The Desirous Public: Public Pedagogy as Symptomatic Text

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Abstract

In this article, our hope is to extend yet another notion of the public, one that productively complicates its pedagogical life via the psychoanalytic concept of *desire* as formulated by Lacan (1981; Fink, 1995). Using these theoretical constructs, we analyzed three sites of public pedagogy that we deemed to represent enduring pedagogical meanings. The Geroge Floyd Mural in Lafayette, Indiana, which memorializes Floyd's murder and the BLM movement that his death amplified. The figure of the "Karen" as a means of identifying a specific form of identity in online and cultural discourse. The town of Delphi, Indiana, largely known as the site of two children's horrific murders. These sites, presented via inquiry vignettes, were taken up individually by each respective author within coursework on public pedagogy, however, as we discussed our work, we recognized areas of overlap in our theorizations that ultimately led to the adoption of our Lacanian framework.

Keywords

Public Desire; Lacan; Sinthome

Journal of Public Pedagogies, Number 8, 2026
Published by Public Pedagogies Institute: www.publicpedagogies.org
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URL http://jpp.vu.edu.au/

Even in its nascent days, the second Trump Presidency has ordained the greatest transformation of public life and private freedoms since the 1980s. The effects of this conspiratorial, authoritarian, id-clad political movement have distorted and upended conceptions of the public, the stakes of contestation, and the forms of pedagogical resistance that are possible within and outside of the public sphere. Accordingly, our work certainly draws upon the past literature within public pedagogy but does so with a caution born from the sense that we now live, work, and think in times that do not cohere to the logics and promises of the past. That said, this reterritorialization is not *new* historically: the writing, even within public pedagogy literature, has been on the wall. In a footnote to his introduction to the *Handbook of Public Pedagogy*, Pinar (2010) claimed "public pedagogues substitute for the struggle of subjective reconstruction a socio-material world that, while portrayed as inviting in this collection, may prove to be even less hospitable to education than the school historically has been" (p. xvi). This quote, and much of what Pinar discussed in his introduction, animates this conversation; our tensions in finding anything resembling critical possibility in the modern public; and ultimately, the symptomatic dialectic we use as a heuristic for engaging the ruins of the mid-apocalyptic public (Burdick & Sandlin, 2022). Moreover, we also wish to acknowledge that understandings of the public that do not take up its problematic history and present emanate from radically dominant perspectives, particularly that of whiteness, as, for example, the public has been nothing short of an abattoir for Black American life (Wilderson, 2020).

Within the scholarship on public pedagogy, the public has taken on an elusively totemic status. Whereas scholars seem to land on the idea that term is crucial in differentiating a certain species of pedagogical activity, all of that which happens outside of the confines of institutional learning. However, at the same time, the figuration of the public itself, and the existence of any sort of historical, material, relational, or even ideological instance of a public, has been contested, rethought, and critiqued readily (Savage, 2010, 2014; Biesta, 2012; Charman & Dixon, 2023, 2022). As such, the public, if one can be said to exist in the apocalyptic *now* (Burdick & Sandlin, 2022), *happens* somewhere between necessity and nebulousness within the public pedagogy literature, as well as within the enactments, practical theorizations, and activisms that occur, and teach, globally. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the public has often been taken up as a site of possibility and communal generativity, or in the case of scholars like Giroux (2001), as a site of deleterious, neoliberal pedagogies to be decoded and resisted via specific forms and performances of intellectualism. And, whereas this multiplicity can prove vexing for scholars working in this realm, we primarily contend that this contested, slippery, and indeterminate nature is both an apt understanding of such a complicated, historically mediated space, as well as a means of discussing the generative possibility that give the public its capacity and vitality as a site of pedagogical production.

Desire and the Public

As such, in this article, our hope is to extend yet another notion of the public, one that productively complicates its pedagogical life via the psychoanalytic concept of *desire* as formulated by Lacan (1981; Fink, 1995). For Lacan, and the many analysts and scholars who would take up his conceptualization of psychic and social metaphysics, desire constitutes much of the *cause* of identity formation and, within many interpretations, cultural (re)production (jagodzinski, 2004; Fink, 1995). Moreover, Lacan's (2007) central maxim, that "Man's [sic] desire is the Other's desire," foregrounds the notion that much, if not all, of subjectivity is mediated via the demands of the Other, an Other that can take the form of another subject, a social structure, moral belief, or even the subject's own fantasy of what the Other wants of them (Fink,1995). As such, within a psychoanalytic episteme, it is fundamentally impossible to understand pedagogy without the undergirding of desirous relations, given pedagogy's close relationship to much of what we know

as teaching and learning. Building on the work of Charman and Dixon (2023), who center public pedagogy within a nexus of social relations and mediations by power, our Lacanian lens begs us to ask, what might the public want of/from/for us?

