"NEVER, EVER, TURN OUT THE LIGHTS": PODCASTS, SUPERNATURAL PERSONAL
EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES, AND FOLKLORIC TRANSMISSION

by

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A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

In Folklore and Public Culture

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June 2024

THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: "Never, Ever, Turn Out the Lights": Podcasts, Supernatural Personal Experience Narratives, and Folkloric Transmission

This thesis examines supernatural personal experience narratives presented in "true horror" podcasts. Through content analysis, I investigate four podcasts featuring supernatural personal experience narratives and compare their modes of narration and presentation, as well as their approaches to gender and place. I argue that the unique affordances of the podcast format allow for the modern folkloric transmission of supernatural experiences and the creation of a parasocial cycle of intimacy between the submitter, host, listener, and the podcast as a whole.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the members of my advisory committee, Whitney Phillips and Gordon Sayre, for their continued support and input throughout the completion of this thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Folklore and Public Culture program faculty and staff for their guidance throughout my years at the University of Oregon. Thank you to my family, who always stood by me along the way. Lastly, I want to express my appreciation for the encouragement and friendship from my fellow members, both past and current, in the Folklore graduate program. I could not have done this without you.

For my parents, who instilled in me a love of stories.

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"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Hamlet (1.5.167-8)

Introduction: Podcasts and Folklore

"Forget facts. Forget logic. Forget everything that seems real. Trust. Believe."

Opening Quotation

Odd Trails

I.   Podcasts and True Crime

The academic study of podcasts has become increasingly relevant in the 21st-century media ecology. According to Rime et al., "A podcast is a piece of episodical, downloadable or streamable, primarily spoken audio content, distributed via the internet, playable anywhere, at any time, produced by anyone who so wishes" (Rime, Pike, and Collins 2022). A combination of the words "broadcast" and "iPod" (the most popular listening device at the time), the term was coined by journalist Ben Hammersley near the turn of the millennium (Hammersley 2004). However, it wasn't until the viral success of true crime podcast *Serial* in 2014 that podcasts became a solid feature of the modern media landscape ("About Serial," n.d.). Since then, there has been an explosion of podcasts on every imaginable subject, from fantasy fiction to current events to book reviews. Since the barrier to entry is low (all one needs is an audio recording device and a computer), almost anyone can make a podcast, making it one of the most accessible forms of mass media production today. Although there is some concern about the so-called "podcast bubble" bursting from a marked decrease in advertiser support, the listenership of podcasts shows no sign of slowing ("Has the Podcast Bubble Finally Burst? | On the Media" 2023).

Following in *Serial*'s wake, one of the most popular podcast genres is that of true crime, defined by Franks as "[presenting] a narrative about a criminal act, or acts, based on fact, rather than fiction. This insistence on the presentation of the truth is reflected in the way in which true crime is offered as fact…" (Franks 2016). While the subject first began to flourish in the 19th century, true crime has found a marriage in podcasting unlike nearly any other genre. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2022, over a third of podcast listeners listen to true crime, and it is the most common topic among top-ranked podcasts. The majority of these listeners are white, although the number of Black and Latinx listeners has been steadily rising (Naseer and Aubin 2023). Twice as many women reported listening to true crime as men, falling in line with other studies of the gender differences in true crime listeners (Vicary and Fraley 2010).

True crime is as popular as it is for a reason. Although listeners cite a variety of reasons for listening, such as education and wanting to see justice prevail (Monroe 2020, 1–9), I posit another reason true crime is such a compelling genre to so many: it tells a good, "true" story. Audiences are drawn to such true stories because they merge the human need for storytelling and the desire to find something interesting yet intimate in the non-fictional realm that is nonetheless different from their everyday reality. The "truth" of true crime is typically "unchallenged by its audience" (Murley 2008), and despite the occasional acknowledgment of subjectivity, the hosts as well, who also typically believe in the stories they are telling. Most true crime podcasts present their stories as "truth" and appeal to a sense of reality present in each case, which can make it more attractive to listen to as it "really" happened. Listeners want to hear about the world around them, even if or especially because of its darker subject matter, and the "truth" in true crime stories makes them more entertaining and frightening to listen to. Every crime presented

has a plot to follow, protagonists to root for, and villains to root against. While this presentation

tends to simplify real people into stock characters (the victimized heroine, the tireless police

detective, the insane serial killer), it also gives the listener a familiar story they can both distance

themselves from and enjoy. Even when the crime is left unsolved (and that is often the case), it

functions as a cliffhanger to keep the readers tuning in for more updates as the investigation

progresses (or, more likely, does not progress).

This desire for a good, "true," story is also one of the drivers of a lesser-known sister genre

to true crime, a genre I dub "true horror." "True" in the sense that (the majority) of the tales told

on these shows are experiences "actually" had by the submitter, are presented as real, and

believed to be the truth by the audience. "Horror" because there is often a frightening or uncanny

aspect to these tales to either the listener or the submitter, making it fall into the "horror" genre

of storytelling, just as true crime falls in the general genre of storytelling about crime.

## II.	Folklore, the Supernatural, and True Horror

Folklore itself is notoriously difficult to define, even within the discipline. Perhaps the most

famous definition is that of Ben-Amos, which defines folklore as "artistic communication in

small groups" (Ben-Amos 1971, 13). However, this definition is increasingly problematic with

the advent of the internet and the birth of the field of digital folklore, as artistic communication

no longer has to be in "small groups" to be transmitted in ways that mirror "traditional"

processes. These processes include Toelken's dynamism (changing elements in folklore) and

conservatism (static elements in folklore), both of which are present in digital folklore. As Sims

and Stevens say, these are "elements that connect with a group's past and present in ways that

evolve and change through sharing, communication, and performance" (2005, 10). The definition

I will be using for this project, then, was also created by Sims and Stevens, and is worth quoting at length:

> "Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people" (Sims and Stephens 2005, 8).

This "interactive, dynamic process" allows for a much broader classification of folklore than many traditional definitions, including what I will be focusing on in this project: supernatural folklore.

The supernatural is defined by folklorist Jeffrey Tolbert as referring to "experiences that aren't able to be quantified in a way that satisfies Western science" (Penn State Harrisburg 2020). Though Oring emphasizes the "common" in his definition of folklore (as opposed to the "extraordinary") (Oring et al. 1986, 18), this emphasis is reductive because it excludes a wide range of human experiences that are transmitted in precisely the same way as more "common" experiences. Despite its importance to the origins of folklore as a discipline, the supernatural aspects of folklore have been understudied in an academic context in the past century. Goldstein et al. speak hopefully of a "spectral turn" in folklore studies, a future where the supernatural is taken seriously by the academy and studied with the same interest as other subjects, but in the years since there have been few folkloric inquiries into the supernatural to fully bear this out.

How do podcasts fit into the idea of folklore? On the surface, they may seem antithetical to each other. Podcasts are produced to reach a wide audience and each person receives the same product, while folklore tends to transmit itself through variations and individual interactions. However, it is how the cycle of audience submission, host presentation, and listener reception interacts with the narratives told on the podcasts that make it truly folkloric. The variation comes not from changes in the "text" of the podcast but from the way the listener consumes the narratives told to them and interprets them per their own worldview and creates a personal embodied experience. It is the "creative expression" and "dynamic process of… sharing that knowledge with other people" that allows a podcast to take on a folkloric dynamic.

While there have been many successful explicitly folkloric podcasts (*Lore*, *Freaky Folklore*, and *The Folktale Project*, to name a few), the content of the "true horror" podcast is folkloric through a different route: the use of first-person narratives about supernatural experiences. The supernatural personal experience narrative, also known as a memorate, was first defined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow as a first-person story of a supernatural experience (von Sydow 1948). While scholars such as Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi have rightfully complicated the narrowness of this classification, noting the blurriness of the genre (especially with other related genres, such as the legend, which is not always believed by its speaker and audience, and the fabulate, which are told in the third person) (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974, 225; Sims and Stephens 2005, 66), I will largely be sticking with the general idea of von Sydow's definition in this project. I will be using "supernatural personal experience narrative(s)" (abbreviated henceforth as SPEN or SPENs) as my main term to describe these tales in this project.

III.   Intimacy and Affordances

Affordances are, as defined by Phillips and Milner, "what an object allows a person to do with it" (2017, 45). The affordances that allow the mobility of podcasts are what create a unique vehicle for folkloric transmission. As opposed to other narrative mediums, podcasts can be taken and listened to practically anywhere. Television, streaming, and books, though becoming increasingly portable, can only be consumed (safely) in a stationary manner. Podcasts, on the other hand, can be consumed while in motion, whether walking, biking, or driving. This mobility allows for a simultaneously detached and attached sense of place and an increased sense of intimacy. Podcasts travel with you and can serve as companions for everything from long road trips to working out at the gym. Unlike highly produced and formalized audiobooks, the less formal and more interactive nature of true horror podcasts creates a relationship between the host of the podcast (and the podcast itself) and the listener, allowing the listener to connect to them through the digital "airwaves." This parasocial relationship, or "the more enduring, long-term, and usually positive, one-sided intimacy at a distance that users develop toward media performers, based on repeated encounters" (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen 2016, 24) is what fosters a sense of intimacy despite the differences in time and space between the two.

"While each podcast has its specific mixture of ways in which it defines itself as intimate," writes Euritt, "What relationships and historical constructs it draws from, and what spatial and temporal aspects of closeness it emphasizes, these individual forms of intimacy are, together, a negotiation of the closeness of podcasting mediation that is continually being reshaped and redefined" (2023, 28). While Euritt is referring to the narrative fiction podcast *Within the Wires*, the same could be said of the true horror podcasts surveyed in this thesis.

Podcasts are, at first glance, a non-intimate medium. After all, how can intimacy be created without the use of sight or, especially, touch? However, podcasts allow the creation of a form of intimacy through sound alone. The affordances of the earbud, the disembodied voice, and the mobility of the listener all play important parts in forming intimacy between the listener and the voice on the podcast, whether they are submitters or hosts.

"Podcasting defines intimacy as a relation that is close in time and/or space..." writes Euritt. "[Podcasts] are intimate because they draw on how culture constructs intimacy to communicate the feeling of closeness" (Euritt 1, 2023) This "cultural construction" is where the folklore lies in this process. The "interactive, dynamic process" of folkloric transmission allows for the creation of intimacy through a relationship between podcast and listener. This dynamic situates intimacy within a space, where despite their distance, podcast and listener can connect on a deeper level. The cultural context surrounding intimacy makes it possible for podcasts to reach across space (and time) and into the listener's ear. One can listen to the podcast (and by extension, the narrator) while doing domestic chores or trying to sleep, implicitly tying together the intimacy of everyday life (the lifeblood of vernacular or "unofficial" folklore) and the experience of listening.

The disembodied voice, created by the affordances of the smartphone and the earbud, generates a certain sense of ghostliness that adds to the atmosphere and soundscape of the true horror podcast, which creates an experiential and embodied form of folklore through its supernatural-esque qualities. The common use of earbuds makes this possible, with the host or voice of the submitter speaking directly into the listener's ear. This pulls the listener into the podcast and enriches their experience, making it feel like they are sitting and listening to a person talk about their experiences in an intimate setting. With how common narratives

about disembodied voices are in the SPENs surveyed, listening to the podcast is akin to experiencing the supernatural event itself. After all, as Chess and Newsom write, "This is the way that ghost stories have always been told, but [they are] enhanced by the affordances of the digital spaces that housed their telling" (2016, 5). The overall detachment from place makes this even more possible. Like a haunting that follows a person from house to house, the floating voice of the podcast host follows a listener as they go about their lives.

Podcasts have a certain liminal quality to them that also creates this ghostliness and contributes to their unique relationship with intimacy through the folkloric atmosphere. As a product that is not quite radio but not quite anything else, the podcast has an "ontology of inbetweenness [sic]" (Llinares 126, 2018). In this betwixt and between state, podcasts can behave in distinctive ways that set them apart from other media. The sound of the podcast exists in this liminal space by the nature of its format, neither personal nor impersonal, face-to-face nor distant. This is true especially when the podcast is listened to through an earbud, which engenders liminality through its very technology of creating closeness out of distance. That people often listen to podcasts while in liminal spaces, like in a car or walking from place to place, helps solidify this association of in-betweenness. Ghosts are often thought to haunt liminal spaces (Davies), thus the creation of a liminal space through a podcast serves as an invitation to let the supernatural in.

