DON’T TRUST THE QUEER IN APARTMENT 213: JEFFREY DAHMER, THE BROADCAST NEWS MEDIA, AND THE POLITICS OF OSTRACIZATION

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DON’T TRUST THE QUEER IN APARTMENT 213: JEFFREY DAHMER, THE BROADCAST NEWS MEDIA, AND THE POLITICS OF OSTRACIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis works to understand the dynamic relationship between Jeffrey Dahmer and the broadcast news media by analyzing the portrayal of his murder case by the big three networks – CBS, ABC, and NBC – between the years of 1991 and 1994. This analysis was conducted visually and rhetorically on 33 news media clips supplied by the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Utilizing a Foucauldian philosophical framework, this thesis is rooted in the idea that every agent engaged in the process of broadcasting possesses some form of power – be it as producer, viewer, or as the person whose story is being told. This thesis finds that the broadcast news media was able to further ostracize marginalized communities through the sensationalization of the Jeffrey Dahmer case as it produced a layered narrative of fear which terrified an assumedly white, heterosexual “general public.” Once Dahmer was depicted as a violent boogeyman, the news media encouraged its audiences to try and strengthen the sanctity of the nuclear family as a means through which they could then protect themselves from threats like Dahmer. Paradoxically, it was the groups that Dahmer targeted the most – the black and queer communities – which became vilified as a result of this discursive shift. When the news media sought to reduce the importance of the queer underpinnings in the Dahmer case, the message implied was that queer lives didn’t matter. Finally, the Konerak Sinthamsompone
incident incited fear in the hearts of white Milwaukeeans, who suddenly became preoccupied with the thought of a race-based riot in their city.

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INTRODUCTION

A human head in the refrigerator. Seven skulls. A barrel of acid. Photos and drawings of mutilated bodies scattered throughout the apartment. When the Milwaukee police department arrested Jeffrey Dahmer on July 22, 1991, the scene waiting for them in apartment 213 repulsed them. Over the course of the next few weeks, grizzly details about the Dahmer case emerged which captivated the nation. Dahmer confessed to killing 17 boys and men, the majority of whom were people of color. More shockingly, however, were the revelations that Dahmer engaged in acts of necrophilia with the corpses of his victims, as well as cannibalizing some of their flesh.

The broadcast news media descended upon the Dahmer story like a cluster of flies onto rotting flesh. From the moment of his arrest until his eventual murder in prison, the big three networks -- ABC, NBC, and CBS -- were there to chart, comment, and analyze upon the Dahmer case as its narrative unfolded in front of an enraptured audience. The news media was there for the Konerak Sinthamsonpone incident and its racially divisive repercussions. Sinthamsonpone

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1 CBS, aired on July 23, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, aired on July 24, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); NBC, July 24, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive). Everything preceding this footnote was constructed using conflicting information provided by three of the first news media broadcasts about the Jeffrey Dahmer case. Though my description of apartment 213 may not be totally accurate, this does not deter from my writing's intent, which is to provide a visual for the heinous crime scene discovered by the Milwaukee police department. Furthermore, the majority of the news media clips that I analyzed for this project were provided by the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which unfortunately did not offer much background information on the clips – even the title of the shows that had originally broadcast them. Consequently, I have cited them according to the limited information with which I was provided.


4 Though the circumstances surrounding Dahmer’s arrest will be discussed extensively later in this thesis, for information surrounding the event, please check: NBC, aired on November 28, 1994, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, aired on November 28, 1994, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); ABC, aired on November 28, 1994, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).
was a 14 year-old Laotian boy who managed to escape from Dahmer’s apartment, “nude” and bleeding,” but was returned to Dahmer’s custody by the Milwaukee police under the guise that the two were merely engaged in a “homosexual quarrel.” The news media was there for the verdict of Dahmer’s trial, during which questions arose regarding Dahmer’s plea of insanity.

Regardless of the time, date, or place, the news media was always there.

It is the ubiquitousness of the news media in its ability to cover the Dahmer case that has captivated me over the course of the past seven months. Specifically, I have found myself intrigued by the ways in which the news media is responsible for the presentation of information in such a way that a narrative arc can be traced over the course of a series of clips. News is supposed to be factual, unbiased, trustworthy. Yet, in my analysis of the news media’s coverage of the Dahmer case, I realized very quickly that the news media had adopted the conventions of storytelling in order to relay information: I encountered exposition and resolution, heroes and villains, plot twists and plot holes. As Ed Ingebretsen writes, “[n]ews . . . is narrative-based and bound by point of view: thus it partakes of fictional devices as much as any strictly ‘made up’ novel.” This epiphany implicated a series of actors in the process of broadcasting which I had previously not considered. I began to explore the power relationships between the people responsible for the production of the newscasts, the people whose stories were being told, and the people who were watching at home.

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6 ABC, aired on January 13, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

In this thesis, I argue that the broadcast news media sensationalized the Jeffrey Dahmer case as a means through which it could further ostracize minority groups -- specifically the black and queer communities. In order to accomplish this goal, the news media generated as much fear about the case as possible, thereby launching Dahmer into the national mythos of America as a boogeyman. Upon accessing four separate points of fear in a Foucauldian-esque network of resistances, Dahmer became a hallowed figure through which the alienation of nonwhite, non-heteronormative groups could be othered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the preexisting literature about Jeffrey Dahmer seeks to understand his role in American society as a serial killer, as well as the cultural ramifications which accompany that title -- both as it pertains to hegemonic culture as well as to the marginalized groups who were impacted by him. My thesis initially aimed to perform a similar cultural analysis, but I have since realized that my thesis contributes to existing scholarly works by inverting the role of the villain in its approach. Instead of positing Dahmer as the focus of my project and trying to uncover the reasons for his criminal behavior, I have elected to use him as a lens through which a study of the broadcast news media may be conducted. Though my thesis does not serve as an approbation of Dahmer’s deeds, it does seek to highlight the pernicious machinations of the news media as it detailed his story, with careful attention being paid towards its treatment of the black and queer communities.
My analysis of the broadcast news media was largely informed by a theoretical framework established by scholars such as Timothy Crouse, Joel Best, and Simon Watney. The works of these three men may be understood to work in tandem as they seek to postulate that the broadcast news media operates as a hegemonic force, both as it produces news material and as it considers the audience to whom it is geared. Timothy Crouse is famous for coining the term “pack journalism,” which is the idea that journalists “beg[i]n to believe the same rumors, subscribe to the same theories, and write the same stories.” While Crouse’s theory is restricted to those who remain in close physical proximity to one another, Best suggests that “something similar occurs even when reporters remain physically separated” because “the prominent media sets the agenda . . . and the rest of the pack follows.” Applying this theory to the depiction of the Dahmer case in the news media, then, it becomes apparent that the big three networks that I studied each subscribed to the same cohesive narrative, irrespective of any possible political biases. Watney extends the influence of the news media’s hegemony as it assesses its audience, declaring that there is a “danger” in “in thinking of newspapers or television as being primarily concerned with ‘news’ values” since they “share an identical presumption about their audience, which is projected across them . . . as a unified “general public” over and above divisions of class, age and gender.”

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9 Joel Best, “Famous for Fifteen Minutes: Notes on the Researcher as Newsmaker,” Qualitative Sociology 9, no. 3: 377 quoted in Martha A. Schmidt, “Emotion, Identity, and Social Movements,” 36. The Crouse and the Best sources were initially placed into conjunction by Martha A. Schmidt.

which they then distribute to an assumedly white, heterosexual population -- also known as the “general public.”

A sizable portion of the literature about Dahmer seeks to understand the ways in which he is constructed as a cultural monster in order for Americans to undergo a cathartic experience as they process his crimes. In “Monster-Making -- A Politics of Persuasion,” Ed Ingebretsen suggests that Americans construct monsters to “watch [them] die”: “the monster’s role” is “to make a worthy sacrifice of the otherwise brutish, even banal social necessity of violence by which the human is created in the shadow of the monstrous.”\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, in Making Monsters -- Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer, Richard Frank Tithecott uses Jeffrey Dahmer to demonstrate that “‘normality’ and ‘perversion’ exist together on a dynamic continuum, rather than as separate entities, however interpenetrated, or as oppositional structures giving each other meaning.”\textsuperscript{12} Both of these scholars theorize that the construction of “society” or “civilization” relies upon the existence of a monstrous other against which it can be defined; they also agree that the binary between these two poles is blurred, thereby providing a space for the “civilized” to delight in the “monstrous.” In my research on Dahmer’s monstrosity, I chose to investigate the news media’s one-dimensional portrayal of Dahmer-as-evil. In doing so, I began to understand how the news media could depict Dahmer as a monster as a means through which it could generate terror and, therefore, an audience as well. Furthermore, both texts relied on a number of sources -- for Tithecott, “books, movies, magazine and newspaper articles, jokes,  

\textsuperscript{11} Ingebretsen, “Monster-Making,” 30.

afternoon talk-shows”; for Ingebretsen, magazines, novels, movies, television shows. In my research, I relied extensively on a series of news media clips supplied by the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, thereby providing me with a smaller scope and a more in-depth analysis.

Martha A. Schmidt, Dahmer’s childhood friend, provides the most extensive analysis of the repercussions of Dahmer’s murders for queer people in her text, *Emotion, Identity, and Social Movements: The Effects of Jeffrey Dahmer’s Serial Killings on Milwaukee’s Lesbian and Gay Community*. However, a number of the conclusions that Schmidt draws vary vastly from my own, starting with her assertion that “the media frequently focused on the issue of homosexuality”; according to my research, the media actively sought to avoid any direct references to homosexuality when possible.13 Furthermore, Schmidt concerns herself primarily with the local gay community in Milwaukee, whereas I consider the implications of Dahmer’s murders on a national level. My research also varies from hers as I draw a connection between Jeffrey Dahmer and the HIV/ADIS crisis. While both of us have relied upon queer theorists from the 1980s and early 1990s in order to assist in the establishment of a philosophical framework for our argument, this thesis is unique from other work in that it draws a connection between the news media’s portrayal of Jeffrey Dahmer and the “America Responds to AIDS” PSA ad campaign.

Though the Konerak Sinthamsompone incident garnered a considerable amount of media attention in the clips that I reviewed, I found that scholarship on it was sparse. Tithecott investigates Dahmer’s tendency to choose men of color as his victims, but he did so by contextualizing it within American society’s apparent need to posit civilization (or whiteness, which Dahmer represented) against the savage (or blackness, which the victims represented). Tithecott wrote that “Dahmer’s possible racism is much more of a taboo subject than his putative sexuality, and that taboo helps to shield the partnership of whiteness with civilization.” In my analysis of the Sinthamsompone incident, I choose to review the ways in which the news media was able to elevate it to a level of scandal in such a way that black Milwaukeeans -- the very citizens crying out for help -- became “threatening.” In doing so, I highlight its effort to further divide -- rather than unite -- Milwaukee on racially-based lines in a counterproductive fashion.

**METHODOLOGY**

When I initially approached this process, my research question was as follows: how was the spectacle of media surrounding the Jeffrey Dahmer case informed by the popular discourse about the HIV/AIDS crisis during the early 1990s? Unfortunately, this question was plagued with

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14 For clips about this moment, please see: NBC, aired on July 30, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); ABC, aired on August 5, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, aired on August 6, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

“boulders” -- that is, as Professor Erika Seamon defines the term, the vague phrasing of a claim or question which is in need of greater clarification or specification. Chiseling away at these boulders became my primary focus as I began conducting more in-depth research on my thesis.

Redefining the “spectacle of media” was simple enough. Knowing that I wanted to analyze the broadcast news media exclusively, I consulted Maura Seale, the American Studies Librarian at Georgetown University’s Lauinger Library, who pointed me towards the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Within this archive, I was able to locate 33 separate news media clips from the big three networks -- ABC, CBS, and NBC -- ranging in length from 30 seconds to just over 50 minutes. My primary source research was limited by the constraints of the archive; I elected not to use any clips that were underneath 30 seconds as a matter of practicality and to be economical (each clip was accompanied by a sizable price tag), and the clips lacked detail about their origins. Nevertheless, I was satisfied with my material. Considering that the clips aired on basic television and not cable, I could safely hypothesize that a majority of Americans would have had access to seeing them. Having clips from all three networks also played to my advantage, as my blanket analysis of them would override any potential political biases existing from the channel producing them. Though the lack of background information is frustrating -- specifically in my efforts to have accurate citations -- I have since deduced that their mysterious origins do not render them unusable for scholarly work. I may not know if they were produced for local or national networks -- though the familiar faces of anchors such as Dan Rather suggest that they were national -- but the clips were still contributing to the formation of a discourse surrounding Dahmer. The geographic level (national, regional, or local) at which they aired was
negligible considering they were geared towards to the same blanket “general audience” as defined in my literature review.