Reading Public Desire

In formulating this likely unanswerable, but theoretically generative question, we turned again to Lacanian concepts as a means of *reading* pedagogy's desirous urge. In this case, we took up the structural form of the symptom, in particular, symptomatic repetition and the symptom's role in the production of desire (Fink, 1995; Zizek, 1989). In the case of the former, Lacan understood the symptom as innately repetitive, a psychic need for a behavior or performance that allows a subject some release from psychic trauma. However, in taking pleasure from the symptom, Lacan also noted that the subject avoids any address of that symptom's root cause, as that cause would overwhelm the subject completely, which necessitates that the symptom be taken up again and again, leaving its traumatic cause untouched (Zizek, 1989). Moreover, it is this relationship that effects the symptom's capacity to produce desire, as the symptom will always fail to satisfy, thus producing, intensifying, and potentially reifying the desirous relationship between subject and cause (Fink; Lacan, 1981; Zizek). Reading the public symptomatically, then, became our inroad to making suggestions around what the public, in its multifarious, shifting ways, *has wanted* of us, how its desirous pedagogies enact a dialectical, tidal dance of want and near-fulfillment, all of which, we suggest, simultaneously maintains dominating social structures and demands their toppling.

Sites of Desire

Using these theoretical constructs, we analyzed three sites of public pedagogy that we deemed to represent enduring pedagogical meanings.

1. The Geroge Floyd Mural in Lafayette, Indiana, which memorializes Floyd's murder and the BLM movement that his death amplified (Jake)
2. The figure of the "Karen" as a means of identifying a specific form of identity in online and cultural discourse (Mahreen)
3. The town of Delphi, Indiana, largely known as the site of two children's horrific murders (Ralph)

These sites, presented via inquiry vignettes, were taken up individually by each respective author within coursework on public pedagogy, however, as we discussed our work, we recognized areas of overlap in our theorizations that ultimately led to the adoption of our Lacanian framework. Albeit exceedingly different in terms of pedagogical meaning, each site illustrates how publics operate as symptomatic structures, particularly as they promote critical, even liberatory action *as a means of* avoiding the fundamental cause of their traumas – structural racism, patriarchy, and the consumption of violence, respectively. From these readings, we synthesize our understanding of the public's pedagogical role in cyclical cultural reproduction as well as a Lacanian means of potentially traversing this relationship via his late-career theorizations of the sinthome (Lacan, 2016).

Jake: The Lafayette George Floyd Mural and the New Lynching

In downtown Lafayette, Indiana, USA, there is a mural depicting the face of George Floyd, with the phrase *Black Lives Matter period* painted alongside. Floyd, murdered by police in May of 2020, had become an amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement, and his image has become symbolic of the structural racism enacted on Black bodies by law enforcement. The mural was the work of activists in the Summer of 2020, and by August of 2021, it had been defaced and repainted

four times. Murdered in the public, by agents of the public, and for an ostensible, and ironic, public peace, Floyd's spectral face now bears the thousand cuts of yet another public. These cuts, however, are neither new, nor are they Floyd's alone.

The procession of unarmed Black people murdered by police officers or other institutional agents within the US is also not new, but rather, it exists in the contemporary moment as a complex, deeply historicized knot. What has shifted, however, is the technology with which these events are captured. New media and the social media-fication of knowledge across the last 2 decades has enabled the broadcast of these deaths, in Floyd's case, the very moment of death, to the digital public, for the clicks and consumption of untold numbers of people. Searching "George Floyd murder" on media sites, such as YouTube, garners multiple videos with millions of views each, illustrating, at least, the public desire to witness death. More than just a fetishization of the anathema of death, however, the image of Black death as a spectacle has a deep American history in the form of lynching (Berg, 2011). As Pinar (2004) describes, lynching existed as a form of public entertainment throughout American history, one documented with images of joyous white crowds encircling mutilated, hanging Black bodies. One image, from nearby Marion, Indiana, taken in 1930, represents a cross section of a crowd of "ten to fifteen thousand" in attendance to observe the murders of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, two young (19 and 20, respectively) Black men accused of murdering a white man and raping his wife (Rozen-Wheeler, 2017). In the photograph, white people can be seen smiling, pointing, and gawking at the lifeless figures of the two men. In the foreground an ostensibly young couple loosely holds hands, suggestive of a date. In the background, Shipp and Smith's destroyed bodies dangle. Black death is an enduring fixation of the American public, materially and otherwise.



