Her Side of The Story: A Textual Analysis of Maggie Nelson, Michelle McNamara and Alice Bolin's autotheoretical texts in relation to Western culture's oppressional silencing of women

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10th Semester Thesis

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31 Mai, 2022

Summary

This thesis is a textual analysis of Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* (2007), Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2018) and Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls* (2018) focused on examining how the authors through their fluid approach to genre become able to articulate how Western culture's obsession with dead girls oppresses women into silence. In order to examine how the three female authors manage to articulate silencing of women, this paper takes a theoretical starting point in queer narratology, which reveals how Nelson and Bolin both express their fluid approaches to genre, as well as emphasize the reality of their personal experiences through metanarrations. In contrast, McNamara does not include such an explicit focus on her role as narrator, and instead to a higher degree dedicates her focus to the dead women in her narration's stories.

Although, the authors create different levels of explicit commentary on their fluid use of genre, they all create queer authorial designs that allow them to blur the lines between themselves and the dead women in their narrations, as well as between personal subjectivity and theoretical objectivity. Thus, it becomes possible to define their texts as being autotheoretical, as they derive the knowledge they use to criticize Western culture's oppressional silencing of women through portrayals of dead girls from their own personal experiences, thereby becoming able to articulate both their own, as well as a majority of other women's experiences with being silenced.

However, the authors feminist messages are challenged through their queer use of both autotheory and true crime features, as their use of poetic license can make their personal experiences untruthful, thereby invalidating the knowledge and theory they derive from it. In addition, the authors can be considered hypocrites, as their use of true crime and dead women arguably makes them participate in the very obsession and silencing they criticize. While Bolin's use of true crime generally is limited to her red-herring-title, Nelson and McNamara to various degrees use the features of the genre; Nelson by approaching the problematic with a high degree of self-awareness and reflection, McNamara by indulging in the genre's conventions. However, as McNamara's text in the light of her death can be perceived as a cautionary tale about heavy consumption of true crime, both Nelson and McNamara's texts reflect on the moral of true crime, but without moralizing.

However, as all three authors evidently still portray dead women in their narrations, it is relevant to examine whether they are perceived as being 'narcissistic' for inserting themselves into the stories of silent, dead women. Through an examination of the readers' reviews of the three books, it becomes evident how this is not the case, as the critical readers instead appear to want a

larger focus on the dead women, and instead perceive the authors as being ‘narcissistic’ for focusing on their own lives. However, as these accusations of the authors being ‘narcissistic’ is only stated by a minority of their readers, it is indicated how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin’s autotheoretical texts are generally well received.

The final part of this thesis, consists of an experimental, autotheoretical text, wherein I use knowledge gained through both my own personal experiences as a woman, as well as my knowledge obtained through my academic curiosity in the cultural obsession with dead women to constitute the theory used to discuss the three authors’ narrations. Throughout this text, I explore cultural tendencies and concepts such as e.g. victimblaming, the word ‘feminazi’, inherited fear, obsession with true crime, white privilege etc. that I have experienced in my life and relate them to Nelson, McNamara and Bolin’s texts. Thus, I partake in the literary tendency and conversation around how Western culture traumatizes, oppresses and silences women in various ways, while I try to remain aware of my own participation in the obsession with dead women – both personally and academically.

Indhold

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"Speech is silver, but silence is golden" - such goes an old saying. This idiom evidently implies how the ability to speak is important, but that sometimes it is better to say nothing. However, if you rarely get the chance to speak, silence is no longer golden. Instead, it becomes repression, control, domination and even suffering. The history of silence is central to women's history, as they in ancient Greek times were deemed incapable of creating valuable thoughts and speeches, whereby women were banned from public speaking (Beard 810). Over the centuries, this perception have changed, although it arguably still is far from optimal. In the literary world, women writers still struggle with being accepted, as they constantly are being categorized in ways different to men and have to continuously prove their work as being valuable and important (Howell 23). Thus, the history of Western culture's oppressional silencing women is not only history: it is still the reality for a majority of women.

The ways through which the silencing of women in contemporary Western culture occurs are plentiful: Husbands and boyfriends beat their female partners to silence them. Anti-abortion activists silence women by denying them autonomy over their own bodies. A rapist ignores the word "no", and rape culture portrays women as being untrustworthy. A murderer silences forever. These are some of the major societal and cultural problems, but the silencing of women is also permeated through our everyday lives; through shaming and victimblaming, through the humiliation of being catcalled, through threats and online harassment, through being talked-over and 'mansplained' to. Indeed, Western culture is filled with behaviors and tendencies developed specifically to devalue and silence the female voices existing in the patriarchal culture.

A clear – yet generally invisible - example of how Western culture continuous to silence women is through its obsession with dead women (Bronfen 3). This obsession originates from Edgar Allan Poe's perception of how the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic in the world, which evidently indicates how a woman is perceived as being most valuable, when she is passive and silent. This fascination with silent women has come to be constituted through the beautiful, dead, white girl trope (BDWG), which permeates several genres such as e.g. true crime and crime fiction (Pedersen 79). As these genres are amongst some of the most popular at the moment, the trope is ever present in contemporary pop culture, whereby it manifests and fortifies the fascination with passive, silent women, thereby participating in continuing the perception of how women are not capable of speaking intellectually and are therefore most valuable when silent.

However, within the last decade it appears how a new literary tendency has occurred, consisting of women writers who create genre-defying texts, which critically question the cultural obsession with dead, silent women. Although, female writers employing genre-bending is far from a new tendency (Fournier 21), the focus on dead women and thereby the silencing of women appears to be relatively new. One of the most prominent authors, who employ genre-bending, is Maggie Nelson. Indeed, Nelson has received great recognition for her genre-fluid book, *The Argonauts* (2015), which she on the book's cover defines as being 'autotheory'. The year after its publication, Nelson received the MacArthur Fellowship, which is an award known unofficially as the "Genius Grant", and it is awarded to individuals of any field who have shown "extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction" (MacArthur Foundation). Thus, Nelson is amongst some of the most prominent female authors in Western culture.

However, *The Argonauts* is not the only one of Nelson's books that applies a fluid approach to genre. Indeed, her earlier book *The Red Parts* from 2007 can in many ways be considered her first attempt at utilizing the genre of autotheory. *The Red Parts* is a unique narration that revolves around the 2004 trial of the more than 30 years old murder of Nelson's aunt, Jane. The narration is characterized by Nelson's highly self-critical narrational voice, as she not only narrates about the horrors of the trial, but also reflects on the trauma that her aunt's violent death has left in her own life. Considering how *The Red Parts* was published eight years prior to *The Argonauts*, the narration appears to be one of the first autotheoretical texts exploring the obsession with dead girls, and thereby also the silencing of women.

Since Nelson's publication of *The Argonauts*, thereby making autotheory more mainstream, one of the most popular publications, which also ties into the articulation of the cultural silencing of women is Michelle McNamara's book *I'll Be Gone In The Dark*, which was published in 2018. The publication of this book quickly gained attention, partially due to McNamara herself passed away in 2016 before being able to finish it and partially due to how the Golden State Killer – the serial killer she tries to capture in the book – was apprehended shortly after the books release. Indeed, McNamara's husband, Patton Oswalt, as well as her close professional confidants Paul Haynes and Billy Jen finished the book, whereby the published text consists of the pieces McNamara finished herself, edits of her rough drafts, as well as an introduction written by Gillian Flynn and an afterword written by Oswalt. *I'll Be Gone In The Dark* is a true crime story of McNamara's obsessive search for the Golden State Killer, whom she desperately want to catch in order to make

him lose "his power when we know his face" (46). This focus on justice for the mainly female victims of the serial killer also indicates how she is exploring the traumatic consequences of the obsession with dead women.

While McNamara's book received great recognition, promptly becoming a *New York Times* #1 bestseller, the reception of Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls* the same year was more moderate. While several magazines[1] praised the author for her book, which consists of a curious mixture of academic examinations of pop cultural texts and personal anecdotes from Bolin's life, the book also received its fair amount of critique, as both critics and readers argue that the book is misbranded through the phrasing of the title (Anonymous reviews on Goodreads). Nonetheless, Bolin questions the obsession with dead women and the silencing of women in general, as she examines the different representations of women in popular culture, while also including her personal experiences.

Thus, it appears how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's books are a part of a literary tendency of female writers creating texts, which constitutes an exploration of the trauma that Western culture's silencing of women have inflicted on them. This literary tendency appears to have especially bloomed since Nelson's release of *The Argonauts* in 2015, whereby this tendency appears to be somewhat related to the genre of autotheory's rise in popularity, but it is also possible to speculate that the last decade's beginning focus on feminist movements like #MeToo (2017) have created a focus on how contemporary culture silences women. A small plethora of other contemporary authors, who partake in this representation of female trauma is amongst others – but far from limited to - Jeannie Vanesco's *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl: A Memoir* (2019), Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's *The Fact of a Body: A Murder and a Memoir* (2017), Bri Lee's *Eggshell Skull* (2018), Rabia Caudry's *Adnan's Story: The Search for Truth and Justice After Serial* (2016), *Rachel Monroe's* Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession (2019).

As these texts in various ways explore female trauma, they appear to question the aesthetic objectification of silent women, which Elizabeth Bronfen questioned in her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and The Aesthetic* (1992) roughly 30 years prior. Bronfen argues how Western culture is obsessed with passive, hence silent, portrayals of women to such a degree that it has made us culturally blind to the ever-presence of these objectifications of dead women (3). This notion is what Anne B. Pedersen builds on in her paper, "(Mis)Using Sylvia Likens:

[1] E.g. Maurice Carlos Ruffin's article "Returning the Gaze: Dismantling Patriarchal Narratives of Women's Lives" (2018), as well as Dahlia Balcazar's "Sentimental Miseducation: Alice Bolin Deconstructs the Dead Girl Narrative" from Bitchmedia.org (2018).

Fictionalizations of a Torture-Murder" (2019), as she notes how this objectification of passive women today is represented through the many portrayals of the trope referred to as 'the beautiful, dead, white girl' (BDWG). Pedersen further notes how this trope steals the dead women's voices, as they often are used to tell other people – mostly men's – stories (79). Thus, Bronfen and Pedersen emphasize how Western culture prefers portrayals of passive, silent women, which Mary Beard also argues in her paper "The Public Voice of Women" (2015). In this paper, she argues how this preference is a cultural inheritance from the contemporary culture's roots in ancient Greece, as this culture deemed women's voices invaluable and nonintelligent (810).

Thus, Nelson, McNamara, Bolin and many other female writers are challenging this cultural preference of passive, silent women through their texts, as they are using their voices to articulate how the silencing of women has traumatized them in various ways. This articulation of silence is interesting, as it in its nature is contradictory, as silence and articulation generally excludes one another. In addition, it is also challenged by how literature historically has been dominated by men, which according to Jennifer Ring's notion in her paper, "Saving Objectivity for Feminism: MacKinnon, Marx, and Other Possibilities" (1987), forces women to invent new ways of writing in order to be able to fit their voices and feminist messages into literary texts (467).

Susan S. Lanser proposes how such gendering of literature can be observed by applying a 'queer' approach to narratives. Throughout her academic career, Lanser's papers suggests how she gradually has narrowed down how this queering is optimally performed. In her paper, "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (1986), she coins what would become the beginning of narratology's application in relation to the contextual influence of gender, thereby introducing feminism into narratology. However, in doing so Lanser applies a binary perception, which during the 1990's was challenged by amongst others Ring. Thus, Lanser addresses this critique in her papers, "Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology" (2015) and "Queering Narrative Voice" (2018), in which she revises her binary perception and replaces it with a queerer and more intersectional approach to narratology, as she argues how this approach allows one to observe structural and circumstantial effects or particular convergences of individual people in specific locations. This is in opposition to her first theory, which rather presumed commonalities. Thus, Lanser's sequels to her 1980s paper reflects the development and advancement of feminist and queer theory and to a much higher degree the general perception of gender today as not being two opposing binaries, but rather a fluid concept moving on a spectrum between the two binaries of 'man' and 'woman'.

Thus, at this moment in time, Lanser argues how queering of narratives can be the tool needed in order to be able to portray the different ways of how gender and more specifically the female gender is expressed through narratives. This need for a more intersectional approach to analyzing narratives, but also in narrative portrayals in general is arguably what Bronfen, Pedersen, Beard, Ring and many other feminist and queer scholars also seek, as it would create more nuanced representations of women. This would be the case, as an intersectional approach to texts would challenge the stereotypical cliché of woman being passive and silent, as it would reveal how women also can be active and vocal agents capable of controlling their own stories.

It is possible to argue how the literary tendency of women writing about Western culture's oppressional silencing of women indeed can provide such queer and intersectional portrayals, as they can be defined as being 'autotheory'. In her book, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), Lauren Fournier argues how the genre of autotheory has a long and indissoluble relationship with feminism – especially Black Feminism -, which has provided it with an intersectional ability to portray many different aspects to women's lives. This is potentially the case, as Fournier argues how the genre has a non-restrictive approach to genres and literary conventions, as autotheoretical texts can consists if a mixture of personal experiences, theory, philosophy, cultural criticism etc., as well as it can be expressed through many media including literary texts. Thus, not only does this genre do what Ring argued in relation to inventing new ways of writing in order to encompass the oppressed female voice, but these categorization-defying texts can evidently also be considered queer and intersectional, as they provide an insight into larger cultural tendencies and problematics through the body of a single individual. Thus, as the literary tendency of women writing about their inherited traumas generally is narrated through the body of the author, but also provides a view into how the cultural obsession with passive, silent women oppresses these women, these texts can be perceived as being autotheory.

Thus, the autotheoretical texts are both queer and intersectional, as they break with the 'norm' within literature by mixing the personal with the theoretical, thereby providing a look into how the individual woman's experiences are indeed not singular, but are related to and even are a part of the material making up feminist theory. It makes the female authors able to speak up, while also emphasizing silence, as they articulate how they in various ways have experienced being oppressed and silenced.

Thus, this thesis is built on the abovementioned scholars and their work. In addition, some of the points presented in this thesis are further developments of my own two previous papers; "'To

Talk about the Sufferings of a Stranger': A Textual Analysis of Narrative in Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts*" (2019) and "'She Wanted so much out of life': An Analysis of the 'Beautiful, Dead, White Girl' trope's Presence in True Crime Narrations on YouTube" (2021). Although, this thesis does share some of the points made in these papers, these points are revised and inserted into a new theoretical framework namely that of queer narratology and autotheory.

Thus, this thesis will examine Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* (2007), Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone In The Dark* (2018) and Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls* (2018) in order to establish how they through their narrations manage to vocalize Western culture's oppressional silencing of women through portrayals of dead girls. In order to do so, the analysis will take a starting point in queer narratology to gain an understanding of how the authors structure their genre-defying narrations with the intention of establishing whether these narrations can be considered autotheory. Further, the authors' use of poetic license and true crime will be examined in order to establish whether the combination of this concept and genre features hinder the texts' feminist messages. The paper will also examine the readers' reception of the books in order to establish whether the authors are considered 'narcissistic' for using the stories of dead women in their narrations. Finally, I will discuss how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts demonstrate the various ways culture's oppressional silencing of women is constituted within an experimental, autotheoretical text. Here, I will use knowledge gained through my own personal experiences as a women and through my academic curiosity in the obsession with dead women to constitute the theory used to discuss the narrations' articulations of Western culture's oppressional silencing of women through portrayals of dead women.

The Silencing of Women

The Obsession with Dead Girls

Contemporary Western culture has a tendency of silencing women. This is a notion that Mary Beard states in her paper *The Public Voice of Women* (2015), as she argues how the ancient Greek culture's tradition of silencing women's voices in public is still influencing contemporary Western culture. She accounts for this silencing of women as she examines Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus's son tells his mother, Penelope, to be quiet and let the men be the ones to speak in public: "It's a nice demonstration that right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are not being heard in the public sphere; more than that, as Homer has it, an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence

the female" (810). She continues: "What I want to underline here is that this is not the peculiar ideology of some distant culture. Distant in time it may be. But this is a tradition of gendered speaking – and the theorizing of gendered speaking – of which we are still, directly or more often indirectly, the heirs" (812). Thus, Beard indicates how the tradition of silencing women has become an inheritance and a powerful template that we still apply when thinking about what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' public speaking.

This notion of how women's voices have been hindered and heavily critiqued as being 'bad', is a notion that Samantha Howell examines in relation to literature in her paper, "The Evolution of Female Writers: An Exploration of Their Issues and Concerns from the 19th Century to Today" (2014). She notes: "Although women writers have gained more respect and acknowledgement since the 19th century, they still experience hardship against the disrespect they receive from male writers, readers, and critics. Modern women writers face the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men, and still have been subject to unethical remarks" (23). Thus, Beard and Howell both argue how contemporary Western culture's tendency of silencing female voices is rooted within the culture's patriarchal construction, whereby this 'muting' of women is the result of a long-lasting misogynistic approach to and perception of not only women's abilities in regards to rhetoric and writing, but also women's capabilities in general.

This misogynistic and generally sexist perception of women being less capable of constructing valuable thoughts, speeches, and literature than men is captured in Thomas De Quincey's, quote from his text "Joan of Arc" (1847):

> Yet, sister woman, though I cannot consent to find a Mozart or a Michael Angelo in your sex, cheerfully, and with the love that burns in depths of admiration, I acknowledge that you can do one thing as well as the best of us men – a greater thing than even Milton is known to have done, or Michael Angelo: you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal (1356).

