at this point there is rarely an emphasis placed on the victims other than mentioning their names and discussing exactly how their bodies (and body parts) were mutilated and strewn about.

The fascination with Jack the Ripper is not a singular incident. Crime enthusiasts all over the world gather to talk about murder cases, often sharing rumors and legends about the killers. Many outsiders who are not within the crime enthusiast group view this

interest as distasteful. The practice of sharing personal legends about these killers is under constant scrutiny for those who are often negatively judged for belonging to what outsiders consider to be a fandom. These etic reactions are understandable, given that many of these serial- or mass-murder cases are particularly brutal or involve those who are perceived to be more innocent that others (school children or religious groups). Public dislike of true crime followers is also partially attributable to the perceived commercialization of more recent events. For instance, Hangman Tours offers a 90-minute walking tour of sites related to Jeffrey Dahmer's hunting grounds in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For $25.00, the "Cream City Cannibal" tour invites participants to "Listen to the cautionary tales and gruesome events of his depraved murdering spree as [they] walk in in the footsteps of the predator" (Hangman Tours 2015). On the other side of the country, and for $30.00 per person, Seattle's Private Eye Tours (2015) takes participants on a tour of several killing sites, including those of the Wah Mee massacre, the Capitol Hill massacre, and more.[3] Hundreds of people sign up for these and other tours each year, ready to take a peek at the places where brutal murders took place. People all over the world travel to similarly grisly sites, fascinated by the macabre and the killers who commit such violent acts. Though undoubtedly people during the Ripper's crime-spree were fascinated by the mystery surrounding the killer, it is important to remember that if the transmission of information about not only this murder, but all murders, affects the lives of those who knew and loved the victims. While it is possible that violent killings such as those of Jack the Ripper have become less shocking simply because 127 years have passed, is it also possible that dark tourism will someday catch up to those violent killers whose crimes are now playing out on our televisions.

    In a study of serial killer-related tourism in several countries, Gibson (2006)

"surveyed 140 cases of serial murder and identified numerous instances of travel and

tourism activity, representing nearly 60% of the sample" (58). Of the 140 cases, then, 84

have some form of formalized tourism associated with it—cases excluding the numbers

for mass murder. The commodification of these sites initially appears to contradict the

idea that these areas of attraction can be considered folklore. The tours themselves are

perhaps more along the line of the Brothers Grimm: the tours are a modified, often

sterilized, versions of the local and personal legends surrounding the killers, and the

stories are sold for money. Yet, as Lauri Honko (1968) said, "It is often forgotten that a

definition refers to an ideal type, rather than being an exact representation" (qtd.

Tangherlini 1990, 377). Surveys such as Gibson's function as a way to monitor the extent

of commercial travel. While money-based thanatourism is not an ideal register of the

personal legend-trip, it can be assumed that if the masses are paying to travel to these

areas at this degree, the folk are participating as well.[4] Even then, the experience a tourist

has during a mass-produced event can create similar responses to a typical legend trip.

Those who travel to a location, no matter who travels with them, experience the

landscape in an individual way. There is a tremendous difference between those who seek

out these dark tourism places as a form of recreation versus those who seek out these

places on a more personal level; those who travel with a tour group can still feel a deeper

sense of connection (creating the legend-trip experience) than those who are traveling for

entertainment purposes. This leads to the question of whether or not it would be

beneficial to have new terminology for this specific type of legend trip.

Legends and legend-tripping are most often directly associated with belief and the

supernatural. However, as noted above, works such as those by Brunvand (1996), Dégh

(1996; 2001), and Ellis (2001; 2004) are specifically looking at the participatory nature of

belief legends. As legends do not always focus on supernatural events, there is a need for

a distinction between those legend-trips associated with the mystical and those associated

with personal legends told about historical criminals. While there are elements of the

supernatural in some of these narratives, it is not the supernatural that necessarily drives

people to visit these locations—it is the shocking and often graphic details of the case, the

criminals, and the victims. In an online survey conducted in September 2015, I asked

participants whether or not they ever traveled to a site related to serial or mass killings.

Of the 143 participants who responded to the question, 32 responded in the affirmative

and gave a more detailed account of their trip. The following experience was given by

Rose, who went out of her way to participate in a Jack the Ripper walking tour in

London[5]:

> For Jack the Ripper, my friend came along with me. I thought I had already read
> everything there was to know about JtR, but I learned things on the tour I never
> knew, specifically, how exactly he killed his victims. I remember feeling really
> disturbed at Mitre Square and Miller's Court, especially. After the tour, the guide
> pointed to a pub that they suspect JtR frequented, and may have even met his
> victims at, and suggested we go have a drink there, but I grabbed my friend and
> we went to the nearest Underground station instead because I was pretty freaked
> out by the whole thing.

Her reaction to the tour is very similar to the reaction of legend-trippers; they get spooked

and quickly leave the trip site. However, this is not always the reaction to visiting crime

scenes. A second respondent, Mike, explained the emotional response he felt while

visiting Belanglo State Forest in New South Wales, Australia. The forest is known for

"The Backpacker Murders" where the bodies of seven victims were found, brutally

murdered by Ivan Milat between January 1990 and April 1992 (Sutton 2014). Mike

recounted his experience in the forest:

> It was a place of peace for me - a solitary place where the outside world did not seem to stretch (which is perhaps why Milat chose it as his dumping grounds). There are rumours (and had been long before the murders) that the forest was haunted, and it's easy to see why.

