

Not Just Jack the Ripper: Explaining Myths of Serial Murder

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Since the concept of serial murder first entered the public consciousness in the early 1980s, the serial killer has become a standard figure in popular culture, the subject of numerous films and thrillers, in addition to many scholarly and criminological studies. Given that serial murder accounts for no more than (perhaps) two percent of homicides in any given society, the attention paid to this type of offender is astonishing. Moreover, the specific type of killer who most frequently features in the cinema and the news headlines represents a still more tiny subset of an already small group, namely “sex killers” or “rippers” By this term, I mean specifically men who kill repeatedly for obviously sexual motives, and who often engage in extreme acts of sexual violence and mutilation. Coupled with this image is a demographic stereotype, namely that the individual in question is a male, almost invariably white, in his thirties or forties: while the “normal” victims in such a case would be young women, usually prostitutes. Once this conceptual frame has been universally accepted, all other offenders cease to be counted as serial killers or even noticed, and the media can state with some sincerity that they have never heard of a multiple killer who fails to fall into this category. The analysis thus offers a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rippers do exist, but they attract a massively disproportionate amount of attention from both media and law enforcement.

The obvious public interest in such killers demands explanation, as does the equally puzzling neglect of other multiple killers who claim many more victims than the “sex

fiends,” but who fail to draw much public attention. By this, I particularly mean the medical serial killers who seem to account for the vast majority of serial murder victims, yet who garner only a minuscule amount of notice. The popular view of serial homicide thus represents a classic example of how a social problem is constructed, with a very selective and distorted focus on some aspects of a phenomenon, while other themes are left almost entirely unconstructed. Just why have we heard of the serial killer cases that we have, why have they entered contemporary folklore and demonology? In explaining this peculiar construction, I will stress the mythical functions of the serial killer: the emphasis on sex killers or rippers indicates a popular need to believe in the existence of implacable killers who are as monstrous, soulless, and apparently without rational motive as the sex-killers of the popular stereotype. Other forms of killing are excluded in large measure because they fail to meet the requirements of the overarching narrative structure.

Other writers have explored this view, but it has been rarely noted that such narratives emerge at particular historical moments. The killers who do make the headlines tend to belong to specific periods, by which I mean that there are particular eras of a few years in which cases are far more likely to receive intense media attention than at other times. The late 1970s/early 1980s was one such era, the time of celebrities like Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy, while the early 1990s was marked by notorious cases like the Gainesville murders, and the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos. Even on a global scale, Dahmer was probably among the best-known Americans of the decade. All these affairs were heinous in their own right, but they were neither more violent nor sensational than those of many other periods before or since, nor did these offenders claim more victims. Yet characters like Gacy and Dahmer retain a popular fascination, often for readers and viewers far too young to have encountered the cases when they first surfaced

(for the continuing outpouring of books on these “classic” cases, see for instance Rule 2000; Moss and Kottler 1999; Schaefer and London, 1997; Rolling and London 1996; Keppel and Birnes 1995; Nelson 1994. See also Internet sites like the “Serial Killer Info Site” or the “Serial Killer Hit List”). In the popular mind, serial murder is a story not just of sex killers, but of sex killers in particular times, when the process of constructing homicide as a potent social problem was peculiarly intense.

I will thus emphasize what I have called elsewhere the usefulness of the serial killer, namely that some types of offender prove rhetorically valuable for a wide variety of causes and interest groups. A sensational case is thus appropriated to advance certain cultural messages, often concerning matters of race, gender and sexual orientation, and such appropriation is particularly likely at times of intense social conflict over these issues. When conflict of this sort is muted, the need for such demon figures is diminished, and cases go unconstructed. Some types of homicide have historically failed to attract the notice of activists and claims-makers, and remain little noticed.

What We Can and Can't Know About Serial Murder

I want to suggest that “rippers” or sex killers account for a relatively small part of the serial homicide phenomenon, but I acknowledge from the start that my view is largely impressionistic, and much of the evidence anecdotal. That does not mean that I am too lazy to go out and consult the evidence, but rather, I do not believe that reliable evidence exists.

Many books on serial murder offer statistics for scale of the serial murder phenomenon, in terms of the numbers of killers active at any given time, and (less frequently) of their victims. Even when the researchers in question are cautious and skeptical, such figures are deeply suspect, except in indicating the maximum extent of the offense. We know that there are X homicides in a particular year, and that a vast majority

percent of them can be attributed to a variety of specific motives, so that serial murder cases must be found among the rather small remainder of cases. The maximum number of serial murders is unlikely to be more than a fairly small proportion of all homicides: I have suggested around one or two percent, but the real figure might be somewhat larger or, more likely, smaller. In the contemporary United States, that would mean anywhere between 150 and 350 deaths in a given year.