De Quincey's quote is arguably less known than Edgar Allan Poe's famous statement about how the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic in the world (468). However, De Quincey's quote arguably even clearer than Poe's reflects not only the misogynistic and sexist perception of female capabilities – or rather the lack there of -, but it also highlights the idea of how the most inspirational thing a women can do is to die.

Thus, the poets' notions indicate the long history of Western culture preferring silent women, as the dead are able not to speak for themselves. This fascination and favoring of dead women is a tendency, which Elisabeth Bronfen explores in her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), and she indicates how Poe and De Quincey were far from the only artists, who were infatuated with the idea of dead, silent women. She notes that the: "representation of dead women became so prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century European culture that by the middle of the latter century this topos was already dangerously hovering on the periphery of cliché" (3). Thus, the fascination with dead, silent women appears to have existed not only through multiple centuries, but also to such a degree that there appears to be an actual obsession with women as silent objects.

According to Bronfen, this long-lasting obsession with portraying dead women as aesthetic objects in art and literature has resulted in this topos becoming so common that Western culture is now blind to the dead, silent women's omnipresence. She argues: "Representation of feminine death work in the principle of being so excessively obvious that they escape observation. Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death. Though in a plethora of representations feminine death is perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty" (3). In her paper, "(Mis)Using Sylvia Likens: Fictionalizations of a Torture-Murder" (2019)[2], Anne Bettina Pedersen argues how this overrepresentation of feminine death is exemplified by the 'beautiful, dead, white girl' trope (BDWG) that permeates especially the genres of true crime and crime fiction (78). She links its creation to Poe's abovementioned statement about a dead, beautiful woman being poetic: "Poe's view upon the beautiful female corpse as an aesthetic object has influenced e.g. the almost formulaic TV-shows in which the death of a beautiful girl kicks off the narrative" (79)[3]. Pedersen continues: "However, the narrative rarely revolves around the victim herself; instead her murder is used to put focus on any potential problems and secrets in her hometown. Otherwise, her death primarily functions as motivation for the male hero's quest of revenge" (79)[4]. Thus, the BDWG trope is a prime example of how the silencing of women's voices still thrives in contemporary Western culture, as the trope not only

[2] The originally Danish quotes is translated by me, the author of this paper. The original title in Danish: (Mis)Brugen af Sylvia Likens: Fiktionaliseringer af et kvindemord.
[3] The original quote in Danish: "Poes syn på det smukke kvinde-lig som æstetisk objekt har sat sine spor i f.eks. de nærmest formulariske TV-serier, hvor en smuk piges død sparker narrativet i gang" (Pedersen 79).
[4] The original quote in Danish: "Narrativet omhandler dog sjældent offered selv; i stedet bliver mordet på hende brugt til at sætte fokus på eventuelle problemer og hemmeligheder i hendes hjemby. Eller også fungerer hendes død primært som motivation for den mandlige helts hævntogt" (Pedersen 79).

literally makes it physically impossible for the woman to tell her story by killing her, but her death does not even become an event through which the surviving characters can discover her voice.

However, recently it appears how such portrayals of women's voices being oppressed is the object of examination and reflection in several genre-defying texts written by female authors. Examples of such texts are – but is not excluded to – Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's books, in which they in addition to writing about their own lives also in various ways explore the concept of dead, silent women. Thus, their texts become relevant to explore, as the existence of these female authors' narratives and their incorporation of personal experiences can be considered a rebellion against the cultural attempt at silencing women, as their texts become mediums containing their voices, while they articulate the silence of dead women.

Autotheory

Although, it appears paradoxical to categorize the literary tendency of women writers creating genre-bending texts, it is possible to argue how these kinds of texts often share characteristics of the relatively newly defined genre of 'autotheory'. Lauren Fournier studies this genre in her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), in which she creates this guiding definition: "Most simply, the term refers to the integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective models" (15). This definition is evidently broad; however, as autotheory is a 'hybrid'-genre consisting of characteristics from multiple different literary categories, a broad approach to the genre might prove beneficial. This is the case, as the texts that can be categorized as being autotheory often tries to evade categorization, thus becoming difficult to even detect as being autotheory due to the ways through which the genre is constituted may vary from narrative to narrative. Therefore, a broad definition of the genre will allow for an unrestricted examination of the different shapes autotheoretical texts might take.

In her book, Fournier explores the complexity of autotheory as she unfolds how the genre is a result of a strained relationship between the male-dominated fields of academic theory and criticism and the history of women fighting against oppression. She notes how autotheory as a literary tendency began to take its modern form in the early 2000s; however, it was not until 2015 that the genre began trending (16). Thus, it initially appears as if the style of mixing different genres together into one narrative is a relatively new literary trend. However, according to Fournier this is not the case, as she argues that the characteristics of autotheory indeed have been used in feminist

texts for centuries as a way of incorporating the female voice into literary traditions that has been created and dominated by (white) men (17).

Fournier elaborates on this notion, as she argues how some form of autotheory has existed since the 1700s: "Since the beginning of the feminist movements as understood in the West, feminist philosophers have worked from an autotheoretical place: from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I A Woman?* (1851) to Shulamith Firestone's *A Dialectic of Sex* (1970)" (17). Despite these texts are spread across different centuries and throughout time has been referred to through a multitude of different hyphenated hybrid-appellations; e.g. "critical-memoir," "theoretical-fiction," "life-thinking," and "fiction-theory," etc. (15), Fournier argues how they share the feature of being catalyzed by the authors' lived experiences as women in patriarchal and colonial societies (17). Thus, Fournier indicates how women have used the genre to explore and articulate their experiences of misogyny and oppression through both feminist arguments and personal experiences.

The method of women writers combining both intellectual arguments and personal experiences continued through the 1900s. Fournier notes how the incorporation of personal, female experiences became a crucial part of women's liberations movements - especially in the latter half of the century -, as the shared experiences within a majority of these mixed texts unveiled a systemic oppression of women: "The act of disclosing to other women what was once private was central to the formation of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, where "consciousness-raising" came to describe practices of disclosing lived experience as means of becoming conscious of the ways in which so-called personal issues were, in fact, structural and systemic" (19). This "consciousness-raising" that is characteristic of second-wave feminism led to a recognition amongst women that their daily and domestic life was political: "feminist writers, artists, scholars, and activists came to see that, as the slogan had it, "the personal is political,"" (20).

Thus, it is evident how autotheory as a genre has the potential for protests integrated within its core, as the genre historically has a close relationship with women trying to fight against oppression and silencing. This feature became even more developed during the 1980s, as women writers began mixing their personal experiences with feminist academic theory (Fournier 20-21). Fournier notes how this increase in texts mixing personal experiences and theory was a continued development of the abovementioned slogan as the texts not only emphasized that the personal is political, but that the personal is also theoretical (21). This is the case, as their combination of personal experiences and academic theory not only emphasized how the personal is a part of theory's material, but also

how theory can be grounded and explored through the individual physical body in the world and not only through the abstractions of a neutral mind.

This approach to understanding theory in relation to the body and personal experiences is what comes to constitute elements of rebellion within autotheory. This is the case, as the combination of academic theory and criticism and personal experiences, according to Fournier, can be considered a protest against the (white) male perception that dominates academic theory and criticism (21). She notes: "This [considering the personal a part of theory's material] came from a larger shift, driven by movements such as critical race studies, to reconfigure what constitutes legitimate knowledge in the academy" (21). The (white) male perception, which dominates what constitutes the legitimate knowledge that Fournier refers to, consists of the notion of how one should erase all traces of the first person when writing academic theory and cultural criticism and instead take on a personally distanced neutrality.

In her paper, "Saving Objectivity for Feminism: MacKinnon, Marx, and Other Possibilities" (1987), Jennifer Ring argues that this perception is male due to the fact, that it was created and mainly developed by men: "Men's perception of the relationship between mind and matter, subjectivity and objectivity, have not only dominated Western thought but defined the nature of women's experience. Epistemology is gendered, as is everything else. The task of feminist theory is to establish a new vocabulary with which women can express their experiences" (467). Thus, the rising numbers of autotheoretical texts in the 1980s can be considered a protest against the dominating (white) male perception of neutrality and personal distance being the 'correct' way of conveying knowledge (Fournier 64).

Although, the fact that the standard perception within academic theory is male, it is in relation to autotheory's protest against oppression of women further imperative to acknowledge how this perception too is *white*. Fournier notes how there in academic theory and criticism is a "thinly veiled racist and sexist configuration of what kinds of knowledge are critically upheld." She then cites David Chariandy for stating: "Theory, real theory, will appear to be white" (62). This perception of how white voices (including the voices of white women) carry more credibility than those of people of color is arguably also an understanding, which has been protested through autotheory. This becomes evident when recognizing the large amount of autotheoretical texts that has been authored by women of color with prominent examples being e.g. bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Adrian Piper, Gloria Anzaldua and many more.

In her paper "Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and Feminist Movement" (1997), Stacey Young explores this rebellion against the racist perception within academic theory, as she examines how autotheoretical texts authored by women of color attempt "to counter discourses that homogenize 'women'" (61). She argues this attempt is established through how the texts "center on the experiences and perspectives of women traditionally marginalized on the grounds of race, class, ethnic or religious background, sexuality, physical ability, and so forth" (61). Thus, Young argues how autotheoretical texts written by minority women provide the genre with an intersectional perspective, as they emphasize how topics such as e.g. female oppression cannot fully be expressed through "the hegemonic subject of feminism" (61) – i.e. the white heterosexual cisgender woman.

Considering these beneficial features of autotheory in relation to being able to explore misogyny and oppression of not only women but minorities in general, it becomes relevant to explore the literary tendency of female authors writing genre-defying texts focused on both the authors' own lives and dead, silent women in relation to autotheory. This is the case, as not only does it appear that these narrations contain elements of protest, as their very existence indicate how they are trying to defy Western culture's attempt to silence women, but also because autotheory's historical relationship with women articulating oppression through both theory and personal experiences arguably also will make it an apt genre to employ in a narrational reflection on the topic of dead women.

Thus, a combination of autotheory and a focus on dead, silent women arguably appear to be able to create a unique narration with potential for providing not only an insight into how the cultural obsession with dead girls oppresses women, but also how authors manage to articulate themselves despite the culture trying to oppress them into silence. Therefore, it becomes relevant to examine how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts in relation to autotheory, and how the genre influences their focus on the cultural obsession with dead women.

Queer Narratology

Although, autotheory has become a genre in itself, its fluid composition of multiple different genre conventions arguably appears to be able to create some unique, genre-bending narratives. Thus, it becomes relevant to analyze how autotheoretical texts in combination with a focus on dead women become a mouthpiece for female authors to voice the ways through which oppression and silencing of women still exist today. For such an examination, an analytical point of departure within the

theoretical framework of narratology will provide a useful insight into the construction of these unique narratives.

As previously established, the genre of autotheory is impossible to separate from feminism, whereby it initially might appear obvious to approach an analysis of the genre by applying 'feminist narratology'. However, 'queer narratology' might indeed prove to be able to provide a deeper insight into the genre. This is the case, as 'feminist narratology' as presented by Susan Lanser, the scholar who generally is attributed with establishing gendered narratology, according to Ruth Page is restricted by a binary understanding of gender, which is not the case with 'queer narratology', as she notes in her paper, "Feminist Narratology" (2003) (53). The fluid understanding of gender is important in relation to autotheory, as this genre cannot be considered a product of binaries, as it is both established through multiple different genres, as well as it in its core is feministic and therefore seeks equality between genders. Thus, the genre – and thereby its narratives – is born from the authors demonstrating the need for fluidity and nuance within genre and narrative voices, whereby autotheory evidently is more queer than binary.

Indeed, this rejection of binaries and norms is a characteristic of the genre that makes 'queer narratology' a relevant point of departure when analyzing autotheoretical texts. In her paper, "Queering Narrative Voice" (2018), Lanser argues how there exist three uses of 'queer' within the study of narratives: "(1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms" (923-924). Evidently, all three academic uses of 'queer' can be applied when analyzing autotheoretical narratives depending on the explored topic and the structure of the individual narrative. However, when viewing autotheory as being a way to incorporate female voices into an otherwise male-dominated literature in order to articulate oppression, it is especially the third use of the term that becomes relevant to explore.

Returning to the notion of how autotheory can create room for oppressed voices, it becomes evident how this ability of the genre can be considered queer. In relation to explaining the third academic use of 'queer' Lanser notes how 'queering' is to be understood as "deconstructing" or "making strange" what otherwise appears as "normal". Therefore, an entity – like a narration - that can be considered 'queer' in some way or form must reject categories, binaries and/or norms (2018 924). Thus, when applying the third use of 'queer' onto feminist, autotheoretical texts, it becomes evident how the genre and its narrations' refusal to conform to the neutral, male perspective within

academic theory and criticism, is a protest against and an attempt at breaking with and rejecting the norm of what is deemed correct and accepted knowledge within academic writing (Fournier 56).

This rejection of the norm is done, as the neutral, male perception in writing academically values above all logic, hegemony and citations as an accepted way of achieving and conveying knowledge. However, autotheory evidently dismantles this approach as it instead focuses on the personal and even bodily experiences as a way of processing knowledge too, which comes to constitute the first person narration (Fournier 56). Thus, the incorporation of the personal perspective not only 'queers' the autotheoretical narration, but it is also what arguably creates room for oppressed voices, as it rejects the norm of how only 'male' voices can convey knowledge in a 'correct' and 'acceptable' way.

However, this rejection of the hitherto accepted way of not only writing academic theory and criticism 'correctly', but also obtaining and conveying knowledge, is not the only feature of autotheory that can be deemed 'queer'. In addition, the genre's composition of characteristics from various different genres such as academic theory and criticism, memoir, autobiography, essays etc. 'queers' the genre too. This is the case, as autotheoretical texts (until the conception of the genre's definition) rejected categorization because of their inclusion of different genre characteristics (Fournier 15). Thus, the fluid composition of autotheory that – at least initially – makes it difficult to identify becomes another 'queering' factor of texts belonging to this genre

Although, queer narratology thus can provide a valuable insight into the rebellious nature of autotheoretical texts, this approach may not be able to provide a view into the individual nuances influencing the narrations. This disadvantage of queer narratology is a notion, which Lanser comments on in her paper "Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology" (2015). She argues: "While feminism and narratology have made a fruitful marriage that produced contextual narratology as its sturdiest offspring, the benefits of narratology remain untapped. Tapping those benefits, however, may require some reform in narratological theories and practices, not least a shift to inductive and intersectional approaches" (24). Thus, Lanser indicates how an analysis of narrative voices within feminist and queer narratives might benefit from applying an intersectional approach, as this, according to her notions in her paper "Gender and Narratology" (2019), will provide a deeper insight into the narration: "Intersectionality theory maintains that no coherent female or male experience exists even within a single culture let alone across cultures, since cultures are always constituted within, and in turn constitute, aspects of identity, location, individual

agency, and discursive realm. Thus, intersectional thinking rejects a narratology that assumes gender or sexuality to be predictable or predictive" (TLHN).

As previously mentioned, Young also argues how it is relevant to take an intersectional approach to autotheory, as the genre has the potential for creating narrations showing how believed 'shared experiences' indeed are experienced differently based on the individual narrator's gender, race, sexuality, religion, physical ability etc., i.e. through their varying relations with power and privilege (61). Therefore, in addition to employing a queer narratological approach to analyzing autotheoretical texts' narratives, it arguably also is important to keep the intersectionality in mind, as the notions of power and privilege of the authors evidently will influence their narrations. Thus, by applying a queer approach, but simultaneously keeping an intersectional awareness it will be possible to get a comprehensive look into how autotheoretical texts rebel against normative genre conventions, as well as how the individual narrations portrays the personal experiences with oppression and silencing of the authors.

A Theoretical and Personal Approach

As the focus in this paper is on gaining an insight into the narratives belonging to the literary tendency of women writers narrating about their traumatic experiences with oppression and silencing, the analysis has been conducted through a qualitative, comparative study of a plethora consisting of the three books written by respectively Maggie Nelson, Michelle McNamara and Alice Bolin. This narrow focus on a smaller sample of texts allowed for an in depth analysis, whereby it became possible to uncover how the authors have incorporated multiple genre characteristics into the constructions of their narrations. In addition to this, the comparative approach allowed for a side-by-side comparison of the three texts' genre conventions and narrational designs, making it possible to discuss how their respective constructions aid the conveyance of the texts' feminist messages. Thus, the combination of these two approaches have provided a possibility of understanding how the complexity and queerness of these narrations help provide oppressed minorities such as e.g. women with a voice.

In order to approach this study with the ability to observe the differences between the three texts, an inductive approach has been employed. This approach was chosen in order to initially allow an unrestricted observation of the genre patterns within the texts, thereby making it possible to define different genre characteristics within the texts. Thus, the analysis will take a starting point in queer narratology, specifically employing Lanser, but also several other scholars' narratological

theory in order to examine how the authors' have constructed their genre-defying narratives internally. As the analysis progresses, Fournier's theory concerned with the genre of autotheory and the genre's relation to feminism, as well as Ian C. Punnett's theory on true crime.

Inspired by Michael Humphreys' "Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes" (2005), Lanser, Young and Fournier's theory, as well as Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's genre-defying, feminist texts I have discussed my findings of the analysis through an experimental chapter, wherein I 'practice what I preach' and leave behind my comfort zone of employing the personally distanced, male perspective in academic writing. Instead, I insert myself as a woman into my text and use the genre of autotheory to join the conversation of female oppression and silencing that Nelson, McNamara and Bolin participate in. Thus, I have in this final chapter used my own personal experiences as the theoretical material driving forth the discussion.