Figure 2. The Crowd at the Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. Original photograph by Laurence Beitler. (Edited image found at https://www.dailyherald.com/20160518/news/elgin-to-examine-mural-that-evokes-lynching-photo/)

Digital and Physical Bodies

In recent years, as a means of activism and a demand for power's accountability, the act of filming police violence and the technological advances that have enabled this practice have certainly shifted the discourse around race, authority, and supremacy, with the now-viral video of Floyd's murder even acting as a catalyst for the 2020 BLM protests and an amplification of the call for racial justice. Accelerated greatly by the rise of high quality video recording via cell phones, legislation mandating that police utilize body cameras during arrests, and social media spaces as a means of distributing

this content globally and near instantaneously, an archive of physical violence against Black bodies has emerged within digital space, with the footage of Floyd's murder as its most widespread example. The last moments of Floyd's life looped endlessly across feeds, reels, playlists, and stacks during the pandemic-muted Summer of 2020, with a captive global audience watching. Clearly, there is an overwhelming need for this sort of evidence to not only be captured, as it must be understood that the rise of media depicting anti-Black violence is not documentation of new phenomena, but rather, an opportunity to *unveil* the violent ontology within which Black life exists – the very crux of the phrase *Black Lives Matter* (Burdick & Sandlin, 2021). Such videos have complicated and reterritorialized dominant institutions' capacity for controlling the narrative by providing a counter-story comprised of empirical evidence.

However, simultaneously, the viral nature and monetization that undergird social media illustrating a man's brutal, public execution suggests a more concerning element of this phenomenon – the production of a public, desirous spectacle of Black death. Given the history of lynching as a site of white public entertainment and the aforementioned wide reach of these forms of social media, I feel that we must also pose difficult questions around the function of Black death as a space of public enjoyment, particularly given the capitalist contexts of digital "publics" like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In these online, decidedly corporate spaces, Black bodies are mobilized and repackaged for the production of content, influence, and clicks, instrumentalized as engines of profit within an economy founded on white supremacy and enslaved labor, becoming part of the same, albeit streamlined, libidinal and financial economy of desire that historically funded lynching. Drawing on Wilderson (2020), I argue that the presence, digital or physical, of Black death and its attendant white witnesses, is not an aberrant form of either the historical or contemporary American public, but rather, a constitutive element. Wilderson, describing this relationship as *Afropessimism*, avers that the historical condition of slavery still undergirds all understandings of Blackness under the sign of white supremacy; it does not exist as an historical event, but rather as a condition of social identity, or in Wilderson's terms, *social death*. Furthermore, for Wilderson, the act of lynching – actual, digital, metaphorical, fictional, and social – serves a critical identifactory purpose for its white audiences:

> It is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped, genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed. And it is necessary for this to take place in the streets as well as in popular culture-as on TV and in the cinema . . . Civil society does not want Black land as it wants Indian land, that it might distinguish the Nation from Turtle Island; it does not want Black consent, as it wants working-class consent, that it might distinguish a capitalist economic system from a socialist one, that it might extract surplus value and turn that value into profit. What civil society wants/needs from Black people is far more essential, far more fundamental than land and profits. What civil society needs from Black people is confirmation of Human existence . . . to be able say, I am alive at a paradigmatic level, that I am really and truly a Human being and not the other thing... this can only be guaranteed to the extent to which one can say, I am not Black. (2020, p. 212)

Thus, for Wilderson, the images of Black death are caught in a knot of Lacanian desire, this time with the desire for the Other serving as affirmation of the self's special status *as human*, a status that refuses to become undercut via the ironic genesis of its avowal. From historical figures like Sarah Baartman, a kidnapped South African woman whose very body became a source of European desire, both physical and scientific, even after her death to the work of the purported "father of gynecology," J. Marion Sims, whose foundational surgery techniques were perfected on the still living, unanesthetized bodies of enslaved Black women, Black bodies have been central to whiteness's understanding and renewal of its self concept. Even within purported *liberal* whiteness, Wilderson's economy persists, as Arendt (cited in Lebeau, 2005) takes up similar standing when she critiques the American left's valorization of individuals like Elizabeth Eckford, the young, Black woman who was forced to walk through throngs of hateful, screaming white faces as she

entered her high school directly after racial segregation deemed illegal in the US. For Arendt, the question is not one around the policy of desegregation, but rather, she forces us to consider what it means to make a sole, young woman the quilting point of racial politics and, in doing so, to allow her to face a vile, vehement *unwantedness* at the core of her being and if that sacrifice undercuts the sense of *justice* enacted in the moment. Neither Baartman, Sims's victims, nor Eckford asked for their bodies to be used in this way, and George Floyd was never asked if he wanted his final breaths to incite a loud conversation of race. Whiteness demands that they do so.

Ostensibly, then, murals like the one in Lafayette extend Floyd's archive to physical public space, a memorialization intertwined with the politics of race in a medium that cannot be closed like a browser window. George Floyd's body has been consumed, but on a street in downtown Lafayette, his image remains as far more. Painted, defaced, and repainted, the phrase, *Black Lives Matter period* endures beneath him, as the erasure of Black history proceeds under the Trump administration, and the dialectic of witnessing and spectacle plays out across his visage – the repetition of the symptom played out in microcosm, as white culture moves forward, *bettered* by his sacrifice. The social life of violent spectacle reveals itself in palimpsestic ways, with public space's haunted graveyards (Ford, 2025) and cruel affects (Ahmed, 2004) constantly seeping back into ideological and material presence, a machine that ebbs and flows with discourse and performances of both resistance and domination, all maintained by the Black bodies that provide it desirous sustenance.