Within these broad limits, we can never know exactly how many serial murders there are at a given time, either how many offenders active at once, nor the number of their victims. Nor, perforce, can we deduce how many of these cases remain unsolved, since such a statistic would have to be based on records of known offenders, cases which are (of course) solved. Nobody has ever composed a plausible listing of serial murder victims, which is the only way to work out the number of unsolved cases. And here, we fall into the logical trap that if you have an unsolved homicide, the only way to establish that it is the work of a serial killer is to link it to a specific offender, that is, by solving it! Also, by definition, if a case is not recognized as serial murder, then it does not appear as such in the records. So much about serial murder is not just unknown, but frankly, unknowable.

Though the data have many problems, even the evidence which is freely available offers little support for the notion that the typical serial killer is a ripper, the sort of offender who is so massively over-represented in the true crime literature, as well as thrillers and detective fiction. Analysis by scholars like Eric Hickey shows above all the extreme diversity of types and motives (Hickey 1997; compare Egger 1998; Holmes and Holmes eds., 1998). Multiple killers fall into a kaleidoscopic variety of types: they are female as well as male, black as well as white, minority as well as majority, and they kill for an enormous range of reasons,

and in countless different ways. Some are sex killers who mutilate their victims; others are arsonists or poisoners.

Medical Murders

By far the largest exception to the ripper myth is medical serial murders, crimes committed by homicidal doctors or “angels of death,” who seem to be able to kill dozens or hundreds of victims without having the deaths listed as suspicious. Drawing distinctions between acts as self-evidently horrendous as those covered under the general rubric of “serial homicide” is extremely difficult. It is plainly offensive to suggest that one killer claimed “only” ten or twenty victims, that Jeffrey Dahmer killed “only” seventeen men, or the original Jack the Ripper a “paltry” total of five women. Nevertheless, the number of victims must serve as one gauge of severity or seriousness, and by this criterion, there is not the slightest question that medical killers are by far the most significant of the breed.

If we examine serial murder cases with very large numbers of victims, say in excess of forty or fifty, we find far more medical murderers than rippers or sex-killers (from a thin literature, see Clarkson 2000; Haines 1993; Mandelsberg, ed., 1992; Linedecker and Burt 1990; Furneaux 1957). The reasons for this are obvious, and depend entirely on the nature of victim choice. Serial killers are, by definition, very disturbed individuals, but the degree of disturbance has little to do with the fact of becoming a multiple killer, or the number of victims. An individual who kills twenty victims is not necessarily more disturbed than one who kills five, but he or she has rather selected particular victims or settings rather than others. If an individual murders a victim and is caught immediately, then he or she does not go on to become a serial killer. This status is only achieved if the offender, whether by accident or design, follows a strategy which allows him or her to kill repeatedly without being caught. By far the best way of doing this is to select victims whose disappearance will

not be noticed, or whose deaths will not be regarded as either significant or suspicious. The question is not why X decided to kill, but rather why he was allowed to get away with it, and thus to kill again and again. Serial murder research thus needs to pay at least as much attention to these issues of victim-offender relationship, the social ecology of the crime, as to the psychopathology of individual killers.

Sex killers generally pursue a relatively “successful” victim choice strategy by pursuing street prostitutes, namely low status individuals in notoriously crime-prone neighborhoods, whose deaths will initially attract little police notice. We repeatedly hear harrowing stories of the neglect which police often demonstrate in such cases of violence against prostitutes. To take one characteristic example, in a recent series of murders in Poughkeepsie, New York, women who had been attacked reported incidents to the police, together with the name of the alleged attacker, Kendall Francois. Nevertheless, no action was taken:

‘They totally ignored her,’ A similar story was told by a second woman, a one-time prostitute The woman said that she told police that Francois had tried to strangle her in November 1996, a month after the first disappearance in the case. She remembered that during the assault Francois suddenly stopped himself from choking her and said: ‘Oh my God, I almost did it again.’ She too managed to escape and flagged down a squad car.”

(Berger and Gross 1998).

Yet again, police paid little attention to the incident. The murder series continued until eight women were murdered.

In such a social context, offenders might kill ten or twenty victims without detection, but this strategy will not succeed indefinitely. By the time a serial murder case has reached this degree of severity, the affair has attracted massive police attention, and it becomes ever

more difficult to find victims. Potential victims are probably organizing self-defense associations or carrying weapons, while police are blanketing potential killing grounds like red light districts. There are admittedly a few cases where killers can remain undetected after so many victims, such as the Green River murders of the 1980s, but they are very rare. Equally, at least in western countries, it is very difficult for such a large number of individuals to disappear without the fact attracting public attention. This does occur in third world countries with much weaker criminal justice systems, and some recent cases have apparently involved murders of hundreds of children. One such involved Pakistani serial killer Javed Iqbal, arrested in 1999 for the sex murders of perhaps a hundred boys, while Luis Alfredo Garavito in Colombia is believed to have killed 140 victims. It is very unlikely that such a case could occur in the contemporary US or western Europe.

