

Judith May Fathallah



Killer Fandom

*Fan Studies and the
Celebrity Serial Killer*

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Judith May Fathallah

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CHAPTER 2

Textual Poaching to Discursive Formations

Serial Killers and Fannish Creation

Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992) is considered a foundational text for fan studies. A twentieth anniversary re-issue with an author interview and an edition of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* dedicated to its influence bear witness to its enduring presence as a touchstone in our field (Jenkins 2013; Larsen 2014a). Jenkins himself is always the first to acknowledge that the theory has dated in fundamental ways, and, moreover, that the book contains significant weaknesses, but without it fan studies as we know it would not exist. Its key tenet is that fan audiences "poach," or take from the texts of corporate media whatever aspects are of interest to them, and rework those aspects in innovative, communally informed, and communally interpreted ways.

The lens of textual poaching has been developed both by Jenkins and others into a less top-down approach, in keeping with the current landscape

of media convergence and active meaning-making processes of fans. In this chapter, I applied these lenses across a range of fannish sites, including the major fanfic archives the Archive of Our Own (AO3), Fanfiction.net, and Wattpad, as well as the multimedia sites YouTube, TikTok, and Tumblr, on which creative fanwork has a strong presence. I also incorporate some of my own insights regarding discursive construction by fans, exploring how far fans actually create the objects of their interest amongst their own communities. I found that the older poaching model was, in many ways, more suited to this relatively small and stigmatized fandom than the model of media convergence, but that a discourse-analytic approach that accounts for fannish construction serves as a necessary corrective to viewing the process as primarily (or entirely) top-down and derived from media corporations.

When Jenkins was writing, it was easier to think of fandom as comprised of relatively contained subcultures, largely pre-internet and reliant on zines, word of mouth, and physical meeting places. Like his contemporaries Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) and Constance Penley (1997), who both utilized the poaching metaphor, Jenkins was actively and deliberately working to counter contemporary stereotypes of fans as pathological, isolated, obsessive, juvenile, and pitiful—the stereotype that fans have “no life.” He also introduced the idea of the “aca-fan,” the researcher who, far from standing objectively and looking (down) upon their subjects, occupies a hybrid identity as both fan and scholar. In an introductory interview to the new edition, Jenkins stressed the importance of the fannish subculture in both producing and interpreting texts:

When my mentor, John Fiske (1992), said he was a “fan,” he meant simply that he liked a particular program, but when I said I was a fan, I was claiming membership in a particular subculture. Meaning-making in Fiske was often individualized, whereas in my work, meaning-making is often deeply social. (2013, xiv)

The meanings which fans poach and create often differ emotionally, socially, and politically from those of media producers, and may privilege pleasures traditionally thought of as feminine (relational, sexual, emotional) in the face of androcentric media. “Slash” (the queer pairing of canonically straight characters) was easy to read politically at a time when queer pairings in media were either absent or a joke. Slash communities remained a relatively secretive sub-section of larger fandoms (Bacon-Smith 1992), and as Lucy Bennett observed:

Within *Textual Poachers*, a tenet that proved influential towards my work is the concept of fans reading a text in the “correct” way that is dependent on the relevant fan culture and community. Exploring the processes at work between fans and the fan text, Jenkins argued that this “right way” of reading and approaching the text as a fan or object of fandom is determined and enforced by normative fan identity. (2014, 14)

In approaching the poaching habits of serial killer fans, the observation of interpretation being determined by fan identity seems as true today as it did at publication. Serial killer fans have particular ways of reading and appropriating texts which resonate with each other and are shunned by communal outsiders, specifically, by other kinds of fans. Thus, aspects of the poaching idea still resonate, particularly when scholars apply it to contemporary forms of fan creativity like GIF-creation, vidding, and gaming practices (Hautch 2018; Walliss 2010; Nguyen 2016; see also Zhao 2019; Matthews 2018; and Palmer 2021 for more recent engagement with the model). Larsen suggests that perhaps the best evidence of poaching’s importance is the fact that we now take so many of its principles for granted: “Of course fan cultures are participatory; of course that participation often involves cultural critique; and of course fandom involves renegotiating the terms of engagement between fans and producers” (2014b, 3).

But the idea of fans as relatively powerless, industrially voiceless nomads largely cut off from the processes of media production had become dated as early as the mid-2000s. In acknowledgement of this, Jenkins published *Convergence Culture*. The media environment has absolutely transformed over the past thirty years, leading Jenkins to acknowledge that it’s best to read *Poachers* as a “time capsule which captures a particular moment of transition within fandom—the beginnings of the end of the era of print zines, the beginnings of the era of digital networks” (2013, xx). His use of the phrase “convergence culture” represents a shift in the relations between audience, technology, and producers, as he argued that “fandom is one of those spaces where people are learning how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community” (2006, 134). This learning takes many forms, from increasingly direct engagement with media producers and production to the creation and participation in communities of collective intelligence via database building, knowledge sharing, and creative collaboration. These cultural shifts are enabled by increasing digital connectivity, the development of more advanced and user-friendly tools to create and edit media,

and economic models favoring multimedia narratives using mixed modes of broad- and narrowcasting.

As the findings below show, serial killer fandom seems to fit rather better into the older model—where fans are poachers, relatively powerless, subordinated, and pathologized by the broader culture. They often have little to no involvement with media production and no particular engagement with media producers. One criticism of Jenkins's views in *Poachers* centered around ideas of labor and reward: in sum, the school of thought that as users/viewers dissect media, create content, review, respond, hashtag and tweet, we are not so much poaching the fields as tilling them (Andrejevic 2013). We are performing free labor, which adds value and creates revenue for copyright holders (Andrejevic 2008; Lothian 2009; Milner 2009). Jenkins recognizes these criticisms, and draws a distinction between

participatory culture (a broad movement which takes many different forms across history), fandom (a specific kind of participatory culture with its own history and traditions), and Web 2.0 (a business model which seeks to capitalize and commodify participatory culture). (2013, xxii)

At first glance, serial killer fandom might seem to rebut these criticisms of the *Poachers* model and demonstrate its continued applicability. It is fairly difficult for the media industry to profit from and reappropriate TikTok videos admiring the sexiness of Richard Ramirez the Night Stalker. Or is it? Sentiment mining, vibology, and interest monitoring do indeed benefit the media industries, which have never been particularly hesitant about presenting the so-called “Death Row Romeo” as sex symbol. On the other hand, such sentiment mining also has to account for the exclamations of horror and disgust this content inevitably meets; it can certainly be argued that serial killer fandom is *less* co-optable, less profitable, and less automatically generative of revenue than mainstream forms of fan creativity.

Many scholars have raised the point that some forms of fan labor in convergence culture are, for better or worse, more incorporable than others (Scott 2019; Busse 2013, 2015). Suzanne Scott has done significant work on the typically gendered nature of this divide, noting that forms of fan work that are typically gendered masculine, such as modding and collecting, are often more valued, more visible, and more economically rewarded than those gendered feminine, such as writing slash. Scott (2019) coined the term “convergence culture industry” to describe the prioritization, ap-

appropriation, reward, and revaluation of fanwork that is typically gendered masculine. Consider the creation of wikis, the demonstration of and collation of encyclopedic knowledge, the creation of video game spinoffs via modification and streaming channels—even the occasional promotion of fanboy to industry-insider blogger or game developer. These shifts have been enabled by the cultural and economic revaluation of geek culture, and as Scott’s 2019 work *Fake Geek Girls* encapsulates, girls and women are very often perceived as inauthentic outsiders here. To be clear, Scott isn’t suggesting that the solution is to incorporate, repackage, and appropriate GIFs, fanvids, and fanfiction too. She is merely applying a critical lens to the celebration of convergence culture, asking whom it benefits, in what ways, and whom and what it excludes. I wonder, though, if the reappropriation of more fanwork gendered feminine is, in fact, where convergence culture is headed. This has not happened on any large scale yet—but it might be starting. Witness the *Fifty Shades of Grey* machine. The day when some form of slash fic reworked for traditional publication secures its film deal may well be on the horizon (by the time this book is published, it may have happened). Serial killer fanfiction, by and large, is not publishable in any traditional sense, and not recuperable by the convergence culture industry except as fodder for clickbait articles. Thus it returns us to the textual poaching lens of early scholarship.

Finally, I myself have developed the lenses of convergence culture and textual poaching in a rather different direction. In my 2020 book *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture*, I argued that we need to look beyond the idea of fans “taking” and “re-adapting” from industry. Emo, or emotional hardcore, is a music genre that I demonstrated had developed a coherent mainstream definition in the late 2010s—because fandom made one for it. “Emo” meant many things to many people for decades—but now, it has a relatively stable set of reference points that fans invented during the expansion of home broadband, which was then taken up by the music industry and resold. This occurs through the operations of discourse theory—the active, definitional properties of language to construct objects and positions (as opposed to “reflecting” something that already exists in reality). Since I first began applying discourse analysis to fanwork (Fathallah 2017), I have made the point that discursive analysis needs to take account of the reaction to and reception of statements. Statements can be rejected, silenced, and banned—or applauded, repeated, and elevated, and thus gain more definitional impact. That is why I take account of comments, views, and responses to fanwork

in my samples (see below). The relevance of these insights here is that I will investigate to what degree serial killer fans define their own object of fandom, as opposed to poaching it in what is ultimately still a top-down model. What is the “Richard Ramirez” or “Aileen Wuornos” that fans celebrate? To what degree is it a poached and reappropriated object? To what degree is it a collective fannish invention? The key difference here to my former work is that when I looked at emo, for example, I had years’ worth of archived, solidified, and curated material to explore—and these acts of archivism and collection are a kind of discursive consolidation. Serial killer fandom is rarely archived. Its materials vanish. Creators take it down after receiving backlash. Sites ban it. Its constructions are altogether a more fleeting and ephemeral phenomena. Yet it persists, and it has a cultural memory—several times, in this sample work, I found authors and creators claiming to have returned after being banned, creating a new account and identity, and continuing their discursive constructions.

I made the survey for this chapter across a selection of websites that host fannish content, informed by my preliminary reading on serial killer fandom and its venues. I began the search for fanfiction at the Archive of Our Own (AO3), then moved on to Wattpad, a less popular site overall but more popular within this niche. I then turned to YouTube and Tumblr for visual data, before venturing into relatively new territory as I explored TikTok. I will explain my exact methods and findings as I treat the sites in turn, and discuss how the lenses of textual poaching, convergence culture, and discursive construction have illuminated my findings. All the searches for this analysis were performed in January and February of 2022.

AO3 is a project of the Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit organization devoted to encouraging, promoting, preserving, and defending fanworks. It thus has something of a semi-official presence within many fan cultures (a fact which not all fans have been comfortable with). “Serial killers: fandom” and “serial killers—fandom” are both functional tags on AO3 (meaning that users have applied these as tags using a freeform system), though they have not been marked as common. I searched using both these tags, then excluded stories that were explicitly based on fictional portrayals and franchises. I noted the number of hits, comments, and kudos,¹ as well the completion status, on each story, and listed the results in table 1.² The table items are arranged by number of kudos in descending order.

¹ Kudos on AO3 are akin to “Likes.”

