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## The Racialization of Sexuality: The Queer Case of Jeffrey Dahmer

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# The Racialization of Sexuality

## *The Queer Case of Jeffrey Dahmer\**

Ian Barnard

### I. Introduction

How is sexuality racialized? How is race sexualized? And what are the consequences of separating race from sexuality, as if each component of subjectivity had a self-sufficient identity that could be cumulatively added to an infinite number of other components of subjectivity (i.e., as if sexuality were not always-already raced, as if racial identifications were not necessarily sexualized)? In this article I read media and subcultural representations of Jeffrey Dahmer, the white male U.S. serial killer who gained notoriety in the late 1980s for having sex with and then murdering and dismembering men of color in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My aim is to show the extent to which the degree of Dahmer's homosexualization in a particular representation determines Dahmer's thinking and actions in the sphere of race, and to suggest how spiraling efforts to separate race from sexuality in the Dahmer case only further intricate the two analytic axes.

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The shame of Dahmer has led to a disavowal of his possible gayness by all but the most rabid of homophobes, unless that gayness is used to indict institutional homophobia (this is rare); it has also led to a strategic forgetting of his apparent whiteness both by rabid homophobes and by anti-homophobic activists. These omissions separate discussions of race from those about sexuality in connection with Dahmer, a separation that also erases the racialized sexual subjectivity of those he murdered. Here we see the very material and human destruction that such theoretical foreclosures can wreak — I am referring to the ways in which Dahmer's violence has been reproduced not only in the discourse about his killings, but also in the ensuing conflicts in Milwaukee, and in the 1994 prison killing of Dahmer himself. In addition to mimicking the kind of mindset that might have enabled a Dahmer, many representations of the Dahmer case restage the particular horrors of Dahmer via a series of phobic displacements that reproduce the racism and homophobia that characterized Jeffrey Dahmer's crimes.

I suspect that the neat separation of race from sexuality in analyses of the events around Dahmer's 1991 arrest and insanity trial can be partly attributed to the reluctance of commentators to take on the question of interracial desire (both on the part of Dahmer and those he killed). In fact, those who do consider the subject can only think of it in its inverse form (Dahmer must have hated people of color) or express bafflement: why would someone who held white people in low regard — supposedly a trait of some of the men Dahmer killed — consent to have sex with a white person (as some of Dahmer's victims apparently did)? Anne E. Schwartz, reports, for instance, that Curtis Straughter's "friends were puzzled when they heard he was one of Jeffrey Dahmer's victims because of Straughter's open hostility toward white men."<sup>1</sup> Both Schwartz and Straughter's friends seem to assume that political/racial hostility translates into sexual revulsion. The question, "What of the man of color who is politicized to the extent that he hates white men, but yet is sexually attracted to them?" appears to evoke an impossibility to those involved with and commenting on the Dahmer case (the lure of money is usually the only motive cited). Likewise, Dahmer is taken to have lured men of color to his home only because he hated them and wanted to kill them. Desire drops from a picture that would become too convoluted otherwise. These critics don't ask why Dahmer might have had such strong desires for those he supposedly hated, how desire and prejudice might produce one another, how desire might override or reconfigure prejudice or principle (and vice versa), or how desire might produce its own cancellation.

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz (1992), 84.

I want to extend existing analyses of interracial gay desire by complicating dominant Dahmer discourse in order to suggest both how racial fetishization can lead to literal death and how the denial of such fetishization reinvents the erasure of the fetishized subject (i.e., how a refusal to recognize race as formative in the Dahmer case perpetuates the discursive invisibility of those whom Dahmer murdered). My goal is not to answer the question of whether Dahmer's killings were racist or not (in any case, I do not believe that they need be only racist or only not racist), but rather to show how both those professional writers and lay commentators who see the killings as racist and those who do not, have had to ground their positions in a pivotal and ominous denial of the ways in which race and sexuality form particular and non-factorizable identities, a denial of queer race.

I am also interested in multiplying and destabilizing the content of sexual identities, the categories of sexual practices, and their nomenclatures ("gay," "queer," "homosexual," etc.). For instance, I perversely give Jeffrey Dahmer a gay identity to counter the gay commentators who have insisted that he was not gay, presumably for fear of homophobic public reaction to a gay Dahmer. I leave my own insistence on Jeffrey Dahmer's "gayness" polemically and strategically unproblematized while also moving toward a definition of sexuality that can never stand on its own (sexuality cannot be defined other than in multiple contexts, and sexuality is always also race, gender, and so on). These aporias insist that competing discourses of identity and politics need not only be seen as indicative of conflict in need of resolution. These discourses can also work in concert to mark the very disjunctions of identity from political effectivity that characterize the absence of or impoverished nature of current intellectual and social understandings of racially inflected sexualities.