The second boulder in my proposed research question was the phrase “popular discourse about the HIV/AIDS crisis.” Initially, I intended to use Simon Watney’s Policing Desire -- Pornography, AIDS and the Media as the cornerstone for my understanding of how the media handled the HIV/AIDS crisis. Though Watney’s text remains important to my work, I found myself feeling like I had an insufficient understanding of the true way that HIV/AIDS was represented without any primary sources. Fortunately, as I transcribed an exchange during a commercial break of a Barbara Walters special on Dahmer, I was surprised to see a public service announcement (PSA) on HIV/AIDS sponsored by the America Responds to AIDS (ARTA) campaign. I was immediately intrigued. Unlike the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, there is not an archive nor database that stores PSAs. However, I was able to locate twelve of them myself and conduct a visual and rhetorical analysis on their content in order to have firsthand knowledge about the media’s representation of the HIV/AIDS crisis while the Dahmer case was unfolding. In order to compensate for any potential gaps created by my inability to conduct a comprehensive analysis of these PSAs, I was able to locate numerous secondary sources about ARTA that provided me with a full picture of both the campaign’s intent and success (or lack thereof).

Having reduced my boulders into manageable pebbles, I embarked on an effort to review each of the clips, noting whenever anything seemingly significant was either said or shown. After completing this more casual process of note-taking, I combed through my log and highlighted any trends that I noticed within the texts. My first realization was that there was an obvious
shortage of any references to “queerness” or “sexuality,” and a total absence of the phrase “HIV/AIDS.” At this point, it was necessary for me to reassess my research question: although it would have been possible to write an entire thesis on the absence of a connection between Dahmer and the HIV/AIDS crisis, I felt as if I would be stacking the deck against myself had I continued to pursue that endeavor exclusively. I then consulted the themes that I had traced in my note-taking, only to perceive four very distinct ideas developing: Dahmer as monster, the threat that he posed towards the nuclear family, an effort to erase the queerness from the case, and an exploration into the racially-based divide occurring in Milwaukee as a result of the Konerak Sinthamsompone incident. Juxtaposing these four points against one another enabled me to discover my thesis statement: the broadcast news media sensationalized the Jeffrey Dahmer case as a way through which it could further alienate the queer and black communities.

I shaped much of the philosophical framework for my thesis based on Michel Foucault’s first volume of The History of Sexuality. Foucault describes “power” — an intangible force that exists between any and all levels of hierarchies or socially-organized bodies — as existing in “a multiplicity of points of resistance” which are “present everywhere in the power network.”¹⁶ As I considered the actors involved in the creation of a news broadcast -- the producers, the viewers, the individuals whose stories were being told -- I realized that the process of information transmission did not occur in a linear fashion. Instead, by applying Foucauldian theory to this process, I was able to grasp the dynamic interplay between each discursive faction. This, in turn, allowed me to hold the broadcast news media responsible for its warped portrayal of the queer and African American communities. The big three networks weren’t just telling stories; they

were depicting a world in which marginalized communities -- groups that were inherently othered by a predominantly white, heterosexist society -- were being held accountable for cultural failures which they had not caused. In short, the broadcast news media was doing a disservice to itself, its audience, and to the people whose stories it impacted the most. This thesis seeks to shed light on this form of negligence, using the Jeffrey Dahmer case as an example of the pernicious consequences of unchecked media coverage.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this thesis, I argue that the broadcast news media sensationalized the Jeffrey Dahmer case as a means through which it could further ostracize minority groups -- specifically the black and queer communities.

In the first chapter, I explore the traditional ways that horror was used as a tool for Dahmer to gain notoriety. I first examine the way that broadcasters opened their segments by instructing their audiences to be afraid, followed by a pampering of ghastly details about Dahmer’s crime in order to instill fear in their audiences. I then analyze the associational way that fear is developed by the news media, through its comparisons of Dahmer to other serial killers and by discussing explicitly his more gruesome acts.

In the second chapter, I explore the ways in which Dahmer was utilized by the news media as a tool through which heteronormative familial structures could be reinforced. I ask the two questions which plagued white, heterosexual America about the Dahmer case -- what type of system allowed Dahmer to commit his crimes as well as why couldn’t American people figure
out Dahmer existed sooner? In answering these questions, one begins to understand how the news media is able to act in subtle, nefarious ways in order to reinforce normative lifestyle choices. I then move towards an examination of the families of Dahmer’s victims, noting how their public grieving processes were utilized in order to help American society recover from the collective trauma it experienced as a result of Dahmer’s crimes.

In the third chapter, I use the works of Simon Watney and Michel Foucault in order to explore the interlocking power roles of the broadcast news media, the general public, and the gay community. I then analyze the way that the broadcast news media skirted around the queer element of the Dahmer case, even though the HIV/AIDS crisis was very much a part of broadcast news media’s discursive space as per the ARTA PSA campaign. In omitting the queer element from the Dahmer case, the broadcast news media sought to erase queer discourse from existence – a reality that bares a striking resemblance to the narrative surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis.

In the final chapter, I examine the racial tensions which emerged between white and black Milwaukeeans as they grappled with the Konerak Sinthamsompone incident. The broadcast news media cast black Milwaukeeans in a negative light as a destabilizing force on the verge of upending society, whereas white Milwaukeeans were depicted as sympathizing with the police force.
CHAPTER I

Before examining the active role that the broadcast news media played in using Dahmer as a tool through which it could further ostracize minority groups, it is important to understand how the case became sensationalized. On paper, it may seem obvious: a necrophiliac serial killer...
claims the lives of seventeen different men, dismembers their bodies and consumes parts of the remains. Though the task was perhaps not a difficult one, the news media still played a fundamental role in elevating the Jeffrey Dahmer case to such an extreme that it became mythological, a part of the American narrative. As the adage suggests, heroes -- or, villains, in this particular case -- are not born; they are re made. The broadcast news media exploited particular elements of the Dahmer case by attributing more narratorial importance to them than others in order to captivate the attention of the viewing public. In doing so, it fixated upon Dahmer in such a way that he became a national boogeyman, a figure that could strike terror into the hearts of a rapt viewing public due to its fear of the way that his real-life barbarity resembled the workings of horror fiction.

Early on in the coverage of the Dahmer case, the news media contributed greatly to the idea that the case was unlike anything that preceded it due to a seemingly indefinite number of victims. The lack of verified information and conclusive evidence in the early stages of the crime assisted the news media, who could withhold details about the case under the guise that it wished to report only accurate information to the public. Yet, due to this understanding, the news media was able to instill a sense of underlying fear in the public that would help keep its ratings up. During the first three days following Dahmer’s arrest, CBS noted numerous times that authorities “may take a long time to identify the remains” as they “sorted through the body parts” and “counted the victims.”

17 For an example of the conflicting reports in the earliest days following Dahmer’s arrest, please see: NBC, Jul 24, 1991, DVD; and CBS, Jul 24, 1991, DVD. The clips don’t vary to such an extent that the validity of their information then becomes questionable; however, they do differ in the areas where they choose to be specific, which paints an incongruous picture of Dahmer’s arrest. This is perhaps most noticeable in their accounts of the body parts in Dahmer’s apartment.

the public, they were able to produce a sense of fear regarding the number of bodies left to be discovered by authorities. The phrase “sort through the body parts” is rather horrific; when paired with the knowledge that the sorting process will “take a long time,” the viewing audience begins to conjure images of heaps of body parts lying about with no discernible way for them to be reassembled. They are thus inclined to tune in to the broadcast again the following day with the hope that a cap has been placed on the number of victims claimed by Dahmer.

As authorities worked to identify Dahmer’s victims, their investigation prompted them to investigate internationally as they sought out the identities of the bodies. Broadcasters noted that police were looking “throughout the nation” as well as “outside of the United States” in “any place he has lived and might have murdered” “despite Dahmer’s claims that he had never murdered outside Wisconsin or Ohio.” At this juncture in the case, audiences were petrified by the vast scope of Dahmer’s crimes. With the number of victims seeming infinite, the knowledge that Dahmer could have killed anywhere he had lived or travelled introduced a brand of fear to audiences based in Dahmer’s apparent omnipresence. Dahmer’s atrocities were no longer limited to the midwestern portion of the United States; he could have taken a life in any corner of the Earth. Thus, we begin to see Dahmer’s portrayal as a national mythological figure being constructed, as the potential for him to have impacted multiple disparate communities is introduced.

Many broadcasts would begin by prompting the audience to be afraid. These were not trigger warnings; no, as the broadcaster read from their teleprompter, they were subtly instructing

their audience to prepare themselves for fear -- even before any mention of Dahmer had been made. The first broadcast ever aired about Dahmer features a newscaster opening with “good evening” before immediately -- and comically -- switching his tune and saying that “a gruesome discovery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin” had been made.20 This particular clip is made humorous by the thoughtless transition between the newscaster’s warm welcome into the ensuing information, which is “gruesome” indeed. The delivery of these lines transparently reveals the greatest concern of the news media, which is to keep a viewing audience tuned in. There wasn’t any particular reason to describe the discovery as “gruesome,” for instance -- the objective details of the crime provide that information -- but in doing so, producers are able to keep the attention of their audience. Many of these openers relied on an appeal of disbelief in order to keep their audiences from changing the channel. One begins with “the almost unbelievable multiple murder in the Milwaukee case took another terrifying turn.”21 Another states that “it’s real, and it’s not artificial.”22 By commencing with the ominous idea that the incoming broadcast is so terrifying that it exceeds reality, broadcasters are inviting their audience to remain watching their channel so that they may attempt to ingest the forthcoming information. Statements like this also contributed to Dahmer’s mythic status: by depicting his crimes as hyper-real, the broadcast news media assisted him as he became a transcendental discursive figure due to his actions’s incompatibility with the real world.

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20 CBS, Jul 23, 1991, DVD.

21 CBS, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.

These “terror-alert” openings were bolstered by the tendency of the broadcast news media to use flashy, attention-grabbing hyperbolic statements to describe the crimes. Though these statements may be rooted in the truth, they’re often opinions that are presented as if they’re fact. As Tithecott writes, “[s]ometimes denial takes the form of distancing ourselves from the killer by exaggerating the macabreness of his acts.”

CBS intermittently uses the terms “worst multiple murder case” and “worst mass murder case” to describe the Dahmer scandal. These clips were aired in a nation that had been ravaged by the Civil War and Pearl Harbor -- and was just twenty years removed from Vietnam. There had been more serious mass losses of life prior to Dahmer, yet in flagging his crimes as historically evil, they became more newsworthy and “worth” knowing about. CBS interviewed Dr. Mark McClung, a sexual disorders specialist, who described Dahmer’s crimes as being culturally innovative. He described the reality of the “Dahmer situation” as “more creative, more lurid, and more bizarre than just about any book” ever “written about sexual horror or sexual murder.” Though such musings are highly debatable -- what about the Marquis de Sade? -- they still cast Dahmer in a light as being innovatively horrific, thereby validating his morbid ability to fascinate the American public. If Americans “are both thrilled and horrified by what [they] see,” then it makes sense that they “exist in a kind of horror-movie which [they] write and perform for [them]selves daily.”


25 CBS, aired on February 15, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television Network Archive).

Between the “terror-alert” openings and the over-exaggerated claims about Dahmer’s historicity, a system of horror-based call-and-response had developed. As a clip opens by telling its audience to be scared, we find the call; as the clip continues with empty estimations about Dahmer being a groundbreaking killer, we find the response. The audience is being trained to fear Dahmer. This system played a pivotal role in the eulogization of Dahmer in American history, as evidenced by the broadcast news media’s handling of Dahmer’s own murder. ABC claimed that “the revelation that he had eaten or otherwise defiled some of his victims revolted the nation,” while CBS recounted that his actions “were impossible to imagine” even three years after the story first broke. In these examples, the unprecedented and the grotesque are emphasized. ABC blatantly cites some of Dahmer’s more insidious acts while asserting that they elicited national shock; CBS, on the other hand, slyly uses “impossible” as a double entendre: they were “impossible to imagine” because they were so revolting, just as they were “impossible to imagine” because they had never been imagined before. While the argument could be made that the media was simply regurgitating a narrative for which it was responsible, it’s also possible that the writers behind these stories were producing material that had come to be accepted as truth. Record exists, therefore, that the media was able to canonize Dahmer as a ghastly boogeyman.