² The only item on the list that I did not find by tag is the “Book One” entry, which was

Three points stand out at once: firstly, that self-proclaimed serial killer fanfic is not popular on this site. There are only twenty-two entries here, and the AO3 hosts over seven million fanworks in over forty thousand fandoms. Secondly, that several of the stories are unfinished, which may suggest a lack of audience engagement. This impression is confirmed by an exchange (2021) between author sunhealer24 and a reviewer in discussion of continuing the story “Safe and Sound”:

I am aware that I write for a very niche community, especially since my writing often tends to cross the line into taboo subjects that no one wants to think too hard about. I also understand that my writing is far from the best out there. (sunhealer24 2021)

It's been a while since I checked on this tag on ao3 (i admit i have obsessed over true crime for months, particularly Bundy's case) so when i read your fic I was immediately hooked [. . .] I'm a fan of this story of yours and if you ever need a beta reader, or heck just someone to talk to and exchange ideas with, I would be delighted to be there for you. (crowbar_p1per 2021)

The author also refers to her interest in “true crime,” showing that for this reader and author, there is no distinction between “true crime” and the serial killer fandom with which the fic is tagged. Finally, note the dominance of three specific serial killers in the text: Ramirez, Bundy, and Dahmer. Wuornos features in just one, and then only briefly, as a throwaway side character. The media celebrification of certain male serial killers is thus amplified here. The relatively small sample on AO3 meant that I was able to inductively code every story thematically. The key themes I found are as follows:

A. Historical metalepsis

Metalepsis, a kind of self-conscious interplay between fiction and reality, is frequently discussed by scholars of digital fiction. I have written elsewhere that it is particularly applicable to Real Person Fiction (RPF),³ because the “hypertextual, multimodal context of digital fiction allows for specific forms of metalepsis, which [. . .] we see at work in RPF in genre-specific ways” (Fathallah 2018a, 569). Here I was referring to the integration of real-world

linked directly from “Book Two.” For all fan texts, titles and author names are stylized and capitalized as on the site quoted. Fan texts, reviews, comments, and responses are all *sic*, with minimal corrections/insertions to avoid confusion.

³ I.e., fanfiction featuring real people, living or dead.

images and video into fictional text, which I did not find on AO3, but did on Wattpad (see below). The historical metalepsis I found on AO3 comprised a form of textual poaching based on a communal body of knowledge: knowledge of the serial killer's life, times, and certain key texts about him or her.

B. Fix-it/redemption arcs

"Fix-it fics" are a staple in many fandoms, serving to correct perceived injustices, failings, or tragedies in plotlines (or indeed, historical events). These stories tend to explain or rationalize a murderer's behavior as caused by trauma, mental illness, or adverse life events, and provide redemption narratives assisted by original characters/authorial insertions.

C. Self-referential comment on serial killer fandom

When a discursive construction is sufficiently developed, it begins to produce statements about itself and its norms. I found this less with regard to the killers as personas, but significantly so with regard to their fandom, as fans interrogated their own fascination with and affection for serial killers.

D. Sex

The explicit sexualization of serial killers was another theme. In the cases of Richard Ramirez and Ted Bundy, this theme is easily poached from mainstream media and adapted to the author's purposes.

E. Romanticization/cute-ification

These stories were less focused on explicit sex, more on discursively constructing the character as otherwise appealing/likeable. There is less "poachable" media content here, relying more on fan construction (though, cf. the relatively sympathetic portrayals of Dahmer and Wuornos considered in the previous chapter).

As table 1 shows, "A Handsome Face with a Monster Inside" by nevermoreflesh (2018) was the single most popular story tagged "serial killer fanfic/fandom," as measured by kudos. This story tells of a fictional meeting between Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, whom the summary introduces as "perfect for each other, but not in the way you might expect." Metalepsis is established by reference to "canon":

Note: The year is 1988, canonically Ted is 40 and Jeff is 28. He's also living at his grandmother's house at this time, though in this AU Jeff has started to work at Ambrosia and just killed his second victim. [. . .] Bundy escaped from Aspen to Florida, and was never caught again due to not attempting to kidnap Carole Deronch (hopefully That's how you spell it). (nevermoreflesh 2018)

“Canon” in fictional fandoms is a (disputed) body of works considered as authorized, and/or to have come from the official creators and owners of a text. (Multimedia franchise fandoms often dispute which materials “count” as canon, such as spinoff novels, prequels, or post-hoc comments from directors and writers.) The story explicitly flits between fact and fiction, positing fiction as an “AU,” or “alternative universe” in fandom speak. Other Real Person fandoms also utilize this term to deviate from the real-life circumstances of their characters. The author states that it should be “pretty obvious I don’t condone, because this story isn’t romantic at all,” thus implying that other serial killer fanfics—more romantic ones—might actually be written by authors who condone the killer’s actions.

The story goes some way towards humanizing Bundy, attributing to him the “non-violent, non-sadistic pleasure” of enjoying socks (an invented quirk), but utilizes a particular imagistic trope that several real-life witnesses and acquaintances attributed to Bundy: his chameleon-like qualities. From Dahmer’s point of view, “Ted’s eyes were brown or black, but as the sun came over them he realized that they were in fact, blue. It was inhuman- extremely strange. It felt like looking at a whole different man” (nevermoreflesh 2018). This statement solidifies the construction of Bundy popularized by such media as *The Bundy Tapes*, wherein witnesses and law enforcement officials testify that Bundy seemed to change before them, including that particular quality of his eyes (episode 2). This statement ultimately ties into the conservative impetus of true crime media: It is not that law enforcement missed opportunities, but that the killer has some special ability to evade them. *The Bundy Tapes* thus provides a textual touchstone of which the community is presumed to be aware, similar to the way that key texts provided touchstones for Jenkins’s communities of interpretation. Indeed, a commenter on a different Bundy fanfic acknowledges, “I just saw the tapes. Amazing” (JiKook_Namjin_taegiseok 2019), to which the author agrees: “So interesting right?!” (michaelsmistress 2019a). Acknowledged textual touchstones tie these stories together as poached within the same structure.

Table 1. Serial Killer Fanfic from AO3

Title	Author	Year
A Handsome Face with a Monster Inside	nevermoreflesh	2018
Life's Too Short to Match Your Socks	michaelsmistress	2019
A Second Chance	Upset	2020
Baby, I'm an Animal (But You Can Have a Taste)	orphan account	2020
Safe and Sound	Sunhealer24	2021
The One Where True Crime Meets High-school	orphan account	2018
Candy Necklace	Yolandi	2019
Blood Moon Rising	HauntedAttic	2021
Philocaly: My Love. My Beauty	orphan account	2017
We Don't Need to Be Friends	orphan account	2020
Flesh without Blooo	lovetoomanythings	2021
In This Together	jdimh7	2022
We Can See the Stars ... And They Don't Burn Anymore ...	2Lady4Mental6Hospital9	2020
Minutes of Joy	2Lady4Mental6Hospital9	2020
The Most Beautiful Happiness for Lizzie and Ted	2tady4Mental6Hospital8	2020
The Love of My Life-Is You, My Dear Lizzie	2Lady4Mental6Hospital8	2020
A Collection of Poems about Jeffrey Dahmer and the Original Female Character	2Lady4Mental6Hospital9	2020
Spinning Wheel	orphan account	2020
Don't Let Be This Eno in the Name of Love	2Lady4Mental6Hospital9	2020
Breaking and Entering	LittleMinxxx	2022
Book One-Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer	cheeto_twat	2021
Book Two-Theodore Robert Cowell [Ted Bundy]	cheeto_twat	2021

Table 1. Serial Killer Fanfic from AO3 (continued)

Characters	Hits	Comments	Kudos	Words	Cmplt
Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer	4,544	17	121	4,544	y
Ted Bundy	4081	7	105	10,699	y
Jeffrey Dahmer	2956	45	100	18,220	n
Richard Ramirez	1778	3	63	941	y
Ted Bundy	1527	32	61	2,710	n
Wuornos, Bundy, Ramirez, Gacy	2714	34	51	4,452	n
Richard Ramirez	1231	3	35	1,654	y
Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer	449	9	30	6,380	n
Jeffrey Dahmer	564	4	27	538	y
Richard Ramirez	318	6	24	1,938	y
Richard Ramirez	928	4	24	5,053	n
Jeffrey Dahmer	688	6	18	30,042	y
Ted Bundy	239	0	17	1,534	y
Ted Bundy	99	0	15	435	y
Ted Bundy	175	2	13	2,762	y
Ted Bundy	144	0	13	2,467	y
Jeffrey Dahmer	194	2	10	1,151	n
Jeffrey Dahmer	262	0	9	14,383	n
Ted Bundy	101	0	7	1,628	y
Richard Ramirez	177	0	7	3,093	y
Jeffrey Dahmer	64	0	2	538	y
Ted Bundy	192	0	3	725	y
Total	23,425	174	755	115,887	
Average	1,065	8	34	5,268	

“A Handsome Face” concludes with a fantasy scenario: The killers meet, and agree to go home together, each believing he is going to murder the other. The reader is left to imagine which, if either, would succeed. As reader, I was left with the impression of a short, fantastical horror story, rather like the untold number written about Jack the Ripper.

“Spinning Wheel” is similarly billed as:

a novel of explicit and psychotic nature. With Jeffrey Dahmer as the main protagonist, the novel works around other killings in the same era with knowledge while including Dahmer as It's hitching post. The book is written under numerous points of view, as well as, the use of partial and impartial AU. Also, speaks on the secrets that Dahmer himself may have taken to the grave. (orphan_account 1 2020)

Look again at the interplay between avowed fiction, speculation, and history. The story is meticulously researched, creating a fictionalized “back-stage” for a real period in Dahmer’s life when he was stationed as a soldier in Germany. Several unsolved murders that took place in the area at that time were reinvestigated after Dahmer’s apprehension, and in this story, of course, he is responsible. The author adds these historical circumstances, complete with quotations (which are correctly attributed but not sourced as they would be in an official document) as notes to the end of the piece. The story makes use of multiple points of view, notably those of Dahmer’s fellow soldiers and associates, for whom the author has created fictionalized identities, informing us that “[the character] Andrew is actually Billy Capshaw (who is still alive til this day and don’t wish to use his name for this reason)” (orphan_account 1 2020). This statement is interesting. The textual poaching utilized for this historical metalepsis seems to have a moral limit: Real, living people are off limits. This moral limit certainly does not apply to other kinds of Real Person Fiction.

“In This Together” and “A Second Chance,” two other AO3 stories, are key examples of fix-it fics, thematically speaking. I consider them as a form of discursive construction, as authorial self-insertions and original characters are both utilized to assist in the character’s redemption arcs, though traditional textual poaching is also in evidence. In “In This Together,”

Amelia is a shy, lonely, friendless teen who can relate to America’s most notorious serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, on why he did his crimes. She decides to help him when

no one else did. She uses a small time machine to travel back in time and make this come true. (jdimh7 2022a)

Again, though the piece is explicitly tagged as a fanfic, the author professes not to “condone what he did” and wishes “may everyone rest in peace, and I mean EVERYONE who died. I don’t condone what he did but I feel like he could’ve been helped. Like I really do” (jdimh7 2022a). “EVERYONE” then, includes Dahmer. Again, this sympathetic perspective is not unique to fanfic but poachable from mainstream media. John Backderf, for example, is the author of the very successful graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer*, later made into a film (Backderf 2012; Meyers 2017). Though Backderf professes to lose sympathy for Dahmer after his first kill, his regret for the damaged teenager he knew is explicit in his work. As an author profile in *The Independent* newspaper puts it:

Backderf doesn’t believe the course Dahmer’s life took was inevitable, though, and his question has always been: where were the adults? Dahmer’s behavior was bizarre, and his drinking was obvious to everyone, but no one in authority intervened.

“They didn’t care. They just pushed him along and figured, ‘Well, next year he’ll be somebody else’s problem.’ And of course he was somebody else’s problem.” (in Applebaum 2018)

“A Second Chance,” in which the second-person narrator raises Dahmer from the dead in order to assist in his redemption arc, references *My Friend Dahmer* (2012) explicitly. The narrator has a copy of the graphic novel in her home, which the characters consult, and authorial notes explain their discussion with reference to the graphic novel. “In This Together” quotes Dahmer (again correctly, but without reference) in his more sympathetic moments:

“It made it feel like they were apart of me.” Those were the words Jeffrey Dahmer said to FBI agent and author, Robert Ressler, on why he ate his victims.

A quote of Jeffrey is, “What worth is life if you can’t be helpful to someone?”, and I think that getting him involved with the community can make him feel worthy and that his life can be meaningful even if It’s a little. (jdimh7 2022a)

The Amelia character assists the would-be killer in getting the proper diagnoses of mental illnesses, allowing him to “function in life.” She does

experience moments of fear, when she wonders if he will in fact attempt to kill her, and experiences a frightening dream where this happens. But she is ultimately “able to prevent Jeff from becoming this monster that we all know of.” The author confesses in the notes that “JD is the serial killer [t]hat’s most captivating to me,” because she can “understand not having any friends and being lonely” (jdimh7 2022a). Despite her claims to absolutely not condone his acts, she agrees with a commenter that they are both “Jeffrey Dahmer supporter[s] all the way” (jdimh2 2022b).