In contrast, a striking number of medical murder cases involve “kills” in excess of fifty, and perhaps more. This can be understood if we examine the circumstances of a typical medical case of this kind, epitomized by figures like Michael Swango and Donald Harvey in the 1980s, Orville Lee Majors in the nineties, as well as countless lesser figures like Genene Jones and Beverly Allitt (Stewart 2000; Askill and Sharpe 1993; Elkind 1989) . Commonly in such affairs, a doctor or nurse kills repeatedly, though the murders attract little attention because the fact of someone dying in a medical setting occasions little surprise, and is readily explained. Moreover, the bureaucratic dynamics of the hospital militate against over-keen enthusiastic investigations of even the more suspicious deaths. In most of the celebrated medical murder cases, offenders had already attracted widespread suspicions from colleagues long before any external law enforcement agencies were involved, and often the killers had earned informal nicknames like “angel of death.” Even when such rumors became intolerable, hospitals and medical authorities would dismiss or transfer a suspected offender,

rather than initiate a serious investigation of him or her, so that the crimes would recommence at a new facility. To quote a review of a recent study of the Swango case,

Stewart credits Swango's considerable gift for lying and manipulation. But the real fault rests, he argues, with medical authorities, ... who, with some honorable exceptions, closed ranks in misplaced professional solidarity. They feared publicity. They feared lawsuits, not only by patients and their families but also by Swango. A snobbery of the professional class system asserted itself: Medical authorities tended to believe a doctor's word over nurses' eyewitness accounts. (Morrow 1999)

As a consequence of such attitudes, the victims of medical killers died without causing official concern, much like pauper street children in Pakistan or Colombia.

In most of the notorious cases, medical crimes thus went unreported until police intervention was promoted by some egregious incident, or perhaps by a confession. Only at that point would the record of crimes come to light, though in many cases these criminal careers had been in progress for many years or perhaps decades. In addition to being very difficult to detect, these crimes are also hard to prosecute, and thus to form an accurate picture of the whole case. When a sex killer has been arrested, fairly straightforward medical tests will probably determine swiftly that this suspect was indeed involved directly in (say) three of twenty murders in a series, and the case can be closed without too much difficulty. In a medical case, however, it is all but impossible to achieve such certainty without full cooperation from the accused. Identifying cases of murder requires detailed medical expertise, because of the difficulty of determining the cause of death so many years after the actual incident, and the lack of obvious physical signs like cut-marks or bullet wounds. If the offender is a doctor or surgeon, it is very likely that the accused will marshal expert witnesses to challenge the prosecution at every stage. Even if a conviction is achieved, the full scope of

the crimes will virtually never be proven. Most of the murders reputedly connected with Michael Swango remain unprosecuted (Stewart 2000).

Often, the resulting statistics are extremely unreliable, but since offenders had got away with their misdeeds for so long, victim totals in medical murders are often shockingly large. Donald Harvey probably killed almost sixty people between 1970 and 1987, while some sources suggest that Swango claimed over a hundred lives: others suggest a total nearer 35. Within the last few years, other such “angel of death” cases have surfaced. In a still unresolved case, Efren Saldivar was accused in 1998 of being responsible for perhaps forty or fifty deaths of hospital patients (Lieberman 2000). The following year, Orville Lynn Majors was convicted of six such deaths, but was commonly believed to be linked to perhaps a hundred in all (Dedman 1999). Nor are such cases this a new phenomenon. Arguably, America’s most prolific serial killer may be Amy Archer Gilligan, who according to some accounts might have been responsible for over a hundred deaths in the old people’s facility at which she worked between about 1912 and 1914. In other countries, too, medical killers have been linked to extraordinarily large numbers of victims. In Austria in the early 1990s, a group of medical personnel were linked to the murders of over forty patients (Protzman, 1991). In Great Britain, one of the great crime scandals of modern times involved Dr. Harold Shipman, convicted in 2000 of murdering fifteen women by morphine injections. Estimates of the total number of victims remain uncertain, but the final tally is certainly not less than a hundred, and may well approach two hundred (Carter 2000).

Shipman’s case also points out a particularly disturbing aspect of the medical murder phenomenon, namely that the great majority of such cases involve offenders low or very low in the medical hierarchy, either nurses or nurses’ aides, whose expertise and prestige are both far less than those of trained doctors or surgeons, yet even these have succeeded in escaping

detection for many years. We can only imagine the extreme difficulty of catching or prosecuting a skilled and careful doctor who turns to murder, especially when he or she is protected by the mystique of the profession. The Shipman affair illustrates just how enormous is the damage which can potentially be caused by such a relatively protected individual.

