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Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer

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Published by:
mediastudies.press
414 W. Broad St.
Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Copy-editing: Emily Alexander

Cover image: drow_easy

Landing page: mediastudies.press/killer-fandom

mediastudies.press acknowledges with gratitude the support of Lancaster University Library (Pilot University OA Fund 2023-2024 - Books)

Media Manifold series - issn (*online*) 2832-6202 | issn (*print*) 2832-6199

isbn 978-1-951399-36-8 *(print)* | isbn 978-1-951399-23-8 *(pdf)*

isbn 978-1-951399-25-2 *(epub)* | isbn 978-1-951399-24-5 *(html)*

doi 10.32376/3f8575cb.c2702120

Edition 1 published in November 2023

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Introduction

"Their declarations of lust and love wouldn't seem out of place on a message board for the newest chart-topping boy band of the month," the stern and worried article at feminist site *Bitch Media* opens. "But these devoted fans are not beguiled by harmonized pop songs or synchronized dance moves: They're obsessed with serial killers" (Willoughby 2017). The piece is titled "Killer Crush: Inside Tumblr's Serial Killer Fandom Problem." This interestingly ambiguous piece of phrasing could grammatically render the fandom, its object, or both as the posited "problem." Of course, it wasn't so long ago that fandom itself was, unambiguously, the "problem." Many of us in the field of fan studies still remember our obsession with media and textual objects being a teenage secret, our guilty awareness that it wasn't quite "normal" to be so "obsessed" with a fictional text. Or a series. Or a band. Or all of the above. The first wave of fan studies was more-or-less devoted to undoing this stigmatization, to demonstrating that media fandom was a social, productive, creative, life-enriching, and positive experience (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). Later work, of course, has been more nuanced, inspecting fandom's relationship with capitalism and with conservative ideologies, its reinforcement of classed, racial, and gendered hegemonies, as well as its progressive and creative aspects (Leppänen 2009; Scott 2011; Fathallah 2017; Pande 2018).

The field of fan studies is now well-established. The study of true crime, as a genre and a mode of digital media, is likewise a flourishing field. Yet the obvious—if difficult—conjunction of these themes in the popular phenomenon of serial killer fandom remains strikingly underexplored. In some

ways, this is surprising: Fandom of serial killers is older than the term "serial killer," and has actually been one of the most publicly visible forms of fandom historically, from Victorian hawkers selling bottled dirt from murder-sites as souvenirs to media moralizing over the contemporary sexualization of Richard "The Night Stalker" Ramirez or Ted Bundy. Yet, in other ways, it is expected. Remember that fan studies evolved from a place of pathologization, seeking to reclaim the positions and affinities of fans from the labels of "freak," "obsessive," and "abnormal." Early fan studies scholars can perhaps be excused for their avoidance of so-called "dark fandoms," which a handful of scholars are just beginning to explore (Broll 2020, Jones 2020). But these days, surely, the figure of the media fan is sufficiently mainstreamed and visible—not to mention commercialized—that, for better or worse, one can assume that the category of "fan" as such is a neutral descriptor. What one is a fan of, and in what ways, can of course still produce all kinds of (gendered and raced) stigmatization. But scholars should not avoid the discussion of more confronting fandoms on the grounds that it might reinforce lazy stereotypes that "being a fan" makes one crazy.

In this book, I want to look at contemporary serial killer fandom online, considering the ways in which it is or is not like other forms of fandom, and what fan studies scholars can learn from applying some frames that fan studies has now established. The small body of work on fandom of criminals so far has tended to focus on school shooters, probably because of their problematized connections with youth subcultures and the vast amount of media coverage they generate. Certainly, there is crossover between serial killer fandom and school shooter fandom, in the sense that they share a common stigma, but I wish to open a discussion on serial killer fandom specifically now, because it has a specific mediated history. The relationship of the mainstream media to serial killing and the celebrification of serial killers is quite distinct and deserves specific attention.

Across the coming chapters, I'll be utilizing four of the major frames applied to fan studies generally: fandom as textual poaching, convergence culture, and/or fandom as the discursive construction of its object (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006; Fathallah 2020); fandom as affective community (Baym 2000; Bury 2005); fandom as subculture through the lenses of capital building and gatekeeping (Thornton 1995; Hills 2002; Fathallah 2020); and fandom as digital play (Booth 2015, 2017; Fathallah 2020). This introduction provides an overview of the key work that has been done on true crime and killer fandoms, scattered across a variety of academic fields and in the popular

press, noting the absence or intermittent, scattershot use of the theoretical lenses that fan studies has established for media fandom. I then give a brief overview of the fan studies frames I will be applying, though each will also be explicated more fully at the start of the relevant chapter. Chapter 1 presents a historical retrospective of serial killer fandom as it emerged amid Victorian era tourism practices through to the twentieth century discursive construction of the serial killer as celebrity. I will consider what scholars can learn from applying fan studies frames to this pre-digital history. Subsequent chapters (2–5) turn to the digital sphere, especially Tumblr and TikTok, where serial killer fandom flourishes, but also to fanfiction sites and sites for the sale of so-called "murderabilia." In each chapter, I focus on applying one of the established fan studies frames, investigating what, if anything, is unique or distinctive about this most-moralized form of fandom, and what it has in common with more mainstream fandoms. I'll also be concerned with the construction of the serial killer as celebrity in the mainstream media texts that fans utilize, as these intersect and interact with more underground and pathologized texts, each feeding off the other in the creation of a full-fledged "serial killer industry." Indeed, one primary argument of the book, explicated most fully in the final chapter, is that serial killer fandom is *not* particularly unique, nor is it directly opposed to the mainstream construction of serial killers. It might operate "at the edges" of popular discourse—it might even stretch the limits—but just as with any fandom, the material and textual roots of serial killer fandom are already part of the cultural fabric. Fans did not make serial killers into celebrities: We all did.

For the purposes of this research, I will be taking a primarily discursive perspective on the term "fan." By this I mean that I define a serial killer fan as a person who claims to be one, and or/professes love and dedication to a serial killer. Granted, there is a blurred line between "serial killer fandom" and true crime fandom: Many true crime fans express empathy or at the very least pity for serial killers with particularly awful backstories and display the same kind of fannish tendencies to documentation, collection, and focused reading and research that self-professed killer fans do (Barnes 2019). Yet at the same time, true crime aficionados are typically keen to distinguish themselves from serial killer fans, looking down on these fans as the pathologized Bad Other or Bad Fan of the broader true crime community (Daggett 2015, 53; Fathallah 2022). True crime fans state, loudly and often, that they are *not* serial killer fans, much as they might display similar behaviors. There may well be a different study to make here, on the degree to which self-professed

true crime fans actually differ from self-professed serial killer fans in their interests and practices, but there is certainly a sufficient number of the latter, and a sufficient number of fanworks praising and celebrating serial killers that, as the first extended academic foray into serial killer fandom, it makes sense to focus this project on these manifestations. Nonetheless, I will now review some of the key work on true crime fandom as part of this introduction, before narrowing down the focus to murder-related fandoms and serial killer fandom specifically, because all of it provides important insights on fan practices for the work to come.

