From Art to Propaganda: The Shift in the Concept of the “Most Dead” in True Crime Literature

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From Art to Propaganda: The Shift in the Concept of the “Most Dead” in True Crime Literature

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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May 2023

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Abstract

This thesis studies the shift of the true crime genre from art to inescapable propaganda. This change is due, in part, to the politization of the genre by modern society. This includes the concept of the “most dead” seen within the true crime genre over the past several decades. The idea of the most dead is the belief that some victims of crimes are more or less dead depending on how marketable their demographic is. For instance, a blonde, Caucasian child would be considered the most dead while a woman of color in the sex work industry would be the least dead. This is because the latter isn’t considered a valuable member of society and is therefore not seen as marketable by investigators or true crime authors.

By underreporting and misrepresenting members of demographics that would be considered least dead, there has been a further spread of misinformation about these groups. However, in recent decades there has been a shift in the way society views these demographics, which has led to a change in how true crime writes about them. This shift has caused readers’ views on these groups to change. Which has led to the entire genre becoming politicized and making it now arguably more propaganda than art.

Further into my thesis, I describe why and how this has happened by analyzing different examples of true crime literature. I focus specifically on contemporary pieces of the murder subgenre that take place within North America. I place them on a scale from most politically correct to least, or “cancelable” or not. This allows me to compare the pieces and how they discuss the demographics seen within the least dead.
This Study by: Hannah McConkey

Entitled: From Art to Propaganda: The Shift in the Concept of the “Most Dead” in True Crime Literature

Has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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Chapter One

Introduction

*True Crime and the Concept of the Most Dead*

Since the time the genre of true crime was first conceptualized, it has both influenced and been affected by greater society. While true crime literature has historically served as a reflection of the violence seen in society as well society’s perception of that violence, people have always been affected by the way true crime reports on this. This is because the subject, tone, and language true crime authors use when writing about this violence influence how people understand it. Some argue that true crime literature can inadvertently skew how people view crime.

One critic who believes this is Sarah Hughes, a researcher who specializes in how certain topics affect peoples’ perceptions of society, as seen in her essay “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000”: “they analyzed it as a powerful delusion, or [termed it as a] ‘hyperreality,’ in which audiences confuse the media universe for real life” (Hughes 1), when discussing the Satanic Panic and what led to it becoming such a defining characteristic of the time period. The Satanic Panic was a period of time covering many decades when a large population of Americans believed there was a severe risk of being attacked by Satanists. Some other critics argue that, similarly to how tabloid media skewed peoples’ views on crime in the 1970s, true crime literature is similarly swaying public sentiment today. But whether true crime writing skewes the reader’s view positively or negatively depends on the particular case being examined, the author of the piece, the timing of its publication, and the way in which it was read.
For instance, some of the first popular writings of true crime were overly graphic in their descriptions of the crimes being discussed in order to both sell copies and spread awareness about the crime. While the graphic details in the genre obviously had an effect on readers, the way true crime describes this aspect of crime has evolved over the centuries as a reflection of society’s views on that violence. True crime, overall, tends to be very sensationalist, especially in the journalism field. But other forms of true crime literature have shown their ability to change their focus on what society is most concerned with at the time in order to report on it and spread information.

For example, in the 1960s through 1970s, many cults emerged and became a concern for many Americans. Consequently, many true crime pieces about famous cult cases were published at this time to either spread awareness or raise fear, depending on your opinion. Likewise, after World War II, many books about crimes committed by Nazis were written to go along with the strong anti-Nazi sentiment at the time. These upticks in works being written about such subjects had both positive and negative effects on readers for multiple reasons. These reasons will be explained further into the thesis. Additionally, though these examples of change in the genre indicate how true crime reflects society’s views on a subject, it also shows how true crime has been able to evolve over time.

While every literature genre is able to evolve in order to fit society’s views, true crime is more susceptible to change in order to reflect both the interests of society, and also its fears. The effects this had on readers could be both positive and negative. In some cases, it educated society on important topics while in others it only helped to feed into people’s paranoia. There are many schools of thought as to why true crime literature
changes and how it discusses crime or other popular subjects. Some argue that it is simply because true crime authors must stay current and be as sensationalist as possible in order to sell the most copies.

Anita Biressi in her book *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories* discusses how true crime journalism in particular has evolved to always stay popular with readers even if that means spreading fear and misinformation: “true crime narrates crime-events… and transmutes them into new kinds of stories, into mass-produced entertainment, into ‘leisure interest’ products” (Biressi 21). However, some think that true crime’s ability to change is a positive attribute and illustrates the genre’s ability to be reactive to public opinion.

Another opinion on why true crime changes its subject matter is evidenced by Jack Miles in his article “Imagining Mayhem: Fictional Violence vs. ‘True Crime’”. Miles argues that all nonfiction writing must be somewhat sensationalist to sell, and that true crime’s popularity doesn’t actually have much to do with the writing itself, but rather how society views crime at that moment. For instance, Miles points out that when crime rates rise, so do true crime sales even if readers are buying books about unrelated cases and crime types: “crime as a public topic and as private experience quite literally forces itself upon us. And yet, even knowing this, someone who observes… the torrent of violence-preoccupied popular literature” (Miles 57). Meaning that even though we all must deal with crime in one way or another, we can see it even in our literature. Which is another example of how true crime is simply a reflection of greater society.

One of the most important ways true crime literature reflects society is how it advocates for different groups of people. This advocacy is evident in the subject matter
and the individuals who are discussed by the genre. Contemporary true crime is well known for advocating for multiple different groups, ideas, and demographics. Some true crime pieces not only advocate for certain demographics, but also educate people about them and spread awareness into the lives and deaths of the members of such groups.

The thesis “True Crime as a Literature of Advocacy” by Leslie Rowen even argues that the true crime genre should be taken more seriously by critics because of the advocacy true crime accomplishes through its writing: “an alternative literary history of true crime which merits further investigation because of its focus on advocating for justice where the justice system failed” (Rowen 2). In Rowen’s opinion, true crime not only advocates, but also provides justice to victims who were let down by the justice system. Therefore, this genre is able to shine a light on a population which our society failed to protect. In such cases, true crime may be a least dead victim’s last chance at justice.

In addition to criticizing the motives of why true crime changes to reflect society, some critics take issue with the subject matter true crime literature discusses and the manner in which it’s written. Such critics argue that paying so much attention to the violence and gore of crime has a negative effect on society and only furthers to victimize victims. However, I would argue that it should be up to the reader to decide how they view each true crime piece, such as whether they feel it’s sensationalist or not and if that sensationalism serves a greater purpose. Additionally, the issue of categorizing all true crime as being sensationalist is an unfair overgeneralization. This problem has caused serious consequences for true crime considering it affects the way all readers view the genre and the way true crime advocates for victims.
Expectantly, there are examples where true crime does not in fact advocate for victims and is rather sensationalist for the sake of being sensational. Some critics claim that this happens when true crime writers don’t advocate to push for change, but rather to appear relevant. Though this is a legitimate concern, one could argue that every piece of true crime writing that advocates does so for somewhat selfish reasons. However, an author’s reasoning for advocating doesn’t take away from the fact that they are advocating for a person who might have otherwise been ignored by society. So, no matter their reasoning, they are supporting these victims by giving them their attention and teaching their readers something that they should care about. This questioning of true crime’s reasoning for the advocacy of certain demographics connects to how and why true crime discusses victims that fall under both the most and least dead categories.

By way of background, the concept of the most dead is a relatively new term to describe an attitude that has been conducted by some in law enforcement since crime investigations have been recorded. It’s the attitude or belief that some crimes should be taken more seriously and investigated more thoroughly than others based on how they valued the lives of the victim, and how marketable the investigation is. While most police officers would not admit to valuing one life more than another when investigating a crime, their actions and attitude often portray otherwise. While this is of course not true of every member of law enforcement, there are thousands of precincts around the world that disregard crimes against specific demographics. Some even going as far as labeling some murder victims as DNI, or “Do Not Investigate,” which is a clear indication of an investigator’s opinion that the victim is least dead.
Though this attitude has been a problem since organized police forces were first formed, the label of the most dead wasn’t coined until Orlando Patterson’s study “Slavery and Social Death” written in 1982. Though the study focuses mainly on how slavery caused some lives, and therefore deaths, to be labeled as more important than others, the concept has been interpreted over a broad scope of subject matters. Though the concept of the most dead is seen being used by law enforcement and true crime of any media, it’s mainly utilized by critics of these investigators, creators, and authors. Therefore, this idea conveys a generalized attitude, fairly or unfairly, of the justice system and media and is a concept rather than a technical term.

Moreover, the most dead demographics are often described as Caucasian, younger in age, Christian, educated, and from middle class or wealthy households. This of course leaves several other demographics whose cases aren’t taken quite as seriously but may still be investigated. This includes people who may not be wealthy but are still Caucasian, or people who may not be educated but are young. While police may still investigate crimes against the least dead, such investigations, if they do occur, are often devoid of resources, time, and commitment that are often seen in the investigations of the most dead.

The primary demographics that fall under the least dead category include sex workers, people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, people in the homeless population, and people with mental health problems. There is a historical precedent of police either ignoring or flat out refusing to acknowledge crimes against members of these demographics around the world. Unfortunately, this attitude occurs despite multiple
people asking for help, plentiful evidence, multiple victims, and sometimes even voluntary confessions from the perpetrators.

Werner Greve and Cathleen Kappes discuss these attitudes and belief systems of law heavily in their essay, “Victims of Crime: Towards a Psychological Perspective.” They explain that all victims of crimes can also be victimized by failed police work: “it must not be forgotten that victims of crime have rights. Amongst these are acknowledgment that they have been subject to an injustice and not simply misfortune” (Greve & Kappes 195). Further to this point, when victims fall under the label of least dead, that injustice just becomes more severe and evident because these victims often lack the personal resources and media attention given to the most dead. They also address how this lack of compassion from law enforcement can affect greater society. Not only does this failure to have empathy drastically affect the state of life of the people in these demographics, but it also heavily impacts how people view and understand these victims, the police, and crime as a whole.

If one were to agree with the concept of the least dead, they would be able to see how our government and legal system fail entire demographics of people. However, others may think this position is correct given the long-standing racism, homophobia, and uncompassionate belief systems being used in society as a whole. I would argue that how one views this concept is heavily influenced by one’s own views on society, their exposure to diverse populations and thoughts, as well as how their upbringing and social circles have influenced their thoughts on such topics. Writers of true crime are of course not immune to these effects, and therefore, their personal opinions and belief systems will in most cases be reflected in how they write about these demographics.
Besides their personal beliefs, any author’s goal is to have as many people as possible read their writing. Whether for monetary gain, their desire to spread information, or to simply share their opinion. Therefore, it’s a natural outcome that the true crime genre discuss topics of interest and represent society’s views on crime and crime victims. As a result, for most of true crime’s history, the genre has failed to accurately represent the crimes being perpetrated against people who fell under the least dead category such as people of color and the homeless. Some authors even go as far as to ignore those specific cases in order to focus on stories they thought readers would pay more attention to. Though this failure by true crime literature is seen around the globe, it’s predominantly evident in North American true crime writing.

In order to further explain the most dead idea, I will focus on examples from Mexico, the United States, and Canada. I chose this region because, when compared to other areas, North America is known for its serial killers and mass murderers. Though of course, misconceptions and under-investigating are problems universally. While serial killers and mass murderers are seen all around the world, there are many factors that have led to North America being known for its killers. This is evidenced by the World Population Review, which stated that the United States has the most documented cases of serial killers as of 2023.

Sandie Taylor, Marie Cahillane, and Lance Workman explain this phenomenon in their essay, “Adopting the Bottom-up Approach and Cluster Analysis on North American and European Male Serial Killers: A Follow-up Study.” They state that North America is known as an epicenter for serial killers because we’ve caught, researched, and glamorized so many of them. Therefore, focusing on this region allows for a rich area of focus due
the number of resources and cases. I also chose this geographic region because, as someone who lives in North America, I’ve had more personal exposure to North American based true crime literature and media coverage.

By focusing this discussion on North America, I will be able to discuss the topic from a more researched and data-rich perspective. For instance, my pre-existing experience on this topic informs my opinion that there are, of course, outliers in North American true crime literature where crimes against the least dead are thoroughly investigated and covered by the media. However, most North American true crime works are now viewed as problematic since they too ignore crimes being committed on the least dead or misrepresented entire groups of people. Fortunately, society is always changing and evolving, and North American true crime literature has changed for the better over time as it seeks to advocate for the least dead and expose failures in our legal system.

Additionally, this thesis will also discuss a specific subgenre within true crime literature. Specifically, true crime stories that cover murder rather than fraud or a different kind of crime, I decided to focus on this type of true crime writing because this subgenre in particular is the one that involves actual bodies of victims. Though crude, it’s these bodies and the way they’re investigated that are politicized within the genre.