The difficulty of detecting and investigating such crimes also suggests that the dark figure of unknown crimes is far larger in medical cases than for other types of homicide, such as “ripper” sex murders. Put in the crudest terms, if a woman is found disemboweled or with her throat cut, it is immediately obvious that she has been murdered, and if other crimes of a similar type occur in the same region, then even the slowest-witted police agency or prosecutor appreciates the likelihood that a serial offender is at work. Once an offender has been linked to one crime, it is usually not too difficult to connect the same protagonist to some or all of the remaining acts in the presumed series. By contrast, the fact that a medical predator is “working” a particular hospital or old age home does not by definition come to light for many years, if at all, and the odds that an offender can escape detection altogether are very high. While the number of “ripper” murder series of which we become aware is probably a close approximation of the number of crimes which actually occur, the medical serial murders which come to public knowledge are only a small proportion of the whole, and perhaps no more than a minuscule fraction.

Medical serial killers are multiply significant for the study of serial murder, not least in making nonsense of the standard explanations of the offense. So much of the literature speaks in terms of “lust-murder,” implying a linkage to perverse or excessive sexuality, yet the overt sexual content in most medical murders is slim to non-existent. We might perhaps argue that medical crimes are indeed sexual because they are above all an expression of

power over the victim, and that that is in itself a thinly veiled form of sexual expression, but it is simply inaccurate to speak of these in the same breath as “sex killers.” Indeed, if all such aggressive or violent behavior is ultimately sexual, then we should extend the term “sex crime” to all violations of law. If medical murders are not sex killings, then other more accurate terms suggest themselves. We should perhaps see these crimes as “lust-murders” in the original German sense of the term, lustmörd, of which the English term is a mistranslation: the original sense implies that the crime is “killing for pleasure,” recreational homicide.

In terms of the severity of the offense, there is no question that medical killers stand at the apex of the serial murder problem, and that is only to speak of the offenders of whom we know. Probably such cases account for a considerable majority of serial killings. If we were to list the ten or twenty most prolific killers in the United States in the last quarter century, even the known medical killers, doctors, nurses and anesthetists, would probably constitute a sizable proportion, and probably a large majority. Yet by and large, these “star” killers remain almost entirely unknown in popular culture, and are treated only rarely in true crime books. There are exceptions - Donald Harvey attracted much notice, and the Harold Shipman case ignited public panic in the United Kingdom - but most are far more obscure, and indeed are often treated as a separate topic only tangentially related to “real” serial murder, unofficially defined as the realm of the sadistic sex killer, the Bundy or Gacy. The gap between image and reality is all the greater when the medical killer is a woman since, as all the world knows, or believes it knows, women are virtually never serial killers: real serial killers are (surely) rippers.

Constructing Serial Murder

Many reasons can be suggested why rippers gain more public attention than medical killers, and analyzing these tells us much about the diverse and paradoxical appeals of the serial murder theme in popular culture (Tithecott, 1997; Fisher 1997; Sharrett, ed., 1999; Simpson, 2000). Purely from a media perspective, a “traditional” sex murder series offers wonderful copy, because it is probably a long-running story with inherent drama and a build-up of tension over months or even years, in which the public can be tantalized with every new lead and disappointment, and is offered so many different characters as targets for blame or sympathy. The media may build up one police officer as a hero, identify a victim’s relative as a spokesperson for outraged innocence, and so on. All the elements of drama are present. In contrast, medical murders only come to light at the end of a series, and lack such ongoing drama. And while the trials might be sensational events, they often bog down in conflicts over medical details which win little public attention.

Also, crucially, medical murders lack the sexual elements which often present a pornographic gilding to serial murder cases. No matter how earnest the statements of media presenters that they are merely seeking to reveal the seamy environment which forms the backdrop to a series of ripper murders, all too often such ventures become salacious in their own right, with depictions of scantily clad prostitutes. Moreover, there is an undeniable sexual element in the true crime literature on serial murder, which so frequently emphasizes (for instance) that victims are young, attractive, stunning, models and coeds, pretty hitchhikers, “lovely victims,” being stalked or hunted by monstrous male predators. Books with such themes vastly outnumber cases in which victims are young men or elderly people of either sex, while accounts of the serial murder of children are very rare. And while we do have books on cases like Jeffrey Dahmer, who murdered young men, we never hear that the victims were young, handsome, attractive, or the usual buzzwords confined to women. It

seems beyond argument that the serial murder literature has a powerful soft-core pornographic appeal, which is simply not feasible in the case of medical killers. Even the most imaginative writer of true crime fact or fiction finds it next to impossible to put a sexually exciting spin on the multiple murders of elderly hospital patients.