IV.   **Research Questions and Argument**

In this thesis, I seek to interrogate the relationship between audience, host, and submitter through the vehicle of true horror podcasts. How do these podcasts create an intimately folkloric experience for their audience through their affordances? I also will examine the cultural context that surrounds the telling of SPENs in a podcast format, specifically through

gender and place. Most of all, I seek to investigate the place of supernatural folklore podcasts in the overall podcasting ecology and the discipline of folklore. What does the proliferation of these narratives mean for folklore's place in the digital world? I argue that SPEN podcasts are contemporary storytelling vehicles that allow the transmission of first-person supernatural narratives in a uniquely modern yet folkloric way that allows personal experience to become mass media and then become personal again. Through the affordances of the podcast format, a relationship forms between host, submitter, and listener in a mode that encourages a multi-way interaction between them, creating an intimacy that allows for a folkloric reception of true horror podcasts.

V.   Methodology

For this study, I have selected four podcasts to focus on: *Monsters Among Us* (2016), *Odd Trails* (2021), *Anything Ghost* (2006), and *Spooked* (2017). Each of these podcasts publishes their episodes on Apple Podcasts, the platform I used to find and listen to them. These shows were chosen as a sample from a wide list of true horror podcasts because of each of their unique approaches to the same genre conventions in the true horror podcast, as will be shown. From these podcasts, three to four episodes were chosen out of the most recent ten episodes to focus my analysis on. I first listened to each episode on its own and took introductory notes, then downloaded the episodes into Descript transcription software, which generated a transcript for each episode, on which I also left preliminary notes. For my first cycle coding, I relied on initial coding, where qualitative data is broken "into discrete parts, closely [examined]… and [compared]… for similarities and differences" (Saldana 2016, 87). Initial coding allowed me to approach the transcripts, as Charmaz indicates in Saldaña, "open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by [my] readings of the data" (Saldana 2016, 88). I applied line-by-line

coding of each transcript, marking codes (ex. "haunted house") and themes (ex. "skeptic proven wrong") in each for comparison. For my second cycle coding, I used focused coding, which looks for "the most frequent or significant Initial Codes to develop 'the most salient categories' in the data corpus" (Saldana 2016, 154). I also applied pattern coding, which according to Miles and Huberman, "pull[s] together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis… a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs" (Saldana 2016, 151). Once these categories and patterns were developed across all transcripts, I was able to do a comparative analysis of frequency and application between each selected episode and podcast. The data I collected allowed me to analyze the podcasting format and its affordances while also examining the content of each podcast, allowing me to understand the folkloric nature of their transmission and the intimacy they create.

VI.   Previous Literature

While supernatural folklore remains understudied in folklore studies, there are a few works that have made important contributions to the subdiscipline. Goldstein et al.'s *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* provides an overview of the history and present research on supernatural folklore and the "usefulness" of ghost stories. This includes gender dynamics, haunted houses, and the commodification of belief (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007a). Gillian Bennett's *Alas Poor Ghost!: Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse* relies on ethnographic fieldwork among elderly women in Manchester and Leicester, UK. This study found the high prevalence of supernatural beliefs, especially contact with and visitations from the dead in a supposedly "disenchanted" modernized world. Bennett also examines literary, historical, and narrative aspects of such beliefs in modern and traditional supernatural contexts (Bennett 1999b). *Putting the Supernatural in Its Place*, edited by Jeanie Banks Thomas,

commentates on the hypermodern aspects of supernatural folklore and its specificity to place. This includes racialized dynamics of New Orleans ghostlore, internet fandoms, and the performative elements of legend-tripping (Thomas 2015). These works draw upon folkloric research to examine and display the existence of supernatural folklore in the modern era and bring to light the cultural context, especially that of place and gender, surrounding it.

Studies of reception and fan culture will also play a vital role in this project. Machor and Goldstein's *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* covers mass communication, the history of the book, and literary critical studies throughout its various essays. This book is a primer for the field of reception studies and lays down the basics of the theory in the field as well as goes into several case studies that will be useful in my thesis (Machor and Goldstein 2001b). Janet Staiger's *Media Reception Studies* also gives an overview of the theory and history of mass media reception studies, covering everything from horror movies to race to memory. Staiger provides perspectives from social sciences, linguistics, and cultural studies, but it is the latter that I will be focusing on in this project (Staiger 2005). These have given me an anchoring point to connect audience reception to cultural context to folkloric expression.

While podcast studies is an emerging genre, there are a few works that will be integrated into this thesis. The *Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies,* edited by Mia Lindgren and Jason Loviglio, has a variety of essays on the history of podcasting and on the impact of true crime podcasts that will be especially relevant to my study. I will also be integrating this book's essays on radio into my project, as they provide a fascinating link and continuity to the modern podcasting phenomenon (Lindgren, Lindgren, and Loviglio 2022). *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*, edited by Llinares et al., contains wide-ranging essays about the various aspects of the podcast ecology, from its identity as a medium to aspects of its production,

as well as narrative construction and feminist themes (Llinares, Fox, and Berry 2018). These have provided a background and structure to the ongoing discussion of the role of the podcast in folkloric transmission in this thesis.

VII.   Chapter Overview

The first two chapters of my thesis will focus on presentation and reception and how they create a folkloric atmosphere. Chapter One of this thesis will focus on the case model of presentation versus the compilation model of presentation in SPEN podcasts. I will look, as case studies, at the way *Spooked* manages its single or double-user submissions per episode and contrast it with the way *Anything Ghost* manages its multiple-user submissions per episode. Chapter Two will examine the presentation of the podcast by the host and producers, as well as the reception of the podcast by fans. I will compare and contrast two podcasts with actively commenting hosts that differ in levels of afforded belief: *Monsters Among Us*, whose host often displays skepticism, and *Odd Trails,* whose hosts more readily express belief in the submitted narratives. I will also examine how the podcast is produced and how that impacts its presentation and reception by fans and listeners of the podcasts. I will analyze the communal aspects of these podcasts and how they draw in and retain their listener base.

The third and fourth chapters of my thesis will focus on the cultural context of true horror podcasts. Chapter Three will focus on the presentation and interactions of gender in these podcasts. Drawing on feminist theory, I will examine how gender, femininity, masculinity, and genderless-ness are performed by the hosts, the submitters, and the supernatural entities themselves. I will unpack why certain themes and tropes surrounding gender surface repeatedly in these submissions and what they say about their surrounding culture. Chapter 4 will examine the relationship between place and the supernatural. I will interrogate why certain places

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repeatedly appear as supernatural hotspots and how they relate to the individual and communal cultures of the region. What does place, especially the haunted house, signify to the submitter, the host, and the audience? Lastly, my conclusion will present my overall findings and how they are significant to the broader fields of folklore and podcast studies through autoethnography. I will connect these findings back to ideas of true crime and the storytelling process and relate them to the overall themes I found during my coding process.

Chapter 1: Modes of Storytelling

"...True-life supernatural stories, told firsthand by people who can barely believe it happened themselves. Be afraid."

Apple Podcasts description

Spooked

I.   Introduction

A low, baritone voice comes through the speakers as the audio starts. An upbeat tune plays in the background, and the host begins to talk in a familiar tone to the audience.

"Electric word, life. It means forever, and that is a mighty long time, but I'm here to tell you, there is something else," he quotes. " You're listening to *Spooked.* Stay tuned" (Washington, 2023c, 00:00:00).

The audio reverbs on the last two words, then cuts to the podcast's theme song, beginning the show in earnest.

This intro to the podcast *Spooked* exemplifies a certain mode of storytelling found in true horror podcasts. It signals to the listener that a supernatural story is about to be told and that they should prepare themselves for what they are about to hear. This allows a listener to settle into their listening mode and set aside their possible disbelief to be entertained, frightened, or puzzled. Even in the highly produced setting of *Spooked*, the storytelling aspect of this podcast still comes in strongly from the very first lines of the show. Although each podcast examined in this project takes a different approach to their storytelling modes, they all emphasize the personal

experiences of the narratives that they tell and allow, through the affordances of the podcast format, the transmission of the SPENs in a folkloric manner.

Modes of storytelling are the forms in which a narrative, whether presented as fiction or non-fiction is shaped by its teller, from dialogue to description to narrative perspective. These forms allow for the construction of the narrative into recognizable shapes while still permitting experimentation with form and content. There are as wide a variety of podcasting modes as there are podcasts. From fictional narratives to advice columns to educational lectures, podcasts exhibit a diverse number of forms that can be as individual as the podcast itself. True horror podcasts are no different. They exhibit modes that are both unique to the genre and reflective of other genres, especially its parent genre of true crime. In my research, I have found two main modes of storytelling in true horror podcasts: the "case study" and the "compilation." While these modes are not necessarily unique to SPEN podcasts, I argue the affordances of each mode exemplify how these stories are told and presented to the audience and create a sense of intimacy between the narrator and the host. The two types of podcasts examined here interact with (either to confirm or to challenge) the audience's belief systems. How each podcast tells their stories makes a difference in which podcast the submitter chooses to submit their work to, creating a different sense of interaction between them, the host, and the audience

The creation of sensationalism in true horror podcasts serves to draw in the audience through its affordances and presentation of the SPENs, just as it does in true crime media. However, like true crime, this sensationalism varies when used to different degrees between different podcasts or even between different episodes of the same podcast. This sensationalism can be either "positive" (or socially and narratively productive and generative) or "negative" (or socially and narratively destructive and excessive) (as per Frisken and Soderlund 2022), but both will

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influence how the audience receives (and possibly interacts with) the podcast. This effect is crucial to understanding the presentation of each podcast and the nuances between them. The affordances of the podcast format also contribute to the sensationalist bent of many true horror narratives. Because of the purely auditory format, first-person encounters with the supernatural can more easily be represented in a way that obscures or complicates the "truth" of the true horror narrative. While lacking in the visual representation found in many forms of sensationalist journalism, the necessitation and encouragement to use the imagination to create said visual representation allows for an exaggeration of the narrative beyond its original form.

In this chapter, I will be presenting two true horror podcasts as examples of each one of these storytelling modes. I will be examining the podcast *Spooked* as a model of the "case study" format of podcasting, where one or two specific instances of supernatural horror are narrated in a highly produced format. In contrast, the podcast *Anything Ghost* represents the mode of the "compilation" where many short stories are told by submitters with little post-production. I will also be examining the role of sensationalism vis-à-vis the production elements of each podcast and how it changes based on the mode and format of storytelling by examining several story pairs following the same thematic elements. The use of sensationalism allows for a greater "theater of the mind," creating a greater sense of intimacy and thus a greater folkloric appeal. Finally, I will discuss how the affordances of each of these storytelling modes allow for the folkloric transmission of SPENs and the creation of intimacy.

II.   The Case Study: *Spooked*

The podcast *Spooked* began in 2017 and was initially produced by WNYC studios and hosted by Glynn Washington. Originally a spin-off of the popular *Snap Judgement* storytelling podcast's Halloween episodes, the 11-episode first season was a success and was greenlit for a second

season not long after (Buvanova 2017). Before the release of the third season, though, *Spooked* was acquired by Luminary (a 2019 media startup) and placed behind a paywall, much to the chagrin of listeners on Reddit.[1] While some episodes remained free on platforms such as Apple Podcasts, the majority were only accessible via Luminary subscription, which many listeners were unable or unwilling to purchase. It wasn't until April of 2023 that Luminary lost Spooked to Bay Area NPR affiliate KQED, who announced via Twitter that every episode (including its substantial backlog) would now be available for free on a variety of podcatchers (podcast listening websites and platforms) (Carman 2023). Like many other podcasts, *Spooked* turned to their fans for financial support after leaving a subscriber-based service, launching a VIP-esque service where "Spookedsters" can support the show for benefits like early episodes and extra content.

"*Spooked* challenges skeptics of the supernatural, daring listeners to confront the unknown. These stories demand listeners question their own map of reality," describes the page of the website of parent podcast *Snap Judgement* dedicated to its offshoot ("Spooked," n.d.). From its inception, *Spooked* invites listeners to grapple with questions like mortality, the afterlife, and the supernatural from wherever they are listening, be it driving to work or doing the dishes. This "demand" that listeners "question their own map of reality" puts the onus on the listener to believe the stories being told. Like disinformation on the internet, there is an implicit demand for the audience to believe what they are hearing on the podcast and disbelieve claims contrary to what they're hearing. The way that *Spooked* interacts with its audience is a factor of the mode of storytelling that it uses the most: a mode I call the case study.