Upon Dahmer’s murder, part of the memorializing process was grounded in explicitly calling him a monster. Janie Hagan, a victim’s sister, was “just glad that monster [was] gone.”

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27 ABC, aired on March 28, 1994, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.

28 CBS, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.
NBC described his crimes as “monstrous” and “ghoulish.” By “identifying Dahmer as a monster,” audiences are not “[told] . . . what he is about but what we, as audience and citizen wannabes, are about.” Similarly, in “constructing the figure of the serial killer” . . . we . . . dare ourselves to sit opposite him, ask ourselves and are asked what it is we see, ask what it is he sees. If Dahmer is labeled as a monster, then the audience is able to identify itself with the things for which he does not stand. Dahmer is queer, insane, dangerous; the audience, heterosexual, sane, safe. Through Dahmer’s polarizing deviancy, the audience is able to locate a sense of peace within itself by not being him.

The fear surrounding Dahmer extended beyond subtle fear-mongering semantics; the news media also went out of its way to describe some of the more horrific acts that Dahmer had committed in vivid detail, thereby adding a reality-based facet to the story. As Tithecott writes:

> However, now we can rush live to a scene of a crime or a disaster via a television camera strapped to an ambulance or police car without leaving our homes. The sense of inappropriateness has disappeared. The pleasure of horror, that which was deemed appropriate only in a recognizable world of fiction, is not something one can experience (without fear or condemnation) on television framed as reality. In our creation and consumption of infotainment we have sprung the aesthetics of horror from fiction. We are able to appreciate the natural beauty of horror and violence by constructing their aesthetic value -- by locating them, that is, on an amoral plain beyond the reach of condemnation -- and erasing the memory of its construction.

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29 NBC, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.


32 Making Monsters, 207.
As society’s repulsion towards violence eroded, a space grew in which a fascination with Dahmer as Boogeyman became more acceptable. Dahmer’s notoriety was largely a byproduct of the information transmitted about him which recounted his intensely physical brand of violence. Dahmer violated bodies; audiences were invited to be repulsed by the news media’s coverage of Dahmer as it fixated upon his intimate and unnatural interaction with corpses. Dahmer removed the innards of his victims and made a show of them, much like a hunter would mount a taxidermic trophy on his wall. With his first victim, he “took the bones and smashed them so the bones may not have been bigger than half of the size of the hand”; his attorney, Gerald Boyle, used a flow chart during the trial which illustrated all of Dahmer’s degenerate actions, ranging from “showering with corpses” to “masturbating into viscera” to “zombies.” Dahmer’s disregard for the laws of nature made him a debasing fiend. Bones are not meant to be smashed, let alone into the size of half of a hand; living bodies are only supposed to interact with corpses within the confines of a funeral -- certainly not as someone tries to bathe themselves. Human bodies aren’t intended to be opened as Dahmer chose, and his apparent delight in the act of bodily desecration terrorized the nation.

The news media was particularly focused on Dahmer’s dismemberment of the human body into parts, an act that transformed him into a butcher of sorts. The reporting of body parts stored in Dahmer’s apartment varied in detail across the networks. CBS stated that the rooms were “littered with human body parts, some crammed into a freezer” with “grizzly remains, a refrigerator carrying three human heads, a barrel of acid, and stacks of photos showing

33 CBS, aired on July 30, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, Feb 14, 1992, DVD.
dismembered bodies” all being removed from his apartment by authorities. NBC kept it simpler, saying that “police found the remains of the victims’s skulls, torsos, a vat that apparently contained acid, and photos and drawings of the victims’s mutilated bodies.” Much of the terror in this reporting is rooted in Dahmer’s integration of human body parts with everyday objects. Tithecott notes that the “Sadian monster” is especially monstrous because his “(anti-heroic quest for the biggest score possible” is “mingled with everyday life.” Not only was he living amongst rotting corpses, but he had managed to associate them with mundane household belongings. While the average American family kept food in its freezer, Dahmer had decaying bodies; instead of displaying family photos, Dahmer had pictures of his dismembered victims. Every day life, as seen through Dahmer’s eyes, involved coming home to an apartment filled with the macabre -- a thought that captivated a terrified American audience.

Revulsion surrounding Dahmer’s affinities towards debasing his victims came to a discursive peak with the revelation that he had engaged in acts of cannibalism. Dahmer-as-cannibal was certainly culturally relevant: the early 1990s saw an explosion of films with cannibalism as the main subject of interest, the most famous of which is 1991’s Best Picture winner, *Silence of the Lambs*. Surprisingly, the broadcast news media kept references to Dahmer’s cannibalism at a minimum, sparing its audiences from any vivid accounts of Dahmer’s

34 CBS, Jul 23, 1991, DVD.

35 NBC, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.


dietary habits. CBS touches upon Dahmer’s cannibalism just after his arrest, but only in passing. As it does so, the network revealingly acknowledges that “no one will discuss published reports that Dahmer confessed to cannibalizing his victims.” The following day, it airs a video from a press conference in which a reporter asks Dr. Jeffrey Jentzen, the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner, if there’s any “evidence of cannibalism” to which he vaguely responds that “[they]’re still making those examinations.” Beyond this, discussions around Dahmer’s cannibalism only occur after his conviction: NBC notes that he cannibalized “young men” and CBS describes his act of cannibalism as a “barbaric crime.” It is perhaps impossible to theorize why the networks felt comfortable revealing to the general public information such as the extent to which Dahmer dismembered the bodies of his victims, yet shied away from the more provocative subject of his cannibalization. Tithecott suggests that it is because “the regarding of the body as something that can be hoarded, reassembled, consumed is a form of abnormality with which currently we seem particularly fascinated.” They may have been limited by censorship laws; it is possible that the viewing code established for news media at the time allowed for the airing of excessive violence, yet cannibalism was too extreme of a subject to discuss any more than in a limited capacity. The revelation that the news media barely discussed Dahmer’s cannibalism shows that it played an independent role in shaping the memory of Jeffery Dahmer beyond that of Dahmer-as-Cannibal.

38 CBS, Jul 24, 1991, DVD.

39 CBS, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.

40 NBC, aired on February 15, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive); CBS, aired on February 17, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

Though it used his cannibalism as a point of fear, it contributed to his legacy in its own unique, nuanced way.

As a serial killer, Dahmer existed as the latest entrant into a preexisting series of culturally-defined markers which established the parameters under which he would need to operate in order to achieve this title. The news media desperately compared Dahmer to other serial killers in order to rely on the trope as an associational tool through which horror could be generated. From the earliest broadcast until the trial, Dahmer is indiscriminately compared to various serial killers -- among whom include John Wayne Gacy, Juan Carona, Wesley Allen Dodd, and David Burkowitz (the Son of Sam). In labeling Dahmer as a serial killer, the media aimed to proliferate the idea that serial killing, as a trend, was growing. This is not to discredit the idea that Dahmer was a serial killer -- he undeniably was -- but it is to draw attention to the fact that “serial killer” is a socially constructed term. NBC forebodes that “despite the growing body of knowledge about serial killers . . . they are almost impossible to stop.” CBS even quotes “FBI analysts” who believe that there are “more serial killers than ever before.” This presented serial killers as growing at an exponential rate. The arrest of Dahmer is thus something of a double-edged sword: while his arrest proves that serial killers can still be detained -- and shows that one more has been taken off of the streets -- the next conclusion to be drawn is that more and more remain waiting to be caught.

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44 CBS, Aug 22, 1991, DVD.
The authorities were concerned with the potential for Dahmer’s case to produce “copycat killers,” meaning an individual who was inspired by Dahmer’s actions to go out and commit crimes in a similar fashion. There seems to be a brand of self-interest informing both the thinking behind the idea that copycat killers were a pertinent threat and that more serial killers were in existence than ever before. If the news media cared enough about the threat of serial killers to give it press, then the American public must have expressed interest in the story. As NBC and CBS approached the subject of copycat killers, they consistently labeled psychiatrists as the authority behind the subject matter. According to NBC, psychiatrists were “worried” that copycat killers would “feel like they’re being ignored.” Who did the killers feel ignored by? If copycat killers felt ignored by the news media, wouldn’t they simply bring more notoriety to the original killer by mimicking their crimes? If they felt ignored by the general public, then wouldn’t a shift in the copycat killer’s style of killing direct more attention towards the previously captured killer? CBS, on the other hand, interviews Dr. Lawrence Hartmann who suggests that the “inhibitions” of some people may be “partly less” because of Dahmer’s sensationalized case. CBS’s suggestion of the modus operandi for copycat killers is significantly less confusing than the one provided by NBC, but still is not entirely convincing. While it is possible that a potential killer may feel more motivated to act by the notoriety of Dahmer’s case, one could also argue that their inhibitions had been lowered by any type of

45 CBS, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.

46 NBC, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.

47 CBS, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.
violent material within American media. Regardless of the impetus behind it, the threat of the
 copycat killer aligns itself neatly with the goal of the broadcast news media to paint a picture of
 Dahmer as a catalyst for fear in America. Not only was he a dastardly killer himself, but he
 inspired others to act as malevolently as he had.

 Dahmer was particularly terrifying because of the gratuitous extent to which he mutilated
 his victims. It appears as if killing was not enough for Dahmer; he needed to annihilate his prey,
 to see them reduced into bits and pieces before he could be satisfied with his work. The rhetoric
 used to describe Dahmer’s grizzlier actions often evokes the physical, thereby relating to his
 murders with active words which remind the audience that these crimes were not merely
 fantastical. One report mentioned that Dahmer “boiled the head[s of his victims] to remove the
 flesh so that he could retain the skulls.” 48 The image of a severed head boiling in a pot is
 gruesome enough to repulse an audience; it becomes more repulsing, however, by the
 accompanying thought of Dahmer taking the time to remove any excess skin from the skulls that
 the water was unable to clear. Similarly, Chandra Beanland, the girlfriend of one of Dahmer’s
 victims, lamented that “they don’t have any parts of his body left where they can have a regular
 funeral for him.” 49 Dahmer’s version of murder was so extreme that it began to “inhabi[t] a
 world of the ineffable, beyond language, beyond culture” allowing him to “emerge . . . endowed
 with power . . . above and beyond our worlds and our words.” 50 When Dahmer murdered, he did

 48 CBS, Jul 24, 1991, DVD.

 49 Ibid.

it in a brutal fashion that left the American public incapable of expressing its level of disturbance.

CHAPTER II

One of the key factors in Dahmer’s ability to strike fear into the hearts of normative audiences was his appeal to normalcy. A white, working-class, single man whose bachelor status
implicated heterosexuality, Dahmer functioned as an everyday person until one of his victims was able to escape and receive proper attention from police forces. Dahmer’s ability to masquerade around as a normal American terrified the general public, a realization that the broadcast news media quickly formed and then manipulated in its favor. For a monster to be scary, it “must be able to be mistaken for us” in a manner “so extraordinary because it is so ordinary.” The inability of police forces to capture Dahmer before he could take the lives of 17 men represented an institutional failure of governmental peacekeeping forces; the general public suddenly found itself endangered, and not just by visually-identifiable others. A villain had managed to wiggle his way into the fabric of everyday American life, thereby unsettling the notion that whiteness and heterosexuality were synonymous with safety. The result was an effort on behalf of the broadcast news media to stress the importance of a return to a hyper-protected sense of “normalcy”: the sanctity of the nuclear family needed to be strengthened, the innocence of children protected, and American culture purified.

One of the first questions to arise following the arrest of Dahmer concerned the legality of his freedom: what type of system allowed Dahmer, a convicted sex offender, to commit these crimes? The term “convicted sex offender” becomes something of a scarlet letter for Dahmer in many of the early clips about his trial. After his name is given, the broadcaster will often identify him by this label, as if his association with socially-unsatisfactory sex explains his murderous tendencies. CBS mentions that “police arrested 34 year-old Jeffrey Dahmer, reportedly a convicted sex offender on probation” as they display his mugshot; NBC describes him as a “31 year-old child molester, paroled from prison, living alone with his horrible secret” before finally

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51 Tithecott, “Making Monsters,” 147.