“A Second Chance” is very similar thematically, with the notable difference that it is written in second person. The main character is “you.” This is uncommon in fanfic, as in other forms of fiction, and prompts a degree of self-reflection in the reader. His or her deliberate choice to read this story is an involvement, perhaps an implication, in this fandom. Again, the redemption arc is explicit, indeed religious, as the notes instruct:

You’ve been given the gift of resurrection, by God, who can say?

However, you unknowingly bring back something much bigger and more dangerous than yourself, but you aren’t so quick to give him up.

Will you be able to keep the Milwaukee Monster under control and show him how to adapt to a much different society, one that he may very well thrive in? (Upset 2020)

The author once again states that she does not condone the killer’s act, but bills the story as

a psychological experiment based on a question I often asked myself regarding Jeffrey’s early life and circumstances: could he have had a chance at a normal life in our current society, one that has come to accept homosexuality and views a fascination with paleontology as potential rather than freakish sickness?

Again, there is little here that seems particularly shocking or taboo. Speculation over whether a killer could have turned out differently in different social circumstances is commonplace. What perhaps renders this piece fannish is the focus on appealing aspects of Dahmer’s physicality—his eyes described as “baby blue gutwrenchers.” This is a fannish trope: Francesca Coppa (2006), for example, has written on the physicality of fanfic, the appropriation and arrangement of recognized bodies reminiscent to her of drama. It is the visual, voyeuristic aspect of these fanfics that is picked out as particularly,

inappropriately fannish by some commenters, cited as “proof that God left this Earth, after he saw delusional women lusting after an actual serial killer and cannibal because they have this delusion they could change him” (Whoneedsanameforthissite 2020).

Sometimes, the tendency to sexualization prompts the theme of self-reflection in these stories. This is a fan-specific inflection of the discourse which does not fit so easily into the poaching/convergence model. In “Life’s Too Short to Match Your Socks” (michaelsmistress 2019b), the main character (again: “you”) is both the unwitting girlfriend of Ted Bundy and the lead detective responsible for apprehending the serial killer. The plot thus relies on dramatic irony, complicated by the suspension of knowledge required to enter the you-character. When the killer is revealed, the you-character confronts accusing newspaper headlines: “BLINDED BY LOVE: BUNDY’S GIRL IS LEAD DETECTIVE WHO FAILED TO CATCH HIM!” Being “blinded by love” is, in essence, what girls in the serial killer fandom are typically accused of. The you-character reads on:

“In her statement, she said Bundy had demonstrated aggression towards her multiple times” “Upon hearing about the discovery of bodies Bundy apparently turned ‘ghostly pale’ is it any wonder he was disturbed by the fact his play things had been discovered?” “Bundy tensed up and appeared visibly shaken when being told one of his victims had come forward, how stupid is this detective?” (michaelsmistress 2019b)

Bundy himself comments in this story that “women are always so easy to lure to their deaths. A smile, a kind word, and they melt” (michaelsmistress 2019b). The story climaxes with the armed you-character and Bundy in their bedroom, surrounded by police, as she struggles with her conflicting feelings. The you-character pulls the trigger in the last line, but the reader is left not knowing if the bullet lands. The story reads as highly self-reflexive on serial killer fanfic as a whole, a question as to how far the entire construct is delusional: There is little evidence of textual poaching in this story. It is primarily a self-reflexive statement on the discourse of serial killer fandom, and fairly subversive of patriarchal ideas of romance.

On the other hand, I cannot ignore the presence of more straightforwardly sexual and romantic short pieces. “Baby, I’m an Animal (But You Can Have a Taste)” simply relates a sexual encounter between Richard Ramirez, described as “more interesting than most of the guys around here,” and a second-person narrator who is described as uninterested in nice men (orphan_account 2

2020). In addition, or as an alternative to prompting self-reflection, the unusual prevalence of second-person narration in this marginalized fandom suggests a sort of conspiracy between reader and author, an understanding of a shared interest in this taboo genre. In “In This Together,” Amelia ends up in a loving sexual relationship with Dahmer, despite his homosexuality. “A Collection of Poems about Jeffrey Dahmer and the Original Female Character . . .” (2Lady4Mental6Hospital8 2020) is exactly that. This is especially notable because fandom is generally thought of as a pro-queer space: Queering straight characters in fanfic is commonplace, but I believe this is the first time I have seen a queer individual straightened.

The short stories by user Lady4Mental6Hospital8, meanwhile, comprise romantic interludes between Ted Bundy and his real-life girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer (often called Elizabeth Kendall). In the fiction, they are expecting an imaginary child. Lest the reader be mistaken, the stories are tagged as “Cutesy” and “Out of Character.” Similarly, the story “Candy Necklace” is a Richard Ramirez fic written specifically to fulfill a request from Tumblr:

Please can you write a Richard fic where he and the reader are kind of chilling in a graveyard somewhere and he tells her that he loves her and they cuddle and stuff?
Fluff pls. (Yolandi 2019, quoting a deleted Tumblr post)

“Fluff” is a fannish term for a light, silly, sweet story. The author likewise acknowledges that the responding story is “O[ut] O[f] C[haracter] in some ways but I think anyone who likes Richard will like this little break from reality” (Yolandi 2019). These are self-conscious acts of discursive construction. The authors and intended readers of romanticized fic know they are not writing in a way that reflects any pre-extant reality pertinent to the killers in question, much as RPF writers know they are writing about a media construct rather than a real person. Commenter Matt chastises:

This is really gross. Ted Bundy was a real person and he hurt a lot of REAL people. Please don’t romanticize him. Even if this is based on the plot of a movie, even if Elizabeth for one moment actually cared for him, please don’t call what they had “true love” He was a misogynist, a murderer, and a monster.

And if he were alive today he’d be happy at this kind of romanticized attention he’s getting. (Matt 2020)

A user who has simply filled in the name form with “Fuckyou” responds:

Dude, this is just a fiction, obviously this never happen, and ted never loved her, but that is the point of made fanfiction, have fun, stop being gringe. (2021)

“Gringe” presumably means “cringe,” implying that the concerned commenter is responding inappropriately, failing to appreciate the communal codes of understanding that sanction this as pure fantasy. This communal code suggests a reading through the lens of discursive construction, though the theory of community interpretation from *Textual Poachers* stands. But, as I explored in *Emo* (2020), the point of fannish discursive constructions is that, in an increasingly converged media culture, they rarely stay contained. That is how fandom defined emo as a genre—via reuptake and re-articulation by the mainstream media. Serial killer fandom is of course a much more closed, secretive community. Ted Bundy is not alive today—and fanfic of him doting over a fictionalized pregnancy is not recuperable for industry profit in the way fannish genre construction is. Nonetheless, Matt’s comment seems to be hinting at a kind of unease that the fannish romanticization of serial killers has consequences outside of the community of understanding.

Finally, the two short fics titled “Serial Killers: Book One” and “Book Two” (cheeto_twat 2021a, 2021b) are essentially short biographies. It is questionable what characterizes them as fanfiction, save for the tags. In a sense, they are textual poaching, as the author inserts her opinions, for example, on Dahmer’s parents, but there is little to qualify them as stories. Nonetheless, I have included them in the sample as per the methodology, because they described themselves as serial killer fanfiction and occupy a space in a self-declared fannish archive. Moreover, I did see this tendency to documentation picked up in other forms of textual poaching, as I will demonstrate below.

There are numerous positive reviews across the range of these stories, where the reader seems to have received them in accordance with communal norms: a hot fantasy, a psychological experiment, or a pseudo-historical exercise. Unlike most fanfiction on AO3 (Fathallah 2017), they also attract plenty of censure:

So there’s fan fictions of murders now? It’s shit like this that makes me believe in abortion. (Lokisnotdead 2018)

Imao not to be rude but don’t fetishize serial killers ;^) (Tortellini 2019)

The authors, typically, do not care:

Not to be rude or anything like that, but I truly don't care what your moral standpoint on it is. You read the tags and you still clicked on it, don't click on things you don't like. (orphan_account 3 2019)

This assertion of the reader's implication relates to the reflexivity I observed in the tendency to second-person narration. Unlike the romanticizing indulgences of films like *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Berlinger 2019b), to which one critic responded with the headline, "The Ted Bundy Movie Starring Zac Efron Sure Does Love Ted Bundy" (Wilkinson 2019), there is no way to engage with these stories without knowing at the outset what they are.

We turn now to the next set of findings, gathered from the platform Wattpad, an online social reading and writing platform founded in 2006. The site has a closer relationship with traditional publishing than AO3, as popular Wattpad authors of original stories are both approached by major publishing houses and connected to them via a Wattpad service. Nonetheless, it is now a popular site for fanfic, and, if anything, has a reputation for fanfic of lower quality and (perhaps unfairly) a younger, less experienced userbase than AO3. At the time of data collection, "serial killer fandom" and "serial killer fanfic" were not searchable tags. I found that stories tagged "serial killer(s)" turned up a multitude of unrelated (fictional or fiction-based) content. Therefore, I searched one-by-one for the names of the sample of serial killers mentioned in chapter 1 (Jack the Ripper, Holmes, Bundy, Ramirez, Dahmer, Wuornos), documenting the stories that also included the tag "fanfic" or "fanfiction." Recall that these were selected as a sample of killers with a high degree of celebrity, spanning a wide swath of history, whose fame has been inflected by their differing genders and sexualities. Wattpad does not offer wordcounts, but an estimated reading time in minutes, which reflects the length of each piece. I noted these, plus the number of reads, votes (again, akin to likes), and comments on each story. Comments are not recorded by Wattpad, but I counted them manually. The results are presented in table 2, arranged by descending vote count.

Again, some initial observations are clear from the data. Firstly, most of the stories are short, with an average reading time just over sixteen minutes. While this might, at first glance, look like more material than AO3 provided us, it was actually less, because many of these were simply short opening

snippets that offered little for analysis. Very few of the stories are actually finished, despite a slightly higher average of comment numbers than on AO3. The most popular serial killer to utilize as a character is Richard Ramirez, and unlike on AO3, Jack the Ripper is represented here. H. H. Holmes did not produce any relevant results, nor did Aileen Wuornos. I think it fair to state, then, that serial killer fanfiction is sparser for Dahmer and much sparser for Wuornos than it is for Bundy and Ramirez, mirroring (rather than critiquing) the media's intense glamorization of the latter two killers and gender-based pathologization of the former.

Unlike AO3, Wattpad authors frequently integrate images into their title pages and headers. (It is technically possible to integrate images on AO3, but not much practiced as a site norm.) This practice is an illustration of textual poaching via multimedia convergence culture, as well as another form of multimodality. For example, see figure 2 for the header on richieshadesofgrey's "Richard Ramirez: One Shots" (2022).

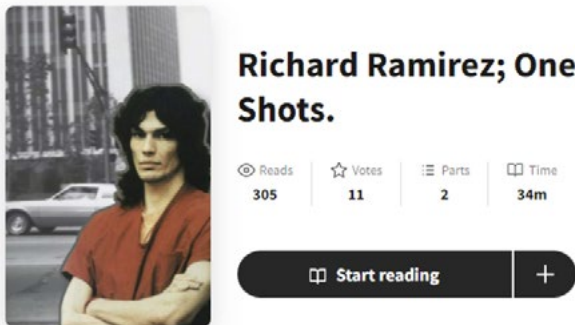


Figure 2. Wattpad story header by richieshadesofgrey.