Articulations of Silence

Voicing Their Use of Genre

When researching Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* (2007), Michelle McNamara's *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2018) and Alice Bolin's *Dead Girls* (2018) it appears how they all share the same feature – they confuse publishers, readers and critics in regards to their categorization of genre. When researching the books online, the various ways these texts are described in relation to genre is diverse; "memoir", "provocative essay", "an account", "nonfiction", "true crime", "biography", "poetry", "biography memoir", "law enforcement autobiography", "personal memoir" and "essay collection"[5] are a small selection of genre-related terms used in order to describe the abovementioned books' genres. Some sites do not even dare to make a guess; they merely avoid any attempt at pinpointing a genre-descriptive for the texts. This apparent inability to define the texts as being any specific genre is an indicator of the how the books potentially contain unique narrational structures. Thus, it becomes relevant to examine how the authors themselves refer to their use of genre

When examining the covers of the books, it becomes evident how two of the three authors within the titles of their books have included a reference to a specific genre, thereby creating specific expectations for their narrations. This is the case with Nelson's text, which she has given

[5] The descriptions are gathered from Saxo.com, Goodreads.com, Wikipedia.com, Harpercollins.com, The New York Times and Bustle.com.

the title, *The Red Parts – Autobiography of a Trial*. As Nelson mentions the genre of autobiography within the title of her book, it becomes obvious to assume that her text will adhere to the characteristics of this genre. However, a contradiction in relation to the text belonging to the genre of autobiography already occurs when applying the definition of this genre to the book's title. In her text "Autobiography" from *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2014) Helga Schwalm notes how autobiography as "a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author's own life, or a substantial part of it" (TLHN). Thus, in other words, an autobiographical narration is focused upon the life of its author – a characteristic that arguably makes the statement within Nelson's title paradoxical, as the phrasing in relation to Schwalm's definition then suggests that it is the trial itself that is the author. This, of course, is impossible, as the trial is an inanimate object, therefore incapable of writing a text. Thus, this paradoxical title of Nelson's book indicates how she is going to take a fluid approach to genre, as her phrasing of the title plays with and distorts the common understanding of and expectations to the autobiographical genre (Lanser, 2015, 924).

However, as stated above, Nelson is not the only one of the three authors who mentions a genre and thereby sets the readers' expectations for specific genre conventions within the title of her text – so does Bolin, as she has given her book the title, *Dead Girls – Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*. However, in opposition to Nelson, Bolin's title does not create any immediate paradoxes. Her descriptive of 'essays' generally can be considered somewhat vague, as multiple different types of essays exist. However, when reading the first couple of sentences of her book it is indicated how Bolin's text potentially adheres to the style of the 'personal essay', as she writes: "This is a book about books. To try that again, it is a book about my fatal flaw: that I insist on learning everything from books" (1). This focus on personal experiences and thoughts is a common thread throughout Bolin's narrative. In his book, *The Made-up Self – Impersonation in the Personal Essay* (2010), Carl H. Klaus argues how this focus on personal experiences and thoughts indeed is a characteristic of the personal essay: "A personal essay does, after all, put one more directly in contact with the thought and feeling of its author than do other forms of literature" (1). Eventually, Bolin's implicit indication of using the personal essay does become explicit as she asks the question: "How can I use the personal essay, instead of letting it use me?" (Bolin 268).

Although, Bolin's initial phrasing of merely describing her text as "essays" instead of the apparently more fitting "personal essays" arguably appears vague, it is indeed an indication of how Bolin, like Nelson, also takes a generally fluid approach to her use of genre. Despite the characteristics of Bolin's text do adhere to the 'personal essay', the first sentence does also indicate

a relation to the 'formal essay': "This is a book about books" (1). Although, Bolin revises this statement in the following sentence, it is still a valid description of her text as she throughout the narration includes an excessive amount of intertextual references to pop cultural texts, which she examines and discusses. In addition to this, Bolin also indirectly refers to how her text resembles the formal essay, as she notes: "I didn't intend for this to become a term paper" (169). Thus, despite Bolin does not indicate a fluid approach to genre immediately through her title, like Nelson arguably does, Bolin does indicate a generally non-restricted use of genre within her narration, as she throughout the text directly comments on various characteristics of different genres in relation to her narrative. Thus, it arguably appears how Nelson and Bolin's narrations might be queer, as they already through their titles and first few pages indicate the presence of multiple genres within their narrations, which makes them "reject categories […] and/or norms" (Lanser, 2015, 924).

However, Bolin's references to different types of essays in her text also reveals how she feels a need for reflecting on her arguably queer use of genre explicitly within the narration. This explicit reflection on genre can be observed in the quotes: "How can I use the personal essay, instead of letting it use me?" (Bolin 268) and "I didn't intend for this to become a term paper" (169). In these quotes, Bolin does not only mention the genres, but she also articulates how she intends – or does not intend – to use them. This explicit reflection on her use of genre conventions within the text can be referred to as a "metanarration". Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning describe this term in their texts, "Metanarration and Metafiction" from *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2014): "metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration" (TLHN). As Bolin evidently reflects on the process of narrating by her mentioning the ways through which she intends to use the personal and formal essay, she creates metanarrations.

Thus, Bolin's use of metanarrations eliminates the narratorial illusion a majority of texts have, as she by reflecting on her own intend with the text within the narration itself not only reveals her text to be a construction, but also suggests the presence of both herself as the author and narrator within the narration ("Metanarration and Metafiction", TLHN). This constructed nature of the narrator is a notion that Klaus also comments on in relation to the personal essay: "the 'person' in a personal essay is a written construct, a fabricated thing, a character of sorts – the sound of its voice a product of carefully chosen words, its recollection of experience, its runs of thought and feelings, much tidier than the mess of memories, thoughts, and feelings arising in one's consciousness" (1). Thus, Bolin's metanarrations can be interpreted as an exposure of herself as the author; instead of letting her narration be told through a tidy, constructed narrator, she reveals her own doubts and

flaws through the metanarrations' reflection on her intended use of genre. Thereby, she indicates her own mess of thoughts and feelings, which Klaus implies is characteristic of the author's mind, and she lets this personal "mess" seep into her constructive narration.

The presence of metanarration can also be located within Nelson's text, as she – despite her mentioning of autobiography in the book's title – defines her text as being a memoir on the very first page of the book, which is solely dedicated to featuring this metanarration. She writes: "This book is a memoir, which is to say that it relies on my memory and consists primarily of my personal interpretations of events and, where indicated, my imaginative recreation of them. Conversations and other events have been re-created to evoke the substance of what was said or what occurred, but are not intended to be perfect representations"[6]. Thus, Nelson's metanarration further supports the notion of her applying a fluid approach to genre, which she eventually confirms in yet another metanarration in the preface of the book. In this metanarration, Nelson describes how she wishes *The Red Parts* to be a book impossible to categorize in relation to genre, as she wants it to become: "a peculiar, pressurized meditation on time's relation to violence, to grief, thankfully untethered from the garish rubrics of 'current' events,' 'true crime,' or even 'memoir'" (xviii). Thus, Nelson also reflects on her intentions with the book by articulating how she has constructed it, whereby she – as Bolin – inserts herself as the author and as a real person into the narration breaking the narratorial illusion (Neumann and Nünning, "Metanarration and Metafiction", TLHN).

The authors' insertion of themselves into the narrations through metanarrations can also be considered a tool they use in order to emphasize the feminist nature of their texts, as they through this personal insertion also install a gendered perspective into the narrations (Lanser, "Gender and Narrative", TLHN). This is the case, as while their use of metanarrations inserts their presences as the authors into the narration, it unavoidably also inserts the fact that they are women into the texts. This presence of their female selves emphasizes the feminist nature of the texts, as this insertion of the author's self according to Neumann and Nünning creates a "different type of illusion by accentuating the act of narration, thus triggering a different strategy of naturalization" ("Metanarration and Metafiction", TLHN). This different narrational illusion occurs, as Nelson and Bolin by accentuating the act of narration indicate how it is they, who have created these texts, whereby they remind the readers that the narrations are representations of real and "messy" experiences lived by real women.

[6] This page does not have a page number of any kind.

This accentuation of their female selves within the narrations does also trigger "a different strategy of naturalization" (Neumann and Nünning, "Metanarration and Metafiction", TLHN), as it by emphasizing the fact that the authors are real women grounds the narrations in reality, thereby naturalizing their queer and therefore potentially confusing narrations. This is the case, as the metanarrations' function of reminding the readers of the real female authors' presence in the narration makes the 'messiness' that the fluid use of genre might provide more expected and acceptable as it is a natural aspects of being human (Klaus 84). Therefore, Nelson and Bolin does not only manage to insert themselves as real women into the narrations through their metanarrations, but they also manage to use the new and different narratorial illusion to emphasize how the experiences portrayed in the narration are their real experiences. Thus, they arguably emphasizes how their texts are feminist in nature, as their use of metanarrations and thereby the presence of themselves indicate how important it is for them to emphasize the reality and relevance of the experiences they portray in the narrations.

This notion is further supported by how Nelson and Bolin's insertion of their authorial selves can be considered a point of feminist rebellion. This is the case, as both Nelson and Bolin's books revolve around the phenomenon of 'dead women': Nelson participates in the trial of her aunt's murderer, while Bolin examines stereotypical narratives about women including the BDWG trope. Thus, they arguably both explore how the cultural obsession with dead women oppresses and silences women, although it is from different perspectives (Bronfen 3/ Pedersen 79). However, as the authors insert their female, authorial selves into the texts through metanarrations they evidently defy the cultural attempts at silencing of women, as they emphasize through their metanarrations how they use their real voices in these narrations. This point is further supported by how Neumann and Nünning argues an accumulation of metanarrative expressions in a text can be viewed as "a deliberate metanarrative celebration of the act of narration" ("Metanarration and Metafiction", TLHN). Thus, as Nelson and Bolin evidently employ several metanarrations throughout their narrations, their texts can be understood as celebrations of the act of female narration, which evidently further can be perceived as a rebellion against how literature generally has been dominated by men (Howell 23).

Thus, when considering how there appears to be both narrational and feminist benefits of articulating the queering of the texts' genre conventions through metanarrations, it becomes interesting to note how McNamara does not incorporate an explicit reflection into her narration, although her text also can be argued to take a fluid approach to genre. McNamara's book is titled;

I'll be Gone in the Dark – One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer, whereby she in contrast to both Nelson and Bolin does not mention any specific genre within the title. However, the title arguably does allude to how the narration consists of a mixture of true crime and memoir, as it indicates how the search for the serial killer is going to be narrated through McNamara's own personal experiences. This personal perspective is a characteristic that McNamara shares with Nelson and Bolin; however, in contrast to the two other authors, McNamara does not create any metanarrations within her text, whereby she does not establish the same kind of narrational illusion of herself being present as a real woman within the text. This lack of a direct feminist presence is interesting, as McNamara's narration also is related to the oppression and silencing of women, as she focuses on the mostly female victims of the Golden State Killer within her text. Thus, McNamara's lack of metanarrations indicates how the true crime aspects to her book potentially are emphasized more than her feminist perspectives as she uses her narration to focus on the case rather than on how she is narrating it.

Thus, even though Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts all indicate a fluid approach to genre and create what appears to be queer narrations, it appears how McNamara's text portrays a different relation to the cultural obsession with dead women than Nelson and Bolin's texts do, as McNamara does not insert herself as a present, female author into the text. This difference between the texts makes it relevant to expand this analysis from merely focusing on their authors' own genre-related reflections – or lack thereof – to examining how their queer use of genre affects their internal structuring, as well as how it affects their focuses on the cultural oppression and silencing of women through the obsession with dead women.

Plotting to Queer

As established through the previous chapter, the three authors' fluid use of genre makes it possible to perceive their texts as being queer. This is the case, as Lanser argues how a text can be perceived as being 'queer' when it "disrupt[s] or deconstruct[s] any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms (2015, 924). Thus, as the authors respectively appear to mix different genre conventions from multiple different genres they arguably reject the normative categorization of texts. That the texts indeed can be defined as being queer is further emphasized by how Nelson and Bolin use metanarrations to reflect on their intentions with their texts, which indicates how they themselves perceive it to be necessary to 'explanation' the nature of their narrations. However, as indicated by McNamara's text such reflection is not always present, although the text can be defined as being

genre-fluid. Thus, it becomes relevant to examine how the authors have constructed their queer narrations internally in order to establish how they use this queerness to vocalize the cultural oppression and silencing of women.

As mentioned above, Nelson explicitly describes her text as being both an autobiography and a memoir, while Bolin mentions different types of essays within her book with the 'personal essay' being the most prominent. According to Schwalm, these genres all fall under the umbrella-term of 'life writing', which "denotes all modes and genres of telling one's own life" ("Autobiography", TLHN). This mode of genres is also possible to trace within McNamara's text, as she has incorporated a memoir-like perspective into her narration, when she narrates her personal experiences. Schwalm argues how one of the most prominent features of life writing is what she refers to as "the duality of the autobiographical person", which is how the narration is divided by a 'narrating I' and a 'narrated I'. This duality is common within many types of life writing, including autobiography, memoir and the personal essay, as the division between the two I's marks a distance between the experiencing and the narrating subject ("Autobiography", TLHN).

Schwalm further elaborates how the 'narrated I' is the protagonist of the story, while the 'narrating I' is the first person narrator, that "ultimately personifies the agent of focalization, the overall position from which the story is rendered, although the autobiographical narrator may temporarily step back to adopt an earlier perspective" ("Autobiography", TLHN). As already noted, this dual narrator can be experienced within all three texts, but is here exemplified by a quote from McNamara's text: "My first inkling that the Kid's work was high quality came at the beginning of my interest in the case when, after noting from his posts on the board that he seemed knowledgeable, I e-mailed him about a possible suspect I uncovered. I've now come to realize that getting excited about a suspect is a lot like that first surge of stupid love in a relationship" (174). In this quote, McNamara's 'narrated I' is situated within a past point of her search, while her 'narrating I' is narrating from her present point of view, allowing her to "temporarily step back to adopt an earlier perspective", as Schwalm describes it, in which she reflects on her previous naivety in relation to her search for the Golden State Killer.

As this dual narrator is a shared characteristic of both autobiography, memoir and the personal essay, it does not further queer Bolin's text, as this traditional narrator does not provide her narration with any unexpected or colliding genre conventions. However, it might further queer Nelson and McNamara's texts, as their texts arguably contain elements of true crime, which will be examined later in this paper. Although, this duality is not always present in true crime, Ian C.

Punnett notes in his book, *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives* (2019) that the insertion of personal values and beliefs are quite common, thereby indicating how it is not uncommon that the genre contains a first person narrator (3).

However, when examining this normative narrator in Bolin's text, it appears how she uses its duality to unify the queer elements in her narration. As previously mentioned, Bolin describes in the book's title her text as consisting of 'essays'; a definition that is possible to argue her text adheres to. The characteristics of the genre of essay are generally constructed through the internal structuration of the book, as it consists of 14 shorter texts, which often identifies an essay collection. The individual essays further adhere to the characteristics of the genre as described by Purdue University's *Guide to writing essays*. This guide states how an essay is characterized by being a relatively short piece of writing through which the author is able to analyze and examine ideas and concepts (*Essay Writing*). This is generally the case with Bolin's individual essays, as she throughout the book examines different topics such as e.g. the Dead Girl Show, the noir, pop music, reality TV etc. within the individual shorter texts.

However, the guide also argues how "essays are (by nature) concise and require clarity in purpose and direction. This means that there is no room for the [author]'s thoughts to wander or stray from his or her purpose; the writing must be deliberate and interesting" (*Essay Writing*). Considering how Bolin has titled her book *Dead Girls,* it is fair to assume how this is the main object of examination within her essay collection – an assumption that is supported by the first chapter "The Dead Girl Show" and its focus on the formulaic storylines revolving around the BDWG trope. However, in several of the essays this focus appears to be overshadowed by – or even substituted with – a focus either on Bolin's own life or on other topics entirely such as e.g. pop music. Thus, it becomes possible to question whether Bolin indeed meets the criteria of maintaining a clear purpose, as her narration arguably at times stray relatively far from the topic of 'dead girls'.

However, this apparent lack of focus on examining 'dead girls' is arguably not (only) Bolin failing to keep a precise and direct focus within her essay collection, but indeed an indication of how she queers her narration by incorporating elements of both the essay and autobiography into the text (Lanser, 2015, 924). As previously mentioned, Bolin argues in the first couple of sentences of the introduction, how the book is about her "fatal flaw" (1), thereby indicating a personal approach to the narration. This personal approach is of course a characteristic of the 'personal essay', which Bolin – as discussed in relation to her use of metanarrations – describes her texts as being (268). However, it is possible to argue how her use of personal experiences to a greater extent

bears resemblance to the characteristics of autobiography than the personal essay, as the experiences despite not always occurring in a perfectly chronological order do portray the majority of Bolin's life. This is, according to Robert Graham, a feature of autobiography, as this genre tends to focus upon the entirety of the author's life (170), as he argues in his book *A Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* (2005).