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reducing him to a “convicted sex offender on probation” in the same broadcast. It appears as if the networks have constructed a narrative rooted in the idea that sex offenders shouldn’t be allowed to “roam free” so-to-speak. Had Dahmer been imprisoned for life after his conviction, then he wouldn’t have been rereleased into the public where he was provided with the opportunity to wreak havoc on innocent lives. One broadcast went as far as to note that after Dahmer’s conviction, he was “released in 1990 despite the protests of his father.” In acknowledging that Dahmer’s own father wished to see his son locked away, the network suggests that Dahmer’s toxicity extends to his own familial life. According to the heterosexist logic of the news networks, father knows best -- and when his rule is challenged, society is upended. Dahmer’s release then becomes an example of the greater trend of familial breakdown. Perhaps the greatest flaw of the network’s apparent desire to keep sex offenders behind bars is its failure to acknowledge that not all will be repeat offenders; Dahmer’s murderous behavior is not informed by his conviction, they merely happen to coincide with one another.

The second question to arise out of Dahmer’s case -- and the more urgent one -- involves the naiveté of the people: why couldn’t they figure it out sooner? What about Dahmer specifically enabled him to pass as normal? Dahmer’s “veneer of normalcy is as much a performance as ours . . . Yet his successful passing . . . provokes anxiety because we know

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53 NBC, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.

54 The short answer to this question is that the white, heterosexual “general public” couldn’t be bothered with the tragedies existing amongst queer communities and communities of color, as is explored in the second and fourth chapters of this text. However, for the purpose of this section, I have chosen to focus on the internalization of this question: how could a tragedy like this happen to our educated, safe, and normal community?
others like him exist.”

A recurring theme in the portrayal of Dahmer’s undetected activities is that there were many chances to catch him, but he simply escaped due to chance. “The killings went on, undetected, despite warnings” suggests one NBC broadcast; “the authorities encountered Dahmer several times” begins another before discussing the Konerak Sinthamsompone case. Though this evidence suggests a failure on behalf of the police forces responsible for keeping Milwaukee safe, it contributes to the idea that Dahmer was not a mastermind, but instead one who benefitted from a fluke. The police had been somewhat negligible, sure, but Dahmer’s hidden crimes were the result of good luck (on his part, at least) and not bad detective work.

The broadcast news media undertook numerous efforts to answer this question. The first of these was the idea that a blanket of ignorance covered Milwaukee -- no one could’ve predicted the Dahmer case since its harsh reality was too devastating for an average Milwaukeean to envision. The spokespeople of these beliefs were always heterosexual, white men with respected occupations -- one was a church official, the other a Milwaukee County executive. Given their backgrounds and life experiences, the two unsurprisingly had similar sentiments to express about the Dahmer case. The church official suggested that “the events in the past week in the city of Milwaukee have stunned us all,” while the executive said that the Dahmer case acted “as a wake-up call to all Milwaukeeans that [they]’ve got urban problems”


and that “[they]’re not immune to ‘em the way [they] thought [they] were.” The usage of “all” by both men is incredibly revealing about the racially-based social differences in Milwaukee during the early 1990s. To the communities impacted by the Dahmer case, his arrest was perhaps not a surprise; however, to the heterosexual white communities whose populations remained unaffected, ignorance is a “passable” excuse for allowing Dahmer to continuously kill. Thus, it becomes a sellable message for the big three networks to transmit: how can you stop something that you don’t know exists?

Dahmer’s invisibility aligned itself with the trend of serial killers historically being able to pass as normal. “For the serial killer ‘on the loose,’” his “invisibility . . . . is what separates him from the average murderer.” CBS describes serial killers as “seeming so ordinary,” noting that “almost without exception, serial killers held down jobs and fit in.” In relating Dahmer to the other serial killers who managed to go undetected, Milwaukee and its police force is less responsible for Dahmer’s devastation. Milwaukee is not an exception to the rule; it is a textbook case of a serial killer being able to claim multiple lives before eventually being caught. Though Dahmer’s relation to other serial killers was primarily used to increase his boogeyman status, in this instance it operates well as an excuse for normative Milwaukee’s failures.

Just as his identification as a convicted sex offender was used as an initial justification for the murders, some networks used the label of “serial killer” to cast Dahmer in an “extra-human”


59 CBS, Aug 22, 1991, DVD.
light: that is, no humane person could possibly commit the crimes that Dahmer did, therefore, he must be totally devoid of rationale or emotional capacity. If the networks could air this narrative as truth, then the citizens of Milwaukee were forgiven of their neglect: how could they have predicted the heinous crimes of someone who was barely human? Furthermore, Dahmer’s narrative became easier to digest if Dahmer was depicted as an entirely separate species from the human race. In order to broadcast Dahmer’s extra-human livelihood, many networks fixated upon his lack of emotion during the trial, specifically when the verdict was announced. CBS described Dahmer as hearing the verdict “the same way that he sat throughout the trial: without obvious emotion.”

“Obvious” as an adjective in this sentence introduces the terrifying possibility that Dahmer, cold and calculated, was experiencing some form of emotion and actively hid it from the court, the victim’s families, and the viewing public. It also invites the audience to determine whether or not Dahmer experiences emotion at all: did Dahmer not show any emotion because he was a massive manipulator or because he was incapable of feeling? NBC illustrates Dahmer’s lack of emotion as a family affair: while he “remained impassive, so did his father and step-mother.”

Incriminating his family for Dahmer’s emotionless existence suggests that Dahmer was doomed from the start. If a father can listen to his child’s fate without producing a visual emotional reaction, how could he have possibly raised a child to be an emotionally healthy adult? NBC’s answer: he couldn’t, and instead reared an inhumane serial killer.

60 CBS, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.

61 NBC, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.
Paradoxically, in spite of the later efforts to erase Dahmer’s humanity, early broadcasts about the case fixated on his ability to appear to be part of the community. Dahmer is often described as living in a “working-class neighborhood” with neighbors who were baffled by the revelation that they lived next to a serial killer. Neighbors “never had reasons to be suspicious of foul play” and “the people who knew him were still trying to understand how this happened.” One woman, unidentified though presumably a neighbor of Dahmer’s, goes as far as to refute the claim that Dahmer was abnormal. “Some of these people around here are saying he was weird and he was strange,” she says before adding that “he was just alone, you know, by his self.”

Thus, the broadcast news media is able to use the standard trope of the serial killer once more in order to validate normative Milwaukee’s ignorance. Like the serial killers who came before him, Dahmer had existed as a part of society, yet he was on its outermost fringes -- a loner about whom most never thought twice, that is, until it was too late.

One of the recurring images throughout the coverage of the Dahmer case is of Dahmer entering the courtroom on the day when charges are first brought against him. With his hands cuffed in front of him, Dahmer makes his way down the courtroom aisle with his blond hair affably parted at the side and a neat blue-and-white striped shirt tucked into his pants. Dahmer looks approachable. Dahmer looks attractive. Suddenly, it becomes difficult to imagine that the man seated before the judge is responsible for the mutilation and death of seventeen different people.

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64 For an example of this clip, see: NBC, Jul 24, 1991, DVD; or NBC, Jul 25, 1991.
men. Like Ted Bundy before him, the news media became fixated upon Dahmer partially because of his good looks. Dahmer is intermittently described as “the boy next door,” “all-American” and having “choir-boy good looks.” A discursively fascinating act occurs whenever Dahmer is described in such a manner. Though Dahmer’s name is synonymous with the wretched, he becomes wholesome and desirable because of his shapely jaw and blue eyes. This projection of Dahmer-as-attractive doesn’t seemingly taint the categories with which he has been associated (American, religious, good), yet the news media has still chosen to allow these tropes to have a positive impact upon him. Thus, yet another reason for Dahmer’s ability to pass is constructed: he is attractive. The broadcast news media, a visual medium, relies on the transmission of aesthetically pleasing images in order to captivate an audience; a denigration of Dahmer’s handsomeness would be an assault on the television industry itself. The general public is then informed that Dahmer was able to go unscathed because he was desirable, and a passively-viewing audience accepts it as truth.

Having accepted that Dahmer was able to pass as an ordinary member of the general public, the broadcast news media shifted its focus towards the provocative hypothesis that American culture was somewhat responsible for the production of a serial killer. CBS declared that “the stress of modern society” had produced a “culture of hate,” inviting criminologist James Fox to theorize that American “culture had become less obsessed with moral responsibility,” resulting in a “condition that allowed serial murderers to develop.” This instilled a sense of fear in the general public: by living in America, one became susceptible to falling into the same

66 CBS, Aug 22, 1991, DVD.
form of depravity which produced Dahmer. Given that the majority of Dahmer’s victims were “mostly single, poor, non-white, gays,” the nuclear family” -- which is presumed to be white -- “[was] more likely to express moral outrage than fear.” Thus, in response to the rapidly declining status of American culture, the broadcast news media began a centralized effort to reinforce the structure of the nuclear family so that the sanctity of the next generation of children could be preserved.

Though broadcast news media produced its material for an assumedly white “general public,” it didn’t hesitate to use images of mourning black families as a means through which it could vilify Dahmer and emphasize his role as a destroyer of families. The raw emotion of these families transcended the melanin in their skin; their devastation could be felt across racial divide, providing the story with an emotional undercurrent. Whenever the families of Dahmer’s victims were aired, they were often seen crying while a broadcaster narrated one of the case’s more grizzly details. An unnamed relative of one of Dahmer’s victims is seen hugging another unidentified individual while the broadcaster notes that “police say it may take a long time to identify the remains”; two pairs of women comfort one another during a montage in which the prosecuting attorney urges the court not to allow Dahmer, a “murderous killer,” to “fool” them. As these families are seen finding solace in one another, the audience is invited to empathize with each televised embrace. The public grieving of these families provides a discursive space in which both Milwaukee as a community and America as a nation are encouraged to join in the

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67 Tithecott, “Making Monsters,” 89.

healing process -- an act which requires the resolution of these recently shattered familial structures.

The families of Dahmer’s victims were expected to grieve, but they were also expected to be tenacious. A tremendous amount of pressure had been placed on the families to persevere through their trauma; given their representation as a microcosm of all American families, failure to do so would imply that the country as a whole was incapable of moving beyond the Dahmer case. CBS ran a segment during which it highlighted that “one victim left behind a son and a grieving girlfriend.”69 The image of an abandoned young mother weeping over her child resonates with audiences, but it’s also incredibly political. Dahmer is personally responsible for placing this woman into a disadvantaged role. She alone must ensure that her child has a good upbringing -- a task made difficult in a world where men like Dahmer are lurking in the shadows. Dahmer then becomes a figure against which Americans must posit themselves as he acts as a direct challenge to the familial fabric of society. Furthermore, in depicting one of his victims as a family man, CBS is able to further ignore the queer element from the case by focusing on the heteronormative structures from which he is absent rather than on the queerness of the life that he lived.70

As the trial progressed, the attention directed towards the families shifted away from their tenacity and towards their ability to find personal retribution for their losses. This manifested

69 CBS, Jul 30, 1991, DVD.

70 While I do not know the sexual orientation of this particular victim -- he very well could have been a heterosexual male -- none of the victim’s male partners were interviewed as they mourned. While most of the loved ones interviewed were blood relatives, the complete lack of any queer intimate figures is significant in considering the political objective behind these broadcasts. The erasure of homosexuality will be further explored in the third chapter of this thesis, but should be acknowledged here as CBS exploited a heteronormative narrative of grief in order to produce a more “relatable” tragic figure for its audiences.

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itself through the families being depicted as having sway over the final verdict, a feat made possible by a Wisconsin law which allowed “relatives of homicide victims . . . to address the court before sentencing.” One broadcast went as far as to suggest that “the judge in this case plans to confer with the families before he sentences Dahmer next week,” thereby implicitly placing Dahmer’s fate into the hands of the families that he had hurt and ignoring the judge’s autonomous role in determining the actual verdict. The spectacle of an incensed or distraught relative being given the opportunity to confront Dahmer provided the viewing audience with a sense of catharsis. The relatives had endured his violence and were now, in a sense, able to verbally return that violence to its creator. Dorothy Straughter told Dahmer that he “took [her] 17 year old son away from [her]” as well as “her daughter’s only brother”; Donald Brandehoft lamented that “the baby of the family” had been “destroyed”; an unidentified black male asked Dahmer if he had “ever stop[ped] to think that this is someone’s brother, son, nephew, uncle, grandson, or just someone’s friend?” Each of these testimonials was impassioned, and the speakers were able to restrain themselves from acting inappropriately -- thereby legitimizing their suffering as rational yet enduring. The testimonials also cite the role that Dahmer’s victims played in heteronormative familial structures (“son,” “brother,” “baby of the family,” “nephew” and “uncle”), rather than focusing on the victims’s legacies as individual people. The

71 ABC, aired on February 17, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

72 ABC, aired on February 15, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

73 ABC, Feb 17, 1992, DVD; CBS, Feb 17, 1992, DVD.

74 The notable exception being Rita Isbell, whose testimony is analyzed extensively in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

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memories of Dahmer’s victims are hijacked by the families that they left behind, having been
deed unimportant by the broadcast news media which seeks to validate the experiences of
heteronormative actors alone.