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[1] See IbrokeMaBwains, "Love Spooked, Hate Luminary," (2019) amongst many others.

I define the case study mode of storytelling as a format of storytelling where one or two examples are highlighted in a single telling, in this case, a single episode of a podcast. Like a case study in a research paper, the story told in each podcast episode takes a deep dive into a single event, encounter, or subject. The narration is first person and is told directly by the submitter in their own voice, not that of the host. This submitter-as-narrator format gives the podcast a personal and intimate feel, as if the listener were sitting and hearing the submitter talk about the experience next to you. It also cuts down the distance between the listener and the SPEN. One is hearing it straight from the source (or at least, that is the impression given), and the layer of telling the SPEN to the host and then having the host tell that SPEN on air is eliminated from the listener's experience. Because of this focus on only a few stories, episodes tend to be shorter than other modes, typically spanning between twenty-five and thirty-five minutes. If one story is not enough to fill up airtime, another narrative will be added, or, sometimes, as in the case of *Spooked*'s first season, two other narratives. That each episode spotlights comparatively fewer SPENs means that a relationship, however brief, can be formed between the submitter/narrator and listener more easily than in other modes.

Of course, *Spooked* and other true horror podcasts like it are highly produced, so the job of the case study is to create intimacy while still making a glossy final product. To do this, *Spooked* employs a variety of methods. It often involves vocal effects, such as in the episode *The Occupants*. In this episode, the submitter phones a previous occupant about a haunting in their house. The beginning of the phone call is reconstructed through the soundscape: "Hi, this is Sarah, and I'm renting your house in Colorado. We've been seeing some strange things around the house. Can I ask you a few questions?" (Washington, 2023c, 00:13:00). The voice of the submitter dips in quality and sounds as if it were coming out of a live phone call instead of a

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recorded reconstruction. That this episode is most likely playing on the listener's phone through their headphones adds another level of realness to the presentation. This play at authenticity is signature to the case study mode, which strives to seem as genuine as possible and, as the website description puts it "[challenge the] skeptics of the supernatural" through their audio production.

Another vital affordance of this mode of storytelling is the audio *mise-en-scene* or the soundscape. *Mis-en-scene* is a concept from film studies that encompasses the entire setting of a picture, from the framing, lighting, use of color, and set design. Likewise, then, the soundscape is the entire audio setting of a podcast, from music to sound effects to low-frequency sounds layered in the background (a common effect in horror media). In *Spooked* and other case study true horror podcasts, the soundscape is highly tailored to each narrative. Gently upbeat music plays behind the host's introduction, while tense music plays during the climactic moment of each story. Audio is distorted when ghosts or demons are speaking. Sound effects, like running feet or shattering glass, are played at appropriate moments in the tale. All of these helps draw the listener in from their mundane lives into the world of the "supernatural," making it seem like the listener is experiencing the submitted event themselves alongside the storyteller, pulling the podcast into the realm of folklore.

III.   The Compilation: *Anything Ghost*

"Since 2006, *Anything Ghost* has been sharing people's personal paranormal experiences. The stories are sent to Lex Wahl, who reads the experiences and sometimes adds music and effects to the background," reads the Apple Podcast description for *Anything Ghost* ("Anything Ghost Show on Apple Podcasts" 2024)*.* As the oldest and longest-running podcast in this project, *Anything Ghost* provides a fascinating study of the changes and continuities of true horror

podcasts from the nascence of podcasting to its present peak. While an in-depth analysis of all 310 episodes (spanning nearly 20 years) is beyond the scope of this study, some elements of the podcast's enduring appeal through the years will be examined here.

Anything Ghost can be found on almost all podcatchers, and in fact, predates many of them (and has most likely outlasted many more). Interestingly, like *Spooked* for most of its run, the vast majority of *Anything Ghost's* episodes remain behind a paywall. All but the most recent twenty episodes are unavailable to those who have not become "VIP members" of the podcast. This is likely what has allowed the podcast to support itself for so long, but also likely a reason the podcast has remained relatively under the radar despite its longevity. Because of this, the show is less "binge-able," and it is hard for a new or casual fan to do too deep a dive into its content without having to pay for most of it. It is worth noting that there has not seemed to be a similar fan outrage to the paywall as there was with *Spooked,* possibly due to the paywall being present from the outset of the podcast and its relative obscurity (*Spooked* has 14.8K ratings on Apple Podcasts, while *Anything Ghost* has 1.3K. Interestingly, *Spooked's* ratings are slightly lower, sitting at 4.6 stars, while *Anything Ghost* is sitting at 4.7 stars) ("Snap Judgment Presents: Spooked on Apple Podcasts" 2024; "Anything Ghost Show on Apple Podcasts" 2024). *Anything Ghost* also advertises to a different crowd, falling under the "Religion and Spirituality" label on Apple Podcasts, while *Spooked* falls under the more general "Arts" label.

"When my family, my father and mother, and my brother and I first moved into the house, nothing seemed out of the ordinary," begins Episode 305 of *Anything Ghost* in the voice of Lex Wahl, the show's host, which gives a quick, sound-bite-style preview of one of the stories he will be sharing in the episode (Wahl 2024a, 00:01:00). Wahl then briefly gives an overview of the premise of the show, saying that "Anything Ghost is a podcast where people share their personal

paranormal experiences… And I share them with you on the show" (Wahl 2024a, 00:01:00). As emphasized by the title of this episode ("…Other True Stories") and many others ("…Personal Experiences with Ghosts" "…Creepy True Ghost Stories" "True Ghost Stories for A New Year!"), *Anything Ghost* plays up its connection to the truth and the supernatural, as well as the "sharing" aspect of the podcast to create its intimacy. This is emblematic of another storytelling mode: one I call the *compilation*.

The compilation mode of storytelling is a type of storytelling that relies on the collection of multiple stories and their integration into one serialized format. The stories are self-contained and rarely related to each other, though sometimes there may be an overarching theme for an episode. Like a collection of poetry containing several authors, the compilation mode presents each stand-alone narrative as its own, autonomous entity. On most occasions, the narrative is submitted in text form and is read by the host, though there sometimes is a self-read audio user submission (see *Monsters Among Us* in Chapter 2). Each story is short, 3-10 minutes long, creating a "compilation" style narrative. The overall effect is that of a campfire or sleepover storytelling session, where multiple people come together and share their supernatural stories. The level of intimacy is at once close, as we are hearing the words exactly how the user submitted them, and further, as we are hearing them through another layer of abstraction.

As a less-produced product, *Anything Ghost* and other compilation mode true horror podcasts must use other methods to create intimacy and appeal to listeners. Though they tend to be more "amateurish" (often produced by a team of one to three people, as compared to the entire production crew of *Spooked*), this can heighten the podcast's appeal to many. They rely less on sensationalist tactics and strive to give the appearance of a more grassroots approach. Each episode contains instructions for how to submit a story, usually by online form or email. A

submitted SPEN is much more likely to be included in a compilation podcast than a case study podcast by the very nature of the number of stories contained in each episode. This incentivizes the listener to submit their own stories and become a part of the chain of folkloric transmission, as well as become part of a community. Community building, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a crucial aspect of the compilation of stories mode, and the desire to join a community of supernatural believers and be heard and believed drives listenership to engage with the podcast.

The soundscape in compilation podcasts tends to be minimal. As the Apple Podcast description for *Anything Ghost* indicates, the host "*sometimes* adds music and effects to the background" (emphasis added) ("Anything Ghost Show on Apple Podcasts" 2024) When and where these "music and effects" are added tend to be indiscriminate, and there seems to be no particular indication why one story will receive this treatment over another. Usually, the soundscape is subtle, with low-frequency hums and soft music during host segments. The soundscape is completely focused on the voice of the host reading the submission, emphasizing the secondhand nature of the stories. This gives the compilation of stories a "friend of a friend" feel, a classic folkloric trope where one hears about an occurrence from a friend that happened to a friend of theirs. The listener may not feel like they have experienced the event themselves in the same intimate way as a case study podcast, but compilation podcasts make up for it with their reliance on the presentation of authenticity and sincerity that creates a different sort of intimacy.

IV. Sensationalism

According to Frisken and Soderlund, sensationalism is "a combination of striking content and formal elements distinguished by hyperbole and excess and designed to attract an audience" (Frisken and Soderlund 2022, 1). While sensationalism is often studied in journalistic contexts, it can be applied to storytelling, and more specifically storytelling podcasts as well. In the attention

economy, and especially in the podcasting format, each podcast has to fight for the audience's time and interest, no easy feat when there are thousands of podcasts being produced and more being released each day. Thus, some rely on sensationalism to draw in audience members.

This is most apparent in podcasts operating in the case study storytelling mode. Because only one or two narratives are told in each episode, each of these SPENs must pack a punch to keep the listeners coming back every week. The content must grab and hold the listener's attention, and in *Spooked*, this entails ratcheting up the intensity of the later seasons. Ghosts turn malevolent and ambiguous spirits turn into demons. The form of the podcast similarly allows for a sensationalist bent. The audio mixing and effects make the storytelling more dramatic, more like an audio play at times than a simple storytelling session. Finally, there is an excess to the case study podcast that sensationalizes it. Each case gradually gets more intense, increasing the negotiation of the listeners with their level of belief. The episodes increasingly involve increasingly supernatural experiences in a single incident.

The case study mode, and *Spooked* in particular, relies on flashy storytelling and sensationalist rhetoric to pull their audiences in. In contrast, the compilation mode operates more subtly. The submitters certainly use sensationalist tactics, such as excessive supernatural experiences and strong assertions of the truth. However, the podcasts themselves are not as sensationalist because they tend to be more restrained and straightforward. They give more of a familiar feeling to the listener, like they are at a campfire telling spooky stories, whereas case study podcasts seem like an exaggerated recreation of a supernatural event. Compilation podcasts are also less produced, so the soundscape and vocal effects tend to not generate as much immediate emotion in the listener, decreasing the overall reaction to the story as well as its memorability. However, the produced nature of case study podcasts can distract from the

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narrative and can push the SPEN into an over-the-top sensationalist mode, decreasing the narrative's believability.

This contrast is best seen when examining parallel SPENs between *Spooked* and *Anything Ghost.* Consider the following description of a hooded figure from the submitter's childhood in *Anything Ghost*:

"One evening, as I was trying to fall asleep, I opened my eyes and saw a hooded figure dressed in what I can best describe as a monk's robe standing beside my bed and kind of standing over me. I couldn't see a face or hands, just the hooded cloak. It was only there for a moment and then gone. It shook me up enough for me to go to my mom and dad's room. My mother reassured me I was fine, and I eventually went back to bed and had no further visits from that figure" (Wahl, 2023b, 00:19:00-00:20:00).

The description of the figure and the surrounding event are typical of the compilation genre. It is matter of fact, unembellished, and comparatively rather anticlimactic, where the brief appearance of the hooded figure constitutes the entire supernatural event, almost an afterthought in a larger narrative. There is no musical backing, no voice effects, and no change in the cadence of Wahl's narration. It stands on its own but also as part of a collection of similar events, either by the same or a different submitter.

In contrast, here is an excerpt from the *Spooked* episode *Lady Grim* describing a similar hooded figure:

"It just totally shocked me that this figure was standing at the very front of the hay wagon. She had one arm raised as if she had to keep her balance. She had a black cape that went right down to her feet…. And she was not transparent. She looked like a real, alive person there,

dressed in that outfit… She never moved her head in either direction. She just stared straight ahead the whole time that they went through that circle of light. And she looked to be a female version of the Grim Reaper. That image is burned in my mind until the day I die. …They only show themselves when somebody's gonna die" (Washington, 2024a, 00:11:00-00:14:00)

Immediately, the differences between the two are apparent. The narrator (using her own voice) describes the figure down to every last detail, making her the centerpiece of the overall narrative. She describes her fear in a visceral, non-detached way, and takes us into the thoughts and emotions she experienced at the time of the encounter. This is the first (and most striking) climactic moment of the episode (the second being her husband's death five years later) and is produced in a way to up the fear in the listener. Light, eerie music plays through the pregnant pauses as the narrator recounts her experience, then fades out at the climactic statement. Heartbeats sound as she continues, then turn into the beats of more tense music. As her daughter asks her a question, the voice echoes in a childlike tone. The music then fades back into the lighter music that preceded it. All of these effects serve to grab the audience's attention and heighten their emotional response, much like common journalistic sensationalist techniques, but the podcast format leaves just enough to the imagination (a necessary aspect of the audio nature of the podcast) to create an even scarier atmosphere.

