Judith May Fathallah

Killer Fandom

Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer

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Contents

CHAPTER 5

Serial Killer Fandom as Digital Play

The concept of fandom as playful, either as a ludic experience or a more conventional kind of play akin to gameplay, wasn't absent from early fan studies, but it wasn't particularly well developed either. For example, Henry Jenkins's concluding chapter to *Textual Poachers* described the space of the fan convention as a "weekend only world" (1992, 277). Still, early fan theorists were more concerned with justifying fandom in terms of political impetus, transformative power, and social meaning than investigating fandom as a ludic experience or experience of play. Foundational texts like *Textual Poachers* and *Enterprising Women* are ultimately concerned with resistant cultural production and ideological challenges to media narratives, without much attention to pleasure and fun. This began to change in the later 2000s, when the concept of "play" entered the discussion in earnest. By 2009, Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse were exploring fan fiction as "limit play": i.e., as explicitly playful engagement with a text, as free movement within the boundaries created by the source text by broader culture, by the technologies in use, and by the social and artistic conventions of the fan community itself (Stein and Busse 2009). Yet it was not until 2015 that a full monograph on fandom as play was published, Paul Booth's aptly titled *Playing Fans.* In this work, Booth posits that the contemporary internet has embraced a "philosophy of playfulness," which he goes on to define:

> What is a "philosophy of playfulness"? [. . .] The contemporary media scene is complex, and rapidly becoming dependent on a culture of ludism. Today's media field is fun, playful, and exuberant. More so than at any other time, the media we use in our everyday lives have been personalized, individualized, and made pleasurable to use. We play with our media; it is malleable in our hands. (2016, 8)

Though Booth is studying fandom, and finds playfulness inherent to the fan experience, he is speaking of media more broadly here; and indeed, the dividing lines between "fandom" and "media engagement," or even "media culture," are no longer as clear as they were. Booth attributes some of this convergence to the (then) popularity of Tumblr, whose technological affordances and social norms prioritize remix, transformation, replication, curation, and adaptation of media texts. These were formerly practices associated with fandom; now they are just norms of media engagement. Tumblr also upholds social norms of humor, irreverence, and emotionality over rational response and debate. Louisa Stein argues that:

> Step by step, we are moving to a millennial media landscape no longer dominated by fears of the excesses of the unruly fan, one that instead embraces personal investment, performativity, emotion, and excess, within the content of shared digital creativity. (2015, 15)

When I studied the influence of emo fandom on shaping the genre via engagement with the music industry, I thought this argument was apt. Applied to serial killer fandom, however, it is not: Fears of the unruly fan, the over-invested fan, are still very much the dominant narrative outside of the community—though, as I observed, the performance of excess can earn subcultural capital. Moreover, a great deal of the actual material of killer fandom *is* playful, at least as playful as other fandoms, if not more so. I have observed a tendency to humorous provocation at several points in this book already, from the absurdist fanfiction to the performance of excessive sexuality.

Booth notes the centrality of parody and pastiche to playful fandom. Pastiche, which is the selection, curation, and rearrangement of elements from one or more texts, does not have the social impetus or satirical bite of parody. It is a form of what Booth describes as "coloring inside the lines" (2015, 2), or pleasurable engagement with a media text that does not necessarily subvert it or its surrounding culture. It is not so easy to claim

pastiche as politically or ideologically subverting the source text's narrative. As Booth puts it:

> "Media play" has many meanings, as the term "play" itself is in inherently ambiguous. I use the term "media play" as a characteristic of contemporary media culture to focus on those instances in which individuals create meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media, all the while working within the boundaries of the media text. (2015, 15)

Fans are not "resisting" the text; they are playing with it and in it. One example might be what Booth calls "identity roleplay," in which "fans both act as if they were [a] character and 'play' with the characteristics that define that character" (2016, 116). Online communities which enable fans to create fictional profiles for themselves are an obvious resource for this play. Another example might be media properties actually licensed by rights holders, such as the "collaborative storytelling system" Storium or the licensed game *Star Wars Rebellion* (Booth 2017). Both of these franchises set authorized lines within which fans may move freely, shifting elements of the game or the narrative around, but only within a set of rules set by the rights holders. This is the sort of fandom that theorists invested in a resistance model have, understandably, paid less attention to.

My aim in this chapter is to make a somewhat bold argument: that much of the fandom I observe from serial killer fans is, counter-intuitively, "coloring inside the lines." Those lines are already drawn by the mainstream fascination with serial killers—the endless stream of content. It might operate at the edges of the discourse formation—*just* inside the lines—but I don't think serial killer fan-play is beyond them. I have already observed that the sexualization and lionization of serial killers in the fanwork analyzed in chapter 1 takes precedent from the mainstream media. So does the primacy of straight men as the most "impressive" killers, as opposed to the pathetic abjection of the monstrous queer. At the time I was researching this chapter in late 2022, Netflix launched its new top-ranking drama *Dahmer—Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Though my focus is not on fans who engage specifically with fictionalized dramas, the series generated a vast wave of playful content across the sites where I've collected data. The posts and comments, I found, were more reflective of mainstream culture's fascination with serial killers than subversive of it.

When Booth discusses parody, much of his focus is on the way that media industries strategically parody fan engagement, though he also introduces the concept of "sociocultural parody." He offers pornographic parodies of major franchises as an example, arguing that "in this mode of parody, parodic discourse has an effect of unsettling 'established normative systems' in order to subvert traditional structures and create alternative cultural meanings" (2015, 123). Pornographic parody highlights "what is always pornographic about mainstream culture" (128), exposing the "undercurrent of sexuality within all mainstream texts by providing negotiated readings of mainstream media" (128). As I read it, many of the fan texts generated around serial killers are doing the same thing. They are exposing our already-extant fascination with serial killing, the media's endless profit from it, and the circular relationship between the public and the media industry in valorizing serial killers. Indeed, Jacqueline Vickery (2020) has made a similar point about the "memeification" of school shootings. Short, humorous, and ironic videos on the subject have been circulating on youth-dominant social media for years. Vickery writes:

> While these videos may be read as inappropriate, dark, or crass, it is the very absurdity of the memes that sheds light on the equally—and arguably exponentially more—absurd responses by adults and policymakers that have failed to safeguard children's protection and well-being. (2020)

Memes about school shooting are absurd and insulting—but not as absurd and insulting as the absolute lack of action that the US legal system is taking to prevent them. Memes are a key example of where fannish play and online play more generally overlap.