A capitalistic undercurrent belied the vengeance sought by a number of the victims’s
relatives. As early as a few weeks after Dahmer’s arrest, “the mother of a man whose
dismembered body was found in Jeffrey Dahmer’s apartment ha[d] filed a three billion dollar
lawsuit against the city” of Milwaukee.75 Similarly, after Dahmer’s murder in 1994, “an attorney
representing eight of the families . . . pushed police to release Dahmer’s belongings so they can
be auctioned off . . . to make at least one hundred thousand from the sale” because, as the
attorney put it, the “victim’s families” hadn’t received “closure on the Dahmer chapter . . . until
there [was] compensation.”76 In neither of these cases were the families criticized for seeking out
financial compensation; neither the newscasters nor any interviewees criticized their actions. The
lack of reporting on the first incident suggests that it was perhaps dismissed as tabloid fodder
given the astronomically high number of the suit’s demands. However, the second quote -- which
comes a full two years after Dahmer’s sentencing -- explicitly suggests that at least some of the
victim’s families would not have been satisfied until they had received a tangible reward for the
grief that they endured. This comes after Dahmer had been given a sentence of life
imprisonment, meaning that the due process of law had been carried out; justice, for both the
victims and their families, had been served by the state of Wisconsin. The financial demands of

75 ABC, Aug 6, 1991, DVD.

76 ABC, Mar 28, 1993, DVD.
the victims’s families seem opportunist, arriving conveniently at a time when the case is once again relevant to the news media. The greed of the victims’s families, as evidenced through the ascription of a monetary value to the lives of the victims, ultimately tarnishes their legacy, thereby cheapening the impact that their deaths had.

The “threat” that Dahmer posed to the sanctity of the nuclear family was enhanced by a fabricated fear surrounding his ability to endanger the metaphor of the child as a symbol of the future. In “The Future is Kid Stuff,” Lee Edelman postulates that “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the child.”77 For heteronormative America, children are emblematic of the future: without them, there is no next generation, and therefore the human race would cease to exist. Immediately following Dahmer’s arrest, concerns were expressed about the American public’s obligation to protect the children of the next generation from real-life boogeymen like Dahmer. “Serial killing’s prevention is restricted to the policing of childhood, an activity which is instrumental in the construction of our idea of childhood, that is, as a space to be policed.”78 One of the first men interviewed following Dahmer’s arrest noted that Dahmer’s victims “were somebody’s children too.”79 Though the majority of Dahmer’s victims were adults, here they are infantilized by this man’s speech. They are reimagined as faultless beings, not to reduce any of the stigma that may have accompanied the circumstances surrounding their deaths -- specifically


78 Tithecott, “Making Monsters,” 76.

79 CBS, Jul 23, 1991, DVD.
their queerness or blackness -- but to shoehorn them into a digestible narrative for heteronormative America.

As the broadcast news media began its campaign to protect the children, it also attempted to undercover the flaws in Dahmer’s upbringing which could have led to the rearing of a monster like him. In a broadcast which related Dahmer to other serial killers, CBS mentioned that serial killers “were tormented, often having been sexually abused as children.” 80 The issue with this rhetoric lies in its blurring of correlation and causation; while it is possible that many serial killers had been molested as children, the inverse of this statement -- that sexually abused children were often serial killers -- does not hold, and therefore cannot be logically used to understand Dahmer’s actions. Tithecott echoes this sentiment, pointing out that “we identify a link between ‘abnormal family’ backgrounds and serial killers and we conclude that the link is causal,” when in reality, “the majority [of serial killers] come from what we would consider normal family backgrounds.” 81 An NBC broadcast airing clips from Dahmer’s only televised interview noted that “he began having disturbing thoughts as early as six.” 82 This prospect is significantly more difficult for a viewing audience to digest, as it implies that there is no catalyst for the murders. Dahmer didn’t act in the way that he did because his childhood was violated; instead, the evil within him was innate, beginning to express itself at early age and manifesting itself in horrendous ways later in his life. If Dahmer is evil, then “there is no need to explain the

80 CBS, Aug 22, 1991, DVD.

81 Making Monsters, 76.

82 NBC, aired on Nov 28, 1994, DVD.
crime, to speculate about context, only to deal with him, the criminal” in such a way that allows the American public to find solace in “the safety of silence.”83 In an interview with Marty Schmidt -- a high school friend of Dahmer’s who would later go on to write a text about him that was consulted for the production of this thesis -- Schmidt suggests that she “felt . . . strongly always like something tragic was going to happen” before noting that “he had a major problem with alcohol.”84 Schmidt’s sentiments echo a sense of inevitability about Dahmer’s crimes established by the idea that he was inherently evil as a child. Importantly, his alcoholism exacerbated a preexisting condition and promoted his violent behavior -- but did not cause it.

The news media focused on Dahmer’s boyhood home as evidence of him being an evil child due to the fact that Dahmer committed his first murder there. American culture glorifies the childhood home; it is depicted as a sanctuary of innocence and familial piety. For Dahmer to have committed his first murder there is to suggest that his house was never a home, that his family had failed to establish a residence in which a healthy, normative child could be raised. One broadcast notes that Dahmer committed the crime “just after [he] graduated from high school.”85 Dahmer couldn’t have been older than 17 or 18 at the time of the murder; in highlighting the immediacy of it following his graduation, Dahmer’s tarnished childhood innocence -- or rather, his total lack thereof -- is called to attention. The advent of his foray into adulthood was marked by his committing an irreversible crime; to a viewing audience, the

84 NBC, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.
85 CBS, Jul 30, 1991, DVD.
inevitable conclusion to draw is that a lifetime of murder would follow. When Dahmer himself was killed, an NBC broadcast noted as a “final irony” that “the divorced parents of Jeffrey Dahmer, the man who dismembered his victims, [were] fighting over his remains.” Even after his death, the blemish of Dahmer’s malevolent childhood loomed over his life. Though the connection here is not necessarily explicit, implied is the idea that the divorce of Dahmer’s parents -- and the broken home which it produced -- was at least somewhat responsible for the “dismember[ing]” of his “victims.” Having spent his formative years without proper guidance, Dahmer’s ability to endanger the consecrated home, and its inhabitants, seems to be an act of retaliation -- the vengeful attack of a predator who was doomed from the start.

Given the attention directed towards Dahmer’s turbulent upbringing and his besmirched childhood home, it is fitting that Dahmer’s apartment operated as the setting for his grizzly crimes. The news media was quick to capitalize on the image of his apartment building as one of the earliest visuals that it could use to remind viewers about the threat that Dahmer presented. In a news cast from Jul 24, 1991 -- just two days after Dahmer’s apprehension date -- it is mentioned that police discovered a “grizzly scene . . . in Dahmer’s apartment” and that “authorities are still sorting through the body parts and other gruesome items that they removed from Dahmer’s apartment” before cutting to a frame of one single illuminated window in the whole of Dahmer’s complex. Though the viewer doesn’t know if the window shown is actually from Dahmer’s apartment, the shot’s intention remains: Dahmer murdered inside of his home.

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86 NBC, aired on November 29, 1994, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).

87 CBS, DVD.
while those living in the immediate and intimate spaces around him had no idea. The place in which Dahmer conducted his daily life was also the place where he committed most of his murders; Dahmer violated his home. In doing so, he transformed his apartment into a haunted house, thereby permanently linking a physical location with his atrocities. Roughly two weeks after Dahmer’s arrest, CBS concluded a clip on Dahmer by noting that “the curious” had “flock[ed] to the scene of the crime” as it relayed an image of one man asking another to “take [his] picture” in front of the apartment complex. Ultimately, Dahmer’s apartment -- his home -- is depicted as becoming a place of spectacle. The macabre radiating from apartment 213 began to attract visitors, people who wished to see a space which had tried to pass for a home as it housed the one man responsible for the corruption of families around him.
CHAPTER III

*Policing Desire -- Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, Simon Watney analyzes the representation of the HIV/AIDS crisis by the news media. Watney takes no prisoners in his takedown of the heteronormative news media, which he accuses of doing a massive disservice to the gay community. He explains:

> “Hence the danger of thinking of newspapers or television as being primarily concerned with “news” values, as distinct from entertainment, or drama, or sports coverage, or advertising, or whatever. For all these categories of production share an identical presumption about their audience, which is projected across them in different genres as a unified “general public” over and above the divisions of class, age and gender. ... The very existence of homosexual desire, let alone gay identities, are only admitted to the frame of mass media representations in densely coded forms, which protect the “general public” from any threat of potential destabilisation.”

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Watney is frustrated by the news media’s effort to protect the “general public” -- an umbrella term for the white, Christian, heterosexual majority of Great Britain -- when the gay community is being ravaged by an epidemic.90 He viewed it as an injustice to allow the heteronormative majority to continue a life of blissful ignorance when millions of people were dying each year due to the mishandling of a crisis. He continued his assault on the legitimacy of the news media by labeling journalists as “institutional guardians of moral ‘welfare,’” an acerbic insult meant to

89 Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*, 42.

90 Though Watney is British, I have elected to appropriate the term “general public” onto American society as well given that those who constitute as the “general public” are the same on both sides of the pond.
draw attention to the fact that “welfare” is a constructed and relative term which often fails to
include the entire populace.91

Much of the philosophical framework of Watney’s text is inspired by the works of Michel
Foucault, whose first volume of *The History of Sexuality* acted as a primary philosophical source
for this thesis. Foucault views “power” -- an intangible force that exists between any and all
levels of hierarchies or socially-organized bodies -- as existing in “a multiplicity of points of
resistance” which are “present everywhere in the power network.”92 Power is not just enacted
from a top-down perspective, but also from the bottom-up. As Foucault describes, power comes
in “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” in the sense that “power lets itself be invaded by the
pleasure it is pursuing” just as the power “opposite it” has the “power” of “showing off,
scandalizing, or resisting.”93 Foucault’s theory of multiplicity creates a network for the broadcast
news media, Watney’s “general public,” and the gay community to exist in one discursive space.
Unfortunately for the gay community in this example, there wasn’t much pleasure to be derived
in any attempted resistance from the broadcast news media’s continued attempt to erase the gay
community from media exposure. Continued erasure was synonymous with the perpetuation of
the death of a people.

Between the years of 1987 and 1992, the Center for Disease Control sponsored the
America Responds to AIDS (ARTA) campaign in an attempt to reduce the number of
transmission of the virus. The campaign was certainly well intentioned. With the knowledge that


92 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 95.

“through sheer repetition, mass media are believed to provide an effective means of imparting
the latest scientific information to large groups of people,” the ARTA campaign sought to
“encourage and reinforce social norms supportive of healthful behaviors among specifically
targeted audiences.”

Furthermore, it had the resources necessary to target a massive audience.

According to a report published at the conclusion of 1991, “ARTA represented 47 percent of both
the dollar value and number of AIDS PSAs shown since October 1987” and had been able to
“cover nearly 80 percent of U.S. households with television.”

The ARTA campaign faced one
significant difficulty which would later prove to undermine its kind intent: it had to toe the line
between “offending public sensitivities” and appealing to the “calls” of “AIDS activists . . . for
more direct messages” in order to have “approvable” and “effective” content.

According to an analysis of the portrayal of AIDS in the ARTA campaign by Douglas J.
Swanson, the ARTA campaign failed to convey an impactful message due to its efforts to appeal
to the general public rather than to those afflicted with the HIV virus. Swanson lambasts the
ARTA Campaign:

“The analysis . . . supported conservative philosophies by stereotyping male
carriers and female victims, using inexplicit terminology, employing fear appeals,
blocking access to helpful information with a government gatekeeper, and
empowering AIDS as a social rather than medical problem. PSAs supported
traditional family and social relationships, denied homosexuals and other

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94 Alan J. Bush and Gregory W. Boller, “Rethinking the Role of Television Advertising During Health Crises: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Federal AIDS

95 Diana R. Woods, David Davis and Bonita J. Westover, “’America Responds to AIDS’: Its Content, Development Process, and Outcome,” Public Health Reports(1974–) 106 no. 6

96 Woods, Davis, and Westover, “’America Responds to AIDS’: Its Content, Development Process, and Outcome,” 621.
disenfranchised groups a voice in the fight against the disease, and failed to address the specific behavioral changes which are needed if we are to control the spread of HIV infection and AIDS."\footnote{97 Douglas J. Swanson, “‘Repellent and Shameful’: The Portrayal of AIDS in ‘America Responds to AIDS’ Broadcast Public Service Announcements, 1987-1992,” (paper presented at the Fourth Annual Sooner Communications Conference at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, April 3, 1993): 2, accessed on November 27, 2015;}

Thus, the ARTA campaign fell into the same patterns established by Watney. Homosexuals and the HIV/AIDS crisis were swept under the rug so that a palatable but ineffective message could be delivered to a population that wasn’t endangered.