Serial Killing and the Media, Part 1: The Creation of Celebrity Killers

> *Serial killing is predominantly a media event.*
> —Haggerty, "Modern Serial Killers" (2009)

The serial killer is a modern invention (Haggerty 2009). Naturally, there have always been humans who killed a series of other humans over a period of time, but the term "serial killer" was popularized in the 1970s by FBI agent Robert Ressler.[1] This peculiarly modern discursive construct has always existed at the intersection of the media, the judicial system, and public imagination. In a US context, the figure partly served to take the place of the criminal gangs that had operated during Prohibition: an ever-present domestic threat whose existence helped to justify the functions, operations, and continued funding of the FBI (Schmid 2005). The news media have always paid disproportionate attention to serial killings, which make up a miniscule fraction of all crime. This is particularly true when the victims are deemed appropriately sympathetic and the killings sufficiently sensationalist. Police investigators and the murderers themselves have often had a contentious yet productive relationship with the media industries, which have served by turn to assist with, interrupt, compromise, and promote investigations, motivate and encourage murderers, and disseminate public safety information (Gibson 2006).

Kevin Haggerty suggests that the serial killer is a creature (and creation) of modernity, and "the mass media and the attendant rise of a celebrity culture"

[1] It is difficult to claim that any one person coined the term, but it certainly didn't have much currency before the 1970s. The English phrase might be a direct translation of "Serienmörder," which can be reliably dated to 1931.

have been key factors in this creation (2009, 168). There have always been people who kill a number of other people, but the serial killer as a "type" or "kind" of person is a twentieth century invention, in which the mass media play a critical part. Jean Murley explains:

> Serial killing is not new—there are records of such deeds throughout recorded human history—but the phenomenon was named in the 1970s and it was constructed in 1980s true-crime murder narratives [. . .] as a new kind of murder, one that reflected and refracted fears about anonymity, depersonalization, and the consequences of extreme self-interest. (2008, 156)

Haggerty similarly designates the rise of a relatively anonymous society, the marginalization of particular groups and opportunities for victimization, and the notion of society as engineerable (e.g., by mission-orientated killers who target groups they consider undesirable, such as sex workers or the homeless) as socio-cultural resources that co-create the serial killer as a modern phenomenon. Multiple writers have commented on the media construction of the serial killer as celebrity in the modern sense, where celebrity applies to the property of "knownness" rather than virtue or achievement (Schmid 2005; Gibson 2006; Haggerty 2009). Gibson documents the media treatment of twelve cases of serial murder in the US, UK, and France, from the early to late twentieth century. In each case, the media industry, the killer themself, and to a more conflicted degree, law enforcement, collaborate in the creation of the serial killer celebrity. Most serial killers read their press: indeed, they contribute to it, and have done so for a hundred and fifty years. The infamous "Dear Boss" letters attributed to Jack the Ripper may be unverifiable, but nineteenth century American killer H. H. Holmes confessed publicly (and exaggeratedly) to his crimes in both the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

There is, likewise, a huge public appetite for stories about serial killers, from (in roughly more-to-less normalized order) the consumption of mainstream news stories; to reading and collecting crime books; to the collection of murderabilia—souvenirs and artifacts associated with serial killers and their victims. People who perform these widespread and often mainstream practices would usually deny that they are fans of serial killers, but there is no denying that "serial killing [. . .] has become big business within the culture industry" (Jarvis 2007, 327). Again, while I will be focusing on serial killer fans, the reader ought to bear in mind that the material of their fandom is

generated by a much broader background of general fascination with serial killers. In their edited volume *Criminals as Heroes in Popular Culture*, Roxie James and Katherine Lane argue that "while we may need heroes, we want criminals" (2020, 3, italics in the original). Rather than serial killers as such, their volume is concerned with "ambiguous figures" who have clearly broken the law and often violently, yet are generally not considered evil (4). Drawing on Paul Kooistra's work, they argue that the criminal hero is understood to be rebelling against some brutally corrupt authority or political regime. They are driven to crime by their injustice of their life and situation; their actions are illegal but justified, at least to a degree, by a morality higher than law (2020, 4). Moreover, James and Lane contend that "we no longer expect our heroes to be picture perfect" but "expect/accept a duality in our heroes" (5).

Typically, serial killer fans do not consider their heroes to be "moral and honorable men," but they *do* often consider them as victims of social injustice and as standing against some authoritarian figure or regime, such as in the case of Aileen Wuornos, a sex worker who was systematically abused by men from an early age. There are echoes here of a cultural tendency identified by Lionel Trilling (1972) in his lectures on sincerity and authenticity: specifically, the location of the authentic in a form of insanity that defies all social restriction in favor of total self-realization. The ultimate origins are Freudian, conflating "authenticity" with some received idea of the id drive. Relatedly, James and Lane cite Wayne J. Douglass on the popular appeal of the psychopathic criminal, who "assert[s] their identity through their violence and disregard for societal strictures," to become "an existentialist hero rebelling against the conformist demands of modern society" (8). British serial killer Ian Brady self-consciously framed himself in this way in his book *Gates of Janus*.

> Why are the mass media and the public so fascinated by serial killers, yet show not the least interest in, and quite frankly, absolute boredom with, far more prolific legalized killers? [. . .] It becomes transparent that the reason why the media and public are so fascinated by serial killers is that these people kill at will, requiring no legislation, without asking for or needing permission, the very concept never entering their mind. (quoted in Gibson 2006, 69)

Via the available discourses of existentialism and anti-authoritarianism, Brady, who is a diagnosed psychopath, constructs himself as an existentialist antihero. Ironically, as Brett Easton Ellis so powerfully showed us, it could

equally well be argued that psychopathic serial murder is merely the full expression of the ultra-rational, neoliberal hyper-capitalism that dominates Western societies (cf. Haggerty 2009; Jarvis 2007). In his book *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid has a similar view regarding the celebrification of serial killers, observing that

> the serial killer both outrages and thrills us by his seeming ability to stand outside the law, to make his own law, in a gesture whose ambivalent destructiveness and creativity mirror our ambivalent response to the killer, composed of both fear and attraction. (2005, 24)

Schmid builds on Walter Benjamin's observations that "the figure of the 'great' criminal" has often "aroused the secret admiration of the public" for his "violence confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law" (24). Though we might consciously condemn their acts, many people are at some level attracted to the existential outsider, who appears to operate outside all established moral and social systems. For Schmid, this is a peculiarly American phenomenon, rooted in frontier mythology and the cult of the individual. He observes that "even the most explicit rejection and condemnation of serial killer celebrity can find itself implicated in (and perhaps even unwittingly encouraging the growth of) that celebrity" (2005, 2). At one extreme, he gives the example of the murderabilia industry, through which one can "now purchase the nail-clippings and hair of some killers, as if they were religious icons," but notes equally that features of supposedly public-service orientated programs like *America's Most Wanted* "pander to the same prurient public interest in crime that the program supposedly condemns" (3).

Public appetite for true crime is apparently insatiable—Schmid called the genre a "phoenix" for its remarkable ability to morph, adapt, and resurge through transformations in social structures and the media industry (175)—and it is impossible to draw clean moralistic lines regarding the uses and gratifications of either its producers or consumers. According to Schmid, the contemporary evolution of the concept of fame has "allow[ed] not only for the existence of criminal celebrities such as the serial killer but also make[s] the serial killer the exemplary modern celebrity" (4). Fame, after all, is now characterized by "visibility rather than achievement" and "it no longer makes sense to distinguish between good and bad forms of fame" (9). Schmid stresses the "multiaccentuality of serial murder": that is, the way that "serial murder can be used to support such a wide variety of ideological agendas," as useful

to policy makers and law enforcement as to novelists, sociocultural critics, and filmmakers (6). From the perspective of media studies, one might call the media construction of serial killers a producerly text, which John Fiske defined as a text which contains multiple gaps and potentials onto which diverse groups and individuals project and construct meaning (1989, 104). The shocking and antisocial nature of the acts demands hypotheses and explanation from the psychological to the socioeconomic to the religious. It can even play a comforting, nostalgic role: a domesticated, explicable, understandable threat to contrast against the politicized unknown quantity of the terrorist or radical extremist (Schmid 2005, 27).