Here a full-color image of Ramirez in prison attire is superimposed over a black-and-white shot of a city, as the story has an urban setting, picking out his persona as the most important aspect. While this kind of metalepsis was more common on Wattpad, due to the site's norms of utilizing images, the stories here contained far less historical metalepsis within the text. Certainly, iconic locations are mentioned that played key roles in the serial killers' lives, and famous quotations are used, but there was nothing like the in-depth engagement and documentation observed in, for example, "Spinning Wheel." Sexuality, romanticization, and the self-referentiality of serial killer fandom persisted as themes, as did the presence of the "fix-it"

Table 2. Serial Killer Fanfic from Wattpad

Title	Author
Just Another Lost Angel: Richard Ramirez	rrebelyell
Bloody Paths-Richard Ramirez/Reader	rottenfuck
The Night Stalker	shesdanny
Richard Ramirez Imagines	RICHIES ANGEL
The Night I Met the Perfect Man: Richard Ramirez	FfionDunne
My Secret Killer Boyfriend	CourtneyBalfombe
Carl Azuz x Ted Bundy	rxbbittOser
His Evil Grin	RichardRxmirez
Richard Ramirez: One Shots	richiesshadesofgrey
Devoted Love/!Richard Ramirez	iijazzyxx
The American Dream	princessdaey
Midnight Dreamer	richie ramir3z
When I Met Him ...	whatisthisapp666
Blinded by Love	slutfeitan
Clifford's Big Red Cumshot	deadmayo
Serial Killer Oneshots	jeffreydchmer
Stockholm Syndrome	stopidontknow
The Untold Story of Jack the Ripper	stickstuckstack
Jack and His Paramore	FullMooners
Friendship Goes a Long Way	axolotlcore
Ted Bundy x Reader	Governorvera
Sleeping with My Demon	pureteen ger
Jack the Ripper	SarahSkarsgard
Jack the Ripper	Kaylabeear
Jack	XianTan99
The Viper in the Glass	X_Paranomal_X

Table 2. Serial Killer Fanfic from Wattpad (continued)

Killer	Votes	Reads	Mins	Comments
Richard Ramirez	168	4,300	157	10
Richard Ramirez	40	1,200	21	2
Richard Ramirez	34	1,500	5	11
Richard Ramirez	27	1,000	5	25
Richard Ramirez	24	881	9	42
Bundy, Dahmer, Albert Fish	17	267	21	0
Ted Bundy	17	1,300	5	20
Richard Ramirez	13	1,200	5	0
Richard Ramirez	8	187	34	16
Richard Ramirez	7	164	15	2
Ted Bundy	6	176	5	6
Richard Ramirez	6	151	5	1
Ted Bundy	5	187	5	10
Bundy, Dahmer, Albert Fish	4	71	8	0
Ted Bundy	4	200	6	4
Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer	4	634	5	4
Richard Ramirez	2	7	6	1
JTR	1	99	9	0
JTR	1	22	8	0
Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer	1	262	5	10
Bundy, Dahmer, Albert Fish	1	605	5	16
Richard R-amirez	1	95	5	0
JTR	0	18	5	1
JTR	0	17	5	0
JTR	0	10	15	0
Ted Bundy			50	0
Total			424	181
Average			16	7

trope. But the Wattpad stories also offered two new categories: explanation for the serial killer's actions *without* the redemption of the fix-it trope, and explicit and absurdist troll fics. In fitting with Paul Booth (2015) and Phillips and Milner's (2017) observations of internet culture, a stance of irony, humor, and mockery is common to online youth culture in general and new generations of fandom in particular.

The reader may have noted that one story in the table above is titled "Clifford's Big Red Cumshot." Clifford the Big Red Dog is a children's cartoon character, whose image the story utilizes as an icon. It is tagged "Ted Bundy" and "fanfiction" presumably as a prank on serial killer fandom, in order to attract readers looking for that content. The actual story is not about Ted Bundy at all. It opens on an evening wherein Clifford "goes to sleep happy knowing he won the Guinness World Record for biggest tip," unaware that "all this was about to come crashing down" (deadmayo 2022). This demonstrates how ironic use of tags inserts intentionally disruptive, absurdist statements into the discursive formation. On one hand, this tactic might be read as mocking the existence of a serial killer fandom—on the other, it is hardly issued from a position of moral high ground. It is more akin to carnivalesque absurdism, a kind of leveling humor in which the joker and the joke are implicated equally. Most of the troll stories, though, do feature the serial killers as characters.

As noted, historical metalepsis is present but brief and summary. I saw no examples of notes or references as observed on AO3, perhaps reflecting AO3's more academic norms. In the Wattpad stories featuring Ramirez, the Cecil Hotel is frequently mentioned. (The Cecil is the notorious site of numerous murders, and Ramirez lodged there during his killing spree.) The presence of sex was a much more prominent theme in the Ramirez stories, often featuring sadomasochistic fantasies of submission:

She loved how he choked her, his big hand around her neck. She bit her lip suppressing a moan and nodded

"I-I do, I love y-your cock, daddy." She whined out, feeling out of breath. (rrebelyell 2022)

Commenters appreciate the text as sexually arousing. Sex scenes often feature elements of romanticization:

he was breathtaking but very sinister[.] [A]t the same time she just hoped that he would never be caught by the police, if he was that it would be the end of the relationship

physically for her and she couldn't do that she loved him way too much[.] She loved spending all this months with him even if he was a so-called "Monster." She didn't care about that because she knew he had a heart underneath all the coldness that he showed towards of a human beings and her at some points in the relationship. (richiesshadesofgrey 2022)

Again, this might be unsettling, but it certainly isn't new. This romanticization dates to Ramirez's trial and the surrounding media circus, as solidified and reiterated in contemporary media. Remember the comments on Ramirez made by observers in the *Night Stalker* documentary: intense, charismatic, full of sex appeal. To an extent, this is textual poaching, just not in the ideologically progressive way Jenkins imagined it. The softening and romanticization are the author's additions to the sexualized celebrity of Ramirez, allowing the writer and reader to share the sadomasochistic fantasy in a relatively safe arena. As observed on AO3, some stories also comment self-reflexively on this tendency to fantasy. In "Just Another Lost Angel," the main character and narrative focalizer Naomi is explicitly described as naïve and sheltered. She is given lines that cannot but ring with dramatic irony, as another character asks, "You got in a car with someone that you didn't even know? What's his name?" and she replies, "Richard. He's okay, don't worry!" (rrebelyell 2022). She is later forced to confront her naïveté when her crush displays his violent tendencies, hurting and threatening to kill her: "Why would I be gentle?' he demands: 'You're not special. [. . .] You're delusional. [. . .] And delusional whores have to be punished'" (rrebelyell 2022). Despite the sexually sadomasochistic overtones of "punishment," one can detect the same echoes of standard criticisms leveled at serial killer fans that were observed on AO3: that such fans are deluded in imagining that they could fix or change a killer who would simply murder them.

Fix-it fics remained a theme on Wattpad but overlapped substantially with a new theme I tagged "explanations." In short, these snippets and stories offered no redemption of the killer, but inferred explanation for their behavior based in trauma and mental ill-health. The childhood abuse suffered by Ramirez was frequently invoked, and interestingly, the short speculative stories concerning Jack the Ripper also hypothesized childhood trauma for the unknown killer. XianTan99's "Jack" imagines the young Ripper as a "boy who had lost those precious to him goes out seeking bloody revenge," and relates the murder of his parents:

“No! Don’t take mom! No!” Jack shouted in desperation.

His father spoke weakly, “Son . . .”

“Dad! “

“I’m fine—” He smiled as he coughed out blood, knowing he doesn’t have much time left.

“Dad—” (XianTan99 2021)

“Mom” is an Americanism, evidencing the discursive construction of this imagined killer in (presumably) the writer’s national idiom. The snippet is too short—and unfinished—to judge how this would develop or if any redemption would be offered, but the invocation of childhood trauma is also common to stories that do offer it. In RICHIES_ANGEL’s “Richard Ramirez Imagines” (2021a), a chapter called “Teenage Richie” is illustrated with a real image of an innocent-looking Ramirez as a young teen. (In fandom, “imagine” used as a noun means a short, imagined scenario.) This piece is billed as a “short, cute fluff imagine were richie and the reader are teenagers and his going through depression and she comforts him.” Once again, the you-pronoun is utilized as a narrative focalizer: “It was always your weekly routine to visit him because you knew his dad and uncle didn’t really treat him well. You always wanted to make sure his [*sic*] okay because face it you love him” (RICHIES_ANGEL 2021a). Commenters stress the potentially redemptive nature of such a relationship, calling it “ADORABLE 🥺 [I] r[ea]lly wish he had someone like this in his life besides his sister” (yourboyfriendsbimbo2 2021). To this the writer replies: “I[]k[now] r[ight]. He could of changed 🥺💔” (RICHIES_ANGEL 2021b). The commenter’s response is “Possibly 🥺” (yourboyfriendsbimbo2 2021). The unsure, unhappy-face emoji stresses the uncertainty of the proposition.

Rrebelyell’s long, developed story “Just Another Lost Angel” has Ramirez report in detail on the abuse he suffered as a child, before the focalizer character meets his family. His mother confesses to her that she is “glad” they are together, acknowledging that “My son was always, you know, complicated. But I hope that you’re changing him for the best” (rrebelyell 2022). Of course, these statements are inflected rather ironically by the violence attributed to Ramirez in the story, his threats to the reader, and the reflection on delusions quoted from the same story above. More of the romanticization on Wattpad tends towards “cuteness,” crossing over with some of the fix-it/explanatory theme (witness the Ramirez “fluff”). “The Viper in the Glass” appears to

be a wish-fulfillment narrative in which “Ted Bundy saves Y/N from her abusive relationship that she hopes it will turn out of what she was hoping for” (X_Paranormal_X 2021). “Y/N” is an abbreviation of “your name,” inviting the reader to insert herself into the family. It is not a particularly developed piece, but has time for such savior tropes as Bundy promising to protect the reader from her ex, taking her in after the death of her parents, and avowing that while he did, indeed, commit the past murders, he is now a changed man and “not that bad person anymore” (X_Paranormal_X 2021).

Finally, I must explore the presence of explicit troll/joke fic on Wattpad. I noted above the story that utilized Bundy as a tag purely for bait, luring the reader seeking serial killer fanfic to a story regarding Clifford the Big Red Dog and his “Big Red STDs” (deadmayo 2022). Another troll fic pairs Bundy in a relationship with the popular American news anchor Carl Azuz, who features regularly in comedic memes across the internet. The author creates an icon poaching the images of Bundy and Azuz, placing them together and superimposing red hearts around them. The fic is pure absurdism, utilizing ridiculous sexual scenarios, deliberate misspellings, and malapropisms. The protagonists enter a sexual relationship (for unknown reasons), until

Carl's mother bursts in with garlic bread from her room. Her mom tall and Brunnet with beautiful brown eyes. They fastly get off each other with a quick moan. She gasps and winks at Ted. Ted feels uncomfortable with this but he feels a weird way about her soft warm flowing brown hair. He immediately leaves with no hesitation. (rxbbtlOser 2019)

His intention is of course to murder her, as Bundy's real victims tended to have long brown hair, an act which Azuz is initially upset by, but “as the time went on Carl had almost completely forgot about his dead mother.” Readers are entirely privy to this joke, leaving comments replete with emojis that mimic the deliberate misspellings, like “mor sexie secen plez 🤔” (malscat 2019).

“Friendship Goes a Long Way” is of a similar type, concerning a love triangle between “Ricshart Ramirez,” “Jeffrey Dumber” and Bundy. It likewise utilizes bad-taste humor such as the moment Dahmer opens his refrigerator to get food but “couldn’t decide if he should grab Ben or Jerry!!? He grabbed Jeremy instead. Chomp!! He ate Jeremy cutely. ‘Yum yum!’” (axolotlcore 2021). The fic concludes “69 years later” as “Ricshart, Ted,,,,, and Jeffrey all went to bed and died from intense cancer and trees,” prompting the police to arrive and hold an impromptu “funral.” The commingling of humor and

murder is, again, not unique to fan culture. These “fanfics” could hardly be said to glamorize the killers. A long discussion on the Reddit True Crime forum r/truecrime concerned the appropriateness (or otherwise) of comedy true crime podcasts, with frequent reference to *My Favorite Murder* (Reddit 2021). Many commenters felt that all such commixture was disrespectful; others pointed out that humans have always laughed about horror and tragedy, and that so long as the jokes were on the killers rather than their victims, they felt no discomfort.