Sex killers are also much more valuable than medical murderers in terms of the cultural and moral messages which can be extracted from their cases. This can be understood if we examine the themes presented in the typical media coverage of serial murder, namely that offenders are monsters and savages, cannibals and ghouls, the ultimate nightmare, and moreover that they could be one's next door neighbor. Presenting inflated statistics about the scale of serial murder activity gives the impression that a new Bundy or Dahmer could strike at any time, and that the reader or viewer could be the next victim: they are everywhere. The appeal to overwhelming fear seems curious, in that it is likely to intimidate and discomfort a potential media audience, but this can be explained if it is placed in the context of what we might call the underlying mythology of the genre. The books postulate the existence of extremely dangerous and threatening individuals, who undertake the worst crimes imaginable; but there are also factors which make them perhaps less threatening than "everyday" crime, and which counter-act their threat potential. Violent crime in this context is linked to a handful of very evil individuals, and understanding this menace is less difficult than comprehending the diverse social factors which drive the faceless robbers, rapists and murderers of real life. Crime can thus be personalized and individualized. Once such an individual has been identified, he can be fought, defeated and captured.

In popular culture and media treatments, multiple homicide can be comprehended with a certainty that is lacking in real life. There are very few authentic cases where it can be

said with certainty that we know the exact number of killings associated with a particular offender, or if in fact a genuine series even existed. In contrast, readers of a novel or true crime study are permitted the illusion that they can observe the actions of the killer from within, so that there is never serious doubt about matters like an individual's guilt, or the scale of his crimes. Portraying the evil of a serial killer thus makes the conceptualization of crime more manageable, simpler, and perhaps ultimately, less rather than more frightening. Moreover, virtually all the books and films on serial murder portray not only the actions of the villains themselves, but also of the heroic police, detectives or criminologists who pursue and (almost invariably) apprehend them. Where the greatest villains are involved, it is only natural that the agents of society should be presented as uniquely able, courageous and skilled, an idealization that is most apparent in accounts of the "mind-hunters" like the FBI's John Douglas or Robert Ressler (Ressler and Shachtman 1992; Douglas and Olshaker 1995, 1997, 1998; Michaud and Hazelwood 1998). Even with books that address unsolved cases, the emphasis is still on the complex mechanics of the process of detection, and the ways in which the forces of rationality and law repeatedly approach their criminal quarry.

If we accept this as an accurate description of the popular mythology of serial murder, then we see immediately that medical murders simply violate all these rules at every point. These are not stories of investigation, detection, mindhunting and profiling: at best, they are tales of offenders being caught by dumb luck or confession. The forces of rationality simply do not win in such tales. Nor, as we have seen, do we usually know the scale of the offenses, whether (for instance) Amy Archer Gilligan killed a hundred patients, or three, or none at all. Worse, the stories are not just frightening in the sense of offering a mild frisson, they are authentically nightmarish in posing an uncontrolled and uncontrollable danger which could befall any one of us, or any member of our families. Going into a

hospital or old people's home is traumatic enough in the first place, without having to suspect that any dose of medicine might result in death at the hands of a malicious doctor or nurse. Medical murder is too real, too authentically terrifying, to be channeled and sanitized in the form of popular culture treatments.

Unconstructed Serial Murder

The mythology of serial murder thus focuses on one type of killer rather than others; but even then, it is only certain rippers and sex killers who become icons, and not others. Figures presented by Hickey and others also show that the vast majority of serial murder cases receive remarkably little public attention, in the sense of becoming news stories at a national level, as opposed to within a particular region or city. There is little or correlation between the notoriety of a given case and (say) the number of victims. If we were to list the American cases of the last quarter century with the largest reasonably well-established totals of victims, then the vast majority of such offenders would have next to no name recognition, in striking contrast to legends like Gacy or Dahmer: I am thinking of figures like Coral E. Watts, Larry Eyler, or Gerald Stano. Much serial murder - even the cases with the largest victim totals - goes largely unnoticed outside the immediate region. If such cases ever are mentioned in national media, it is at most fleetingly. What decides whether a case earns fame, or sinks into oblivion?