Drawing on Leo Braudy (1986), Schmid argues that the modern celebrity is defined more by a performed identity than achievements or actions. He writes that, as the "exemplary modern celebrity," the serial killer is "widely known and famous for being himself"—famous for what he *is*. Granted, what he *is* is defined by series of acts (murders), but in the serial killer "action and identity are fused" (2005, 15). He is himself because he is a serial killer, and he is famous for being himself. This tendency is evident in serial killer fandom, wherein a killer's name evokes in shorthand a whole range of known characteristics. Schmid contends that true crime as a genre serves a primarily conservative function (see also Murley 2008 and Browder 2006). Typically, popular true crime narratives depict serial murderers as individual psychopathic monsters disconnected from the social fabric that produces them, and thus these stories operate in a mutually beneficial relationship with law enforcement in general and the FBI in particular. The aberrance of serial killers is constructed via retrospective psychological analysis, typically focusing on their childhoods, rather than an analysis in critical socio-economic terms. Moreover, the construction of serial killers as a social threat disproportionate to their actual prevalence helps secure public support and governmental funding for the FBI and related organizations. Certainly, serial killer fandom undermines this conservative function, appropriating media construction of serial killers to different uses, including forms of sociocultural parody, examined in chapter 5.

Illustrating the disparity with which interest in serial killers has been addressed across academic frameworks, scholars from some disciplines have produced moralistic treatises on media sensationalism which go on to participate in the very sensationalism they condemn. A key example is Scott A. Bonn's *Why We Love Serial Killers* (2014). A criminologist and lecturer who sets himself up as an expert witness on serial killer enthusiasts, Bonn

constantly condemns the media for their focus on serial killers—yet he advertises his exclusive interviews with said killers as a selling point of his book. He contends that a certain degree of interest in serial killers is normal, a fascination with the incomprehensible driven by fear and adrenaline and a desire to play detective, yet claims that fans constitute a "curious and obsessive world" of their own. He makes no clear distinction regarding what separates a fan from the normally-interested (other than "low self-esteem," apparently). He positions his book as a corrective to how mass media have made "morbid rock stars" of serial killers. Yet in his rhetorical use of declarations like "the Son of Sam legend is born," it is hard to characterize what he is doing here as any different.[2] At some points, Bonn invokes Émile Durkheim, suggesting serial murder as proceeding from social circumstances rather than individual consciousness, yet equally claims that "some acts of evil defy comprehension." Bonn's confused treatise—which notably perpetuates the construction of monstrous queerness, attributing Jeffrey Dahmer's crimes to a need for sexual gratification that "had no limits"—illustrates the need to apply consistent theoretical frameworks to interest in serial killers, whether focusing on self-declared fans or not.

Dirk Gibson's *Serial Killers and Media Circuses* (2006) is another example, supposedly a critique of the vast media interest surrounding serial killer cases since at least the nineteenth century. In a selling point from the forward, Gibson's material is presented in "such a way that the crime buff, interested in the gory details of strangulation, stabbing, torture, dismemberment, and even instances of cannibalism, will not be disappointed" (Wilcox 2006 in Gibson, ix). Gibson does make some notable points regarding the communal construction of the serial killer figure by the media, law enforcement, and indeed killers themselves, mostly via the letter-writing campaigns to newspapers that presaged the current relationship between social media and self-advertising criminal behavior. I will investigate how serial killer fandom treats this material in my discussion of media convergence.

[2] "Son of Sam" is a self-bestowed nickname for serial killer David Berkowitz, whom Bonn interviews. At the time of his crimes, he claims to have believed himself under the influence of some demonic force, and has now declared himself a Christian.

Serial Killing and the Media, Part 2: Killing, Sex, and Gender

The media construction of serial killers is highly dependent on their sex and gender, as well as the sex and gender of their victims. David Schmid has some notable observations on this point. He compares the reportage on Ted Bundy, a heterosexual man who killed a series of women; to that on Jeffrey Dahmer, a White gay man who murdered queer men of color; and that on Aileen Wuornos, a lesbian who killed men. He argues that true crime as a genre must exonerate heterosexuality by constructing Bundy as a totally anomalous straight man, an inexplicable exception who operated counter to everything we would expect of a heterosexual male: "True-crime narratives seek to relieve straight men of any guilt by association" (2005, 27, 178). This is particularly important considering that, in reality, the vast majority of serial killers are heterosexual men, and the vast majority of their victims are women. Feminist critics like Jane Caputi (1989) or Deborah Cameron (1994) would argue that the actions of Bundy are simply the ultimate expression of hetero-patriarchal hetero-capitalism: the peak of a pyramid supported by a normative social structure. Conversely, Dahmer's and Wuornos's homosexuality was utilized by the press as psychological explanations for their behavior: their queerness posited as monstrous, as telling "us," the posited straight reader, everything we "need to know" about homosexuality and lesbianism (Schmid 2005, 27). For example, Wuornos's lesbianism was consistently used as a justification or explanation for "man hating," and Dahmer's homosexuality was posited as having some sort of automatic link with "homicidal violence" (238). Bundy was constructed as an aberration, while "Dahmer had simply done what was expected of someone like him by being a murderous queer" (240). This discourse has material consequences, and actually contributed to the death of one of Dahmer's victims, whom police returned to his apartment despite his disorientation and visible injuries. In accordance with a popular assumption of gay relationships as aberrant and violent, police took Dahmer at his word that the boy was of age (false) and that their activities were consensual (obviously also false). Fan culture is often analyzed as a queer and feminine-leaning space (Lothian et al. 2007; Levin Russo 2013). Though this is obviously site-dependent and much more applicable to spaces like Tumblr and TikTok than murderabilia auction sites, it will be important to observe how serial killers are gendered across these spaces, and how that plays into their uses by fans.

In considering the easy acceptance of murder as entertainment, Jean Murley is particularly concerned with women's fascination with the genre. Women are the majority audience for true crime texts, and this is reflected in serial killer fandom. Murley observes that true crime and crime reporting deals primarily with "white, middle class killers and victims" (2), which is not at all reflective of real homicide statistics in America (or the UK; see also Horeck 2019). Murley is particularly interested in women's fascination with the genre. Like Schmid, Murley is critical regarding the qualitative distinction between receiving true crime texts in socially approved ways and a posited Bad Other of fannish interest, observing that "true crime is obsessed with full-on visual body horror: autopsy footage, close-ups of ligature marks and gunshot wounds on bodies, bruises or lividity on flesh, and blood pools, stains and spatters [. . .] causing some critics to refer to true crime as 'crime porn'" (2008, 5). Put into context like this, the faux outrage and horror over serial killer fandom in popular press accounts seems all the more unthinking and uncritical. From the release of Truman Capote's genre-defining *In Cold Blood* in 1966 to the multi-award winning Serial podcast (2014–present), consumption of true crime, always ubiqutous, has become almost respectable (Horeck 2019). So how does this relate to the phenomenon of serial killer fandom?