Thus I observe that the key themes of the serial killer fanfic across AO3 and Wattpad were broadly similar, as were their protagonists. Romanticization and sexualization were certainly present, but so were self-reflexivity, and attempts to explain serial killer psyche and other more mainstream intersections from broader true crime culture. Particularly interesting was the lack of (any serious) exploration of queer sexuality, given its prominence in the mainstream media surrounding Dahmer and Wuornos. With the exception of troll fic (which is, I suppose, fairly queer in a variety of ways), fandom if anything has had a straightening effect via its poaching habits and discursive constructions of the killers. This is textual poaching, in its basic form, but it is not particularly progressive or resistant to mainstream media ideologies. If anything, it reinforces them: Serial killers are special people, and heterosexual romance is more important than queer lives. Perhaps the fics that differed the most from mainstream source texts were the troll fics, which are not exactly resistant, but exist in an ambivalent relationship to their sources (see chapter 5). I turn now to some sites hosting different sorts of fan media, to observe what the lenses of textual poaching, converged media culture, and discursive fan construction can illuminate.

Tumblr is a microblogging site founded in 2007, and a major locus of online fan cultures. Here users post and recirculate text, images, video, and other media via an online dashboard, and can follow other users or tags to receive more of their selected content. As Tumblr depends so heavily on reblogging, the reader should not assume that the blogs cited are the originators of each post attributed to them, but that if not, they have integrated it into their personal blog by recirculation. Tumblr is like a scrapbook. One might expect to see imagistic and GIF-based textual poaching here, as Jessica Hautsch (2018) did for the *Supernatural* fandom. One might expect, likewise, to see the multimedia affordances of convergence culture more heavily utilized. Actually, searching for hashtags like “serial killer fandom” and “serial killer fan” produced primarily exclamations of disgust and horror regarding

the existence of such a phenomenon. However, entering “serial killer” and clicking the names of sample killers as hashtags did also locate some material that falls on the pathologized side of that constructed binary between legitimate interest and stigmatized fandom I noted in chapter 1: romanticization, professions of love, serial killer roleplay, fanvids, and expressions of sexual desire. Again, I am aware that the divide I am drawing here regarding the material to analyze is contestable, particularly as Tumblr users are less likely to use the term “fan” than fanfic authors. Nonetheless, Tumblr users draw quite discernible discursive lines separating what is considered to be fannish content from “proper” and normal interest in serial killers. Let us return to the lines drawn by Tumblr user v1ntage-p3psi1, neatly summarizing the boundaries that the True Crime Community seeks to uphold:

What is okay:

Being interested in true crime

Wanting to find more about the killers

Liking the killers but not excusing what they did

Not idolizing or humanizing them

What isn't okay:

Literally wanting to suck off a serial killer

Idolizing them

Drawing fan art of them and making it all cute

Shipping. The. Fucking. Killers. [. . .]

Saying shit like: “omg the victims are dead they’re not gonna care,” they have families you uncultured swine. (2020)

Variations on this post are all over the true crime hashtags on Tumblr, mostly along the same lines, though “liking” is disputed. Searching the serial killer hashtags and names of the serial killers in my sample did produce a spread of content that fell on the “bad” side of the binary, and is received as such by other Tumblr users. Expressions of horror, disgust, and condemnation from the broader true crime community were common on the blogs I sampled, as was the direct injunction that the respective blog owner “kys”

(kill yourself). My sample, taken at the end of January and beginning of February 2022, produced the following results as “top” rated according to the opaque Tumblr algorithm:

- <https://nightst4lkerxx.tumblr.com/>
- <https://the-real-ricardo-ramirez.tumblr.com/>
- <https://angelrose-666.tumblr.com/>
- <https://sick-girl-666.tumblr.com/>
- <https://casdied.tumblr.com/>
- <https://gunsnkillers.tumblr.com/>
- <https://richardramirezxx.tumblr.com/>
- <https://richardramirezricardo.tumblr.com/>
- <https://yourickie-x.tumblr.com/>
- <https://stalkersdisneyland.tumblr.com/>
- <https://the-real-dahmer.tumblr.com/>
- <https://datingdahmer-blog.tumblr.com>
- <https://nightst4lkerxx.tumblr.com/>
- <https://aileenwuornos-blog.tumblr.com/>
- <https://teddyshellclub.tumblr.com/>

The blog owners understand which side of the binary they fall upon. The header on <https://datingdahmer-blog.tumblr.com> reads “Jeffrey Dahmer Fangirl. In my free time I write fan fiction, search for new pictures of Jeff and obsess over how much I love him 💕” as of 2022. Tumblr is notoriously unstable, and I fully expect these blogs to have been deleted and/or banned by the time this work is published, but I saved the key images and posts for reference as I worked. Once again, I observed that Ramirez was the most popular killer, and this time Bundy less so. Wuornos and Dahmer received more attention on Tumblr than on AO3 and Wattpad. Searching for their names also revealed fannish content on blogs not specifically devoted to

them, which I included in the sample. Tumblr supports all types of media, and posts were comprised of the following types:

- A. GIFs, with and without sound or superimposed text
- B. Images, edited and unedited
- C. Music
- D. Song lyrics
- E. Fanvids
- F. Written quotations from serial killers and those who knew them
- G. Other text posts

Some of the key themes are echoed from the study of fanfiction, especially romanticization, sexualization, trolling, and explanation/sympathy for the serial killer's behavior. Tumblr does not support the kind of long-form text content that would make a narrative "fix-it" arc possible. There was an additional theme of historical documentation without additional fictional elements or metalepsis, and Tumblr also introduced the themes of radical feminism and queer sexuality with regard to Wuornos and Dahmer. These themes were continued and elaborated on TikTok. Again, this is interesting, because while Tumblr and TikTok are certainly thought of as queer spaces, they are not necessarily considered *more queer* than AO3. In this study, however, they proved to be so.

Documentation of the serial killers' lives takes the form of real photographs and quotations from official media. Some of this is romanticizing via selection, e.g., the reproduction of certain romantic letters Ramirez sent from prison to his admirers, replete with doodled hearts and expressions of love (richardramirez 2021). Yet side by side with these are notes on Ramirez's more physically repulsive features, such as his rotten teeth. There are extensive quotations from official biographies (credited, but without page numbers), and reproductions of famous images from television. The image of Aileen Wuornos raising her middle finger to the judge at her sentencing, inscribed with the caption "You fucking motherfucker," is recirculated often in her tag. It could be argued that the lack of comment on these GIFs allows Wuornos's rage to rearticulate itself, particularly if one is aware of the context of her accusations—that she was set up by the world; that the judge

and jury will burn in hell for sending a raped woman to her death—but it is hard to describe these actions as textual poaching. They are more like what fan scholars, after fan obsession_inc (2009), call “affirmational fandom”: affirming, amplifying, and promoting the object of one’s fandom rather than transforming it. In *Playing Fans* (2015), Booth referred to this sort of content as fan pastiche, a collection and documentation of texts of interest that does not subvert or contradict their meaning.

Some reuse of media, however, is explicitly sexualized and romanticized and fits better into the textual poaching model. Short videos of both Bundy and Ramirez speaking are set to songs by Lana Del Rey, an artist who is frequently criticized for glamorization of violence against women, with lines like “he hit me and it felt like a kiss,” from her 2014 song “Ultraviolence.” The Del Rey lyric “If he’s as bad as they say then I guess I’m cursed looking into his eyes,” from her 2019 song “Happiness Is a Butterfly” is frequently reposted. “I’m sorry for this,” posts the owner of the blog *nightst4lkerxx*, followed by a red-faced, panting emoji, and the imposition of the words “Is this love, daddy?” in red on black over a series of Ramirez shots (*nightst4lkerxx* 2014). Dahmer too receives a handful of “sexy edits,” though Wuornos does not; her edits are dealt with below, in the section on radical feminism. This is notable. The sexuality of a gay man is apparently more appreciated than that of a lesbian, although lesbian rage is given space.

Tumblr presented the most explicit examples of “cuteifying” I had encountered so far. Chibi-style fanart featuring killers circulates among the blogs, such as these examples of Richard Ramirez and Jeffrey Dahmer (figures 3 and 4). There is much to unpack here. Though both images contain elements loosely poached and adapted from popular media narratives—figure 3 apparently depicts Ramirez at the Cecil Hotel, where he stayed during his killing spree, and figure 4 appropriates Dahmer’s explanations that he killed out of loneliness—I would consider these more as fannish discursive constructions. They are deliberately slightly absurd, pairing kawaii-style aesthetics derived from Japanese animation with images of violence, inhabiting a semi-ironic, deliberately evasive tone that Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner attribute to online youth culture in *The Ambivalent Internet* (2017). Irony seems present, yet it’s difficult to pin down and define. The emblematic phrase of this tone might be the statement “Ha ha just kidding . . . unless?” One might call this cuteifying theme “pastiche” in the sense of “blank parody” (Jameson 1991). It *seems* parodic, yet what exactly is being parodied evades us. The killers? Their fan culture? “Normal” interest in serial killing? Anime and chibi art,

which can itself combine violent and kitchily cute images in all manner of publications? All of the above?

Explanation for and understanding of the serial killer's actions is also a key theme on Tumblr. Sometimes it appears in text form:

Some not so fun facts about Richard Ramirez

His family had a history of anger issues, a trait him and all his siblings inherited from his father. Once while fixing a sink his father got so angry over not being able to get a drainpipe to fit that he beat himself in the head with a hammer to the point that he had blood dripping down his face. Richard, and a couple of his siblings saw all of this. (sick-girl-666 2021a)

Compare:

Jeffrey Dahmer was quoted saying that killing them was his least favorite part, though, and that all he ever wanted was a living "zombie." Maybe if his father wouldn't have forced him to get rid of the mannequin that he'd been keeping, none of this would've happened to begin with. (datingdahmer-blog 2017b)

Some users post images or edited videos of the killers as innocent-looking children, reflecting on the possibility of a life without the trauma that they claim led them to kill. One video, reposted from TikTok, utilizes Ramirez's real explanations of how abuse can damage a developing person to the point that "one day . . . he explodes" as a voice-over to fictional images depicting his childhood, then merges these into real court footage (nightst4lkerxx 2021b). The song "The Night We Met" by Lord Huron (2015) plays in the background. This minor folk rock piece was also featured in the American television series *13 Reasons Why*, thus creating an intertextual link with a text that explores the social causes for suicide and violence. This is classic textual poaching in quite a sophisticated form, and though it utilizes the affordances of media convergence, I consider the poaching model to fit it better because sympathetic interpretations of Ramirez are not common in mainstream media. Without making any statements on how far childhood abuse and head injuries determine future life choices, I would say that, certainly, the complexity of these pieces gives the lie to patronizing nonsense like "I worry about those kids" as a dismissal of serial killer fandom.

Images and video of Wuornos are also heavily poached to express empathy, identification—and here, feminist anger. "I cry every time I read about



Figure 3. Ramirez fanart (nightst4lkerxx 2021a).



Figure 4. Dahmer fanart (datingdahmer-blog 2017a).

Aileen Wuornos” is superimposed in block text over an image of Aileen taking an oath in court: “I really don’t think she deserved the death penalty” (aileenwuornos-blog 2011). Nor do I, nor does Nick Broomfield, nor does Phyllis Chesler. Indeed, while it is anti-conservative and anti-patriarchal, I would consider this perspective to be mainstream enough that these posts seem more like an illustration of convergence culture than textual poaching. The post utilizes readily available text to make a political point that, while disputed, is still within the realms of mainstream discourse.

More notable, perhaps, are the posts and edits actively celebrating and endorsing Wuornos’s actions. A now-deleted post from user smokinfeeds briefly showed an image of Wuornos with a halo of purple hearts, and the inscription “kill your johns” over her body. The post was annotated “starting a radfem y[ou]t[ube] stream [. . .] and I made aileen fanart to use as the next background” (2022). The background of this blog was a repeated image of the symbol for “female,” where an assault rifle forms the t-cross. A short video whose origin has been lost was briefly circulated with the annotation “touch me without consent . . . I dare you.” In the clip, a young woman is lying on a bed with her back to the camera, turns around as though touched unaware, and morphs into an image of Wuornos.