Limor Shifman defines an internet meme as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (2014, 7–8). This is a good working definition, but it may be a little rigid for the way the term "meme" is now used. In searching TikTok and Tumblr for serial killer memes (see below), I found that the term could be used for almost any text that referentially hails another text, or group of texts, via imitation and adaptation. Playful engagement with school shooter media was also noted by Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner in their significant and insightful book *The Am-*

bivalent Internet (2017). As Ashley Hedrick et al. have noted in their review of Phillips and Milner, too many studies of online cultures and movements

> have at their foundation a model of what we call an "earnest Internet." By this, we mean that communication scholarship generally posits that people act rationally and in good faith; care about facts, truth, and authenticity; pursue ends in line with their political and social values and aspirations. (2018)

This is a mistake. Online cultures are not necessarily "earnest," and fan cultures certainly are not. On the contrary, they usually exhibit a high degree of ambivalence, which, as Phillips and Miller point out themselves, is not the same as indifference. The prefix ambi- "refers to 'both,' on both sides, both at the same time" (2017, 9). Serious and not serious, simultaneously. Meaningful and nonsensical. Art and trash. Significant and mundane. Their book is "full of cases that could go either way, in fact could go any way simultaneously, immediately complicating any easy assessment of authorial intent, social consequence, and cultural worth" (9). In their introduction, titled "Some Initial Oddities to Set the Scene," they present

> an image posted to microblogging platform Tumblr, the yearbook pictures of [Columbine school shooter] Eric Harris and second gunman Dylan Klebold are decorated with hearts and captions. Dylan's images are captioned with the inscriptions "cute but psycho" and "3000 %," while Harris's images are captioned with "now real life has no appeal" and another "psycho" (this one inscribed in cartoon hearts). Harris and Klebold are both wearing photoshopped princess flower crowns. (2017, 5)

What do these posts mean? Nothing? Something? Compare the anarchic proliferation of signs at Ted Bundy's execution (chapter 1). If Phillips and Milner are right regarding the fundamental ambivalence of online cultures, this sort of post means several contradictory things all at once:

> Playful fawning over mass shooters could be seen from several co-occurring vantage points, from excessive attachment to excessive dissociation to a pointed satire [or Booth's sociocultural parody?] of the idolatrous 24-hour news coverage that invariably follows American mass shootings. Maybe the people who post Columbine sweetheart photos are just assholes. Maybe all of the above. (11)

In my opinion, ambivalence and digital play are very useful lenses with which to view serial killer fandom, especially with regard to Tumblr and TikTok. The two sites are built on architectures, and host cultures, which are fruitful grounds for ambivalent digital play. I have argued previously that the phenomenon of the Tumblr "hateblog," a blog supposedly devoted to hatred of a text or media person, is actually a form of ambiguous pastiche:

> Far from a straightforward display of antifandom, what we find here is a comic pastiche of fragments enabled by the postmodern flatness of the medium. [. . .] I suggest we can read these pastiches as critique without authority—as a polyphonic surface that undermines both claims to discursive dominance and the dominance of mass media cultural icons. [. . .] [The surfaces of] Tumblr produce a distinct mode of critique, one which rebuffs depth hermeneutics in a comic display of postmodern pastiche that both invokes and satires fandom discourses across its depthless surface. (Fathallah 2018b)

The pastiche, copy-and-paste, always-juxtaposed effects of Tumblr mean that all statements are automatically critiqued and self-critiqued, and the authority of any voice is deconstructed. It is a playful platform, and an ambivalent one. Hedrick et al. independently reached similar conclusions to the ones I have been making; in their review of Phillips and Milner, they write that "much of the fan fiction literature fails to acknowledge any sort of ambivalence in fandom" (2018). This is "understandable given the subfield's origins in the attempt to reclaim popular culture as an important object of study"—but it isn't accurate, and it is past time to move on.

Further, Phillips and Milner argue that the understanding of ambivalence functions as a social bond within certain online communities. If you understand the ambivalent way in which a text is meant to be received, you are part of the group. If you misunderstand, and take it earnestly, you are not. This aligns with Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman's position on "the structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense" (2017). They write that "digital nonsense may potentially serve as a social glue that bonds members of phatic, image-oriented, communities" (825). Contemporary memes can be polyvocal to the point of incoherence, enabled by the digital technologies that mean "elements that could not previously be imagined appearing together are now juxtaposed in seconds" (834). The authors claim that such memes carry affective meaning, rather than referential meaning: They serve to tie together the community of those who "know"—those who understand ambivalence,

I would argue—rather than outsiders who attempt to decode the meme in an earnest fashion, as though there were a stable referent underneath it.

In a similar vein, Clinton Lanier et al. have offered a conceptualization of fans in digital culture as "tricksters, or those crafty entities that call an established order into question by disrupting conventional behavior" (2022, 384). Digital technology has increased both the amount of information available to fans, and "the tools and spaces for fans' trickster activities" (384). There is both a resistant and a ludic element to this conception of fandom. Lanier et al. contend that "elements of the trickster underlie much of fan creativity," in drawing "(critical) attention to the established meanings of the text, which, in turn, often leads to new meanings and cultural forms" (387). Digital fandom practices frequently "lend themselves to fans' tricksterish activities" such as roleplay, including "screen name, avatar, and profile, created by fans to express their desired connection to a cultural text," even as they undermine and unsettle it (388–89). Deliberately calling back to early fan culture scholarship, the authors argue that fans' activities "often lie outside the accepted social order" (392). They do not, however, really give any concrete examples, and their assertions are too generic to simply apply in broad brushstrokes to "fans." What about those fans Booth described, who create stories firmly within the bounds of licensed official material provided by copyright holders? Or forms of roleplay which don't challenge accepted narratives and definitions? Even so, it is true that Lanier et al.'s observations can often be applied to serial killer fandom, specifically when viewing it through the lens of ambivalence. They write: "The trickster is fundamentally an ambiguous and anomalous figure who does not fit well in any category and who always operates on the edge" (392). As suggested above, much of the material I will examine in this chapter is very much "on the edge": on the edge of acceptable discourse around serial killers, not fundamentally different from or opposed to the serial killer discourse provided by mainstream media, but operating at its outer boundaries. Play at the outer limits of the rigid structure (discursive or otherwise) may be most likely to alter those limits, but such play is not a direct confrontation or opposition.

Lanier et al. do acknowledge that not all fans are tricksters, that indeed:

> There are pressures within all fandoms toward order, control, and predictability. This is exacerbated by the more recent push within digital fandom for activism and advocacy. [. . .] Community naturally engenders constraints that can blunt the creativity of the trickster. [. . .] Given that the trickster is inherently a boundary

> breaker, role disrupter, and mischievous deceiver, community and tricksterism are seemingly at odds. (2022, 394–95)

It seems that the authors feel fandom is becoming too domesticated, perhaps deliberately domesticated by the corporations which would seek to monetize it. There is an echo here of critics like Mark Andrejevic (2008), who argued that Jenkins's poaching model neglected the real monetary value of the labor fans performed on behalf of media corporations, offering up a wealth of free data. They suggest:

> Perhaps in their push to move fandom from the deviant margins of society and remove the stigmatization of fans as fanatics, both fans and aca-fans may have cut themselves off from the very source of their fannish practices. If digital fandom is going to retain its vitality, it must figure out how to transgress and subvert itself. What digital fandom may really need is the resurrection of the crafty, unconstrained, and irreverent trickster. (Lanier et al. 2022, 395)

If we as scholars are going to follow this suggestion, I would argue, we need to start considering forms of fandom that we are not entirely comfortable with, which do not align so neatly with our more mainstream and acceptable political impulses. The present study is one example.