The difference in approaches between the two podcasts is crystalized in these two excerpts. *Spooked,* operating in the case study mode, plays up the sensationalist aspects of heightened emotions and stakes. It uses its production value to full effect, manipulating its soundscape to draw the listener in and create belief, even if the story itself seems more outlandish. On the other hand, *Anything Ghost*, operating in the compilation mode, treats the narrative as one part of a bigger whole, downplaying the fearful elements of the single event. The visit still "shook [the

submitter] up enough" for them to be impacted and want to share their story on a true horror podcast, but it takes less of a leading role in the overarching submission. A defining quality of the case study mode, then, is the use of sensationalism through its affordances to increase the tension and audience reaction to a particular narrative.

V.   Conclusion

The case study and the compilation of stories are two useful categorizations for supernatural personal experience narrative podcasts. Of course, there can be crossovers between the two. The occasional compilation podcast might be more produced, and a case study podcast might rely less on sensationalism. While these are not fixed lines that apply to every single podcast, they allow a quick and general understanding of the traits of a true horror podcast upon the first listen. They permit analysis of several podcasts as a whole from a variety of angles, from reception and production (Chapter 2), gender (Chapter 3), and place (Chapter 4).

Both of these narrative modes create intimacy but in diverse ways. The case study mode allows for intimacy with the submitter/narrator through the use of their own voice to tell the narrative, giving the listener a glimpse into their thoughts and emotions during the supernatural event and allowing the listener to view them as more than words read off a page. In contrast, the compilation mode creates intimacy through its non-sensationalized narratives and its sense of authenticity. It gives the listener the exact words that were submitted and lets them experience the narrative through a minimally modified (through soundscape or other elements of production) form. Both of these allow for the reader to put themselves in the shoes of the submitter because of the affordances of the audio formatting (which necessitates a visual imagining of each SPEN through a "theater of the mind") and allows them to relate their own supernatural experiences to those on the podcast. This creation of intimacy is folkloric because it

allows for a dynamic relationship between host, submitter, and listener over a recorded and archived element, the mass-produced podcast.

In the next chapter, we move to an interrelated topic: the presentation and reception of true horror podcasts. The compilation of stories and the case study each are presented and received in separate but similar ways, but I will be focusing on two podcasts operating in the compilation of stories mode for a narrower comparison and analysis. The modes of presentation found in SPEN podcasts are vital to understanding the fan decoding process which allows a folkloric interpretation of the podcast.

Chapter 2: Presentation and Reception

"Big shoutout to all the Creepazoids that follow you and hopefully, we all keep it creepy."

"Deadly Lake Ghosts, Lake Monsters, and the Infamous Mothman,"

Monsters Among Us (2024a, 00:06:00)

I.   Introduction

A slightly eerie tune plays through the headphones. As it fades out, the host introduces

himself and the podcast: "Good evening and welcome to *Monsters Among Us*. I am your guide,

Derek Hayes. And that was a listener-submitted version of our *Monsters Among Us* theme…"

(Hayes, 2023a, 00:02:00). Right away, the listener is made aware of a crucial element of the

Monsters Among Us podcast: it has a community and fandom that actively engages with the

show, who not just submit stories to be shared with a wider audience but create fan content as

well. Continued listening to other episodes shows that fan-submitted theme songs are commonly

used in the introduction of this podcast.

What can we make of this interaction between podcast presentation and its reception? It is

readily apparent that there is some sort of fandom involved here, but to what extent does it

influence the way the podcast structures and presents itself? Is this relationship one-way, or does

it create a kind of feedback loop of storytelling? How does host skepticism (or lack thereof)

affect this parasocial relationship? How do the technological affordances and folkloric reception

of the podcast impact its creation of intimacy? In this chapter, I will be examining two true

horror podcasts operating in the compilation mode, *Monsters Among Us* and *Odd Trails*. I will be

looking at how they position themselves through their differing forms of presentation, especially the differences in how the hosts interact with their fans and with the content they present. I will discuss the ways fans interact and receive the podcasts and how that creates folkloric intimacy through the affordances of the podcast format. Finally, I will be investigating the ways fans interact with each other and create digital and aural communal relationships surrounding each podcast.

II.   Presentation: *Monsters Among Us* and *Odd Trails*

Monsters Among Us began in 2016 and is currently in its 16th season, with 388 total released episodes. Its host, Derek Hayes, compiles audio calls from the podcast's hotline and audio recordings sent by email and presents them in a compilation form, often commenting on the stories and adding additional context from the research he or his small team has conducted. In this way, through the format of the call-in style, it feels very much like a recording of a radio show, only the "callers" are not live on air. Currently, it has 6.9k ratings (sitting at 4.8 out of 5 stars) on Apple Podcasts and is under the "Society and Culture" genre tag (although interestingly enough, it is classified as "True Crime" on Spotify). Each episode tends to have about six to seven stories featured in it and lasts from an hour to two hours.

From the very first moment a prospective listener clicks on the podcast's page, the podcast aligns itself with the truth of its contents. "True Paranormal Stories" reads the subtitle under the podcast's cover graphic. Its description on Apple Podcasts further drives this point home: "An anthology of true paranormal stories *told by the witnesses* themselves. Monsters Among Us is a collection of *first-hand* audio recordings made *directly* from experiencers of the paranormal" (emphasis added) ("Monsters Among Us on Apple Podcasts" 2024). Not only are these recordings "first-hand" encounters, but they are "directly" in the words of the submitter without

any additions or subtractions. This appeal to authenticity is not unique to *Monsters Among Us,* but the way it presents its authenticity through these audio first-person narrations is. While other podcasts surveyed used the submitter's voice (*Spooked* and occasionally *Anything Ghost*) and general first-person narratives (*Anything Ghost, Odd Trails)*, *Monsters Among Us* is the only podcast examined that combines both of these aspects as their main draw for the audience.

 Odd Trails, though similar to *Monsters Among Us* in many formatting aspects and general content, stands in contrast to it by its overall presentation style. "*Odd Trails* is an anthology of true paranormal stories, narrated by Andy Tate and Brandon Lanier. Join us every week as we dive into all things weird and otherworldly," reads its description on Apple Podcasts. Started during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and following the success of Andy Tate's (not to be confused with Andrew Tate, misogynistic influencer) user-submitted true crime storytelling podcast *Let's Not Meet*, *Odd Trails* has 1.3k ratings (sitting at a 4.8 out of 5 as well) ("Odd Trails on Apple Podcasts" 2024). It also is placed in the "True Crime" genre on Apple Podcasts, perhaps so a listener can more easily connect it to *Let's Not Meet.* Each episode tends to contain five to six user-submitted stories and lasts from forty to fifty minutes.

 Andy Tate and Brandon Lanier take a slightly different approach to their storytelling process. While also an "anthology" and in the compilation mode, instead of using the submitter's voice to tell the tale, the hosts take turns reading the submissions. A unique aspect of *Odd Trails* is that each submission comes with a user-created title and submitter name. While most of these are no doubt pseudonyms or simply anonymous submissions, *Odd Trails* is the only true horror podcast I have found that accepts usernames (such as SimilarYesterday657 and Straight4Shady, to name a few) for their submissions. The use of titles (for instance, "Disembodied Voices Around Me" and "Lady in White") also primes the listener for the narrative they are about to

hear and showcases the most important or memorable aspects of each SPEN. Similarly to *Anything Ghost*, these create another level of abstraction that the audience must negotiate while they are listening, limiting the development of intimacy between the listener and the submitter.

While both shows rely on their host presentation to tie the SPENs together and provide commentary, the approaches of *Odd Trails* and *Monsters Among Us* to their host presentation are vastly different. On a surface level, each podcast structures its host commentary in contrasting ways. Keeping to its "radio show" style, *Monsters Among Us* keeps a running commentary, where Hayes makes remarks before and after each recorded entry. He also introduces the show, often with a fan-submitted musical theme, and wraps it up with a bonus story included after he reads out the credits. In contrast, in *Odd Trails* its stories begin directly after a cinematic (in that the remixed audio is taken from an unknown movie or TV show) intro, with no host introduction to the podcast. There is no commentary between each presented SPEN. Instead, Tate and Lanier hold their commentary until the end of the show, where they spend ten to twenty minutes discussing that episode's stories and various other paranormal miscellany. They answer fan mail and theories about previous narratives and produce theories of their own about what may have happened to the submitter, before playing out the show with another "cinematic" outro.

The similarities and differences between the presentation and intimacy created by each podcast can be shown in an examination of two similar tales about cryptids seen in the woods of Kentucky. *Odd Trails* gives us the following description:

"He knew immediately he wasn't looking at a deer. …He described its body as that of a panther. But the upper torso, where the shoulders and neck were, sat noticeably higher than its lower back and hind legs. …The most unsettling detail I can remember, though, was this thing's back legs. He described them as frog-like, as in the back legs were tucked up close to the creature's sides. …But

I know one thing for sure. He was an honest man, and his eyes told the truth when he would tell me that story." (Tate and Lanier, 2024a, 00:34:00-00:38:00)

In a similar vein, *Monsters Among Us* describes the following creature:

"…Well, you know, that they were big dogs with abnormally long legs, specifically the back legs higher and longer than the front legs. So they were kind of loping along, you know, with this odd gait. She said they were like a reddish brown and there were either two or three of them. …And the fact that both [she and her mother] saw the same thing without either one of them saying anything to each other just lends a bit more credence to the story" (Hayes, 2024b, 00:21:00-00:23:00).

Both sets of hosts go on to discuss the implications of the presented narratives. Hayes, in typical *Monsters Among Us* fashion, speaks of the research his team has done on these "long dogs." He recounts an (allegedly) indigenous tale of a dog that can stretch out to six feet and the legend of the long dog of Sir Corville, a ghost dog from the neighboring Tennessee. He then goes into detail speculating on what rare (for North America, at least) animals these dogs could actually be, including the maned wolf or the hyena. This skeptical standpoint stands in contrast to Tate and Lanier's take on a similar submission to their podcast. They too discuss rare animals but relate them instead to the discovery of rare new creatures, a tenet of cryptozoology, the study and search for unknown animals. Comparing what the submitter dubbed the "Kentucky Holler Crawler" to Bigfoot, they take a less uncertain approach, asserting that "nothing is impossible in nature" and "these legends [exist] for a reason" (Tate and Lanier, 2024a, 00:42:00). Each podcast's diverging methods of examining regional folklore are indicative of the divergences in their presentation as a whole.

On a deeper level, the way the hosts present the stories impacts the way listeners formulate and relate their own beliefs. In *Monsters Among Us,* Hayes frequently expresses skepticism about some of the stories he presents. "And I'll be honest here," Hayes says after a particularly eyebrow-raising tale in one episode, involving little beings in a storage container and a man moving in slow motion in the desert, "I think Jeff is lying straight to our faces" (2024b, 00:58:00). In another episode, he uses thorough research to explore alternatives to a lake monster narrative submitted to him, including news clips and articles (Hayes 2024a, 00:07:00-00:16:00) Later in the same episode, when describing a Mothman encounter, he voices his skepticism in more communal terms of audience belief:

"But Luke's experience, at least the portion that occurred back home in Florida, seemed like something straight out of a film or a movie. Didn't seem realistic. We're really supposed to believe that the creature just showed up and shot into the air. Just like that. Well, I can't speak toward the validity of Luke's entry…" (Hayes, 2024a, 00:59:00)

As shown in this quote, Hayes openly acknowledges when the stories he receives are almost beyond the bounds of acceptability, even for a supernatural believer. Thus, he opens the floor for the listener to engage in their own skepticism, something other podcasts implicitly or explicitly discourage (see the *Spooked* website description in Chapter 1). He creates an implied line between believability and unbelievability, one he does not outright define but still engages with. He allows the listener to question the submitters while still maintaining their supernatural beliefs by validating other submissions. This makes the listener acknowledge their own implicit line between what they can believe and what they cannot, either in having them align with Hayes's boundary or having them defy it. This impacts the parasocial relationship formed with the host. On the one hand, engaging with skepticism could increase a listener's trust through

their honesty, especially if the listener is skeptical or agnostic. On the other hand, an overabundance of skepticism could drive away listeners who are greater believers in the supernatural. The intimacy created by the engagement with belief thus differs from person to person, allowing for folkloric interactions with the podcast.