That Bolin's text might bear a stronger resemblance to the genre of autobiography than the personal essay, is further strengthened when perceiving her text as being a singular cohesive narration rather than 14 individual essays. This perception of her text is established through how Bolin has chosen to assemble the individual essays into one definite structure within her book, thereby making it possible to not only read the essays as individual pieces, but also to consider them paragraphs in a coherent text. This way of conceptualizing the text is further enabled by how the personal experiences which span across the majority of Bolin's life, create a sense of progression – and thereby plot – throughout the entirety of the book, thereby blurring the lines between the individual essays. Thus, as these personal experiences overall occur in chronological order, this progression binds the individual paragraphs together as they come to form a narration portraying Bolin growing up through their interplay and locked structure within the book.

Thus, it appears how the narration contains elements of both autobiography and/or the personal essay as well as the formal essay, whereby her text evidently is queer, as Bolin makes both her personal experiences and professional examinations of different topics coexist within the same narration (Lanser, 2015, 924). This coexistence of contrasting narrational approaches could arguably create a rather incoherent narration - in fact, it is possible to argue that this is the case as will be argued later in the paper. Nonetheless, Bolin uses the structure of the dual narrator to make the two different approaches coexist within her text. She manages to do so, as she uses her protagonist, the 'narrated I', to create the narration's plot through the autobiographical elements of the text, as it acts out her personal experiences, while her first person narrator, the 'narrating I', is the one to conduct the academic examinations relating them to her personal experience by also encompassing a retrospective focus.

This can be experienced in the book's first chapter, in which Bolin's 'narrating I' examines the Dead Girl Show, emphasizing the problematic nature of this formulaic story, especially highlighting how the show tends to make the concept of 'innocence' migrate from the female victims to the male perpetrators, thereby portraying victimblaming (Bolin 16). This examination is grounded within the 'narrated I's progression of the plot, which mirrors this focus on 'innocence' as it generally is

focused on memories from Bolin's childhood, reflecting on her hometown, her family home and her parents, thereby being situated within the most innocent part of our lives. However, this retrospective look on her childhood is far from idyllic, as the 'narrated I' and the 'narrating I' come together in a reflective moment, in which Bolin indicates how she lost her childhood innocence due to the Dead Girl Show:

> This [reading about a serial killer in her home region] was the first time I left the fairy tale of my childhood, or maybe the first time I understood it. That summer held for me both the full swell of puberty and my first depressive episode […] This was a rough initiation into womanhood, when I learned something fundamental about the place I was growing up in and its desperation and its remoteness. I learned that there were legions of hopeless women and they could be hurt and hidden so easily (43).

This quote exemplifies how Bolin through her dual narrator containing two different genres, is able to not only academically argue why the Dead Girl Show is problematic, but also to prove its actual harming qualities, as she through her retrospective scope shows how being exposed to the show affected her negatively while growing up.

This mirroring between the 'narrated I' and the 'narrating I's object of examination continues throughout the book. In the second chapter, Bolin's personal experiences are focused on her move to L.A, while the 'narrating I' examines several female icons and tropes to come out of the city. Thus, this chapter can be read as a general reflection upon 'identity', which evidently is a natural reflection to follow the loss of childhood innocence, thereby indicating how each chapter represents different stages of growing up. This is further indicated through the third chapter, in which the dual narrator is focused on the concept of 'control' in relation to Bolin's own experience with a lack of control due to anxiety and hypochondria contra the trope of the 'teen witch', who controls not only her own life, but the people and circumstances around her through magic. The fourth – and final - chapter can be read as an examination of 'consciousness', as her 'narrated I' demonstrates how she unconsciously has acted out stereotypical female roles, while her 'narrating I' examines how women, herself included, participates in maintaining these roles to not only gain power in a patriarchal culture, but also to stay alive.

These concepts of 'innocence', 'identity', 'control' and 'consciousness' are arguably cornerstones in the process of growing up and becoming an adult. Thus, as Bolin thereby through her structuration of the narration creates a portrayal of the act of growing up, it becomes evident

how important this aspect to the text is. When regarding this growing-up-structure of the narration in addition to the dual narrator's queer combination of both a personal and professional approach to Bolin's object of examination, it reveals the true purpose of her text - and despite her 'red-herring' title this purpose is not solely focused on 'dead girls'. Indeed, it is rather the second part of the book's title that indicates the text's main purpose: *Essays on Surviving an American Obsession*. This subtitle indicates the rather essay-like hypothesis that runs throughout the book: that Western culture's obsession with dead women have a negative impact on the lives of the girls growing up in it. Bolin is able to answer this hypothesis, as she through her queering of the dual narrator is able to use the 'narrating I' to create an academic examination of pop cultural texts to provide an insight into how narrations create false and stereotypical narratives about women. Meanwhile, the 'narrating I's retrospective perspective also allows her to transform her 'narrated I' into an actual example of a female life that has been negatively impacted by this obsession, thereby supporting her thesis from both a theoretical and real perspective.

Thus, Bolin to a degree queers the 'normal' dual narrator within life writings, which allows her to construct a plot that emphasizes her feminist message of how the silent narratives about women are harmful and oppresses women. When considering this structuration of the plot in relation to her insertion of herself as a female author, it becomes possible to argue how she uses this queering of the narrator to form a plot that further emphasizes how her personal experiences are grounded in reality, as it portrays her life story in relation to cultural trends. This indicates how a mixture of different genres allows the author to create a queer design that aids them in sculpting a narration, which defies categorization and is formed to encompass their messages perfectly (Lanser, 2015, 924). However, as Bolin utilizes metanarrations less than Nelsen and thereby is not nearly as present and reflective, it is relevant to turn the focus to Nelson's narration to establish whether she too strengthens her vocalization of the cultural silencing of women by queering her text.

Nelson's more reflective approach to a fluid use of genre is established within the first couple of pages of her book, as she both announces her text as being an autobiography and a memoir, as well as she states how she does not want her text to conform to any definite descriptions (xviii), as previously mentioned. Nelson elaborates on her queer approach to writing her text in yet another metanarration, as she states how she does not like to tell stories or create narrations: "I became a poet in part because I didn't want to tell stories. As far as I could tell, stories may enable us to live, but they also trap us, bring us spectacular pain. In their scramble to make sense of nonsensical things, they distort, codify, blame, aggrandize, restrict, omit, betray, mythologize, you name it"

(155). Naturally, this statement appears to be a contradiction to the very fact that she indeed is narrating a story within her book – a decision she notes that she felt a need to do: "I felt an intense rush to record all the details before being swallowed up, be it by anxiety, grief, amnesia, or horror; to transform myself or my material into an aesthetic object" (xvii). These apparently ambivalent emotions of Nelson's in relation to creating her book makes it relevant to examine how she – like Bolin – queers her narration, and whether her queering allows her to not "distort" the "nonsensical things" that the story, which she needs to tell, contains.

As previously mentioned, Nelson's creation of the authorial paradox in her title, as well as her metanarration on her text being a memoir, is the first indication of how she queers her text through genre, as she evidently want to resist her text being categorized (Lanser, 2015, 924). This is the case, as even though the genres of 'autobiography' and 'memoir' both fall under life writing, therefore sharing similar characteristics that can make it difficult to differ them from one another, they still do contain specific conventions that separate them into being two individual genres. As previously mentioned, Graham argues how autobiography is characterized by being focused on the chronology of the author's entire life, and he notes how this feature indeed separates it from memoir, as this genre in contrast only covers one specific aspect of their lives (170). When taking this time related difference between autobiography and memoir into consideration, it becomes evident how Nelson's claim of her text being both an autobiography and a memoir is true.

When relating Graham's notion of autobiography focusing on the chronology of the author's entire life to Nelson's authorial paradox, it becomes evident how the progression of the trial – figuratively the trial's life story – provides the narration with this characteristic of the genre. The beginning and end of the narration aligns with that of the trial's, whereby the plot of the text evidently consists of the trial's entire 'life' from start to finish. However, it is also the confined timespan of the trial that establishes elements of memoir within the narration. Despite her genre-defying attempt to attribute the role of author to the trial, Nelson is of course the true author, and as the trial's beginning and end occurred within a couple of months of each other, the narration does indeed only cover a limited period of time in Nelson's life, which according to Graham is a characteristic of the memoir. Thus, Nelson's indicated fluid approach to genre is solidified through the narrated time within the text, as it contains contradictory elements of autobiography and memoir, thereby aiding her attempt to create "a peculiar, pressurized meditation" (xviii) rather than a genre-defined text restricted by categorization.

However, despite the two genres' differences provide the narration with a queer element in relation to the narrated time, autobiography and memoir also share the identical characteristic of the dual narrator, which thereby does introduce normativity into Nelson's narration. In Nelson's text her 'narrating I' narrates the story from an unidentified point in time after the trial has come to its conclusion, while her 'narrated I' is situated within the trial itself. Thus, as the 'narrated I' is the protagonist of the story, the plot is constituted through the trial's progression; a point which is emphasized by how Nelson initiates the narration with a focus upon the trial: "*We have every reason to believe this case is moving swiftly toward a successful conclusion*" (1). This structuration of the plot around the trial arguably is a rather normative feature, as the trial provides the story with a clear 'beginning' – as indicated in the quote above – 'middle' and 'end' (Lanser, 2015, 924).

This structure can also be argued to be normative, as it generally is the common way of conceptualizing plot, although it is possible to conceive of plot in multiple ways. In her text "Plot" from *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2013), Karin Kukkonen argues how there generally exists three ways of conceptualizing plot: 1) Plot as a fixed, global structure with a 'beginning,' 'middle' and 'end,' 2) Plot as progressive structuration in relation to motivation and consequences, and 3) Plot as part of the authorial design ("Plot", TLHN). When regarding these three ways of conceptualizing plot in relation to the trial being the main event within the narration, it appears how the first way is the one reflecting the plot's structure the closest. This way is arguably the most traditional – and by that the *least* queer – conceptualization of a plot, whereby the structuration around a 'beginning,' 'middle' and 'end' appears to initially hinder Nelson's attempt to not distort the "nonsensical things" in her narration, as this structuration of the plot forces them into a normative, chronological progression of a story.

However, just as Bolin uses the normativity of the dual narrator to queer her narration, Nelson indeed also utilizes a queering of the normative plot structure in order to avoid distorting the "nonsensical things". This is the case, as Nelson constantly interrupts the natural chronology of the trial's progression with anachrony, consisting of flashbacks to personal experiences of Nelson's. This is e.g. experienced in the quoted flashback below in which Nelson describes consulting a religious, former teacher of hers after Nelson's boyfriend almost died due to a drug overdose: "*Why not just read the red parts on you own?* She said. OK, I told her, hanging up. *I'll do that* […] At the time I imagined slitting a body from chin to genitals, spreading apart its internal organs and trying to read them like tea leaves […] *Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be, hereafter*. A red part" (40-41). The term 'the red parts' refers to a

specific edition of the bible, in which the Dominical words – the words spoken by Jesus himself – are written in red ink (Countryman vi).

The fact that Nelson has named her book *The Red Parts*, thus, is a clue to how her narration is to be conceptualized. Just as the red part in the quote above preaches, Nelson writes about what she has seen and what she is experiencing. Thus, just as the bible tells a story that is divided by the words of Jesus, so is *The Red Parts* about a chronological story of a murder trial, which is interjected by Nelson's own words – her own red parts. These red parts are the "nonsensical things" that Nelson argues narration distorts, as the generally consist of her reflecting on deep emotions and complex, abstract thoughts about grief and violence. Therefore, Nelson's solution to avoiding distortion of her emotions and thoughts related to the story she *needs* to tell, is to create the chronological plot that lets the story of the trial progress, while queering this normative structure through anachrony, thereby letting her "nonsensical things" exist 'outside' of the progressing story while still being an integrated part of it. Thus, Nelson's incorporation of multiple different types of life writing also allows her to benefit from both the normativity and queerness that such a mixture provides, thereby allowing her to – like Bolin – create a unique narration that suits her ambivalent perception of narration perfectly.

Thereby, it becomes evident how both Bolin and Nelson's narrations can be regarded as examples of Kukkonen's third way of conceptualizing plot: as being part of an "authorial design" ("Plot", TLHN). This is the case, as they evidently not only utilize the concept in relation to its ability to provide a chronological progressing plot with a 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' – although they definitely do – but they also use it in relation to its ability to provide their narrations with a normativity that they then can queer. Thereby, they become able to sculpt their narrations to fit their

ambitions with the texts; be it in order to provide evidence for a thesis of how the obsession with 'dead girls' traumatizes the women that are being subjected to it from both a theoretical and real perspective, or to avoid distorting the deep emotions and complex, abstract thoughts that being a witness to violence and death creates. Thus, it is evident how despite Nelson and Bolin's fluid approach to genre and way of queering their texts might vary from one another and create rather different narrational structures, they nonetheless both create an authorial design that is permeated with and structurally marked by their focus on Western culture's obsession with dead women.

According to Kukkonen, the creation of such an authorial design further can be considered "the author's way of structuring the narrative to achieve particular effects" ("Plot", TLHN). The effect

that Bolin and Nelson arguably are trying to achieve is one of blurring lines; lines between themselves and dead women, as well as lines between subjectivity and objectivity. As their authorial designs through their composition of life writing and a focus on Western culture's obsession with dead women cast respectively Bolin and Nelson as the main subjects to experience this obsession on their own bodies within their narrations, it becomes obvious how they through their narrations identify themselves with the dead women. Nelson's identification is with Jane, as she uses her authorial design to blur the lines between them. This is done, as her interjecting 'red parts' intermixes her own thoughts and the trial, which represents Jane's story, thereby blurring the lines between Nelson herself and Jane. Bolin's identification with dead women on the other hand is constituted through her narration creating a growing-up-story. As her authorial design essentially is an examination of how female lives are negatively affected by silent portrayals about women, her identification is not so much with actual dead girls, but rather with the *potentially* dead girls and women, who throughout their upbringing are bombarded with portrayals of how they are worth more dead than alive, resulting in them unconsciously turning against one another in an attempt to survive.

It is further through this identification with dead women that Bolin and Nelson's blurring of subjectivity and objectivity arises – as well as the possibility of defining the texts as being 'autotheory'. As they create queer texts containing narrations about their personal experiences, examinations/reflections of the cultural obsession with dead women, as well as insertion of themselves as female authors through their metanarrations, which provides their narrations with a stronger sense of reality and relevance, it becomes clear how they are transforming their own lives as women into theory (Fournier 21). By inserting themselves into the narrations, they emphasize how their experiences with being able to identify with dead women – or the risk of becoming one – they reveal how the cultural obsession with dead women is not only a theoretical conundrum, but indeed is a real problematic affecting the lives of actual women. Thus, their queer narration can be perceived as autotheoretical texts, which contain a feminist message that critiques Western culture's obsession with dead girls, as the theory used to support this critique is derived from Nelson and Bolin's own personal and bodily experiences (Fournier 21).

That Nelson and Bolin's text can be perceived as being autotheory is further supported by how they arguably challenge the historically preferred neutral, male perspective within theory and cultural criticism (Ring 467). This is the case, as their narrations demonstrate how an inclusion of their personal experiences related to the cultural obsession with dead women grounds the theory

related to this problematic in reality, as it shows how their actual lives are affected, thereby emphasizing the severity and reality of the problem. They use these experiences as knowledge used to criticize the silencing of women, and they use their queer narration to do so, as the generally accepted way of theorizing and criticizing is developed and dominated by men, whereby it arguably is unable to fully contain a female perspective (Ring 467). Thus, they use their fluid approach to genre to create a queer narration that not only is able sculpt the narration that fits their intentions with their texts, but it is also able to encompass their female voices, making them able to articulate how the cultural obsession with dead women are silencing women.

Returning the focus to McNamara's narration it becomes evident how this text also has a queer narration. On the surface, McNamara's text resembles Nelson's narration in many ways. Like her, McNamara also create a rather normative plot structured around the natural progression of her search for the Golden State Killer. Then, she interjects this chronology with anachrony consisting of flashbacks to her personal life, which also creates a queer authorial design blurring the lines between McNamara herself and the subject(s) about whom she is writing. It is even possible to argue how McNamara's text is possible to define as being autotheory as well, as her obsessive search for a criminal emphasizes how she is on a quest for justice for the killer's victims: "'Why are you so interested in crime?' people ask me […] I need to see his face. He loses his power when we know his face" (46). Thus, McNamara wants to return a sense of control and power to the women who have been subjected to male violence. Therefore, she uses the victims of the Golden State Killer's lives to produce the knowledge she evidently appears to use to critique the cultural problem of how men through threats or actions of violence and abuse uses their power to silence women.

However, despite McNamara's text thereby shares many characteristics with Nelson and Bolin's narrations, it also contains some drastically different elements, which relates back to how McNamara has not included any metanarrations into her narration. As previously mentioned, McNamara in opposition to Nelson and Bolin does not insert herself as a woman and as an author directly into her narration, thereby not providing it with a stronger sense of reality and relevance. Therefore, it becomes easier to read her narration as a true crime story rather than autotheory, as her own presence and thereby affection by the cultural oppression and silencing of women does not become as present within the text. This notion raises an interesting point in relation to Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts, as they despite being based on the authors' own experiences and real cultural problematics - even despite Nelson and Bolin's metanarrative attempts at emphasizing their actual presence within their stories - they are still constructed narratives. Therefore, it becomes

relevant to examine how these queer narrations display their constructiveness, despite the authors' various attempts at emphasizing the stories to be bases in reality.

