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Archetype, Fantasy, and Vital Outrage: A Conversation with Sarah Marshall

Sarah Marshall
samarshall@wisc.edu

Meghan O'Hara
The University of Western Ontario, mohara4@uwo.ca

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Archetype, Fantasy, and Vital Outrage: A Conversation with Sarah Marshall

Sarah Marshall* and Meghan O’Hara**

Editor’s note: this interview took place through an email exchange between Meghan O’Hara and Sarah Marshall from May 16th, 2016, to July 29th, 2016.

To: Sarah Marshall
From: Meghan O’Hara
Subject: Interview questions

Hi Sarah,

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this email exchange with me.

Justyna’s paper points to opposing cultural and social desires: on the one hand, we want to demonize capital criminals in order to justify their treatment by the justice system, and on the other hand,

we seek out and consume stories which re-humanize them. Why are we, as consumers, so ready to accept the idea of the capital criminal as monster, while at the same time we voraciously read/watch narratives which rehumanize these same figures? I’m fascinated by the temporality of this—first, we’re willing to buy into the (often media produced) image of the criminal as inhuman and/or monstrous, and it is only *after* that point that we’re willing to potentially recognize the criminal’s humanity? I’m also particularly interested in the form and the immense popularity of these re-humanizing narratives. I’m speaking here specifically of the more recent examples like Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos’ Netflix series *Making a Murderer* (2015), but also documentaries like Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky’s *Paradise*

**Sarah Marshall spent the summer of 2016 interning with the Georgia Innocence Project and deciding whether or not to apply to law school. The answer was “not.” She is currently trying to figure out what else “not” entails.*

***Meghan O’Hara is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English and Writing Studies at Western University, where she researches contemporary performance practice and affect theory. She is also Managing Operations Editor at Word Hoard.*

Lost trilogy (as well as Amy J. Berg's *West of Memphis* [2012]), Werner Herzog's *Into the Abyss* (2012), or Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* (1988). What do you think fuels the public's interest in such narratives? Speaking specifically about *Making a Murderer*, what do you think is behind viewers' urges to not only watch the series, but also to become actively involved (via online petitions, or developing fan theories, etc.) in the case it presents?

Looking forward to hearing what you think!

Best,
Meghan

To: Meghan O'Hara
From: Sarah Marshall
Subject: RE: Interview questions

Dear Meghan,

I think—or at least, I like to think—that the combination of narratives that Justyna's paper reflects may come from a sea change in our cultural approaches to crime. To some degree, this has to do with our growing understanding that the American criminal justice system is marred not just by occasional mistakes, but also by grave, fundamental flaws. Most of the re-humanizing narratives you mention—*Making a Murderer*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Thin Blue Line*—focus, at least in part, on the stories of men

who were convicted of crimes that they did not commit.

I think we are beginning to countenance the fact that our legal system is capable of depriving the innocent of their liberty, and sometimes of their lives, and I think this growing awareness may come, in part, from our increasing mainstream awareness not just of the subjectivity of criminal trials, but of police brutality. All of the central figures in the above narratives are white, but it seems as if white America's growing awareness of wrongful convictions like the ones depicted above has, to an extent, gone hand in hand with its growing comprehension of the police brutality endured by people of color.

I wonder whether Americans' ability to challenge the validity, the *justness*, of one element of the criminal justice system has allowed us to regard the entire system more critically, to entertain greater doubts, and even to feel more willing to maintain the presumption of innocence when we learn the details of a given case. When we take in a narrative as devastating as *Making a Murderer*, our ability to effect change in what small, workaday way we can—by voting, by writing to an elected official, by signing a petition—could and should remain dwarfed by our desire for greater change. Regarding the world around us more critically, and continuing to educate ourselves and each other as opportunity allows, is one way of keeping this spark

alive. Our desire to know more is, whether we know it or not, a desire to become better citizens, and better actors in our legal system, no matter how small those roles may be.