Other posts tagged with Aileen Wuornos generally express the sentiment that women have every right to kill abusive men—that it is indeed a “net positive” (male-to-catgirl 2021)—or remark, “I hate when men talk about female serial killers . . . like first of all . . . you’re already worse than them just be existing as a male, so don’t push it” (its-jilleus 2021). Though the phrasing is somewhat facetious, I would call these more radical statements an explicitly political kind of textual poaching, the poaching of a media narrative for radical feminist purposes. It does seem, so far, that Wuornos fandom is qualitatively different than that of male serial killers. It is fandom of an idea as much as of a person: The idea that if a few men need to die in order for men as a group to stop killing and raping women with such casual regularity, so be it. If they happen to be the type of men that use destitute lesbian sex workers, so much the better. This would be serial killer fandom at its most political, its most subversive, textual poaching in the ideological sense Jenkins imagined it (though he certainly didn’t imagine this ideology in particular).

Explicit trolling and joking was the final major theme on Tumblr. Similar to the tagging practice observed on Wattpad, there were blogs that utilized the names of serial killers simply for attention and/or shock value. A blog

jeffrey dahmer

- gay
- causes feels
- ate people
- everyone has a crush on him
- everyone
- women tried to score with him when he was in prison i guess

i have nothing else
to say he's p cute
and stuff



Figure 5. Jeffrey Dahmer “identification card” (*datingdahmer-blog* 2017c).

with the URL slug “ted-bundy-is-my-sugar-daddy” contained nothing related to Ted Bundy, just a range of images from films with a bleak aesthetic and jokes about depression. The troll/joke category plays up the absurdity broached in the cuteifying theme more explicitly, with more obvious irony and cynical humor. One example is the circulation of some sort of killer “identification cards,” as in figure 5. The juxtaposition of “causes feels” and “ate people” is obviously humorous (although—it should be noted—objectively true). This again perhaps says more about media culture than it does about killer fandom specifically. Impositions of cartoon characters and puns over serial killers are commonplace. Bundy pontificating in court is captioned: “Not only do I feel ya—I *necrophilia*” (*sick-girl-666* 2021b); and a news story on a typo that briefly legalized cannibalism instead of cannabis in Ottawa is juxtaposed with an image of Dahmer edited with glowing laser eyes, a meme convention to convey intense interest and enthusiasm (*sick-girl-666* 2021c). Atrocity and tragedy humor is fairly widespread; these texts are rendered fannish primarily by their inclusion in fannish blogs and by the expressions of affection contained within the jokes. For this reason, I would still consider them an act of textual poaching, intended for circulation by and within a

community of alternative interpretations, but enabled via the affordances of convergence culture. They should also be considered through the lens of fandom as play, to which I will return in chapter 4.

YouTube, a Google property, is a hugely popular video sharing website. Though not a fannish platform as such, it is another site where image, sound, and text are combined in the production of fanvids. Searching “Serial killer fanvid(s)” mostly produced fanvids explicitly based on fictional texts. So, again, I searched the names of the killers sampled above, plus the term “fanvid(s).” This produced a wealth of data. I selected the top ten results based on number of likes for each killer in the sample and recorded the results as below. Tables 3 to 6 shows the overall results, with totals and average comments, views and likes and dates, in order that the reader may compare the differences in average responses.

There were no fact-based matches for “Jack the Ripper” and “H.H. Holmes” with “fanvid”; Jack the Ripper defaulted to fiction, while Holmes produced no matches. In a sense, then, I am relying on the YouTube algorithm to define fanvid in this context—but the algorithm is informed by the ways users interact with the site, demonstrating how discursive boundaries are produced via human-technology interaction. The site judges these to be fanvids, as opposed to documentary clips, and that judgment is based on their content, keywords, tags, and the way viewers respond to them. Look at how often the creators utilize the serial killers’ names in their username. Other usernames are more obscure: “Peek-a-boo” is the infamous final statement of shooter Eric Harris to his victim Cassie Bernall during the Columbine massacre, made directly before he murdered her. Again, I observe that Ramirez is the most influential figure, by some distance, with Bundy in second place, Dahmer third, and Wuornos the least—more replication of the mainstream media hierarchization by gender and sexuality. I use “influential” deliberately here, as opposed to “popular.” Many of the comments on these videos expressed disgust and horror, which is to be expected on a mainstream site. On the other hand, many were supportive, and this must be accounted for when examining the discursive construction.

At the level of content, the videos were much like those observed on Tumblr: a *mélange* of televisual footage, popular music, captions, and editing, although they are often longer. Both the videos and the comments responding to them reinforced some of the previous themes and introduced some new material. Romanticization, sex, and explaining or empathizing with the killer all remained, as did trolling. But these videos also produced an intense

self-conscious discussion of both fanvids of work as art, typically horror art, and of textual poaching. I already observed self-consciousness with regard to serial killer fandom in some of the fanfic, but here I found a tendency for commenters to police what may or may not be textually poached for these sorts of videos, as I will explore below. The fact that YouTube is a relatively open platform, making these videos easy for outsiders to stumble across, no doubt contributes to the broader range of statements I discovered here.

Regarding romanticization, the videos did not reveal significant new insights as compared to the Tumblr set. For example, “Ted Bundy Footage | Lana Del Rey—Summertime Sadness” (Белый Русский 2020) is, just as it sounds, real footage of Bundy after his arrest, set to the 2012 Lana Del Rey song “Summertime Sadness,” a pop/trip-hop ballad concerning suicide. The most interesting point is the selection of Bundy footage; it tends toward captures of his least performative, less upbeat, less charismatic moments. He is frequently shown smiling and smirking, but this video focuses on those moments when Bundy seems perhaps not as in control of his circustial as he sometimes was. He is shown limping, returned to his cell after his second jailbreak, having lost a great deal of weight to escape through a ceiling hatch. Sometimes the viewer glimpses moments of what might be fear, as though the proceedings weren’t going in the way he thought they would. Thus a certain depth is attributed to him, via combination with the song. Viewers are aware of how the poaching process inflects media: “Don’t confuse the feelings by playing a beautiful song” says Jessica Pazo: “Make no mistake, he was evil” (2021). While the reader may take issue with religious terminology like “evil,” Bundy was indeed a diagnosed psychopath. Thus the “inner life” and depth of feeling attributed to him by this piece of textual poaching is unlikely in historical fact, and a demonstration of how textual poaching works to create new meaning. Some viewers dislike the creator’s choices of texts to poach:

Please keep lana [Del Rey] out of your weird romanticization of homicide. (gabi mejia 2022)

leave lana del rey out of this. (C.M.B. 2021, on “Ted Bundy: Sweet Serial Killer,” featuring another Del Rey song)

I tagged these comments as “poaching police”: It seemed to be important kind of boundary work for media fans in general. Textual poaching is a fine and acknowledged process, but the wrong sort of poaching is an offense. “Did

Table 3. Serial Killer Fanvids from YouTube (Bundy)

Title	YouTuber	Views	Comments	Likes
Ted Bundy Footage Lana Oel Rey—Summertime Sadness	Ланселот	88,729	336	1,400
Ted Bundy Edit—Criminal	Mad Villain 29x24	78,986	781	1,400
Ted Bundy: Sweet Serial Killer	Theodora	53,080	460	971
Ted Bundy: She's Gone Away	Kiefer89	53,881	156	752
Ted Bundy—In the End—Music Tribute	My Head	25,629	69	406
Ted Bundy: The Unknown	Kiefer89	23,453	56	386
Ted Bundy Edit Dark Paradise	serial killer edits	12,012	19	209
Ted Bundy Edit Bang Bang Bang Bang	serial killer edits	8,840	20	187
Ted Bundy—SMELLS LIKETEEN SPIRIT	Buttercup	144	0	9
Average		38,306	211	636

Table 4. Serial Killer Fanvids from YouTube (Ramirez)

Title	YouTuber	Views	Comments	Likes
Richard Ramirez—Dirty Mind	Kelly Lambert	401,341	2,459	6,600
Richard Ramirez (Devil Eyes—Hippie Sabotage)	Queen Bee	191,217	986	3,800
Richard Ramirez Careless Whisper	Angeles Ramirez	90,686	571	1,900
Richard Ramirez—The Night Stalker	Angeles Ramirez	56,181	219	1,500
Richard Ramirez “Fell with the Devil”	Dew Ddtz	43,156	247	1,100
Richard Ramirez—Gangsters Paradise	theuncombe-done	22,914	74	1,100
Richard Ramirez—Heaven	theuncombe-done	23,252	102	741
SMELLSLIKETEENSPIRIT Richard Ramirez Edit	Nighthunter	12,647	41	529
Richard Ramirez—Dark Paradise	PEEK-A-BOO	5,451	28	194
Richard Ramirez—Animal (Glitch Remix)	PEEK-A-BOO	3,961	6	87
Average		85,081	473	1,755

Table 5. Serial Killer Fanvids from YouTube (Dahmer)

Title	YouTuber	Views	Comments	Likes
Jeffrey Dahmer-Creep (Tribute)	Luke Skywalker	36,437	280	770
Richard Chase, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer—The Devil within	Samantha Trecazzi	46,188	223	593
Jeffrey Dahmer Edit	Mad Villain 29x24	25,542	210	495
Jeffrey Dahmer Fan Edit [looped]	eleanor dahmer [i]	11,030	0	484
Jeffrey Dahmer: Love You Like I Do	Kiefer89	15,525	151	309
Summertime Sadness [Jeffrey Dahmer]	Poems of Plupp	7,402	40	235
Serial Killers Edit Richard Ramirez Ted Bundy Jeffrey Dahmer-Bad Guy Billie Eilish	STALKER ON YOUTUBE	5,690	34	182
Jeffrey Dahmer: Nothing's Gonna Hurt You Baby	Kiefer89	4,232	47	120
Jeffrey Dahmer Edit Ma-neater (lyrics)	serial killer edits	3,638	25	106
Jeffrey Dahmer Edit	Richard Ramirez	2,746	15	94
Average		15,843	103	339

Table 6. Serial Killer Fanvids from YouTube (Wuornos)

Title	YouTuber	Views	Comments	Likes
× Aileen Wuornos × Edit ×	Honey Bee	11,981	432	51
Aileen Wuornos: Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)	Kiefer89	122,051	903	214
Aileen Wuornos Memorial Edit	serial.multi.fandom	5,507	268	23
□ Aileen Wuornos—Edit	Mr. Bundy	2,688	136	9
Aileen Wuornos Edit—freaks	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	810	39	3
Aileen Wuornos Edit—Billie Jean	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	556	21	2
Aileen Wuornos Edit—I Was Made for Lovin You	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	348	29	1
Aileen Wuornos Edit—Intro (Her Version and 3 Version)	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	407	24	0
Aileen Wuornos Edit—Ma-neater	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	663	34	0
Aileen Wuornos Edit—Bloody Mary	Monike Leyva Munoz Ramirez	585	29	0
Average		14560	193	30

you really do Queen Brittney like that?” asks Haze Dante on a video pairing a Britney Spears song with Bundy footage (2021). Music, and the ability to edit clips to a beat, seems to be an impactful means of romanticization: “Ted Bundy was like a movie star. I think even now he’s more popular than any film star,” says Manoj Krishna on the same video (2021). Commenters make similar observations on videos utilizing clips of Ramirez in court, cut to songs such as “I Fell in Love with the Devil” by Avril Lavigne (2019), and, again, commenters are aware of how the poaching process works: “He does have a certain appeal in these clips with the music and all. But can you imagine sitting in that trial hearing all about his gruesome acts. I think that infatuation would quickly dissolve into contempt” (Mandy Monroe 2021).