From True Crime Enthusiasts to Serial Killer Fans

We will now explicitly introduce the relationship—or sliding scale—between the more acceptable and popular forms of true crime fandom and serial killer fandom. Multiple academics have observed that women are significantly more likely to engage with true crime media than men are (Vicary and Fraley 2010; Browder 2006; Boling and Hull 2018; Schulenberg 2021). Reasons might include education—learning the ways and means of serial killers, in a bid to decrease one's chances of becoming a victim (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 82; Boling and Hull 2018; Schulenberg 2021), empathy (Schulenberg 2021; Browder 2006), a strong interest in abnormal psychology (Schulenberg 2021, 83), to vicariously cope with and process patriarchal violence, and/or to safely explore an interest in violence from which women are typically proscribed (Browder 2006, 292; Schulenberg 2021). Many women who enjoy true crime "feel that others perceived their reading habits as strange or disturbing" and express a sense of kinship and community upon finding other women who enjoy the same genre (Browder 2006, 933). Though

I would question how far an interest in true crime really is pathologized (cf. Horeck 2019), the important thing is that the women Laura Browder interviewed in her study of female true crime fans felt their interest to be stigmatized. Just as Jenkins and Bacon-Smith's Star Trek fans, analyzed in the first wave of fan studies, Browder's interviewees felt a sense of kinship, homecoming, or finding their communities upon meeting others who were equally invested in a then-stigmatized interest. Rhiannon Bury's (2005) soap opera fans reported a sense of community in their fandom that sometimes superseded interest in the text itself. Schulenberg writes, likewise, that fans of the irreverent female-hosted podcast *My Favorite Murder* feel a strong sense of communal support from their fandom, and experience para-social relationships with the hosts. Browder reports that the female true crime readers she interviewed identified with both the victim and the killer:

> Marla told me that "I can probably empathize and feel both what the criminal and the victim must be feeling at that moment, and I put myself into their shoes and think about what I would feel like if I were having these things done to me and I also do the same thing with the criminal." (2006, 932)

While these readers wouldn't call themselves serial killer fans, it is already clear that identification with murderers is not unique to self-professed killer fandom. Moreover, while true crime is generally considered a conservative genre, Browder notes that its modern form can be subversive in its critique of the patriarchal family structure (most female victims are killed by husbands or boyfriends). She suggests that true crime functions as a "dystopian romance":

> Many true crime books concern what happens to women who take romance novels too seriously: the genres talk to each other. A subgenre of true crime is the narrative of gullible women who are lulled by the romantic promises offered to them by psychopaths. (938)

In my consideration of serial killer fandom as textual poaching and discursive construction, I will consider how far serial killer fandom subverts conservative structures such as that of the primacy of the straight man, the valorization of law enforcement, and denigration of women. I will also return to this point in chapter 5, on sociocultural parody.

Kelsea Schulenberg does invoke a fan studies framework in her qualitative study of *My Favorite Murder* fans, who like many fandoms have evolved

a collective noun, in this case, Murderinos. Schulenberg is aware of fan studies history and writes that the original direction of her work "pointed towards possible findings that would align with previous fan studies work on participatory culture (Jenkins, 2013) and fan behaviors like gift economy (Hellekson, 2009)" (2021, ii). Ultimately, though, her "findings tell a story fundamentally centered on journeying from feeling alone to no longer feeling alone" (ii), thus more aligned with Bury (2005) and Nancy Baym's work on affective communities (2000). I would actually consider the gift economy aspect of fandom—wherein fans gift each other user-generated content (UGC) based on their preferred texts without expectation of direct return, upon the understanding that the whole community benefits from the common practice—to be an aspect of an affective community rather than an alternative lens (see chapter 3). Indeed, this is how Schulenberg ends up treating gift culture as an aspect of affective community in her analysis, despite the statement quoted that seems to separate them. She explores Murderinos' UGC from a fan studies perspective, following Jenkins to analyze how analyze how "new tools and technologies enable consumers to achieve, annotate, appropriate, and rearticulate media content" and "promote DIY media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies" (2021, 21). Sarah Sacks also focuses on convergence culture and UGC as a framework for analyzing Murderino fandom (2017). In line with Line Clausen and Stine Sikjaer's observations on the participatory nature of podcasting as a genre, she acknowledges how "the hosts' inclusion of UGC promotes collaborative meaning making and knowledge" (2017, 35).

Serial killer fandom is likewise a participatory culture; it participates in the media construction of serial killers, and fans certainly do share UGC, with each other if not with official media channels. Schulenberg is primarily interested in how these activities support "friendship formation" and "foster relationships" (25). Her participants expressed very strongly that most people in their day-to-day lives found their fascination with murderers bizarre, and their fandom had significantly reduced feelings of isolation. Some of the fanwork Sacks documents in the Murderino community definitely straddles the border between fandom of the podcast and fandoms of the killers, such as Instagram art depicting murderers. In one case, a fan submitted a knitted "nipple belt" to the hosts, reminiscent of the belt of human nipples created by serial killer Ed Gein. Sacks interprets this act through a lens of resistive discourse, arguing that "what the fans appear to be doing here is transforming

a threatening individual who represents the absolute worst of a patriarchal culture into objects to be laughed at, thus neutralizing their threat" (2017, 37–38). Yet such objects are polysemic, and meaning is context dependent. Maybe the creators just thought it was funny.

Acknowledging Sacks, Luna Stjerneby also considers *My Favorite Murder* fandom as a form of resistive discourse (2018). Like Sacks and Schulenberg, she invokes fan studies frameworks to do so. She is concerned with MFM fandom as resistive to patriarchal hegemony that positions women to be passive, polite, and accommodating even at the expense of our safety. One of the podcast's catchphrases is "fuck politeness," which Stjerneby uses as the title of her thesis. She finds awareness and self-protection through community to be of primary importance for the

> "sisterhood" of murderinos [sic] and sets out to investigate the discursive construction of particular gendered values within the community compared to those of "dominant culture" (which in this thesis will refer to dominant social norms of the Western world, particularly regarding gender). (2018, 4)

Her major research question is stated as, "How are hegemonic notions of femininity resisted and negotiated within the My Favorite Murder online fan-community?" (4), where hegemonic femininity is taken to be subordinate and passive. There are parallels here with my own work on fan communities as constructive of alternative discourse formations (Fathallah 2017, 2020). She suggests that the "carnivalesque laughter" invoked by the podcast's irreverent style "is humor marked by a satirical or mocking [attitude] against authority and hegemonic social hierarchies" (Stjerneby 2018, 32). Laughing at these awful situations defuses them of some of their power to victimize. But while the discourse formations constructed here do posit a somewhat alternative femininity—one based on self-protection, vigilance, and education—it is still a femininity within broad bounds of normative social structures. It is not particularly radical, confronting, or outrageous to state that women should be alert, informed, and self-protective. The femininities constructed in serial killer fandom—posited on a fascination with and attraction to the very violence MFM fans are attempting to evade—are rather more difficult to accommodate. On the other hand, I also found that fans of serial killer Aileen Wuornos utilized the narrative of her life to construct a different kind of resistant femininity: one based in identification with the abused killer, and retaliatory violence for men's abuse of women. Both these

constructions of femininity need to be borne in mind and held in tension as I examine the data.