Looking forward to continuing our conversation, and all my best,
Sarah

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To: Sarah Marshall
From: Meghan O'Hara
Subject: RE: RE: Interview questions

Hi Sarah,

I think you're absolutely right to point to a rise in mainstream public criticism of the ways that the legal system often operates. However, I'd also like to dwell briefly on the public's role in what comes before the redemption stories—that is to say, the crimes, trials, and convictions. A common theme among these narratives (I'm again thinking specifically here of *Paradise Lost* or *Making a Murderer*) is the demonization of the suspect or criminal in the court of public opinion immediately following the crime, during the trial, or both. In the *Paradise Lost* trilogy, for example, much of the public's support for the suspects (Jessie Misskelley, Damien Echols, and Jason Baldwin) to be found guilty and

receive sentences of life in prison or even death is the result of the characterization of the three young men as Satanists—a particularly damning depiction in their Evangelical Christian town. Similarly, in *Making a Murderer*, Steven Avery's earlier wrongful conviction, particularly because of its sexual nature, seems to cast him as already deviant in the eyes of the public before he is even tried for Teresa Halbach's murder. For me, these examples demonstrate a readiness (perhaps even an eagerness) to accept and consume the image of the suspect or criminal as “monstrous.” I'm fascinated, then, by the turn towards re-humanizing narratives in the extended aftermath of a crime: the degree of sympathy demanded by such narratives seems equal to the amount of hatred or fear incited by the original “monstrous” image. As such, I wonder: must these two characterizations (of the monstrous and the human) exist in some sort of cultural symbiosis? Must narratives—and I use this term broadly here so as to include news media—create monsters for us to fear so that we might subsequently consume with equal voraciousness other narratives, which not only seek to question and reduce that fear, but also to grant us the opportunity to actively dismantle the image we once (perhaps) bought into?

Best,
Meghan

To: Meghan O'Hara
 From: Sarah Marshall
 Subject: RE: RE: RE: Interview questions

I'm fascinated by this question, because it suggests a generative approach to what I see as a broad cultural trend: the criminal justice narrative as a hero's journey. Simply put, the only thing more troubling than the realization that we impose plots on criminal trials is the fact that they often end up with pretty much the same plot as *Jaws*, or any other similar parable of masculinity: there is a force of evil, and there is a good man who must destroy it. The man either proves or attains his goodness through the destruction of an evil force, which may or may not take human form. How else but by destroying evil can goodness prove itself? these stories ask. And perhaps they ask, also: how can goodness *exist* without evil to throw it into counterpoint?

I love the way this philosophy manifests in fictional crime narratives about the hero who gets *too close* to the evil it is his job to combat, and who may even begin to empathize with its bearer. (It's hard to think of a more consistent use of this trope than in Thomas Harris' and eventually Bryan Fuller's saga of Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter.) The underlying assumption here is that evil is contagious, and that we must only get close to these specimens in order to destroy them.

How, then, do these dynamics map onto narratives in which we feel we are able to communally rescue an exoneree from the vilified archetype he has been cast as, and which has previously cloaked his humanity? I think our interest in not just disassembling but examining these archetypal forms suggests a more enduring interest in the forms themselves—that we may suspect they are overly simplistic not just when they shroud the innocent, but when we apply them to any human being, no matter how grave their offenses may be. If we see how much potential a figure like Damien Echols had and has to be read as the epitome of soullessness or the epitome of victimhood, we may realize how arbitrary the shape of any narrative's villain truly is, and see that this is an archetype that can only exist in the fables we distill from reality, but not within reality itself.