When Booth wrote *Playing Fans,* Tumblr was very much a center of fannish activity. Thus he paid particular attention to Tumblr's affordances. More recent research has explored TikTok as an "inherently playful social media platform" (Duval et al. 2021, 2), though not necessarily with regard to fannish play in particular. Jared Duval et al.'s quantitative study found that performance and dramatization are key to TikTok culture: "TikTok is generally more outward-facing [than interior focused]. [. . .] content on TikTok is generally performative, exaggerated, and dramatized, indicating that [some of its] design concepts are more likely to elicit these types of experiences" (2021). At the level of architecture, Ethan Bresnick argues for TikTok as a "virtual play structure: a recreational space manifested in electronic media" (2019, 1). In his formulation, "virtual play structures (i.e., virtual playgrounds) are digital experiences that correspond to physical playground experiences" (1). Some of the comparisons that Bresnick makes between editing functions and physical playground equipment might be a little stretched, but I agree that, overall, the affordances of TikTok encourage playful engagement. It is perhaps too broad and diverse a platform to

strictly comprise the "magic circle" that early fan studies borrowed from play theory: that is, a circumscribed arena within which all participants understand the rules of play and their separation from the rest of life. But it certainly lends itself easily and readily towards playful forms of production. These include rapid video creation and sharing, the ability to enhance videos with cartoon-style effects, augmented reality features, and the "back and forth motion between creators" enabled by the common use of hashtags and the ability to "duet" one's response to an earlier video, so that original and response play side-by-side (2019, 56). Bresnick also recognizes the popularity of a "rise-and-fall" format on TikTok (7), analogous to a playground swing. Traditional narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but TikTok culture favors the jump-cut between two clips, which one popular TikTok creator described as typically "going from seriousness to humour" (quoted in Bresnick 2019, 7). All these elements contribute to the expression of play as free movement within (an admittedly broad) structure, one defined by both technology and platform social norms.

Further, Diana Zulli and David Zulli have helpfully extended the "theoretical and methodological utility" of the meme "by conceptualizing the TikTok platform as a memetic text in and of itself" (2022, 1872). We typically think of memes as individual units of media, but TikTok is mimetic at the level of platform architecture. Zulli and Zulli argue that the "principles of mimesis—imitation and replication—are encouraged by the platform's logic and design" (1872). I have already indicated the ability of TikTok users to respond to each other's videos via "dueting" their response into a split screen. Further, the "use this sound" affordance allows many videos to be created to the same music or sound effect, linking them together and inflecting their meaning with the meaning of all the other videos using that sound. Imitation and replication are also fundamental TikTok social norms. Zulli and Zulli write:

> On any given day, we observed users replicating the same type of video or similar video concepts using a sound or effect over and over again. These videos primarily took the form of "challenge" videos, whether that be dancing or "check" videos were users described and projected identities in a roll-call fashion (e.g., "Texas check"). (2022, 1881)

In a video hashtagged "Texas check," a user would rapidly perform a series of poses or showcase a series of images associating themselves with the state of

Texas. TikTok "checks" typically use the same sound and can refer to almost any facet of one's identity, even a tangential one. I have recently observed a "famous relative check" wherein users display family photographs or home media of a famous person to whom they happen to be related. Another memetic trend I have observed is the use of captions starting "POV: You [. . .]" These videos purport to present the viewer's perspective as he or she fulfills whatever position the video is assigning them. Zulli and Zulli persuasively argue that TikTok "extends the Internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure" (2022, 1873), which helps constitute it as a site for digital play.

Given this previous research, then, I focused the data collection for this chapter on Tumblr and TikTok. I also drew upon some of the data gathered during earlier collection periods—examples particularly appropriate to analyze through the lens of digital play, including data on Tumblr roleplay accounts. However, for this data collection cycle, I did create a new Tumblr account from which to search and follow blogs, in order that the sample not be overwhelmed by posts that were less relevant to the concept of play. Rather than focusing on individual blogs, I searched and followed the hashtags "serial killer meme," "serial killer joke," and "serial killer humour," as well as the alternative spellings, appropriate plurals, and hashtags written as single words, e.g., "serialkillermeme(s)." I then repeated those searches, replacing "serial killer" with each of the names of the serial killers in the sample, and inductively coded the collected posts for common themes. The process on TikTok was the same. The data for this chapter was gathered between September and December 2022.

The Tumblr data fell into the following primary categories:

A. Roleplay as serial killers, often self-consciously humorous

B. The adaptation of memes from broader pop culture

C. Visual humor through juxtaposition

D. Linguistic humor/puns

E. Nonsense

I am using the term "nonsense" here in a slightly technical way. I am referring to posts that deliberately rebuff coherent referential meaning, "absurdities" of the same sort recognized by Phillips and Milner. Often, these recalled the "flat parody" I identified in work on Tumblr as pastiche, undercutting all

claims to authoritative discourse, including their own. Across all the data categories, but perhaps most acutely in the last, I also detect an element of Booth's sociocultural parody—i.e., parody that highlights the mainstream media's obsession with serial killers and the profitability of the serial killer industry. Parody may or may not be the intention of the creator, but the effect stands. As noted above, Netflix's *Dahmer—Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* aired during this data collection cycle. As a result, a good deal more of this material was focused on Dahmer and humor relating to cannibalism.

Roleplaying blogs on Tumblr often utilize the title "the-real-[name of person or character]," sometimes addending "blog." Others simply use the name in question. I located roleplay blogs of this sort for Bundy, Dahmer, Richard Ramirez, Aileen Wuornos, and other serial killers such as Gary Ridgeway, who was convicted of murdering forty-nine women and girls in the state of Washington, mostly sex workers. These blogs interacted with each other in the killer's "voice," as well as with roleplay blogs for other infamous criminals, such as "the-real-squeaky."[1] Some of the roleplay involves "shipping" killers with each other—i.e., imagining them in romantic relationships as though they were fictional characters. Here is a good example of play "at the edges" of mainstream discourse. The media already treats serial killers like fictional characters, imagining their private and romantic lives. Shipping them together is probably the outer limit of this discursive construction, but not beyond it.