For Mike, the experience of being in a place where murders happened was not disturbing.

Though he visited with the intent to be in the place where these murders happened, the

concepts of death and hauntings are mentioned in passing, as in the end it became a place

where he spent the day exploring a world outside his normal boundaries. In many ways,

those participants who go out of their way to travel to these areas are not necessarily

searching for a confirmation or challenge of supernatural belief; they are instead

performing something more akin to pilgrimage.

In a discussion of religious pilgrimage compared to recreational travel, Erik

Cohen (1992) explains that, typically, pilgrimage is associated with The Center, or "the

most sacred place on earth," while travel is associated with The Other, or "the strange

and the attractive, the threatening and the alluring…lurking in the recesses of chaos

surrounding the ordered, 'civilized' cosmos" (51). Cohen points out that "new centers of

political and cultural pilgrimage have now emerged, symbolizing the basic values of the

polity" (52), meaning that pilgrimage and travel are dependent on the cultural values of

those who participate (a very folkloric perception). He concludes that pilgrim-tourists

"travel towards the religious, political, or cultural centers of their cultural world" while

travel-tourists "travel away from [these centers] into the periphery of that world" (59).

Therefore, pilgrimage and tourism have a delicate interplay of convergence and

divergence in purpose and outcome. Regardless of whether the pilgrim or traveler is

moving towards or away from society, both are seeking an escape. This escape happens either through recreational diversion (external modes), or existential diversion (internal modes). In either case, the pilgrim and the traveler change their focus to The Center or The Other which allows them to "opt-out" from their everyday social boundaries. Because pilgrimage moves towards the center of society (including political and cultural sites), it "reinforces [the pilgrim's] commitment to basic cultural values; he is restituted to, and reconciled with, his role and position in society" (59). In contrast, the tourist seeks alienation from this center of society. Their Center is not changed, rather they move away from their Center for a moment to be revitalized, but this process happens through alienation instead of reconciliation.

Here, then, is the distinction between the mass-produced tour and the folkloric *crime-trip*. While both types of participants (the travel-tourist and the pilgrim-tourist) seek escape by means of traveling to specific locations where crimes took place, the intent of the Traveler is more superficial than the intent of the Pilgrim. If a person uses a commodified tour as a means to obtain access to certain areas, or to exchange narratives, it does not mean the participant is incapable of participating in a crime-trip. The individual on the commercialized tour has equal opportunity, as mentioned above, to experience a movement towards their Center, while others travel towards the Other. This does not mean the experience does not fulfill the escapism need for the Traveler, it - simply means that the crime-tripper has a different experience. The first is an external excitement over being in a "spooky" area, while the second experiences something deeper, not unlike concepts of the sublime where the more ugly aspects of the world are sought after in order to experience life in a more substantial way (Brady 2013). This

happens through heightened emotions when experiencing the ugliness of human nature and can have a variety of outcomes, both positive and negative.

The postulation of varied response is tied directly to the idea that each participant has unique personal interests, fears, and experience. Therefore not all who participate in a legend trip have the same reaction. This concept is demonstrated in a personal interview with Matt Stockett, as he described visiting Kay's Cross in Kaysville, Utah with a group of friends. The group was made up of teen and pre-teen boys who decided to visit the Cross, whose location is referenced in many local legends. When the group of boys reached the site, one boy in particular would not enter the clearing where the remains of the cross were located, while others participated in legend-telling and legend-tripping rituals. Stockett, however, was unaffected by the situation and the trip held no real significance. Correspondingly, not all participants have the same response in the act of crime-tripping. For example, survey respondent Miranda's experience visiting Adam Lanza's house and Sandy Hook Elementary School was emotionally draining:

> A very profound sadness and uneasy feeling settled over me when visiting Adam's house. I merely looked at the site, as I believed it would be far too emotionally intense if I were to do anything more…I was very shocked that I had driven by this house so many times before, and had no idea about the severe emotional trauma that one of it's occupants was enduring. For days afterward, I could not help but wonder what sort of inner turmoil those around me might be experiencing that I was completely oblivious to.

Similarly, Donna visited sites related to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. She also experienced a different response that she originally expected:

> my boyfriend took me…to Littleton and columbine and the memorial and by their old houses. it was truly a surreal feeling at the high school and the memorial also sadness for the lack of crosses for Eric and Dylan. I wanted to go into the school more than anything but didn't walked around. it was just such an odd feeling. driving by Eric old house made me feel ashamed and creepy bc of the new owners. driving by dylans parents saddened me. I say I left more sad than I thought I would. sad the event ever took place.

These two survey participants had what most would consider the expected response to being in a place where tragedy happened. But, as with varied responses with other pilgrimage and tripping sites, Mike, Miranda, and Donna's thought provoking experiences were not the only reaction. In some cases, the crime-trippers felt something more akin to euphoria.

In comparison to Rose (the woman who ran away from the Jack the Ripper tour), Sarah found the encounter with Ripper sites to be exciting. Sarah explains:

> I've made trips to London and sort of reveled in the idea that Jack the Ripper had killed in certain locations, but only in passing. I was there on a study abroad trip with other students from the University of Utah, where (funny enough) Ted Bundy went to school for awhile. When I found that out and that he had done things at the Fashion Place Mall where I frequently shopped I was more interested in him and learning more.