Mahreen: Karen Pedagogy and the Spectacle of White Entitlement in Reel Culture



Figure 21 Silhouetted graphic representation of the stereotypical "Karen" haircut, widely associated with entitlement and surveillance in meme culture. Reproduced from How the "Karen" Meme Benefits the Right by N. Burleigh, 2020, GEN (https://gen.medium.com/how-the-karen-meme-benefits-the-right-4cff760d6e90). Copyright by the author or publisher. Used under fair use for educational and critical commentary purposes.

I googled "Karen," and this is one of the most prominent images that popped up. This image presents a repeated silhouette of the "Karen" haircut, rendered in stark black against a muted beige background. At the centre, a large red circle isolates one "Karen" head in profile, amplifying the figure's prominence and symbolic weight. The hairstyle is a distinct, exaggerated bob with sharp asymmetrical layers and heightened volume, popularly associated with middle-aged white women who exhibit entitlement, complaint-driven behaviour, and racialized surveillance practices in viral media (Hunt, 2020). Visually, the repetition of the same silhouette creates a pattern of sameness, invoking a kind of deindividuation or flattening of identity. The high-contrast black-and-red graphic element evokes propagandist aesthetics, suggesting that the meme has shifted from an organic joke into an ideological symbol. From a critical media perspective, this design aesthetic reflects how digital meme culture flattens individual identity into a hyper-legible archetype (Best, You, & Young, 2024). In this case, the flattened silhouette of "Karen" becomes a floating signifier for racialized surveillance and public spectacle. It also generalizes and pluralizes the persona, highlighting how meme culture reduces complex subjects into digestible and easily vilifiable archetypes. The visual repetition and stylization of the "Karen" haircut in Burleigh's (2020) article reinforces how digital iconography flattens complex social types into recognizable, consumable memes.

One of the most widely recognized moments that cemented the "Karen" archetype was the 2020 Central Park incident involving Amy Cooper, a white woman who called the police on Black birdwatcher Christian Cooper, falsely claiming he was threatening her (Nagesh, 2020). This and

similar incidents made visible how white women's perceived fragility could be weaponized as a form of racialized power. As these videos multiplied across digital platforms, they solidified the "Karen" archetype as a viral shorthand for entitlement, racism, and public disruption (Negra & Leyda, 2020).

Being a person of colour, I admit to being influenced by reels portraying the "Karen" figure in fits of entitlement and rage. These depictions make me hyper-aware during confrontations, as I fear becoming another meme or spectacle. Videos of women labelled "Karens" are circulated as entertainment, blurring the lines between justice, misogyny, and mockery (Woods, 2023). The "Karen" is typically described as a middle-aged white woman, often blonde, whose behaviour in public or customer service scenarios reflects racialized surveillance and entitlement; hence the meme, "call your manager!" (Williams, 2020).

I am going to use this image as an artifact of gendered public pedagogy; a visual shorthand that encodes cultural anxieties and stereotypes about white femininity, privilege, and performative aggression as I attempt to investigate how "Karen Pedagogy" operates as a form of public pedagogy, analysing its mechanisms for monitoring female entitlement and the production of vulnerability spectacles within digital spaces (Sandlin et al., 2010). The hairstyle that was once a neutral or fashionable choice, has been imbued with symbolic meaning that now circulates widely in meme culture, policing behaviour, and social critique. Its overdetermined form invites both humour and scrutiny, positioning the wearer as a figure of public moral commentary and digital surveillance (Theilen et al., 2021). These digital circulations, while appearing to hold individuals accountable, simultaneously commodify female behaviour, blurring the lines between social justice, voyeurism, and misogynistic undertones (Sandlin et al., 2010). These online environments, while offering opportunities for inclusivity and knowledge co-construction, also present significant risks, including the potential for misogynistic trolling and the perpetuation of offline inequities within virtual spaces (Aneja, 2016) (Ringrose, 2018).

These representations, while appearing to hold individuals accountable, also commodify female behaviour by blending social critique with voyeurism and misogyny (Sandlin et al., 2010). While some scholars describe digital platforms as spaces of empowerment (Aneja, 2016), the "Karen" phenomenon reveals how these same platforms can reproduce gendered stereotypes and amplify public surveillance. "Karen Pedagogy" illustrates how viral media trains audiences to monitor, judge, and discipline female behaviour through spectacle and repetition. The digital age, however, has reversed this gaze, placing white entitlement under scrutiny through the lens of viral accountability.

This shift underscores the need to examine how digital spaces are often shaped by algorithmic visibility, participatory cultures, and affective economies that reinforce entrenched gendered and racialized power structures. While the "Karen" meme appears to critique entitlement and racialized surveillance, it simultaneously operates as a mechanism of gendered discipline. In doing so, it regulates how white women behave publicly, encoding a set of normative expectations around femininity, visibility, and accountability. These dynamics highlight how digital platforms, despite their democratic potential, can become sites for the perpetuation of gendered violence and the reinforcement of societal control over women's public and private lives, often under the guise of communal oversight. Hall, Hearn, and Lewis (2022) show how digital environments create new arenas for gendered violations, while Ferreira (2025) cautions that moderation systems tend to fail marginalized users, deepening structural inequalities.