One Bundy roleplay blog invites viewers to "ask the professional lawyer (me)" (the-real-ted-bundy-blog 2022), then displays these anonymous "asks" with responses as though from Bundy himself. There is a slight satirical edge to this: Bundy was not a professional lawyer, though he seemed to believe he was, and the insertion of the pronoun in parentheses as though to clarify "me" draws attention to this claim. I previously observed other users appealing to the creator of this blog to join a Discord server, a private chat channel where people are apparently continuing the roleplay. "We talk about you all the time," wrote one anonymous commenter (Anon. 10 2018). Other roleplayers assume the killer personas more explicitly: "You're the only (former) prostitute I'd never kill, Aileen . . . if that makes you feel any better" (garyleonridgway 2012). "Uhh, it sorta does," replies user aileenwuornos-blog, "cause at least I know I won't be dead" (2012). She, in turn, promises that she would "*neve*r" (italics in original) kill garyleonridgway with a gun, and the commenters exchange expressions of humor. This play seems very

[1] "Squeaky" is the nickname of Lynette Fromme, a member of the Manson Family cult.

Figure 8. "Is this a total stranger?"

much like the sort of roleplay fans engage in for fictional murderers, mixing properties of the self with properties of the character one is performing. The practice was nowhere near as common on Tumblr as on TikTok (see below). I would describe these practices as simple "identity roleplay," the assumption of a media-created mask for a form of online play that combines known characteristics of the killer with the fan's own personality (cf. Booth 2016, 116). In this way, the roleplay is a key example of Phillips and Milner's ambivalence, tied to a (terrible) reality, one within living memory for some people alive today, yet self-consciously "not real," as the references to one's "dash[board]" illustrate. The real killers would not be making reference to the affordance of their Tumblr account. Besides which, most of them are dead.

The second category of Tumblr posts adapted memes from pop culture to serial killers. Below is an example, based on the meme "Is this a pigeon?" from the 1990s anime *The Brave of Sun Fighbird* [*sic*], wherein an android

mistakenly identifies a butterfly as a pigeon. The meme has been developed to comment on misconceptions, with the android labeled as the subject misperceiving something, the butterfly labeled as the object, and the caption "Is this . . . ?" expressing the misconception. For example, it has been used to satirize out-of-touch media corporations who cast obviously adult actors as high school students, with the android labeled "High School TV dramas," the butterfly labeled "sexy 28-year-old actor" and the caption reading "Is this a teen?" (See: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1370553-is-this-a-pigeon). In the instance pictured in figure 8, which appeared several times on my dashboard from the searches above, the meme draws attention to Bundy's supposed facility with disguise and his chameleon-like ability to change appearance, implying that this myth is born of police incompetence rather than any mysterious ability.

In most memes of this sort, including this one, the humor is no more and no less offensive than a great deal of mainstream comedy. It is humor about murder, certainly. But so are comedy true crime podcasts. In fact, I think these sorts of memes are a clear example of sociocultural parody, pointing up the media and law enforcement's collaboration in portraying serial killers as more intelligent, more cunning, indeed more special than the average person, sliding neatly over the errors and oversights in investigations that allowed them to continue with their crimes.

Sociocultural parody is not always this pointed. In another example, a very popular meme—featuring the rapper Drake appearing to disapprove of something in one frame and approve of an alternative in the next (see: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting)—was adapted to feature the face of Dennis Rader, known as BTK, or the Bind Torture Kill killer. In one frame, he disapproves of a "Live Laugh Love" placard; in the second, he approves of a placard reading "Bind Torture Kill." While not directly satirizing the FBI, the image remains a pointed comment on mainstream serial killer obsession. Why do we still refer to Rader by a catchy three-part nickname—one he gave *himself*—catering directly to the desire for fame and notoriety he expressed in his taunting letters to police? We consume his life and crimes as easily as we consume a mass-produced piece of home décor.

We saw above that Shifman has drawn attention to how digital play is facilitated by the ability to juxtapose "elements that could not previously be imagined appearing together" (2017, 834). In serial killer fandom, this facility creates humor through incongruity. I also observed, in common with Bresnick, that a "rise and fall," or serious-to-humor format, is popular on TikTok. It

was also popular on Tumblr. A common type of Tumblr post juxtaposed one image, which seemed to set an earnest tone, with a second image to overturn it (see figure 9). These posts effect an argument in microcosm against the naïve model of an "earnest internet" that Phillips and Milner (2017) and Hedrick et al. (2018) were critiquing. In the meme (figure 9), which appeared on my dashboard multiple times when I searched "Ted Bundy humo[u]r," a black and white image of a young woman gazing romantically into the distance is captioned, "Ever daydream about going somewhere and never coming back?" Edited below it, like the second frame of a comic strip, is an image of Bundy entering his Volkswagen, with the caption ". . . Hi. I'm Ted." The object of this rather biting satire is (small-r) romanticism, sentiment, and naivety: Imagining one is about to run off with a charming handsome stranger, for example, certainly might lead to "never coming back," though not in the way the first image intimates. Recall Laura Browder's observation that true crime as literary genre may be critical of the patriarchal family, given how often women are killed by their partners (2006, 938).

There were several images of this type, and the object of parody wasn't always so clear. For example, a meme that featured an image of a knife captioned "regular serial killers" above a picture of a pizza cutter captioned "Italian serial killers" appeared once, posted by user slayersbookofdeathblog (2017). Still, we can read these images through Booth's lens of sociocultural parody, as a flat comment on our collective ease with violence. The intentions of the creator are not so important. Like the costumes and props at Bundy's execution, such images are not really "saying" anything in a referential sense. They just are, the way violence just "is," without comment, part of the fabric of our mediated existence. We scroll on.

That said, I also found that linguistic humor and puns, which *do* turn on referential meanings, were also a popular category. Given the timing of the data collection, it is not surprising that most of them referenced Dahmer and cannibalism. The posts are not insults, precisely, neither to Dahmer nor to his victims. They simply use cannibalism as a source of humor. The posts use visual and verbal puns that turn on incongruity—specifically, the incongruity of cannibalism with dating, daily life, and Dahmer's rather geekish, dispassionate, nonthreatening appearance. Most were tagged with "meme," and although it is questionable whether or not they are high circulation enough to be memes strictly speaking, the same puns did appear multiple times within the searches, sometimes with slightly different images. For example, I have already noted the image of Dahmer's face superimposed

Figure 9. "Hi. I'm Ted."

over that of a man in a fast-food restaurant, with the caption "I don't think there's actually Five Guys in this" (moonlitnitely 2021). There were several very similar images making the same joke. Dahmer's face superimposed onto that of a man sitting on a toilet is captioned "Jeffrey Dahmer dumping his last boyfriend," the deliberately disgusting pun capturing the slide of meaning between dating and digestion (memes4ya 2021). The coincidence of the terms is not entirely random; plenty of words elide sexual and gustatory

appetite: to devour with one's eyes, to eat someone up, to look good enough to eat. The sociocultural parody here highlights the aggression inherent in so much sexual content, via its physical and semantic links to consumption and/or rejection.