Between Truthfulness and Creativity

As Fournier argues, autotheory contains a perception of how the personal is part of theory's material, as well as how theory can be grounded and explored through the individual physical body and not only through the abstractions of a neutral mind (21). As argued above, this is exactly what Nelson, McNamara and Bolin do as they create their queer narrational designs allowing them to portray the problematics of Western culture's obsession with dead women as they convert the knowledge they have gained through their own or other female bodies into culturally critical narrations. Thus, they do not only speak on behalf of themselves within their narrations despite focusing on their individual lives, but also more or less directly use their personal experiences as part of a feministic theory's material that indicates how their experiences are not singular, but indeed shared by many women.

Although, their queer narrational designs thereby are what provides them with this autotheoretical ability of fusing the abstract, theoretical examinations of the mind with the physical knowledge they have gained through being women in a culture obsessed with dead, silent women, it is also the complexity of these queer texts that indicates how their narrations are constructed. Even though their narrations contain elements of life writing, which is a characteristic of autotheory (Fournier 15), this foundation on real experiences does not equal an exact written recount of what actually has happened in the authors' lives. As previously mentioned, Schwalm notes how life writing denotes modes and genres of telling about the author's life. However, she further emphasizes how such a narration "is inevitably constructive, or imaginative, in nature and as a form of textual 'self-fashioning' ultimately resists a clear distinction from its fictional relatives […] leaving the generic borderlines blurred". Schwalm explains how this duality of factual and fictional elements within life writing is a result of the author often oscillates between truthfulness and creativity ("Autobiography", TLHN). Thus, despite Nelson, McNamara and Bolin undoubtedly have based their narrations on their own lives and personal experiences, it is important to stay aware of how their recounts also have an unavoidable constructive nature.

According to Graham, this oscillation between truthfulness and creativity in texts containing elements of life writing is referred to as 'poetic license'. He describes how this license is somewhat of a "permission to lie", although this statement evidently is to be taken with a grain of salt: "I am not free to write that I crashed my car while making an emergency dash to the hospital to save a

friend's life, because that isn't what happened. However, I am free to write something that will re-create for the reader the emotional truth of an episode when, driving illegally, I crashed a car because I wasn't looking where I was going" (172). Thus, Graham indicates how the circumstances of real life do not always comply with being directly translated into concise, captivating narrations, whereby it generally is accepted to shape and alter real experiences in order to enhance the valuable points and lessons they might contain to be able to convey them to the reader.

Although, the use of 'poetic license' generally is an accepted and necessary tool amongst authors writing texts that contain elements of life writing, it becomes relevant to examine this concept in relation to autotheoretical texts, as the genre often performs cultural criticism based on knowledge obtained through personal experiences (Fournier 36). This is the case, because of autotheory's connection to feminism and women's attempt to vocalize their experiences of oppression in a patriarchal culture (Fournier 52). Not only can an autotheoretical text that does not manage to capture the emotional truthfulness of reality potentially invalidate its own message, but it can arguably also harm feminist liberation movements as it paints a faulty picture of how autotheoretical, female authors fabricate the knowledge and thereby the theory they use to criticize the culture's oppression and silencing of women.

This literary tightrope that Nelson, McNamara and Bolin have to walk in relation to their use of poetic license in their autotheoretical texts becomes further complicated, as their texts in addition to being able to describe as autotheory, also contains elements of true crime, which becomes evident by relating them to Punnett's definition of the genre:

> By definition, 'true crime' is an occasionally controversial multi-platform genre that is most often associated with murder narratives and shares some common ancestral heritage with journalism, but always has been driven by different impulses. True crime stories are narratives that are best understood as 'the story of real events, shaped by the teller and imbued with his or her values and beliefs about such events (3).

When applying this definition to the three texts, it becomes possible to note how Nelson and McNamara's texts adhere to this description, as their narrations revolve around real murder cases, which evidently are shaped by the authors' own experiences, values and beliefs, as they also have incorporated elements of life writing into the texts. Although, Bolin's title, *Dead Girls*, might indicate the presence of true crime, this title mainly functions as a red-herring, as her text does not contain any genre conventions of true crime besides the luring phrasing of her title. This appeal of true crime in the title will be examined later in this paper.

Although, this incorporation of true crime further queers Nelson and McNamara's texts, as it aids in impeding a definite classification of them in relation to their genres (Lanser, 2015, 924), this combination of autotheory and true crime also potentially complicates their ability to criticize Western culture's silencing of women through portrayals of dead women. This is the case, as true crime is one of the major genres to incorporate and distribute the BDWG trope, which as previously discussed is a direct consequence of the cultural obsession with dead, silent women (Pedersen 79). Thus, the combination of autotheory and true crime appears rather contradictory in Nelson and McNamara's texts, as they on one hand try to demonstrate the consequences of Western culture's obsession with dead women, while they on the other hand participate in a genre that is notorious for exploiting and silencing women.

Thus, this contradiction within especially Nelson and McNamara's texts, but also partially in Bolin's, arguably can devaluate the feminist messages that their texts' contain, as they partake in the very obsession they are criticizing. This also applies pressure to their use of poetic license, as a potential misuse of the concept not only composes a threat to their credibility and can harm the female liberation movements. A misuse of their poetic license will also put the authors at risk of becoming hypocrites, as they not only fail to base their critique in reality, but also ends up partaking in and spreading portrayals of dead women. Thus, the combination of both autotheory and true crime indeed creates an even narrower tightrope the authors have to balance in order to get their feminist messages across clearly and credibly, whereby it becomes relevant to examine how Nelson and McNamara operate their poetic license.

Considering how Nelson tries to avoid "distorting" the "nonsensical things" (155) and generally almost can be considered hyper-aware of her role as the author e.g. through her reflective metanarrations, it is in accordance with the remainder of her narration that she articulates her use of poetic license within a metanarration before her actual narration begins. As previously quoted, Nelson states how the events in her book relies on her own memory, interpretations and imaginative recreation of them[7]. Thus, despite she does not mention the term explicitly this metanarration functions as a sort of 'readers warning', as she makes the readers aware of how she indeed has reinterpreted and reimagined some events, whereby they do not and are not meant to reflect the real events exactly as they happened in real life.

Although, Nelson's initial reference is implicit, she does refer directly to the concept later in the book, as she addresses and reflects on her poetic license in the chapter, which she very

[7] This page does not have a page number of any kind.

straightforward has named "Poetic License". In this chapter, Nelson's reflection on the concept is triggered as her 'narrated I' during the trial witnesses how the prosecutors use extracts from the suspect, Gary Leiterman's, private journal to incriminate him. This is an act that horrifies Nelson, and she notes how she would perceive it to be "nothing short of a Kafkaesque nightmare" to have her own journals publicly dissected like that (145). Then, she realizes that this is essentially what she has done to Jane: "It is also one way of describing what I did with Jane's diaries in *Jane*. I had told the CBS producer at dinner that I made use of Jane's journals so that she could speak for herself. That was true. But I also selected the words I wanted, chopped them up, and rearranged them to suit my needs. *Poetic license*, as they say" (145). This realization of how she potentially has replaced Jane's voice with her own is what accentuates and accelerates the self-critical nature of Nelson's reflection, which evidently is integrated throughout the entirety of the narration, but only becomes explicitly discussed by Nelson, as she is confronted with her use of poetic license in *Jane*.

As indicated in the quote above, this realization makes Nelson think back on a previous event in the book, where she meets with the producer of the true crime TV-show *48 Hour Mystery*. The producer asks Nelson if she was trying to channel her aunt as she wrote *Jane*, but Nelson rejects this implication: "I try to explain that *Jane* is about identification, not fusion. That I never even knew her. That in the book I don't try to speak for her" (67). However, as Nelson during the trial witnesses how the utilization of poetic license can transform a person's own narration into an entirely new story, she begins to question whether she indeed let Jane speak for herself or whether Nelson merely used her identification with Jane as an excuse to turn her aunt's life into the story that Nelson herself wanted to tell: "I feel like a trespasser. A peeping Tom, with nothing to see" (183).

Thus, considering how Nelson through her self-critical reflection on poetic license and her right to Jane's story arguably indicates how she in hindsight views her dissection of Jane's diaries as potentially problematic, it is possible to propose that Nelson's complex, queer narrational design in *The Red Parts* functions as a way for her to avoid making the same 'mistake' she made in *Jane*. As previously argued, the design of inserting her own experiences into the narration through anachrony allows Nelson to keep her complex and abstract emotions on grief and violence situated outside of the reality of the trial. However, vice versa, this design also allows her to not "distort" Jane's story i.e. the trial with Nelson's own thoughts and emotions. Thus, it appears how she is able to rectify the 'mistake' in *Jane*, as Nelson thereby indeed lets Jane's story speak for itself without having

Nelson influencing and potentially manipulating it with her poetic license. Thus, it is possible to argue how Nelson's queer, authorial design allows her to narrate Jane's story as factual as possible.

The authorial design's partial separation of Nelson and Jane, also indicates how Nelson tries to avoid creating a BDWG story, while simultaneously being forced to include Jane into the narration. At one point in her narration, Nelson states how the story is about her: "I am the hero of this story" (175), thereby emphasizing how the book indeed is not about Jane. Instead, the narration is about the trauma and fears that Nelson has inherited from her aunt's violent death. As previously quoted, she notes how she wants her text to be a "meditation on time's relation to violence, to grief" (xviii), and that is exactly what it is. Nelson narrates the story of how the consequences of violence can be passed down through generations, whereby she is not able to disconnect herself entirely from Jane, as Nelson's own trauma and fears are inherited from Jane. Nelson expresses this feeling of having a traumatic bond to Jane, as she during the trial sees a towel stained with Jane's blood: "I may not have known Jane, but I know I share in that blood. So does my mother. So does my sister. I know this every time I see it, and every time I see it I feel like I'm being choked" (Nelson 121).

Thus, Nelson evidently addresses the paradox her utilization of both autotheory and true crime creates in relation to her focus on how the obsession with dead girls silences women. However, Nelson's explicit, self-critical and conscious reflection on her use of poetic license stands in sharp contrast to McNamara's narration. As previously argued, McNamara's text is not characterized by containing metanarrations. In accordance with this, the text indicated to have been written by McNamara herself does not contain any implicit or explicit references to her use of poetic license. However, in the chapter, "Afterword", which is written after McNamara's passing, Patton Oswalt, her husband, does reference how his wife indeed made use of the concept, as he notes how McNamara based her descriptions of the crimes and crime scenes in the narration on facts: "Michelle was a crime researcher and journalist who dealt with facts. She wrote about the facts she could confirm in a novelistic way, to keep a reader's attention" (323). This statement contains an interesting point in relation to the concept of poetic license, as the term "novelistic" indicates how McNamara has fictionalized and reinterpreted facts of the real rape- and murder cases included in her narration.

However, as a fictionalization of the victims' experiences evidently blurs the lines between fact and fiction, it becomes possible to argue how McNamara's imaginative reinterpretations of other people's traumatic experiences can be considered a potentially problematic use of her poetic license. This is the case, as she by reinterpreting the factual events commits the same act, which

Nelson critically reflects on and arguably revises in her text, as McNamara uses the victims' experiences to create her own versions of how the crimes took place. The concern of how this "novelistic way" of writing potentially is problematic becomes further valid, as Oswalt notes how McNamara created these fictionalizations to "keep a reader's attention" (323), whereby her imaginative reinterpretations becomes possible to perceive to be an exploitation of the victim's trauma in order to create entertainment. This perception can compromise McNamara's autotheoretical, feminist message about returning power to victims of violence, as she thereby does not manage to use the features of true crime to emphasize the problematic nature of the obsession with dead women, but instead partakes in the objectification of them.

When examining McNamara's descriptions of the experiences of the Golden State Killer's victims it initially appears that she is creating a distance between herself and the victims, as she substitutes her first person narrator with a third person perspective when describing events she did not experiences herself. This can be observed in the quote below:

> A loaf of sheepherder bread was out, three stale-looking pieces stacked beside it. Roger felt, by degrees, a creeping fear. He walked down the ochre-colored carpeted hallway toward the bedrooms. The door to the guest bedroom, where Keith and Patty slept, was open […] Keith and Patty were lying on their stomachs. Their arms were bent at strange angles, palms up. They seemed, in the strictest sense of the word, broken. Were it not for the ceiling, you might think they'd fallen from a great height, such was the spread of blood beneath them (22).

However, the initially indicated distance between McNamara and the events is not realized, as the quote above contains an internal focalization, which allows her to narrate the internal experiences of the 'characters'. This is exemplified through how the quote describes how "Roger" feels a "creeping fear", a fact that would not be possible to know through external observation. Not only does the internal focalization therefore indicate McNamara's use of poetic license, as it is fair to assume that these descriptions of Roger's feelings doubtfully has been a part of factual sources such as e.g. police reports (McNamara 173). It is also possible to argue that these feelings is a literary device integrated by McNamara to enhance the feeling of suspense within the text, thus increasing the chance of "keeping a reader's attention" (323).

In addition to employing an internal focalization, it is possible to argue how McNamara's use of poetic license also is revealed through the metaphor she uses to describe the bodies in the quote above. This metaphor describing how the bodies and the blood around them makes it appear as if the victims have fallen "from a great height" is evidently rather gory and graphic in nature. As

McNamara describes looking through police reports of the crimes (178), it is possible to assume that she indeed is describing the real corpses. However, the metaphor is most likely a literary device employed by herself in order to be able to portray the gory graphicness of the crime scene through her narration, emphasizing the horror Roger must have felt as he discovered the bodies, as well as the severity of the crimes. Thus, it is possible to note how the metaphor also is part of making her narration entertaining.

That McNamara uses the gory and graphic metaphor to enhance the appeal of her text is possible to propose, as it generally can be perceived to be a characteristic of the genre of true crime. Indeed, Punnett argues how the inclusion of graphic descriptions and pictures is a way for true crime to emphasize the interesting grotesqueness of violent crimes and murders: "Meaning-making/sensemaking through startling words and images was always the intent of true crime magazines and books". He further notes how many critics of this "full-on visual body horror" in true crime refers to these portrayals as "crime porn" (21). As this nickname indicates, the graphic representations of murdered bodies is a controversial aspect to the genre of true crime, as it can be considered an exploitation of the victims (Punnett 8). Thus, considering how McNamara – like Nelson – through her mixture of autotheory and true crime hovers dangerously close to partaking in the very obsession she critiques, her graphic descriptions of the victims potentially can be considered a misuse of her poetic license, as they arguably exploit the victims' traumatic experiences in order to make her narration more interesting.

However, McNamara is not the only one to create what can be considered "crime porn", as Nelson evidently also includes some rather graphic descriptions into her narration. These graphic descriptions consist of Nelson describing multiple crime scene and autopsy photos of Jane, which were displayed during the trial:

> *Photo #3:*
> *A close-up of the entry wound in Jane's lower left skull. Her hair, thick and red with blood, has been pushed aside to expose it, as if to isolate a tick in the fur of an animal. Around the hole is a bright-red corona of flayed skin which the examiner calls a "contusion collar." The diameter of the wound is very small; a .22 is not a big-caliber gun* […] *The lingering close-up makes me feel like doing something perverse – I feel like standing up and starting to sing. I imagine the courtroom suddenly sliding over into musical farce* (Nelson 72).

However, when comparing Nelson and McNamara's examples of "crime porn" it becomes evident how Nelson also applies her authorial design to these descriptions, allowing her not to reinterpret

Jane's story. This is the case, as while the first part of the quote does create a rather horrifying representation of Jane's corpse, the description is voided of fictionalized metaphors and is instead characterized by a sterile and objective style. Then, as demonstrated through the second half of the quote, Nelson follows this almost medical description with her imaginative reinterpretation illustrating how the photos make Nelson feel. Thus, she only utilizes her poetic license in relation to her own part of the story, but leaves Jane's as plainly told as possible.

Thus, it becomes evident how Nelson and McNamara generally employ the concept of poetic license differently in their narrations, as Nelson tends to only use it in relation to her own parts of the narration keeping Jane's story as factual as possible. In contrast, McNamara uses the concept to indulge in the characteristics of true crime, fictionalizing parts of the victims' stories in order to enhance the suspenseful appeal of her narration. Still, it is in both texts possible to argue that they partake in the silencing of women, as they do incorporate the BDWG trope into their narrations.

Although, their portrayals of dead women can be considered them taking part in the obsession with dead women, it is also possible to argue that their narrational conflicts of narrating about dead women, while trying to emphasize the consequences of such narrations further supports the latter point. This is the case, as their texts are possible to perceive in two different ways: 1) as pure true crime narrations that partake in the cultural obsession and objectification of dead women, and 2) as autotheoretical texts portraying how this cultural obsession is hurting and silencing women. It is fair to assume, that this ability of perceiving the texts in two different ways is due to how the readers must 'discover' the cultural criticism within autotheoretical texts and realize that the narrations are not only about Nelson and McNamara specifically, but rather functions as snapshots of female lives that represents the problematics the cultural obsession with dead women creates for a majority of the women in Western culture (Fournier 17).

As previously argued, McNamara's general lack of her female, authorial presence and self-critical reflection, makes it appear how her text to a greater extent than Nelson's can be understood as pure true crime. However, McNamara's indulgence in true crime is arguably also what along with her message of returning power to the victims constitute the possibility of perceiving her text to be autotheoretical – especially when understanding the text in the light of her death. Throughout the parts of the text indicated to be written by herself, McNamara hints at how her obsession is wearing her down. This e.g. becomes clear in McNamara's description of how she almost hit Oswalt with a lamp one night, as she mistook him for being an intruder when he was sneaking into bed (173). Oswalt also mentions the consequences of McNamara's obsession: "She was honest

about her own obsession, her own mania, her at times dangerous commitment to the pursuit – often at the expense of sleep and health" (319).