My best,
 Sarah

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To: Sarah Marshall
 From: Meghan O'Hara
 Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: Interview questions

I'm really interested in your reading of the way that narrative and archetype can define how we understand and therefore

react to criminality. I wonder if, in light of recent events—the killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, as well as the numerous other tragically similar cases in recent years—we might return to your earlier point about the racial identities of those typically involved in mainstream redemption stories. Quite problematically, in the examples we've cited, the re-humanized criminal is white. Lately, I've been thinking about how narratives of villainy or criminality are not just called into being as a crime is committed or prosecuted, but also exist in advance of any one individual or event. Could you reflect on the pre-existence of the archetypes you've spoken about? I'd also be interested in discussing how archetypes define the notion of threat—in what ways are these social narratives connected to our affects, even on an individual level? I ask because the perception of threat seems intimately linked to what we've been discussing: narratives define interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions by labelling certain bodies as threatening, and defining which lives “matter,” or to borrow Judith Butler's term, are “grievable.” Can the narrative of progress towards redemption and goodness which is so popular in the mainstream be equally possible for all members of our society? Are there alternative forms (such as, perhaps, the occupation of public space for protest)? How might we also understand the videos documenting these killings and

their circulation (in the media, online) in terms of narratives of identity and justice?

Best,
Meghan

To: Meghan O'Hara
From: Sarah Marshall
Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Interview questions

I recently wrote a piece reconsidering the mythos of Ted Bundy, trying to interrogate just *what*, exactly, made his crimes such a communal robbing of innocence, and why he is now a kind of American true crime icon—the greatest American serial killer.

I think part of this had to do with the fact that, during the mid-seventies, when he was at large, the term “serial killer” hadn't yet made its way into everyday parlance, and for this reason his crimes seemed not just shocking, but *new*. We embraced the idea that Bundy, and the other serial killers whose crimes followed his (ignoring those that had preceded him and doubtless gone unnoticed in large part because investigative techniques yet sophisticated enough to detect them), were examples of some new evolutionary trend—the emergence of a psychopathic strain of humanity.

The myths about Bundy's brilliance suggest that we took a strange kind of comfort in this story. It meant that humans were

getting ruthless and reptilian, but it also meant we were getting *smarter*. Most disturbing of all though, I think, is how our attraction to the image of the brilliant psychopath (even when he is depicted as anything but brilliant) suggests that we think such behavior implies not disability, but strength. Does this mean we believe, on some level, that we would be better off if we could be cut loose from the demands of empathy and love, and become completely self-serving?

I think this is a fantasy we do indulge in from time to time, if not on an individual level then certainly through our broader cultural trends. And it's easy to see why. There is nothing more difficult or demanding than forming meaningful relationships with those around us. There is nothing more complex than growing and nourishing our secure attachments with the people we love. There is nothing more potentially wrenching than forming these attachments, because loving means risking loss, pain, and heartbreak. There is, I think, simply nothing more painful than living in the world in an emotionally present way—especially when doing so means waking up, looking at a video of a fellow human being breathing their last because they have been shot without provocation, and thinking: *this is the world I live in*.

The depth of the pain we must countenance in times like these—and at every time, if we're going to be honest—makes

the fantasy we engage in so we can distance ourselves from this pain somewhat comprehensible, though not acceptable. Internalized racism, even of the most quiet and insidious variety, allows white citizens to look at the deaths of people of color and say, *this person died because they did something wrong*. It's an immensely destructive logic. It's an unacceptable response. But it's also worth noting that it effectively saves the observer from acknowledging something deeply painful not just about their nation or their culture, but about the world they live in: *an innocent person has been murdered*.

Not just one or two people but countless people are dying, not because they have done anything wrong, but because Americans live in a country that, on an essential level, does not value or protect citizens of color. We have to accept this. But if we wish to shield ourselves from the intrinsic pain of this awareness, we have a wealth of racist fantasy with which to protect ourselves. I can't entirely blame someone who shields themselves with this fantasy: I can hold them accountable, I can sit with them and try to bring them to a place from which they are ready to see the truth, but I can't say that the method they are using to comfort themselves isn't one I have never used in the past. I am ashamed of this fact, and I remind myself of it daily. For me, this is part of doing the work it takes to remind yourself that empathy is not a knee-jerk reaction, and that our prejudices can

inform our instincts far more powerfully than our higher natures. It takes daily care and effort to be emotionally present within this world. It is a painful endeavor. It makes us vulnerable. But it also makes us strong.