## *II. Disavowing Homophobia, Erasing Race*

Media coverage of the Dahmer case was imbricated in a sustained and complex logic of homophobia at the same time that it actively disavowed any homophobic intentions and effects. Initial references to the Dahmer murders as "homosexual overkill" by public officials and the mainstream press were vigorously protested by lesbian and gay activists in Milwaukee and elsewhere, who pointed out that Dahmer's actions were no more representatively homosexual than a heterosexual serial killer's killings would be representatively heterosexual, but that those who used the phrase "homosexual overkill" would never have used the term "hetero-

sexual overkill” to characterize a heterosexual mass murderer.<sup>2</sup> The phrase “homosexual overkill” was thus, once more, naturalizing heterosexuality and pathologizing homosexuality. Members of the media responded to the protests surprisingly quickly, and the term “homosexual overkill” was soon dropped from reports on the case. In fact, the media seemed to become so concerned that their reports not appear homophobic, that all references to Dahmer’s sexual orientation also disappeared from most coverage of the case. Dahmer’s gayness was also hardly mentioned at his trial.

This change was welcomed by those espousing a liberal politics of assimilation. Dahmer’s sexual orientation had nothing to do with his becoming a serial killer, the argument went, so references to his sexual orientation were inappropriate in media coverage of the killings. But if Dahmer’s sexual orientation could not be mentioned, neither could institutional homophobia. Liberal celebrations of individualism generally identify prejudice and success as manifestations of personal achievements or failings, and so can only look at individuals as repositories of humanistic or anti-egalitarian values, rather than at the formation of these individuals through socially constructed and institutionally enforced power relations. The result, then, of media attempts at liberal tolerance was that the occlusion of Dahmer’s gayness also occluded the identification and discussion of societal homophobia in general, and specifically of the external and internalized homophobia that might have contributed to Dahmer’s development as a serial killer, of Dahmer’s own homophobia that might have led him to kill gay men, of the possible effects of homophobia on the men whom Dahmer killed, and of the possibility that institutional homophobia might have made them more accessible to the murderous Dahmer.<sup>3</sup> Of course, I cannot conclusively assert that Dahmer’s homosexuality turned him into a serial killer, but such a teleology is possible, given the overwhelming evidence that Dahmer had internalized societal homophobia to such an extent that he felt guilt, shame, discomfort, and hatred about his own homosexuality, and that a logical result of these feelings could have been the urge to destroy those with whom he attempted to satisfy his proscribed sexual desires.<sup>4</sup> However, with gay-

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<sup>2</sup> For chronicles of the initial homophobic coverage of the Dahmer case in Milwaukee, see Schmidt (1994), Peck (1993). The term “homosexual overkill” had previously been used by the Milwaukee County medical examiner to describe the 1990 murder of James Madden by Joachim Dressler: Dressler shot Madden and mutilated his body (Peck [1993], 55).

<sup>3</sup> Only a few writers lamented the fact that homophobia had not been put on trial with Jeffrey Dahmer. Schmidt (1994, 84) documents this argument.

<sup>4</sup> Every account of the Dahmer case that I have read and that mentions Dahmer’s gayness, points out that for almost all of his adult life Dahmer was unable to accept his homosexuality, and made disparaging remarks against other gay men. For an unusually

ness out of the way, Dahmer could be constructed as an inexcusable monster, and the society around him could escape being implicated in his crimes.<sup>5</sup>

During and after Dahmer's trial, the few reporters who did discuss homophobia and Dahmer's gayness (primarily in the gay media) tended to ignore the fact that Dahmer was white and that all but three of the seventeen men he murdered were of color. This reticence was presumably a sign of embarrassment, a dread of having gayness associated with racism, or a fear of talking about interracial sex in the context of the Dahmer murders. The habit of partializing identity or of assigning individuals separate racial, gender, and sexual identities, in turn, makes it impossible to speak of Dahmer as white, male, and gay or of those he murdered as gay men of color. Usually the lineaments of white gayness are not difficult to identify. Even though the racial component of this identity is often assumed rather than articulated, gay whiteness is nevertheless normalized to such an extent that gayness is thought of only in terms of whiteness, and queer identities of color become literally unthinkable. In the case of Dahmer, though, the specification of whiteness becomes much more difficult because of the immediately and explicitly monstrous and racist connotations that whiteness takes on in this context. What characterizes whiteness, other than racism, in this instance? The embarrassment accompanying such a specification points to the incoherence of a liberal discourse of individual responsibility (Dahmer's actions were solely his individual responsibility) as it is threatened by the contaminating truth of generality (Dahmer's actions say something about whiteness in general). Dahmer's own apparent insistence that the races — and sexualities — of those he murdered were "irrelevant," that he chose his victims because of their physical features ("My only objective was to find the best-looking guy I could"<sup>6</sup>) and not because of his

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explicit account of the role that internalized homophobia might have played in Dahmer's killings, see "Debate Rages" (1992, especially page 26). One exception to these accounts comes from Dahmer's attorney, who claimed at Dahmer's trial that his client had as an adolescent "discovered and accepted his homosexuality" (*Trial* [1992]). Dahmer did perhaps accept his sexuality near the end of his life. His probation officer noted in 1991, Dahmer "had admitted to self he is gay. Told agent that's the way he is so 'fuck it'" (Davis [1992], 129; Norris [1992], 219; Schwartz [1992], 84; Dvorchak & Holewa [1991], 158).

<sup>5</sup> My imputation that Dahmer's sexual orientation should have been publicly discussed would apply equally to a heterosexual serial killer; I certainly would not want to imply that a straight serial killer should be referred to as a "serial killer" while a gay serial killer is called a "gay serial killer," or that heterosexuality as an institution and as a state could not be a murderous shaping influence for a straight serial killer. Homophobia might play a part in the actions of both the gay and straight serial killers.