Sarah's reaction to being in these locations excited her, and increased her desire to learn more about the crimes themselves. Instead of focusing on the effect of the crimes on the public or individual, she was fascinated by the events that took place. This does not mean she is callous or unfeeling, but rather that her crime-tripping provoked her curiosity. One survey respondent, though, showed even more excitement over traveling to a crime location. Paul did not specify which murder site he visited, though he did indicate he traveled to a place where a murder victim's body was found. He recounted his crime trip as follows:

> I went with a older friend of mine; The person who introduced me to the interest of crime. Honestly I felt estatic!! Like wow, I'm going to a place someone was killed!! What if there are ghosts? The murder him/herself?? I was absolutely off my kid. We dug up some dirt and we keep it in a little glass bottle.

Paul's shocking response and enthusiasm may initially appear to be an indication of his young age (he identified himself as age 17 or younger). This would correspond with the Ellis' (2004) theory that legend-tripping is regularly performed by teenagers who use the

trip as an "excuse to escape adult supervision" and "commit anti-social acts" (124). Paul is the same age as Miranda, however, whose poignant response to visiting the Sandy Hook sites made her more contemplative about the emotional lives of those around her. Age, then is not necessarily an indicator of participant response. Neither is gender, as Mike felt peaceful rather than excited during his trip. These varied responses to crime-tripping reflect the idea that the purpose of the trip and the intent of the participant have more effect on the reaction than the demographics of the participant.

Crime-Tripping on the Web

The above survey responses are associated, specifically, with a physical crime-trip experience. As Elizabeth Bird (1994) explains, "local legends tend to develop around particular types of places—bridges, cemeteries, unusual graves, deserted houses and so on" (193). Accordingly, legends not only need places of ambiguity to survive, they thrive on it. Similar to physical locations of ambiguity, the Internet can be mysterious, unusual, and even frightening at times—qualities that are especially dependent on the website. More people are choosing to travel in the virtual world when physical travel is not available, or when limitations are placed on specific types of locations. These are not the only reasons, though, as Timothy Tangherlini (2011) points out, "Today's legend-tripping activities aren't limited to exploring ancient sites…Legend-trippers increasingly rely on computer-mediated communications" (34) in order to enhance their experience. Some may argue the Internet does not always provide the right context for legend telling, but "a narrative should be considered in tradition when original authorship is no longer verifiable and transmission is still actively taking place—this could occur in as few as a single transmissionary link" (374). Quite often—through the process of sharing, re-

blogging, re-tweeting, or re-posting—we lose track of authorship, and few bother to search for the originating source. As with most areas of folkloristics, source genesis is not as important as *what* is being shared, by whom, and for what reason. The dissemination of information is key, and the Internet provides a unique landscape for the telling and re-telling of narratives. This type of communication allows participants to share legends with those they would likely never meet otherwise.

Kinsella's (2011) work in studying online legend-tripping also connects the virtual world with the physical, even though online tripping "operates slightly differently than when performed in face-to-face situations" (xi). He explains that because online interaction and communication allows "tellers to instantly present various kinds of 'evidence'" they can "hypertextually connect their accounts to other legends to form vast legend complexes" (xi). This evidence and performance may include audio or visual elements, discussion posts, or telling of similar legends, and can allow participants to connect with events that occur in remote distance or time (39). The web serves as a way for legend-trippers to "use both archived and real-time audio and video feeds as well as message boards…[to] augment participants' efforts towards creating a shared ritual environment constructed from temporally or spatially distant real environments" (Kinsella 2011, 40). Where the Internet provides the same legend *telling* experience as the physical world, it also offers virtual trips to various places—some specific to serial killer and mass murder locales. Websites such as LiveLeak.com, Jack-the-Ripper.org, and VirtualGlobetrotting.com provide virtual tours to those who cannot travel to such areas such as Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, various killer's homes (such as Adam Lanza, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy), and specific aerial views

of sights where murders happened or where bodies were discovered (e.g. Zodiac killer

locations). Thus, just as crime-tripping happens in the physical world, it happens online,

and with similar responses.

Tangherlini (2001) also compares online legend-tripping to the use of Ouija

boards. The experiences are similar in that the ambiguity from the trip does not come

from a change of physical space, but rather a change of perceived space. Ouija board

users do not have to leave their home environments to achieve the same time-out-of-place

experience of physically traveling to a magical or supernatural location (35). In this

situation, ambiguity is dependent on the participant's willingness to mentally,

emotionally, or spiritually distance themselves from their physical surroundings. This

same willingness to suspend "real life" happens in the virtual world as well. The feelings

of fear exist, but participants also "use the legend trip as a form of play, deliberately

suspending the normal laws of the real world" (Bird 1994, 202). Crime-tripping online

serves this same function—that of brushing off social norms in order to explore a topic or

interest that is socially unacceptable. As users navigate their way through the Internet and

participate in specific groups, they create identities and form new folk groups—ones that

may differ radically from "real life."

The Internet has become a common ground that "allows like-minded people who

would never otherwise meet (whether due to physical, geographical, or situational

obstacles) to find each other almost immediately" (McNeill 2009, 83). People meet

online in various forums or chat groups, through social media websites (Facebook,

Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, etc.), and via other means in order to discuss similar interests,

which quite often lead to the formation of fandoms. As such, the Internet provides diverse

groups with a method of connection that would otherwise be unlikely. Even when not specifically sharing legends, this specific type of group (the fandom) still provides a participatory environment for people to engage in other ways. Members share narratives, jokes, music, folk art (fan art), rumors, memes—the number of folkloric genres is far too extensive to list here. B. Grantham Aldred asks, "But what about groups whose interactions are inherently disembodied? Can there be an art of the self when its most powerful symbol, the body, is unavailable?" (8). Some argue that there can't be a sense of self as the virtual world is fake, and personal connections that occur in a non-physical place are not real. On the other hand, Trevor Blank (2009) explains the importance of realizing "that just because the Internet is virtual…it still has an inherent base in the real world. The fact remains that there is a human behind everything that takes place online" (11). In many ways, then, virtual interactions are just as important (sometimes moreso) than those that happen in everyday, physical existence—especially for members of groups that participate in socially taboo discussions about murder, such as the True Crime Community. When people join the TCC and other groups and choose to discuss topics related to murder and violent crime, they are making a choice as to the label and projection of their identity.