I will also focus on more contemporary true crime literature. One reason is simply because all the cases whose books I’ll be comparing are contemporary and have taken place relatively recently, and the pieces themselves have been written between 1983-2020. Another reason is, though there have always been authors who point out police failings and advocate for victims, this is a much newer practice when looking at the overall history of true crime. The idea of speaking out and supporting demographics that
were once ignored or outright hated is especially new, and this shift is seen mostly in contemporary true crime. Because it’s so new and seen specifically in contemporary literature, I’ve chosen this specific timeframe to write on when discussing this topic.

As a result of these changes in contemporary true crime literature, previously ignored groups are now often covered by such works. This shift is largely due to the fact that, in most areas of North America, these groups are no longer seen as the dregs of society and are now seen as some of our most vulnerable that deserve our attention and advocacy. Current true crime works have even implemented a theme of calling out police for their lack of care in specific cases and have begun to condemn the idea of the most and least dead in law enforcement. An example of an author condemning law enforcement can be seen heavily in one of my primary texts, *On the Farm*, by Stevie Cameron. Though there will always be instances of true crime authors not correctly portraying these demographics, the genre overall has evolved to keep up with this change in society and is now known for actively advocating for such groups. Though, as stated previously, the reasoning behind why true crime often advocates for these demographics can be debated, one could argue that any accurate information and call for action is positive for society regardless of the reason for the advocacy.

There have always been instances of people who have spoken up about failings of law enforcement. However, modern callouts and mass protests, such as the Black Lives Matter protests, have caused critics of police to have a far more critical viewpoint on investigative practices. As a result, society at large has become more interested in how crimes are investigated and how victims are portrayed by the media. This in turn has caused true crime to reflect this change. When the genre fails to reflect this new
expectation, critics have been quick to call out such failures as part of the larger problem. Thankfully, most true crime writers have been surprisingly adamant about wanting reforms in law enforcement, even before these changes in society were apparent.

These reforms are one of the most glaring examples of true crime’s adaptation over the centuries it’s been written. For instance, in the past if true crime authors did write about a member of the least dead demographic, they often only did so because the crime was so gruesome and/or popular amongst their readers. Additionally, in the rare cases when authors did write about the least dead, they often did so in a way that was disrespectful and derogatory. Many true crime authors in modern times, however, often give least dead individuals as much attention as members of the most dead demographics and usually write about them in sensitive and respectful ways, which is a change that’s only been apparent in recent decades.

This change from being a part of the problem to becoming one of the strongest voices of support in only a few decades has also shown how much and how quickly both society and true crime literature can change. It also gives an interesting opportunity to compare and contrast the way true crime, and society as a whole, view specific demographics to illustrate how their opinions on these groups have evolved over time. I will discuss true crime books that cover crimes related to people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, the homeless population, people with mental health issues, and sex workers. I will also give examples of both positive and negative portrayals of the people in these demographics within contemporary true crime literature. I will explain how these examples reflect the evolution in society’s views on them and discuss how true crime literature was able to advance in order to become an advocate for these groups.
I will do so by comparing these portrayals to one another and explaining society’s expectations for them, given the type of writing and subject matter. I will also rate these portrayals on a scale from politically correct to incorrect and use the scale as a tool to show the differences and similarity in the propaganda seen in my primary texts. This exercise will allow me to make multiple points about each particular piece, including dissecting how they discuss members of the demographics at issue, analyzing how society views the subject matter, the treatment of the group by each author, and theorizing how true crime has become more propaganda rather than art. How I analyze each of these pieces will be based on my own opinions and thoughts on each work, which many could disagree with when reading the texts. My own position in this work is based mainly as a critic of the genre, but I can also give insights as an avid reader of true crime as well which will help to further my point. By doing so, I will be able to examine each piece and illustrate how readers, including me, can view it as propaganda while also explaining the effects this has on the genre as a critic.

One might ask if true crime becoming more propaganda than art is just a natural result of its subject matter becoming more politicized. If the victims of the crimes being discussed by the genre are politicized, such as the LGBTQ and sex worker communities, then the media discussing victims in these groups are inherently political. As a result, true crime cannot escape becoming politicized because its subject matter cannot escape either. It is this innate politicization which can take away from the genre’s artistic integrity.
Chapter Two

Discriminated Groups Discussed in True Crime Literature

Crime can, of course, affect anyone. However, historically, serial killers have primarily focused their crimes on discriminated or least dead groups, which is rarely on accident. Sometimes, the fact that killers focus on such groups is simply because that particular community has a large population of people in these demographics and sometimes it’s because it’s simply easy to get people, such as sex workers, to go with them to secluded locations. In some cases, it may be due to the perpetrator’s psychosis since they may see these groups as non-human and therefore think they are disposable.

Many killers also use focusing on the least dead to their advantage because they believe the police are less likely to investigate crimes against them. This allows true crime literature to view this idea in one of two ways: first, they can either see law enforcement’s failure to investigate such crimes as another injustice to these victims. Or, secondly, true crime can become part of the problem and not report on that crime accurately. As mentioned earlier, there has been a shift in recent decades that has caused true crime literature to not only report on these specific kinds of cases accurately, but true crime has also begun to advocate for these victims and the demographics they fall under. To illustrate this change, I will compare how different true crime books discuss these different groups of victims.

When comparing such texts, I will also place the works on a scale to determine their approval in a political standpoint. This is done in order to have a better understanding of society’s current thoughts on how each author handled the topic as well as examine whether the work is more propaganda than art. This practice also helps to differentiate how cancelable these stories are and explain how many readers view them as
either good or bad. Many true crime readers view the true crime genre in black-and-white terms, and while there’s some truth to this, using a scale can show a range within that black-and-white and better illustrate the degrees of propaganda within each piece rather than place it in yes or no categories.

Historically, in North America, people of color have been one of the most marginalized and victimized groups. In the United States specifically, there has been a historical conflict between people of color and law enforcement given the long practice of over policing these persons and under-investigating of crimes committed against them. This has caused most people of color to have a strong distrust of law enforcement, resulting in a division in these communities and the police. True crime has, in some instances, captured the effects this division has had on the victims of crime, their families and communities, and society overall.

One true crime book which shows both the law enforcement’s, society’s, and true crime’s discrimination against people of color is *Buried Secrets: A True Story of Serial Murder* (2019) by Edward Humes. This book details the case of Adolfo Constanzo, a Cuban murderer and drug runner. Constanzo practiced a type of religion called Santeria. Santeria is a form of Afro-Cuban voodooism practiced mainly in the Caribbean. While Santeria is sometimes practiced by traditional Haitian Catholics, Constanzo took his religious practices to the extreme by preforming black magic rituals which included animal, and later, human sacrifices.

Raised from an early age to practice this taboo branch of Santeria, Constanzo became involved in drug running once he reached adulthood. Drug traffickers would come to where he lived in Mexico and pay him to commit animal sacrifices in order to
protect their illegal drug runs. However, by the 1980s, Constanzo began to up his game and started committing human sacrifices as well. He is estimated to have killed around fifteen people at this time, though not much attention was paid to the disappearances of his victims until he was found to have killed an American college student who was visiting Mexico on break. Constanzo would evade custody for a short period of time until he was later killed in a shootout in Mexico City. Though many people went missing in the area of Mexico where Constanzo resided before his American victim disappeared, Mexican police were more convinced of the victims’ involvement with gang violence rather than being the victims of a serial killer.

However, once it was found that their disappearances were in fact all tied to him, they began to take the investigation seriously. It was noted that while searching the farm where the murders were committed, the Mexican police were very respectful of the religious items found there. This could be because they knew they were sacred to the people who practiced the Santeria religion and that there were in fact members of their community who practiced traditional Santeria.

When analyzing this book and the case as a whole, American law enforcement’s racist and Christian-biased thinking is clearly evident. The police from the U.S. who came to assist in the investigation were often very disrespectful towards the Santeria artifacts and would publicly state that Constanzo was a Satanist, though this was inaccurate. They also often only spoke about Constanzo’s one American victim rather than the multiple Mexican victims that Constanzo had also killed. Though this somewhat makes sense considering the American victim was the one victim they were investigating, their unwillingness to show the same concern for the other victims shows an apparent
bias. Humes points out these differences between Mexican and American investigators in his book, but he fails to comment on whether the American police were correct in their actions.

Regarding how the American police handled the religious artifacts found while investigating Constanza’s crimes, as well as how they discussed the Santeria religion, Humes mainly describes their actions and statements rather than saying such acts were wrong or right. It’s also worth noting that while Humes did discuss the cases of the first victims Constanzo had claimed, he spent far more time talking about the American victim and the investigation surrounding him. This inequality shows, much like how the American police managed the case, that Humes was much more interested in discussing the one white victim of the Constanzo murders rather than the multiple others. It is also illustrative of an example of apparent racism being exhibited by police, but the author simply mentioning it rather than discuss how this racism had a negative effect on the way the investigation was handled.

Humes’s failing of not pointing out the lack of understanding and compassion of the American police in this case can be seen multiple times throughout his book. One instance is when an investigator spoke about the area where the crimes had taken place, which was almost solely inhabited by aboriginal Mexicans: “…we referred to it as ‘occupied Mexico’” (Humes 278), meaning that they saw the people living there as little more than inhabitants of the location. When discussing working on the scene in this location, investigators were very open about their discomfort in being there. In this instance as well as multiple other examples of police from the U.S. showing disrespect
towards people of color are never commented on by Humes as being wrong or insensitive.

Due to Humes’s unwillingness to call out the police for their failings in this specific case, I’ve decided to place him on the Somewhat Politically Incorrect point on the scale. Because he failed to point out that how the American investigators handled the case was inappropriate and unprofessional. However, at the same time, Humes didn’t outwardly show any disrespect himself towards Santeria or any people of color, even though he still didn’t actively advocate for the group. In my opinion, his decision to stay quiet on the acts of the American police while still illustrating the respect shown by the Mexican investigators is why I chose to place him in this specific category.

An example of a book which describes crimes committed against people of color correctly and accurately is *The Little Old Lady Killer: The Sensationalized Crimes of Mexico’s First Female Serial Killer* (2019) by Susana Vargas Cervantes. This work centers around the multiple murders of elderly women that took place in Mexico City from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Juana Barraza, a retired professional wrestler, was eventually arrested for the crimes and sentenced to over one hundred-seventy years in prison. Barraza did in fact confess to the murder of one of the victims, her boss at the time, during interrogations. However, there is quite a bit of evidence that the police actually framed her for the deaths of fifteen other victims. This evidence includes the fact that Barraza didn’t look anything like the dozens of police sketches made by witnesses, and the fact that police claim she had a list of victims’ names on her person when she was arrested even though she could neither read or write.
Though this book does discuss race, it mainly addresses how the Hispanic community holds the elderly in high esteem and how this factor affected the case. By discussing race while examining other aspects of victims, this book illustrates that true crime authors can discuss race in true crime literature while also focusing on other demographics important to the case and victims. Additionally, this work also discusses the apparent sexism that took place during the initial investigation. For instance, police first thought that the assailant couldn’t be a woman despite what all the witnesses had said in their statements. This assumption was due to their belief that a woman wouldn’t be strong enough to murder someone, let alone multiple people.

Though the investigators apparently changed their mind about a woman’s ability to kill when they decided to charge Barraza with the crimes, it is important to remember that the author, Vargas Cervantes, thought it was crucial to bring up this example of sexism both in regard to whether or not Barraza was truly guilty and also to illustrate law enforcement’s prejudice. This book is important because it gives an excellent example of police changing their narrative to fit their unsubstantial conclusions, which can be seen again and again in serial killer investigations.

Law enforcement’s failings in Vargas Cervantes’s book include examples of police not wanting to properly do their job: “in 2014, seven thousand bones were found… Officials denied the discovery was evidence of a massacre, stating instead that most of the bones belonged to animals. However, [it is] claimed that the attorney general had admitted… [that] sixteen cadavers had been found of women” (Vargas Cervantes 190). This is just one of the many examples of the police investigating cases incorrectly and how that affected the Barraza case.
Due to Vargas Cervantes drawing attention to police failings in this case and many others, I’ve decided to put her in the Somewhat Politically Correct category of the scale. This decision is because she did an excellent job of calling out investigators over multiple discrepancies, explaining the culture of the demographic involved, and discussing what effect these details had on the case. And while she did an exemplary job explaining the difference between how police operate in Mexico versus in other countries, it could be argued that Vargas Cervantes could have done more to advocate for the group of people of color discussed in this case. This lack of advocacy is why I’ve chosen to place her on this point of the scale rather than the Not Cancelable category.

There is obviously a huge difference in how Humes and Vargas Cervantes discussed race in their two books. While Humes ignored its importance in the case and examples of racism seen in the investigation, Vargas Cervantes described how that race’s culture impacted the case. This difference could be attributed to the fact that Vargas Cervantes herself is Hispanic, and therefore would have a better understanding of how race played into the Barraza case. However, if Humes desired to accurately report on the impact race had on his case, he could have researched and portrayed the importance race had on the law enforcement’s investigation.