When people talk about Ted Bundy, they tend to fall back on the term “middle-class”: e.g., how could anyone so *middle-class* commit such terrible crimes? (See also: Jeffrey Dahmer, Paul Bernardo, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, to name just a very few.) What we're often really saying, I think, is *white*: how could a *white* man do these things, when our culture teaches us that white men are not needlessly violent, and that white women cannot expect to be the victims of violence unless they have done something wrong?

Ted Bundy was so fascinating to us because he broke this social contract. He enacted his violence on “grievable” victims who had done nothing “wrong” (e.g. had not been demonstrably independent, rebellious, flirty, aimless, “promiscuous,” or poor). He also showed us that white patriarchal masculinity contains a tremendous potential for violence: he grew up in a society that taught men to see women as possessions. He was a sick man whose mental illness led him to take the logic of a sick society to its extreme. By insisting that he was a “psychopath”—a breed apart, a brilliant killing machine, intrinsically separate not just from American society but from the human race—we allow ourselves to

ignore how much his crimes can tell us about ourselves.

—Sarah

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To: Sarah Marshall
From: Meghan O'Hara
Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Interview questions

You mention the “fantasies” which often work to sustain our blissful ignorance towards the world around us, and I'd like to close our interview by discussing the impact of these fantasies. One of the things that troubles me about viewers' participation in the wake of *Making a Murderer* is the amount of fantasy involved: the viral nature of the documentary series calls spectators to share and discuss with friends, to post about it on social media, both of which perform one's identity as a critically thinking, socially-minded, and generally aware member of society. While I agree with your earlier point that public awareness about the injustices of the criminal system is generally a good thing, I'm a bit skeptical about the value of this public response to the documentary. Yes, there was a widely supported petition to the White House (which garnered enough signatures to earn an official response from the government), but this attempt at activism was largely

misguided considering the White House is neither responsible for nor capable of pardoning Stephen Avery or Brendan Dassey. Further, while it's true that the show's popularity has resulted in Avery finding a new lawyer for his case, who plans to begin the appeal process, this development is more related to the content of the documentary, rather than the strength of fan response. I offer this largescale, popularized fan participation in comparison to Black Lives Matter, whose activism and calls for justice have not achieved the level of acceptance or support that Avery's case has (for instance, here in Canada, Black Lives Matter's choice to protest at the recent Toronto Pride Parade [a protest which successfully instigated a conversation between Pride organizers and Black Lives Matter activists] was subject to a barrage of popular criticism). Is there some form of fantasy at work here which allows spectators participating through largely passive means to imagine themselves effecting material change? What is behind the resistance to in-person forms of activism, such as protests? (I recognize here that there were several public protests re: *Making a Murderer*, but these were relatively small in comparison to the online response).

Best,
Meghan

To: Meghan O'Hara
From: Sarah Marshall
Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Interview questions

I've been thinking about these questions a great deal lately, as I've been interning with the Georgia Innocence Project (GIP), and one of our clients, Joey Watkins, has become the subject of the *Undisclosed* podcast's second season. The podcast has already inspired a healthy fan following, and a healthy amount of outrage on Joey's behalf: like Adnan Syed, he was convicted of a murder he denied and still denies having anything to do with, on the basis not of any physical evidence but of an unreliable witness' incentivized testimony¹. A great many of the show's fans believe he is innocent. The GIP believes he is innocent. I believe he is innocent. And right now, the best case scenario is that this podcast will garner enough public support—and put enough pressure on Floyd County, Georgia, where Joey was convicted—to help exonerate him.