Identity in the True Crime Community

Tumblr is a website that provides a space for user-created material to be posted by individuals; material is typically in the form of writings, digital art, pictures, videos, memes, and other digital folklore. It is also interactive in that users can reblog posts they like and add comments that can then be reblogged and added to again and again. The TCC differs from a typical online forum in that it is an affiliation of pages united around

the topic of true crime.[6] Users can interact with each other via "asks" and other forms of direct contact and have the power to grant access or block certain people from seeing their posts. In many ways, Tumblr serves as a type of gathering place or "home" for members of the TCC to meet one another and share information about their particular interests. TCCers gather from all areas of the globe, and their particular section of the Internet becomes a place where personal legends of various killers can be passed from member to member. Lynne McNeill (2007) states that "If 'home'…is a concept that is increasingly unanchored, then concepts such as 'place' and 'home' must simply become things we can take with us when we travel" (282). Thus, while communities like the TCC have existed for quite some time without the aid of the Internet, the more "unanchored" concept of community found in the virtual world provides an immediate sense of place and belonging.

Satya Mohanty (2003) states, "Whether we inherit an identity…or we actively choose one…our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences" (398). Instead of fully gaining and losing our identity as a whole, we merely fluctuate identities as we attempt to understand and negotiate our way through the world, which corresponds to the idea that we change the things we say and do based on the folk group in which we find ourselves. Aldred (2010) explains this concept of "instanced identity" while discussing userpics on LiveJournal (an online, public journaling website). Through his observation of the changing userpics on this particular website, he claims, "Because the totality of identity cannot be expressed or understood through the symbolic, it is instead presented in fragments that represent aspects of 'instanced identity' based in time and space, and linked to a sense of Subjectivity" (Aldred 2010, 14). In essence, our total identity is never

fully revealed in one moment. Our moods change, our understandings, reactions,

experience, etc. alters as we participate in everyday life. While some of Alan Dundes'

(1983) ideas surrounding identity are a little outdated, he likens identity to funhouse

mirrors, which demonstrates the Subjectivity theory. He states:

> There are many personal identities and many social identities. At some amusement parks, one can find a battery of different mirrors. In one, a person looks tall, in another short, in a third, skinny, a fourth, fat, etc. Which is the real person? I would think that all the images are real in some sense and these diverse mirrors would constitute an apt metaphor for the complexities of multiple personal identities. (Dundes 1983, 238)

For Aldred (2010), LiveJournal userpics allowed participants to construct social identities

that reflected how they viewed themselves within the world of LiveJournal. Not only did

this allow users to create a sense of individuality, it helped them identify with groups that

created a sense of community.

As Aldred (2010) explains, "One of the ways in which many people attempt to

communicate personal identity is through connection to a group" (25). This connection

forms that sense of belonging and security found within a community. Camille Bacon-

Smith (1992) agrees that while group identity is important, "establishing [personal]

identity in a group is a matter of compromises, and of varying emphases…based on the

facet of the structure that is most important to [the individual]" (23). Though her study

referenced the various types of participatory methods within the *Star Trek* fandom, the

idea that individual identity within a group relies on specific interests follows a similar

development in the True Crime Community. The connection to the TCC is often evident

on the stylistic choice of a user's homepage on Tumblr:

Fig. 6. Homepage for user, *ericharrisvevo*

Fig. 7. Homepage for user, *skykidklebold*   Fig. 8. Homepage for user, *sociopathic-compulsions*

Each of the above captured images of homepages shows some traditional traits of the

TCC Tumblr blogs: an image of a killer used as a userpic, insider references to the crime

or criminal, a message that the blogger does not condone the actions of the criminal, and

a username directly associated with an aspect of true crime.[7]

Even at a cursory glance, the choice of a person's username provides a unique

identification that automatically sets that person into one of the TCC's many subgroups.

Some usernames are explicit references to certain killers or crimes, such as:

mycolumbineobsession, *bundyofjoy*, *mrsjeffreylioneldahmer*, *richardrramirez,* and

dylannstormroofies.[8] Others are less explicit, and someone would need to know details

about the killer or crime before the reference becomes clear. Examples include

ripbowlcut (a reference to Dylann Roof's haircut at the time of his arrest), or

vodkaismyhomie, rebobsessions, and *natvral-selection* which all reference the Columbine

killings.[9] Whether explicitly stated or more subtle, these types of usernames let others

know the specific crime or killer the individual TCC member is most likely interested in.

Using the names of these killers, or making specific emic references to them, seems to

complicate the fan vs. non-fan labels surrounding the TCC. It is difficult to reconcile the

use of these names with the idea that people would likely not identify themselves based

on someone they hate or despise; the claims of "I do not condone" seem more doubtful in

the face of users who take a killer's name as their own. TCC usernames, however, are

typically an outward expression as to what or who brought an individual into the TCC.