Another difference between the two books is how Hispanic true crime is written differently when compared to how authors from the U.S. depict true crime. For instance, Vargas Cervantes writes her book as a sad story that mourns the loss of some of the most important members of society: elderly women. It also tells the tragic story of Barraza, showing that whether she was guilty or not, she still deserved sympathy. In Humes’s book, however, he mainly sticks to reporting on the facts of the case. Though there is a
plot in Humes’s book, it goes into detail when describing the life of the one American victim: “…the same day Constanzo arrived back on the border, Mark Kilroy finished an exam in one of his junior-year pre-med classes” (250). Though short, this line is just the opening of Humes’s discussion of Kilroy’s life, whereas he didn’t give any detail into the lives of Constanzo’s other victims at all.

The culture between the two books also shows a distinct difference between the two societies being discussed. For example, in Hispanic culture, the elderly are held with much more reverence than in the U.S.’s society. That’s why the crimes depicted in Vargas Cervantes’s book had such an extreme effect on the community. Of course, in Humes’s book, the death of a young man with his life ahead of him was also a big blow. However, the difference in how he spoke about the one American victim in comparison to multiple Hispanic victims is obvious in its hypocrisy.

One other difference is how each society’s law enforcement affected the writing of the book. As stated previously, Humes discussed what most would label as the insensitivity of the American police in his story, though he never stated whether he agreed with it or not. But what makes this distinction is the fact that authors from the U.S. have much more leeway with their criticism of American officers. Though true crime authors only recently started to point out police failings in true crime literature, Hispanic authors are even newer to this treatment of law enforcement within the genre.

This difference could, however, be due to the fact that the awareness of serial killers is relatively new in Mexico. While the U.S. has had decades-worth of serial killer cases to investigate, report, and criticize, Barraza’s case was the very first official serial killer manhunt in Mexico’s recorded history. This fact would obviously affect how true
crime writers view law enforcement in Mexico since, officially, they have far fewer serial killer cases to discuss and write about within their society.

True crime literature also fails to accurately represent the sex worker industry. Until very recently, society has tended to look down on members of the sex work industry, despite the fact that they are some of our most at-risk members of society. Therefore, in many cases, crimes committed against sex workers are often ignored regardless of how severe, and many sex workers are too frightened to go to police out of fear of being arrested themselves. Serial killers have targeted sex workers for centuries because they know they can commit crimes against this group easily. Additionally, given the number of killers who have targeted sex workers, true crime authors have multiple opportunities of cases to write about. However, whether or not they show support for sex workers in their writing seemingly depends on the author.

The book *Dead Ends: The Pursuit, Conviction, and Execution of Serial Killer Aileen Wuornos* (1992) by Joseph Reynolds is an example of a true crime author who looks unfavorably on the sex work demographic and, through his writing, contributes to the problem. Reynolds’s book is about the famous hitchhiking serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who is believed to have killed seven men while working as a sex worker in the late 1980’s. Her crimes shocked the nation for one reason; she was a woman. Many people were baffled that a woman not only could, but would, want to commit serial murder.

After Wuornos’s arrest, the media and police scrambled to find a reason for how a woman could commit such heinous acts. Their consensus: she was a “prostitute.” After they decided that this was the only plausible explanation, a narrative that any
promiscuous woman, sex worker or not, was dangerous and could commit horrible acts of violence was spread. Unfortunately, Reynolds’s work only served to further spread falsities about the sex work industry, and arguably make life even more difficult for people in this demographic.

Regrettably, Reynolds fell right into the pattern of blaming Wuornos’s crimes on her occupation rather than focusing on the more-likely reasons why Wuornos would commit serial murder. Such as her deplorable childhood and struggle to make ends meet. Therefore, instead of considering the fact that she shared the same mental and abusive history of multiple other male serial killers, he instead seemed to blame her crimes on the fact that she was a sex worker, which is evident: “…sometimes I do things. You know, like, I mean as a professional call girl” (Reynolds 72). The context of this quote being Reynolds’s imagined conversation between Wuornos and a victim asking her why she was robbing him. Reynolds doing this not only prevented readers from having a full understanding of the factors that can contribute to a person to becoming a serial killer, but it also helped to further the spread of harmful stereotypes surrounding sex workers and further devaluing their lives.

The idea that the statement quoted above was imagined by the author shows another harmful way that true crime authors can further spread misinformation. Considering that Wuornos killed the man she was speaking to in the quote mentioned, and the fact that Wuornos herself never stated exactly what it was she said to each of her victims, this quote was imagined by Reynolds when he tried to think of what exactly she might have said to these men she killed. By him coming up with this quote, Reynolds is quite literally putting words in Wuornos’s mouth, and by doing so, he’s further spreading
negative stigma about the sex work industry. Many true crime authors have to come up with dialogue in order to piece together a plot for their story, but when they use this technique to spread misinformation, it only further hurts the least dead demographics.

Reynolds blaming Wuornos’s occupation as the cause for her crimes is evident throughout his book. While there are many examples of investigators and members of the press judging Wuornos for her work in the sex work industry, Reynolds himself seems to agree with society’s harsh judgements of sex work. This is evident in the example where he focused on Wuornos’s statement, “my only premeditation was to go out and make another dollar. It wasn’t in my mind to go out and kill a guy” (9). Though this quote does say a lot about Wuornos’s place in life at the time, Reynolds doesn’t give context to her lifestyle in regard to her poor mental health or abusive childhood. Reynolds seems to view her openness about being a sex worker as easy and simple way to sum up the reasons for her being a serial killer.

I’ve chosen to place Reynolds’s piece on the Cancelable end of the scale for multiple reasons. First, the issue that Reynolds seems to be shaming Wuornos for her occupation and him failing to point out when police did the same. Moreover, Reynolds didn’t advocate for any kind of demographic at all throughout the story. These aspects put the book to the farthest end of the scale on the most negative side. This placement is because Reynolds becomes part of the problem by pushing stigma against the sex worker demographic while discussing this case.

Fortunately, On the Farm: Robert William Pickton and the Tragic Story of Vancouver’s Missing Women (2010) by Stevie Cameron didn’t follow this pattern when discussing the case of Richard Pickton, the Pig Farm Killer. Pickton was arrested in 2002
after spending decades murdering local sex workers and disposing of their bodies on his expansive farm. It was later discovered that Pickton had killed around fifty women, though the number could possibly be much higher. However, despite the large number of victims, law enforcement didn’t take the investigation or trial seriously, which shows how harmful discrimination and the idea of the least dead can be.

In the Pickton case, police famously refused to investigate the disappearances of women in the area despite pleadings from their families, friends, as well as the community. This injustice occurred even as the numbers of the missing went into the double digits, then later, the dozens. Law enforcement even refused to investigate the claims of multiple women who had escaped Pickton’s murder attempts, including a woman who was almost gutted by him but was able to get away.

The judicial system would also later fail these women as prosecutors refused to try Pickton for the fifty-or-so murders he was sure to have committed. This is because they decided they only needed to obtain justice for only six victims since that was sufficient enough to put Pickton behind bars for life. This decision, of course, caused many relatives and friends to not receive justice for their fallen loved ones.

Despite the police’s lack of care and attention to these missing women, the community was desperate to put an end to the violence they knew was occurring in the Port Coquitlam area of Canada. Families and friends searched tirelessly for their missing loved ones, despite the police saying the victims must have just decided to leave without telling anyone. Eventually, local social workers also joined in the search and worked to convince law enforcement to investigate. When they refused, social workers eventually went to the local press who wrote several articles about the missing women and the
police’s lack of attention. Them going to the press was incredibly helpful because it kept the community’s focus on the cases and showed that these women’s lives did have value.

Cameron’s own writing on this case also helped to bring attention and value to the lives of Pickton’s victims. It not only illustrated that these women were valued and loved members of their community, but it also advocated for them and spoke out against the injustice by law enforcement and the legal system. Cameron spent a large portion of the book speaking out against the way law enforcement handled the treatment of Pickton’s victims and how it’s an issue still seen around the globe when some police investigate crimes against sex workers. Cameron’s writing an excellent example of true crime literature not only speaking out against injustice suffered by sex workers, but also advocating for change: “I was told it wasn’t a serial killer, that she just disappeared and started a new life somewhere” (Cameron 341), which highlights how the police disregarded these cases of missing women.

Examples of Cameron advocating for the sex worker demographic is seen throughout her book. One way she did this was by providing details about each victim and illustrating how their life had meaning: “Sereena was in her mid-teens [when] they felt they couldn’t cope with her any longer, she was moved into a group home. Sereena never held this against them; she phoned [her foster parents] the Draayersesthe Draayers every day for the rest of her life” (344). Cameron also took many opportunities to call out the police for their failure to care about the victims in the case.

Cameron’s strong advocacy for this group as well as her harsh judgement of the investigators on this case, places her on the opposite side of the scale from Reynolds in the Not Cancelable category. I decided to put her on this point of the scale because
Cameron uses her platform to do all she can to advocate for and humanize this demographic. Her work makes it undeniable that she did as much as she could to help the sex worker group when discussing this specific case.

Considering that the sex work demographic is still one of the most ignored and disrespected groups in North America despite the economic and social reasons people choose the profession, how true crime discusses this demographic is very important. This lack of understanding the U.S. has regarding sex work is why it’s incredibly important for true crime literature advocate for them and give readers a glimpse into their hardships when discussing sex work. So, when Reynolds not only didn’t advocate to support this demographic, but actively spoke down about the demographic and spread false information, he not only further damaged society’s perception of the demographic, but he also made it easier for law enforcement to continue to ignore crimes committed against sex workers in the future. As seen in the Pickton case, until authors start advocating for least dead demographics, little change in perception and attitude towards those groups will occur. Cameron’s book is an excellent example of how the decision of an author to advocate for victims within the least dead in their writing can be a part of the change in how society and its systems treat these victims.

Cameron’s book also illustrates how if it weren’t for the victim’s families and friends, and later, the community speaking out for justice, the police may never have caught Pickton, and the killings would have continued. This overwhelming call for justice shows that society’s thinking toward sex workers has changed because society was beginning to think that people who work in the sex work industry are human beings who
deserve rights. And by further spreading this message, Cameron both advocated for this demographic and illustrated how society’s views can change toward the least dead.

When comparing these two books, it’s important to consider the similarities in Canada’s and the U.S.’s culture. Unlike the differences between Humes and Vargas Cervantes’s books, the U.S. and Canada true crime writers tend to be similar when it comes to how they write about crime and how police investigate crime. For example, police often under-investigate crimes against sex workers in both Canada and the U.S. This inequality happens especially in rural areas, such as Port Coquitlam where Pickton was active. This of course affects how true crime literature discusses law enforcement’s attitudes and behaviors, but thankfully the growing trend of criticizing police failings is becoming more and more accepted in both countries, as seen in Cameron’s book.

Similar to sex workers, another demographic that has experienced a lack of support from the true crime genre is the LGBTQ community. Throughout recent history, there has been a stigma against the LGBTQ community, which includes hate and misunderstanding from law enforcement. Because of this stigma, police are often reluctant to investigate crimes committed against this community and they, along with many in the media and in true crime literature, often misrepresent the demographic when cases do emerge and become public.

One book that illustrates the discrimination seen in the genre against the LGBTQ community is *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* (2020) by Brian Masters. This book covers the case of infamous killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Dahmer killed seventeen men over several decades, but what the media has mainly focused on during the investigation of his crimes and the resulting trial was the fact that Dahmer, and a majority of his victims, were
homosexual. While the brutality of his crimes was not overshadowed by this fact, Dahmer and so many of his victims being queer was considered a large sticking point for anyone covering the case, which is unfortunate given how much attention was given to a rather insignificant aspect of the case.

While today a case similar to this would more likely be used as an example as to why people in the LGBTQ demographic need to be supported and have crimes against them taken seriously, that wasn’t the case at the time of Dahmer’s investigation. Instead, their being queer was seen as another disgusting aspect of the crime and was often suggested as a valid reason why the police didn’t have a responsibility for protecting people in this least dead demographic. An instance of this homophobia can be seen in some of the letters that were written to the FBI shortly after Dahmer’s arrest. Many were homophobic, but one in particular read, “it is high time that we wake up to the realities of the homosexual behavior and its dangers” (Wakefield). This was in reference to many believing all gay men acted similarly to Dahmer, and therefore police should protect society from the LGBTQ community rather than protect the community itself (according to Lily Wakefield’s article Jeffrey Dahmer FBI Files Reveal Rampant Homophobia that Followed Investigation.)

Though Masters doesn’t appear to feel this negatively toward Dahmer’s victims in his writing, he didn’t do much to advocate for their rights or show sympathy for the injustice they faced. Yes, Masters did point out how horribly the Milwaukee police handled their investigation of Dahmer. And yes, Masters did discuss the fact that many of Dahmer’s victims were people of color and how that meant their loved ones dealt with a lot of racism postmortem by the media and law enforcement. But unfortunately, Masters
did not extend this mindset to the queer aspect of the case. Masters’s own apparent discomfort in discussing the fact that so many people involved in this case were queer, came through very clearly in his book.

Masters’s failure to discuss how most of Dahmer’s victims and himself being queer influenced the crimes and the investigation is a notable omission. Instead, Masters framed it as if his sexuality was just one of the many mental illnesses Dahmer had that triggered him to murder. This opinion, of course, only helped to spread stigma against the LGBTQ demographic and misrepresent the case as a whole despite Masters’s efforts to advocate for the people of color involved in the case.