Though both podcasts create a similar sense of intimacy and a parasocial relationship with their audience, the hosts of *Odd Trails* take a contrasting approach to *Monsters Among Us* and belief in their podcast. Tate and Lanier rarely, if ever, express doubt in the validity of their submitter's experiences. After briefly discussing a Discord (an online messaging service) conversation he had with a submitter about a faceless dream entity, Tate says: "I'm fully vested with the author now … I can confidently say that he's genuine" (Tate and Lanier, 2024b, 00:41:00). Later in the same episode, when talking about a submitter and his girlfriend who each heard disembodied voices, Tate makes the following assertion: "So I'm sure this is going to seem pretty controversial to some folks out there, but I think it does a great injustice to experiences like in the all-knowing voice story to assume that the voice that both parties heard was some kind of temporary psychosis…" (Tate and Lanier, 2024b, 00:43:00). In this way, Tate and Lanier seek to validate the submitter's experience and encourage the listener's belief in their story. While this may seem to shut down avenues for the viewer to engage with their belief, this differing approach serves another purpose: to confirm existing beliefs and to counter skepticism. In contrast to *Monsters Among Us, Odd Trails* creates a cycle of reinforcement in supernatural belief, where a submitter's beliefs are supported by the hosts' beliefs, which in turn attempts to reinforce a listener's belief. The intimacy created here, especially by the conversational section at the end of every podcast, is the opposite of *Monsters Among Us.* It increases the parasocial relationship between the hosts and the listener who believes in the supernatural, who feels

validated, and decreases it with the skeptical listener, who may feel the hosts are being too credulous.

The affordances of the medium through which the hosts communicate and ally themselves impact the listener's reception. Podcasting has been closely related to radio since its inception, though it has evolved into a format separate from radio in its own right (Llinares, Fox, and Berry 2018). One can often see the traces of radio in many genres in the post-*Serial* world, and SPEN podcasts are no exception (Hancock and McMurtry 2018). Of the podcasts examined in this study, the formatting of *Monsters Among Us* is the most self-consciously and intentionally aligned with radio. As previously mentioned, *Monsters Among Us* is styled as a late-night radio call-in show, with the host (Hayes) acting as DJ, presenting the stories, and providing commentary. He has a typical "radio voice," low and soothing but energetic and casual enough to keep the listener alert and focused during the show. The show closely emulates a live format without technically being "live." In contrast, *Odd Trails* is more typically "podcast-like" in format. The hosts read the stories in a formal tone, then shift to a conversational tone when they get to the discussion section. It makes no attempts to emulate a live format or act in almost any way like a radio show. While radio functions in a "real-time" space, interacting live with the hosts as they call in, the intimate parasocial relationship with a podcast is created between the listener and the host and reaches through time and space. The affordances of both of these formats allow for the folkloric creation of intimacy, where the host and the listener form a "bond" that allows for a sense of familiarity through its formatting, whether it be closer to radio or a typical podcast.

III.   Reception and Belief

Presentation and reception are inextricably tied together. How the audience receives the podcast depends on how it is presented, and how the podcast is presented is often influenced by how it is received. Contrary to "dupes" of "cultural industry", audiences actively receive and process information presented to them by the media (Machor and Goldstein 2001a, 204). Through this process, the audience makes their own decisions about what they do with the stories they have received. Do they reject them outright, believe them wholly, or something in between? As there is no way to "fact check" these SPENs or otherwise determine their veracity, the listener must operate on faith that they are not being lied to. This believability (or lack thereof) forces the audience to come to their own conclusions precisely because there is no easy answer, even from the majority of true horror podcasts that encourage straightforward belief. This "dynamic process" of engagement with belief allows for the folkloric interaction between listener and podcast.

In a post on r/Ghosts dating back to 2013, Reddit user Rukiayuzu makes the following comment while recommending supernatural podcasts to their community: "Anything Ghost is a really interesting podcast where "true" (*And I say it like that because you really are just taking people's word*) ghost stories are collected from all over the world" (emphasis added) (Rukiayuzu 2013). While *Anything Ghost* was the only true horror podcast surveyed that was active at the time of this post, this description could easily apply to any one of the podcasts examined in this study. Audiences are faced with what seems like a binary choice: to believe or disbelieve "people's word" about what happened to them. However, there is a third option: to create a bricolage of belief that is unique to each individual. After all, belief is highly personal, and no two people's sets of beliefs, even in more orthodox spheres, are going to be the same. Listeners, whether consciously or not, pick and choose what they will or will not believe. This leads to an interesting folkloric process,

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where a "mass-produced" product such as a podcast becomes personal, impacting the worldview and creating a chain of transmission of personal stories that reach a wider audience than they ever would have before. This interaction between the impersonal medium and the personal message is what allows connection to these podcasts by the listener.

Because of their differing presentations, the listener reception for *Monsters Among Us* and *Odd Trails* is different. At first glance, this might not seem to be the case, as their ratings on Apple Podcasts are nearly identical. However, it is their interactions with their fan communities that set the two podcasts apart from each other. For instance, *Monsters Among Us* fans frequently call in with one or more stories, sometimes years apart from each other. They frequently end with a comment referencing their love of the show and other listeners, such as the quote at the beginning of the chapter and a submitter with the alias "Robin's" sign-off in one episode: "But anyway, I absolutely love the podcast and I get so excited when I see one come up on my feed" (Hayes, 2024b, 00:25:00) There is no such listener commentary in the submissions to *Odd Trails* (or at least, none that are put onto the podcast). Instead, listener theories and feedback are shared during the discussion section at the end of each episode, putting them in direct conversation with the hosts. Though their voice is not directly used to interact with the hosts and other fans, there is still a larger conversation taking place with the podcast as its medium. Both podcasts interact with their fans in a way that encourages a parasocial relationship and increases engagement with the podcast.

Fans of true horror podcasts interact with each other in a variety of ways. Though the fandoms may not be as mainstream and visible as fictional horror podcasts, like *Welcome to Night Vale* or *The Magnus Archives,* they still make themselves known through social media posting and community engagement. *Spooked* and *Monsters Among Us* have decently sized and active communities on Reddit, while *Odd Trails* has only a small and less-well-maintained subreddit, and

Anything Ghost has almost no presence on the website apart from occasional posts recommending the show (see above). *Anything Ghost* does have a Tumblr and Facebook page, however, indicating a different demographic of fans than those usually found on Reddit. *Odd Trails* was the only podcast surveyed that had a publicly advertised Discord server, where fans can directly interact with each other and Tate and Lanier, which perhaps speaks to the target demographic of the podcast as well, as Discord is generally seen as a "younger" form of social media than a website like Facebook. It should be noted that all four podcasts have ways for fans to monetarily support the creators, from Patreon, (a website where people can support creators by becoming members) (*Odd Trails)* to VIP memberships (*Spooked, Anything Ghost*) to merchandise (*Monsters Among Us*). All podcasts surveyed except for *Spooked* contained advertisements as well, usually containing a code for a discount for listeners of the show. The memberships and ads would not exist without a number of fans willing and able to contribute, indicating that fans interact not only with the hosts on a ludic level but a monetary level as well.

IV.   Conclusion

While there is no self-conscious name for the fandom (for instance, "Trekkie" for Star Trek fans) of any of the podcasts surveyed, the playful use of the term "creepazoid" in the opening quote of this chapter highlights that not all of the submissions are deadly serious, despite their often dark subject matter. Rather, listeners take a negotiated stance on their belief in the supernatural, allowing them to draw their own line between belief and skepticism without passively accepting every story that the true horror podcast tells. There is a spectrum of listener belief, and the audience must figure out where they fall on that spectrum instead of having it decided for them. While it is certainly true that some of the SPENs submitted are not based on "true" experience and are entirely fictional, the lack of verifiability means that the audience must take on faith what they are listening

to. The negotiation of belief, where some listeners decide a story is fake and others decide that it is genuine, is the essence of the folkloric engagement that happens when listening to a SPEN podcast. The listener takes in the supernatural personal experience narrative and puts it through their belief systems, resulting in the transformation of the impersonal into the personal. Listeners of true horror podcasts are encouraged to share their stories and share the podcast, making a chain of transmission that allows a SPEN to spread further than it would have on a purely traditional oral basis.

Through this process, intimacy is created through the parasocial relationships that are (or are not) formed with the host(s) and the relationships formed over a distance with other fans. The presentation of both *Monsters Among Us* and *Odd Trails* create intimacy in similar ways by virtue of their both acting in the compilation mode and through the parasocial relationship between host and audience. While *Monsters Among Us* may take a more skeptical tone and *Odd Trails* a more trusting one, they both rely on the affordances of the podcasting format to create a believing reception from the audience. No matter which approach they may ultimately use, both podcasts seek to foster a sense of plausibility for the narratives they present to their listeners.

In the next chapter, we move to the first of two thematic "case studies": that of gender and true horror. Understanding how gender interacts with the supernatural and with the transmission process is vital to understanding the cultural context of these podcasts. I will be examining the intersections of gender with submitters, hosts, and the supernatural entities themselves in all four surveyed SPEN podcasts. This will allow me to further examine how supernatural podcasts, culture, and folklore intersect and how the affordances of the podcast allow for embodiment and the creation of intimacy.

Chapter 3: Gender and True Horror Podcasts

"What makes the house haunted cannot be separated from women's experience of the 'homelike,'

what is homely but also unhomely and therefore uncanny."

The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories

Emma Liggins

I.   Introduction

Supernatural belief spans many boundaries. While historically associated with women (especially those of lower class and lesser education), recent studies have been mixed on the differences in supernatural belief between genders in North America (Silva and Woody 2022). Although the image of the "credulous" or "sensitive" woman remains strong in popular culture, the supernatural investigation field remains visibly dominated by men (see the disproportionate male-female ratios of hosts on *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghost Nation*, for instance). But what of supernatural personal experience narrative podcasts? What is their approach to the gender of their hosts? Their submitters? Their ghosts? How do cultural notions of gender create intimacy between host and listener? In this chapter, I argue that gender ties into the cultural context of narratives about supernatural beliefs as demonstrated by true horror podcasts. The affordances of the podcast format allow both a gendering of voice and genderless anonymity through their embodiment, affecting the way the audience understands and receives each SPEN.

Judith Butler defines gender not as an innate biological category, but as "an unstable identity that is 'tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of*

acts…'" (emphasis original) (Butler 1988, 519) These "stylized repetition[s] of acts" are performed by all involved in the podcasting process, including the hosts, the submitters, and the listeners. But how is gender performed by supernatural entities who cannot speak for themselves? All accounts of supernatural beings in these podcasts are secondhand in the sense that all submitters are speaking for their supernatural visitors instead of presenting the voices of the ghosts. As inherently voiceless entities in the telling of the narrative, even when they speak supernatural entities must communicate their gendered (or genderless) presence in unique ways and always through a mediator. The way supernatural visitors are spoken about configures their gender as much as their presentation does. The voice of the podcast, either that of the submitter or the host, is just as disembodied as that of a supernatural being. Their gender identity, despite given markers, can never be fully determined by the listener. The spectral nature of both ghost and narrator is created by the affordances of the podcast formatting and the intimacy formed between the voice coming through the headphones and the one listening to that voice.

The subject of gender and the supernatural has been largely neglected by scholarship. Most studies relating women to ghost stories or haunted houses (see the above quote), for instance, are reviews of literary or likewise fictional narratives. While these studies provide a useful structure for the study of the haunted narrative, they provide little for the folkloric and experiential ghost. Gillian Bennett's *Alas Poor Ghost* was one of the first academic and folkloric studies to take women's, especially older women's, supernatural beliefs seriously (Bennett 1999). Similarly, Goldstein et al. have an extensive section on gender and ghosts in their book *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore.* They develop three main categories of "gendered" ghosts: the "extreme male," the "deviant femme," and the "genderless presence"(Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007). However, I argue that these categories are

ultimately reductive and take away from the multitude of gender expressions found in supernatural entities.