So romanticization is both a common theme and a criticized one. Sex is likewise. Footage of Ramirez in court is quite often set to rock music or sexual music. The Julia Michaels song “Heaven” (2018) utilized in “Richard Ramirez—Heaven” (theuncombedone 2021) is known from the film franchise *Fifty Shades of Grey*, creating an intertextual link with BDSM practices. “Richard Ramirez—Animal (Glitch Remix)” (PEEK-A-BOO 2021) uses the 2014 song of that name by Maroon 5, which speaks of hunting down prey, eating one’s lover alive, and other such violently sexual acts over a hard bass line and dramatic octave leaps. Ramirez is shown smirking, snarling, flicking his eyes, and performing to his followers in court, sometimes wearing dark sunglasses. “Richard Ramirez—Dirty Mind” (Kelly Lambert 2016) imposes the highly sexual, 2006 hard trance track by Hyper over very similar clips, but in black and white. Commenters, even on this open platform, are surprisingly receptive to the sex theme:

I know he did horrible shit but you can’t help but not look at him. (Nathan 2021)

ikr,,even a guy like you cant deny that. (muan muan 2021)

They called it “animalistic magnetism” and “greatest sex appeal” in Netflix documentary. 😊😊 It is what it is, uncontrollable. 😊 (lovemusicmusa 2021)

These videos are more explicit in their tone than the discussion of Ramirez’s sexuality in mainstream media, but the difference is one of degree rather than kind, and commenters are aware of this. What makes these “fanvids” rather than documentary footage is: a) the work of textual poaching, and b) the amateur-media, narrowcast context.

Empathy and sympathy were another key theme that endured here, primarily around Dahmer and Wuornos. As the title suggests, “Summertime Sadness [Jeffrey Dahmer]” (Poems of Plupp 2021) utilizes the same Del Rey song, but this time an instrumental version, over black and white footage of Dahmer as an innocent-looking child. These are intercut with his adult explanations of his violent compulsions, his knowledge that his behavior was wrong, and his methods for desensitizing himself to his actions. He typically appears devastated. Old scenes from Disney films are also intercut: Pinocchio pressing his hands to his mouth to stop himself from speaking (and presumably, lying); Mickey Mouse attempting to escape from a skeleton as Dahmer speaks on his desperation to keep his lovers with him. The suicide of an anime character and images from the 2019 *Joker* film are likewise spliced, creating a complex and questioning commentary on blame, guilt, innocence, mental illness, and culpability. The creator’s note states, “Whether my Dahmer videos are a tribute to Jeffrey Dahmer or a mockery of his entire existence is completely determined by the viewer, just as beauty and art are in the eyes of the beholder. Peace” (Poems of Plupp 2021). Yet I would argue that the invitation to sympathy—especially through the use of childhood images—is fairly clear. The victims are absent from the video, though the creator does pin a comment listing their names and wishing that they rest in peace. A similar video pairs childhood images of Dahmer cuddling a dog and playing with firecrackers with Radiohead’s mournful, self-excoriating alt-rock ballad “Creep” (1992), and his moving apology speech in court. Most of the comments express sympathy for his mental illness, and some commend the song choice.

On the other hand, the video titled “Jeffrey Dahmer: Love You Like I do” (Kiefer89 2015) actually shows images of his victims: their faces, ages, dates of death, real and fictional footage of the crime scenes. It also shows fictional footage of Dahmer caressing and preserving their skulls, his own death date is shown as a bell tolls, and an image represents his deceased body after his murder. This image may or may not be real: Such images were released to the press, but the damage to Dahmer’s skull and head was heavily censored, making comparison difficult. The overall impression, as confirmed by the commenters’ reception, is still of sympathy, but a sympathy complicated by an acknowledgment of his actions.

The Wuornos videos are similar, showing her crying, intercutting clips of her as a child, but also include her more aggressive moments, such as that often-circulated image of her raising her middle finger to the judge.

The fanvid “Aileen Wuornos: Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” (Kiefer89 2014a), which is a cover by Emily Browning of the Eurythmics song of that name, is essentially a short biography. This version of the song is from the 2011 film *Sucker Punch*, a story of the personal and institutionalized abuse of a young girl by powerful men, and her flights into fantasy to escape it. Feminist sympathy, then, is a sub-theme of empathy once again. (Though I only found one comment specifically referring to Wuornos as a feminist, remember that Wuornos videos attract the least attention in general.) The parallels with Wuornos’s life are only recognizable to those who either know of or look up the version of the song, demonstrating the role of communal interpretation within a set of viewers sympathetic to Wuornos. The fanvid recounts the trauma of Wuornos’s childhood through captions, utilizing clips poached from news media and documentaries, and inserting the creator’s own additions of sky, an open road, and police headlights. Her victims are briefly shown. The music pauses and the audio of their “deaths” is supplied by the soundtrack to the 2003 film *Monster*. In the film clips, some of her victims are heard crying and pleading for their lives, but this does not prevent some commenters from siding entirely with Wuornos, declaring, “I’m a fan of hers” (Connie 2017) or “I think she was pretty kool. she sure did give those men what they deserved. they We’re Weirdos” (Amber Bell 2018). Again, this is textual poaching in opposition to both patriarchy and conservatism. One might also interpret it as a fannish discursive construction that is a political point first, and a comment on a real person’s life second.

Others take a more even-handed view, complimenting the video’s creator on their editing choices:

This song really fits Aileen, she was very abused since the age of 13 she was sleeping in the snow banks of Michigan. And everyone even her so call Friend used her up.

You know if you beat a dog or a Horse. They will turn on you. Aileen was set up by the system for Failure, Rest In Peace Aileen No one can hurt you now. (zClosurez 2019)

YouTube was also the first platform on which I observed something akin to romanticization of Wuornos, with commenters expressing “Love her soooo much. 💕💕💕💕💕💕💕💕💕💕” (Miss Noir in the shadow 2020) and “I was made for loving her” (Paula Moyano 2022). It will only be on TikTok, however, that I observe these empathetic-to-romantic statements merge into explicit sexualization, demonstrating that lesbianism remains a marginalized category even within this already-marginalized space.

Oddly enough, the fanvid “Richard Ramirez (Devil Eyes—Hippie Sabotage)” (Queen Bee 2017) plays Jeffrey Dahmer’s apology speech for his actions over images of Ramirez, implying that the words are his. Though some commenters are sympathetic to Ramirez’s abusive childhood, citing him as a “victim of circumstance,” they are quick to “correct” the creator on this implied misattribution:

So to clear things up the last part wasn’t Richard it was Jeffrey dahmer. (Soo Soo 2021)

At the end it is not RICHARD’s Voice . . . he never apologize. (Valentina Flores 2021)

Thus, while textual poaching is understood and appreciated, commenters in this space seem to dislike the use of creative license to fictionalize “accurate” representations of the serial killers. This isn’t unique to killer fandom or indeed to RPF—some fans object to fanfic where their favored fictional characters behave “out of character,” after all—but I did see more permissiveness of this tendency on the fanfiction sites, where the “fluff” fics, for instance, were explicitly tagged as such. It seems then that the themes of empathy and sympathy attach mainly to the queer killers, an adaptation of the “tragic queer” trope.

Some of the fanvids mimic the aesthetic of a straightforward horror story, utilizing strong images of violence, and hard, heavy, sinister music. These tend to be presented and received as artworks. Kiefer89s “Ted Bundy: The Unknown” (2014b) merges real images of Bundy with fictional depictions of his violence, cut to the beat of the 2004 song of that name by Crossfade 2004. The minor guitar melody over a choppy, syncopated beat creates an eerie effect, not at all dissimilar to the many professional documentaries on Bundy (or Ramirez): more like a skillful piece of affirmational fanwork than a transformative one. Whether the affirmation is of Bundy or of serial killer media is left to the viewer’s interpretation. Comments are primarily praise for the creator’s skill, both as a textual poacher and as a well-known fanvidder with their own distinctive style:

Absolutely stunning! This video, as always, has a great quality to it. I mean, it flows with effortless grace. Stunning. Thank you, Kiefer89. :) (kkg108 2019)

I haven’t seen some of this old Bundy footage ever before. Thanks for being so thorough in your research, Kiefer89. (Garden Dormouse 2019)

I remember your reply to my comment about how you wanted to remake some of your old videos and, while I don't think it was necessary, I must admit I've been anticipating the new products. I must also admit that when you said you were going to remake Ted Bundy-- The Unknown I was a bit saddened due to my love for the original, but with you I always have high expectations and was certain the new one would be just as good if not better 😊 (MKManiac 2019)

It seems that Kiefer89 is something of a celebrity-fan within this tiny fandom, as their videos are among the most accomplished and appreciated. I'll return to this idea in chapter 4.

Finally, some of the fanvids and comments seemed to fall into the category of trolling and joking, such as the imposition of the 2016 song "Maneater" by Nelly Furtado over clips of Dahmer both in court and in his private life, with the subject pronoun changed in the imposed captions from "she" to "he'[s] a maneater" (serial killer edits 2021). The song is a light-hearted R&B pop track concerning a woman who is so attractive she causes men to spend all their money on her, and regret they "ever met her at all." A single image of Dahmer passing his hand over his hair as he walks, surrounded by law enforcement, into a court room, is repeated many times, in a way that, when combined with the lyrics, suggests sexualized preening. It wasn't: Dahmer was no Ramirez and, on the contrary, was generally self-conscious, highly awkward, and walked with a stoop. The clip is explicitly poached and re-configured here for humor, a fannish discursive construction. "Lol this is perfect" (your-little-edit-witch 2021) reads a comment that has been pinned and liked by the creator, further situating the video as a joke. The top comment, also pinned by the creator, is "He's so handsome 😊😊" (Bumi 2021). To which the response is: "yasss jeffrey! SLAY 🍆" (A B 2021). This statement utilizes the discourse of queer culture in a rarely seen acknowledgment that Dahmer was entirely homosexual. So far there has been surprisingly little acknowledgement of this fact in the supposedly queer-friendly spaces of fan culture (see the fics where he falls in love with the reader's female stand-in). Another sort of joking and trolling coalesced around commenters with male usernames expressing flat admiration for the "work" of serial killers:

Your a good man Ted Bundy lots of respect to you a good job well done. (mark quish 2021)

Overpopulation is a problem. Thanks for doing what you had to do Richard. Rest easy legend. (Sherminator 2021)

A clear illustration of internet ambivalence, the level of irony can be hard to judge here. But the juxtaposition of an official-sounding, polysyllabic term like “overpopulation” with the implied solution of killing people does suggest black humor.

Other comments utilize the discourse of online misogyny and right-wing culture, purporting to read the sexualized videos as such:

I'm just in awe of this dark triad mogger, Im Richard Ramirezmaxxing as we speak.
(Antonio Salviano 2021)

ramirezpill is indeed brutal. (Keith Grenier 2021)

These statements take some unpacking. Firstly, the “dark triad” refers to a psychological term for the traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, which in combination are a high predictor for criminal behavior.⁴ “Mogger” is a verbification of the acronym AMOG (Alpha Male of the Group), a term originating in incel subcultures. A “mogger,” then, is one who regularly dominates others—who regularly takes actions worthy of such an “alpha.” “Ramirezmaxxing,” one must assume, is an invented term to describe being overcome with emotion due to the mediated presence of Ramirez. “Ramirezpill” is a variation of Blackpill, itself a variation of Redpill. To be “redpilled,” a term originating in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, is used in far-right circles to denote an act of awakening, to see the world as it “truly” is for the first time (according to far-right, misogynistic, nationalist ideologies, or sometimes according to related conspiracies). To be “blackpilled” means, for a heterosexual male, to give up all hope of attracting a mate and resigning oneself to celibacy, due to the realization that women are impossibly shallow and literally only care about physical appearance. To realize that Ramirez has female admirers, then, is the Ramirezpill: the ultimate illustration and “proof” of this sentiment. Via this process of reflexive discursive construction, serial killer fandom becomes the manifestation of what has gone terribly wrong with both society and gender relations . . . if it is taken seriously. As I will further explore in the chapter on digital play, the ever-ambivalent internet resists easy definitions, yet never quite allows us to dismiss these statements as only jokes.

The relatively new platform TikTok offered numerous search results for serial killer fandom. TikTok became increasingly popular during the

⁴ An unavoidable use of the term here, as that is unfortunately how it's used in the psychology texts.

COVID-19 pandemic, becoming one of the world's primary platforms for short user-created. It specifically targets teenagers and preteens in its marketing. Like Tumblr, TikTok attracts a fair amount of concern regarding teen sexuality, bullying, supposedly deleterious effects on the developing attention span, and other vague consternation around teenagers doing things on the internet. Again, there was a large amount of content here; I think it is fair to say that serial killer fandom tends more towards the visual/audio/hybrid modes than strictly written forms of production. As this chapter is primarily focused on texts rather than community, I analyzed the content of the most popular account result for #serialkiller and #fandom, along with the most popular fan accounts for the celebrity serial killers I have been using as a sample set, using the search term #[name] and #fandom and/or #fan. Connections between these accounts, and the utilization of hashtags around community, will be considered in the next chapter, as they will for Tumblr. Table 7 presents the name, featured killer, and number of videos for these accounts. It also shows the total number of plays those videos have received, the average number of plays per video, the total number of comments received per account, the average number of comments per video, the total number of likes received per account, and the average number of likes per video. This data was recorded in the second half of February 2022.