In Masters’s work, he called out several examples of how the investigators on the case were openly racist, but he did not do the same for their displays of homophobia such as when officers famously said they had to bathe after entering Dahmer’s apartment when returning one of his victims to him. This refers to the fact that they knew Dahmer was gay and thought the teenager with him was his boyfriend. One instance of Masters missing an opportunity to address the role of Dahmer’s sexuality: “‘I don’t know why it started. I don’t have any definite answers on that myself’” (Masters 53). Though this is a quote from Dahmer himself, the context in which Masters phrases it references his mental illnesses and homosexuality, which shows how he lumped these two aspects of Dahmer’s life together as one in the same.

For the reasons stated above, I’ve decided to categorize this book on the Somewhat Politically Incorrect point of the scale. I gave his book this rating because Masters was unable to draw attention to the homophobia exhibited by law enforcement and even showed signs of being uncomfortable with the queer aspect of this story himself
through his failure to address it meaningfully. Masters did, however, point out examples of when investigators were racist towards the victims, which shows how he advocated for the people of color in this case. That being said, Masters’s attention to one least dead demographic but not another causes me to rate his work in this way.

In contrast, *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original Psycho* (1989) by Harold Schechter focuses a portion of his book on its killer, Ed Gein, being queer as well as the impact his gender identity had on his crimes. *Deviant* tells the story of Gein, who killed two people, and famously dug up graves on a regular basis in order to conduct experiments on the deceased’s’ bodies. Some of these experiments involved making him appear as a woman, which he would often do in the privacy of his farmhouse. This fact, along with the psychological testing Gein went through after being caught, causes many people to hypothesize that Gein was in fact transgender, which if true, would place him in the LGBTQ demographic.

Though there is, of course, no excuse for the horrific crimes Gein committed, Schechter points out that him being transgender is an entirely separate aspect of Gein’s personality that bled over into the gruesome acts he committed. Schechter argued in his book that if Gein had been raised in a stable household and the multiple mental illnesses he suffered from had either been treated or not present, Gein would most likely have just lived his life as a closeted transwoman. Schechter highlights these depressing elements in Gein’s life by saying that his upbringing and mental illnesses shouldn’t be overlooked by people who want to truly understand Gein and his psychology. He also notes how the police and the media failed to address these aspects of Gein in a way which was not exactly professional.
It's interesting to note that while the public was, of course, horrified by the details of Gein’s crimes as they were disclosed following his arrest, they were equally shocked to learn that Gein wanted to be a woman. Because of the time and location, this reaction shouldn’t be too much of a surprise, though it still illustrates how just his being queer, in addition to his horrendous crimes, strongly influenced how people viewed him. For example, many people in the media and law enforcement involved with the case made comments that alluded to the fact that Gein would not have committed these crimes if he weren’t queer, or that his being queer was just another one of the many mental illnesses he suffered from. They also seemed to perpetuate the idea that his being queer was just as bad as the horrible crimes he had committed.

Schechter highlighted this prejudice by law enforcement and the public throughout his book and made the point that Gein being queer should have been the one element of the case that was not negative since there’s nothing wrong with being transgender. He advocated that the LGBTQ community should be supported and Gein’s crimes do not represent the community in any way. He also spoke out against the way many people discussed the case while it was being investigated and tried, and how Gein’s case is discussed in other true crime writing. By advocating for the LGBTQ community in this way and by discussing Gein’s transgenderism in a biographical manner rather than in a psychological sense, Schechter proves that the true crime genre can talk about and support this least dead demographic in different ways.

Schechter’s support of the LGBTQ community is demonstrated multiple times throughout his book. He writes: “there was something distinctly… womanish about the shy little bachelor” (Schechter 38), which, when taken in Schechter’s context, in no way
suggests that Gein’s femininity is something negative, but rather is another part of Gein’s personality. When asked to contribute to a fund for Gein’s trial, one man is quoted as saying, “I’ll contribute a thirty-aught-six” (226), meaning he’d rather kill Gein than help him considering a thirty-aught-six is a type of bullet. The context of this quote is in relation to both Gein’s crimes and it recently being made public that Gein had wanted to be a woman. Schechter points out that, though the man being quoted had every right to have such a strong reaction, this would be considered inappropriate by today’s standards.

Due to Schechter’s strong sense that Gein should not have been judged for being transgender and his advocacy of the LGBTQ community, I’ve ranked this book in the Not Cancelable category of the scale. I chose to rate this piece as non-cancelable because Schechter does nothing that could be considered cancelable throughout his entire discussion on Gein’s case. There are even examples of Schechter pointing out people who were cancelable within the story. This, along with his active advocacy for the LGBTQ community, causes me to conclude this book could not be considered cancelable for any reason at all.

Most would argue that it’s always important to advocate for a marginalized person or group no matter the context or setting. Even though Gein committed some of the most disgusting crimes in recent history, it’s notable that his being transgender is separated by Schechter from those crimes and the author uses this opportunity to instead speak out in favor of the LGBTQ community. This is an example of how true crime authors can use their platform to spread information and advocate for the least dead. Though this advocacy can sometimes be hard to accomplish within the true crime genre, some authors are finding that when they write about a marginalized demographic, they
have a responsibility to also advocate for the least dead rather than convey that they’re part of the problem.

This is the main difference seen between Schechter’s book and Masters’s. Schechter used the opportunity to speak out in support of the LGBTQ community simply because he had a platform to do so. Masters, however, did not and instead suggested that he himself saw Dahmer being queer as very negative. This distinction between the two works shows a difference between an ally and someone who is not, and how that can be seen in true crime writing.

Another least dead demographic that is starting to be more consistently discussed in true crime writing is those who suffer from mental illness. According to our understanding of killers’ psychology, every serial killer has suffered from some kind of mental illness and usually has more than one. Additionally, in many cases survivors of crime or families of victims end up suffering from some sort of PTSD as a result of the crime. Because of this, true crime literature often addresses mental health, even if the writer doesn’t openly discuss it in detail. Despite true crime’s improvement in addressing mental illness, some true crime writers don’t discuss the topic accurately or appropriately.

One such author is Genoveva Ortiz who wrote the book *The Vampire of Sacramento: The True Story of Richard Chase The Blood-Thirsty Cannibal* (2020). It tells the story of Richard Chase, a young man who suffered from debilitating schizophrenia and would later go on a murder spree, claiming the lives of six people. Chase was also known for cannibalizing his victims, in particular drinking their blood, which mental health professionals involved in his case believed was a direct symptom of his schizophrenia. Chase had had access to mental health treatment multiple times in his
life before committing these crimes, but each time he or his parents would end up refusing help. He and his parents refused mental health treatment for Chase because of the stigma associated with mental illness at the time. Unfortunately, pieces written on Chase himself would later only serve to further spread this negative stigma.

Schizophrenia was barely understood at the time of Chase’s crimes in the 1970s, and unfortunately, this lack of understanding would cause Chase’s mental illnesses to worsen and later, as most believe, drive him to such commit terrible crimes. Though he had been hospitalized and medicated multiple times for mental illness throughout his life, Chase’s parents were very traditional in their thinking and insisted that he deal with his problems on his own and in private. This opinion did nothing to help Chase, and unfortunately, the lack of understanding didn’t end there. After his arrest, the media began writing about his mental illness, which led to them spreading misinformation about schizophrenia and the effects of the illness on Chase.

Many within the media stated that Chase was so ill, there was nothing anyone could do to treat him or anyone like him. They also implied that he didn’t deserve to be helped. Though this lack of mental health treatment is what most people involved with his case believe caused Chase to reach such a demented mental state in the first place. Unfortunately, the commentary exhibited by the media carried over into the trial and Chase was sent to San Quentin State Prison instead of a mental health facility where he could have been given the support he needed. All of this only served to further society’s misunderstanding and prejudice against mental illnesses. The irony being that this lack of understanding and stigma is what caused these crimes to occur in the first place.
Ortiz, though not pushing the negative stigma about this demographic, did nothing to educate people on mental illnesses in her book. Though she did mention that Chase was diagnosed with schizophrenia and that he had been taken off of his medication by his parents, she glossed over the topic when covering his background. When covering the crimes themselves, Ortiz also failed to discuss how his mental illnesses affected him and led to him committing these crimes besides stating that they must have been somewhat influenced by his illnesses.

The failure of Ortiz to more thoroughly and accurately discuss Chase’s mental illnesses, removed any opportunity to help readers understand Chase or his psychology, and it also missed the chance to educate people on why receiving treatment for mental illness is so important. One could argue that when a true crime writer discusses a subject such as mental illness and they fail to take advantage of their platform to advocate for the support of people who suffer from it, their silence only helps to push misunderstanding and stigma.

The stigma surrounding mental health during the time of Chase’s case is discussed multiple times throughout Ortiz’s book. Including one example of how his mother would handle his mental health treatment, seen here: “she would deal with his problems at home” (Ortiz 43), referring to his mother pulling him out of a psychiatric ward because she didn’t believe he was sick enough to warrant being admitted to in-patient treatment. There are multiple other instances of Chase and his parents not taking his mental illnesses seriously, which would later lead to the crimes he committed. While Ortiz did include these examples in her work, she neglected to take it any further, such as
how harmful the failure to take his illness seriously was to the victims as well as Chase himself.

I chose to place this book on the Somewhat Politically Incorrect point on the scale. This is due to the fact that, though Ortiz didn’t promote any stigma or misinformation about mental illness, she didn’t take the opportunity to point out the impact of people diminishing the effects his mental illnesses had on his mental state and his crimes themselves. She also did not use the opportunity to advocate for the mentally ill demographic. Therefore, I categorized this book as somewhat incorrect rather than totally cancelable.

Flora Schreiber’s book, *The Shoemaker: The Anatomy of a Psychotic* (1983), does the exact opposite of Ortiz by not only highlighting the importance of receiving treatment for mental illness, but also advocating for more support for people who suffer from mental illnesses. Her book is about the killer Joseph Kallinger who, like Chase, also suffered from schizophrenia which caused him to have hyper-realistic hallucinations that drove him to kill three people. Unlike Chase, however, Kallinger rarely had the opportunity to receive help for his mental illnesses throughout his life.

The one instance where Kallinger was offered mental health treatment was when he was ordered to attend court-mandated therapy. However, he was only required to attend three sessions and was therefore not diagnosed with any disorder. In contrast to this unhelpful access to mental health treatment, Kallinger was sentenced to a psychiatric hospital following his trial, where he did receive the treatment he desperately needed in the form of a diagnosis and medication. It was at this time he would meet Schreiber.
Schreiber’s main focus in her book was to explain how Kallinger’s mental illnesses caused him to commit his crimes. She explained how Kallinger’s schizophrenia and the abuse he suffered during his childhood had caused him to commit these crimes. Additionally, Schreiber pointed out instances where the state had failed to intervene and provide him with treatment at several points in his childhood and adulthood. While doing so, she also spoke frequently about how important mental health is and how there needs to be a better understanding of mental illness and the benefits of mental health treatment in our society.

Schreiber did an excellent job of trying to disregard stigma and misconceptions of mental illness, allowing readers to have a better understanding of mental health as a whole: “an insanity plea is generally regarded as a ‘cop-out’” (Schreiber 356), which Schreiber argued against heavily. She also tried to explain Kallinger’s mental health issues throughout the book so that readers could have better insight into what drove him to commit these crimes. Schreiber’s dismantling of mental health stigma and effort to spread more information on the topic are just some of the ways she advocated for this least dead demographic in her book.

Due to her advocacy, I’ve categorized Schreiber’s piece as Not Cancelable on the scale. This choice was made because Schreiber spent so much of the book spreading factual information about mental health and pointing out instances of when stigma and misunderstandings of it were evidenced in this specific case. She also appeared to advocate for this demographic so that her readers could have a better understanding of mental illness. One could argue that the level of advocacy shown by Schreiber gives no reason to cancel this piece for any reason.
Therefore, Schreiber’s piece is a great example of an author advocating for the support and understanding of a marginalized group, even if it is a little awkward given the context. Yes, Kallinger committed terrible crimes, but there’s no denying that direct intervention and mental health treatment would have both helped him personally and would have likely prevented him from committing these crimes. Schreiber does a notable job of explaining the importance of proper mental health diagnosis and treatment in her book as well as spreading awareness on how this help for mental illness can prevent crimes from occurring. Comparing Schreiber’s work to Ortiz’s causes Ortiz’s failings to be more apparent and potentially harmful, since Ortiz simply spread information about what terrible things mentally ill people can do rather than educating readers on the importance of proper mental health treatment and how advocating for this assistance can help reduce crime.

The demographic of people who are homeless are also often forgotten or under appreciated by the true crime genre. Members of the homeless population are especially vulnerable, and similar to sex workers, they’re often too frightened to report crimes against them to the police for fear of drawing attention to themselves or their situation. There are instances, however, where police use the vulnerable state of the homeless population to help themselves in their investigations.