In a topical reference to the threat of the COVID-19 virus, an image of Dahmer's face is pasted below the caption "TV: The CDC says to refrain from handshakes. Jeffrey Dahmer: *stops blender*" (immaturegrammy 2021). The pun turns on the double meaning of "shake," but humor is also created by the incongruity between Dahmer's characteristically flat, expressionless face and the extremity of his actions. Not all the puns referenced cannibalism, though most of them did. Some referred to Bundy's necrophilia (utilizing the double-meanings of "stiff," for example, referring to both a penis and a corpse). More randomly, one pictured Ramirez's face superimposed onto that of a supermarket worker, describing him as a "night stocker" (vodkancheese 2021), homophonically punning on his nickname. This sort of humor is not qualitatively different to the bad-taste jokes that appear in the wake of any highly mediated tragedy. Some Tumblr posts drew attention to the widespread nature of this sort of humor, such as a screencap from Facebook wherein a user has asked a community page for "an air fryer that can handle a family of 8." In addition to being completely mainstream, Facebook has a reputation as a rather stolid, older social media site populated by middle-aged and elderly people. Nonetheless, the first response is "take it easy Jeffrey Dahmer." To the outraged objections of another commenter that "MURDER IS NOT FUNNY," a user replies, "First day on the [ambivalent] internet?" (robotsvsdinosaurs 2017). Even on Facebook, cannibalism is funny.

The final group of posts I categorized as "nonsense." By this, I mean posts that seem deliberately constructed to be nonsensical, to rebuff referential and/or logocentric meaning. As Katz and Shifman (2017) noted, this sort of post can carry "affective meaning," which is to say the post functions as a signal of recognition between those in the know: those who understand that the posts are not to be read in earnest, that there is no referential meaning underneath to be sought. Bracketing these sorts of posts as their own category is slightly artificial, for as I noted above, there is overlap with some of the other categories, such as visual humor. However, I have selected here some examples that seem to push the tendency to the extreme, in order to better illustrate the theme. Some of these were tagged "shitpost," which functions as a signal for the way in which they are (not) to be interpreted. I can merely

offer some examples of their content with my own understandings of their referents in popular culture:

A. In 2022, popular singer and reality TV judge Adam Levine was subject to a minor scandal when leaked text messages demonstrated his infidelity. These included such comments as "Holy fucking fuck" and "that body of yours is absurd." They have been photoshopped to look as though they are sent to Dahmer, fully clothed, in prison attire (zodiacgirl666 2022).

B. Dahmer in green is placed next to Kermit the Frog (oh-that's-good-ta-hear 2022).

C. An audio meme created using the app Songify designates Bundy and Dahmer as "one thick bih" (slang for a generously proportioned woman). The lanky Ramirez is designated by variation on the sound, as "one sticc bih." The "singer" requests to see their handcuffs, fridge, and dick respectively (truecrimedittys 2022).

D. A long description of "Serial Killers as People You Regret Swiping Right on Dating Apps":

> Richard Ramirez aka the Night Stalker:
>
> -fake woke
>
> -has taken one (1) philosophy class and thinks he knows everything about the human condition
>
> -doesn't know what a toothbrush is
>
> Jeffrey Dahmer:
>
> -always drunk
>
> -REALLY wants to photograph you naked
>
> -profile says "no fatties"
>
> -won't shut up about his pet fish
>
> [. . .]
>
> Aileen Wuornos:
>
> -basically the personification of that "Florida Man" meme except female

> [. . .]
>
> Ted Bundy:
>
> -profile is basically a resume
>
> -treats your date like a job interview
>
> -Republican
>
> [There are several more killers included in the post.] (orevet 2018)

This last example has a little more referential meaning than the preceding: The statements could "make sense" to a person well-versed in serial killer history. For example, Ramirez's "one (1) philosophy class" probably refers to his over-estimation of how deep, interesting, and original his insights on the supposed evil of humanity are. It thus serves to puncture the "special" and "charismatic" status attributed to Ramirez by mainstream media like the *Night Stalker* docuseries (2021), which in turn raises the question of why such an unimpressive person evaded the police so long. But what are these statements doing here? Why would the serial killers have dating site profiles? No particular reason—except for fannish play. A similar template sometimes appears to be describing killers as personalities one might meet on social media, but also randomly insults them in the same format: "You look like a big ol poof," is directed at cannibal Dennis Nilsen, who is named as "British Jeffrey" (a-top-hat 2021).

The reader has probably noticed the relative lack of playful data on Wuornos. There were a few posts of her face caught in expressions of extremis, whose purpose seems to mock her appearance, and a few brief references to her as in the dating post above. Also filed under the category of nonsense was the following text:

> lesbians forced aileen wuornos to murder 7 people and then we snuck into the death chamber and swapped out the lethal injection for an electric chair. And that is why lesbians can not use the electric chair meme because it is offensive and rubs in the faces of others the [*sic*] we committed against feminist icon aileen. People using the electric chair meme is a reclaimation of the abuse from lesbians and our murder of innocent aileen wuornos. Know ur herstory.
>
> #death (kiluwa 2019)

The object of parody is indiscernible. The text mocks and undercuts feminist interpretations of Wuornos's death, but equally disavows any claim to a voice of authority via deliberate absurdity and self-parody. Via the personal pronoun, the "author" positions herself as a "lesbian," even while apparently rejecting this position as one from which to make any serious social critique.

On the rare occasions that posts objected to using serial killers and killing as humor, however, they tended to point out another double standard in the media treatment of Wuornos: "I love how people joke about male serial killers like theres no tomorrow but you like say the name aileen wuornos and everyones like ooh dont joke about that shes scary O_o" (jackpotcomicsno5 2022). Admittedly, I did not actually find any data to back up this assertion of "everyone's" objection to Wuornos jokes—but I did not find many jokes, either. It seems that serial killer fandom on Tumblr is, by and large, fruitfully analyzed through the lens of ambivalent play, especially with regard to sociocultural parody. Most of this play takes place inside the lines drawn by mainstream media, however: It might be just inside the lines, but such is the nature of parody. Even Facebook users joke about cannibalism. Moreover, Tumblr play quite often overturns the conservative impulse of some true crime texts, pointing up the inefficiency of law enforcement. Sociocultural parody also functions at the level of form, as the flat surfaces of Tumblr offer mediated violence as just one more scrollable product that we casually consume in our media-saturated day. But again, it seems that Wuornos might be qualitatively different, more serious, and better viewed through the other lenses. Playful manifestations do appear, but they are quite rare.

Turning to TikTok, I performed the same searches by hashtag as outlined above. I also created a new account, so that the data not be overwhelmed by non-humorous or non-play content. The primary themes were as follows:

A. Performance and roleplay (most dominant)

B. Puns in visual form, often the same puns as were circulating on Tumblr

C. Adaptation of popular culture memes

D. Nonsense (rare)

There were also several instances of professional comedians and stand-ups using serial killer material for humor, especially Dahmer. After some consideration, I elected not to include these in the analysis, as they are not really "fannish" or professionalized fan material. Unlike the professionalized

fans who collect and sell murderabilia, these comedians have not built their careers around serial killer material; they are simply using a topical subject for professional benefit, riffing on contemporary media trends as part of a larger set. This does, however, lend credence to my perception that most of this material is play "inside the lines" of more mainstream media.