<sup>6</sup> "17" (1994), A-1. The word "could" in Dahmer's statement might be read as symptomatic of a racism underlying Dahmer's claims to racial indifference, if we understand Dahmer's own insecurities interfacing with a racist assumption of the inferiority of people of color: he had to make do with people of color.

perception of their racial identifications, does not bracket race and racism, given the prevalent association of particular physical features with specific racial identifications. In any case, Dahmer might not have realized that his murderous desires were racialized, or he might have been lying: he might have been as interested in political correctness as the media were, and there is much evidence to suggest that Dahmer was not as nonchalant about race as he claimed to be.

Many of Dahmer's acquaintances report that he seemed to hate black people (and black gay men, in particular), and frequently referred to black people with racist slurs. Further, Dahmer's racial consciousness was demonstrated in his claim that he thought that Jamie Doxtator, whom he had lured to his grandmother's house in 1988 and killed, was "Hispanic" (Doxtator was Native American). Doxtator's mother later told reporters that she was initially relieved to hear that those Dahmer had killed were "black, Hispanic, and Laotian,"<sup>7</sup> since she then mistakenly believed that her Native American son was safe. Both Dahmer's and Doxtator's mother's accounts suggest that race was very much at issue, and that Dahmer was actively thinking of race when he brought men of color to his home prior to killing them. In addition, it seems that Dahmer's victims were mostly poor and might have felt neglected and vulnerable in other ways, too: institutional racism produces a disproportionately high ratio of poverty, neglect, and vulnerability among people of color in the U.S., and thus even the class status and degree of self-esteem of those Dahmer murdered cannot be said to be extrinsic to race. Although Dahmer's attorney insisted in his opening statement that the case was not about race, the race of each of Dahmer's victims was mentioned several times in the course of Dahmer's trial, an indication of the impossibility, on the part of both the prosecution and defense camps, of not seeing race in the case.<sup>8</sup>

### III. *Gay Rights for a Serial Killer*

While legal and media figures learnt not to explicitly remark on Dahmer's gayness in their official representations of him, Dahmer himself invoked what we might think of as gay rights strategies (i.e., strategies that share discursive space with the liberal logic of gay civil rights and identity politics) in the course of his growing momentum as a serial killer and his consequent run-ins with and escapes from the law. As with the media's belated ignoring of Dahmer's gayness, these practices suggest the limitations and dangers of a liberal gay rights discourse.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz (1992), 53-34; Baumann (1991), 205, 265.

<sup>8</sup> *The Trial of Jeffrey Dahmer* (1992), Court TV/Video.

<sup>9</sup> One of the few Dahmer texts that does point to societal homophobia as a cause of

Commentators have bemoaned the fact that Dahmer had so many brushes with an incompetent or unobservant legal system and with other state officials (a probation officer, for instance) prior to his final arrest, and yet was able to continue killing. If the law and the others had been more vigilant and more conscientious, this argument goes, Dahmer might have been caught sooner, and several lives could have been saved. In one such early encounter, Dahmer was convicted of sexual assault and of enticing a child for immoral purposes in 1989.<sup>10</sup> In his remarks to the judge successfully soliciting the judge's leniency, Dahmer came out: he told the judge that he was gay.<sup>11</sup> In a chillingly magnified version of this plea two years later, Dahmer came out to two police officers who were summoned by neighbors when a drugged fourteen year old Konerak Sinthasomphone escaped from Dahmer's apartment. The policemen returned Sinthasomphone to Dahmer's custody and left the scene after Dahmer convinced them that Sinthasomphone was his adult lover.<sup>12</sup> Dahmer killed Sinthasomphone shortly afterwards.

What is particularly remarkable about these scenes is that before and after each of them Dahmer had on many occasions indicated that he felt shame and guilt about his gayness, and was loathe to accept his gayness, let alone admit it to others or matter-of-factly assume it in their presence. In the 1989 and Sinthasomphone incidents, then, whether consciously or not, Dahmer came out only for his own murderous advantage. These coming-outs enabled him to kill again because they played on the sympathies of others trained to be good civil libertarians. In June of 1990, Dahmer's probation officer, Donna Chester, had suggested to Dahmer that he contact "a gay rights organization" in connection with what she perceived to be his problems with his sexuality.<sup>13</sup> Dahmer's matter-of-fact proclamation of his gayness to the two police officers in 1991 might have been the logical result of such a contact, had it occurred, but the context in which it was uttered and the purpose for which it was deployed could hardly have been what Chester had anticipated or hoped for.

We can read the police officers as similarly confounded. Anti-racist

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Dahmer's killings is Hirsch (1996). In his efforts to establish a larger social accountability for Dahmer, Hirsch also delineates the continuities between the Dahmer phenomenon and other social discourses. However, in his zeal to claim Dahmer's victimhood, Hirsch does not account for what might be read as Dahmer's cynical deployment of the same gay rights discourse that informs Hirsch's article. Hirsch also does not develop any theory of race in the Dahmer case, though he does several times mention the races of the men Dahmer killed.

<sup>10</sup> Davis (1992), 303.