One example of this is seen in the Cleveland Torso Murders case. In the 1930s, body parts of multiple murder victims washed up in the Kingsbury Run area of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio. While the total body count is unknown, investigators believe there were at least twelve victims. Despite investigators interrogating thousands of potential perpetrators, no one was ever sentenced for the
crimes. This was in spite of the fact that investigators in the case focused their attentions on a large group of suspects.

Unfortunately, this group of suspects consisted primarily of the homeless population of Cleveland, according to the book *In the Wake of The Butcher: Cleveland’s Torso Murders* (2001) written by James Jessen Badal. As explained in this work, the murders took place during the Great Depression, which had left many residents of Cleveland homeless. Investigators immediately thought the killer must be one of these individuals and spent years harassing and abusing this particular population of Cleveland rather than putting their effort into finding the actual killer. The lead investigator, Eliot Ness, even went so far as bulldozing an entire homeless camp where many of these people lived in an attempt to find the killer.

Seemingly running out of patience, investigators eventually arrested a man named Frank Dolezal for the murders though he was later killed in jail before standing in trial. His death was classified as a suicide despite that impossibility. Because of their focus on the those who were homeless in the area, investigators failed to follow up on forensic reports that suggested the killer was most likely a doctor. A man named Francis E. Sweeney was brought in for questioning by investigators, though he was never charged for the murders despite being a medical doctor and having multiple people allege that he’d attempted to drug them. Badal described all these discrepancies in his book, however, there are still some issues with how he addressed the demographic of people who are homeless in his work.

Similarly to how Ortiz wrote about the disgrace of being mentally ill without advocating for them in her piece, Badal wrote with the same approach regarding the
homeless demographic. Badal’s lack of care for this least dead group poses a problem for many reasons. First, the fact that the prejudice shown by law enforcement toward the homeless plays a significant role in this case and discussing it further would have helped readers have a better understanding of homelessness and the misinformation surrounding that group, especially during the Great Depression. Additionally, as stated previously, Badal could have used this platform to advocate for this group and show how investigator’s refusal to focus on suspects other than those who are homeless may have prevented them from solving the case.

There were many points throughout the book that Badal could have used as an opportunity to advocate for this demographic: “Ness led the raiders from shack to shack, rousing the startled, angry inhabitants with violent banging” (Badal 153), which is a reference to one of the many raids the lead investigator held in different homeless camps in and around Cleveland. This is just one of the many examples seen throughout the story where Badal could have pointed out how wrong this is. Unfortunately, he didn’t choose to do this, though it could have helped advocate for this specific group.

Considering Badal chose not to use his platform to advocate for the homeless population, I’ve decided to categorize this book as Somewhat Politically Incorrect. I chose this rating because I think Badal could have done more to advocate for this demographic. Though he did not gloss over the investigators’s targeting of the homeless population and did not make excuses for investigators, he failed to comment on how wrong this was and the impact it had on the case. However, Badal didn’t show any prejudice himself towards anyone who was homeless mentioned in his piece, so I don’t feel like he reached the level of cancelable.
The author Mike Cox, however, did a fantastic job of advocating for the homeless demographic. In his book, *The Confessions of Henry Lee Lucas* (1991), Cox made a point of advocating for the homeless population. He did this by pointing out the prejudice against those who are homeless that investigators exhibited when working on Lucas’s case, even discussing how Lucas being homeless affected the case, as well as talking about how this specific demographic deserves better treatment from police. It’s very commendable that Cox chose to advocate for the homeless population when discussing this case specifically because it’s such a famous example of police taking advantage of Lucas’s homeless status.

Although Lucas likely only killed three people, he confessed to killing hundreds with his partner, Ottis Toole. He made these confessions because investigators used his vulnerability as a homeless drifter to close cold cases all over the country just so they wouldn’t have to deal with finding the actual perpetrators. It allowed them to quickly and easily close a number of open cases, despite there being little or no evidence that Lucas had even been in the area of the murders. Cox discussed how dangerous this approach was throughout his book. He explained how this not only let real killers go, but it also denied true justice to the victims and their families. Additionally, it allowed law enforcement to take advantage of Lucas at every level within the justice system.

In Cox’s work, there are multiple examples of when the police did something wrong when working this case: “twenty-nine officers representing eighteen different law enforcement agencies… along I-35 registered for the meeting. At the conference, the officers discussed more than twenty unsolved homicides… The only thing they had in common was that their bodies had been found either on or near I-35 between 1976 and
1980” (Cox 123). This is just one of the instances throughout the case where police used the fact that Lucas was a drifter to close their cold cases. Cox argues against this practice throughout his book.

Cox used his work to advocate for people who are homeless by both pointing out what the police did wrong in this case, as well as talk about how Lucas’s housing status impacted the case. Cox also argued that anyone who is homeless should receive better treatment from police both in reference to this case and other criminal investigations. This advocacy shows how authors can use their work as an opportunity to speak out for least dead demographics.

Due to Cox’s strong advocacy for the homeless population, I’ve decided to place his work on the Not Cancelable point of the scale. I made this decision because I believe that Cox did everything he could to advocate for this marginalized group. Throughout the story he pointed out investigators' failings, discussed how Lucas being homeless played a major part in the case, and argued that people who are homeless deserve better treatment from police. Because of this advocacy, I don’t believe that Cox could be considered cancelable in any way.

While I’ve covered all the examples of positive and negative representations of the five least dead demographics, I also wanted to give a baseline example of a true crime work that takes no position on any aspect of the demographics involved in the case. I chose Harold Schechter’s book titled *Hell’s Princess: The Mystery of Belle Gunness, Butcher of Men* (2018). It tells the story of Belle Gunness, a Norwegian immigrant to the United States who lured men to her farm and murdered them for their money. Gunness
ended up killing around forty people, and when she was almost found out she faked her own death and disappeared, killing her children in the process.

I chose this book because it’s a great example of a true crime piece telling a story in a straightforward way. It takes no stance and offers no theories; it simply tells the story of Gunness and her crimes without either advocating for a group or misrepresenting one. I included this book because it offers a great baseline to compare the others pieces I’ve mentioned, either for positive or negative examples of advocacy for the least dead. This book is a great baseline simply because while all the other primary sources I’ve analyzed have been very obvious in the ways they can be politicized, it’s very difficult to think of a way *Hell’s Princess* could be propaganda in any way. Therefore, when considering that there’s no negative stigmas, misinformation, or examples of advocacy in this piece, it works as a perfect baseline in comparison to the other primary sources being examined.

When analyzing each of these pieces, there are many political ideologies that arise when discussing the victims, their treatment by law enforcement, and how they’re written about by true crime authors. These political ideologies and how they’re presented and discussed by true crime authors leads to the genre’s recent trend of leaning more towards propaganda rather than art. While not all propaganda is negative, such as when authors educate readers about marginalized groups of people or police failings, there is still a potential for negative effects of propaganda as well. Such as when victims are victimized again by being politicized even in their death.
Chapter Three

Political Correctness and True Crime

When it comes to the premise of the most and least dead and how this concept has evolved over the decades, it’s easy to conclude that this change has been unsurprisingly political. This is because least dead demographics have historically been politicized, such as gay marriage being made legal as well as legalizing sex work. On top of this inherent politicism, many readers are especially sensitive to how true crime writes about these groups considering it’s the victims of these crimes and their bodies that are being politicized by law enforcement, the media, and the genre itself. The true crime genre has been political despite the fact that it’s typically only reflected within the true crime genre where it depicts how police investigate and prioritize crime and how society views them as well as the victims and perpetrators. Biases in law enforcement has been a hot topic in politics, especially in recent years, and is heavily discussed in more contemporary true crime literature.

In order to best understand how true crime literature discusses this law enforcement bias against the least dead and the demographics involved, one must also understand the politics associated with the least dead. In the 2010’s, political correctness became the focus of media attention. Such as the “war on Christmas” as well as the terminology and ideology of “wokeness” becoming politized in the 2020’s. Though there will always be people who hold prejudices against least dead groups, it is now more politically correct to advocate for demographics that, until recently, were marginalized and ignored.

Some positives changes that have resulted from these groups being viewed in a more favorable way by society, media, and true crime literature include the growing
rights they are obtaining, as well as the public attention on law enforcement’s failure to
treat such individuals as they would a most dead victim in a similar case. Unfortunately,
given the political right’s focus on demonizing wokeness, some true crime authors have
been shunned for being politically correct in their writing. Conversely, some authors are
also sometimes canceled for not being politically correct enough for the left. This
politicization has caused the true crime genre to be caught in the middle of a political
debate, creating a difficult line for authors to toe, as it’s impossible to make everyone on
the political spectrum happy with how they treat the subjects of their writing.

Further, this politicization can cause people to view true crime literature as black-
and-white, or either politically correct enough or not. Though this view is somewhat
controversial since some readers are categorizing books within an entire genre as either
being woke or cancelable with nothing in between, I myself often categorize true crime in
this way. This is because, while I don’t fault older true crime literature for being
cancelable by modern standards, I do think it’s dangerous to consume literature that isn’t
politically correct because it can spread harmful disinformation. I also fall under the other
controversial view that most contemporary true crime literature is propaganda in some
way.

The definition of propaganda is a loaded one. While many people view the term
as negative, some such as W.E.B. DuBois saw it as positive because it means people are
engaging in political discussions. The actual definition of propaganda is “information,
especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular
political cause or point of view”, which I believe means, though many would disagree,
that propaganda can be used both constructively or not rather than just one or the other.
One of the issues with having such a strong viewpoint as mine is the harm that can come from cancel culture. Many critics of true crime cancel authors even if what they wrote or failed to write wasn’t inherently harmful to members of the least dead demographics. For instance, an author may be canceled for simply using terms that were correct at the time of the writing but aren’t considered politically correct by current standards. As a critic of true crime literature, I understand how readers can’t not cancel and approve different authors and works in the genre, but as a reader I personally think this is a bridge too far, though there are cases of authors being clearly racist or homophobic who are, therefore, deserving of being canceled. One example of this is author Billy Jensen, who has been called out repeatedly in the past for writing inappropriately about women and who was cancelled in 2022 for some alleged misconduct towards coworkers on his podcast.

The main problem in determining what makes a work of true crime literature cancelable or not depends on each individual critic and is highly subjective, depending on where the critic’s thinking falls on the political spectrum. For example, one reader might think an author is horribly insensitive and deserves to be cancelled while another sees nothing wrong with the work. It is this factor that causes me to classify true crime as propaganda considering readers will be divided on how they view the piece based on whether the propaganda supports their political thinking and personal opinions, regardless of facts.
Going further into the idea that this genre is propaganda, one could argue that any form of media that discusses police is, in a way, police propaganda. If a piece of media discusses police officers in a positive way then, even if not intended, given the politicization of law enforcement in today’s society, the author has inadvertently created police propaganda. Conversely, if a piece of media talks negatively about law enforcement, it is still police propaganda despite it disagreeing with their policework. This is because someone may consume this specific media, disagree with its negative stance on law enforcement, and therefore become an even stronger advocate for police officers. This issue puts true crime authors in a double-bind situation where they can find it impossible to win in this specific situation.

In addition, since true crime can take strong stances, either negatively or positively, on different politically targeted demographics, anything written about those groups can be considered propaganda as well. This contributes to the idea that it can be hard to find a gray, middle area when most true crime literature is seen as so black-and-white by society. As a result, this mindset has a definite influence on how true crime is written and read. As stated previously, I myself fall under this mindset and even portray this mindset when discussing my primary texts. However, by going through and explaining how each book can be read as politically correct or incorrect, one may start to see how each text is in some way propaganda. One could further their examination by looking at where each text was placed on the Political Correctness Scale, which helps to map out where each of these specific texts in how cancelable they are. It also allows one to compare each of these works to one another even if they fall on the same point on the scale.
For instance, while Humes’s book, *Buried Secrets*, wasn’t inherently racist, it definitely discussed racist themes without addressing whether treatment of race by investigators was right or not. This refers to how police from the U.S. did not pay much attention to the crimes committed against the Hispanic victims and the fact that Humes was unsuccessful in addressing this failure by police caused issues in solving the Constanzo case. Humes himself wrote far more about the single American victim and ignored the fact that the investigation involved a dozen-or-so Mexican victims. This inconsistency with the portrayals of the different victims is what leads multiple people to think that this specific piece isn’t politically correct by modern standards.

However, the counterpart, Vargas Cervantes’s *The Little Old Lady Killer*, could be seen as very politically correct for a variety of reasons. One such reason is the fact that Vargas Cervantes highlighted the police’s failings throughout the case and even directly called out their sexism when they refused to consider a woman could be a serial killer. Vargas Cervantes also took a great deal of time explaining the cultural implications of this case, which helped spread accurate knowledge about Hispanic culture in a way that was factual and insight. Though her discussion on police arguably makes this book police propaganda since it discusses police failings, it should still be considered politically correct given the reasons noted above.

Reynolds’s piece, *Dead Ends*, is yet another example of a true crime book being cancelable. When discussing how serial killer Aileen Wuornos could have been capable of committing such violent acts of murder, Reynolds blamed her career as a sex worker as the reason for her crimes. This completely disregarded all the other factors that would have led her to become a multiple murderer and only helped to further spread stigma
regarding the sex work industry. Of course, it would not be considered correct to write about sex work in this way in present times since society generally now advocates for sex workers and view them as a vulnerable group in society.