In conducting a limited analysis of these PSAs, I found these patterns to hold true. In a 1991 PSA, an attractive white female speaks directly to the viewing audience. Demure and attractive, she looks innocently into the camera and gives the following instruction:

> If you’ve had a sexually transmitted disease like gonorrhea, herpes, or syphilis, listen: what you were doing that exposed you to that disease could also expose you to the AIDS virus. There is no cure for the AIDS virus. You’re living proof that a sexually transmitted disease can happen. Please, don’t prove it again.\footnote{98 “America Responds to AIDS” PSA, aired during \textit{Dateline} on August 7, 1991, DVD (Vanderbilt Television News Archive).}

In this PSA, the phrase “living proof” becomes problematic upon considering that millions of lives were lost to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Unlike those who acquired “gonorrhea, herpes, or syphilis,” a diagnosis of HIV or AIDS was a death sentence. Furthermore, those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were not white women, as the speaker in the PSA is. Rather, the populations most significantly affected by the HIV/AIDS crisis were African Americans and gay men.\footnote{99 Center for Disease Control, “HIV and AIDS – United States, 1981 – 2000,”(June 1, 2001), accessed on April 27, 2016, \url{http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm}.} They weren’t, as the PSA suggests, given the opportunity to become “living proof,” nor were they privileged enough to not “prove it again.”
There is a striking contrast between the depiction of HIV/AIDS in the 1991 PSA and a 1992 PSA that was also sponsored by the ARTA campaign. Unlike the foreboding ingénue of 1991, 1992’s ad features Gary, a white, middle-aged man whose diagnosis of HIV becomes a turning point in his life. After recognizing that his taking of an HIV test would mean “no turning back” (as if to suggest that the taking of an HIV test automatically resulted in a positive diagnosis), Gary can “make some goals.” As Gary exclaims that his “life seems so much more important now,” images are depicted of Gary riding a bike in a meadow and strolling next to an older woman with whom he’s engaged in conversation.100 This ad certainly doesn’t dispel doom regarding HIV/AIDS like the one immediately preceding it; however, it is replete with a number of pitfalls that do little to assist the media’s greater depiction of the HIV/AIDS crisis. For starters, the causal factors behind Gary’s prognosis remain a mystery. Did Gary practice unsafe sex? Did he use intravenous drugs? Perhaps, like Ryan White and Kimberly Bergalis, Gary joined the ranks of white, heterosexual victims who stumbled upon an HIV/AIDS diagnosis accidentally. Furthermore, although there’s a clear effort in the ad to encourage its viewing audience to go out and get tested, it unfairly presumes that those getting tested will receive a positive diagnosis. The ad thus conversely encourages its audience to not get tested, as getting tested becomes conflated with a positive (and therefore life-ending) result.

The significance of these advertisements becomes apparent with the revelation that “AIDS [sic] PSAs were aired predominantly during news shows.”101 This means that as the


Dahmer case became sensationalized, it aired against a backdrop of PSAs that dealt with content which many associated with the gay community -- even if the ARTA PSAs would have you think otherwise. There was an undeniably queer element in the Dahmer case, yet the broadcast news media chose to follow the pattern established by the ARTA PSAs preceding it: rather than address Dahmer’s queerness in a potentially productive manner, it chose to use his case as a means through which queer populations could be further societally ostracized. A traceable effort to avoid any explicit references to Dahmer’s homosexuality -- or the inherently queer elements of the case -- can be found in some of the earliest news media reports on the Dahmer case.

Perhaps this is due to a lack of reliable or proven information regarding Dahmer or his victims; the big three networks (CBS, ABC, NBC) may have been hesitant to air any faulty information that was at risk of being dispelled just a few days later. However, it is more likely that these networks made a conscious effort to omit the queer elements of the case in order to present a palatable narrative for the general public.

From the moment that the story broke, the networks had mastered a language of “vague avoidance” which allowed them to talk explicitly about the case without going into its queer details. A broadcast aired on NBC on July 24, 1991 demonstrates the network’s ability to speak at length about the case without breaching its queer overtones. For example, the word “victim” is frequently used when discussing the individuals against whom Dahmer committed his murders. 102 While “victim” is certainly an appropriate word to ascribe to one of the 17 people that Dahmer murdered, it’s also conveniently genderless. In this broadcast, it is revealed that

102 The word “victim” appears regularly and indiscriminately throughout many of the news media clips reviewed for this thesis. For the purposes of this example, however, please consult the following clips: CBS, Jul 23, 1991, DVD; CBS, Jul 24, 1991, DVD; NBC, Jul 24, 1991, DVD.
Dahmer “molested a 13 year old boy,” but the gender of his murder victims still remains a mystery -- despite the fact that the broadcast also reads lines from his affidavit, which highlights that Dahmer “had met these individuals either at taverns or shopping areas . . . by offering money so that he could take pictures of them.” The notion that Dahmer would “take pictures” of these “individuals” has an undeniably erotic undertone, fitting neatly into the trope of a moneyed, male photographer paying his attractive, poor subject to take exploitative photographs. However, just like the word “victim,” the usage of the word “individual” is able to place the subject of Dahmer’s actions into a genderless discursive space. The usage of the word “tavern” in the affidavit is similarly devoid of a queer connection. Similarly, a CBS broadcast on July 25, 1991 states that Jeremiah Weinburger, one of Dahmer’s earliest identified victims, “was seen earlier [that] month leaving a Chicago bar with a man matching Dahmer’s description.” 103 This effort towards queer erasure by the news media is the result of, as Watney writes, “the contour maps of sexuality and national identity [being] obliged to duplicate one another,” with “homosexuality . . . squeezed out first.” 104 It was less important for the media to present an accurate picture of America when it had the opportunity to depict American society as fully heterosexual.

When the news media is tasked with the “troubling” problem of reporting on an incident that explicitly involves queerness, it depicts a reality where queer lives didn’t matter -- which rang especially true for Dahmer’s victims. Tithecott smartly describes Dahmer’s victims as

103 CBS, Jul 25, 1991, DVD.

104 Watney, Policing Desire, 85-86.

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“without cultural significance,” a sad truth that would rear its ugly head regularly throughout the Dahmer case. One of the most newsworthy moments of the Dahmer case arrived with the revelation that Konerak Sinthamsompone -- a 14 year old Laotian boy and Dahmer’s youngest victim -- had escaped Dahmer’s apartment and was later returned to Dahmer by the police. While the racialized elements of this incident were the primary cause behind its elevation into a headline-making moment, it retains an undeniably queer element which merits investigation (although, to be sure, the racialized elements of the Dahmer case will be discussed at length in chapter four). At fault for Sinthamsompone’s dismissal as irrelevant due to his queerness, according to the news media, is the Milwaukee police force. Evidently, the police could not be bothered to address the incident: they “brushed it off as a homosexual quarrel,” “thought [it] was a gay lover’s quarrel” after Sinthamsompone “was seen running naked and bleeding from Dahmer’s apartment,” and, according to a police transmission from the scene, laughingly described Sinthamsompone as an “intoxicated Asian, naked male was intoxicated to his sober boyfriend [sic].” In the first two examples, “homosexual” and “gay lover’s” quickly become synonymous “negligible.” When they act as qualifiers for the word “quarrel,” they are deemed unworthy of police interference and -- alarmingly, given Sinthamsompone’s physical state upon discovery -- without need of assistance. This is all but confirmed by CBS’s decision to air the

105 “Making Monsters,” 89.


107 While I hesitate to refer to Sinthamsompone as queer due to the highly questionable power dynamics between him and Dahmer, I have chosen to do so in this instance since the Milwaukee police force had labelled him as such. While Sinthamsompone may not have identified as queer himself -- nor do I have any record which suggests he did or did not -- he was, at least, perceived as queer and therefore is considered queer for the context of this paper.

police transmission, during which an officer’s laughter suggests that “quarrels” within the gay community are -- perversely -- comical. While explicit usages of the words “homosexual” and “gay” by the broadcast news media initially appear progressive, any potential advancement in the perception of gay men by the media is undone by the frustratingly predictable equation of these words to “meaningless.” Following the logic of the news media in the early 1990s, gay men -- specifically, those who found themselves victimized in some way -- are people about whom the public doesn’t need to care.

This line of thinking may also be applied to two separate reports of incidents that occurred a year prior to Dahmer’s arrest, during both of which an unidentified young man was able to escape from Dahmer’s grasp and was mishandled by the Milwaukee police force. According to the first man’s testimony, “despite the fact that [he] kept telling them that [he] didn’t know the man” the police “just laughed at [him].” According to the police, however, the man “only reported a robbery, not an assault” and were “satisfied” with Dahmer’s “explanation” about the incident. Meanwhile, ABC reported that the police “never called back” the victim of a failed attack by Dahmer. Jeff Aiken, a Milwaukee County Social Services spokesperson, stated that “it appeared to have just been a homosocial situation that went sour.” These accounts provide further evidence against the Milwaukee County police department’s handling of the Dahmer case. More damagingly, however, is the fact that the broadcasting of these messages

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109 Both CBS and ABC broadcasted stories about a young man -- whose identity had been protected by the networks -- who had encountered and was attacked by Dahmer prior to Dahmer’s arrest. While it is possible that the networks are covering the same story, I have elected to cover them as if they involve separate individuals due to the discrepancies in the police’s comments on their handling of the cases.


111 ABC, Aug 5, 1991, DVD.
suggests that this form of ignorance is perhaps admissible. While both networks manage to avoid any serious bias in either portrayal of these accounts, a viewing audience is nonetheless given an example where police negligence is deemed acceptable given the context of each account. If the police are acting as a government agent, then the connection can then be made that the government’s consistent mishandling of gay men -- both on the local level, and broadly speaking, the national with the HIV/AIDS crisis -- is permissible.

In all of the news media coverage of the Dahmer case, a self-identified gay man is only given the opportunity to speak once. Scott Gunkel, a spokesperson for the Gay Rights Council, acts as the voice of the entire LGBT community during an NBC broadcast on July 30, 1991 -- a position into which he is thrust due to the complete absence of other self-identified queer people in any of the other news media clips. During his brief time in the limelight, Gunkel does not hesitate to call out the structural injustices which are at fault for Dahmer’s success: “not only were these men the victims of a mass murder, but also of a police department that did not even notice.” When Gunkel appears on screen, a title card is depicted beneath his face with his name and “Gay Rights Council” labeled on it. If it were not for this identifier, then Gunkel’s words could have spoken by any individual -- not just an agent acting on behalf of a gay rights organization. Though his words do speak towards the plight of queer people in Milwaukee as they grapple with erasure, they don’t directly address the condition of his queerness nor the lives of queer people. Thus, even as a queer person gets the opportunity to speak about their queerness and the difficulties which accompany it, they must speak around it as evidenced by NBC’s decision to not air any footage of Gunkel using words like “gay” or “homosexual.”

112 NBC, Jul 30 1991, DVD.
Thus far, queerness has been presented as an object that was either discursively omitted or considered negligible by the broadcast news media. However, as queerness manifested itself through Dahmer, the news media utilized it as a way to amplify the sense of villainy surrounding him. In the first appearance of the Dahmer case on any of the big three networks, Dahmer is identified as a “convicted sex offender on probation.”¹¹³ Dahmer’s status as a sex offender suggests that he has been labeled as having “bad sex” by the government; his sexual proclivities are recorded as being socially undesirable. In this broadcast, the audience wasn’t given the reason behind his conviction (which, according to later broadcasts, was for molesting Konerak Sinthamsompone’s thirteen year old brother¹¹⁴), meaning that they had free range to associate Dahmer with a number of sexually deviant acts -- including, as per the social convictions of 1991, homosexuality. The day after Dahmer’s story broke, his own attorney described him as a “very sick young man.”¹¹⁵ “Sick” is a convenient word for his attorney to use due to the malleability of his intended meaning. Is Dahmer sick because of the murders that he committed? Or, perhaps, is he sick because of his sexual interests -- certainly necrophilia, but what about his homosexuality? In placing the entirety of Dahmer’s sexual activities underneath an umbrella, a the division between homosexuality and necrophilia is blurred to such an extent that the two may be interpreted by a heteronormative audience as being equally disdainful.