Naomi Barnes explores in detail the potentially blurred line and gatekeeping trends between serial killer fans and true crime fans in her article "Killer Folklore Identity Issues in the True Crime Community" (2019). The True Crime Community, or TCC, is an active and self-defined network spanning Tumblr, Reddit, and other websites. Though their activities look very much like those of a fan community, Barnes notes that "many members of the TCC object to the idea that they belong to a fandom" (154). Barnes utilized the Tumblr #TTC hashtag to recruit community members for surveys, asking questions concerning their interest in true crime, their activities around true crime media, and "whether or not they would consider themselves 'fans' of serial or mass murderers" (158). In accordance with earlier findings, more than 80 percent of Barnes's respondents were female—though I note that the Tumblr demographic skews female anyway. One of Barnes's respondents, bundyofjoy, asserted that TTCers were not a fandom, stating,

> A fandom is a community of people who enjoy the same things—they write fan fiction, create videos and fan art, they create OTPs, etc. Basically fandoms refer more to people who enjoy TV shows, movies, music artists. [. . .] If the true crime community were to do those things and consider ourselves a fandom we would be glorifying murderers and I not what we do. [. . .] A majority of the true crime community has made it well known that they do not condone the actions of the people they blog about. I think the best thing to call us is a community because [w]e're basically just a bunch of people who share the same interest in true crime. (2019, 159)

Barnes identifies this in sociological terms as "boundary work," and while from a fan studies perspective one might call it gatekeeping, the process is essentially the same. Yet she points out that TCC participants "utilize many of the basic techniques of Internet-based fandom" on their Tumblr blogs:

> Banners running across the top of a TCCer's homepage often display certain traits: an image of a killer used as a "userpic," insider references to the crime or criminal [. . .] Some usernames are explicit references to certain killers or crimes, such as: mycolumbineobsession, bundyofjoy, mrsjeffreylioneldahmer, richardrramirez, and dylannstormroofies. [. . .] It is difficult to reconcile both the community's rejection of the label "fan" as a socio-performance practice, as well as how the use of these names connoted a positive identification with the killers themselves. The common

> disclaimers, "I do not condone" at the top of a blog seems disingenuous when a user takes a killer's name as their own. (163)

Moreover, TCC members create and share the same kind of UGC that self-professed killer fans do: "the art, fanfiction, jokes, memes, etc" (164). Some serial killer fans simultaneously consider themselves TCC members and utilize the hashtag in their Tumblr posts. Other TCC members reject this forcibly. Barnes does, after all, acknowledge certain distinctions:

> Those who belong to various Killer Fandoms [. . .] tend to express a desire to feel closer to the killer on a personal level, obsessing over the minutiae of a killer's life. [. . .] While they do discuss case details and interact with members of the TCC, more often their focus is on physical attributes of the killers and they frequently express desires to either comfort the killers or engage in sexual encounters. (165)

Here I draw some definitional lines for the purposes of my study. A serial killer fan professes to be one, and/or expresses desire for/devotion to a killer, and is more focused on the killer than their victims. Serial killer fans may attempt to engage with serial killers at a personal level, via, e.g., letter writing, approaching them after apprehension, or collecting and requesting objects from them. They might write serial killer fanfic, and label it as such. They might create other forms of UGC celebrating serial killers. A TCC member might also create UGC, but states distinctly that she is *not a serial killer fan*, and marks out serial killer fans as a Bad Other. She might be equally or more interested in the victims of the crimes, their stories, and/or the detective work that led up to the apprehension of the killer as the killer himself. A serial killer fan may consider themself simultaneously to be a member of the TCC, but a TCC-only member would reject this. Serial killer fandom thus qualifies as a stigmatized fandom; TCC probably does not. Consider this Tumblr post, in which user v1ntage-p3psi1 neatly summarizes the lines that TCC community members tend to draw in defining the killer fan as Bad Other:

> 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. (v1ntage-p3ps1 2020)

"Liking the killers" is perhaps surprising and illustrates the debated nature of these lines. But then again, invoking a degree of sympathy or identification with serial killers is hardly unusual in professional media (see, e.g., Murley 2008, 5). With these definitions established, I will now explore the small amount of academic work there is on killer fandoms specifically, before introducing the frames through which I will analyze my defined object of study.

Killer Fandom in the Academy and in the Press

Some of the first academic work on so-called "dark" fandom specifically has been surveyed by Bethan Jones. I have chosen to avoid the descriptor "dark" in this text, unless quoting or referring directly to another academic's work, due to a) the inherent racism involved in casting anything perceived as negative as "dark" and b) the fact that we are speaking of serial killer fandom specifically, meaning there is no need for it.[3] Jones observes, as I have done, that early fan studies "focused on the positive aspects of fan behaviors and practices" in a deliberate effort to counter the pathologized and sensationalized perspectives of fans that appeared in the popular press (2020). Ryan Broll (2020) introduced the idea of "dark fandoms" in a journal article, but any further studies undertaken—such as Chelsea Daggett (2015) or Andrew Rico (2015) on the Columbine school shooter fandom—"tend [. . .] to be disparate analyses, taken as case studies of specific events rather than an overarching approach" (Jones 2020). Rico likewise noted that "dark fandoms remain rooted in the first wave [of fan studies] where these fans

[3] I thank Gus Hutchinson of the BTRN radio show *The C.O.W.S* for opening this discussion with me.

are dismissed as Others and their communities lack legitimization and acceptance by society" (2015). Jones also questions why the frames I have established to understand and explore fandom have not been better applied to killer fandoms, such as community identification, resistance to dominant narratives, or indeed trolling and irony, rightly arguing that "we can't afford to simply look at the audiences who engage in the "approved" versions of fannish production and involvement" and ignore what we find uncomfortable (2020). Daggett broached the idea of textual poaching (in suggesting that fans invested in the Columbine massacre construct an "alternative understanding [. . .] rooted in negotiated and oppositional readings of central news frames that solidified in early news coverage of the case" (2015, 46). Jones cites a user in a Columbine community on Reddit who wrote:

> It's a common thing for most communities about Columbine. Most people come here with widely spread narrative that Eric was a soulless psychopath and Dylan was a sad, sad boy. But then they actually research and see that it wasn't as simple. (quoted in Jones 2020)

Daggett's 2015 research showed a similar pattern of media reinterpretation:

> At first [. . .] I thought Eric and Dylan were terrible monsters to do something like that. As I researched, I realized that happy, healthy people don't just go and kill a bunch of their classmates and I started to humanize them more and more. That's the problem with this case [. . .] and why it keeps happening. They dehumanize the perpetrators. [. . .] If society cannot recognize that these sorts of crimes are committed by seemingly normal people they will continue to happen. (quoted in Daggett 2015, 64)

We observe then a form of textual poaching in the way that fans

> refigure news frames about Columbine to inject empathy and understanding into reading the motivations of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Personally inflected interpretations lead these individuals to actively educate others about the shooting and potential ways to prevent future shootings. (Daggett 2015, 45)

This might be a somewhat sanitized interpretation on Daggett's part: Most killer fandom members are not potential school shooters, but nor is every member earnestly researching and studying for the sake of preventing them.

The error of assuming "earnestness"—in fandom as in online culture more broadly—is a key theme of chapter 5 of this book, on digital play.

It is also important to consider whether Daggett's respondents would actually consider themselves a member of a killer fandom, or something more akin to Barnes's True Crime Community members. Daggett argues that self-identification as a "Columbiner" (which sounds like the name of a fandom), rather than a person who is "interested in Columbine," is "a distinction based on members' primary association with more 'fan'-related emotion versus research" (48, 53). But she admits the distinction is in tension. Broll declares his study of the Columbiner community on Reddit a "study of one dark fandom," though again, he does not precisely delineate how he or his subjects define a fan. Like Daggett, he finds that:

> Columbiners express their fandom much in the same way as more conventional fans might: by discussing relevant characters, proposing fan theories, and debating the legacy of the shooting and shooters. (2020, 793)

Given the widespread media interest in and celebrification of extremely violent criminals, Broll contends that "rather than being seen as anomalies, these communities represent a natural progression of a cultural interest in dark artifacts and actors" (796). He goes on to argue that "the emergence of dark fandoms should not be seen as a surprise" (802). So far as this goes, I agree with Broll, as with Rico whose similar short study seeks to "challenge and expand the object of focus when we study fandom" (2015). Both writers see the pathologizing of Columbiners as a callback to the early pathologizing and stereotyping of media fans that fan studies emerged in opposition to, and point out how fan scholars have thus far largely avoided analyzing killer fandoms. Rico argues that popular media reinforces "the common perception that these fans are unpopular, disturbed, and inevitably murderous individuals—just like the idols of their fandom" and