Cameron’s *On the Farm*, however, actively advocates for this least dead group. Cameron talks extensively about the lives of each victim in order to show that they deserve respect and discussed how the community searched for them because they cared about the victims and their lives had value to society. She also actively pointed out the many police failings that led to so many of these women being killed. Cameron’s accurate portrayal of the sex work demographic and advocacy for them could cause people to label this story as politically correct.

The queer community is one of the most politicized groups in modern times, so it’s important that any literature written about this demographic be politically correct and factual. Masters’s *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*, however, is neither. This book did nothing to advocate for the queer community in the way that it advocated for the racial components of this case. Masters even suggested that Dahmer’s queerness was just another mental illness, which, of course, would place it under the politically incorrect category.

*Deviant* by Schechter, by contrast to Masters’s work, spent a large portion of his book discussing the queer elements of killer Ed Gein’s crimes. Schechter spoke about how Gein himself was most likely transgender and that, while him being transgender didn’t cause him to commit these crimes, it did influence the case overall. Schechter also used his piece as an opportunity to advocate for the queer community. All of these
components could cause someone to see this piece as politically correct by today’s standards.

Ortiz’s book, *The Vampire of Sacramento*, is another true crime piece that could be categorized as cancelable. Though Ortiz did not stigmatize mental illness in her book, she did nothing to advocate for the demographic. The story of murderer Richard Chase is riddled with mental illness and a misunderstanding of how to treat it and how people suffering from it should be treated. So, when author’s such as Ortiz fail to use their platform to spread information on a least dead demographic or advocate for such groups, the work itself can arguably do more harm than good. Which is why many readers and critics have a problem with this work despite it not outwardly being anti-mental illness.

Schreiber’s piece, on the other hand, spent a lot of time explaining the mental illnesses and history of mental health treatment of killer Joseph Kallinger and advocating for more understanding of mental illnesses. A large portion of the book, *The Shoemaker*, discussed Kallinger’s severe mental illnesses and explained how it influenced him to commit such terrible crimes. Schreiber also took advantage of her platform to talk about how there needs to be less negative stigma about mental illness and more access to mental health treatment for people who suffer from it. Schreiber’s strong stance and understanding explain why many see this book as being politically correct.

Badal’s story, *In the Wake of The Butcher*, is another example of an author not doing anything inherently wrong or harmful through their writing, but also not doing enough to advocate for a least dead demographic either. When discussing the case of the Cleveland Torso Murders, Badal had several opportunities to advocate for the homeless population. By not doing so, however, he missed out on an opportunity to bring attention
to this group. Nonetheless, his lack of support and advocacy could make readers view this piece as politically incorrect.

Throughout Cox’s, *The Confessions of Henry Lee Lucas*, he in contrast to Badal openly advocates for those who are homeless. Cox does this by arguing for better treatment of this specific group and by pointing out how the police showed prejudice against them in the Lucas case. Therefore, his willingness to discuss the police’s open prejudice against the homeless population in this case action make one argue that this book is politically correct.

One piece discussed earlier in my thesis that could actually be viewed more as being gray rather than the black-and-white of the other books discussed above, is Schechter’s *Hell’s Princess*. While this piece is also contemporary, the case itself is much older than the serial killer cases covered in my other primary texts. Ironically, the fact that it’s a contemporary book written about an older case could be what puts this story in the middle between politically correct and incorrect. By analyzing *Hell’s Princess*, one could see how it’s not exactly politically correct or incorrect by older or modern standards.

As previously stated, this book is about serial killer Belle Gunness who lured multiple men to her property where she killed them for their money. Gunness eventually faked her own death and was lost to history without being held accountable for her multiple crimes. Surprisingly, most accounts of her crimes, both when they were first discovered and now, don’t really fall under politically correct or not. In early pieces written about Gunness, none of these works were sexist despite her being a woman, none
shamed her although she had multiple sexual affairs, and none were xenophobic despite the fact that she was an immigrant.

Conversely, no contemporary works seem to exhibit any of these issues either. However, they also don’t advocate for any least dead group in any manner. This could be because there isn’t really a demographic to advocate for or defend in this particular case. This odd mix of not really having any particular issue within the writing on this case, along with its lack of advocacy for immigrants or women, is what puts this piece in the middle ground between being correct or incorrect politically.

In support of my previous statement that all true crime literature constitutes propaganda in today’s society, one could point out ways that Schechter’s piece could be politicized to view it as being more politically correct or not. For instance, Schechter is known for not writing gruesomely about the crimes of the killers he covers and instead simply describes the facts to avoid being sensationalist. Though this is a positive thing, some might see his unwillingness to gruesomely describe Gunnness’s crimes as him being sexist himself considering he went into more detail regarding the murders of other killers he's covered such as Gein.

Historically, many true crime authors rightfully focus their writing on the murder aspect of their stories, but interestingly, often tend to gloss over such aspects when describing female killers. This may be because it’s difficult for such authors to comprehend how a woman would be able to do something so horrible as committing multiple murders. This difficulty may be a result of history’s portrayal of women in Western society as being nurturing, weak, and compliant. Therefore, any actions that are inconsistent with this societal narrative could be difficult to understand or make readers
and authors uncomfortable. Considering that Schechter’s piece falls within a gray area of political correctness, it is difficult to say whether some readers would find it politically correct or incorrect when taken as a whole.

When it comes to determining political correctness of true crime literature, one must keep in mind what standard of political correctness is being used, given that political correctness is subjective and changes over time. This means, in my opinion, that the current ideology of what is politically correct, when compared to non-contemporary true crime literature, should not be held to the same standards if written today. However, one could argue that it could be dangerous to read these older pieces considering the topics they’re discussing are still political in modern times. All the texts I’ve referenced, however, are contemporary and therefore the writers would be aware of what would now be considered cancelable or not. That’s why one could argue it’s appropriate to hold contemporary true crime writing to this standard, but perhaps not older.

This idea of holding authors accountable has another layer of difficulty when one considers the fact that work such as writing should be seen as separate from its writer. This separate allows readers to only judge the literature itself and gives authors room to change and grow from their past writing. However, when it comes to such a sensitive and political genre such as true crime, it is important to hold authors to some standards given the nature of the work they’re writing. This need for accountability is what makes this separation so difficult to do in the true crime genre, but readers should try to read more than one work of authors they would consider cancelable in order to give the writer a fair chance and to try and separate their work from them.
Another important element to consider when discussing the political correctness of true crime literature is considering who is deciding whether the work is politically correct or incorrect. The simple answer to that question is the audience. However, one must understand how and why they decide whether or not the piece is politically correct, along with how such opinions affect true crime literature. As stated previously, true crime is a reflection of society’s views on certain groups of people. But in order to fully understand this concept, one must understand how the genre was able to shift and accurately reflect society’s current beliefs over time.

The overall shift in society’s views on the groups of individuals categorized within the least dead category is relatively recent. It wasn’t until recent decades that these groups started receiving media attention and empathy from many in society. This change has led to society, in most circles in North America, to no longer view minorities, such as the homeless; members of the LGBTQ community; and others previously marginalized by society, as throw-away members of society. But rather as vulnerable people who need and deserve help. Though there has and always will be outliers in how society views certain groups of people, this change has led to audiences of any type of media to come to expect people to advocate for these demographics and discuss them in a politically correct manner.

This shift is a positive outcome not only for the members of the least dead groups, but society at large because it means that society is becoming less judgmental about who deserves justice, attention, and assistance. By adopting this ideology in regard to the least dead, all demographics that fall under this categorization benefits. This expectation inevitably started filtering into the media of true crime literature, which caused the genre
to shift from merely reporting the facts to a genre that advocates for the less fortunate. There will, however, always be true crime authors that fail to advocate or continue to hold prejudices, as well as readers who disagree with even the most politically correct pieces for a variety of reasons.

Since we as a society have started to advocate for these least dead demographics, more positive change has occurred and can be expected to continue occurring in the future. Hopefully, this means that, despite the influence of people who disagree with being woke or politically correct, there will be better representation and advocacy for these least dead groups. This shift will lead to audiences expecting even more out of medias, which will again filter into true crime literature. So, the genre will continue to shift and reflect society’s views whether it’s to be politically correct and help these demographics, or just sell copies.

The negative effects of this change in society becoming more politically correct is that too high of expectations can also be harmful. For example, if readers demand perfection when it comes to the representation and advocacy of multiple groups of individuals, it may cause authors to be unwilling to write about certain cases and may cause readers to be less willing to read certain authors’ works. Additionally, if an author were to write a piece that is considered politically correct at the time of its publication but doesn’t stand the test of time from this perspective, readers may cancel them unjustly. Audiences may also hold different medias to the same standard, which isn’t always applicable or fair. For example, investigative journalism and historical fiction, rightfully or not, have different expectations in today’s society regarding whether they should advocate for certain demographics.
Therefore, it’s important to have different expectations for different types of media based on the different kinds, intended audiences, and purpose. There are three main types of media when it comes to the true crime genre. They include films/television, podcasts, and literature. By analyzing each of these forms of media, one could better understand the political expectations of each type along with how and why expectations should differ.

When it comes to true crime media, movies and television are the mediums most commonly used by people to consume the genre. Therefore, arguably this specific media has a greater responsibility to be politically correct since it reaches a larger number of viewers than the genre’s literature or podcasts. However, as a whole, this specific type of media hasn’t been known for taking this responsibility seriously. Many true crime films and television shows historically have not accurately portrayed the crimes or victims they’re discussing, which spreads misinformation.

Though there are, of course, outliers at every point in true crime’s film history, the fact that the majority of the genre’s movies and shows are still not working to be politically correct is very dangerous. Fortunately, as in the case of true crime literature, there has been a shift in the genre’s film media since audiences are expecting more authenticity, factual representation, and empathy. While some modern true crime shows and movies continue to spread misinformation and use shock value or dramatization in order gain viewers rather than try to be accurate or advocate for a demographic such as American Horror Story or Boston Strangler, this habit is changing. Especially with streaming services producing their own series and films about true crime. Unfortunately, film and television are not keeping pace with podcasts and literature in this regard. This is
due to the reach of film and television and the fact that they are an easy-to-consume form of media.

True crime podcasts, for example, tend to be very respectful towards victims as well as accurately describe the crime while advocating for the affected demographic. Evidence of this is the fact that the top-rated true crime podcasts for 2022, Bone Valley; Chameleon: Wild Boys; and Burn Wild, are all well known for their accurate representations and advocacy of least dead groups according to Nicholas Quah’s article The Best True-Crime Podcasts of 2022. This could be because it’s a newer form of media, so it would take its audience’s expectations into account in order to gain a following when competing against other forms of true crime media.

This form of media is slowly becoming more and more popular, thanks to the creators within the media that take the time to fully research a topic and look at it from a variety of perspectives. Of course, there are exceptions to this as some podcasters have their own political agenda. But given the popularity of true crime and the competition for listeners, most podcasters have quickly learned that they need to provide accurate information if they want their listeners to find them credible.

Through this whole thesis I’ve been focusing on true crime literature, I wanted to discuss specific types of literature that are very popular today. When considering true crime literature, one must look beyond traditional books and consider crime blogs and magazines as well. While there have always been articles about crime in newspapers, in modern times there are entire tabloids dedicated to the genre. These tabloids can lead to problems considering that most people are more likely to read a true crime blog or magazine article than an actual full-length book in the genre. Therefore, the ability of the
author to portray all of the relevant information or advocate for a demographic is limited to the size of the article.

While some blogs do strive to be as accurate as possible as well as advocate for people categorized as the least dead, most don’t fully achieve these objectives, and some may actively spread misinformation or even sexualize the criminals involved, which I will discuss later in my thesis. The same can be said for true crime magazines and tabloids as well. Many blogs, magazines, and tabloids often focus on the most dead because these victims are viewed as being more marketable and are more likely to catch the eye of a would-be reader. In fact, true crime magazines are one of the most popular media within the genre to use the most dead concept.

True crime magazines focus on the most dead because their marketing is highly targeted. They need to both find marketable victims as well as write in a very entertaining way in order to sell copies. Though this is seen in all types of true crime literature, it can lead to writing in that is highly sensationalist and can be labeled as almost entirely propaganda. Therefore, as in the case of film media, other medias within the genre can be dangerous because people may look at true crime blogs and magazines and assume all the genre’s literature is also politically incorrect or sensationalist in nature.

True crime journalism has a long history of being sensationalist, factually inaccurate, and focused on the most dead. As stated previously, some of the oldest journalism in the genre was incredibly graphic and disrespectful towards the victims of the crimes they were covering. Unfortunately, this can pose to be a problem even today if the writing is sensationalist in nature. Fortunately, many contemporary readers point to sensationalist true crime medias as some of the most politically incorrect and cancelable
writing. Hopefully, this will influence the genre to continue to evolve in a more politically correct and less sensationalist manner.