The dominance of performance and roleplay in the TikTok sample gives weight to both Duval et al.'s (2021) observation that TikTok is a performance-based, outward facing platform and to Zulli and Zulli's (2022) insights on TikTok as exemplifying mimesis at the level of platform. Many of the search results followed a common memetic template, captioned either "POV: You [. . .]" (wherein the creator assumes the perspective of the viewer in some interaction with a serial killer) or "If [serial killer] was [. . .]" (wherein the creator performs a scenario that might take place if a serial killer had some particular characteristic, such as a stereotyped nationality). Serial killer roleplay is popular enough that user sotrueiris444 draws attention to it in a video criticizing fellow users for joking about Dahmer's crimes (2022). Again, given the timing of the data collection, it is not surprising that Dahmer dominated.

Many users created videos in which they roleplay a potential victim of Dahmer, with captions like "POV: Jeffrey Dahmer invited you to hang at his place" (eggplantsworldd 2020). Often the joke is on oneself, as in eggplantsworldd's example, wherein he is saved by virtue of being too heavy for Dahmer to carry. Some played on national stereotypes, roleplaying for example what a Mexican or an Australian would experience in Dahmer's flat. The Australian is so tolerant of intoxicants that he cannot be drugged, as empty drink cups pile up around him to Dahmer's increasing despair (itsjulianwoods 2022). Other roleplays included that of an unsuspecting guest finding body parts in the fridge, being offered a suspect sandwich by the killer (as was one character in the drama), or in one absurdist instance, "POV: You're a fish in Dahmer's tank watching him take his next victim" (landtron 2022). This video utilizes a filter to impose human eyes and speaking mouth onto an image of a tropical fish, in line with Bresnick's (2019) observations on the playful editing affordances of the platform.

There were also some roleplays which did not seem designed for humor. Quite strikingly, these seemed to genuinely roleplay a death at Dahmer's hands, using techniques such cutting to black when the "victim" is to be murdered. Some users seriously imitated Dahmer's mannerisms and posture, using their own kitchens as "sets." It would be a mistake to conflate "play" with "funny":

These roleplays are identity play, free movement within the structure set by the accepted narrative, but they are not designed to be humorous. It is a question beyond the scope of this book as to whether we ought to address the two kinds of fannish play as qualitatively different, but my inclination is to think not. Humor is subjective anyway: The common playful factors are identity roleplay and mimesis at the level of the site.

Bundy-related roleplays were also fairly popular. User get_raccd_24 edits a section of the 2002 Eminem track "Without Me" over a short video captioned "God noticing the world overpopulated with women." In response, God sprinkles "razzle dazzle" to create Ted Bundy, whom the user roleplays turning to face the camera in time with the lyric "This looks like a job for me" (get_raccd_24 2022). Juxtaposing audio clips from various discrete sources to a performance was a standard form of creativity on TikTok. User nuhchez roleplays Bundy disposing of a body while an audio clip of two commentators praising a person's skill is attributed to "Death" and "Satan" (2020). User ted_bundy_epic roleplays Ramirez entering court to an approximation of an old comedy soundtrack, exaggerating his mannerisms. An announcer hails him: "Ladies and gentlemen, Richard Ramirez," with applause and a canned laugh track timed to position him as a celebrity (which, of course, he was). Other types of roleplay utilized computer games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Sims*, in which characters and their behavior may be customized, to create digital avatars of killers.

Roleplays of Wuornos were qualitatively different, and all the examples except for one fell under the rubric of what I would call "serious (identity) play." One memetic pattern was for women to assume an iconic pose of Wuornos holding her cuffed hands to her throat, before cutting to the image of her, as a response and reaction to expressions of male violence. Often these were cut to the lyric "Don't forget about me" from the song "Doubt" by twenty one pilots (2015), invoking Wuornos as a sort of vengeful spirit and recalling her parting assertion that she would return after death. Sometimes the duet feature is used in these responses: User korimari_locx utilizes images of Wuornos as a duetted response to the "God creating Ted Bundy" meme just referenced (2022). Similarly, user thehighpriestess assumes the handcuff pose and then replaces herself with an image of Wuornos, in a duet response to a user who supposedly morphs into Brian Laundrie, who murdered his girlfriend Gaby Petitio, "when [his] girl laughs at little too hard at another dude's jokes" (2021). The message is that if you men can turn into murderers, well, so can women.

These exchanges are an example of how the duet response is used creatively and memetically as a form of serious play. Continuity is also achieved by the persistent use of present-tense "When x" statements as captions and overlays. This particular video is overlaid with the text "When I keep seeing men's posts about unaliving women." (The verb "unalive" is used in several online spaces to avoid automatic censorship of terms like kill, suicide, and murder.) A final memetic pattern drew on audio from Wuornos's interviews, as an "acting challenge" by user stormiej222, who lip syncs to Wuornos's assertion that it is men, not her, who are "out of control," with their assumptions that women's bodies are theirs to take and use (2021). (One of these audio clips is actually a misattribution: Though often captioned "Aileen Wuornos interview," the audio is actually killer Angela Simpson explaining how she murdered a man. Their voices do sound quite similar.) This sort of play is also at the edges of the lines established by mainstream media and culture. Many women are extremely angry about our collective treatment by men, but positing that violent men deserve to die is a fringe (though recognizable) response. Nonetheless, several of the videos are positioned as an exactly proportional response to the frequency with which men really do kill women, *and* continue to joke about it.

The only deliberately humorous Wuornos roleplay was a "day in the life" video by user lucypopmama, in which Wuornos enacts a series of exaggerated "redneck" stereotypes, such as brushing her teeth with beer, and "hoot[ing] and holler[ing] till dusk" (2020). This recalls the single "joke" I found about her in the Tumblr sample, comparing her to the chaotic "Florida man" meme. ("Florida man" refers to a hypothetical man derived from miscellaneous absurd and outrageous headlines originating in Florida. The joke implies that every bizarre incident is the work of one individual person.)

Most of the visual puns in the sample were cannibalism jokes based on Dahmer. Often they were the very same puns circulated on Tumblr, simply adapted to be told as two-frame visual stories for the setup and response ("What did they find in Jeffrey Dahmer's freezer? Ben and Jerry's. What did they find in Jeffrey Dahmer's shower? Head and Shoulders. What did Jeffrey Dahmer call the guy who ran from him? Fast food.") These videos generally adhered to the structure recognized by Bresnick (2019) as common to TikTok: a truncated rise and fall, setup and surprise format, rather than a beginning, middle, and end. The first frame would pose the question, and the second give the answer over related and easily sourced images (a freezer, a carton of Ben and Jerry's ice cream). However, some of them were more

elaborate: The "Five Guys" pun is extended by user ftwinzgottalent to a short skit wherein Dahmer goes for a job interview at the franchise, expressing how enthusiastic and passionate he is about eating "five guys" (2022). This skit was quite elaborate, involving a wig, set, and secondary actor.