<sup>11</sup> Schwartz (1992), 69; Davis (1992), 99; Baumann (1991), 74; Norris (1992), 182. I am not, of course, here using the language of Schwartz, Davis, Baumann, and Norris, none of whom quote Dahmer directly, and all of whom use the word "homosexual" rather than "gay," some also adding that Dahmer's homosexuality was a "sexual problem".

<sup>12</sup> Davis (1992), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Davis (1992), 109.

and anti-homophobia activists have assumed that the police officers who delivered Konerak Sinthasomphone back to Dahmer acted out of racist and homophobic impulses,<sup>14</sup> but we might equally argue that they acted out of anti-racist and anti-homophobic impulses. Yes, they might have dismissed the concern of bystanders because these bystanders were not white; yes, they might have felt less compassion for Sinthasomphone because he was Laotian and apparently gay; and, yes, they might have suspected nothing was amiss because they ignorantly assumed that gay male relationships are typically violent and degraded. However, they might also have felt a pressure to honor interracial relationships, to honor gay relationships, to not assume that a sexual liaison between two males was criminal or immoral, or even not to presume to interfere in an order of sexual conduct that was alien or perhaps offensive to them. After all, one of the police officers<sup>15</sup> did respond to what he might have thought was homophobic (and miscegenophobic?) anxiety about Sinthasomphone's relationship with Dahmer by telling one of the (African-American) women who summoned him to the scene when she called later, still concerned, "Ma'am, I can't make it any more clear. It's all taken care of. He's with his boyfriend and in his boyfriend's apartment, where he's got his belongings also ... It's as positive as I can be ... I can't do anything about somebody's sexual preferences in life."<sup>16</sup> Given the notorious homophobia of police departments, it is ironic that in a newspaper interview months later, another of the officers would defend their actions with recourse to a similar invocation of the very imperative for tolerance that the police department's liberal critics might have insisted on:

I can't believe the community would believe that I would leave a young boy bleeding and just turn him over to someone, just leave without having administered any care. That just wasn't the case. We thought

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<sup>14</sup> These suspicions were confirmed, for many, when the transcripts of one of the police officers' radio reports to the dispatcher after the encounter were made public. The officer, John Balcerzak, laughed, apparently derisively, about the incident, and, in another possibly derogatory reference to Dahmer and/or Sinthasomphone, noted that his partner would get "deloused" at the station (Schwartz [1992], 88-105). Lawrence Chua has further pointed out how "Orientalphobia" was exemplified by the understanding of the Dahmer/Sinthasomphone relationship: in the mind of Joseph T. Gabrish, the Milwaukee police officer who told the press, "There was just nothing that stood out, or we would have seen it," after he returned naked and bleeding fourteen-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone to blond mass-murderer Jeffrey Dahmer. (1993, 316)

<sup>15</sup> Tellingly, none of the Dahmer books mentions the races of the police officers who were called to the scene — suggesting, therefore, that they were white.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Schwartz (1992), 94-95. See also Davis (1992), 51; Jamakaya (1992), 24; Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 118. The caller, incidentally, also makes a nod in an anti-homophobic direction by responding to the officer's comment, "I can't do anything about anybody's sexual preferences in life," with "Well, no, I'm not saying anything about that" (qtd. in Dvorchak & Holewa [1991], 118).

there was a caring relationship between these two individuals. Being homosexual is not against the law ... and I don't base any decision on that.<sup>17</sup>

What concerns me here, in addition to the fact that these words were apparently uttered by officers from a police department with a reputation for racism and homophobia, is the uses to which they have been put by those who reported on the incident. Anne Schwartz, from whose Dahmer book I have taken the "I can't do anything about somebody's sexual preferences" quote above, makes every effort in her book to exonerate the police officers (and the Milwaukee police department in general) from any imputation that they acted inappropriately in returning Sinthasomphone to Dahmer's custody, and in the Dahmer case in general. She uses diverse strategies to achieve this goal: publishing the criminal records of those Dahmer murdered in order to make them less sympathetic and the police, by contrast, more sympathetic; representing homosexuality in a demeaning way for a presumptively homophobic readership so as to further demonize the men Dahmer murdered; and, in contradistinction, using the "I can't do anything about somebody's sexual preferences" quote to present the police officers as models of understanding and tolerance. Schwartz manipulates the mutually dependent discourses of gay rights and homophobia in the service of a racist and homophobic agenda as well as Dahmer himself did for a time.

Contrarily, we see racism enabling homophobia/homosexuality and reproducing racism in Dahmer's probation officer's failure to visit Dahmer in person because he lived in a "bad area". Phrases like "bad area" are usually racialized codes used by white people or middle- and upper-class people of color to indicate neighborhoods populated predominantly by (usually poor) people of color. Ironically, in this case it was one of the few white people — Dahmer himself, the person Chester was supposed to visit — living in an area inhabited by people of color who was the "bad" element.

#### IV. *Homophobia in the Dahmer Case*

To point to particular deployments of gay rights discourse in the Dahmer case, is not, of course, to say that public commentators, media reporters, and police officers had suddenly renounced their homophobia, but rather to illustrate the inadequacy of this kind of rights discourse to contest institutionalized homophobia and other power structures — these

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 181-82.

discourses don't appear to have slowed down the killings that might have been, in part, an expression of Dahmer's (internalized) homophobia. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that no one had reformed their homophobic attitudes, that they were all saying what they thought they were supposed to say, the contradictions in their positions and practices revealed by bumbblings, slips, and plain ignorance.