The first mass-published articles of true crime were written in the nineteenth century, and though there were, of course, instances of the genre being written before that, the articles that made it popular wouldn’t even be considered publishable by today’s standards. These early true crime articles were often overly graphic to the point that they even included inappropriate sketches of the scene. One instance of this was during the Jack the Ripper killings, when journalists would crowd crime scenes in order to make uncensored drawings of the slayed women to print with their articles. If the victim or criminal were a member of a demographic that we would now consider the least dead, they were heavily criticized in ways that were very insensitive and inappropriate. The way the least dead groups are described by today’s standards are still far more positive compared to how said individuals were described in early true crime writing. While we tend to think that our modern society is desensitized to violence, early true crime literature was far more graphic and uncensored.

As stated previously, society’s views on the least dead demographics have changed over time and the true crime genre has reflected that evolution. Therefore, even though there are authors, bloggers, and podcasters within the different medias of the genre that need to continue to evolve to reflect today’s standards of political correctness, true crime has come a long way since it first started in this regard. If the shift we see throughout the history of the genre continues, we can expect true crime to keep pace with changes in societal expectations. This evolution means that any change in the genre is good, and audiences of any true crime media can only expect it to get better politically.
This advancement would be positive because as authors get less and less cancelable, though still political, the propaganda seen in their writing won’t be as obvious and won’t take away from the art of their work. This change would allow the genre to slowly drift solely into art.

One of the genre’s biggest changes, especially in recent years, is how it discusses law enforcement. Society’s views on police have started to shift recently, such as with the Black Lives Matters movement. Since this specific genre is about crime, true crime has needed to change its view on the police as well, especially in the context of the least dead. While true crime has always discussed police and investigative work in some way, it now tends to point out failings of the police when previously it may not have been possible to criticize or question law enforcement. While modern day’s true crime is willing to reflect society’s current views on police officers is overall very positive, it has arguably added to the political tension in society regarding police reform and the defunding of law enforcement.

Because true crime has the ability to delve into police investigations, true crime authors have the opportunity, and some may say duty, to examine law enforcement’s handling of cases. Considering that in today’s environment, officers are charged with murder for shooting defenseless African Americans or lose their jobs for using excessive force against the mentally ill, true crime is in a unique position to not only reflect society’s viewpoints but help shape them as well. This is true whether law enforcement’s investigation of a case is done well or not. So long as true crime accurately portrays law enforcement’s handling, the genre is arguably doing its job of informing readers and being involved in the societal discussion.
Further, there are many instances of true crime pieces actually written by police officers themselves where they point out their own failings and describe what they should have done differently in hindsight such as Mark Fuhrman’s *Murder in Brentwood*. In these examples, the comments of law enforcement are extremely credible and illustrate certain officers’ willingness to learn from their mistakes, which is something everyone in society should want to happen. Unfortunately, many true crime works continue to downplay mistakes from law enforcement, or in rare cases, actually lie about police’s handling of the case, which is both dangerous and misleading. By failing to accurately reflect law enforcement’s investigations, especially in reference to the least dead, true crime will only add to the current tension surrounding law enforcement and will miss opportunities to educate their readers.

Therefore, if one piece fails to accurately portray how police investigated a case, other true crime pieces are put into a position of having to prove it wrong and discuss the police’s actual investigative practices, including their failures. Even if it means upsetting some readers that the piece is telling the truth about police, it still must be done. This is because it’s the only way to accurately portray how the case was handled and allow for authors to advocate for the groups that were affected.

Another characteristic of the genre that has changed throughout its history is the portrayal of the killers themselves. How society and true crime authors discuss murderers seems to constantly change and is heavily dependent on the personality of the killer themselves. For example, even the most brutal killer who showed no sympathy for his victims and was legally sane, may still have groupies and people who feel sorry for him.
Though this idea is very strange, it’s been a constant in true crime history and has also impacted the perspective of murderers by the genre.

One such example of this phenomenon is how some people sexualize serial killers and other murderers. Though there is actual science behind why some people are able to view killers in this way, it has definitely had an impact on the true crime genre as a whole. Historically, there have always been people who have found different high-profile killers attractive. For example, there are entire blogs that fetishize the crimes of people like Ted Bundy or the Columbine shooters. Additionally, in films and shows, some killers are played by attractive actors who look nothing like the murderers they’re supposed to depict such as Jeremy Renner playing Jeffrey Dahmer or Charlize Theron acting as Aileen Wuornos. This is another way the genre sexualizes killers or attempts to get readers or viewers to sympathize with them for the wrong reasons. Both of which are causes to get canceled for the political incorrectness or obvious inaccuracies.

Besides the fetishizing element of this, the fact that so many of these killers are politicized now also adds to how their portrayals have shifted and changed. For instance, some of these murderers are members of the queer community, a few worked as sex workers, and most of them had a mental illness of some kind. This means that as society’s political beliefs on these demographics change, so will how true crime talks about killers within these groups. One could argue, however, that this shift is a positive because as society gains a better understanding of these demographics, true crime will be able to more accurately discuss these killers.

All of this fetishizing and sensationalism poses another problem that critics such as researcher Marcus Parks often point out as cancelable. The true crime genre, as a
whole, tends to glamorize crime by sexualizing killers, misrepresenting the facts of the cases, or portraying some criminals as heroes such as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. This practice is often seen in true crime journalism and film and is extremely problematic because it glorifies crime and fails to take it seriously, not to mention the disrespect it shows the victims of these crimes. Thankfully, this is another negative aspect that is being called out by critics and will hopefully continue to change as our understanding of crime evolves.

Though there is, of course, an obvious issue with sexualizing killers and glamorizing crime, it is important to understand that some criminals are actually deserving sympathy to an extent. While most serial killers are narcissists who commit horrible crimes in order to fulfill their sexual desires while having an understanding of right and wrong, there are some murderers that deserve help rather than a life sentence, or worse, the death penalty. This includes killers such as Joseph Kallinger, Richard Chase, Henry Lee Lucas, and Ed Gein who should be given some amount of empathy due to their mental states and, in some cases, deplorable upbringings. Though true crime should strive to give an accurate understanding of each killer and represent the devastating impact their crimes had on their victims as well as their loved ones, these four serial killers are examples of criminals that should receive at least some level of empathy unlike most other killers.

Until recently, most readers of true crime thought every serial killer was deserving of the harshest punishments and didn’t deserve any form of help or sympathy. However, as society’s views on certain demographics has changed over time, so has its understanding of certain serial killers and the reasoning behind their crimes. Though
having empathy for certain murderers is a relatively new phenomenon, one could argue that if the genre has a responsibility for advocating for the least dead, that responsibility should extend to the killers themselves if they happen to fall into these demographics or truly did not understand their actions due to mental illness.
Chapter Four

Propaganda or Art?

Considering the true crime literature that has been analyzed in this thesis can be labeled as being political, it’s important to ask how much of the true crime genre can be considered propaganda and if the political nature of this genre takes away from the art of true crime writing. As stated previously, I would label most true crime literature as being political in some way. I argue this because the victims, whether most or least dead, are inherently politicized due to the fact that society has a perspective on such victims, politically correct or not, which influences how true crime is written and understood by readers. Therefore, any true crime piece, written at any point in history, can be considered politicized simply based on society’s viewpoint at the time it was written.

Through this way of thinking, all true crime literature could be considered propaganda as well. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, any media that discusses law enforcement’s role in an investigation can be labeled as propaganda because even the least judgmental piece might reinforce someone’s support, or lack thereof, of the police. This idea connects to true crime because all writing of this genre must necessarily speak about the law enforcement involved in the case, and therefore automatically falls into propaganda. This is especially true in current society where the role of law enforcement is under intense scrutiny, especially in relation to their treatment of people of color and the mentally ill.

True crime literature that advocates for demographics seen within the least dead category can also be considered propaganda. This because least dead groups such as sex workers and members of the LGBTQ community are increasingly politicized in modern times. Therefore, when a true crime piece mentions these demographics at all, let alone
advocates for them, that action transitions into propaganda. This is due to the fact that society has a heightened sensitivity towards such groups, either positively or negatively.

When analyzing each of my primary sources, I illustrated how each piece could be seen as political by placing each piece on a scale of how politically correct each work would be considered by modern standards. I did this with the work *Hell’s Princess*, a book I considered to be in the middle ground of the political correctness spectrum and argued that it would be hard to politicize because of the circumstances of the case and how the case was discussed by Schechter. By illustrating how someone could see it as political, I was able to show how even the most middle-ground piece can be politicized by modern standards. Therefore, if a piece that lies so clearly in the gray area of political correctness can be politicized, then any story of the true crime genre can be politicized in today’s standards.

Though the fact that true crime literature is largely politicized isn’t in itself a problem, it does lead one to ask whether the genre is now more propaganda than art. When it comes to discussing hot topics such as the least dead demographics and police, readers may view pieces written about such demographics and law enforcement as more propaganda than art given our current political climate. While creating propaganda is usually not the author’s intent, a true crime piece cannot help but be politicized by its own readers in contemporary society. The problem with this is that even if a true crime author wants to avoid creating a piece of propaganda, the subjects they write about will inevitably make the piece politicized because of the deep political division in today’s society.
When adopting this standpoint, one can view any piece of true crime literature in the genre’s history as being more propaganda than art. This is also true for the earliest examples of true crime writing, up to the most contemporary of pieces. This is because readers will always perceive true crime through the lens of their own political belief system, rather than as an art form. Therefore, true crime literature will always be considered propaganda rather than art due to the very nature of true crime writing.

Before going further into this point, it could be helpful to understand how I as a critic am defining art in this situation. Though everyone has their own opinion on what art is, I would argue that art is any piece of media that has value. When discussing how true crime can be seen as art, the issue is if the genre has as much value as other literary genres. Considering how true crime is now more propaganda than art, one could argue that the genre no longer has as much value as other genres. One other way to view this concept is the thought that art is supposed to be beautiful in some way. Though there are, of course, examples of true crime writing that is considered beautiful such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, the genre as a whole has become so sensationalist and so focused on gore and violence that most works can no longer be seen as beautiful. Another way that true crime has moved away from the standard definition of art, is that art is supposed to show something while propaganda opposes a belief, which true crime writing is doing more and more.

True crime now being seen more as propaganda makes readers, especially in present times, unable to see the true crime genre for the art that it truly is. Though this viewpoint isn’t necessarily harmful considering, I as a reader rather than a critic, believe it is important to call out political incorrectness being written in contemporary writing, by
perceiving true crime as propaganda rather than art, readers have changed the expectations for older true crime literature. These expectations place modern standards on true crime written under different societal standards, whether that is fair or not. By using a modern-day lens when reading older true crime literature, readers may lose some of the original meaning of their work since their focus on the propaganda aspects of the piece may obscure the larger message the writer was trying to convey.

While I don’t mean to suggest that racism, sexism, xenophobia, etc. in older true crime writing is acceptable even if it was a societal norm at the time of publication, I do think it’s important for modern readers to recognize that societal beliefs have evolved over time. And as a result, older true crime is a reflection of those beliefs in society at that time. Therefore, the story the author is discussing in their work should not be overshadowed by their failure to address the prejudice or bigotry portrayed by law enforcement or others in their work. The true crime reader in me thinks it’s unfortunate that the work cannot be viewed simply as art and must always take on some type of political context considering doing so can cloud the original intent of the author.

Above, I gave examples of how each of my primary sources could be politicized by analyzing them from a political standpoint versus viewing them as art. For instance, I categorized one piece, *The Little Old Lady Killer*, as Somewhat Politically Correct because the author pointed out mistakes made by police. She did, however, fail to advocate for any specific group in her book, although she did take time to talk about the culture of the people involved. On the opposite side of the scale, I labeled several works as Somewhat Politically Incorrect due to their failure to recognize racism, sexism, or the failings of police for example.
One such piece was *Buried Secrets*, in which Reynolds failed to point out the harm inflicted onto the investigation by the racist investigators. Additionally, the author of *The Vampire of Sacramento* failed to advocate for the mentally ill and was unwilling to point out the effect taking away medication from a schizophrenic patient had on the killer and the crimes themselves. I also placed *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* on this point on the scale. I chose to do this because, though Masters didn’t say anything homophobic himself, he compared Dahmer’s sexuality to his mental illnesses throughout the book and did not point out the blatant police failings. The same can be said for *In the Wake of The Butcher*. I argued that this book was technically incorrect because the author failed to advocate for any group despite not outwardly saying anything cancelable himself.

One of the best examples of political correctness discussed above was the piece, *On the Farm*, which could be considered Not Cancelable. This is because the writer did an excellent job of illustrating police failings and advocating for the sex worker community. Similarly, I placed *The Shoemaker* on the same point of my scale. I made this decision because the Schreiber talked about where the system failed Kallinger and spread information on mental health awareness. I also labeled *The Confessions of Henry Lee Lucas* as Not Cancelable because he did such an amazing job of advocating for the homeless and pointing out police failings in this specific case. Conversely, I thought the book, *Dead Ends*, was Cancelable because the writer didn’t call out the poor police work and even seemed to shame Wuornos for her job as a sex worker.