Of course it's impossible to overstate how wonderful this would be. But even this best-case scenario would, for the most part, lead to a false sense of catharsis, of accomplishment, of rebalancing the scales of justice: if we see Joey's case as an anomaly, the exception that proves the rule that the criminal justice system generally works, then we can comfortably

move on from his story if it reaches a positive conclusion. If it doesn't, then supporters can continue to labour on his behalf, even if their labour takes the forms you've described, which usually benefit the consumers of a narrative far more than they benefit the people it concerns: the petitions, the postings on social media, the general sense of outrage.

I'm interested, generally, in what "outrage" does, or feels like it does. This has been a terrible, bloody summer. We open Facebook and witness homicide. "Streaming video" has new connotations: you scroll down your feed and see footage, perhaps surging into motion without your pressing play, of Philando Castile bleeding to death. So blood streams out of our screens and into our lives; images we may never have encountered just a few years ago now stream into our consciousness, and we must decide what to do with them.

All of this makes me think of the medieval practice of bloodletting—of loosing blood from the body to balance the humors, to correct what doctors of the time deemed to be a malady stemming from blood overwhelming black bile or phlegm. When tragedy strikes, we want to give blood both literally and figuratively: we want to experience pain, drain ourselves of our body's strength and give it to someone in need, or provide some less tangible outpouring of care in the form of a chant, a march, a Facebook post. In the wake of disaster,

blood banks can find themselves overwhelmed with blood they simply cannot use, because the public's need to comfort themselves is greater than the use their act of altruistic self-comfort can provide: notoriously, blood banks were forced to discard the surplus blood they collected, but were unable to store, after September 11th. At the same time, those who donate in times like these are subsequently less likely to donate during annual drives, since they may be unable to donate again, or less motivated to give, as they feel they have already done their part. So blood banks cope first with an unusable surplus, and then with a deficit.

I think our outrage is vital, but it can run the risk of doing more for us than for the people on whose behalf we experience it. Sometimes the blood we give can go to someone who needs it. Sometimes our outrage is constructive. But sometimes the blood we give is less a donation than a bloodletting: we are left with a sense of fear and anger that it hurts to contain, and so we loose it on the world and hope it does some good. Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn't. But the point for us, sometimes, is that we don't have to hold onto it anymore; that our outrage may not have helped someone else find freedom, but has certainly made us feel free.

What I want to bring this back around to—what I find myself thinking about every day in terms of how I relate to tragedy and injustice, because sometimes

I'm able to do this, and sometimes I'm not—is what it means to sit with this outrage, this pain. When I think about Joey's case, I am outraged. When I think about the fact that Joey may someday be out of prison, I am hopeful. But this is just one story among countless stories—countless because we simply don't know how many wrongful convictions take place in America, because we don't have the resources to gain access to that kind of information, let alone to exonerate the innocent.

What we do know is that Joey Watkins was convicted because of issues that plague the legal system not just in Floyd County, and not just in Georgia, but throughout America. Prosecutors in every part of our country make use of incentivized testimony if it supports a theory they believe. Defendants in every part of this country are represented by poorly prepared and, at times, incompetent counsel. Juries in every part of this country are all too likely to convict on the basis not of evidence that demonstrates a defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, but because the defendant *just seems like* they did it. Trials in every part of this country pay lip service to the presumption of innocence, but most citizens and all too many members of the legal community treat it as nothing more than words, no more valuable than the breath it takes to say them.

Joey's story points to a much bigger set of problems than his conviction alone,

and the discomfort it engenders in us—the discomfort any story engenders in us—discomfort we must sit with and try to understand. We have move beyond the question of *how did this happen?* and ask *how often does this happen?* And then, perhaps the most difficult question of all, because it deprives us of easy answers not just about the world but about ourselves: *what can I do that will help the world more than it helps me?*

¹ Please see: <http://www.innocenceproject.org/causes/incentivized-informants/>.