Along with individual expressions of identity for each TCC member, the group as

a whole shares an identity. The "fandom" label is an issue many members of the TCC

fight against. I discovered this in one of my initial posts, when I asked if there was a

distinction between community members and fans. I was corrected almost immediately

by *bundyofjoy* who stated:

> A fandom is a community of people who enjoy the same things - they write fan
> fiction, create videos and fan art, they create OTPs, etc. Basically fandoms refer
> more to people who enjoy TV shows, movies, music artists…..
> If the true crime community were to do those things and consider ourselves a
> fandom we would be glorifying murderers and thats not what we do. Sure, there
> are people who find themselves connected to a serial killer or a mass shooter, but
> they are not fans of them. A majority of the true crime community has made it
> well known that they do not condone the actions of the people they blog about.
> I think the best thing to call us is a community because we're basically just a
> bunch of people who share the same interest in true crime.

David, another member, had similar thoughts on the subject. He explained:

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

Variations of these responses were repeated frequently. Those who were interested in the psychology, the facts, and the motivations as a way of trying to understand what happened were the TCC members who were resolute in their non-fandom group-identification. They made it clear that a fan is a person who condones the actions of the killer, and the TCC was not about that.

These explanations were interesting, yet confusing. This *stuff* that fans do—the fanfiction, videos, art, jokes, memes, etc.—were present on the blogs of those who were part of the TCC. Pictures of killers appear with flower crowns on their heads, there are pencil sketches, users write about being attracted to certain criminals and leave notes stating they wish they could comfort the killers before they go to trial. The fan art is often used to emphasize different aspects of a killer's crime, and frequently includes insider jokes about the cases, the victims, or killers themselves. Many times the art follows digital trends surrounding celebrities. The following images are a small sampling of such user-created art:

Fig. 9-12. Various images created by Tumblr user *klebitch* for use as cellphone wallpaper. Images of (left to right) Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Dylann Roof.

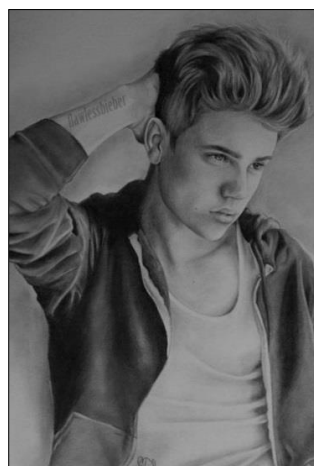Fig. 13. Drawing of Dylann Roof, by Tumblr user *truecrimekid*

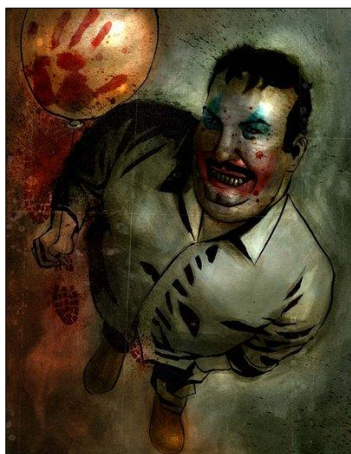Fig. 14. Drawing of Justin Beiber, by Tumblr user *flawlessbeiber*

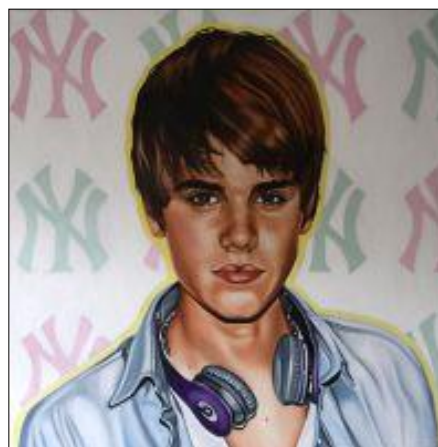Fig. 15. *The Murderers Gacy*, by ScabbedAngel (*DeviantArt.com*)

Fig. 16. *Justin Beiber painting*, by SaraSam89 (*DeviantArt.com*)

Each of the above images of killers were created by Tumblr users who self-identify as TCC members. The images of pop singer Justin Bieber are included to show the similarities between those who are in the TCC and those who are in more acceptable fandoms, such as the Beliebers.[10]

Fan created material does not end with art. Fans often write fanfiction (stories written by fans about their particular interest), and TCC members also engage in this type of writing. One member, Emily, not only writes fanfiction, but has won an award for a story she wrote involving Jeffrey Dahmer. All these actions and interactions, sharing multiple forms of user-created material, works against the idea that TCC members do not constitute a fandom. These are all practices found in various celebrity fandoms throughout the world—which is where the line exists between the identity of a True Crime Community member and the distinction of someone belonging to a Killer Fandom (KF). In actuality, while KF members are members of the TCC, not all members of the TCC are members of KFs. Thus the TCC-KF (True Crime Community-Killer Fandom) member participates in TCC practices, but also follows the actions of typical fandoms—creating and sharing the above noted folklore—while those who identify solely as a TCC member typically only discuss the cases without practicing the celebrity worship aspect of the KF.