One could argue that it’s important to point out the political correctness of these pieces because it allows us to see how they fall under the propaganda label and shows how they can be politicized. However, the problem with this type of analysis is that it
took away from the artistic value in each individual piece. Instead of analyzing these books in an artistic way, I viewed them from a political viewpoint. I did this type of analysis because the political aspect of true crime is largely considered more important by modern expectations than the artistic side of the genre.

Though many genres deal with political issues and therefore must take into account readers’ expectations and societal norms, true crime is in a unique situation thanks to how politicized the genre has become in recent decades. True crime literature has always been a touchy genre because of the sensitive subjects it deals with by nature. Such as violence, murder, sexual deviance, and victims from every segment of society. However, the heightened political interest in the demographics the genre discusses means that readers are paying closer attention to how true crime writes about these groups, even requiring some level of advocacy by true crime writers in their work.

It’s this scrutiny that separates true crime literature from other genres and therefore makes it an easier target for readers wanting to project their expectations upon the author and their work, even if their political beliefs are considered extreme. There are, of course, genres that write exclusively about political topics, but the fact that true crime doesn’t typically try to make outward political statements still doesn’t make the genre immune to political scrutiny from readers and critics. Regardless of the intent of the author, true crime is automatically politicized, and the author is placed in a no-win situation considering they cannot possibly reflect the political viewpoint of every reader.

These expectations are arguably fair considering that any genre that is even remotely political should be held to some standards. The issue with this specific instance is that some readers may be expecting too much from the true crime genre, which can
make people view the genre unfairly. It also means that by politicizing the true crime genre, the artistic side of true crime writing may now be forever lost. Therefore, true crime cannot escape from being labeled as propaganda given its very nature.

Considering these expectations are relatively new when compared to how people viewed the early true crime writing, the genre has become more a form of propaganda rather than art relatively recently. For instance, many believe that true crime did not become politicized until the Satanic Panic of the 1970s, as explained by Hughes’ essay “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000.” This is when readers started to see true crime as political because society and the media held the collective mindset that many crimes were due to a rise in satanism. This resulted in readers viewing the genre under the same lens. After people started to see that true crime of any media could have such a strong impact on society, readers began to place standards on the genre that only grew as true crime became more and more politicized and popular.

These expectations have even influenced how readers view true crime literature that predates the Satanic Panic. One outlier to this is *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, which many readers believe is more as art than propaganda, even by contemporary standards. This exception could be attributed to the fact that it dealt with an average, white family rather than a member of the least dead, which helps make the piece less political. One story that does deal with the most dead but is still politicized is *Murder in Greenwich: Who Killed Martha Moxley?* by Mark Fuhrman. The case deals with a wealthy, white, teenage girl who was killed in her gated community. This book has a victim that would be considered most dead, but it would still be considered political
because of Fuhrman’s constant criticism of the police who worked the case which later led to the arrest of a suspect in 2002. This example illustrates how even pieces about the most dead can be made political. This piece is also an instance of an officer writing a true crime book, which can greatly affect how they write about a case and how readers view their writing considering some might cancel Fuhrman simply for being an officer, which can be said for any true crime writer who is in law enforcement.

Throughout this thesis, I have focused on the literature medium of true crime, however, it’s important to understand that this issue is seen in all forms of true crime medias. People now view all true crime medias as propaganda, including movies, television shows, and podcasts. In fact, the Satanic Panic was largely caused by true crime journalism and tabloid television. As a result, all these forms of media are seen more as propaganda than anything else, and their artistic values are being ignored by their audiences.

This lack of viewing an entire genre for less than it’s worth feeds into a larger problem. The true crime genre as a whole is often not taken seriously by critics such as David Peace, who outwardly calls for a complete rebranding of the entire genre. By critics failing to take the genre seriously, it may cause some writers to elect to write in different genres because they don’t want to be viewed as sensationalist or they want their work to be viewed as art rather than propaganda. This does a disservice to the victims of these crimes as well as to the positive effects true crime can have on society when written responsibly.

Additionally, some critics even feel that the subject matter the genre deals with is simply too upsetting or personal and, as a result, does not constitute legitimate literature.
I believe this perspective is unfair and undeserved because not all true crime writing is sensationalist and many pieces actually condemn sensationalist true crime as well as provide insight that other forms of media fail to produce. It also can’t be considered fair to deem the entire genre as inappropriate due to the sensitive topics it discusses simply because these are real events that happened to real people.

Ironically, while most critics don’t take true crime seriously, many readers take the genre too seriously. This feeds back into the unrealistic expectations many people have when reading true crime. Many readers expect true crime pieces written at any point in the genre’s history to meet their current political standards and often cancel those that don’t meet such standards. Some readers even expect to see the same level of political correctness in every true crime piece no matter the medium.

Both of these standpoints on how critics and readers view true crime only serve to further take away from the artistic value of the genre. These expectations and criticisms can be problematic because it can lead to readers only viewing the genre as good or bad rather than on a type of range or scale. By reading true crime in this black-and-white way, it prevents readers from viewing the genre as anything other than propaganda. Ignoring the artistic viewpoint it was intended to be read in by the author.

To summarize, current subjects matters discussed by the true crime genre tend to be hot political topics. Due to this fact, readers view the genre as more political than artistic, which is setting unattainable expectations for authors of true crime in any media. Besides readers, many critics are adding to the problem by not taking the genre seriously while conversely, many readers are taking it too seriously. The irony in this is that true crime is incapable of escaping being propaganda because the topics it discusses are so
politically diverse culture of North America. Yes, early true crime pieces should not be held to the same expectations as contemporary writing, but it seems that modern readers cannot help to project their modern viewpoints onto dated true crime works. This viewpoint could even be projected onto *In Cold Blood*. It may be hard to politicize this specific work, but the piece does comment on the death penalty, which was considered a political hot topic in the past. This issue of projection ties in with my example of *Hell’s Princess*, which would mean that even stories that seem impossible to politicize still can be.

One could argue that it’s important to hold some specific pieces to current political standards, but those works would have to have been written when the author understood the political expectations of them and their writing. Readers should be able to analyze works written at any time period from a political standpoint, but they should also understand that past authors didn’t live in the society we do now. Readers should also understand that society’s views are going to change over time and what we consider politically correct will continue to evolve over time and will vary from person to person. I believe this situation is something true crime will now always have to deal with, because of its political nature.

Because of the fact that true crime literature is so politicized, it can be difficult to find a true crime piece that is considered purely art. Even work considered very middle
ground can still be politicized by some readers. Further, readers’ lofty expectations of the
genre make some authors more concerned with not getting canceled rather than focus on
making something with artistic value. However, even an inherently artistic piece that has
been held in high regard for decades, such as *In Cold Blood*, can still be reduced to
propaganda in today’s political climate. It is for this reason that I find it is nearly
impossible to find a true crime work incapable of being politicized by modern standards
which, by default, makes all true crime literature propaganda in some fashion.
Additionally, the fact that contemporary readers put so much focus on a piece’s political
correctness means they’re paying more attention to that aspect of the work than any
artistic value it may have had.

Therefore, in order for a true crime piece to be considered art, it would need to
somehow not be political in any way to any person. This means the work would not be
able to discuss any of the least dead demographics, our judicial system, or law
enforcement in any manner. On top of this, the author would also have to somehow use
terms that are incapable of becoming politically incorrect in the future. All of this, of
course, is impossible for any genre to accomplish, but is particularly impossible for true
crime literature given the subject matters it covers. This impossibility is why true crime
can no longer be considered art since we as readers would need a piece to no longer fit
into its genre to be labeled as such.

The profoundly troubling aspect of this entire situation is that the fact that true
crime’s evolution of becoming better and better over time only helped to put the genre in
this impossible situation. By advocating for demographics in the least dead category,
pointing out police failings, and evolving with society, the genre has inadvertently made
itself political, and therefore, propaganda. The irony of this situation is that by trying to
be more politically responsible, true crime literature has inadvertently helped readers to
stop viewing the genre as art.

Considering that the issue of true crime literature being seen as more propaganda
than art affects the whole genre, one has to ask what does this mean for true crime? As
stated earlier, it’s unlikely that future true crime won’t be politicized by at least some of
its readers, so this situation could potentially be a permanent problem for the genre. To
correct this situation, audiences of true crime, of any medium, must try to view the genre
more as art than anything else and not project their own political ideologies onto the
work. If readers and viewers of true crime make more of an effort to see the genre as art,
it would allow them to have a better understanding of the genre as a whole versus the
genre simply being either a validation or contradiction to their own political beliefs. By
doing so, readers would also be able to lower their standards and not have such high
expectations of true crime of any media or from any time period.

The issue of true crime being so politicized doesn’t just affect the literature itself,
but the people being written as well. A victim of any true crime case who was part of a
group in the least dead category most likely was already used to having their lives
politicized before they were ever made a victim of the crime being discussed by the
genre. But when the writing of their victimization is politicized as well and is further
turned into propaganda, it could be argued that they’re being victimized once again.

Though this isn’t necessarily true crime’s fault considering the genre’s nature is
inherently political, it is an important factor that needs to be considered. One action true
crime authors could take in order to help this situation would be to be respectful to the
victims of the cases they write about and take the opportunity to educate readers on the victim’s life and demographic. If readers were influenced to not politicize their victimhood, that would help prevent the further victimization of true crime victims as well.

The issue of true crime being more propaganda than art affects many aspects of the genre. This includes the authors, readers, critics, and the people being written about. That is why it is important to try and see true crime writing as more than just propaganda. Though it’s good to have some expectations of the genre since it’s inherently political, it’s also important to try and see true crime for all that it is, not just propaganda. This would allow for the victims being written about to receive more respect, for critics and readers to have a better understanding of the genre overall and would allow each piece’s artistic value to be fully appreciated.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

How Does This Argument Contribute to Reader’s Understanding of True Crime?

I’ve covered many different ideas within this thesis, which all tie back into the idea that all true crime literature can now be considered as more propaganda rather than art due to the changes in modern society that have caused the genre to be politicized despite the best efforts of the authors. This argument is supported by the modern sensitivities to members of the least dead category. Such as sex workers, members of the LGBTQ community, people of color, members of the homeless population, and the mentally ill, all of which have become highly politicized in our current political climate. When a true crime piece discusses any member of any of these groups, that work automatically becomes propaganda because the topic is inherently politically charged. The same can be said for any true crime writing that talks about law enforcement in any way for the same reasons.

Whether or not the author of the work is writing about least dead demographics or police in a positive or negative way does not matter, because even a negative piece can reinforce someone’s beliefs. True crime pieces are often judged critically by readers because of this which, again, can be both a positive and a negative for the genre. One positive aspect is that any political writing should be held to current societal standards no matter the genre if the piece discusses the least dead who deserve to be accurately represented.

Though as a reader I personally have my own issues with viewing true crime as propaganda, I try to read true crime as more than simply being politically correct or not. I illustrated how to do this by creating a scale in which to put true crime pieces on from
Cancelable to Not Cancelable. By analyzing my different primary texts and placing them on this scale, I explained the expectations contemporary readers may have for the works politically and showed how each book could be considered propaganda despite where they fell on the scale. By mapping them on the Politically Correctness Scale, I was able to move away from the black-and-white thinking many readers of true crime have and was able to give a better understanding of how the context of each work can be received. I was also able to illustrate how even the most artistic or middle ground piece may be politicized despite the author’s intentions were.

While there are some positives to viewing true crime in this way, there are also some very real negative effects from adopting this position. One negative aspect to reading true crime in this way is that it may cause readers to view the genre too harshly and cancel authors that shouldn’t be canceled. These high expectations are also apparent in other true crime media forms, including films and podcasts. The irony of some readers taking true crime too seriously is that many critics don’t take the genre seriously enough, which just adds to true crime’s struggle to be considered art in the current political climate.

Critics not giving true crime the credit it deserves is also an issue because it makes viewing the genre as an art even more challenging. By viewing the genre in such a black-and-white manner and holding it to such high standards, readers lose sight of the artistic value of true crime. Additionally, when critics don’t take true crime writing seriously and treat it as sensationalism, it makes it all but certain that the genre will be viewed as propaganda. This situation illustrates how many critics and readers are not understanding true crime literature the way it’s intended to be viewed.
By analyzing this problem, I believe that this thesis can make a meaningful contribution to the way society reads and thinks about true crime. To conclude, I made the point that it is impossible for true crime literature to not be political in contemporary society. However, if readers placed less emphasis on viewing it as being politically correct or incorrect, that would help them instead see it as the piece of art it is intended to be. By building to this conclusion, however, I did have several questions arise. Such as (1) are other literary genres dealing with a similar problem; (2) though this issue bleeds into other true crime medias, does it affect them differently; and (3) is there a stronger argument to be made that true crime is in fact more art than propaganda?

Overall, it’s impossible for true crime literature to not be politicized and therefore considered propaganda. This is because of the very nature of the genre and the treatment of the subjects discussed by true crime writing. It could be argued, however, that with all these negative aspects, this situation is still overall positive because true crime is reflecting a positive change in the way society views many of these marginalized groups affected by crime. Though, it does make you wonder if this reflection is at the cost of true crime’s artistic value.
References