Thus, considering how the text was finished by Oswalt and the editors, it becomes possible – in addition to reading McNamara's own captivating true crime story - to perceive the text as being an autotheoretical cautionary tale. This is the case, as the book portrays the knowledge that McNamara and especially Oswalt has obtained through their experiences with her obsession, whereby these experiences can be perceived to tie into the more general theories about how an excessive exposure to true crime and thereby dead women can harm you mentally (Vicary and Fraley 85). Thus, McNamara's book becomes an interesting oscillation between a captivation of true crime, dead woman and serial killers, but also a cautionary tale warning the reader about the consequences of being obsessed with the genre. It allows the readers to both enjoy the interesting story about the hunt for justice for the Golden State Killer's victims, but it also recommends the reader to reflect on their own attachment to the genre.

The same oscillation can also be experienced in Nelson's text. However, due to her narration's self-critical and reflective nature this oscillation becomes more explicit throughout her narration, as Nelson goes through this experience of moral ambivalence towards true crime along with her reader. In opposition to McNamara, Nelson's use of the genre appears not to be based in a personal interest, but instead as a necessary consequence of her traumatic bond with Jane. However, Nelson constantly questions the features of true crime in her narration, and she challenges the morals of the genre – as exemplified by her experiences in relation to the TV-show *48 Hour Mystery* and their use of the BDWG trope (66). However, Nelson never moralizes about true crime. Instead, she lets her narration oscillate between one way of perceiving the genre to another. This creates an opportunity for the reader, as Nelson gives them permission to be conflicted – because as they read her book, the reader is also participating in the genre's silencing of women as they are consuming a story containing the BDWG trope (Pedersen 79). Thus, Nelson shows the reader that it is okay to be fascinated with true crime and dead women, but at the same time her self-critical reflection also reveals the importance of staying aware and questioning this fascination as it does participate in oppressing and silencing women.

Thus, Nelson and McNamara evidently use their poetic license and features of true crime to show their own, as well as other women's trauma created by the cultural obsession with dead women. They do this by using the features of true crime to portray their own and other women's deeply, painful experiences and emotions, which are created through the obsession with and

silencing of women. Thus, they portray not only the suffering and trauma created and inherited through abuse and murders of women, but it also confronts the readers with the moral ambivalence in creating and consuming these hurtfully silent portrayals of women.

The Female Narcissism of Speaking ~~for The Dead~~

The paradoxical, feminist tightrope that Nelson, McNamara and Bolin are walking in relation to vocalizing the silencing of women through their narrations is undeniably complex. However, their balancing acts become even more complicated by the fact that autotheoretical texts written by women often are perceived to be narcissistic. This is a notion argued by Fournier, who states: "The very integration of *auto* or *autos*, the self, with *theory* into a single term is contentious, especially in light of the historical disparagement of self-reflective work as a supposedly narcissistic and therefore nonintellectual or fundamentally uncritical mode – and especially when the work is made by women and people of color" (15). Thus, it appears how it can be difficult for the authors to get their readers to perceive their texts as being articulations important cultural problems, and not narcissistic navel-gazing (Moss and Besio 318).

Fournier notes how the inserting the self into theory and cultural criticism especially is narcissistic when it is done by women or people of color is due to the historical focus on their bodies: "One of the reasons why work by women and artists of color is particularly vulnerable to charges of narcissism is that women and racialized people have been historically overdetermined by their bodies – in contrast, always, to the supposedly neutral standard of the white, cisgender man" (52). Thus, Fournier points out how this critique of autotheoretical texts often being deemed 'narcissistic' is related to how the male, neutral way of theorizing still is attributed with more value and credibility, than the voices of women and people of color, as they generally are understood through their bodies rather than their minds (62).

This claim of how women and people of color are 'narcissistic' for inserting themselves into theory is evidently grounded in sexism and racism and is arguably used as a way of shaming these minorities into remaining silent and oppressed (Barlow and Awan 4). This is a notion that Fournier also indirectly comments on, as she notes: "Is this not what good art does – turn a mirror to society, to show it to itself? Is this not the move from the "particular" to the "universal" that so many writers and artists – many of them white men – describe their work as doing?" (72). However, the tendency of people perceiving female autotheoretical writers to be narcissistic does raise an interesting aspect to examine in relation to Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts, as this analysis has revealed how the

narrations are autotheoretical texts containing various elements of true crime. Thus, the three authors evidently use their own experiences as the knowledge that forms the feminist theory they use to criticize the oppression and silencing of women. However, as they have incorporated true crime features, they evidently also employ the experiences of other women – more specifically dead women, who are no longer able to speak for themselves. Thus, it becomes interesting to question whether Nelson, McNamara and Bolin indeed can be perceived as being 'narcissistic' as they through their narrations insert themselves into other women's deaths.

Fournier argues that autotheoretical texts can indeed be 'narcissistic' if the author is not applying an intersectional way of thinking: "At its worst, autotheory can become that unproductive form of narcissism – my truth is the only important truth worth listening to, which is fascistic" (281). However, she further notes how an autotheoretical author, who is aware of their experiences and knowledge not being universal, generally cannot fairly be deemed 'narcissistic': "in contrast to the uncritical narcissist, lacking in cognizant self-reflexivity […] is the self-aware person. By being conscious of what they are doing, the person who is self-aware is a different animal from the person who is not aware of their self-looking – namely, the narcissist" (70-71). As already established throughout this analysis, it appears how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's texts all indicate some form of self-awareness to varying degrees. However, in order to establish whether their individual use of self-awareness makes them appear 'narcissistic' or not, it becomes relevant to examine how the three texts were received by the public.

As previously established, Nelson is the most self-aware of the three authors. When examining the readers' reviews of her book it generally appears as if this self-awareness potentially has made it difficult, although not impossible for readers to deem her 'narcissistic'. On both Amazon.com and GoodReads.com[8] the majority of the reviewers have awarded the book with five or four stars, while only respectively 3% and 2%[9] of the readers have given it a single star. Thus, these reviews imply how *The Red Parts* has been generally well received by the readers. However, amongst the one-star reviews many of the reviewers do in fact imply how they perceive Nelson to be somewhat narcissistic: "I was surprised to see how little of Jane was left in this book. It seemed that Jane's

[8] I have chosen Amazon.com and GoodReads.com based on the sites' popularity amongst readers, as Amazon.com is the largest book store in terms of sales in the US, while Goodreads.com is the top-ranked site for book reviews written by readers.

[9] These percentages are not meant to provide a statistic comparison between the three authors as such a comparison would need a more thorough examination in order to be precise. Instead, they are meant to provide an insight into how the amount of positive vs. critical reviews are divided across each individual text.

case was not enough anymore and the profiling was aimed at the authors' very closest people. It was tabloid journalism of her big sister and her mother […] They were not part of Jane's story, but still this book sells with Jane's murder" (Anonymous[10] review from Amazon). Although this reviewer does not specifically state they perceive Nelson to be narcissistic, the phrasing of the review evidently indicates it, and this is despite Nelson expressing a great amount of self-awareness throughout the narration.

However, the abovementioned critical review also contains an interesting contradiction, as the reader appears to both be disappointed in Nelson not exploiting Jane's story more, while simultaneously indicating being appalled by how Nelson does include her sister and mother into her narration. This review generally represents the opinions of the majority of the critical reviews, whereby it appears how the readers, who are disappointed with the book, expected a more true crime oriented narration. Thus, it appears how it might not be the incorporation of dead women's stories that is the reason why a minority of the readers perceive Nelson to be narcissistic, but rather the fact that her narration is about herself and other living women and not specifically about Jane.

Although, McNamara's text arguably does contain cultural criticism and a feminist message about the silencing of women, the self-awareness in her text is far more subtle throughout the text compared to Nelson's highly self-aware and self-critical narrative voice. Thus, according to Fournier, McNamara appears more vulnerable for being perceived as being 'narcissistic'. However, when examining the reviews on her book, it appears how McNamara's book has been received well by the readers. Only 1% of the reviewers has rated the text with a single star on both Amazon and Goodreads. Like with Nelson's critique, the majority of these critical reviews did not like the text due to McNamara writing about herself: "I HATED that the first third of the book was a memoir. No offence to McNamara, but I don't really care what schooling was like for you when you were 8" (Anonymous review from Goodreads.com). Thus, like with Nelson's critical reviewers, the reader's do not appear to perceive McNamara speaking for the dead as a problematic, but rather the fact that she is speaking about herself.

Thus, it appears how the readers do not perceive the authors as being 'narcissistic' for speaking on the behalf of dead women whether they demonstrate self-awareness or not; indeed, the readers' criticism are often related to their perception of the text not containing enough focus on the true crime cases. Instead, the majority of the negative reviews criticize the authors for inserting themselves into the narration because it takes the focus away from the dead women. Thus, this

[10] I have chosen to keep all reviews from Amazon.com and Goodreads.com anonymous.

potential tendency becomes especially interesting to examine in relation to Bolin's text, as she uses her title *Dead Girls* as a true-crime-red-herring, because her text does not contain any actual characteristics of the genre, but instead are heavily focused on Bolin's own life.

When examining the reception of Bolin's text, the potential tendency of the readers either expressing disinterest in or accusing the author of being 'narcissistic' for focusing on her own life rather than true crime is further supported. When looking at the reviews of Bolin's book it appears how 8% and 6% on Amazon and Goodreads have given the text a single star. When examining these reviews closer, it becomes evident how the majority of the reviewers were the ones tricked by the title, therefore expecting the book to be about dead girls. Thus, they especially criticize the book for taking a turn after the first chapter, redirecting the focus onto Bolin's own life. The general wording and content of these reviews is represented through this review:

> I gave up on this book halfway through it. I wanted to stop 1/4 the way in, but I had hopes the author would actually talk about what her title suggested the book was about. She did not. The book is mostly her talking about her life. I have no idea who she is, so I don't actually care about her life or her experiences thus far […] Alice Bolin shamelessly uses Dead Girls to sell a book that is actually a memoir, and a boring one at that. It is not well written and I often got lost about what she was talking about. (Anonymous reviewer on Amazon).

The critique of Bolin's text not being "well written" is a point that to some extent is possible to support.

As previously mentioned, Bolin does create a queer authorial design through which she uses her 'narrated I' and 'narrating I' to relate her personal experiences with her scholarly examinations of pop cultural texts. Although, this design to some extent manages to relate the two perspectives to one another, it also is somewhat inept, as it tends to make the narration oscillate between either her examinations of texts and her own life, which appears especially maladroit in the transition from the first to the second chapter. This harsh transition between her academic and personal perspectives can be perplexing – especially for the readers expecting a continuous focus on dead girls throughout the book. Thus, the critique of Bolin's narration not being "well written" is possible to state.

However, as the review above represents, this point of critique is not the main focus in these reviews. Instead, the majority of the critical reviews tend to note how it is Bolin's focus on her personal experiences that made them dislike the book, and approximately 50% of the one-star reviewers state how this focus made them stop reading around halfway through and thereby not

finish the book[11]. That roughly half of the critical one-star reviewers stop reading half-way through is problematic in relation to how Bolin has incorporated her self-awareness in the narration. This is the case, as besides from a single metanarration expressing her ambivalence in naming her book *Dead Girls* (1), it is not until the last chapter consisting of the text "Accomplices" that Bolin manages to concatenate her examination of texts and her personal experiences in a self-aware reflection on how women – Bolin herself included as proven by the queer authorial design's growing-up-story – partake in the oppression of themselves and each other. However, as an amount of the readers, who has been 'tricked' into reading the narration by Bolin's red-herring title, stop reading halfway through they never read the majority of her self-aware reflection. Thus, they miss the part of the narration in which Bolin expresses self-awareness.

The fact that roughly half of the one-star reviewers of Bolin's book do not read the chapter in which she demonstrates self-awareness is potentially why these reviews also are the ones that tend to express a perception of Bolin being 'narcissistic'. Although, none of the examined one-star reviews[12] specifically uses the word 'narcissist', the phrasings of the reviews generally imply this perception, as exemplified by this review: "Alice Bolin has an opportunity to do something amazing with this book, but at the end of the day, it is primarily a memoir about an unlikeable, selfish person" (Anonymous review from Amazon). Thus, the reception of Bolin's text is a prime example of Fournier's notion about how a lack of self-awareness can make female authors of autotheoretical texts vulnerable to being criticized for being 'narcissistic' for focusing on their own lives and bodies (70), as Bolin's narration potentially does not manage to express a sufficient amount of self-awareness before half of her readers have abandoned her book.

In conclusion, the readers' critical reviews of Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's books on Amazon and Goodreads do not indicate a perception of the authors being 'narcissistic' for speaking on behalf of the dead. On the contrary, the critical reviewers indicate a dissatisfaction with how especially Nelson and Bolin – but also to a minor degree McNamara's - texts appear to adhere more to the genre of true crime than they actually do, whereby they do express perceptions of the authors being 'narcissistic' for focusing on their personal experiences. Thus, just as Fournier notes, it appears how the authors' experiences as women and thereby their voices are devalued and deemed nonintellectual (Fournier 15).

[11] 4 out of 8 reviews on Amazon and 52 out of 100 examined reviews on Goodreads stated that they stopped reading roughly around halfway through Bolin's book.

[12] These statements are based on an examination of 108 across Amazon and Goodreads.

Although, the reviews do indicate how the incorporation of self-awareness helps diminish the accusations of being 'narcissistic' (Fournier 281), Nelson's book exemplifies how it is possible to find these harsh, personal reviews on self-aware narrations. However, ironically, these accusing comments arguably also indicate a lack of self-awareness amongst the readers, as these harsh, public descriptions of the authors partake in continuing the silencing of women through shaming (Barlow and Awan 4). Thus, these comments become evidence supporting the author's critique of how culture through the obsession with dead girls silences women, as the reviews participate in the harmful behavior, which they were not able to recognize that Nelson, McNamara and Bolin are criticizing, thereby emphasizing how the cultural blindness towards the harmful consequences of the obsession with dead women still exists.

However, it is also important to emphasize how the critical reviews consist of a minority of the readers, who have reviewed Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's books. Generally, all three books are relatively well received, which potentially indicates how people are beginning to recognize how the obsession with dead women indeed oppresses and silences women (Fournier 16). This indicated growing self-awareness within the culture is potentially also the reason why the literary tendency of women writing autotheoretical texts representing their own trauma inflicted by being oppressed and silenced is occurring at this specific moment in time.

However, it is important to notice how some voices are still missing from this literary tendency. The overall positive reception of Nelson, McNamara and Bolins narrations indicate how the three authors despite their experiences and trauma originating from the cultural oppression of women also are privileged, because they – despite a minor amount of critical reviews - have people who read their narrations. However, as Fournier points out, it is not only women who are at risk of being accused of being 'narcissistic' for speaking – so are people of color, and when glancing over the texts that tie into this literary tendency of articulating female oppression and silencing related to the cultural obsession with dead women, it becomes evident how this tendency is dominated by white women. Considering how autotheory is a genre mainly developed in relation to Black feminism (Fournier 15), as well as how the genre has great capacity for providing an intersectional view (Young 61), the absence of women of color within this literary tendency indicates how they are not able to participate in this conversation yet.

Practice What You Preach

I am a human being experiencing fear, laughter, sweat, and perhaps most significant, uncertainty and ambivalence. How often in our job applications, seminar presentations, and interviews do we reveal our own emotional fragility? - Humphreys (851)

Inspired by Michael Humphreys' "Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes" (2005) and of course Nelson, McNamara and Bolin, I have chosen to utilize the genre of autotheory in this following part of my thesis, thus creating an experimental text. I have made this choice in order to emphasize the points of my analysis, which indicates how autotheory's way of conveying theory about larger societal and cultural problematics through personal experiences generally empowers the authors' messages as it grounds the abstract problems in reality and in real bodies.

Therefore, in this part of the paper I have perceived theory to be a kind of story – a narrative used to make sense of our experiences and to generalize it with other people's experiences. Thus, I have tried to understand myself as a text created by Western culture's obsession with dead women and true crime in order to explore the inherited fears and trauma that being a woman in the contemporary culture installs in you. I want to show how my personal experiences as a woman is both a part of academic feminist theory, as well as part of experiences shared with other women; including Nelson, McNamara and Bolin. However, I am also going to show how my experiences are not universal.

In order to do so, I am stripping away the general academic and theoretical objectivity that I have maintained hitherto, as I want to provide my own example of how an affective investment can be the starting point for a theoretical discussion. Therefore, this text will not only function as my way to insert myself into the conversation around our culture's oppression of female voices through the portrayals of dead women and true crime, but also as a way of discussing how Nelson, McNamara and Bolin partakes in it this conversation.

Considering how my interest in the obsession with dead women and true crime is both personal and academic, my narrational voice will oscillate between the knowledge I have obtained through my academic education and the knowledge I have gained through my own body. At times, the line between them might be blurred but in true autotheoretical fashion; that is the point. So far, I have only ever written, as I am 'all brain no body'. However now, I am going to write as if I am both -

because in fact, I am. This is my attempt at practicing what I have been preaching throughout my thesis.