Once again, Jack the Ripper and H. H. Holmes offered no relevant results. The tag #JacktheRipper only offered material from explicitly fictional franchises. H. H. Holmes had no results hashtagged with fandom, though plenty of TikToks were available on him under “interesting/creepy/historical fact” genres, and he was featured on the general “famous serial killers” account. Ramirez is the most popular subject based on amount of content. For the first time, Wuornos is more popular than Dahmer at the level of content, though not in terms of impact on the discursive formation as measured by reception. Note that Dahmer content still has the higher share of plays, likes, and comments. Note as well that the account name “aileenswife” is a specific reference to an appreciation of her lesbian sexuality—a point I will return to under the theme of sex.

Despite the fact that the videos were shorter, the thematic analysis revealed very similar patterns to those found on YouTube, with the exception of the “famous serial killers” general account. This was composed of documentary-like footage, with information in captions presented over black and white or color photographs of historical serial killers, some lesser known. These videos, again, are a product of convergence culture, but lack the ideological

impetus implicit to textual poaching, simply meshing documentary footage and photographs with information. Booth would call them fan pastiche (2015). Commenters received them as informational works, being generally concerned with the correctness (or not) of the captions displayed:

Indiana and Illinois [are] two different states. (*Daddy* 🤔💖 2020)

[Holmes's] "Hotel" was at 63rd and Halsted it was torn down in the late 90s early 2000s[.] Read "The Devil in the White City." (user9361478211356 2020)

Commenters were also concerned with correctness on other, more traditionally fannish accounts, but the tone is more aggressive and mocking. On a video showing letters purported to be from Ramirez, one viewer objects:

BAHAHA he did not right that [. .]

That's a fucking joke and the worst fakes I've seen 🤔🤔 (Amyna_summer 2021)

Because @richard_ramirez62 produces explicitly sexualized, romanticized videos, lacking the pose of distance and objectivity implied by documentary-like footage, responses tend to be more heated and imbued with emotion. It is unclear whether these specific objections are to the misattribution of the letter, or simply to the fact that a Ramirez fan account exists. (And there was plenty of objection in the comments.)

The key themes documented on TikTok, then, were again a self-reflexive strand of discussion on textual poaching and fanwork as art; explicit sexualization; explanation and sympathy; and trolling. The reflexive discussion on textual poaching included, again, policing of the creator's choice of content. User theodorerobertbundy imposes the frenetic beats and distorted vocals of the 2009 Insane Clown Posse song "Chop Chop Slide" over images of Bundy in court, an effect that seemed to me somewhat humorous or trollish. Commenters, however, took issue, advising the creator:

Any member of icp would beat the shit out of you and they should. (Ken 2021)

don't ever use an insane clown posse sound their entire thing is hating bad people.
(deleted user 2021)

One user utilizes the comment section to advertise her own song about Bundy, linking to her YouTube account. Makayla Singleton's "Ted Bundy"

Table 7. Serial Killer Fan Accounts from TikTok

Account name	Featured killer	No. videos	Total plays
famous_serial_killers	Assorted	14	14,9220
_theodorerobertbundy	Ted Bundy	6	20,385
richard_ramirez62	Richard Ramirez	88	957,761
jeffrey_dahmer17	Jeffrey Dahmer	2	978,146
Aileenswife	Aileen Wuornos	8	11,004

(2021a) uses vocal autotune to eerie effect over a minor synthesizer melody, telling a first-person story of abduction by Bundy, intercut with samples of Bundy speaking. The video features an image of a bloodied Volkswagon Bug. Viewers reacted:

Great tune for the spooky season. It reminds me of the soundtrack for a scary movie.
(Jeff Hilton 2021)

And the creator replied:

thank you. thought it would be good for Halloween. (Makayla Singleton 2021b)

The TikTok user’s account, then, is incorporated via links into a presentation of textual poaching as an art form, regardless of the fandom’s marginalized identity.

As mentioned, a large amount of content on the Ramirez account is explicitly sexual. A typical example shows the creator lip-syncing the spoken introduction to the 1993 song “Whatta Man” by Salt-N-Peppa (featuring En-Vogue), that is: “You’re so crazy, I think I wanna have your baby.” It then cuts to a montage of Ramirez preening in court as the song plays. Most of the content is quite similar: images and montages of Ramirez cut to explicitly sexual music, and/or the account creator responding to his images by performing sexual arousal. The comments are a fairly even mixture of appreciation and claims to share in her attraction for him; and condemnation, expressions of disgust, and demands that Ramirez’s fans acknowledge the names of his victims.

Table 7. Serial Killer Fan Accounts from TikTok (continued)

Average plays	Total comments	Avg. comments	Total Likes average	Likes
10,659	60	4	1,281	92
3,397.5	230	39	1,991	332
10,884	4,060	46.14	6,7451	766.5
11,000	129	65	998	499
1,376	115	14	2,463	308

What is interesting about the theme of sex on TikTok is its ventures into queerness. I have already noted that the account name “aileenswife” acknowledges both Wuornos’s sexuality and queer attraction to her: There was a slight acknowledgement of this on YouTube in the professions of love for her from commenters with feminine-coded names, but TikTok reveals more. There is little sexually coded material for the creator to poach here: Wuornos did not present herself as a sexual or charismatically attractive being in court, and the media certainly did not present her as one. Instead, the creator relies on music to inflect the material selected, such as imposing a song about oral sex over clips that show Wuornos’s tongue as she speaks. Commenters admire “her body” (V 2022a) and observe “She fine fine” (JaŽ 2022). Wuornos as sex symbol is a fannish construct, which exists in stark contrast to her treatment by the mainstream media.

Conversely, the Dahmer videos were not constructed as sexual (see the section on empathy below). When female commenters discuss their attraction to him, the response is:

first off: He’s a murderer. second of all: he was gay he would not want you. (Jude the Dude 2021)

I’ve been thinking about this for the past few days thank you for saying this. (🔪🔪 2021)

seriously It’s like even if he wasn’t fckin evil to an indescribable degree they’re denying and disrespecting a real person’s sexuality. (Jude the Dude 2021)

He would have been a gay icon surgeon but no he had to kill innocent men. Ppl need to accept the fact that he was a gay man. (🔪🔪 2021)

These statements inflect the discursive construction of Dahmer in a corrective way. His queerness has thus far been massively pathologized by official media and positioned as the cause of his actions, then elided and ignored by his fandom. TikTok produces the first statements reinforcing Dahmer's queerness yet denying it as a source of his pathology, acknowledging his potential, indeed, to become a "gay icon surgeon" (presumably because of his obsession with internal anatomy).

Trolling and joking remained a key theme on TikTok—meaning that AO3 was the only site where it wasn't. This may reflect the fact that AO3 has a more traditional and in some ways more "academic" reputation than the other fansites. This is not to say that AO3 does not host fan humor: It hosts plenty. But serial killer fan humor is a little beyond its site norms. Here on TikTok, I have already mentioned the Bundy video cut to Insane Clown Posse's "Chop Chop Slide," a short clip that edits rapid-cuts of Bundy smirking in court to the frenetic beat and lyric refrain "alright, pull your hatchets out," a visual joke in the same vein as the cannibalism puns. Jeffery_dahmer17 (2020) offers a video with the caption "here are some cursed photos of me" ("me" implying that the creator assumes the role of Dahmer, as in the account name). "Cursed" is quite difficult to explain as online slang: It can mean distorted, ugly, absurd, stupid, or simply discomfiting, and is usually applied to images and/or comments. "Distorted" is the meaning that applies to the audio, titled "Rhythm Thief but Cursed—TikTok": that is to say, an audio clip circulating on Tumblr that distorts the soundtrack from the computer game *Rhythm Thief & the Emperor's Treasure*. None of the photographs in the montage seem particularly "cursed" (except perhaps for the clip of a teenage Dahmer beside a giant bong built entirely of snow). But the caption plays into the ambiguity and irony inherent in the descriptor, asking, "Should I do the mugshot trend next? (jeffrey_dahmer17 2020). Once again, one senses parody, yet it is hard to say what is being parodied, exactly. Viewers, likewise, experience this sense of ambivalence: On a clip which photoshops the Ramirez channel's creator into Ramirez's actual wedding pictures, one user with the account name "richardramirezsbadbreathe" writes: "CONGRATS 🥳🥳" (2021), while another user, with username ".", complains: "i cant tell if these comments are satire or not" (2021). I'll return to this theme in chapter 5.

Empathy and sympathy are present in these videos, though this is a weaker theme than on YouTube. I have noted irony in the presentation of the jeffrey_dahmer17 account, yet the content of at least one (of two) videos

is quite sympathetic to him, relying again on those clips of his childhood, depicting him as innocent, intercut with clips from the film adaptation of *My Friend Dahmer* (Meyer 2017). These show him being bullied at school and suffering various humiliations, and are edited to the R&B ballad “POV” by Ariana Grande (2020), a song about wishing to appreciate and love oneself as a lover sees one. Most of the comments are actually condemnatory, with users accusing the creator of being sick, appealing that they “please for the love of god get help” (izzy 2021), and asking if the creator is aware of the details of Dahmer’s crimes.

Empathy and sympathy are more validated on the Wuornos videos: “She looks soft or idk,” writes user V on a video showing Wuornos in a feminine cream blouse (2022b): “I wanna hug her.” Viewers claim to be on “her side always” (🔴 [username] 2021), to understand and support her, and to empathize with her. The creator roundly endorses these comments. Expressions of sympathy for Ramirez are present in the comments, too, though not really as a theme in the videos, which as noted are almost purely sexual. Where sympathy is expressed for him, it tends to be scorned and denied.

I have found, then, that the older lens of textual poaching is sometimes an appropriate tool to analyze serial killer fandom. These texts depend on communal interpretation from within a relatively marginalized culture, and attract a huge amount of censure on more open platforms like YouTube. Media convergence is more like a pathway which allows for textual poaching, but texts may also be utilized through convergence in a way that lacks the transformative impulse of textual poaching. This fannish pastiche, which Booth would call “coloring inside the lines” (2015, 2), will be returned to in chapter 5. The most explicitly political poaching concerned the reclamation of Wuornos as feminist icon, justifying violence against men as retaliation for male violence. Multimodal fanwork seems more popular than fanfiction utilizing written text alone.

Self-conscious discursive formation is also at work, such as when fanfic authors tag their fic as “out of character.” The sexualization of Wuornos is a fannish invention. Fannish discursive invention accounted for a relatively small amount of the total data and is unlikely to be reincorporated by the media industry. I also observed some ways in which fanwork reinforces the discursive constructions of mainstream media: the primacy of male (and straight) serial killers over female and queer ones, and the heterosexual sexualization of their personas.

At the level of thematics, there was surprising continuity across the sites, though with differing emphasis. Sex and romanticization persisted everywhere, though it was only on TikTok and to a lesser extent YouTube that queer sexuality was allowed space. Explanation for and identification with the serial killers was another theme, and radical feminism was a sub-theme of this category on Tumblr only. Tumblr and TikTok, taken together, have proved both queerer and more feminist-identified than the traditional fanfic platforms, which is a notable finding considering that the marginalization of female and queer identities was a key political impetus in early fan studies. Perhaps the most complex theme, and the one most evasive of the textual poaching model, is the one I have tagged joking/trolling: This theme will be further investigated and better accounted for in chapter 5, on fandom as digital play. One can easily read parody through a textual poaching lens, but parody is not quite the right term for the material I have thus far discovered. Its object of satire is too difficult to pin down, infused with an invasive irony and ambivalence that elides easy definition.

This chapter has focused on fantexts. In the next, I turn to a theoretical model through which interfan relations have been traditionally addressed—that of affective community.