Recall Andrew Rico's (2015) observation that some "Columbiners" might perform their supposed "fandom" of school shooters simply to provoke a reaction. Some of these TikTok performances could be viewed in the same way, as utilizing sensational and attention-grabbing material to draw attention to oneself and one's social media profile. Other puns-in-skits played on the contemporary slang equating an attractive person to a "snack" or "full course meal," humorously implying that, in the present climate, Dahmer could simply state his intentions to his victims and be taken for flirting. I noted above that the linguistic conflation of eating and sex could be read as a form of sociocultural parody highlighting sexual aggression, and here it is more explicit: Calling someone a "full course meal," after all, implies that one intends to consume them with relish. Similarly, one user animates Dahmer's face (in his mugshot) to pronounce the line, "Your honor, I'm slaying," before "performing" a dance with camp and effeminate expressions (mr_oh_sangwoo 2022). "Slaying" is queer-originating slang for performing exceptionally well, particularly with regard to style and dance. The extension of the puns to skit format demonstrates again the importance of performance and roleplay to TikTok culture. But aside from that factor, this finding was not qualitatively different to the Tumblr case. The even greater dominance of Dahmer on TikTok indicates that the app is even more heavily influenced by trends in contemporary media than Tumblr, probably because it is a newer platform. There was, however, a much smaller set of static images using Bundy's image as the background for a verbal pun ("What's the difference between women and onions? I cry when I cut up onions") that only related to the image by virtue of its subject.

Considering the prevalence of edited media on TikTok, adaptations from pop culture texts were surprisingly rare. It should be noted, however, that given the rule of excluding fantexts of fictionalized representations of serial killers, I was not counting videos wherein fans directly edited images and audio from Netflix's *Monster,* of which there were several. There were, however, a handful of videos adapting other texts. User rainy.msx takes a short sequence from the Amazon Prime (anti) superhero series *The Boys* (2019–), in which the cryogenically defrosted hero "Soldier Boy" informs now-adult son "Homelander" that, perhaps if he had raised him, he would

not have turned out to be a "weak and snivelling pussy," or such a "fucking disappointment." The video is captioned "Ted Bundy when he meets Jeffrey Dahmer on doomsday" (rainy.msx 2022).

In some way, all the play analyzed in this chapter is what Booth would call "within the lines" set by mainstream media. It is all reflective of our collective fascination with serial killers, our cultural inclination to create humor out of tragedy, and our focus on particularly grotesque aspects of certain crimes such as cannibalism and necrophilia. I also found examples of non-transformative play concerning the differing media treatment of Bundy and Dahmer: Bundy, the virulent, successful, charismatic psychopath; Dahmer, the pathetic, monstrous queer. Other pop culture adaptations include a (quite technically impressive) digital animation of an image of Bundy's face, so that he appears to sing the chorus of the 1999 song "Mambo no. 5" by Lou Vega (lameadults 2020). The chorus lists "a little bit of" various women, and the video is superimposed with the caption "IYKYK" (if you know you know). Presumably this refers to Bundy's penchant for decapitating his victims and keeping their heads as trophies. Another TikTok edits Bo Burnham's 2021 comedy song "Bezos I" in ironic praise of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, over images of Dahmer (nem.tudom._.xd 2022). Several lines of the song make no particular sense in this context, but it does contain general encouragement to someone named "Jeff," as well as the injunctions "drink their blood" and "Come on Jeff, get em!" This sociocultural parody conflates one rapacious form of consumption and exploitation, Bezos's brand of neoliberal turbocapitalism, with the literal consumption of humans. In a third example, Bundy is "interviewed" in hell to the audio of a quotation from the Will Ferrell film *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby.* In the clipped audio, the lead character (a NASCAR driver), is congratulating himself on his success:

> Well, Dick, here's the deal: I'm the best there is, plain and simple. I mean, I wake up in the morning and I piss excellence. You know, nobody can hang with my stuff. I'm just a—just a big, hairy, American winning machine. (McKay 2006)

Putting these words in Bundy's mouth (ted_bund_epic 2022b) illuminates the way that, far from an exception, he was from a feminist perspective the pinnacle of male entitlement and misogyny that runs through American society. Relatedly, I found an interestingly self-referential video which could be described as sociocultural parody of this type. The user intercuts images and sequences from TikTok into a TikTok video to suggest what

would happen if Bundy became a TikTok user: In short, he would become extremely popular very fast. The video makes rapid visual reference to pop-news stories on the popularity of serial killers, especially those considered attractive (dictatorxtc 2022). All of this content seems like a twenty-first century echo of the impetus behind works like Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991), a slightly hysterical, hyperreal reflection on the cultural appropriateness of serial killing.

The final category, which I coded as "nonsense," referred to content that was deliberately difficult to parse for referential meaning. This type was significantly rarer on TikTok than Tumblr. The posts in this category don't appear to "say" anything, unlike, for example, a roleplay or a pun. In one, for example, a Sim character approximating Dahmer dances to a hard rap song. That's it: He just dances. The video is captioned: "Jeffrey is vibing" (lsxy2 2022). Where nonsense did occur, it was of this type: an image or short video related to a serial killer, in which they perform a random action or with a random annotation. This was not common—and dancing is not an entirely random action for a Dahmer Sim to perform, given that he did frequent gay clubs. But again, it doesn't *mean* anything, beyond the caption: "Jeffrey is vibing." (Or perhaps, at a stretch, vibing queerly, though the Sim is pictured in a living room, not a club.) There is also a video editing the faces of Dahmer and Ramirez onto crudely animated figures in police uniforms, on a stage, dancing to the 1986 song "You Can Leave Your Hat On" by Joe Cocker (trebkatrebka 2022). Ramirez was certainly not gay; indeed, he was obsessively and sadistically fixated on the female body. This video means even less than the last. I attribute the rarity of this category on TikTok to two factors: Firstly, it is harder to create "nonsense" in video form. A video is always sequential, so in some ways, it is always "sensical," whereas an image can just "be." One frame leads into the next frame, creating some kind of narrative logic. Secondly, as Duval et al. (2021) write, TikTok is an outward-facing platform. Katz and Shifman (2017) write that nonsense functions to signal affiliation with an in-group, and TikTok is more dominated by public performance than intergroup bonding. The roleplayers do not interact with each other as they do on Tumblr; they are playing to "the public," not each other.

Overall, then, it seems that ambiguous play and sociocultural parody are extremely useful lenses through which to view serial killer fandom, highlighting especially the degree to which such fannish expressions are *not* opposed to mainstream culture, merely operating at the edges of it.