To illustrate this situation, we might consider the mid-late 1990s, when has not played a major role in the media, at least on anything like the same scale as the "Dahmer period" of 1991-92. There have been the usual run of documentaries and true crime shows about the "classic" cases (and I recognize the painful inappropriateness of using such terminology to describe such gruesome affairs), and a considerable array of fictional treatments, like Thomas Harris' novel Hannibal, as well as films like Copycat, Seven, Urban

Legend, Nightwatch, and the Scream series (for true-crime studies, see Keers and St. Pierre 1996; Masters 1996; Lasseter 1997; Burn 1998; Jackson 1998). Nevertheless, very few contemporary incidents have registered on the public consciousness to anything like the same extent as Dahmer. The only real exception was the 1997 story of Andrew Cunanan, who earned celebrity by killing world-famous designer Gianni Versace, and whose flight from justice occurred at a singularly slow time for world and national news (Clarkson 1997; Orth 1999). He briefly enjoyed a reputation equivalent to that of other criminal “stars” though he claimed far fewer victims than many others in these years, perhaps four or five in all.

Since then, no case has grabbed the headlines in anything like the same way, though as the following table suggests, the phenomenon itself has continued unchecked.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Several points emerge from this table. First, I make absolutely no claim that it is in any sense comprehensive, and the information is drawn fairly randomly from news media sources to which I happen to have access, particularly the Los Angeles Times and New York Times: I have certainly missed cases, including major ones. Yet even such a superficial examination of the media indicates that significant serial murder cases are still coming to light at the rate of, say, six or eight each year. If we consider the various stages through which a story might pass, from discovery of the murders through investigation, arrest, trial and appeal, it is reasonable to say that some serial murder stories are always in the news somewhere, and this is all the more true when sensational foreign cases are taken into account. And while precise figures are not available, the rate at which cases came to light in this period seems almost exactly what it would have been at any point over the last thirty years or so.

Second, none of these recent cases comes anywhere close to the Dahmer or Gacy affairs in terms of national, leave alone global, notoriety. Certainly some of the stories attracted strong regional interest, notably the long-running Yosemite investigation in California and the Resendiz “Railroad Killer” affair in Texas, while the Resendiz tale made brief national headlines in the summer of 1999. But late night comedians do not make off-color jokes about these individuals, nor can they expect instant name recognition for Ronald Macon, Robert Yates or Elton Jackson. Nor are there web-sites devoted to these “stars.” There may in time be true crime potboilers on some or all of the cases, but the stories are unlikely to gain widespread infamy, and will be known only to the true aficionados (and many such do exist). What has been conspicuously lacking in these years is the kind of cultural or political manifestations which were so very evident in the mid-1980s or the early 1990s. Since the mid-1990s, we have had no congressional hearings on the serial killer menace (For the last such, see Serial killers and child abductions, 1996). There have not been breathless television documentaries in which experts present remarkable statistics about the supposedly vast scale of the serial murder danger. We have heard no claims of a murder “epidemic”, a “growing menace.” Nor have activists claimed the recent cases as they once did those of Bundy or Dahmer, claiming for instance that case X illustrated pervasive male violence towards women, or symbolized the logical consequences of anti-gay propaganda, moral degeneracy, or violent media content. In this sense, we can say that serial murder in the last few years has remained a largely unconstructed social problem. None of the cases has been “made to mean.”

Thirdly, there is no intrinsic or obvious reason why the cases in this period should be so relatively obscure. They are in no sense less interesting or important than what might be termed the “canonical” accounts of Bundy, Dahmer and the rest. To take specific instances,

any one of the stories here offered the potential for major media excitement or extensive popular culture treatments. Several were major cases in the sense of involving large number of victims: Andre Crawford and Ronald Macon were both reportedly connected with the deaths of ten or more individuals, little short of the total attributed to Dahmer.

Other cases had quite sensational or novel elements which one might have thought would have brought them to public attention. Perhaps the most sensational was the Yosemite case, which came to light after the disappearance of three women, and the ensuing search. Police wrongly accused several small time criminals of the murders, before arresting Cary Stayner, a motel handyman whose own background had some astonishing features. In 1972, his seven year old younger brother was kidnapped by a pedophile who kept him prisoner for over seven years: the case was later made into a television miniseries. The Robinson case was highly innovative because it brought up the ever-popular media nightmare of Internet sex: using the guide of “Slavemaster,,” the man had apparently contacted women over the Net with a view to sadomasochistic sexual encounters, and several had been killed. Another case which by all rights should have swiftly entered the realm of legend is that of Robert Yates, who was arrested for a series of perhaps ten killings, though police were attempting to link him to dozens more in Canada as well as Germany. If true, that would make him a more destructive figure than Gacy, Bundy or Dahmer - and obviously far more than Cunanan. The concatenation of major investigations and arrests across the country in the Summer and Fall of 1999 should, by any reasonable expectation, should have provoked the media to map these incidents together, to generate a perceived “wave” or general problem: yet it clearly did no such thing.