In the first place, the mere absence of overt mention of Dahmer's gayness does not guarantee that a particular representation of him will not be homophobic. Where Dahmer's homosexuality is not explicitly made issue of, oftentimes he is nevertheless homophobically coded as gay. Many magazine articles that do not explicitly dwell on Dahmer's gayness, still use his gayness to sensationalize the case. A revealing article (in the magazine *You*) on the murder of Dahmer in prison in 1994 illustrates how the complex interplay of racial and sexual identities in the Dahmer case have in some ways brought homophobia to a crisis, while at the same time drawing out the homophobic potential of racism. Andrew Burke, the article's author, comments on Dahmer's death, "Brutal? Perhaps, but what about Dahmer's victims? The 17 gay men and youths he met in bars and shops over a period of 13 years? The people he invited home, committed all kinds of sick sexual acts with and then killed?" What are the "sick sexual acts" alluded to but not specified here? The reference cannot be to Dahmer's necrophilia or cannibalism, since the phrase "and then killed" indicates that these "acts" were committed while the people Dahmer killed were still alive (Dahmer reportedly ate the biceps of one of the men after he had killed him). They might be the occasions on which Dahmer lay naked next to a drugged but living man. However, given the language used by Burke, and the context of the rest of the article, they can also be taken as any type of homosexual sex, including the consensual gay sex that was the predominant type of sexual activity that Dahmer probably engaged in with his victims while they were still alive.

Burke's homophobia here is confused by his (questionable) identification of the men and youths Dahmer killed as "gay," so that he has difficulty simultaneously expressing his homophobia (and racism) and showing sympathy for those Dahmer murdered. Later in the article, Burke's inability to conceptualize a non-pathological gay identity emerges explicitly when he expresses shock that Dahmer ordered a subscription to *Playgirl* magazine while in prison: is Burke's horror here due to a distaste for pornography, or at the gay desire asserted in the image of Dahmer looking at pictures of naked men? These men are adult and usually white, so it would be difficult to construct this looking as criminal or immoral, or as continuous with Dahmer's murders, unless it is gay desire itself that is seen as murderous, that is thought to be criminal. It is

likely that Jeffrey Dahmer would have been gay even if he had not been a serial murderer, but this possibility does not seem to occur to Burke, for whom the two identities go hand in hand — and for whom, no doubt, every other gay man with a subscription to *Playgirl* is Dahmeresque.

Burke's sinister representation of gay sex is typical of the way in which the numerous books on Dahmer also adumbrate gay sexuality by way of outraged connotation.<sup>18</sup> The conflation of Dahmer's crimes with his gay sexuality is shaped by a larger cultural demonization of homosexuality. Diana Fuss explains, "In the history of Western psychoanalytic representations of the ravenously hungry, insatiably promiscuous male invert, *gay sex has always been cannibal murder*.... The psychoanalytic morbidification of homosexuality upholds and lends scientific legitimacy to a wider cultural view of gay sexual practices as inherently necrophilic."<sup>19</sup>

In his Dahmer book, Don Davis attempts to further demonize Dahmer by exploiting the story of the Sinthasomphone family's 1980 flight from Laos to the U.S. in his discussion of Konerak Sinthasomphone's fatal encounter with Dahmer (a route followed in several of the other Dahmer books as well). By referring to the "brutal" Communist "regimes that had taken over Saigon," in order to highlight the irony of Sinthasomphone's murder in Milwaukee, Davis also surreptitiously links Dahmer with these "Communists".<sup>20</sup> This kind of associational rhetoric itself recalls the familiarly homophobic and reactionary gay-baiting as Red-baiting/Red-baiting as gay-baiting tactics of social and political delegitimation that reached their apotheosis in the U.S. with McCarthyism, but that continue to be used today by conservatives and liberals of all sexual orientations to police queers of all political persuasions and to undermine socialists across the sexual spectrum.

In the second place, although most newspaper accounts of Dahmer did not usually mention his gayness after the initial flurry of homophobic coverage, all the books that have been written about Dahmer, with the

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<sup>18</sup> Joel Norris's book *Jeffrey Dahmer* (the book stresses that its author is Dr. Joel Norris, presumably to convince readers to the expert nature of the testimony given) was published in 1992, just after the Dahmer trial. Although, after Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), this is the least homophobic of the Dahmer books — it does mention internalized homophobia as a contributing cause to Dahmer's self-loathing and outward evil — Norris makes several symptomatic conflations. His prologue begins with the verdict in the hands of the judge: "The pages in the judge's hand were the results of jury deliberations and followed weeks of complicated and conflicting testimony about homicide, violent aberrant sex, torture, and necrophilia" (7). Here, too, "violent aberrant sex" seems to be equivalent to gay sex.

<sup>19</sup> Fuss (1993), 182, 188.

<sup>20</sup> Davis (1992), 4. See Also Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), who, in referring to the seven thousand Laotians who settled in Milwaukee, note, "It offered the promise of a second chance. Better yet, it had no communist thugs butchering the population" (85).

exception of his father's memoir, explicitly dwell on his homosexuality, and most do so with a homophobic logic that normalizes heterosexuality and pathologizes homosexuality, though all the authors would probably deny that their books are homophobic.