We often think of artists' place in society as abrasive but neutral, there to witness and interpret, but not to participate. What a camera specifically does not capture is the person holding it

- Bolin (239)

"An Inheritance"

My own obsession with dead girls began in the spring of 2019, during what was my second year at university. The fall semester had subjected me to discourse analysis, and despite my academic education had hardly begun, I was done. My semester project had been upon decoding the use of language within American pro- and antiabortion campaigns, which had completely and utterly broken my academic-spirit and made me consider whether I should drop out of university and enroll at the teacher training college instead. However, as I recovered over the holiday break, I decided to give my academic education one last chance, as I hoped the spring semester would pull me back in with its curriculum. However, as I browsed through each class' course description my hope withered away: 'Shakespeare and The Tragedy' – boring. 'The Epic' – pretentious. 'Dead Women' – depressing.

Determined to endure at least one last semester, I chose what I believed to be the lesser pain of the three courses, whereby I turned up to 'Dead Women' on a late afternoon in February. None of my friends wanted to join me in the course, so I sat by myself somewhere in the middle of the room, trying to blend in with the honestly relatively small turnout. Then, Anne Bettina Pedersen walked in and quietly connected her computer to the whiteboard. The board lit up revealing the headline of the day's lecture: "The Beautiful Dead White Girl". For the next 90 minutes, Pedersen talked about dead girl narratives, iconic female corpses such as the Black Dahlia and Catherine (Kitty) Genovese, worthy victims, true crime, and analyzed the character of Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks*. Meanwhile, I took the most meticulous notes of my life. Of course, on this late afternoon in February I did not know that I would revisit these notes many times over the following years – indeed, I had no clue that dead women and true crime would become the common thread throughout the remainder of my academic education. As Pedersen lectured, I forgot all about discourse analysis and the teacher training college. I was hooked.

Looking back, I must admit I find it rather ironic that my interest in dead women and true crime was ignited not only by Pedersen's course, but also by reading *The Red Parts*. Before I took the course I had never really been interested in the neither the genre nor – at least consciously – the trope but as Pedersen lectured, I developed an almost obsessive habit of jotting down every small reference she made in relation to texts focused on female death. After each lecture, I would hurry home and devour all the references she had mentioned before the next week's session.

Considering how the course had developed this hunger in me, I naturally wasn't going to skip the book that Pedersen had made the main literary work of the course's curriculum: *The Red Parts*. It simply blew me away. I swallowed up every page of the book within a single night and the next day I read it again. I have since read the book a good handful of times, and in risk of revealing a bias that I have a hard time imagining has managed to stay completely hidden throughout this thesis it still blows me away. I admire Nelson's elegant narration consisting of both true crime and dead girls and her self-critical reflections, which allows her to explore and portray the moral grey zone of speaking for the dead. Although I have tried, I have not yet been able to find a true crime text that holds the same depth of emotional vulnerability and thought-through reflection on the obsession with dead women as *The Red Parts* does. It simply *moves* me.

The irony, then, consists of how despite my way into the obsession with dead women and true crime was paved with moral reflections and theory about how problematic this fascination is, it nonetheless made me dive head first into the heaps of true crime, which unscrupulously exploit the stories of violently, murdered women for pure entertainment. I have ever since the course satisfied my hunger with everything from true crime YouTube videos to podcasts to Netflix's abundance of serial killer series. However, my educational introduction to the obsession has marked me: It has given me the ability to recognize the ever-present dead girl, to notice the questionable ethics of most true crime narrations, and the urge to call it out.

⁘ ⁘ ⁘

It's not a mystery – Bolin (52)

It has most likely already become evident how my own obsession with dead women is dual: it is both created by an academic curiosity of wanting to understand the fascination and aesthetic objectification of female corpses, but it is also driven by a personal interest grounded in my own

identification with these portrayals of women - and studies show that I am far from the only woman who is inflicted by this sense of identification.

In their paper, "Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?" (2010), Amanda M. Vicary and R. Chris Fraley take a starting point in the multiple studies indicating how the main consumers of true crime are women. They argue how our attraction to true crime generally lies within our inherent desire to learn how to survive: "By learning the motives and methods of murderers, people learn ways to prevent becoming victims. In fact, it might be the case that fascination with murder arises from evolved mechanisms more broadly concerned with monitoring fitness-relevant information" (82). They then cite how statistics prove that men have a higher risk of becoming victims of murder, which evidently challenges Vicary and Fraley's notion, as women thereby should not be drawn to true crime due to a – conscious or unconscious - desire to learn how to survive, as we statistically are not in as much danger as men are. This conundrum between how men in theory should be the ones to be drawn to true crime, while the reality is that women constitute the majority of the actual viewers, leads Vicary and Fraley to propose how women's attraction to the genre is based in a greater *fear* of getting murdered (82).

Considering how Bronfen's notion of how portrayals of dead women is overexposed and ever-present still is an undeniable fact more than 30 years after she stated it (3), Vicary and Fraley's thesis appears rather plausible. Since my educational introduction to true crime and dead women has given me the ability to spot the BDWG, it has become obvious to me through my research of the abovementioned true crime YouTube videos, podcasts, series on Netflix etc., just how present the trope truly is, and I believe how the constant narrations of violently murdered women can – and most likely does – install a fear of being killed in women. I believe this due to the fact that not only are the majority of true crime consumers women, but they are also more specifically relatively young, white women – a group of people I myself can be considered the posterchild for. These traits are characteristics we share with the BDWG trope, whereby it becomes difficult not to identify yourself with the woman being murdered on screen. Therefore, considering Vicary and Fraley's notion of how we are drawn to true crime to learn how to survive, it is not surprising to me that the audience of the genre mostly consists of white women - because who would not want to learn how to survive a run-in with a killer if you saw a representation of yourself being tortured and murdered over and over again?

The personal perspective to my obsession with dead women and true crime understands this notion, as any tips on staying alive as a woman are welcomed. However, my academic curiosity cannot help but question whether these true crime narrations provide us with a false sense of security. Sure, the genre's love for serial killers might teach us a thing or two about what to do if we end up in the claws of one, but – as Bolin points out – true crime's attempt to turn reality into captivating entertainment also obscures who is actually most likely to kill us: the men that claim to love us. Bolin argues how true crime and crime fiction's 'whodunit'-structure teaches us how to ignore patterns leading up to domestic violence murders: "on the murder shows, all these facts are elided or saved for the end of the episodes. At the beginning, it's all about the crime scene, the clues, and the giant letters written in [her] blood on the wall" (51). Thus, even though "the husband did it" is a cliché in true crime due to it happening so frequently in real life, the genre indicates how these murders only make sense in retrospect – that it could not have been predicted. As Bolin notes, this is wrong, as "identifying patterns is exactly what it takes to prevent domestic violence murders – and they can be prevented" (50). However, the backwards focus on the murder before the signs of domestic violence teaches us to look for the least likely patterns; we learn how to escape a serial killer, but not an abusive relationship before our partner kills us (Slakoff 1672).

I'm struck by the bizarre sadness of the situation, a young woman fleeing an army of mysterious men for hours every day, driving away just to find herself driving back, always being caught, rooted out. It's like a bad dream – Bolin (123)

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'Why are you interested in crime?' people ask me – McNamara (46)

One of my closest friends is studying to become a criminologist. She chose this study because she fell in love with the crime fiction series *Criminal Minds* (2005) and realized that psychological profiling was her call in life. I often think about this as an example of the positive things true crime narratives have brought me, when I feel like I'm drowning in stereotypical and harmful tropes; at least they gave us a talented female criminologist specializing in domestic abuse. We often joke about how we together form a crime-fighting duo: she deals with the 'real' cases, while I try to fight

the problematic narratives true crime (mis)uses these cases to create, thus working the problem from both angles. I think this is a huge glorification of what I do, as my papers merely allow me to pass my semester exams, while my friend already is making an actual difference in some abused women's lives.

However, our crime-fighting partnership is challenged when it comes to true crime. Although, we share an interest in the genre, hers is founded in love, while mine to a higher degree consists of a love of criticizing it. "Have you heard the podcast I told you about yet?" She's asked me the last three times we've met up: "I haven't – I know it will ruin my mood and make me mad", I have answered every single time. The podcast she wants me to listen to is hosted by two comedians, who tell true crime stories while cracking jokes and "keeping the mood light". I can (almost) not think of a worse way to narrate a true crime podcast. The moral reflections on true crime that Pedersen and Nelson's installed in me during my introduction to the genre has made it really hard for me to enjoy these kinds of narrations, as I simply find it distasteful to talk about murders while laughing – even if it is a coping mechanism. "They are using some person's violent death, including every gory detail to entertain themselves and then they sit and laugh about it – it's grotesque!" I justly argue. My friend mostly just shrugs at my outbursts and answers: "Well yeah, it's dark, violent stories and it makes them easier to listen to".

I can't argue with that, because of course she is right. And I won't judge anybody who enjoys true crime – even if it's filled with jokes. You do what you have to do to ease your fear. I'm just not sure that I personally want true crime to be *easy* to listen to. So, each time she tries to make me listen to the comedic-true-crime podcast, I try to make her take *The Red Parts* home with her. Neither one of us have managed to persuade the other yet. And I'm okay with that.

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Well, that didn't hurt us. I have no idea what he's talking about. *Speak for yourself*, I want to say - Nelson (27)

Although, I have dedicated many hours of research to read about true crime, I still have a hard time deciding whether I personally like the genre or not. One of the aspects of the genre I find problematic is how it invites the audience to become amateur detectives. In one of my previous papers, "'She Wanted So Much Out of Life': The 'Beautiful, Dead, White Girl' Trope's Presence in

True Crime Narrations on YouTube" (2021), I examined how amateur sleuths create true crime content on the social media platform YouTube that heavily relies on the BDWG trope. However, my analysis indicated how these content creators appeared to use the trope unconsciously, which evidently is a major problematic as this unawareness results in a mass production of BDWGs spreading portrayals of woman as passive, aesthetic objects across social media.

However, the possibility for amateur sleuthing is also a big appeal of the true crime genre, as argued by Tanya Horeck in her book *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era* (2019). In this book, Horeck examines "how true crime is repackaged and redefined for users and consumers in an era of 'connected viewing' […] in which content is designed to be distributed and shared across social media platforms and streaming services" (22). In other words, Horeck has a focus on how true crime's invitations for amateur sleuthing in combination with social media create online communities of unprofessional detectives. It is not specifically the online communities that I have a problem with – rather the contrary. There is a multitude of positive examples of how these communities provide help and support for its members: one example is the extremely popular podcast *My Favorite Murder,* which is hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. The two hosts have openly spoken about their personal struggles with mental health, a theme they also explore in their dual memoir *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered – The Definite How-To Guide From the My Favorite Murder Podcast* (2019) - a book that in many ways also can be classified as autotheory. Thus, these two women use their platform to not only speak about murders, but also create a safe space where it is okay to open up about struggles with e.g. anxiety, depression, ADHD etc. I think that is no less than amazing. Their podcast might be based on trauma and female fears, but they are also trying to heal mental wounds.

Still, I cannot help but to feel there is a dark side to amateur sleuthing – and I think Nelson and especially McNamara's texts are testaments to it. As Horeck argues in the quote above, true crime is being created with a focus on being shared and distributed online, which – as my previous study indicates – makes it remarkably easy for amateur detectives to insert themselves into true crime cases. However, unlike professional detectives they do not have the professional training to cope with the amount of violence and death to which the infinite amount of true crime exposes them. True crime's presence online might make it possible for the amateur sleuths to outlive a fantasy of being a detective, but as these communities mostly exist online there is no one to monitor their individual consumption of violence and death, as well as witnessing how it actually affects them. I

fear that this might make the fantasy of being a crime detective hover dangerously close to becoming an obsession.

Or at least, McNamara calls it an 'obsession'. Nelson refers to it as her 'murder mind' (5). Of the two, I find Nelson's description to be more precise, as it - despite being rather obsessive in nature - does not acknowledge the severity of its own consuming abilities. Nelson describes this state of mind as an affliction consisting of the double-sidedness to being obsessed with murder: on one hand, you acclimate to the grotesqueness and gruesomeness of the case you are working on – on the other hand, you become haunted by it (5). I recognize this affliction better than I do 'obsession'. Like Nelson, I fell I *need* to emphasize the problematics of true crime and the fascination with dead women rather than I am obsessed with it. Still, it haunts me at night as I lie in bed not allowing me to sleep, but trying to force me to *keep writing*.

I consider myself lucky though, because I know the end-date of my "murder mind" (Or I think I do. Nelson thought she did as well and ended up writing *The Red Parts*). I know that without worry, I can turn off my "murder mind" at night by taking sleeping pills – both because my friendly neighborhood pharmacist aka. my boyfriend has hooked me up with non-addictive pills, but also because I wouldn't have time to develop an addiction anyway – my deadline is simply too close. Although it ads pressure, I think a deadline is a good thing when it comes to obsessions related to dead women. It is a luxury that McNamara did not have – at least not one she could foresee - and I can't help but wonder whether that attributed to the series of unfortunate events that resulted in her untimely death. McNamara spent years of her life submerged in violence and death, and I am not here to accuse her of dealing with it the wrong way - on the contrary, I think she did what she had to do to survive it. But, her life was still filled with the absolute darkest parts of human existence. Even through my mellower version of "murder mind," I can imagine how such memories of violence and death might affect you like secondhand smoking; they might not directly be experienced on your own body, but they still slowly break you down over time.

I am beginning to think that there are some events that simply cannot be "processed," some things one never gets "over" or "through" - Nelson (114)

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Every mother's brain cycles through the litany of terrible things that might befall her child - McNamara (132)

"Have you ever heard about someone called 'Amager-manden'?" I look up from my plate filled with potatoes, roasted pork and gravy – a dish normally served for Christmas, but in my childhood home it has always been the go-to meal for any special event; be it a birthday, an educational milestone or just because we feel like it. On this day it was served in my honor, as my parents were celebrating me visiting, an occurrence I must admit has become rarer and rarer. My mom looks at me. She is giving me the mom-look that only a mom can give. Although, she phrases it as an interrogative sentence, she is not really asking me anything. Her question is a response to the fact that I just have told my parents that I have signed the lease on a new apartment on Amager, exactly 400 km from my parents' house. She does not even have to say anything else – even before I told her, I knew she would absolutely despise the fact that I am moving so far away. Her question is mostly meant as a scare campaign, a small attempt to get me to change my mind. But it is also an expression of fear – her fear. A fear only a mom can have. I look at her and answer: "Have you ever heard about someone called Mia?"[13]

During the fall and winter months of my last year at university, I once again found myself blissfully consumed by my version of "murder mind". After Pedersen's course had resuscitated my academic spirit on my fourth semester I went on to study my minor in Danish. However, *apparently* there are no dead women in this subject, as indicated by my lecturer's pretty harsh critique of one of my papers, in which I argued how a treasured Danish author uses women as nothing more than passive, aesthetic objects; "That's not really the point of this text. Women are not the focal point of this narration," he commented in the margin of the paper. "That's the point; they rarely are" I wrote pointlessly underneath. So after having ignored my obsession for two entire years in fear of getting another bad grade, I dedicated both my 9th semester project and my thesis to submerging myself in beautiful, dead, white girls and true crime once again.

[13] 22-year-old Mia Skadhauge Stevn disappeared from Aalborg on February 6 2022 in the early hours of the morning. Surveillance cameras captured her getting in a dark car while waiting for the bus. She was found murdered on February 10 2022.

Unfortunately, my lecturer was wrong. As it turns out, women are indeed the focal point – even in a Danish context and even when we don't want to be. On February 6 2022, as I sat in my small apartment in the heart of Aalborg studying examples of beautiful, dead, white girls for my thesis, Mia was taken less than a mile from my street door and made one.

I am not going to say more about what specifically happened to her. I feel with every fiber of my body how her story is not mine to tell. But I can also feel how her story affects me.

There's a scream permanently lodged in my throat now - McNamara (173)

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Sometimes I wonder whether I am a bad feminist. Despite my hitherto academic approach consisting of neutral, distanced examinations, I must face up to the fact that these examinations are – when it comes down to it - based in my own interest. Although it is easy to argue how I conduct them for the right cause – that I want to be a part of eradicating the fascination with dead women and the harmful tropes in true crime (Vedric and Little 10), – I cannot help but think whether my participation in the topic makes everything worse. That I indeed might just be disguising my own participation in the fascination with a thin veil of claiming to try to make people aware of their obsession, while I remain oblivious to my own.

Our intentions were good - McNamara (193)

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I don't consider myself a particularly externalizing person emotionally. Whether that is an attribute, I have inherited from my dad or a symptom of a decade's worth of hormonal birth control dimming my ability to feel emotions I'm not sure. Probably a combination of both. Yet, my boyfriend does not want me to bounce ideas about my studies of dead women and true crime off him anymore:

"You get too angry when I do not agree with you," he says. "You are too invested". I don't think I express my emotions too much.