In addition, the vast majority of these cases exactly fit public expectations of what a serial murder case should look like, and would thus naturally slot into preestablished frames

of understanding. Sometimes, the mesh with popular culture imagery is almost perfect: Cary Stayner's job as a motel handyman placed him in a category all but indistinguishable from Norman Bates, perhaps the prototypical fictional serial killer. Again, the Yates case involved an individual who epitomized the public stereotype of a serial killer, as a white man in his thirties or forties, often a family man who kept the homicidal aspects of his career a dreadful secret. Yates himself was at the time of the arrest a 47-year-old married father of five, and virtually all his known or suspected victims were prostitutes. Wayne Ford, similarly, seems to fit the classic stereotype of a ripper, yet the case remains virtually unreported outside California.

The Historical Moment

Why, in short, have these cases not been appropriated as part of a general social problem? In order to understand this, it is helpful to contrast the political setting of the late 1990s with that of the earlier periods in which serial; murder was seen as uniquely threatening, namely the early 1980s and early 1990s. Just what was different about this recent epoch? Obviously serial murder was not new in 1980 or 1983, whether as a source of concern for police or as a theme in popular culture. Several different reasons can be suggested, including the nature of interest group politics. As I have suggested elsewhere, both in the early 1980s and early 1990s, serial murder provided a convenient weapon for federal criminal justice agencies seeking to expand the scope of their powers and resources, and they were very successful in this, whereas no such bureaucratic campaigns were under way in the most recent period. Yet this can only offer a partial explanation, since even the most dedicated official media campaign can only succeed if it strikes a chord with a large section of the public, who have their own grounds for accepting the claims made as plausible and threatening (Jenkins 1994).

In this context, I suggest that in both (say) 1983 and 1991, there were distinctive social and political factors which ensured a receptive audience for the claims made by the Justice Department and other agencies, factors which no longer prevail to anything like the same extent. In both the periods during which serial murder was constructed as a major social problem, the offense became particularly valuable for diverse ideological causes. Some were conservative, moralists who saw the crimes of a Bundy or Gacy as emblematic of the sexual hedonism and excess of the recent past. Other activists, however, were located on the left of the political divide, at a time when liberals or radicals saw themselves as particularly embattled because they were campaigning against what were seen as profoundly unsympathetic conservative administrations at national level. In terms of making and filtering claims about serial murder, these active groups included feminists, during times of uniquely intense gender politics; gay rights militants; and ethnic minority leaders. However ironically, claims made by conservative bureaucratic agencies appealed across a broad political spectrum, but including many left-liberal groups, all of whom had a vested interest in stressing the scope and harmfulness of serial homicide. Serial murder was valuable because it seemed to offer some form of rhetorical weapon, some symbolic association, for several diverse constituencies. The left/liberal emphasis explains why serial homicide in the early 1990s was particularly constructed as white, male violence, an image which at best offers only a partial truth (Jenkins 1994, 1998).

As I have suggested elsewhere, these political coalitions were particularly evident both in the 1983-85 and 1991-92 periods, the two crucial stages in the evolution of the modern serial murder stereotype. In the early 1980s, for instance, feminist campaigning over male sexual violence was at its height, with the enormous publicity accorded to sexual threats against women and children, and the projection of Ted Bundy as a personification of the

rapist-killer. A sense of distinctively racial violence was reinforced by the near-panic which prevailed during the Atlanta child murders of 1980-81, when it was commonly believed that white individuals or groupings were targeting black children. Racial and sexual fears contributed mightily to promoting public acceptance of far-reaching claims about serial murder. This political context was evident from the types of serial homicide which were most in the spotlight, namely sexual killings. Repeatedly in the media, and in congressional hearings, the reiterated theme was that serial murder was explicitly and solely a sexual offense, so that (for example) a woman who poisoned several husbands could not be a serial killer, and it was hotly debated whether a female serial killer could even exist.

Similar alignments reappeared during the period 1991-92, during which gender and racial conflicts were again much in evidence. This was for instance the time of the Tailhook scandal, the Anita Hill hearings, and widespread violence against abortion facilities. Meanwhile, national publicity was accorded to sensational charges of sexual abuse directed against women and children, as the media reported far-reaching claims about Satanic and ritual abuse, and patients recovering memories of incest during therapy. The politics of homosexuality and gay rights were also to the fore in these years, while racial animosities were symbolized by the Rodney King trial and the Los Angeles riots of 1992. It is not surprising that issues like gender, race and sexual orientation pervaded the public discourse of serial murder, in a time marked by the Dahmer and Wuornos cases, and fictional treatments like The Silence of the Lambs.