Lionel Dahmer's *A Father's Story* often does not give the gender of those Jeffrey Dahmer killed, and only mentions the son's homosexuality half-way through the book, but much like the language of the trial (see below), the language Lionel Dahmer uses in discussing his son's "perversions" resonates with the homophobic discourses that have been used historically and continue to be used in the present to describe, pathologize, and dismiss lesbians and gay men.<sup>21</sup>

In the third place, merely saying that Dahmer's gayness is not at issue does not guarantee that one will not explicitly make it an issue. This kind of hypocrisy was particularly in evidence at Dahmer's trial. At the beginning of the trial, Dahmer's attorney stressed that this was not a case about homosexuality, but much of the language in the trial seemed to function as a code for homosexuality, and Dahmer was frequently explicitly homosexualized as well. The police officer who was called upon to read Dahmer's confession in the course of the trial, exemplified the normalization of heterosexuality in the trial by using the phrases "homosexual sex" and "homosexual activity" to describe Dahmer's sexual encounters with the men he murdered<sup>22</sup> — the witness would not have referred to heterosexual sex as "heterosexual sex" or "heterosexual activity". This is a common practice in most of the Dahmer books as well. As is the case with whiteness in the arena of race, here a sexuality that is presumed to be normal and universal need not be specified or named.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Other kinds of connotations also give to gayness a necessarily pathological trajectory, as in Don Davis's (1992) diagnosis of Dahmer's 1986 arrest for lewd and lascivious behavior: "The eventual full expression of Dahmer's gay life-style was still in the future, but his exhibitionist tendency was about to land him in serious trouble for the first time" (82). By constructing Dahmer's murders as the "eventual full expression of Dahmer's gay life-style," Davis equates gayness with murderousness. Ed Baumann's (1991) and Joel Norris's (1992) Dahmer books are no more able to imagine a non-murderous gay relationship. Baumann's chapter listing and describing the men Dahmer killed is titled, "The Men in His Life," and the back cover blurb of Norris's book promises "exclusive interviews with his friends and ex-lovers." Baumann's chapter title mockingly reduces gay relationships to serial murder, and Norris's book suggests that any kind of gay sexual encounter, no matter how brief, superficial, or coercive, represents the fullest potential gay relationships — the book contains no interviews with "ex-lovers," but does document the words of some of Dahmer's escaped victims.

<sup>22</sup> *The Trial of Jeffrey Dahmer* (1992), Court TV/Video.

<sup>23</sup> Baumann (1991) uses the technique to homophobically pathologize Dahmer by referring to Dahmer's murders as "homosexual slayings". If the adjective "homosexual" here normalizes heterosexuality (heterosexual slayings would just be "slayings"), it also reduces homosexuality to momentary eventfulness. Baumann further forecloses the possibility of a gay subjectivity by conflating gay identity with gay sex in his continual

Homophobic representations of Dahmer mirror the homophobic contexts of his family homes, and the homophobia of the larger society in which Dahmer grew up. These homophobic surroundings could have affected Dahmer's thinking about his sexuality and his crimes, and could have created a link between the two. Dahmer's statement to the court before sentence was passed on him could refer as much to his homosexuality as it could to his crimes: "I knew I was sick or evil or both. Now I believe I was sick. The doctors have told me about my sickness, and now I have some peace," etc. Dahmer also claimed in this statement that he had not pleaded insane in order "to get off" "but for trying to study me in the hopes of helping me and learning to help others who might have problems," an eerie reminder of the kinds of institutional surveillances and categorizations that have long been used to violently normalize lesbians and gay men.<sup>24</sup> The judge in the trial reinforced the representational slippage between Dahmer's criminality, homosexuality, and alleged insanity, in the context of that historical constitution of deviance, by ordering that Dahmer undergo a brain scan, ostensibly to determine if Dahmer was "criminally insane" when he committed the murders to which he confessed.<sup>25</sup> Such an examination reverberates with historical and contemporary brain and other scientific studies of lesbians and gay men both by homophobes and by avowedly anti-homophobic scientists. The interpretation of these diagnoses, prescriptions, and procedures as the discursive legacy of medical and psychiatric pathologizations of homosexuality until only a few decades ago in the U.S. is also enabled by the fruits of that legacy in the homophobic discourses around Jeffrey Dahmer throughout his life, and the evangelical language in which it is couched: "I should have stayed with God," Dahmer told the court shortly after the above explanation of his actions.<sup>26</sup>

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designation of Dahmer's sexual contacts with those he murdered (including consensual sex) as "homosexual acts". Clearly, a gay trip to the grocery store would not constitute a "homosexual act" for Baumann.

<sup>24</sup> See Foucault (1980).

<sup>25</sup> "Judge" (1991).