In this context, "Karen" functions both as a cultural critique and a digital tool of control, revealing how surveillance culture not only exposes privilege but also reproduces new hierarchies of shame, spectacle, and performative morality. Toxic meme cultures often rely on computational

amplifications that flatten individuals into hyper-visible tropes, reinforcing bias and limiting nuanced engagement (Pandiani et al., 2025). The meme's virality, therefore, does not simply hold individuals accountable, it commodifies social conflict while sustaining systems of symbolic violence. Within this framework, Karen Pedagogy serves a dual purpose: it acts as counter-surveillance against white entitlement while also fuelling a digital economy that profits from hypervisibility and public shaming. Videos exposing "Karen" behaviours ranging from calling the police on Black individuals for mundane activities to engaging in public meltdowns over perceived social infractions function as contemporary digital lynchings (or reverse lynchings). Unlike historical lynching spectacles that centred Black suffering (Wilderson, 2020), these videos invert the racialized gaze by making white entitlement the subject of scrutiny. However, this inversion does not reheat the stale economy of racialized spectacle; rather, it reinforces a paradigm where public outrage is commodified, with platforms profiting from views, engagement, and advertisements from the person who posts such videos.

While these videos expose racism and white privilege, they also reinforce a punitive spectacle wherein public accountability is reduced to digital condemnation rather than systemic change. As Charman and Dixon (2021) argue, ephemeral publics those that coalesce around viral moments rarely sustain long-term engagement. The outrage surrounding a particular Karen incident dissipates as new spectacles emerge, leading to a cycle of temporary activism with little structural impact. The "show" then, must go on.

Karen Pedagogy intersects deeply with gender politics, since filming white women "behaving badly" implicates notions of gendered vulnerability and accountability. Historically, white women have held a privileged position in racial hierarchies, where their perceived fragility was weaponized, sometimes to justify violence against Black communities (Schuller, 2018). In the digital age, this power has shifted. Their entitlement becomes the object of public scrutiny.

The filming of white women in public spaces complicates traditional power dynamics. On one hand, such videos dismantle the presumed innocence of white femininity, exposing the racialized logic behind their actions. On the other hand, the act of filming can echo patriarchal surveillance regimes, subjecting women to constant visual judgment. In meme culture, the "Karen" becomes both critique and social policing, a flattening that reinforces new hierarchies of shame and spectacle within digital publics. As Gender, Privacy, and the Politics of Digital Surveillance argues, algorithmic visibility often disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups, reinforcing existing disparities in public scrutiny (Imam, 2025).

This raises ethical concerns about digital permanence and the implications of viral justice. Unlike traditional pedagogies that emphasize reflection and growth, reel culture fosters instantaneous judgment, often without pathways for accountability or rehabilitation. The individuals filmed in these moments may experience real-world consequences loss of jobs, social ostracization but these consequences do not equate to deeper societal change. Instead, they reinforce a neoliberal logic wherein individuals, rather than systems, are scapegoated for broader social issues (Sandlin, 2010).

Karen Pedagogy, as an emergent form of public pedagogy, highlights the complexities of viral accountability, racialized spectacle, and gendered power in digital spaces. While these videos serve as a form of counter-surveillance, they also participate in a broader media culture that thrives on the commodification of public vulnerability and conflict. As Charman and Dixon (2022) note, ephemeral public offer moments of critical engagement, but without sustained intervention, these moments dissolve into mere digital artifacts and are excavated to surface the real societal issues.

To move beyond spectacle, a critical public pedagogy of digital justice must emphasize sustained activism over viral outrage. This requires a shift from individual punishment to systemic

interrogation challenging the platforms that profit from these spectacles and fostering long-term educational initiatives that address racism beyond momentary visibility. Without this shift, Karen Pedagogy risks becoming another form of performative justice, momentarily satisfying but ultimately ineffective in dismantling the structures within which it itself critiques.

Ralph (Spectacular Ipseity: True Crime, Identity, and Public Justice)

Just 21 miles northeast of the vandalized George Floyd mural in Lafayette is a recently completed park and baseball field: The Abby and Libby Memorial Park in Delphi, Indiana. Delphi is a city of under three thousand people, and yet the little midwestern canal town broke into the collective U.S. imagination and then beyond national borders. In 2017, two middle grade girls were kidnapped and murdered in a public park in the middle of the day. The murders remained unsolved for six long, media-stormed, conspiracy-rife years, until the controversial discovery of mishandled evidence led to the arrest and conviction of a CVS employee.