Conversely, the cultural politics of the late 1990s were radically different. Whether in terms of race, gender or sexual orientation, activists felt far less threatened or embattled in the time of a Democratic Clinton administration, which liberal and radical groups by and large supported. The issues at stake politically were very different, and serial murder had far

less rhetorical resonance in this context. In contrast, protests about violence largely shifted from serial murder, as in the Reagan or Bush years, to hate crimes in the Clinton era, and hate crime came to occupy center stage in liberal demonology. Whereas the gender politics of the conservative Republican years found a savage face in figures like Ted Bundy, liberal concerns in the Clinton years were epitomized by the murder of young homosexual man Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, in October 1998. Put crudely, serial murder had lost its political or cultural utility, and without claims-makers or activists, it was no longer constructed as a pressing threat. Cases which a decade earlier would have become archetypal, symbols of what was wrong with American society were now deplored merely as instances of human brutality, lamentable to be sure, but carrying few wider cultural messages. Serial killings still occurred, but serial murder as a social problem no longer existed..

Several preconditions have to exist before serial murder cases can acquire significance as major cultural markers. They must fit official and public stereotypes, but must also occur in a social or political situation when they offer the possibility of rhetorical exploitation, and it is largely a matter of chance whether any given case comes to light at a particularly fruitful time for such cultural work. The fascination with serial murder, and with particular offenders, is thus richly informative about the cultural dimensions of crime, although the offense itself has never been anything but extremely marginal to the realities of violent crime. Public fascination with figures like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer must be seen as a response to a rich mythological tradition, rather than to an objective social problem.

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Abbreviations:

LAT Los Angeles Times

NYT New York Times

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TABLE ONE
SERIAL MURDER CASES 1998-2001

*Russell Ellwood, Louisiana

On trial 1998-99 for murder. Suspected of connection with 25+ homicides committed in southern Louisiana in the early-1990s

*Efren Saldivar, California.

Accused in 1998 of being an “angel of death,” responsible for perhaps forty or fifty deaths of hospital patients. The case remains unresolved. (Lieberman 2000)

*Wayne Adam Ford, Eureka, CA.

Alleged to have killed six women in 1997 and 1998, in circumstances of extreme sexual mutilation (Curtius, Gorman, and Ourlian 1998)

*Elton Jackson, Virginia.

Charged with one death in a reputed series of twelve murders between 1987 and 1998 (“Man Suspected In Serial Killing Goes on Trial,” 1998)

*Kendall Francois, Poughkeepsie, NY.

arrested September 1998 in connection with a murder series of perhaps eight prostitutes (Berger and Gross, 1998)

*David Parker Ray, New Mexico.

Arrested April 1999 in the sex torture and imprisonment of young women; police suggested linkages to several murders. (Contreras 1999)

*Rafael Reséndez-Ramirez (“Maturino Resendiz”), Texas, Illinois and Kentucky.

Killed several victims between 1997 and 1999 in the so-called “railroad killings” (“Houston Jury Weighing Fate of Serial Killer,” 2000)

*Cary Stayner, Yosemite.

Arrested July 1999 in the deaths of four women. (Bailey and Arax 1999)

*Ronald Macon, Chicago.

Accused of the deaths of up to thirteen women, October 1999 (Eig 1999; “Suspect Charged in Chicago Killings,” 1999)

*Orville Lynn Majors, Indiana.

Convicted November 1999 of six hospital murders, but suspected in perhaps a hundred more. (Dedman 1999)

*Juan Chavez, Los Angeles.

Sentenced 1999 for the deaths of several gay victims in the 1980s. (Mozingo 1999)

*Andre Crawford, Chicago.

In February 2000, accused of the deaths of ten women over the period 1993-99 (“Man Admits Serial Killings,” 2000)

- *John Eric Armstrong, Michigan
Accused of several murders of women in the US, and confessed to many more around the world (Hall 2000)
- *Daniel Blank, Louisiana
In 2000, Blank was on trial for six murders committed in 1996-97 (Swerczek 2000)
- *Robert L. Yates Jr., Spokane and Tacoma.
In May 2000, accused of a murder series which had claimed perhaps twenty women, mainly prostitutes (Walter 2000)
- *John Edward Robinson, Kansas,
June 2000, accused of murdering at least ten women, mainly encountered via the Internet (Thomas and McFadden 2000)
- *Vincent Johnson, New York
Arrested August 2000 in deaths of six women
- *Kristen Gilbert, Massachusetts
Sentenced March 2001 in murders of several hospital patients
- *Richard W. Rogers Jr, New York
Suspected May 2001 in several gay murders over the 1990s
- *Paul F. Runge, Chicago
Charged in seven-plus murders over the 1990s
- *Boston Strangler case, Massachusetts
Late 2001 - intense publicity surrounded new investigations of this 1960s case
- *Geoffrey Griffin, Chicago
Charged in deaths of seven women in 2000
- *Gary Leon Ridgway, Washington State
Arrested December 2001 as suspect in 1980s Green River murders
- *Ray Dell Sims, California
Accused December 2001 in four murders in 1970s