<sup>26</sup> I have taken all quotations from Dahmer's speech from Schwartz's transcription of the speech (1992, 217-18). Dahmer's father, a fundamentalist Christian, made disparaging references to lesbians and gay men during Dahmer's childhood and remained unrepentantly homophobic even after Dahmer's trial. While he was growing up, Dahmer knew that his father would not approve of his gay sexual orientation. Lionel Dahmer has said in retrospect of his son, "I've always felt he was somewhat of a social misfit ... I tried my damndest to instill interests, in trying to become interested in something in life, education, trying to get him to accept Christ" (qtd. by Dvorchak & Holewa [1991], 76). In a 1994 television interview with Stone Phillips, Lionel Dahmer admitted that he would have "tried to change" his son if Jeffrey had told him that he was gay, and that he still believed that homosexuality was a sin ("Dahmer and Dahmer"). A lay brother of the Episcopal Church who talked with Jeffrey Dahmer at length, concluded that the son himself was "'extremely homophobic,' with an almost Christian fundamentalist view of

Ironically, the families of Dahmer's (gay) victims used the same language to denounce Dahmer at the trial before sentence was passed on him. Although none said anything explicitly homophobic, homophobia could certainly be construed in their comments: one quoted the Bible, another thanked God for the verdict, another called Dahmer "El Diablo," etc.<sup>27</sup> My point here is not to guess at what these speakers were thinking or intending, but rather to demonstrate how their language is constructed and represented within heteronormative parameters, and to point to the limited availability and uses of linguistic and other resources for generating an oppositional discourse to racialized sexual violence, when that oppositional discourse itself fails to account for the multiple imbrications of racial identity with sexual identity for Dahmer and those he killed.

### V. *The Sexuality of Dahmer's Victims.*

While the (mostly unsuccessful) efforts of writers, reporters, and lawyers to degay Dahmer are undertaken in the name of anti-homophobic altruism, in fact, these efforts have the opposite effect, not only because homophobic values and assumptions continually break through them, but also because they are used to further demonize Dahmer: even though everyone knows he is gay, if he isn't represented as gay, liberals don't have to feel bad about bashing him. An influential consequence of these multiple homophobic undercurrents of Dahmer discourse is the erasure of the gayness of those Dahmer killed: if Dahmer is the monster gay killer, his innocent victims must be the opposite of him (i.e., they can't also be gay). The multiple efforts to hide and deny the gayness/bisexuality/queerness of many of those Dahmer murdered<sup>28</sup> testify not only to

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homosexuality" (Jamakaya [1991], 15). Jeffrey Dahmer's biological mother appears to have been more tolerant. In a March 1991 telephone conversation with her son, Joyce Flint apparently told her son that she had no problem accepting his gayness (Dvorchak & Holewa [1991], 144). After his parents divorced, Dahmer lived with his grandmother. Although I have found no direct evidence of her homophobia, she attended a conservative church, to which her grandson sometimes accompanied her, and ejected him from her home when she discovered a partially naked man with him in the house (see "Dahmer and Dahmer" [1994]; Norris [1992], 153, 165, 249-50).

<sup>27</sup> *The Trial of Jeffrey Dahmer* (1992), Court TV/Video.

<sup>28</sup> From what I can gather, the men Dahmer murdered (and those who escaped him) embraced a variety of sexual identities: some identified as gay, while some apparently did not; some were in the closet about their gayness or bisexuality, while others were not. It is impossible, of course, to definitively fathom their reasons for having sex with Dahmer: for some, no doubt, money was the prime motivator; for others, it might have been desire; for others, still, there might have been other reasons, or a combination of reasons. Although some of those who survived encounters with Dahmer have denied their queerness, it seems clear that almost all Dahmer's victims had at least moments of gay/

the continuing homophobia that might have partly caused Dahmer to kill in the first place, but also to the reality that the degaying of Dahmer is nothing of the sort. If, as I have suggested above, the families of those Dahmer murdered use an evangelical and homophobic coded language to denounce Dahmer, then their efforts to present their sons, brothers, etc. as diametrically different from the demonized Dahmer inevitably involve some degree of homosexual panic, often accompanied by varied, sometimes unconscious, and incessantly confused efforts to deny any gayness in their loved ones. As is true for many of those reporting on the case, much of the time these families seemed to be caught between their own homophobia and their need to present those Dahmer murdered as "innocent victims". Like Andrew Burke in the *You* article discussed above, they often found that their own homophobia seemed to preclude them from imagining a gay man as an "innocent victim".

Journalists and other writers on the Dahmer case went to some length to heterosexualize those Dahmer murdered. Baumann's book displays the densest signs of homosexual panic in Baumann's attempts to heterosexualize as many of Dahmer's victims as he can. For instance, Baumann comments on Konerak Sinthasomphone, "Like many of his American friends, the bright-eyed smiling teen-ager even had a girl-friend," as if to insinuate Sinthasomphone's heterosexuality is to make him more innocent, and Dahmer, by contrast, more monstrous.<sup>29</sup>

The families of those Dahmer murdered followed the example of most of the writers in their attempts to heteronormatize their queer family members. Several of Dahmer's victims were reportedly estranged from families who did not approve of their gayness; several hid their gayness from their families; in one case a man who escaped Dahmer's clutches did not want to report Dahmer to the police for fear that the publicity would lead to his family's discovery of his queerness.<sup>30</sup> The victims sometimes denied their own queerness. Dahmer's final victim, the man who escaped to lead police to Dahmer, was reputedly heard yelling "I got six kids. I love women. I aint no fag," when police officers arrested Dahmer.<sup>31</sup> In an

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bisexual/queer desire/identity/practice. My use of terms like "gayness" to describe these men, then, does not necessarily indicate my/their assumption of their/a gay identity, but includes, as well, moments of "gayness," such as fleeting homoerotic desires and practices.