> when examining fans of particularly challenging subjects like the Columbine shooters it appears that it is all too easy to play into the negative stereotypes of obsessive fannish behavior as disconnected from reality. [. . .] As a result, it seems that this and other dark fandoms remain rooted in the first wave where these fans are dismissed as Others. (2015)

He too describes Columbiners' activities as a form of textual poaching, repurposing appropriate media around the shooting, using such creative methods as drawing and painting. According to Rico, however, "confining Eric [Harris] and Dylan [Klebold]'s appeal to only psychopaths and aspiring school shooters would critically undermine what they can teach us about Western culture and, more specifically, about the field of fandom" (2015). A degree of empathy for a school shooter does not make one a budding shooter (though copycats do exist). Rico writes that "fans may appear to identify or even empathize with Eric and Dylan as social outcasts," and in this case, it is their own shared discursive construction of the shooters which is significant, rather than the historical facts of whether or not Klebold and Harris were systematically victimized at school. There are also other motives to consider, Rico contends: As fandom is no longer a scandalous category, the "lure of the forbidden" may have attached to those with particular objects, and some fans will pursue this for its own sake. Finally—and the reader should certainly bear this in mind regarding serial killer fandom, especially in chapter 5—some "might just be doing it for the attention—to incite reactions from the public" (2015). For some self-identified Columbiners, Rico observed actions which were clearly trolling: posting jokes on memorial pages, for example. After all, the widespread use of social media technology means that fannish activity no longer requires the time and emotional investment it once did (which again raises questions as to the definition of fandom, but as noted, for my purposes here I will abide by fans' self-definition). It takes minutes to create a Tumblr, minutes more to start reblogging posts, and seconds to post on a Reddit page. Even the creation of UGC and repurposing mainstream media is easy, fast, and accessible for millennials and Gen-Z raised in a digital culture.

Unsurprisingly, the profession of love for or attraction to serial killers has attracted particular attention in the popular media. A *New Statesman* article by Thomas Hobbs strikes a moral tone, condemning "warped memes mocking murder victims, or posts (especially in the case of Bundy) gleefully admitting a sexual attraction towards a serial killer" (2018). It is notable that there is still a market for such articles "discovering" something: Female fans turned out to support and express their attraction to Ted Bundy during his trial, and as is well known, he eventually married one. Richard Ramirez also married a fan, one of many who had written him letters in prison. The attraction even has a name: hybristophilia, a paraphilia wherein the knowledge that one's partner is capable of extreme violence has an erotic effect. Yet the

popular press articles still present girls' attention to serial killers as some sort of uniquely shocking discovery, sometimes attempting to analyze in it pseudo-sociological terms, as Hobbs puts it, part of "a climate where serial killers have become pop culture icons" (as opposed to when?). Joshua Surtees (2016) does acknowledge that "back in the old days, before the internet and stuff, if you had a thing for a serial killer it was tradition to send him a love letter in prison. But times change" before a brief description of killer fandom, then admits his total mystification with it all. Some pieces take a more serious tone, playing into the concerned-pathologizing discourse familiar to early fan studies scholars and directed here specifically at the misguidedness of girls on social media. In the *Bitch Media* article I opened this chapter with, psychological explanations are sought, and experts consulted:

> Why are women, especially young women, stanning for these men, despite full knowledge of their twisted and fatal transgressions? There's not one core thread linking all women who have fallen in love with serial killers. David Schmid, author of *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* and an English professor at the University at Buffalo, concludes that some of these women initiate a courtship with serial killers because they believe they can "save" them. "The savior complex is definitely an important part of the phenomenon," Schmid says. "Another element is the appeal of the 'bad boy' taken to its logical (if appalling) conclusion. Not surprisingly, many of the women who form these attachments to serial killers have also been in abusive relationships." (Willoughby 2017)

In this piece, Schmid posits that

> many of these women say that their relationships with serial killers are the safest/healthiest relationships ever been in. [. . .] Why? They always know where their men are and so those men can't cheat on them; because many of them are prevented from having any physical contact with these men, they can't be physically harmed/abused by them; they are essential to the emotional and physical well-being of these men, so these women feel needed. (quoted in Willoughby 2017)

How exactly Schmid knows this, whom he asked, and what gives him the right to speak on behalf of a huge variety of women, girls—and other people!—from a position of such authority is left unexplained. Note also how the special "concern" and moralization over things girls do reflects the construction and separation of "fangirls" as the Bad Other of the rational,

critically engaged, and intelligent style of fandom (Hills 2012; Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Fathallah 2020).

Compare how a CBC radio article (2015) interviews a self-identified teenage female "Columbiner," who denies the label of fan, claiming that "to be a Columbiner is basically just having a huge interest in the Columbine shootings and being interested in the shooters," but admits that "a lot of people identify with the feelings of the shooters. So we kind of take comfort in it in a way, since a lot of us feel depressed and anxious, and they did too." The interviewer focuses on the young interviewee's "depression" before turning to an approved gatekeeper, journalist/researcher Dave Cullen, for comment. In an almost self-parodic opening statement, Cullen condescends, "First of all, I think it's great that you're [the radio station] giving her and people from that group a voice. I think that's really important, because I worry about those kids" (CBC Radio 2015). Cullen believes that Columbiners generally buy into the false narrative of Harris and Klebold as victimized outcasts taking revenge, which may or may not be the case, but presents no systematic research or analysis on how exactly Columbiners have constructed this discourse, and from what. This is why there is a need to bring the frame of textual poaching to killer fandoms: What matters here is ultimately what fans are constructing, how, why, and what that tells us about media culture and fan studies in general.

Adrian Chen is at least direct in his declaration that fans of spree killer James Holmes are "mostly teenage girls [. . .] die-hard James Holmes fans who gush supposed love for the alleged killer on Tumblr like he was a teenage vampire" (2012). His article takes a tone of mocking distance, stating that he has "yet to see any explicit fiction detailing James Holmes" romantic tryst with Ryan Gosling" but is "not looking too hard because [he'd] like to be able to fall asleep in the foreseeable future." He does acknowledge that some self-declared fans may be trolling, less invested in James Holmes than in making mischief on the internet, or indeed in fandom itself as a communal activity, arguing that "as the specificity of fandom has increased, fandom has become less about the cultural product it's supposedly obsessed with, and more about the very act of being a fan" (Chen 2015). This is certainly a possibility to be considered here. Some serial killer fans might just enjoy making memes, posting fanart and conversing around a shared media interest, or reflexive discussion of fandom as a practice—though this does raise the question of why they would choose to congregate around a serial killer text specifically. Chen suggests it is the very oddness or taboo nature

of the subject matter, as "nothing brings a fandom together better than their weird passion being mocked by outsiders. Now that fandom is largely about the act of being a fan, this mockery can be the very thing the fandom is after." This seems to be a factor in Murderino fandom, as the hosts stress frequently how odd outsiders find their obsession with murder, and "paint fans as [a] knowledgeable in-group" (Sacks 2017, 45). Sacks argues that "this kind of discourse perpetuates an idea of [hosts] Karen and Georgia [and the listeners] as 'authentic outsiders' whose niche interests separate them from mainstream culture" (46). Subcultural studies has long pointed to the draw of the "alternative" and "authentic" as opposed to a posited mainstream that is considered mundane and inauthentic by comparison (Thornton 1995; Hills 2002). I also observe that Browder's participants conceived of themselves as confronting the true, depressing, violent nature of society via their interest in true crime, as opposed to those who choose to avoid thinking about it (2006). One even suggested that women predominate in true crime fandom because women are more likely than men to "live in the real world" (932). Browder's participants conceived their reading of true crime narratives as an "existential encounter with the truth—and saw bravery in their own refusal to avert their gaze" (932). So if true crime fans who would not define themselves as serial killer fans self-identify through the "different" and taboo nature of their interest, as perhaps more authentically engaged with gritty reality, I must consider whether and in what ways being cast as the Bad Other of the True Crime community consolidates serial killer fandom as an identity, and with what effects. This is explored in chapter 3, on affective community.