¹¹³ CBS, Jul 23, 1991, DVD.

¹¹⁴ NBC, Jul 30, 1991, DVD.

¹¹⁵ CBS, Jul 24, 1991, DVD.
Words relating to sexual activity -- including “queer,” “gay,” “homosexual,” and “sex(uality)” -- are conspicuously missing from the earliest footage covering the Dahmer arrest. It is not until Dahmer goes to trial that the audience was exposed to explicit references to his sexual interests. The intention behind this marked shift in visibility was to portray homosexuality and necrophilia as two intertwined and similarly harmful mental illnesses. Questions arose regarding Dahmer’s ability to control his impulses. Was he “fully in control when he committed the murders, planning each one carefully to fulfill his sexual fantasies”? The framing of Dahmer’s necrophilia becomes problematic as soon as “sexual” is used as a synonym for “necrophilic.” In this quote, it is unclear if Dahmer “committed the murders” as a means through which he could have sex with dead bodies or so that he could have sex with male bodies. Though Dahmer’s victims were indisputably male, it appears as if the broadcast news media attributed equal importance to their gender identity as it did to their deaths. In doing so, they were able to suggest that homosexuality and necrophilia were equally repulsive -- rather than the alternative, which is to suggest that Dahmer happened to target other men as he sought to fulfill his necrophilic desires. In this case, language of circumstance would have been less discursively malicious than the language of causation used. That is, Dahmer’s queerness should have been presented as a circumstantial detail, not as the impetus behind his actions.

Though Dahmer was denied the insanity plea as his defense, the news media still invoked the presence and opinion of medical professionals as implicit evidence for its presentation of homosexuality and necrophilia as mental illnesses of similar gravitas. During the trial, “seven psychiatrists, all of whom said that Dahmer had problems” were consulted regarding his

116 ABC, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.

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psychosexual condition, though “only one felt his particular sexual disorder was a defense for murder.”117 The sheer number of psychiatrists needed to determine the condition of Dahmer’s mental state indicates that his case flummoxed the medical world -- though that is not to discredit the court, which succeeded at consulting a proper number of professional opinions in order to arrive at an informed verdict. To a viewer, the number “seven” suggests that Dahmer’s diseases are incomprehensible, even to the educated elite. Although only one psychiatrist found Dahmer to be innocent as a result of insanity, the damage had been done: Dahmer’s “problems” -- a loaded, vague word with homophobic implications -- represented a labyrinth of psychosexual terror. This culminated in an interview in which the interviewee, E. Michael McCann -- one of Dahmer’s prosecutors -- stressed the importance for those viewing at home to seek psychiatric care if needed. McCann encouraged “a person troubled with one of the paraphilias, whatever it might be . . . voyeurism, exhibitionism, necrophilia . . . to get help.”118 Though he lacks a medical degree, McCann is posited as an authoritative voice capable of diagnosing sexual disorders -- thereby exposing CBS’s desire to instill fear in its audiences, even if they challenge their own credibility in the process. Though he refreshingly doesn’t list homosexuality in his catalog of illnesses, his usage of “whatever it may be” provides a space for the interpretation of his intent to still include homosexuality. Dahmer’s case becomes a teaching point, an effort on behalf of the news media to encourage the general public to eschew a queer lifestyle.

117 CBS, Feb 14, 1992, DVD.

118 CBS, Feb 15, 1992, DVD.
The reoccurring equation of Dahmer’s queerness to his necrophilia resulted in homosexuality and death becoming synonymous in the presentation of his case. This is a result of a discursive “slippage . . . from ‘gay’ to ‘Aids’ to ‘death’” becoming “commonplace of Aids commentary in the press” during the 1980s and early 1990s.\textsuperscript{119} As a prosecutor spoke before the courtroom, he encouraged his audience to not “forget Matt Turney,” one of Dahmer’s victims, whose life was “extinguished” for Dahmer’s “sexual satisfaction.”\textsuperscript{120} In order for Dahmer to feel fulfilled by his sexual life, the prosecutor manufactures a system in which an exchange of virility was requisite for Dahmer to feel satisfied: he must take the life of another man in order to achieve an orgasm. In America’s “heterosexist culture the Dahmer cased represent[ed] . . . a confus[ion]” between the “homocidal with homosexual tendencies.”\textsuperscript{121} Furthermore, the word “extinguish” evokes imagery of finality and permanence in such a way that stresses the irrevocable quality of Dahmer’s crimes. Dahmer’s sexual exploits resulted in the death of men; broadly, sex between men resulted in the transmission of the HIV/AIDS virus and more death of men; therefore, Dahmer’s brand of sex had been successfully compared to the HIV/AIDS crisis. In producing this comparison, the prosecutor was able to utilize the negative connotation associated with AIDS to help convict Dahmer to life imprisonment; in airing this comparison, the broadcast news media was able to place it into the public’s consciousness. Martha A. Schmidt explores the “symbolic construction of AIDS and of Dahmer” by noting that they both “were

\textsuperscript{119} Watney, \textit{Policing Desire}, 85.

\textsuperscript{120} CBS, Feb 14, 1992, DVD.

\textsuperscript{121} Tithecott, “Making Monsters,” 118-119.
defined as the inevitable consequence of the exotic perversion of homosexuality, . . . resulted in” unacknowledged “deaths,” and “raised questions about sexuality, the body, and safety.”122 Once again, queerness and death were discursively linked.

Although Wisconsin had outlawed the death penalty by 1991, Dahmer’s life was effectively over regardless of his sentencing: he was essentially guaranteed to spend the rest of his life locked away, be it in prison or a mental institution. As he addressed the court for the final time before hearing his verdict, Dahmer’s own speech highlighted the reduction of queerness to death. “I didn’t ever want freedom,” Dahmer stated, “frankly, I wanted death for myself.”123 A number of contributing factors could have informed Dahmer’s lust for death -- the guilt of 17 murders and the shame of being caught certainly didn’t augment his joie de vivre. However, it could also be theorized that Dahmer anticipated death because of his queerness. As a man who had sex with other men living in an era in which the media had equated queer livelihood to a death sentence, it is not a leap to assume that Dahmer regarded his personal death as an approaching inevitability. In wishing to die, Dahmer sought to seize control of his fate and to actualize an unavoidable reality which had been instilled into him by the heterosexist hegemonic culture of his time.

Three years after his arrest, Dahmer was murdered in prison by another inmate.124 It wasn’t the first time that he had been attacked, either -- he survived “another attempt on his life”


123 CBS, Feb 17, 1992, DVD.

124 NBC, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.
the preceding summer.\textsuperscript{125} When it gave Dahmer a life sentence in prison, the state of Wisconsin had ruled that he had been properly punished for his crimes. Yet, it seems as if Dahmer’s fellow inmates felt that life imprisonment was not an adequate response for his actions, deeming him worthy of death. They were not alone in harboring those feelings: when news of Dahmer’s murder broke, his death was presented as warranted -- if not unexpected. After mentioning Dahmer’s cannibalism, ABC asserted that “his death may not be as shocking.” The network went on to interview Dahmer’s attorney, Gerald Boyle, who said that he “wasn’t shocked because [he] thought that Dahmer would end up [that] way.”\textsuperscript{126} The apathy displayed by Boyle and the newscaster is unsurprising: Dahmer was not a hero, and his murder understandably did not illicit a mourning period for either party. However, their dismissal of Dahmer’s life as meaningless becomes frustrating upon considering that he had \textit{already been given} a fair sentence by the state of Wisconsin. Further punitive measures were unnecessary. Unfortunately, Dahmer’s murder fits neatly into the narrative of queerness becoming death; with each denial of his life’s worth, Dahmer became yet another example of a queer man whose life was rendered unremarkable by the death which defined him.

\textsuperscript{125}CBS, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.

\textsuperscript{126}ABC, Nov 28, 1994, DVD.
CHAPTER IV

In the summer of 1991, racial tensions in the United States were high following the arrest of Rodney King in March of the same year. A videotape of King’s arrest showed him being savagely beaten by police officers in Los Angeles while he lay on the road helpless; in the months following the arrest, questions about police brutality linked to racism occupied the country. Just four days into the Dahmer case, a similar story broke involving potentially racially-motivated police negligence which resulted in the death of a 14 year-old Laotian boy. Konerak Sinthamsompone, Dahmer’s youngest victim, was able to escape from Dahmer’s apartment and seek out help. Naked, bleeding, and drugged, Sinthamsompone was returned to Dahmer by police -- despite the protestations of two African American women who had called the police on Sinthamsompone’s behalf -- die to their dismissal of the incident as a “homosexual

quarrel." The case was highly reminiscent of the topical King case, with a predominantly white police force being held responsible for the wrongful harm of a person of color. The broadcast news media noticed this linkage between the cases, and took advantage of it as an opportunity to present the sensationalized Dahmer case as a forum for discussion about racial politics in America. In this discussion, people of color -- specifically black people -- were a destabilizing force who posed a threat to the reign of white supremacy; the news media was thus able to posit Jeffrey Dahmer as a symbol of the threat of racial upheaval in America.

The police were evidently split on how to handle the matter between accepting the blame for incident and defending their legitimacy as enforcers of the law. Philip Arreola, the Milwaukee police chief at the time of Dahmer’s arrest, seemed to take the side of the African American community. After “suspending three officers [involved] in the incident,” Arreola held a press conference in which he claimed that it was “a matter of grave concern to me and the entire department.” Two days later, ABC reported that Arreola had suspended the officers underneath the belief that it “was in the best interests of the community, the department, and the officers involved.” Arreola undoubtedly had the proper idea of how to navigate the situation. After suspending the officers involved in the Dahmer case, he went on to appear in an interview on Nightline with Barbara Walters in which he touted his recent efforts to “enhance . . . minority

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129 CBS, Jul 26, 1991, DVD.

130 ABC, Jul 28, 1991, DVD.
percentages within [the] department." Arreola demonstrated a savvy knowledge of how to disarm racial tension; he punished the police officers responsible for Sinthamsompone’s death, and went on a national broadcast to claim that his department had been making steps to -- ultimately -- be less racist. Yet, it still wouldn’t be enough for the citizens of Wisconsin, as racialized tensions nonetheless developed -- even within the department that he oversaw.

Though the leadership wished to be as supportive as possible of the minority groups in Wisconsin, the lower ranks of the police department did not hesitate to air their grievances against Arreola. After he elected to suspend the three officers, the rest of the department decided to “vote on his performance,” which could have resulted in a “demand” for his “resignation.” Though it can be assumed that Arreola was not forced to resign -- he did, after all, appear on Nightline within the next two weeks as acting chief of the Milwaukee police department -- the damage had been done to his department’s reputation. They were a group fractured along lines of authority, and the news media had picked up on it. The drama between the factions was depicted as having occurred due to the instability spurned by the divide between the white and black communities of Milwaukee. If the police force was in shambles, then who could be trusted to protect the city’s denizens?

The anger of the black community in Milwaukee was rooted -- perhaps surprisingly -- in a question that the broadcast news media had used to startle the white general public: why had Dahmer been allowed to kill for as long as he did without getting caught? However, unlike the


132 ABC, Jul 28, 1991, DVD.
assumedly white populace, the black community was frustrated that Dahmer had been able to impact their people rather than bothered by the fact that he had been a part of them. The black community asserted that “the police could’ve stopped the killings sooner” but “racism might’ve slowed them down.”

Reverend Le Havre Buck, a pastor at a predominantly African American church, stated that the black community was “having a heck of a time” as they grappled with the feeling that they “were a burden, and not a credit” to both the police and white residents of Milwaukee. “Activists within the Black . . . communit[y] charged that the homicides had been allowed to continue for so long because of police apathy towards Dahmer’s victims.” In expressing disdain towards the institutionalized form of neglect to which they were exposed on a daily basis, black Milwaukeeans unsettled the white populace. For white Milwaukee, ignorance was bliss: it was easier to continue in life without confronting a harsh reality in which they were complicit due to their inability to act out against systemic racism. In broadcasting that a representative of the black community had said that he felt like it was a “burden,” then the broadcast news media was forcing the white community to reconsider their position in racial politics. While this had the potential to be a productive exercise, considerable steps were taken by the news media to create an environment of hostility, not solitude, between the races.