It is understandable that someone in the True Crime Community does not want to be labeled as a fandom, as the term "fan" is in itself problematic. In trying to explain the connotation of the word, Jenkins (1992) explains that "If the term 'fan' was originally evoked in a somewhat playful fashion…it never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness"

(12). This perception of zealotry and obsession typically brings a certain type of person to mind: the crowds of teenage girls crying over the Beatles, Star Wars fans camping in the street for days to get tickets, or Trekkies at a convention. It also connotes a certain level of acceptance of the actions performed by the celebrity or character being worshipped. If the TCC was willing to take on the label "fandom," they would likely receive more criticism than they already do. Such criticism comes in many forms (some becoming very heated), but in the world of passive-aggressive online posts, it is typical to see disapproval show up in ways similar to the following Tumblr post:

Fig. 17. Post created by Tumblr user *uuentz*

The idea that TCC members (who are often labeled as a fandom by outsiders) do not love themselves or others is a common theme for those who are critical the group. At the time the above image was captured, 11,105 notes appeared along with the original post. This means more than 11,000 people liked and/or reblogged the post in the four month time period it had currently existed. Some reblogs of this post included new messages such as the one from *kyojinkelly*, who said: "Wait, serial killer fandom? Yikes!" This Tumblr user, without knowing anything about the members, automatically assumed that the TCC was comprised of the type of people typically thought of when the term "fandom" is used: people who love and support the person or thing for which they are a fan.

The "fandom" label is problematic for the True Crime Community. Media coverage often fixates on those who are fascinated by serial killers, calling them groupies, disturbed, deviants, or any number of insults. Even scholars such as Dégh (2001) and Ellis (2004) refer to those who would likely belong to the TCC as "sickos" or "psychos." Members of the TCC, however, do not take posts (like the above mentioned) lightly. One particular reblog demonstrates the typical response:

Fig. 18. Posted by Tumblr user *godsonlyplan* (in response to Fig. 17)

Bacon-Smith's (1992) work with Trekkies concluded that "An interest in the performer is almost always secondary to an interest in the character he portrays" (37), but the opposite can be said of the True Crime Community and Killer Fandoms. The interest in the general character of "killer" is often secondary to the importance of the personal character of "performer" (the killer himself). Yes, the cases are discussed, details of crime scenes and trials pass from person to person, but more often than not the emphasis

is placed on who the killers are (or were) in a normal environment. TCCers want to dig

into the childhood, the familial relationships, religion, schooling, sexuality, psychology,

and thoughts of the killer; they are searching for clues as to motivation. Those who are

solely members of the True Crime Community are interested in details to make sense of

the violence. Those who belong to the killer fandoms, on the other hand, search for this

same information to feel closer to the killer on a personal level, obsessing over the

minutiae of everyday life in the same manner a Belieber would obsess over Justin

Bieber's daily routine. While they do discuss motivation to some extent, more often the

focus is on physical attributes of the killers, along with various desires to either comfort

the killers or engage in sexual encounters. This is not to say that these fans condone the

crimes or are unaware of the emotional toll on the victims' families, but they are engaged

in a form of play.

Jennifer, a survey participant, best described the difference between strictly True

Crime Community members and killer fans as such:

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

This sentiment was echoed by Bailey, another survey participant and member of the

TCC, who made an interesting observation about age. As she explains, those who tend to

fall into the fandom categories are younger members usually under the age of 16. She

says:

> They tend to do things like write fan fiction about the perpetrators and sometimes
> actually base their fashion on murderers for example I've seen a few people

wearing the "natural selection" and "wrath" tops that Eric Harris and Dylan
Klebold wore on April the 20th. They also tend to glorify and condone murderers,
when most of us in the true crime community never disrespect the victims or say
we condone it. We always remember the loss of lives, and don't fantasize about
the murderers.

That there is a difference in how older members of the TCC act as compared to the

younger members of the TCC-KF coincides with Bird's (1994) observations about age

and telling legends. She explains that "Different people tell different stories, and there

seems to be some correspondence between age and themes" (195). She explains that there

is a connection between how people experience and tell stories based on their age and

experience. In a way, the connection between the sharing of stories (whether they are

fanfiction or personal legend) becomes autobiographical. Again, Bailey's observations

about the younger group members explains why they may act more along the lines of a

fandom. She says, "I've noticed that the most popular fandoms tend to be for school

shooters rather than serial killers as well, and i think this is because they tend to associate

maybe with some of their experiences." These experiences tend to be ones of otherness—

of being outcasts of society, misunderstood, and struggling to make sense of a world

where violence is played out on 24-hour news channels and media outlets.

Conclusion

Legends are more than scary stories; they serve a very specific purpose for those

who take part in such tellings, as "Legend tries to reconstruct reality in a believable

fashion. Legend narrative is linked to outer reality, opposed to the inner reality of

folktale" (Tangherlini 1990, 372). The TCC and killer fandoms use this legend-telling

experience about serial killers and mass murderers to make sense of an outer reality that

is confusing or terrifying. According to Ellis (2001), "legend telling is the communal

exploration of social boundarie*s*" (11). In other words, people telling the legend, along with those hearing the legend, come to an agreement about what is real, unreal, acceptable, or unacceptable within their community. "Legend, thus, acts as a symbolic representation of collective experiences and beliefs, expressing fears and desires associated with the common environmental and social factors affecting both the active and passive traditional bearers" (Tangherlini 1990, 381). The killers the TCC discuss reacted to the world in one of the most taboo ways: taking lives in order for the outer reality become non-existent for their victims. For members of the TCC, sharing the stories of these killers and their victims and participating in acts of virtual play provides a way to navigate through societal fears of death, gratuitous violence, and loss of innocence—especially in societies that may eschew discussion of such detailed information in public or private lives.