Four Frames from Fan Studies: Methodologies

I will now introduce the four frames through which I will address serial killer fandom in the coming chapters. To be clear, I am not suggesting that this is a comprehensive review of fan studies theories and methodologies, which would be far outside the scope of this book. Moreover, there will necessarily be some overlap between the frames in their practical application. Nonetheless, I will now give a general outline of the four major fan studies frameworks that will structure chapters 2–5 of this book.

1. Textual Poaching and Convergence Culture

Henry Jenkins's 1992 *Textual Poachers* is considered an inaugural work in fan studies scholarship. As noted, this book was written in part to counteract prevailing prejudices against media fans as being passive, silly, immature, or otherwise lacking as properly functional adults. A lot of these stereotypes focused on *Star Trek* fans, and so did Jenkins. He used the term "textual poachers" to describe fans' active processes of meaning-making from their desired texts, taking and building creatively on what they love, ignoring and transforming what they dislike. Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) discussed *Star Trek* fandom as a resistant women's culture based on the appropriation and recreation of masculinized hegemonic culture. Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* was significant for its appreciation of women's labor, subcultures, and subcultural creativity, but could be criticized for perpetuating a sort of soft pathologization of women and girls as wounded victims perpetually in need of healing. Hers was the first book to focus on slash (pairing same-sex characters in homosexual relationships in fanfiction or UGC, at that time a very secretive practice). Her explanations for slash are more or less all rooted in the psychoanalysis of healing gendered trauma from the perspective of female oppression—which may, at times, be the case—or it might be that slash fans are fully self-realized, happy, adult women who find the idea of same sex partnerships attractive. Or a bit of both. The poaching metaphor is adapted from Michel de Certeau (1984), who stressed that the "poachers" of culture are in a relatively powerless position compared to those who own, control, and broadcast it—so the reader may observe immediately that the metaphor has dated, and is based primarily on a broadcast-to-consumer media model and a far less diverse media landscape. Jenkins acknowledged this in his 2006 work, *Convergence Culture*, which depicted a media field based on narrowcasting, audience selectivity, and the active interaction of audiences with texts via UGC and social media. Obviously, these tendencies have only increased; Jenkins cautioned that he did not wish to predict the future, but it must be admitted that *Convergence Culture* was fairly prescient in a socio-technological sense. The book can be fairly criticized for glossing over issues of access, equality, and education when it comes to new media, and for its too-easy slide from media participation to participation in citizen politics. Jenkins's later work is very much focused on what he calls "participatory

culture" and "spreadable media" (Jenkins et al. 2013).[4] Acknowledging the fan studies frame, Clausen and Sikjaer write:

> When Jenkins talks about spreadability, he is not interested in distribution in the traditional sense, which has customarily been measured through the sum of people who watch a movie on TV, or the number of tickets sold at a movie premiere. Instead, he sees it as a process where "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways," or put more simply, the capability of media being spread (Jenkins et al. 2013, 1). According to Jenkins, networked communities play a significant role in how media circulates. (2021, 158)

Now clearly, this is a significant lens through which to understand serial killer fandom. But I must develop it a little. For me, the biggest weakness in the participatory culture argument is that it ignores questions of labor, economics, and the re-appropriation of fan culture by media industries. In a very real sense, corporations can now sell fan culture back to fans, inviting contributions such as game modifications, fanart, and fanfic, then repackaging and redistributing it in commercial forms (Pearson 2010). It also creates a system whereby media industries promote and monetize the kinds of fan production they like, and ignore, denigrate, and marginalize that which they don't. As Kristina Busse put it:

> The fannish community [. . .] might have to disavow those parts that do not please the owners of the media product. Certain groups of fans can become legit if and only if they follow certain ideas, don't become too rebellious, too pornographic, don't read the text too much against the grain. That seems a price too high to pay. (2007)

Suzanne Scott has done significant work on this phenomenon and its intersections with how fannish practices are gendered; I'll discuss this in the introduction to chapter 2. Serial killer fandom is different because, firstly, it is not based on a media franchise with an owner, and secondly, because it is not so easily recuperable by media industries, except perhaps as fodder for clickbait articles. But on the other hand, there is already a serial killer industry, and an industry for entertainment via real-life violence. Murderabilia is openly sold online. The more tenuous marketability of serial killer

[4] "Participatory culture" may be part of the subtitle of *Textual Poachers*, but it is Jenkins's later work that really develops the concept.

fandom, as opposed to more traditional fandom, needs to be remembered in any discussion of convergence and participation. Moreover, as I have argued in my last book (Fathallah 2020), there are occasions when metaphors like poaching and even convergence—which are based on fans appropriating and modifying extant discursive structures—are less appropriate than a perspective where textual definition actually begins with fan culture, and is then reappropriated and reinforced by the media industry. There, I illustrated the case of the music genre emo(tional hardcore). Emo had no stable definition until fans utilized new media to make one, which was then reappropriated, legitimated, and recirculated by the music press. How far does serial killer fandom invent its own objects, and how does this relate to the construction of serial killers in professional media? How does this UGC relate to the largely conservative impetus of professional crime media, in terms of the construction of law enforcement, patriarchy, and violence?

2. Affective Communities

From the outset of fan studies, it was clear that friendship and relationship building, both online and in person, were important factors in fandom. When Rhiannon Bury published her *Cyberspace of their Own* (2005), she was reporting on research on UseNet lists from the late 1990s. She studied women's engagement with the *X-Files* via the coyly named "David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade (DDEB)" mailing list—so-called to mock the way general fan spaces had side-lined female fans as only being interested in a male actor's attractiveness. She also studied a *Due South* list devoted to slash in the early 2000s. On this list, fans discussed the show, their experiences as (female) fans, and several other topics. Bury found that the participants bonded over their shared texts and their experiences as fans and as women in the world, and formed enduring friendships and relationships. While this is undoubtedly true of some fannish experience, I must acknowledge that fan culture and the internet in general from the late 1990s and first few years of the twenty-first century are barely recognizable today. Websites are much more connected. Fan culture is much more visible. Far more people are online, and barriers to technological engagement are much lower. Users dip in and out of communities more easily. Twenty years ago, Nancy Baym (1998) found the term community appropriate for online groups—but is it now? Does it make sense to speak of all the fans of a large media property as a community, though they may never meet each other nor even frequent the

same websites? If not, where does one draw the boundaries of a community? As Stjerneby writes on fans of the *My Favorite Murder* podcast:

> Some fans may believe the fandom they are a part of is a community, while other fans may not. It may be problematic to speak of all MFM fans as one unified community due to fans being spread out in different clusters on different online platforms and the hundreds of subgroups which all have their own specific additional interest besides the podcast itself. (2018, 28)

At the outset of this research, I thought that the more secretive, taboo, and restricted spaces of serial killer fandom may render it as one of the few spaces where the term "community" in a stronger sense is more appropriate. However, my findings (see chapter 3) did not really support this. Stjerneby goes on:

> Baym (1998) refers to Benedict Anderson's (1983) argument that online communities are "imagined communities," a theory which has led many computer-mediated communication (CMC) scholars to research the "style" in which a given online community is imagined [. . .] Baym argues that the "style" of a community "is shaped by a range of preexisting structures, including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics" (Baym 1998, 38). These structures culminate into a set of systematic social meanings [. . .] hence enabling an emergence of "group-specific forms of expression, identities, relationships, and normative conventions" (Baym 1998, 38). (Stjerneby 2018, 28)

Most fandoms, at present, are probably too diverse, too widespread, and too various for attributes like "style" to apply in any meaningful way, not least because communicative styles are heavily structured by the site or app they occur on. Other academics have posited that fan communities are bound by a "gift economy" (Hellekson 2009), wherein fans gift their time, skill, and textual creations to other fans without expectation of direct return, but on the understanding that this practice benefits the community as a whole. Tisha Turk calls this "circular giving," which is rarely one-to-one. The default is one-to-many, as each created gift is available to all. In a taboo fandom, a scholar might posit that gifts are created and shared with less expectation of communal return. For one thing, there are fewer members to create gifts. For another, one might imagine serial killer fandom to have

a greater percentage of lurkers than active participants, reluctant to leave digital traces. How will this affect the gift economy of serial killer fandom?