In Nicole Kousaleos's article *Feminist Theory and Folklore,* she states that "[in] the process of emphasizing female forms of expression, the "new" genre of personal narrative was "discovered" as an entering point into women's lives"(Kousaleos 1999, 24). In the years since this "discovery," personal narrative has gained more respect in the field of folklore from self-consciously feminist scholars and mainstream academics alike. However, I intend to show that while originally discounted as a "woman's" genre, (supernatural) personal (experience) narratives span across the gender spectrum. I share Kousaleos's stated goal of feminist folklore "to make a place for the study of women's lives without asserting the existence of a universal women's culture… asserting female difference without essentializing a female nature or culture" (Kousaleos 1999, 22). Thus, my approach to this chapter is explicitly feminist, valuing the experiences of all genders while acknowledging the differences in cultural context for people of different genders.

II.   Supernatural Entities and Gender

How does one define an entity that resists definition, much less assign it a gender? Supernatural entities, a broad category I will use to refer to a wide number of beings, such as ghosts, demons, cryptids (undiscovered, sometimes supernatural animals), and the like, trouble existing binaries of life and death, reality and unreality, belief and disbelief. Through their inherently liminal qualities, they challenge traditional gender binaries as well. However, supernatural entities can also serve to reinforce cultural perceptions of gender through their presentation and how they are spoken about. How do we reconcile the tension between these seemingly contradictory qualities? A thorough examination of the presentation of the gender of

supernatural entities in the surveyed SPEN podcasts through the basic framework of Goldstein et al.'s three categories of gender (and genderless) supernatural entities will serve to illuminate how supernatural entities replicate and challenge Western cultural notions of gender.

Goldstein et al. first introduce the "Extreme Guy" who "closely mirrors a kind of exaggerated masculinity found in everyday life… [he] exaggerates many of the characteristics stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as toughness and violence" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 82) Associated commonly with domestic abuse and sexual violence, the Extreme Guy often appears in the background of a ghost story, typically as a tormentor of the ghost during life or even the cause of its death, such as in many versions of the "Bloody Mary" urban legend (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 86). More rarely does the Extreme Guy show up as the supernatural entity himself. Goldstein et al. argue that "nurturing masculinity" also appears in ghost stories, but they are "less dramatic- and therefore perhaps less memorable- than the Extreme Guy" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 91) However, this claim is not borne out by the podcasts surveyed in this study. The vast majority of the SPENs that included a "male" (as defined by the submitter) supernatural entity were ambivalent or even helpful. While a few SPENs included vaguely masculine and malevolent sleep paralysis apparitions (an interesting contrast to Hufford's "old hag" phenomenon, where an old woman appears as a sleep paralysis entity and sits on the sleeper's chest), there were only two narratives among those surveyed that encapsulated the Extreme Guy archetype. In episode 305 of *Anything Ghost*, a submitter describes an experience with the ghost of a man who had tried to kill his girlfriend in their dining room before taking his own life (Wahl, 2024a, 00:29:00) The submitter describes him as "looking like Michael Myers," the infamous slasher movie character known for his imposing countenance. However, besides his height and his backstory, the apparition does nothing more to menace the submitter. The other, more

sensationalized Extreme Guy story comes from the second story in the *Spooked* episode *The Occupants.* After playing with white magic, a young boy becomes possessed by the angry spirit of a former tenant of the house where the submitter lives. He possesses unnatural strength, a "weird, mature voice," and an overwhelmingly furious demeanor (Washington, 2024c, 00:22:00) The possessing spirit terrorizes the gathered friend group until the (male) submitter talks the spirit into leaving.

The more common archetype of the male supernatural entity is what I term the "guardian." These entities embody the more positive traits stereotypically associated with men, such as protectiveness and caring for their families. Guardians are most often loved ones visiting from beyond, either in dreams or in the waking world. A striking example comes from *Monsters Among Us,* where a submitter details a narrow escape at an intersection and a subsequent dream of a childhood friend who had passed. "I didn't want you to go like I did," he says, and the submitter muses that he might be a guardian angel of some sort. As host Derek Hayes reflects, "Perhaps one man's guardian angel is another man's ghost" (Hayes, 2024b, 00:54:00). Another example from *Odd Trails* also subverts Hufford's archetypical old hag sleep paralysis narrative by showing a protective sleep paralysis apparition. After seeing an apparition of a man in a hat at the foot of their bed, the submitter's grandmother explains that "[he] would do no harm to our family. In fact, he was one of our guardians, and he was only doing his job, so nothing bad would come inside" (Tate and Lanier, 2024c, 00:24:00) While narratives of nurturing and protective male supernatural entities are less common in popular culture, they are demonstratively more common in the SPENs told in these podcasts. This aligns with Gillian Bennett's research, which found visitations from the deceased to be the most common form of supernatural experience among the women she surveyed (Bennett 1999).

In contrast to the Extreme Guy, the "Deviant Femme" is a common archetype for female supernatural entities. She is "the antithesis of traits usually associated with femininity… she is a manifestation of… rage, violence, mental illness, and eccentricity" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 82) The Deviant Femme is much more likely to be the main supernatural entity in the narrative than the Extreme Guy and might even be his victim seeking retribution. She is typically less associated with direct violence, causing fear through her deviance instead. The Deviant Femme is much more common in true horror podcasts than the Extreme Guy. She is likely to be elderly and off-putting, blurring the line between living and dead and making the submitter (and by extension, the listener) question whether she is a supernatural entity or just a strange human. Several of the podcasts surveyed include SPENs of older women who frighten the submitter and give them "bad vibes" but otherwise do not indicate any supernatural abilities. Two separate stories from two separate podcasts (*Anything Ghost* and *Odd Trails*) tell of an intimidating old woman whom the submitter does repairs for, whose strange behavior leads the submitter to conclude that she is some sort of supernatural entity. Sometimes all it takes for an older woman to be considered "deviant" is a "milky eye" (Wahl, 2023a, 00:20:00) Other SPENs include elderly women who are explicitly supernatural, *Spooked*'s *Opal* being a prime example. The submitter's great-aunt, the titular Opal, appeared repeatedly to her as a child and scolded her for any misbehavior, even going so far as to physically abuse the narrator from beyond the grave (Washington 2024b).

While there are several experience narratives dealing with younger supernatural women on true horror podcasts, deviance in most of the SPENs involving women seems to relate more to age than anything else. There are very few instances of elderly men, especially not in the ambiguous way elderly women are presented. The proliferation of supernatural elderly women

within all four podcasts surveyed indicates that the Deviant Femme has less to do with overt sexuality and more to do with the hostility and inverse (grand)motherhood displayed by these women. Instead of the sweet, nurturing grandmotherly woman, the cranky and possibly supernaturally evil anti-grandmother threatens the submitter either explicitly or implicitly. She does not obey the socially prescribed role given to her and therefore is suspect, even when she has not indicated that she herself is supernatural besides her "vibes."

The genderless presence, or a "ghost that has no apparent spectral embodiment or gender of any sort" and "eliminates [gender] entirely" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 82–83). This is a wide-ranging category, encompassing everything from poltergeists to phantom trucks. In each instance, it could be that "gender… doesn't matter much to the storyline or the ghost is not gendered at all" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 102). In many of the SPENs examined, a "presence" is felt, noises are heard, and "bad vibes" abound. Consider an example from *Odd Trails*. A submitter has a strange experience with books falling that she explicitly attributes to a poltergeist. As she is in her room, she sees "a shadow, or what looked like one, but it was moving. It wasn't a trick of the light. It was there, in the middle of my room, a dark, swirling mass" (Tate and Lanier, 2024a) The presence is "not gendered at all" and lacks a human form entirely. Another example is from *Anything Ghost*, where two submitters testify to hearing what "sounded like an adult imitating a child calling a taunting song, off-key and absent of sanity" (Wahl, 2023b). In this case, some sort of agency of the entity is implied, but no gender is provided for the voice they heard, as it "doesn't matter much to the storyline."

Title of Podcast	Number of Episodes Examined	Number of SPENs Examined
Spooked	4	5
Anything Ghost	3	39
Monsters Among Us	3	28
Odd Trails	3	23
Total:	13	95

Table 1: Division of the number of SPENs between each podcast

Of the 95 SPENs surveyed, there was roughly an even distribution between male and female supernatural entities, with a substantially greater number of genderless supernatural entities. Male supernatural entities numbered twenty-one instances (22.11%), while female entities numbered twenty-three instances (24.21%). In contrast, genderless presences or experiences where no gender was described numbered fifty-one instances (53.68%). Some submitters included more than one supernatural narrative in their submission, so each SPEN was treated as a separate submission even if they came from the same submitter. Why are so many Genderless Presence narratives submitted to true horror podcasts? The answer to this could lie in the fear factor they seem to produce. Whether coded male or female, spectral images of an explicitly gendered nature at least provide some familiarity to latch on to. They are human, or at least appear to be. Genderless Presences, however, are typically seen as non-human entities or forces of a darker nature. In a society so bound by gender binaries, an entity that resides beyond that binary can be "othered" more strongly and thus more greatly feared.

III.   Hosts and Submitters

Of the five hosts of the four SPEN podcasts surveyed, all are male. While there are occasional true horror podcasts hosted at least in part by women (namely *You Can See Me in the Dark* and *Two Girls, One Ghost*), the majority of these podcasts are hosted by men (other podcasts hosted by men not surveyed in this study include *Radio Rental, Jim Harold's Campfire, Night Owl*, *True Scary Story*, and *Unexplained Encounters*). This stands in contrast to the true-crime podcast, which is much more populated by and associated with female hosts (*Crime Junkie, My Favorite Murder,* and *Serial*'s first season are all hosted exclusively by women). It should be noted that both *Spooked* and *Monsters Among Us* credit female producers and researchers on their staff. Clearly, women participate in making true horror content. Why, then, are the genre's hosts almost entirely male?

This is especially odd when one considers the gender ratio of submitters. Of the seventy-four submitters in the thirteen episodes examined in this study, twenty-nine were coded male (39.19%), thirty-three were coded female (44.59%), and twelve either were anonymous, used a username, or otherwise did not identify their gender in their submission (16.22%). Some anonymous users identified their gender through the context of their submission (using phrases like "using my best mama voice" or setting their narrative at an all-girls high school), so these submitters were grouped with their respective gender coding for this analysis. While this is admittedly an imperfect measure of gender ratio as it associates gender with such qualities as pronouns, given (and possibly fake) names, and voices and could exclude gender-diverse individuals from being represented, this method gives a rough estimate of the gender divide present in SPEN podcasts that can be extrapolated.

As we can see, the ratio of male to female submitters is quite close (1:1.34), with a difference of only four individuals between them. This echoes the ratio of male to female supernatural

entities surveyed above (1:1.1), which had only a difference of two SPENs. If a roughly equal number of men and women submit to true horror podcasts, what does this say about the supernatural personal experience narratives told on these podcasts? While podcasting is seen as a "democratic" medium in that the barrier to entry is relatively low, the odds of having a successful podcast are extremely slim. Thus, appealing to advertisers and audiences is of paramount importance. It could simply be that audiences prefer listening to masculine voices tell ghost stories, or that they implicitly or explicitly believe that masculine voices are better suited to this kind of podcast. This is likely the case with *Spooked*'s Glynn Washington, whose voice seems naturally suited to what we have been conditioned to believe should narrate a horror audio production, either by radio or podcast. This also could be because although SPENs have long been relegated to the realm of women's folklore and thus overlooked, male interest in the subject serves to legitimize them. Having men present and often validate the submitter's (and by extension, the listener's) supernatural experiences puts them (perhaps subconsciously, perhaps not) in a realm of respectability that they would lack if presented by women.