Like the "spectacular-ization" of both George Floyd and the Karen phenomenon, the Delphi murders were subject to a storm of click-bait headlines, market-driven newscasts, and a merciless churn of media coverage. From mainstream outlets like Time magazine, Dateline, and Good Morning America to thousands of social media engagements, forums, Reddit pages, YouTube channels, to literally dozens of true crime podcasts (TCPs)—Delphi became an international sensation as the world descended upon this small town to devour its most traumatic moment.

There is insufficient space here to fully unpack this complex interplay of horror, trauma, and publicness, but I (Ralph) have been caught up in this nexus of images that has left me haunted—haunted in the Derridean sense of the lost futures and persistence of deathly ideas into our present (Derrida, 1993; Fisher, 2012)—by our fascination with crime spectacle as a form of public justice (epitomized by TCPs), and by the impact of a public spectacle on the identity of the local community, by *spectacular ipseity:* identity formed in the traumatic public.

TCPs & Public Justice as Public Pedagogy

"What we want to do is go through these new pieces of evidence and really break it down…"
(Down the Hill, Chapter 8)

A True Crime Podcast (TCP) can take a few forms, but it generally shares some standard traits: a serial exploration of a cold case, a particularly troubling act of violence, or an ongoing trial. It is typically narrative in form, and it explores the stories, first-person accounts, expert witnesses, interactions with law enforcement, and any other field evidence they can find. TCPs have exploded in the last 10 years both in number and in audience with hundreds of millions of listeners globally.

A Peculiar Fascination

"For a lot of people, I think they feel like the story is now over, but it's not at all over obviously"
(Down the Hill, Chapter 11).

"Yeah dumb people in there Facebook investigating. That's what we like to call it"
(Down the Hill, Chapter 7).

If we take a step back, we'll notice that TCPs are just the latest iteration of our addiction to consuming crime. We have always had, as Alison Young (1996) puts it, a "fascination with the visibility of crime" (p. 6)—from crime narratives from Greek & Roman drama, to the "penny bloods" of the 1800s, and the solidification of serial crime as a genre in the 1960s with works like Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood," up to the present generation with the inauguration of Dateline in the 90s. But the podcast format of True Crime offers something unique.

1. An *addictive serialization*: "Binging" transmogrifies narrative into "data as a never-ending stream" (Doane, 2021, p. 62), hijacking humanity's predilection for story into corporate profit revenues, and psychically priming the audience for the unique TCP-brand of public participation which is funded by a "desiring, anxious, and invested audience" (Haugtvedt, 2017, p.6).
2. A *perverse intimacy*: TCPs present their allure through the affective and visceral promise of intimacy—intimate insights into personal trauma, the semiotic intimacy of podcast speech, and the locational intimacy of podcast consumption (What could be more intimate than the private whisper of spectacle on your couch, during chores, or on your commute?).
3. A *peculiarly contested agency*: TCPs feast on the apocalyptic lack of agency in late-stage capitalism, offering a sense of agency so polyvalent that the audience can endlessly "chew" on the morsels of participation without sensing the slippery nature of the proffered agency. This dynamic generates an emerging media environment that scholars have begun to describe as "recombination" (McCracken, 2017), creating a sense of publicness and participation, a feeling of control in a world of chaos, when in reality the audience's participation simply provides another source for the bottomless void we call media content.
4. An *acidic authenticity*: TPCs cast themselves as authentic—providing unfiltered access to the "real" facts behind the case as opposed to the "propaganda" and reductive headlines the criminal justice system spits out—and invite the listeners to draw their own conclusions through an engagement with their own authenticity. This framework is the essential mechanism through which TCPs survive, as authenticity is the source of a podcast's *legitimacy*. TCPs offer an authentic encounter that provides privileged access into a perfectly paradoxical confluence of under-the-skin-horror and the safe distance of your morning commute. And this is where authenticity begins to spoil, to acidify. In the context of intense trauma, what form does voyeuristic authenticity take? What do TCPs turn to in order to assure that the listener feels they are experiencing something real? It can be nothing other than the grotesque, the macabre, the gruesome. It can be nothing other than the spectacular.

A Spectacular Public

"Why are we telling this story? I think the answer is easy for me. It's the imagery"
(Down the Hill, Chapter 1).

"Their interest is just … to get that money. I mean that's all it comes down to"
(Down the Hill, Chapter 7).

All of these elements together—serialization, intimacy, agency, authenticity—along with their massive popularity and rate of consumption, indicate that as public pedagogues, we must wrestle with how TCPs function as *public sites of meaning-making*. To understand that we need to add another element of publicness here. Namely, part of the schtick of TCPs is a claim toward *justice advocacy*. It has been cast as a "back door" to criminal justice reform (Boling, 2019) and labelled as "Cultural Criminology" (Yardley et al., 2018) —essentially a "public criminology"— placing it under the same umbrella as other "informal justice mechanisms" (Ahmad & Wangenheim, 2021; Pâquet, 2021). The promise here—claimed certainly by the TCPs themselves, but also the optimistic media, journalism, or criminology scholar—is that the podcasts are not simply entertainment but are innovative correctives for injustice.