3. (Sub)cultural Capital

The theory of cultural capital is developed from the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). It means, in short, to accumulate the sort of knowledge, habits, and ways of expressing oneself that are socially beneficial within a particular milieu. Bourdieu was primarily discussing class, but Sarah Thornton (1995) then demonstrated how subcultures develop and accumulate their own forms of cultural capital—expertise, facility with the topic of interest, and the ability to create and distribute UGC with skill, for example. In Thornton's own work on subcultures, cultural capital depended on having and demonstrating the correct "tastes," showing oneself to be an informed consumer, and denigrating casual participants (usually women). Subcultural capital is often expressed in gatekeeping (you can't be a real fan if you don't know about . . . if you haven't been to . . . if you don't own a . . .). A wide range of fan studies scholars have utilized this framework to study how fandoms operate; see Matt Hills (2002), Milly Williamson (2005), or R. M. Milner (2011) for examples. High subcultural capital elevates one's position in comparison with other fans and may even lead to association with the object or producer of one's fandom. Williamson (2005) demonstrated how some fans of Anne Rice, the author of *Interview with a Vampire*, gathered through expertise, knowledge accumulation, and persistence sufficient subcultural capital to associate with the author in prominent positions running fan activities—which then of course increased their subcultural capital manifold. How will subcultural capital operate in serial killer fandom? How will it be gathered and displayed? Expressed? What relation does it bear to other, more official forms of capital? How will it tie into the collection of serial killer memorabilia, whose cultural and commercial value very much turns on its authenticity? These form the main questions of chapter 4.

Activities that are culturally perceived as feminine lack in subcultural capital in many fan cultures (Larsen and Zubernis 2012; Fathallah 2020). Too-enthusiastic expression of sexual interest, performed lack of rationality, or behavior generally considered excessive depletes subcultural capital—and this is gendered, because behaviors associated with the body rather than the mind are discursively coded as feminine in Western cultures. The derivation of the pejorative term "hysteria" (from the Greek hysterus: uterus) might be the ultimate illustration of this tendency. Will the same be true of serial

killer fandom, or will the subject itself be unusual enough that the expression of sexual interest in serial killers is actually a method of accumulating subcultural capital?

4. Playing Fans

The final frame I will engage is the most contemporary, and taps into some of the caveats raised by writers like Rico above. It might be mistaken to assume that self-professed serial killer fans are particularly serious about their online activities. Paul Booth argues that the contemporary internet is characterized by a "philosophy of playfulness" (2015, 2017) and that fans are, to a large degree, playing. Many might think it play in bad taste—but bad taste humor is hardly new or unique to the internet or to media fandom. Joking about atrocities is a fairly constant cultural practice. Booth writes:

> What is a "philosophy of playfulness?" [. . .] The contemporary media scene is complex, and rapidly becoming dependent on a culture of ludism. Today's media field is fun, playful, and exuberant. More so than at any other time, the media we use in our everyday lives have been personalized, individualized, and made pleasurable to use. We play with our media; it is malleable in our hands. The field of media studies needs to take into account this philosophy of playfulness in order to represent the media texts created by fans not just as individual fan fiction, fan videos, fan songs, or fan research, but rather as pieces of what fans use as a larger multivocal media "game." (2016, 8)

Playing with serial killer media is not a "nice" or palatable game, but it doesn't necessarily valorize serial killers in the way popular critics have imagined. Aja Romano observes that many fans of school shooter T. J. Lane insist their "fascination is laced with irony," and quotes a participant:

> We're making fun of the little shit prick. even the girls who think He's ~so fine~ know he's a complete piece of shit and nothing's gonna change that. not even his fine, soft, newborn baby deer features. (quoted in Romano 2014)

On one hand, this participant admits that there are female fans attracted to Lane—even as they are mocking him. On the other, s/he claims a recognition that ultimately, such fans recognize that he is a "piece of shit." Again, this pushes at the boundary of how one defines fandom—but self-professed fans of all kinds of media mock and insult it and its creators regularly, so again,

I believe I must retain an iterative perspective, and take those participants who claim to be fans at their word. All fandoms can contain a degree of irony. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) believe "ambivalence" to be at the root of much online culture and creativity: Ambivalence is not indifference, as the term is often misused. The clue is in the prefix "ambi-," meaning both, on both sides, in both directions. Expressions of online culture have multiple meanings, both serious and flippant, often signalling in multiple directions. Further, Booth conceives of fannish play as generally *not* transformative, as Jenkins et al. would have it, but rather as operating *inside* certain pre-set boundaries, boundaries drawn by the media industries. In chapter 5, I will suggest that contrary to journalistic admonishments, much serial killer fandom does just that. Online fans did not create the serial killer industry. They might *stretch* its boundaries, but they don't particularly oppose it.

The first three frames established by fan studies tend towards a particular kind of fannish activity—creative, communal, productive, and now, digital. They ultimately derive from the valorization of fan studies phase—and there has lately been a certain widening of these lenses towards the revaluation of less celebrated forms of fandom, such as those based on consumption and curation, cosplay, or ephemeral performance. There is also a great deal of attention paid to the convergence between fandom and professional media in all its forms—convergent, exploitative, opportunistic, or otherwise. Much of the activity of serial killer fandom fits, at first glance, quite easily into these frames—the textual poaching, the UGC, the habits of collection—and the media construction of the serial killer as celebrity fits quite neatly into the idea of the distributed, readerly, eminently poachable, and interpretable popular text. And yet, when I turn to the concept of fandom-as-play, I will observe that it is mistaken to draw a binary between serial killer fandom and received, official media concerning serial killers. If online culture *is* ambivalent (and I think it is), scholars should avoid attempting to categorize instances of fandom as either "resistant to" or "complicit with" broadcast media. How far, then, can serial killer fandom be understood through a fan studies lens? What will the findings tell us about popular engagement with serial killers more generally, or about fan studies in general? Is there a qualitative difference between a serial killer fan and a true crime enthusiast, or is the line merely a site of discursive struggle that might land anywhere on a spectrum at any particular moment—and ought this inflect the way we think about our cultural obsession with true crime? Those are the key questions of this book.

I now turn to chapter 1 for my historical retrospective on serial killer fandom, beginning with media sensations around Jack the Ripper and H. H. Holmes. As noted, these killers' crimes were committed long before the term "serial killer" was coined, but they have since been integrated into a well-established discursive framework, and moreover initiated the kind of public and media fascination to which I begin to apply at least some of my theoretical frameworks. Due to the lack of data and the very different media contexts, it is difficult to be systematic about this, but the chapters following will provide a systematic application of the frameworks described, building off the historical insights I have gathered.