When juxtaposed next to the other African Americans interviewed about the status of race relations in Milwaukee, Reverend Buck looks significantly calmer. The others, though far from

133 Ibid.

134 CBS, Aug 6, 1991, DVD.

riot-inducing, are much more impassioned and blunt in their choice of speech. The directness with which they spoke had an air of confrontation to it -- and deservedly so -- that prohibited white audiences from continued ignorance. Michael McGee, an alderman in Milwaukee, explicitly stated that “Milwaukee does not mind what happens to Black people because we don’t matter. Period.” An elected official’s decision to speak so explicitly certainly had the potential to be incendiary; McGee, however, was protected by his decision to implicate white people rather than to outright condemn them for their role in the systemic negligence of black people. On the contrary, Queen Hyler, a neighborhood activist, goes for the jugular when she exclaims that “We are not ignorant out here, and we know what time of day it is. And what we’re saying to White Milwaukeeans is you better wake up too.” Hyler refuses to let the injustice against black people continue, a just cause, yet one that is phrased in such a way that hints at dire consequences should no change occur. Her usage of the word “better” as a modifier indicates an unuttered sentiment of “or else” at the conclusion of her soundbite -- a concerning thought for a previously passive white populace.

As a result of the Konerak Sinthamsompone incident -- as well as Dahmer’s less-sensationalized murders of many people of color -- a sentiment grew amongst the black community in Milwaukee that the police were not to be trusted. Marcia Coggs, a state representative, felt obligated to instill this sense of distrust into the future generations. “How can I tell my grandchildren and other people’s children that the police is your friend, why they did

136 ABC, Jul 28, 1991, DVD.

137 ABC, Aug 6, 1991, DVD.
not protect that 14 year old?” she asks. Coggs, a seemingly harmless older woman, made a statement that would’ve alarmed a white audience for a number of reasons. For starters, just like McGee before her, Coggs was an elected official -- however, her position was of more importance than that of McGee’s. She held more power within the government, and that made her a more imposing threat. Coggs also admitted to not trusting the police, an unfathomable utterance to white audiences. Perhaps most egregiously, though, Coggs decided to pass this belief onto future generations, thereby inviting the promise of future race-based hostilities. In the eyes of the broadcast news media, Coggs suddenly became the vocal piece for Malcolm X-esque opinions -- when she otherwise could have passed as a kind older woman.

The terror invoked by the presence of an “unruly” black population in Milwaukee reached a pinnacle when the broadcast news media was able to imply that the city was on the eve of an outbreak of violence. In an NBC broadcast on Jul 30, 1991, unlabeled and grainy footage of predominantly black people getting into fights with one another -- there were no authority figures present to intervene -- was aired with the following text spoken over the visual: “a growing number of minority groups in other cities are tired of waiting for the police to act. They’re taking the law into their own hands.” The footage was totally unmarked with no explanation for who produced it, who it featured, where it was shot, nor why it existed. Similarly, no other cities were actually mentioned -- NBC simply hoped that by stating that violence existed elsewhere, Milwaukeeans would assume that racially-based rioting would occur in their

138 ABC, Aug 5, 1991, DVD.

139 NBC, Jul 30, 1991, DVD.
own city. Overestimating the probability of a race-based riot in Milwaukee was an easy step for
the broadcast news media to take in order to instill fear into the hearts of its viewers. According
to CBS in a segment about the “great American cultural breakdown” of 1991, the fact that “black
and white racism” were “smoldering” was followed by the statement that “rap lyrics endorsed
mayhem.”

It was rather convenient that rap music, which was (and is) a historically black art
form, was labeled as “endorsing mayhem” immediately after racism between black and white
people was “smoldering.” Such a presentation of information implicates black people as the
faction responsible for any distress between the groups -- in spite of the fact that white people
may be held accountable for the historic degradation of black people.

The only documented form of racially-based “violence” to actually exist in Milwaukee
due to the Dahmer case didn’t even result in anyone or thing being harmed. Even then, the word
“violent” is a relative word in this scenario. The families of Dahmer’s victims were given the
opportunity to speak to him briefly during the court case, during which Rita Isbell screamed “I
don’t ever want to have to see my momma go through this again. Never, Jeffrey. Jeffrey! I hate
you.”

Isbell later had to be restrained by security guards, having moved from behind the
witness stand and towards Dahmer in a menacing manner; the incident would’ve perhaps been
more unremarkable had it not been for her shirt, which had “100% Black” written across it in
bold letters. Isbell’s actions then become incredibly political. As she stands in the court of law,
Isbell openly screams against the man responsible for claiming the lives of fifteen separate

140 CBS, Aug 22, 1991, DVD.

141 CBS, Feb 17, 1992, DVD. Also depicted in: ABC, Feb 17, 1992, DVD; CBS, Feb 17, 1992, DVD; NBC, aired on February 17, 1992, DVD (Vanderbilt
Television News Archive).
people of color (as well as two white men). It’s a raw moment of pure emotion: though certainly impacted by the emotion she feels upon seeing her relative’s murderer, her attire suggests that Isbell is equally moved by the injustices that she, as a Black woman feels. This moment was aired by multiple newscasts. While notable for its cinematic element, it is also rather alarming that it got as much airtime as it did: it could have easily been interpreted by white audiences to be yet another instance of a black person “acting out” -- a damaging stereotype for a disillusioned group of people trying to organize.

The frustrations of the black community in Milwaukee were amplified by the police force’s privileging of white people in their protective efforts -- a fact that was recognized by both white and black populations in Milwaukee. One broadcast noted that “police officials admit[ted] that officers are usually responsive to complaints from white, more affluent neighborhoods” and interviewed Jerry Wilson of the Crime Control Institute who suggested that “the wealthy person is more likely to be an articulate person” who would be “more likely to complain if [the crime] isn’t handled by the book.”142 Wilson’s quote is shocking in light of the ineptitude on behalf of the Milwaukee police department to protect its black citizens from Dahmer. Rather than protect at-risk communities, the police concerned themselves with the matters of the citizens who would be more likely to report them for improperly performing their job. Members of the black community did not hesitate to articulate their knowledge of this information to the broadcast news media. An unnamed woman demanded for “somebody that’s going to investigate the police department” which “didn’t say nothing about this white boy killing [black people]”; Reverend Leo Champion of Fellowship Missionary Church said “a double standard . . . for how white

142 NBC, Jul 30, 1991, DVD.
people [were] treated and how blacks [were] treated” had “been going on in the community for years.” If Reverend Champion was correct about the black community’s frustrations having existed for years prior to Dahmer’s arrest, then the Sinthamsompone incident provided them with an ideal outlet in which they could air their grievances against a corrupt system. Once armed with the knowledge that officials were consciously neglecting their communities, Milwaukee is perhaps fortunate that race riots did not occur like those to come a few months later in Los Angeles.

In spite of the officials’s admission that they had failed to adhere to the demands of the black community, the white community rallied in support around the police force. Their support stemmed partially from the fact that they lived “in an age in which the concerns of entertainment are the concerns of the police . . . and in which many . . . television and cinema heroes [were] ‘real’ or ‘fictional’ members of ‘elite’ police chapters.” The media depicted the police as being reliable and noble. From the clips aired, it appears as if the support was not maliciously intended; rather, it was the result of an egregious misunderstanding of the black community’s rage. At a rally full of white people holding signs expressing support for the police, Mary Dequardo, a white attendee, said that she “fel[t] that there [was] equal and fair treatment throughout the community by [its] officers” because they were “trained that way.” Similarly, an unnamed white man at a separate rally reiterated that it wasn’t “the officers” who “kill[ed] 17 people” after

145 ABC, Aug 5, 1991, DVD.
pointing out that audiences “[didn’t] even hear about [Dahmer] anymore.”

To put it simply: white Milwaukee was ignorant. They internalized black Milwaukee’s anger, mistaking it to be an attack on their whiteness rather instead of what it truly was: an effort to raise awareness about the failings of the police force. The man who argued that Dahmer’s relevance had been usurped by the vilification of the police department epitomized the trouble with white Milwaukee.

Regardless of skin color, my research thus far reveals that Dahmer’s murders were considered heinous by all Milwaukeeans. Meanwhile, a poll cited by a CBS broadcast suggested that “70% of white residents but only 40% of African American residents believe[d] that police [were] doing a good or excellent job.”

There was a stark contrast between the way that black and white Milwaukeeans were treated by the police department, and white Milwaukee refused to acknowledge it.

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146 CBS, Aug 6, 1991, DVD.

147 CBS, Aug 6, 1991, DVD.
CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to investigate the ways in which the big three networks – ABC, NBC, and CBS – were able to sensationalize the Jeffrey Dahmer case in order to further ostracize the black and queer communities. These networks, which I have often referred to as the “broadcast news media,” initially produced a portrait of Dahmer which depicted him as a one-dimensional boogeyman who struck terror into the hearts of most Americans with his unsettling crimes. A concentrated effort was then undertaken by the broadcast news media to strengthen the bonds between the nuclear family, which culminated in a discursive endeavor to other the queer and black communities. For the queer community, this meant a conscious effort to ignore the queerness of the Dahmer case by deeming that queer lives don’t matter. For the black community, this resulted in a divide in the Milwaukee community over the effectiveness of its police department, with white Milwaukee arguing that it was competent, and black Milwaukee feeling perpetually neglected.

Though this thesis analyzes media trends from the early 1990s, its findings – namely that sensationalized media events can be used to target and isolate marginalized audiences – remain pertinent in the year 2016. At a time when Black Lives Matter but Mexico is expected to build a wall on its northern border, minority groups in the news media would benefit from greater access
to positive representations of themselves. Fortunately, we exist in an age where the premise of
the “general public” is beginning to be undone; in instances where the news media blatant
missteps, social media exists to combat its negligence in achieving diversity – such as the recent
#OscarsSoWhite controversy. After the 2016 Oscars overwhelmingly honored the achievements
of white Hollywood for the second year in a row, the Academy Awards received such negative
backlash that it decided to embark on an “ambitious, global campaign” to “double the number of
women and diverse members by 2020.”

Progress, however slow it may be, is happening.

This thesis has prompted me to consider a number of future academic projects, the first of
which involves a broader look at the connection of the HIV/AIDS crisis with queer figures
similar to Dahmer who aren’t always associated with the epidemic. Connecting Dahmer to the
HIV/AIDS crisis is rather provocative; considering the deep history of trauma imposed upon the
queer community as a result of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it seems almost unfair to saddle it down
with the acknowledgment that it occurred concomitantly with Dahmer’s murders. However, both
Dahmer and the HIV/AIDS crisis played a fundamental role in the shaping of queer history in
such a way that their connection must be studied. In broadening the scope of my studies to
include other lesser-known agents in the crafting of queer history alive during the 1980s and
early 1990s, it will allow the LGBTQ-identified people of today to have an enriched
understanding of the generations that preceded them.

Since Dahmer’s murder, the United States has been the site of many landmark events
which have drastically altered the day-to-day lives of the same communities which were so

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148 Elahe Izadi, “Academy announces major changes to membership amid #OscarsSoWhite Backlash,” The
entertainment/wp/2016/01/22/academy-announces-major-changes-to-membership-amid-oscarssowhite-backlash/.
1xx
negatively impacted by the broadcast news media’s treatment of the Dahmer case. People of the same gender can marry now legally marry one another; Barack Obama was the United States’s first African-American president. Yet, despite all of this advancement, the process of researching, analyzing, and writing about Jeffrey Dahmer’s crimes remains unsettling. The obvious response to this feeling of unease is to suggest that the horror engendered by the goriness of his crimes is unshakeable, that Dahmer’s actions were so irredeemably vile that one must remain bothered by them in order to retain their sense of human decency. Perhaps, however, any residual unease that one feels related to Dahmer extends beyond the realm of bodily revulsion. Perhaps the Dahmer case is troublesome because of its demands for us to reconsider the ways in which we process information at its most basic level. If we fail to challenge our cognitive processes – even the ones that seem harmless, like watching television – then we allow ourselves to become susceptible to the same cultural duplicity which acted as a dehumanizing force in the early 1990s. To regress would be to occupy an intellectual space where our personhood mattered less than our ability to be shaped by the discursive forces enacting upon us. In short, to regress would be to embody Dahmer.
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APPENDIX

(OPTIONAL)