But what do we mean by something like "public justice"? Is this an appropriate aim for social values? What sorts of pedagogies are shaping our sense of justice? Who does justice belong to? Which public? When we consider this framing, TCPs take on a uniquely 21st-century problem that offers an important insight into the present cultural moment: authenticity as legitimacy necessitates spectacularism.

If we return to the idea that the public legitimacy of TCPs rests on its ability to offer an authentic approach to criminal justice—to offer an intimate experience of the grotesque—and if authenticity in our present moment looks like access to what "feels real," then TCPs, in order to sustain their own legitimacy, must resort to creating spectacles, curating encounters with the spectacular: the gruesome, traumatic, realness of crime.

And if we take just a quick step back from the hype around TCPs, we'll notice some really troubling patterns here. Of obvious concern here is that the majority of these TCPs create spectacles around violence against women and girls (VAWG). Without VAWG, without releasing stark images and descriptions of mutilated and victimized female bodies, TCPs would not exist. TC media infantilizes female victims, reproducing ideal victim tropes (Serisier, 2005), and relies on fetishized bodily representations, all of which de-humanize victims and commodify these traumatic moments as sites of voyeuristic consumption.

From this vantage, the idea of TCPs as a form of "public justice" begins to fray at the edges. Justice for whom? And who is responsible for this justice? In this light, TCPs don't so much generate a public of justice advocates as much as they create voyeuristic "fans" of the genre who return again and again to work out their own obsessions with the spectacle of violence, presenting True Crime, as Laura Vitis (2021) articulates, as a "paternalistic constitution of women's bodies as sites upon which public tensions can be resolved and contested" (p.12).

Furthermore, as with any technological medium requiring self-sustenance in the techno-capitalist matrix, TCPs reproduce the neoliberal ideologies and carceral logics around criminology, vengeance, violence, retribution, and "justice" that are baked into the system. To dip briefly into the psychoanalytic, TCP hosts offer a glimpse at the "Real" by engaging in grotesquery in one moment, and then (with no sense of contradiction or irony) slip into an advertisement for the home security company that is sponsoring the episode—a perfect performance of the "Imaginary." TCPs are, in the end, unable to offer any alternative to the actual system that it is critiquing, because it needs to participate within and prop up that same system in order to sustain itself.

As a "public criminology," we must accept that TCPs do pose important questions about our public discourse around trauma and violence and the insufficiencies in our institutions of crime and justice, but they offer little in the way of answers. They cannot provide, as Hall and Winlow (2015) name, "a vehicle for change given its location in the Imaginary … where anxieties about the Real are denied" (p. 111).

Spectacular Ipseity: Identity When Trauma Is Made Public

"People talk without knowing anything… They don't … care all about Delphi, they don't care about the families" (Down the Hill, Chapter 7).

"You google Delphi … [the murders are] the first thing that comes up. Now that's a part of our community, and it is a part of who we are now" (Down the Hill, Chapter 6).

"To the killer who may be in this room…" (Down the Hill, Chapter 8).

We now turn to a second question: what is the impact of a public spectacle on the identity of the local community? In truth, this is an idea I (Ralph) am just beginning to interrogate—a haunting idea I cannot quite shake—so what follows is only a series of further questions. And yet, perhaps these questions will continue to haunt and disrupt the public pedagogy discourse in helpful ways.

This whole project for me started as I was searching for a local event on Facebook, and in the process, I saw the image of these two girls, Abby and Libby, as the background of the city of Delphi's community Facebook page. The icon of that city had become the image of two murdered girls. This struck some kind of nerve in me, something that cued for me that there was something going on here, specifically with the formation of this community's identity—a complicated connection between collective trauma and the publicness of this spectacular grief.

But how else could a community respond? Imagine the combined trauma of your shared public spaces not being safe, the persistent reminders of that horror blanketing the town (in the form of ribbons and balloons, wanted signs and suspect sketches in every window, and law enforcement imploring you to imagine that anyone in your proximity could be a suspect), and the broadcasting of this whole experience to international fame—knowing that millions of people are following, speculating, and consuming these very intimate, traumatic moments of your community's shared life. This experience of prolonged violence through the form of commemoration is brought to a point through what I name as "spectacular ipseity."

Spectacular Ipseity

"This community belongs to all of us" (Down the Hill, Chapter 10).

Ipseity is the philosophical concern with the experience of being a self. It gets at the ways that we navigate the tensions between our moral and ethical commitments, our experience of selfhood, and our encounters with a reality beyond our control—a tension that Paul Ricoeur (1991; 1992) says must be resolved with new narratives. A massive rupture emerged at the centre of the community's sense of identity, an existential moment that had to be resolved, but that resolution happened in a spectacular way—a broadcasted, publicized way.