While some survey results and interview participants responded with what many people would consider disturbing answers, on the whole the TCC and different killer fandoms were full of people like Rose, who participated in the Jack the Ripper tour. In talking about how she feels about serial killers, Rose admitted:

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

Rose's response is a realization that communities or fandoms that surround violent crimes participate in a form of play, and that such play may not indicate how they would respond in a real-life situation. In many ways, these groups are using the taboo subject of murder to participate in the time-out-of-place environment that pilgrims (and many others) have utilized in order to break from everyday life so as to better deal with their own reality.

Yet, despite the fact that the True Crime Community has found an outlet to attempt to deal with these societal fears, they continue to be stigmatized by some who consider themselves to be a part of "normal" society. Henry Jenkins' (1992) states that a fan "still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire…whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality" (15). His analysis concludes that "The fan, whose cultural preferences and interpretive practices seem so antithetical to dominant aesthetic logic, must be represented as 'other,' must be held at a distance so that fannish taste does not pollute sanctioned culture" (19). Jenkins was speaking mainly about fans of television and films; how much more keenly are these feelings of otherness and exclusion—of being treated as person who might be contagious—felt by many in the TCC? As David points out:

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

His questions seem valid. In some way, *normal* people who come across the True Crime Community use them in order to feel more *normal*.

Dundes (1983) explains that "As there can be no self or concept of self without other, there can be no sense of group without some other group" (239). In essence, we are unique only because we classify ourselves as different; we "other" ourselves in order to understand and process who we are in relation to others. By understanding how we are different, it shapes how we see our position in the world(s) that surround us. The TCC gives others a way to reaffirm their own identity within the group of *normal people*,

which makes their own fascination with death and murder acceptable. They are able to enjoy watching crime documentaries, slasher movies, and crime shows on television—*Law & Order*, *NCIS*, *Blue Bloods*, *Bones*, *The Fall*…the list is exhausting—because at least they aren't "those sickos" who blog about real murder (ignoring the fact that many of these crime dramas are loosely based on real-life events). If there was no abnormal, normal could not exist.

Ellis (1996) explains that legends create a liminal moment when "an ambiguous situation produces stress until witnesses find a 'name' or a statement of it in acceptable cultural language. Once this is done, the act of narrating gives observers power over the event" (xiv). If we believe, as Brunvand (1981) points out, that legends serve as a way to deal with "many of the hopes, fears, anxieties and submerged desires of our time" (2), then the acts of legend-telling and going legend-tripping include coded messages within the context of the language and images that are shared. Legends provide a context in which these fears can be overcome in that the fear or anxiety is often given a name. In essence, legend-telling and legend-tripping allows participant to reshape and reinforce their reality within their world. Without a name, an unending liminality is created which becomes uncomfortable or upsetting in prolonged periods. The same holds true for crime-telling and crime-tripping. We often see the uncomfortable liminality happen when killers remain unnamed, and when details of crimes are hidden from the public. Yes, there is a possibility of copycat crimes (which are in essence violent, ostensive crime-trips), but if facts are missing, rumors tend to surface. Folkloric patterns of dissemination tell us that rumors and misinformation travel quickly when there is a lack of clarity and direction from a pivotal source. Those rumors can lead to public mistrust of officials and the

misidentification of suspects whose lives and careers are often ruined. Until naming

occurs, whether it is through the media, law enforcement, or among the folk, these fears

will continue to build. Lack of information may result in a more subversive type of

criminal who is whispered about in polite society, but never fully confronted. Perhaps it

is only when the villain has a name that we can begin to deal with the *act* of killing.

In many ways, the True Crime Community's enthusiastic virtual gathering and

sharing can be seen as disturbing. Though the possibility of future killers gaining

information about previous murders is a possibility, the number of active participants in

groups such as the TCC indicates that the larger society in which they live is not fulfilling

a need. The persistence of such folk groups over the course of history, found in their

various formats, suggests that their particular form of play, while not appealing or useful

to everyone, is a healthy way to deal with social fears and anxieties—some of which are

caused by the very murders they examine and discuss. It is a way for participants to take

control of what may be an uncontrollable outer reality in order for an inner reality to

make sense.

Future Research

Continued research and observation of groups such as the True Crime Community

and more specific killer fandoms in necessary. There is some concern that while stories

of killers can offer society some control over the unknown, "they may also serve as

patterns for psychotics, cunning criminals, or desperate communities for provoking the

same fears" (Ellis 2001, 221). The idea is that by telling these stories, by naming the

killers and showing their faces, we may actually be giving suggestions and instructions

for future killings, which might cause the same society fears to return. A movement has

been growing among some media outlets to keep the names of killers withheld from the

public in order to keep the acts from becoming contagious. This alarm is understandable,

given that "On average, mass killings involving firearms occur approximately every two

weeks in the US, while school shootings occur on average monthly" (Towers et al. 2015,

1). Research has shown that naming killers before they are caught frequently emboldens

the criminal and increases their desire to kill (Levin and Fox 2002). It is important, then,

to discuss the possibility that because the TCC and other similar groups recirculate this

information, it keeps the images fresh and helps foster an environment where a contagion

factor is increasing these incidents.

In a recent study conducted to test the theory that media reports and coverage of

homicides (including mass shootings) "subsequently increase the incidence of similar

incidents in the community…similar to the patterns seen in the spread of infectious

disease" (2), Sherry Towers et al. gathered information from around the United States in

reference to killings, number of victims per incident, cases of mental illness per state, and

suicide rates of the killers involved (whether by self-inflicted wounds or suicide by cop).