It just pisses me off how a janitor at my school told me to smile more as I walked to my classroom, because I looked prettier when I smiled. I was eight. It also pisses me of how a boy in my high school music class got mad at me for asking him to stop sneaking his hand under my shirt as we danced salsa, as he stated I should have worn another shirt if I didn't want him to do that. It pisses me off how a guy I considered my friend grabbed my breasts and squeezed them as hard as he could, because he was drunk and mad I wouldn't date him. It makes me sad how my friend always tells me to text her when I get home. It pisses me off how job interviewers in various abstract ways ask me if I have a boyfriend, and it makes me sad that I want to lie and say "no", because I know it will enhance my chance of getting the job. I'm angry that these experiences are mine, but indeed also are every other woman's story. It makes me furious that Mia could not wait for the bus drunk and alone without being murdered. And, it makes me fume how so many people perceive it to be her own fault, because she was alone and drunk in public. It makes me angry how podcast hosts already are using her story as entertainment. The term 'feminazi' makes my blood boil. I hate how true crime YouTube videos are permeated with beautiful, dead, white girls, and it makes me sad that other beautiful, white women make these videos. It makes me livid thinking about how the USA – a democratic, Western country – is on the road to abolish free abortion and take women's autonomy over their own bodies away. I am enraged that women of color can't relate to the main term of feminism, but only to the *subcategory* of 'intersectional feminism'. It makes me sad that they are diminished to a subcategory, when mainstream feminism should embrace everybody. It makes me want to cry that I could continue this list forever.

I don't think I'm being too emotional (Jones and Norwood 2046).
I think I'm responding appropriately to our circumstances (McVey et al. 41).

Our refusal to address warning signs that are so common they have become cliché means that we are not failing to prevent violence but choosing not to - Bolin (8-9)

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Although, I think it is of highest importance to keep questioning my own intentions when it comes to my involvement in the obsession with dead women, I also think my guilty consciousness and my quick reflex to consider myself a bad feminist stems from the culture's pressure to make me feel like one. On more than one occasion, I have been called a 'feminazi' as I've talked about my studies – several of the times by my own brother. I don't really blame him for it, because I know he's not aware of the severity of the word he calls me. However, I think his ignorance mirrors that of many people who are quick to throw the word of 'feminazi' at every woman who articulates her experiences with sexism, misogyny and oppression – as proved by some of the critical reviews on Bolin's book. Although, the word itself does not actually appear it might as well have, as several readers critique her for having an unnecessary, critical focus on true crime and too much focus on herself, resulting in one reviewer stating that Bolin only writes for "women who want to feel superior"[14].

On the surface, it is possible to argue how the word of 'feminazi' is not *that bad*. Despite my general disinterest in the subject at the time, my professor in discourse analysis once told us that an argument is lost when you mention Hitler or the Holocaust: "few things are severe enough to use this comparison rightfully, so it really just reveals the person using it as argumentation's lack of intellectual sophistication," he argued. And I tend to agree with him. I think the mere comparison of a liberation movement and Nazism is hilariously self-undermining and essentially just plain ignorant. It is a lame attempt to villainize women who criticize the patriarchy.

However, this initial appearance of obvious ignorance is only the first layer of several deeper misogynistic connotations within the word. In their paper, "New Discourses of Masculinity in the Context of Online Misogyny in Spain: The Use of the "Feminazi" and "Gender Ideology" Concepts" (2021), Sonia N. Puente, Diana F. Romero, and Sergio D. Maceiras argue how the term 'feminazi' is used "to refer to any woman who adopts the principles of the feminist movement" (51). They argue that this is the case as the feminist movement threatens the power and privilege of straight, white men, resulting in "online misogyny [defining] a masculinity that suffers at the hands of an ideology that emphasizes gender differences, despite its purported emphasis on equality, and that defends a legal framework discriminatory against 'normal' men" (57). Thus, they argue how the term 'feminazi' contains a perception of how the feminist movement does not seek equality, but indeed is an oppressor in itself – it is odious iconography.

[14] These comments are extracted from anonymous reviews on Goodreads.

This iconography is what makes it difficult to reclaim the term of 'feminazi', because after the straight, white, middle-class man, the next most powerful and privileged group in Western culture arguably is the white, straight, middle-class women. This means that white women, who are privileged and powerful enough to be the most likely to vocalize misogyny and sexism, are silenced by a misogynistic assertion deeming them extreme and radical. It evidently is a term used to control feminist movements, as it can intimidate vocal women into silence, a fact that Puente, Romero and Maceiras' emphasizes, as they argue how the word is part of "a growing culture of attacks on both women and the feminist movement in digital spaces" (55). Thus, despite the word 'feminazi' might initially appear rather ignorant, it is indeed a symptom of how the misogynistic, patriarchal nature of Western culture tries to silence the women who dare to speak up through iconography portraying them as radical, extreme oppressors and mass murderers.

I want to tell my brother that this is what the word he calls me means. But I am afraid that he will understand it as a confirmation of his arguments rather than of mine.

The only way to grow up is to realize that the little tragedies that shock and devastate you are actually universal and inevitable - Bolin (271)

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I didn't want to question narratives about brainy, sad white women growing up or breaking down as they earned their cruel sentimental educations, because they assured me I wouldn't have to work on myself: the world would work on me - Bolin (230)

It was not until the late age of 25 I was confronted with my own race. I grew up in a white-majority area – in fact, 'majority' is almost an understatement. This white microcosm never forced me to think about my own race – and the privilege that comes with it. It was just never relevant to discuss, whereby my privilege remained invisible for me. So, it was not until I was in my mid-twenties, when my boyfriend asked me whether there were any Asian kids in my school (there were not), that I realized just how uni-colored my childhood was.

However, this realization did not lead me to confront my own race and privilege. Neither did the fact that I had become one-half of a racially mixed couple. Instead, I joked how my boyfriend,

whose parents are from Vietnam, and my cultural differences were not due to our different ancestry, but in fact were caused by him being from Zealand and I being from Jutland. This is not a lie though; at times, he still struggles to understand my Western-Jutlandic dialect. However, in retrospect I now know how this joke also was born from an attempt to avoid confronting what I never had before: my race. And his. I was not ready to accept how he and I might indeed be incompatible in any way; an example of not only the ignorance romantic love gives you, but also that of which growing up as a white person in a predominantly white culture provides you.

Although, I initially failed to work on myself, in this instance the world decided to indeed work on me. My father-in-law refused – and still refuses – to meet me, because I am neither Asian nor Catholic. That statement evidently made it impossible for me to keep ignoring the cultural and ethnic differences in my relationship. However, let me emphasize: this is not a sob story about how I (*a white women!)* got racially and religiously discriminated against. Honestly, I have a way harder time accepting how I in the shower appear to have the same color as a few weeks-old, washed-up corpse in comparison to my boyfriend (and even when I'm not compared to him). Indeed, it is a story about how a discriminating, old man and his wonderful son made me realize just how privileged I have been not to be confronted and discriminated against because of my race until the late age of 25. In opposition to me, my boyfriend has been subjected to this his entire life, as he too has grown up in a predominantly white culture.

However, I am not going to sit here and write about his experiences, because a) he is alive, so I perceive it to be his story to tell, and b) it would be rather stupid and ignorant of me to pretend I even remotely understand racism and racial inequality in the same way and depth any person of color does: setting aside this singular experience of being racially discriminated against, all I know about racism is what I have been taught through my education and not through my own body.

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White privilege is also the more or less silent presence that haunts Nelson, Bolin and McNamara's texts. Although, the negative effects of Western culture's obsession with dead women they experience on their own bodies is far from a privilege, there is anyhow a sense of privilege to their narrations: they know their experiences of oppression are the results of them being women and not their ethnicities, sexualities, religions, social status, abilities etc. Besides being women, the three

authors are relatively privileged as they are straight*, white, upper- to middleclass, able-bodied*[15] women. They know what they are experiencing is not because of their race. However, this privilege does not diminish the problematics that the cultural obsession causes white women whatsoever – it only allows us to recognize and focus on the trauma we have inherited specifically from it.

As I wrote this thesis, the uni-colored realization I had of my childhood struck again: however, this time it was triggered by Fournier's description of autotheory's history, as she notes how women of color have utilized the genre as a way to challenge the whiteness of theory: "Part of the move toward decolonizing theory is the turn toward restoring and bringing back to life forms of knowledge and language that colonial forces have attempted to extinguish […] Indigenous and Black artists and writers work autotheoretically as a means of questioning the parameters of 'the theoretical' – or what constitutes theory" (58-59). This realization threw me for a loop, as the three authors I had chosen are white. I had yet again forgotten to think about race.

However, what initially was yet another example of me being ignorant due to my white privilege, also turned out to be a consequence of my obsession with dead women. Apparently, it is not only the viewers of true crime that are mostly white – so are the authors apparently. Just like the ever-presence of the BDWG trope, this only becomes obvious when you are aware of it, but it can be exemplified by Goodread's list of "True Crime by Women and POC" where white women have written nine out of the ten highest ranked books, while the last one is by a white man (Goodreads.com). Naturally, the reason for this dominance of white authors will take excessive research to determine properly. However, I think it might be fair to assume that the privilege that many white women experience might be a relevant factor.

In order to establish why women of color are not as vocal about their experiences with Western culture's obsession with dead women, it will be necessary to take an intersectional approach. Indeed, I do not believe that the lack of women of color within autotheoretical, true crime texts is caused by the fact that the culture's obsession with dead women does not affect them. Besides from the BDWG trope being sexist, it is also inherently racist, as it deems white women 'grievable' and women of color 'killable' (Butler 29), whereby minority women arguably are affected just as gravely by this obsession. However, I can imagine how, when you are oppressed through multiple parts of your identity, it can become difficult – if not impossible - to separate these different reasons

[15] *I write this with a strict focus on the personal experiences in *The Red Parts* and *I'll Be Gone in The Dark*. I am well aware of how Nelson in her book *The Argonauts* (2015) reflects on being in a relationship with a trans man, as well as how McNamara at the current time no longer can be considered able-bodied due to her death.

for oppression and discrimination. I can imagine how it becomes a blur and mixture of discrimination. And I can imagine how, when you do not have the privilege Nelson, McNamara, Bolin and even I have of knowing you are *only* oppressed through a singular part of your identity, it becomes impossible to know where to start, when you want to articulate this oppression and discrimination. However, I can't *know* this for sure – I have not experienced it.

However, considering Western culture's history, I can imagine how it is not even a question of whether women of color cannot know *where* to start, but indeed also a question of whether they *can* start. Despite the autotheoretical attempts to queer what is considered acceptable knowledge, the voices that are deemed most valuable are still white (Fournier 62), which needs to be changed. This does not mean that white women's voices and problems are not important – because they very much are. However, I just think that in a time where autotheoretical texts – true crime related or not – are receiving a lot of praise (e.g. Nelson being awarded the MacArthur Genius fellowship (Fournier 44)) it is really important to acknowledge women of color's contributions to the genre. As Fournier notes, it is especially through their attempts at challenging the white, male perception of what constitutes knowledge that autotheory has evolved its queer and rebellious nature (21), which white, female writers like Nelson, McNamara and Bolin now are able to use in order to emphasize how the cultural obsession with dead girls and true crime silences women. Therefore, we need to acknowledge how women of color have paved the way for this genre that is able to contain oppressed female voices.

And even further, I think it is important to acknowledge how we cannot understand the full extent of the consequences of our culture's fascination with dead women and true crime before the voices of all women have been heard. As Young points out, it is also women of color's attributions to autotheory that initially sought "to counter discourses that homogenize 'women'" (61). Therefore, a full understanding of how the cultural obsession negatively affects women will not be possible to achieve without the voices of not only women of color, but also queer women, people with disabilities, religious minorities, people from lower social classes, etc. Of course, there are a many societal and cultural problematics that make it difficult for women, who are oppressed through multiple parts of their identities, to join the conversation around dead girls, which has been started by mainly white women. And we need to address these problems, because even though Nelson, Bolin, McNamara and many other white, female writers provide an important and insightful look into the consequences of the obsession and silencing of women, it does not provide the full picture, as our white privilege – and so many other privileges – does not provide us the bodily

knowledge that minority women have. We must not only accept the privileged perception as the truth, because it does not provide a sufficient look into the full spectrum of female experience the reality of our culture and society holds.

I wanted – I still want – Jane's life to "matter." But I don't want it to matter more than others.
- Nelson (174)

Narratives that Break the Silence

Vocalizing silence is evidently a difficult task. However, Nelson, McNamara and Bolin manage to do so by creating queer, autotheoretical texts that are not only able to encompass their individual experiences and voices, but also portray how the cultural obsession with dead women oppresses, traumatizes and silences a majority of women.

Nelson and Bolin manage to directly insert their voices into their texts, as they break down the normative narrational illusion and instead emphasize how their narrations consist of thoughts and experiences of real women through their use of metanarrations. This direct female presence within the texts highlights the feminist nature of these narrations, as they function as a reminder of how the texts not only are entertaining stories, but that their contents are embedded within reality and real experiences. This evidently aids the authors' attempts at vocalizing the oppressional silencing of women, as it emphasizes how Nelson and Bolin's experiences are rooted in reality. Besides indicating the reality of the authors' personal experiences, the metanarrations further function as a way for the authors to express their intentions with their fluid approaches to genre. Thus, as Nelson and Bolin feel the need to 'explain' their use of genre, the metanarrations also indicate how they are queering their narrations. However, in contrast to Nelson and Bolin, McNamara does not create metanarrations, which indicates how she generally focuses more on the stories of the Golden State Killer's victims than on her own experiences.

Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's attempts at inserting a female voice into their narrations also become evident through the queer authorial designs they create. While Bolin queers the features of autobiography and essay to create both a personal and scholarly reflection on how portrayals of silent women have negatively affected her growing up, Nelson and McNamara uses the normative

progression of events that life writing and true crime provide to form a main plot they then queer through anachrony. Thus, they become able to insert their own lives and thoughts into true crime cases about dead women. By creating these queer authorial designs, the authors are able to blur the lines between themselves and the dead women in their texts, as well as between personal subjectivity and theoretical objectivity. Therefore, it becomes possible to define their texts as being autotheory, as they use their personal experiences related to culture's oppressional silencing of women through constant portrayals of dead girls as the knowledge they use to theorize and criticize this obsession with dead women. Thereby, they reveal how this cultural obsession is not only a theoretical conundrum but also a real problem affecting the lives of actual women.

However, Nelson, McNamara and Bolin's articulations of the culture's oppressional silencing of women are challenged, as their texts in addition to being autotheoretical also contain features of true crime. As the authors' autotheoretical narrations evidently contain elements of life writing – a genre that employs the tool of 'poetic license' – they risk invalidating the knowledge they have gained through their personal experiences, if they reinterpret them too much. However, they also risk becoming hypocrites, as their use of true crime and portrayals of dead women makes them participate in the very obsession and oppression that they criticize. While Bolin merely uses true crime in her red-herring-title, Nelson and McNamara's texts are more exposed to being either untruthful or hypocritical. Nelson tries to balance this tightrope by being almost hyper-aware and reflective about her use of poetic license and participation in the genre of true crime. Contrary, McNamara indulges in the features of true crime. However, when considering the text in relation to her death, it becomes possible to read her book as a cautionary tale warning the reader about the consequences of exposing oneself to graphic true crime. Thus, Nelson and McNamara's narrations both reflect the moral grey-zone of true crime, but they never moralize, thereby leaving it up to the readers to further ponder the morality of participating in the genre of true crime.

Although, Nelson, McNamara and Bolin thereby manage to vocalize culture's oppressional silencing of women through portrayals of dead girls by queering their use of true crime and autotheory, they still face the risk of being perceived as being narcissistic for using their own bodily experiences as knowledge to criticize and theorize. This general perception of women writing about their own lives being narcissistic is arguably an attempt at shaming them back into silence. However, as Nelson, McNamara and Bolin are writing about dead women, it is possible to speculate whether they are narcissistic for mixing their own stories with theirs. However, when examining the critical reviews of the three books, it becomes evident how the authors are not perceived as being

narcissistic for inserting themselves into the stories of dead women, but rather that their own experiences appear in the narrations at all. Although, it thereby is evident how female authors of autotheory indeed are perceived as being narcissistic for using their own experiences as knowledge to theorize with, the general positive reception of their texts also indicate how Western culture potentially are beginning to recognize how portrayals of dead girls oppresses and silences women. However, the readers' engagement with the authors' books also reveal how privileged the three white authors are for having people who want to consume their narrations. This is emphasized by how women of color appear to not have been able to join in the literary tendency of narrating female oppression, trauma and silencing yet, despite being the one's to develop autotheory.

In the final part of the thesis, I have tried to participate in this literary tendency myself, as I have utilized the genre of autotheory to create an experimental discussion of the three books. I have made this choice in order to emphasize the points of my analysis, which indicate how autotheory's way of conveying theory about larger societal and cultural problematics through personal experiences generally empowers the authors' messages as it grounds the abstract problems in reality and in real bodies. Thus, I narrate about how cultural tendencies and concepts such as inherited fear, victimblaming, the shaming qualities of the word 'feminazi', white privilege etc. have affected me, while also discussing them in relation to Nelson, McNamara and Bolin. I further explore my own participation in the obsession with dead women and true crime through both my personal and academic interest in these topics. Thus, through this experimental, autotheoretical discussion I - like Nelson, McNamara and Bolin - emphasize how culture oppresses women into silence, while trying to stay aware of my own participation in the same oppression.

Finally, I emphasize how important it is to view the literary tendency of writing autotheoretical texts focused on female oppression, trauma and silencing through an intersectional lens; although Nelson, McNamara and Bolin provide different insights into the culture's oppressional silencing of women through portrayals of dead girls, their narrations (and mine) are inherently privileged. Thus, no matter how much we queer our narrations, we will not be able to gain a sufficient look into the full spectrum of female experience, which the reality of our culture and society holds until the voices of women of color, queer women, women from lower classes etc. are able to join the conversation. Vocalizing silence is evidently a difficult task – and none of us can do it alone. Thus, we need to join the voices of all women in order to stop the patriarchal culture's oppressional silencing of us.

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