To capture this concept of *spectacular ipseity* in a phrase, it is an attempt to describe the experience of being a traumatized community while being consumed as a public spectacle. It describes how identity is formed in the traumatic public.

Which Public Matters?

"This isn't entertainment, this is our lives … they dirty [their] memory" (Down the Hill, Chapter 7).

Spectacular ipseity poses questions with strong echoes of the above interrogation of TCPs as a whole, but in a far more personal, affective, and emphatic manner.

Which public matters?

Pushing back on the public-private matrix, this question frames our social discourse as a complicated conversation between multiple contested publics. In this frame, whose public is prioritized, protected, and privileged? Should it be the public of a podcaster's marketed audience reach, or the community tasked with putting itself back together?

If "public justice" exists, what would it look like?

If there can be something as elusive as "justice" for something as tragic as the murdering of young lives, what would a public vision of that justice look like, and who would decide? Could there be a sense of memory, healing, and a return of security for a town wrecked with anxiety and fear and disruption? Or in its place would we be content with the self-satisfied, speculative desire for closure

found in a disembodied public working out its late modern psychosis on the bodies of victimized women?

Whose identity should be tended to with our narratives?

Ipseity is complicated at the best of times. It is challenging enough to simply *be* under the weight of existence. As we shape the narratives of these traumas, who should decide their contours? The narratives of speculation and spectacle, of the macabre and grotesque for the sake of audience engagement and algorithmically mediated exposure and profit? Or the narratives of family and friends and neighbours who will not be able to just click on the next mystery to be solved when the podcast credits roll?

What is the pedagogical task?

Specifically, what is the task of tending to the pedagogical impulses embedded in a medium that is reshaping how we teach the public about crime, violence, justice, identity, and the possibility of healing?

Conclusion: From Symptom to Agentic Sinthome

Each of these three vignettes describes a public laden with an ideological, cultural gravity whose energies pedagogically *pull* social meanings and performances back toward the enduring structures of domination, even within this public's seeming attempts at critique and meaningful interruption. All of our work documents the ways in which critical public pedagogies engage practices and concepts that have been historically associated with resistance – memorialization, confrontations with power, and justice – while simultaneously suggesting that these very acts reinforce the dominant, minoritizing capacities they assail, perhaps illustrating what Pinar (2010) meant as "less hospitable" (p. xvi). Moreover, given the operational nature of the symptom, these moves away from the kind of curative practices offered by critical public pedagogy have to be understood as an almost *agentic* response to pedagogical intervention, despite the heterogenous nature of publics. Rosiek (2015) describes racism within New Materialist claims, suggesting that a public codified under a racist order will seemingly *move* toward racist ends, as if under its own agency, and in adding our theoretical architecture to their work, these moves are made to obscure the Real within public desire , the deleterious histories that compose these spaces, and public complicity in their enduring, spectral presence.

All of this said, we do not wish to foreclose on the possibilities of the public in any way. Rather, our hope in writing this piece is to merely establish a stronger cartography of public pedagogy and a stronger sense of how pedagogical work might shift to address the elusive, recursive nature of the public-as-symptom. In both its physical and digital iterations and despite these long shadows of racialized, gendered, and sensational violence, we argue that the public remains a site wherein cultural production and activist work can be accomplished, but only within the confines of the ephemeral (Charman & Dixon, 2022, 2021) and only in ways that suggest a traversal of the a central fantasy of the public itself (Fink, 1995; jagodzinski, 2004). That is, we see the work of critical public pedagogy as a practice of opening spaces of the unknown (Sandlin, 2010) that produce radical reinterpretations of what publics and public-ness might mean, pedagogies that can bring the symptomatic, deleterious histories of the public into presence and envision a new relationship to these histories.

Lacan's later work can be instructive here, as his final formation of the symptom included a novel concept: the sinthome. The sinthome, for Lacan, shifts the pressure and fulfillment of symptomatic conditions away from desire and toward drive (Lacan, 2016; Miller, 2007). This shift moves the subject out of a relationship of appeasing the dominant order's demands or its structure,

instead, resituating the Real's relationship to the symptom and its persistence and allowing for individuals to generate their own direction and satisfaction without a desirous attachment to cultural demands (Žižek, 1989). In short, a sinthomic pedagogy seeks to address the public in ways that ignore the metaphoric constructs that constitute that space – to engage both symptom and cause in a way that gives ground to neither, but instead opens up irruptive, culturally productive discourses that resist the knowability and reification of historical meanings. In this way, we see the sinthome, and the ground from which we recommend it, as a means of building upon Charman and Dixon's (2023) generative notion of the *educative agent,* as they understand socially productive pedagogy as issuing from a space of active, engaged theorization and reterritorialization, acts that, within a Lacanian episteme, seek to traverse given metaphors and seek new relations of public life. As our vignettes suggest, the *inhospitable*, symptomatic public is by no means a blank slate from which the educative agent to work, but rather, a complicated knot of history, identity, and the unerring presence of desire.

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