IV.   Conclusion

Stacey Copeland writes that "the sound of one's voice carries with it traces of age, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture and many more facets of collective and individual identity. As feminist phenomenologist Adriana Cavarero reminds us, 'When the human voice vibrates, there is flesh and bone that emits it'" (Copeland 2018, 209). The "flesh and bone [emitting]" the "human voice" from the listener's headphones will be gendered in some way, intentionally or not. The affordances of the podcast format separate the listener from the narrator in that we cannot see them as they speak or ask them about their gender. The prevalence of pseudonyms and usernames means listeners must make assumptions and take it on faith that each narrator,

especially the ones whose literal voice we cannot hear, is who they say they are. Each submitter is gendered by their voice, as that is all the listeners can definitively use to sort them into existing binaries. However, the voice is also made genderless by their abstraction from their literal voice. In the cases where the host reads the narrative, we have nothing to go on except their name, which could very well be false. The ambiguity created here by such affordances lends itself both to affirmation and subversion of gender. The embodiment of both the supernatural entities and the narrators creates a detached sense of intimacy, where the listener connects to the disembodied voice coming through their earbuds and ascribes their own understanding of gender through their cultural lens.

Thus, gender is an important category to consider whilst studying all podcasts, not just the true horror genre. Who is saying what matters for the listener's experience, whether they are hearing the submitter's voice or the voice of the host. The overall lack of women's voices in the SPEN podcasting sphere speaks to the unequal presentation of women's stories in other spheres as well. Women's folklore has historically been appropriated and misrepresented, even when supposedly speaking for themselves. While what is happening with these podcasts is less severe, I suggest that the overabundance of male hosts in the true horror genre is representative of a larger issue of representation and presentation. This case study of gender in true horror podcasts has served to explore the cultural context surrounding their presentation and reception. In the next chapter, we move to another case study that explores a similar theme: the idea of place. In particular, I will be examining the haunted house both as a metaphor and as an experience. I will also be examining how place interacts with the listener's experience listening to the podcast itself through localization and dark tourism.

Chapter 4: True Horror and Place

"I knew in my heart that there was something in that house."

"Lady Grim"

Spooked

I.   Introduction

Place is a valuable facet of supernatural experience. Whether in the woods, in a city, or in a suburban home, place always seems to creep into the narrative, becoming both the "setting and character" of the tale (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 144). The types of supernatural experiences that occur in each location seem intimately tied to their sense of place. Poltergeists rarely haunt outside of houses, while cryptids tend to stick to the wilds. Thus, place has a looming, if sometimes backgrounded effect on the telling of the narrative. Setting the scene is vital to the narration of a personal supernatural experience, an effect that allows the listener to become fully immersed in the tale. It is this immersion that allows for the sense of reality (or unreality) created by the SPENs told on true horror podcasts.

In this chapter, I will be focusing primarily on the haunted house as a locus for hauntings and other supernatural experiences. This case study will allow me to examine how identity, both of the listener and the submitter, is tied to and created by place, culture, and context. The intimacy afforded by the sense of place created by the true horror podcast allows for a folkloric connection between the two, opening up the relationship beyond the constraints of place and time. Why are there so many haunted house stories told on true horror podcasts, and what is their function in a

folkloric sense? How does place alter a story or a sense of self? I will also be examining the effect of the affordances of the podcast format for the localization of true horror podcasts and its impact on dark tourism and ostension. How does the true horror podcast allow a listener to vicariously experience a location or learn about its history? I argue that place cannot be separated from the supernatural event it is tied to and functions in a folkloric manner to signify local identity and experience.

II.   The Haunted House

Haunted houses are among the archetypical supernatural occurrences stretching throughout time and place. Pliny the Younger records the haunting of an Athenian house in the first century CE, vouching for a tale of the apparition of a man in chains who was appeased when his bones were found and given a proper burial ("Pliny Book 7, Letter 27 (English)," n.d.). They are standard fare of the Gothic novel, starting with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, and continuing into the present with Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* in 1959 and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* in 2000. There have been a plethora of studies on the meaning of the haunted house in literature, ranging from gender relations (Liggins 2020) to American guilt (Bailey 1999) to a complete rejection of humanity (Geller 2019). There have been few studies of haunted houses, however, from a folkloric perspective. Goldstein et al. include a chapter on haunted houses in *Haunting Experiences* (2007) and Davies examines the social history of home hauntings in a chapter in *The Haunted* (2007), but most other haunted house lore comes from recorded personal experience narratives, either in guidebooks about haunted local locations, face-to-face memorates, or, in this case, true horror podcasts.

What is a haunted house? On the surface, there seems to be a simple answer: a house where supernatural experiences occur. But is one experience enough to classify a haunted house, or

must there be a persistent sense of being haunted? Do "bad vibes" count as hauntings, or otherwise unexplainable occurrences without an apparent sentient actor? For this study, I will be modifying aspects of Bailey's literary "formula for a haunted house tale" to apply to a more folkloric context. The setting includes a "house… with an unsavory history… disturbed by supernatural events" (Bailey 1999, 56) The plot has a "dual structure: 1. an escalating series of supernatural events which isolates the family physically and psychologically 2. the discovery of provenance for those events" (ibid). It is the climax, though, that mainly differentiates the folkloric haunted house tale from the literary one. In Bailey's schema, the tale concludes when the family flees and the house is either destroyed or remains standing, or, in some cases, "a twist ending that establishes the recurring nature of evil" (ibid). A folkloric haunted house narrative, on the other hand, tends to have no real resolution. While sometimes the teller will move away or otherwise leave the house, more often than not the family will continue to stay in the house for much longer than their fictional counterparts, either ignoring the supernatural or learning to live with it. While literary haunted houses tend to escalate into large and unmistakable hauntings, folkloric haunted houses often entail smaller incidents that reoccur over time, if they reoccur at all. Many folkloric haunted house tales do have similar themes to the literary ones in Bailey's analysis, such as "consequences of the past" and "conflict between scientific and supernatural worldviews" (ibid). The folkloric haunted house functions in a similar way as the literary one, but the folkloric haunted house allows for the examination of supernatural experiences and beliefs among tellers and listeners.

Haunted house stories are the most popular tale type in the SPENs submitted by listeners to true horror podcasts. Roughly one-fourth (25 out of the 95) surveyed contained haunted dwellings (homes, apartments, trailers, etc.), more popular than any other tale type. Practically

every episode examined had at least one haunted house tale and most contained more than one. This approximately aligns with estimates of American beliefs in haunted houses in general, where one out of four Americans say that they have lived in a house that was haunted (Cusick). Why are stories about haunted houses so ubiquitous in true horror podcasts and beyond? The answer could lie with the attachment people have to their places of residence. As Goldstein et al. write, "We humans have an incredibly powerful psychological attachment to our houses- our sanctuaries- and the intrusion of a threatening, otherworldly force in that otherwise safe setting is terrifying to consider" (2007, 143). The terror comes from the inversion of the norm- the return of the repressed- in what Freud would term the *uncanny*, or *unheimlich*, which when translated literally, appropriately means "unhomely" (Freud 2003). What was safe is now unsafe, what was comforting now evokes fear. While there are a few haunted house stories with a "friendly" supernatural entity (see the Hat Man example in Chapter 3, for instance), the majority of these narratives center on the discomfort or terror of the occupant as they experience and try to navigate the haunting.

Some of the narratives examined only gave one instance of a supernatural encounter in their home, while others spoke of lifelong hauntings. Almost all of them, however, give a physical description of the house, often describing its age or its architecture. A typical example comes from *Odd Trails*, where a submitter describes his grandparents' house, the location of a strange encounter with the supernatural: "The simplest way I can describe this house is that it looked like it was built in medieval times. …I mean, this house was built stone by stone. It will probably be one of the last houses standing in the world." (Tate and Lanier, 2024b, 00:21:00). Another comes from *Spooked*: "It was an old house… The place was pretty much falling apart. The walls were really dingy like they hadn't been painted for decades… Upstairs things were peeling off the

walls, it had a really outdated bathroom in it, and *it was just a dark, dark house*" (emphasis added) (Washington, 2024a, 00:03:00). These descriptors match those commonly associated with a folkloric depiction of a haunted house, including the age of the building, its mismatch from other buildings of its type (either long-lasting or dilapidated), and an overall oppressive atmosphere. This gothic emphasis on uncanny architecture foreshadows the supernatural experience that is to come. As "Sherry" in the *Spooked* episode *Lady Opal* says, "If I had known this place up here was haunted, I would have never left my little house down the road" (Washington, 2024a, 00:15:00).

The haunting itself can be a major or minor affair. Some, like "Jeremy" in *Anything Ghost,* simply include the appearance of a plastic ball on the porch that he connects to the ill feeling he has within the house (Wahl, 2023b, 00:10:00). Others, like "Ash" and her family in *Monsters Among Us*, have repeat experiences in their home, so much so that the ghost becomes like another, albeit unwelcome, member of the family ("He is our ghost," she replies when her ex-husband asks who the man he just saw in the window was) (Hayes, 2024b, 00:33:00). The haunting can be relatively benevolent, such as "Sarah's" experience with an old man's reflection in the mirror and the apparition of a little boy who waves goodbye to her in *Spooked* (Washington, 2024c). Some hauntings, though, are explicitly meant to terrify, such as "Mateo's" story of his friend's possession by the late owner of his house later in the same episode of *Spooked* (Washington, 2024c). As a general rule, podcasts operating in the case study mode tend to sensationalize their haunted houses more than those in the compilation mode. They take their hauntings to the extreme, adding in more sinister actors, such as beings explicitly labeled as demons, and emphasizing the fear of the submitters, most likely in an attempt to instill that fear into the listener as well. Though the podcasts operating in the compilation mode also

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occasionally rely on some of the same sensationalist tactics, they overall tend to be more subdued and feel more organic than their case study counterparts.

It is worth noting that some hauntings move from being attached to a place to being attached to a person. Several submitters indicated that they've had something supernatural happen to them in every house they've ever lived in. "Sherry's" (see Chapter 1 and above) supernatural entity, which she describes as a female version of the Grim Reaper, still appears after the old farmhouse she was haunting is pulled down:

 "For some reason, I had always thought that if you got rid of the house, you got rid of the spirit. And it was then that I realized she didn't just haunt the house. No matter where I went, that spirit could go too. She just wanted to make her presence known. That you might have dozed the house, but you didn't get rid of me" (Washington, 2024a, 00:20:00-00:21:00).

This shift from place to person is interesting because of its individualistic nature. While fictional haunted house narratives tend to haunt families (or at least more than one person at a time), this change to an individual haunting modifies the structure of the narrative as well. Hauntings involving only one person can be read as scarier (in that the person must face the possibly malevolent supernatural alone) or less scary (in that the family structure or as many people are not threatened), but this can ultimately only be decided by what frightens each individual listener. That listening to true horror podcasts is often a solitary experience further enhances this disembodied sense of place and individualism, creating a distinct intimacy, even through fear, between narrator and listener. Just like the narrator, the listener is left alone with the supernatural entity and must find a way to deal with them. Unlike the narrator, though, the listener can always turn off the podcast and continue with their life, then resume it at another date and location, changing the context in which they are listening. The haunting follows the

listener wherever they go in the form of portable smartphones and earbuds, at once connecting and disconnecting them from their surroundings.

III.   Localization and Ostension

An affordance of the podcast format is its ability to travel with the listener to any location they should choose to go. Whether on a road trip, a plane ride, or a fifteen-minute walk, a podcast, through the mobility of the phone and the earbuds, can go places other, more stationary media cannot. This ability to roam allows the listener to interact with place in a unique way. The traveling listener can learn about the location(s) they are visiting in a way not offered in most travel guides, or they may even choose to visit a location or locations because they heard about it on a true horror podcast. For instance, one submitter on *Anything Ghost* visited the famously haunted Whaley House in San Diego based on Wahl's recommendation and had a minor supernatural experience there (Wahl, 2023b). The ability to listen to these narratives while physically walking around in the location of a supernatural occurrence enables the listener to experience its history in a way stationary media, like travel books and TV shows, cannot provide. Being able to search, for instance, "Oregon ghost stories" on a podcatcher means that the listener can listen to these SPENs while on their way to a location as well as when they are physically at the location. Taking the podcast with you from place to place allows both the localization of the SPENs and the connection between listener and place through the true horror podcast.