The fandom's very existence satirizes our collective fascination with the serial killer industry, and the ease with which a neoliberal, turbocapitalist, endlessly mediated society facilitates the consumption of serial killing. Some examples are more specifically parodic, whether of institutions like the police, romantic notions about charming strangers, or the necessarily aggressive undertone in the popular metaphoric conflation of sex and eating. The specifically playful and ambiguous affordances of sites like Tumblr and TikTok provide the architecture that shapes and enables this fannish play, as do their cultures. Again, I found that fandom concerning Wuornos was qualitatively different, more serious and (fringe) feminist focused; its analysis needs to be supplemented with other theoretical frameworks. Playful does not necessarily mean funny: I found that the performative norms of TikTok enabled a serious kind of identity play, wherein users invoked iconic poses and/or used editing tools to "morph" themselves into a female killer in response to male violence. I did not find convincing evidence that serial killer fandom comprises a "magic circle" within which the rules of play are recognized. If the circle exists at all, it probably comprises something much bigger like "the media landscape." Overall, however, the concept of a magic circle relatively circumscribed from the rest of life did not seem a good fit with the expansive qualities of this play, or indeed, with our media-saturated environment.

One of the primary arguments of Booth's *Playing Fans* was that fandom is no longer a restricted category. Many of the practices that used to be perceived as strictly fannish, such as intense engagement with a media text, knowledge acquisition and curation, and the creation of user generated content, are now common markers of a converged multimedia landscape. Engagement with a favored text takes less effort and less commitment: One does not have to locate a physical zine or a fan convention but can simply open a Tumblr and start reblogging posts. Throughout this study, which applied some of the classic frames from fan studies to the fandom of serial killers, I have discovered that not only is serial killer fandom understandable in terms of frames common to all mediated fandom, but that, to a large extent, it is understandable in terms of the broader media culture. The fandom may be deliberately provocative or purposefully edgy—and the term "edge" is instructive here, because it does, by and large, operate at the "edge" of a discourse already predefined by the mainstream media without clearly opposing, contradicting, or subverting it. The serial killer industry

is alive and well and streaming now on Netflix, probably starring the latest teenage heartthrob hoping to break into "serious" acting.

Like the fans studied in the 1990s, serial killer fans are a relatively marginalized and maligned group that converges around favored texts. Serial killer fans poach the storylines and multimediated material made available to them through a variety of channels. Fanfiction, fanart, and fanvids are just as likely to pastiche and illustrate pre-received narratives as they are to overturn them, whether this be the valorization of the genius killer who thwarts the blameless system of law enforcement at every turn, or sympathy for the queer monster with a damaged past. Fans also create their own narratives, "cuteifying" killers that have personal appeal to them with aesthetics borrowed from illustration and anime, or arranging extant material for a radical feminist justification of retaliatory violence. This last practice was the most explicitly political form of textual poaching I found, and probably the most distinct "counter" narrative. Yet much of the fan material, particularly the visual sort, created the pastiche, non-political effect Booth considers a form of coloring inside the lines, such as setting clips of serial killers to horror film aesthetics. Notably, as a pathologized fandom, serial killer fan material often fits better into a textual poaching model than the more modern concept of media convergence, due to the fact it is less recuperable by the media industries.

The reservations I now have regarding theories of community could equally well apply to any other fandom. Initially, I had thought that the relative instability of identity on contemporary platforms would inhibit communal gifting, but this wasn't borne out by the data. Gifting still takes place, whether that be in the form of specially created videos and edits or appreciative comments. It is true that contemporary platforms used by fans may lend themselves more to networked individualism than community in the sense I used to apply to it fannish circles, but that would be the case for any contemporary fandom. The relative dispersion, instability, and impermanence of platforms like Twitter and Tumblr do not really support community in the same way as platforms like LiveJournal once did, but community persists in at least a weak sense through the exchange of supportive and affectionate comments, empathy, and affective bonding over shared material. Moreover, fans referred to themselves and each other as being part of a community, often embracing a pathologized identity as a point of distinction, against outsiders. There are still platforms such as Reddit which can support community in a more traditional sense, though the most fannish

subreddit devoted to serial killers was deleted by the platform shortly after I finished collecting the data.

Moreover, despite the relative lack of stable online personas, the collection and performance of subcultural capital proved a useful lens to understand serial killer fandom. Some of the strategies, such as the display of knowledge, were recognizable, and others were more platform-dependent: The scrapbook-like affordances of Tumblr, for example, meant that the curation and display of fannish objects was valued even when they were not in the fans' possession. The more traditional values of touch and authenticity certainly did apply in the sphere of murderabilia—the branch of killer fandom with the most obvious economic interchange. The murderabilia domain also produced fans with high social capital, the closest thing to celebrity-fans I observed in this study. These figures are the brokers of high-value objects, which granted an auratic quality by their physical association with serial killers. They also served as intermediaries with mainstream media. Unlike most fandoms, however, I found that in many cases the performance of excess, associated with feminine sexuality, actually functioned as a method of gaining capital rather than depleting it. This may have something to do with the revaluation of emotion and affect we see across the media landscape, but I think it more likely relates to the value of notoriety. Sarah Thornton (1995) observed in her classic study how subculturalists valued being demonized by the mainstream media: Serial killer fans know they are demonized, and relish in the scandal. Many of these performances had a distinctly humorous or slightly trollish tone, which led directly into the final and most important theoretical lens, that of playing fans.

Phillips and Milner (2017) are correct in their claims for the ambivalence of online culture. Some of the most useful insights in studying killer fandom have been from quite traditional, even old-fashioned models, which are stimulating but insufficient. Hedrick et al. (2018) are likewise correct that too many fan theorists have proceeded from an assumption of earnestness: that people believe what they say, say what they mean, and engage in fannish activity from a straightforward position of good faith. This is not true of any fan culture, and it certainly isn't true of this one. Serial killer fans are playing online. Trollishly, provocatively, ironically, they are playing at the boundaries of a contemporary discourse that makes celebrities of serial killers. Their creations, deliberately or not, function frequently as sociocultural parody which highlights our cultural obsession with serial killers, the endless stream of media we consume on the topic (which

makes up a fraction of a percentage of all crime), and the ease with which we consume mediated violence. Serial killer fans are constructed, and even self-construct, as the Bad Other of true crime aficionados. This notoriety serves to reinforce communal identity. But in truth, fans operate not on one side of a binary, but rather at the end of a continuum which we all occupy in our media-saturated, twenty-four-hour news culture.

There is a broader question here, beyond the scope of this book, with which I will close this exploration of a neglected fandom. What does it mean, in this media environment, to be a fan? Are we all fans now, and if we are all fans, does the identity have any distinction left, enough to define a subfield? The secondary question relates to the division between fandoms concerned with killing and violence and other kind of fans. So much of the media we consume concerns tragedy—fictional and real. At what point do we stop being disinterested, reasonable consumers, and start to enter that "Other" realm to which serial killer fandom and other pathologized fandoms have artificially been confined? I hope this book will serve as a provocation, as scholars begin to venture into the sorts of fandom we have so far passed over in silence, posing a question mark over both the term "fan," and the separation of pathologized fandoms from broader media culture.