If their work discovered that media coverage induces a contagion effect, their study

would support the idea that news outlets should reduce the air time given to such stories.

It would also suggest that groups such as the True Crime Community—who spend hours

creating and consuming violent, graphic material—may be more likely to commit such

crimes, as the contagion factor would likely be higher. However, Towers et al. state:

> While our analysis was initially inspired by the hypothesis that mass media
> attention given to sensational violent events may promote ideation in vulnerable
> individuals, in practice what our analysis tests is whether or not temporal patterns
> in the data indicate evidence for contagion, by whatever means. In truth, and
> especially because so many perpetrators of these acts commit suicide, we likely

> may never know on a case-by-case basis who was inspired by similar prior acts, particularly since the ideation may have been subconscious. (9)

Not only were their results inconclusive as to the exact means of contagion, the results are likely to remain inconclusive. Unfortunately, "Studies into the prevention of such tragedies are also hampered by the freeze on federal funding for research into gun violence in the United States, put in place by Congress in 1997" (9). Despite a presidential memorandum issued by President Obama in 2013, the majority of Congressional members are continuing to block federal funding in order to resume studies previously started to research gun violence. As of the writing of this thesis, in December 2015, no significant changes have occurred.

It is possible the information readily shared and made available by groups such as the True Crime Community and fan groups associated with violent crimes does have a contagion effect on those who are already likely to commit such crimes. To say mass murder or serial killings are more prevalent now than in the past, however, is to deny that countries and cultures are often built, lost, and rebuilt on rocky foundations of massacre and violence. It is almost impossible to make claims of contagion based on media coverage alone without having specific, conclusive studies funded and reviewed. Some, in fact, argue that "As paradoxical as it may seem, exposing ourselves to representations of death, even violent death, helps alleviate our anxiety about being claimed by such violent death. Consuming images of…murder in carefully controlled settings…might provide an effective way of managing anxieties about death" (Schmid 2005, 18). Conflicting theories aside, it is imperative to know whether or not repeated exposure to such violent crimes is the underlying factor of contagion, and whether or not serial and mass murders are happening at a faster rate because of it.

It is likely that studies such as those done by Towers et al. will continue to show partial results if folk groups such as the TCC and serial/mass murder fandoms are left out of their research. If researchers recognize that "each individual culture places its own…conventions and norms in opposition to groups which do not conform" (Tangherlini 1990, 378), if they can focus beyond the "psycho" label of the TCC and others, it is possible that the future study of these groups in conjunction with research and analysis of gun violence can better serve as prevention for future killings instead of allowing the contagion to continue.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Dahmer was convicted of killing 15 individuals from 1978-1991; Charles Manson was convicted of killing nine individuals in 1969; Richard Ramirez was convicted of killing 13 individuals from 1984-1985 (among other charges); Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 individuals and wounded 24 before committing suicide at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado on April 20, 1999; Dennis Rader was convicted of killing 10 individuals between 1974-1991; Ed Gein confessed to killing two women (though only convicted of one murder) and exhumed multiple corpses to create items out of skin and body parts; John Wayne Gacy was convicted of killing 33 boys and men between 1972-1978; H.H. Holmes was convicted of killing four individuals (though nine victims were confirmed), but it is believed the true number of victims could be close to 200 (Hickey 2010; Holmes and Holmes 2001).

2. TJ Lane was convicted of killing three students at Chardon High School in Chardon, Ohio on Feb. 27, 2012 (Gast and Pearson 2013); as of the writing of this paper, Dylann Roof is scheduled for trial for killing nine individuals at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 (Ellis 2015); James E. Holmes was convicted of killing 12 individuals and injuring 70 others at the Century 16 theater in Aurora, Colorado on July 20, 2012 (O'Neill 2015).

3. Kwan Fai "Willie" Mak and Benjamin Ng were convicted of killing 13 individuals at the Wah Mee gambling club in Seattle, Washington on February 18, 1983 (Carter 2014); Kyle Aaron Huff killed six individuals in the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle, Washington on March 25, 2006 (Plaza 2015).

4. Thanatourism (also known as "dark tourism") is tourism that specifically relates to locations associated with death or great human suffering. These sites are often associated with war, slavery, and acts of mass casualty (Gibson 2008). Serial killer or mass murder thanatourism is a subset of the broader term.

5. Participant names have been changed for confidentiality reasons. In order to preserve context and texture, all participant remarks have been left in their original language and formatting.

6. At the time I joined Tumblr and located the TCC group, a reposting chain was in circulation that requested people to "Reblog if you're a member of the True Crime Community." I found many individual bloggers because of this particular post, through which I discovered TCC-specific tags such as: #TCC, #True Crime, #True Crime Community, as well as tags specific to certain killers or killings (Columbiners, Roofies, etc.).

7. Figures 2-4 were specifically chosen because of the "I do not condone" message stated on the page. There are plenty of homepages that do not feature this wording, but the general idea that members of the TCC do not support the actions of killers is prevalent not only on individual pages, but also on posts.

8. Usernames and statements from Tumblr are taken from public access areas. While pseudonyms are used to protect identities in personal correspondence between myself and participants, anything showing on public access areas is attributed to the accurate username.

9. "VoDkA" and "Reb" were Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' nicknames. Harris wore a Natural Selection t-shirt during at the time of the shootings The use of "v" in the username *natvral-selection* is a stylistic choice by the user.

10. A commonly used, emic term for a Justin Bieber fan.

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