The true horror podcast gives a glimpse into histories not often advertised, but still of importance to the locals. These histories are often ugly, such as the ghosts of enslaved persons at the Lalaurie House in New Orleans (see Thomas 2015), but they tell a narrative that is typically glossed over by advertising from tourist boards. However, ghost tourism is a sizable industry, growing out of the desire for the ostension, or "physical enactment of actions" (Ellis 1989, 202),

of supernatural experiences. This dark tourism, or "the commodification of, travel to, and experiencing of sites and places associated with death, dying, and disaster" (Holloway 2010, 620), while not the mainstream form of tourism in most places, allows for an interaction with history in a way that differs from the typical tourist experience. Though often borne of morbid events, supernatural occurrences often increase the publicity of a location and draw people in who seek supernatural experiences themselves. While many come away disappointed, they are still able to experience the location in a way that connects them with the numinous in a way most tourism lacks. The true horror podcast functions as a bridge to connect the experiences it recounts with the experiences of the listener.

IV.   Conclusion

The true horror podcast has a special relationship to place. The haunted house narrative exemplifies this relationship through its attention to architecture, emotion, and atmosphere. While each podcast takes a slightly different approach to haunted house narratives, almost all follow similar structures and tropes in their telling. These similarities speak to an emphasis on space found within each of these podcasts. Every SPEN has a setting, and in true gothic fashion, the setting often seems to become a character in the narrative in its own right. It dictates the events of the narrative, supernatural or otherwise, and can even be their source. The ambiguous relationship between humans and their environment can be distilled within the tensions found in the haunted house narrative.

That the true horror podcast can be taken from place to place impacts how the listener interacts with and seeks their own personal supernatural experiences. The cycle of transmission present in these podcasts means that listening to the submitted SPENs encourages the listener to go out and have their own supernatural experiences through ostension. Ghost tourism, as a form

of dark tourism, is heavily tied to place, but the true horror podcast overrides this attachment in that it can be experienced almost anywhere as long as the listener has a podcatcher handy. Thus, the localization of supernatural experiences is at once both reified and challenged. The affordances of the podcasts give the listener the option to both seek out supernatural experiences in the world and have supernatural experiences there while never leaving their house or stopping their household chores. The listener can listen to a podcast in the car, then connect to earbuds and carry it inside to fold laundry, all while listening to the same episode. Each form of listening creates its own kind of intimacy, but the portability and stability of the true horror podcast allow for these two intimacies to intertwine into one parasocial relationship.

As a liminal form of media, the podcast creates a disembodied sense of place that at once tethers and grounds the listener. This is especially true for SPEN podcasts, as the intimacy created with the podcast lends itself to the fear factor of the narratives and immerses the listener into the narrator's experience. The combination of detachment and intimacy allows for a connection through experience, even when the listener and the narrator are separated by time and space. That true horror podcasts can create immersive supernatural events and a foundational sense of place for their listeners is indicative of the folkloric nature of the genre. Place, above all, forms a web of relationships between the listener and the podcast. This effect pulls the listener in until they too become part of the narrative.

Conclusion: Folklore, the Supernatural, and Affordances

"Nobody really knows for sure what's out there in the dark."

The Kentucky Holler Crawler

Odd Trails

I.   **True Horror: An Autoethnography**

The first time I listened to a true horror podcast was in 2021, during a lull in the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in an online class at the University of Texas titled *Religion, the Supernatural, and the Paranormal*, where we examined supernatural occurrences, from miracles to yetis, from the lens of religious studies. In this class, our professor invited Glynn Washington, the host of *Spooked*, to come speak to us. To prepare for this class visit, we were assigned several episodes of the podcast to listen to. While this was in the Luminary era, where most episodes were behind a paywall, there were still a few episodes available for us to peruse before Washington's presentation. As someone who has always been a great lover of the strange and the supernatural, *Spooked* immediately appealed to me. Though I was a podcast fan before this class, I mostly listened to fiction, comedy, or tabletop roleplaying game real play shows like *Welcome to Night Vale* or *The Adventure Zone*. I remember being struck by the fact that these were first-person accounts told by the actual people who experienced them and enjoyed the overall presentation of the podcast. This was a new genre entirely from what I was used to. It was because of this class that I fully decided that I wanted to switch my academic career from the STEM field to Folklore, partially because I wanted to study supernatural narratives like the ones showcased on *Spooked*. After Washington's visit, I kept a few episodes of *Spooked* downloaded on my phone for future

listening on a long road trip or plane ride, but mostly forgot about the podcast unless I happened to be casually browsing through my Apple Podcasts library.

The affordances of the podcast format impacted me before I knew I was going to study them. I typically listen(ed) to podcasts while doing chores, such as folding laundry, cooking dinner, or walking the dog, or when I am crafting with both hands, such as knitting or sewing. The ability to have a podcast on in the background while I worked domestically created intimacy between me and the hosts, as it allowed me to connect with them through my personal day-to-day life. They were a part of my routine, especially during the isolation of the pandemic, and provided a source of intimacy when there were very few other options available. I have also been impacted by the connection between true horror and location (as discussed in Chapter 4). On the four-day long road trip from Texas to Oregon when I was moving to the Pacific Northwest for graduate school, I listened to a six-hour-long, two-part podcast going over the history of Bigfoot from the *Mythillogical* podcast. While not a true horror podcast according to the parameters I have set, the podcast provides interesting oversights on mythological and folkloric themes. I enjoyed their nuanced and thorough discussion of the Bigfoot legend and was able to connect more easily with my new home in the Bigfoot-obsessed PNW.

It took me until the early months of 2023, however, to fully return to the zone of "true" true horror podcasts. I was in a writing circle, brainstorming ideas for my thesis topic. I knew I wanted to research the supernatural in some way, but I was struggling to find a novel approach to the subject. I cannot be certain what triggered this thought, but I was reminded of the podcast I had listened to two years prior for my undergraduate religious studies class. As I continued to think about it, I realized that *Spooked* could not be the only podcast of its kind out there. I did

more research and discovered a plethora of podcasts telling supernatural personal experience narratives. This, I eventually decided, was going to be the topic of my thesis.

Over the next few months, I listened to and took notes on a wide variety of true horror podcasts, from the comedic *Radio Rental*, the conversational *Two Girls, One Ghost*, and the atmospheric *You Can See Me in the Dark.* None of these, however, seemed to lend themselves to the kind of thesis I wanted to write. While *Radio Rental* was unnerving despite its comedic frame story, it consisted mostly of non-supernatural, yet still unsettling, personal experience narratives. The hosts of *Two Girls, One Ghost* were overly chatty, while the hosts of *You Can See Me in the Dark* barely spoke at all. Eventually, I settled on the four podcasts examined in this thesis, each with its own style of presentation. I wanted to include *Spooked,* of course, because of my history with the podcast, but I also wanted to include podcasts that shared the same genre but took a completely different approach. These podcasts appealed to me because of the way they told their SPENs, though every podcast did so slightly differently. They each caught my attention through their individual styles, from *Monsters Among Us*'s radio show format to *Odd Trail*'s post-story commentary.

While the fact that I was taking physical, pencil and paper notes on each podcast episode necessitated my listening to them in a stationary manner, the affordances of the podcast format allowed me to experience them in their intended form during my notetaking sessions. I wore my AirPods (wireless earbuds produced by Apple) each time I listened to an episode, which delivered the voice of whoever was narrating straight into my ears and gave me the mobility to change my location or stand up if I felt it necessary. The wireless nature of the AirPods contributed to these affordances, as it replicated the feeling of sitting in the same room and listening to these narratives being told without relying on a physical connection to my phone. I

could leave my phone on the desk and walk around to stretch should I need to, and the voice in my ears would continue speaking. This enhanced the folkloric nature of these podcasts because it put me in the space with the narrator of the SPEN, even if we were separated by both place and time.

Because I was taking physical notes in a notebook, I needed to listen to these podcasts either during the day or with the lights on. While none of these podcasts explicitly state that they are best experienced in the dark or at night (and in fact, one of *Spooked*'s taglines is "Never, ever, turn out the lights"), as a member of the horror genre that relies on general "spookiness," I do not doubt that the creators of these podcasts want the listener to experience the maximum level of uncanniness possible. Like watching a scary movie or playing a survival horror video game, listening to true horror podcasts in the dark enhances the fear factor. Though in general I am not easily frightened by horror media, I would most likely have been more thoroughly unnerved if I had listened to them with the lights out. Interestingly, many individuals whom I have talked to personally have admitted to listening to true crime podcasts while going to sleep, as it paradoxically relaxes them. As a sister genre to true crime, I would be interested in discovering whether or not the true horror genre is used as a sleep aid in the same way, even though the intent is to frighten, not to soothe.

Admittedly, I was not frightened by any of the SPENs told on these podcasts. This is partially because I consume a good amount of horror content, supernatural or otherwise, and have become relatively desensitized to it. This also could be because of the affordances of the podcasts. As an audio-only genre, I was able to create images in my mind that were doubtless less frightening than the ones experienced by the narrator. Another contributing factor could be my agnostic approach to supernatural experiences in general. I tend to be in the "more things in heaven and

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earth" camp of belief, though this of course varies depending on what type of belief is being discussed. I have not had any supernatural experiences myself (though I did own a haunted doll for a few years), but I believe that many supernatural experiences cannot be explained by Western science. On the other hand, there are SPENs told on these podcasts that are clearly (and sometimes admittedly) caused by mental illness, sleep paralysis, and/or are completely made up for attention. As a folklorist, I approached each narrative with an open mind and a general belief that the narrators experienced what they said they did, analyzing the narratives themselves over whether or not the narratives are "true" in an empirical sense. As a whole, though, I enjoyed listening to these podcasts because I enjoy hearing people's supernatural personal experience narratives, both as a folklorist and an appreciator of the mysterious aspects of life.

II.   Final Thoughts: Affordances, True Crime, and the Supernatural

The affordances of the podcast format allow for true horror podcasts to deliver a uniquely haunting experience to their listeners. Wherever the listener goes with the podcast, the ghosts follow them. Shadow figures linger at the edge of their bed as they lay listening, cryptids lurk in the woods as they jog, and ghost trucks follow behind their car. Through their earbuds, supernatural experiences aurally transfer from the narrator to the listener in a process that is akin to supernatural itself. Like listening to a couple of friends discuss their supernatural experiences in an impromptu storytelling session, listening to true horror podcasts brings the supernatural to life around them and creates interpersonal intimacy. The process, though impersonal in distribution, becomes personal as the listener is made a part of the chain of narrative transmission. This digital fireside storytelling is what keeps SPENs and the genre of supernatural folklore alive in a world increasingly dominated by impersonal mass media.

The genre of true crime mirrors that of true horror. Both present narratives present "true" stories that are consumed for entertainment, however macabre they might be. Both have fandoms that are formed around specific shows, and fans often interact with the hosts and the podcasts in similar ways. However, it also differs from it in several key ways. While most stories featured on true crime podcasts are believed to be "true" without question, true horror listeners face a negotiation of belief, choosing which stories to believe and disbelieve based on their personal worldview. True horror podcasts feature listener submissions and give those who have had the experience their own voice, while true crime podcasts tend to distance themselves from the voices of their subjects through third-person storytelling. A full comparative analysis of true crime and true horror podcasts is outside the scope of this thesis but would make for interesting further research.

The supernatural is a far greater part of everyday life than many would admit. From numinous religious experiences to good luck rituals, the supposedly "disenchanted" world still possesses undeniable supernatural qualities if one knows where to look. To some of the submitters of SPENs to true horror podcasts, the supernatural is as much a fact of life as traffic and taxes. To others, the supernatural is much more ambiguous. Many submitters admit skepticism before and after their supernatural experience, but they clearly believe in its significance enough to send their narrative to a podcast featuring events like theirs. Cultural contexts, like gender and place, impact how the supernatural is conceived and received. While this study is mostly limited to narratives from the US, Canada, Mexico, and England, future research could expound on the cultural context of place and gender in supernatural experiences in other countries, especially non-Western ones.

I do not remember much of Washington's talk, but one statement he made still stays with me: human beings are storytelling animals, and telling stories is what makes us human. Telling narratives of the supernatural on true horror podcasts allows the submitter to connect to other humans throughout the globe, even when separated by both time and place. The deeply personal experiences are transformed into impersonal mass media through their production and distribution in podcast form but are transformed once more into the personal by their resonance with the audience created by the affordances of the podcast format. Through the study of supernatural personal experience narratives in true horror podcasts, we can look at broader implications of belief and culture, and maybe enjoy a good ghost story while doing so.

Just be sure to keep the lights on while listening.

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