<sup>29</sup>Baumann (1991), 36. The exception to this trend is Schwartz (1992), who is so eager to exonerate the police in the Dahmer case that she attempts to demonize those Dahmer murdered by dwelling on their homosexuality and concluding her book with a table of their criminal records. In Schwartz's text, homophobia functions as much to demonize those Dahmer murdered as it functions to normalize them in other accounts.

<sup>30</sup>Norris (1992), 220; Matthews et al. (1992), 45; Baumann (1991), 173; Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 100.

<sup>31</sup>Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 5. After the details of the murder of another of Dahmer's victims, Richard Guerrero, were made public, the Guerrero family continued to

appearance on a television talk show, the mother of Anthony Hughes, another of the men Dahmer murdered, insisted that her son was not a “homosexual out on the street”.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to tell if the denial here turned on Anthony Hughes not being “a homosexual” or not being “out on the street” or both, but given that Shirley Hughes is “a deeply religious woman who taught a Bible class at Garden Homes Evangelical Lutheran Church in Milwaukee,”<sup>33</sup> it is quite possible that contextual and discursive limitations make it impossible to separate “homosexual” from “out on the street,” and that Shirley Hughes herself might be hard-pressed to say exactly which of the terms she was hoping to disidentify her deceased son from. Later on in the same talk show, when Hart D. Fisher, the creator of a controversial Dahmer comic book, defended his representation of Anthony Hughes and of Dahmer’s killings on the grounds that his comic was merely presenting the facts of the case, Shirley Hughes interjected, “It’s not fact!” Here again the object of her denial is not clear. Was she pointing out that all representation carries a perspective with it, and in that sense cannot be factual or objective, or was she passing judgment on comics as a genre (she admitted to not having seen Fisher’s text, but said that a comic book representation of her son was by definition degrading), or was she denying the “fact” that her son was gay (a point that the comic does not make, but that it can be taken to imply in its depiction of the sexual liaisons between Dahmer and those he murdered), or was she denying that he performed specific actions attributed to him, or that he was gay in a certain way? I am suggesting that it is precisely the confusion between these different possibilities, the difficulty of disentangling them from one another, that is symptomatic — for those directly involved in the Dahmer case and for those capitalizing on it and attempting to make sense of it later — of the ways in which Dahmer discourse brought homophobic and homoerotic representation into interlocking crisis.

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refuse to believe that Guerrero was gay, or, in any case, to claim not to believe that he was gay. His sister told a reporter:

“I don’t believe he had a secret life ... He was always broke. He never had any money. He had three girlfriends. He spent time with Mom and helped her clean the house and ran errands for her. Where in the world could he do this secret stuff? Maybe he went in that bar because it was cold and he wanted to wait for the bus. You can’t make me believe he was gay. The only way I think Dahmer could have got him was by luring him with money or a party.” (Qtd. by Schwartz [1992], 56; see also Baumann [1991], 160).

<sup>32</sup> This incident occurred on *A Closer Look with Faith Daniels*, as presented in Boneyard Press’s compilation video of footage surrounding the Dahmer comic controversy (Fisher [1993]).

<sup>33</sup> Schwartz (1992), 87. See also Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 107.

## VI. *The Denial of Dahmer's Gayness*

Most accounts of the Dahmer case that do acknowledge the gayness of some of the men Dahmer murdered, do so in order to emphasize their victimhood (i.e., they are presented as the victims of racist and anti-gay hate crimes). In these accounts, then, there is silence about Dahmer's own gayness (so as to polarize Dahmer and his victims), but still the mechanisms of institutional homophobia that demand closetedness, deny gay existence, and normalize heterosexuality are reinforced in this invisible-making of Dahmer's sexuality. As I suggested with Schwartz above, however, the denial of Dahmer's gayness can also be used homophobically to pathologize those he murdered. For some right-wing hate groups and individuals, the occlusion of Dahmer's gayness had been so complete that they could praise Dahmer for performing a service to society by killing homosexuals, apparently blissfully unaware that it was another homosexual whom they were celebrating. Martha Schmidt, in her article, "Dahmer Discourse and Gay Identity", cites several instances where gay activists, editors, and publishers in Milwaukee were harassed by homophobic letters and phone calls lionizing Dahmer after the Dahmer story broke. One such caller told a gay newspaper publisher, "too bad Dahmer got caught when he did. He should have killed more of you faggots. He did a service to the community."<sup>34</sup> Physical assaults against Milwaukee queers also multiplied following news of Dahmer's arrest — whether these homophobic acts were homages to Dahmer or protests against Dahmer is not always clear.<sup>35</sup> Either way, it seems, queer Milwaukeeans lost out: if a queer-basher approved of Dahmer's actions he might bash other queers in imitation of Dahmer (here Dahmer's gayness is conveniently forgotten); if a queer-basher disapproved of Dahmer's actions he might bash other queers as a form of retaliation (here the gayness of those

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<sup>34</sup> Schmidt (1994), 89. Ironically, Schmidt's article reproduces the very refusal to recognize Dahmer's gayness that enabled racists and homophobes to celebrate Dahmer, in that Schmidt fails to point to the logical flaw in the argument of those who congratulated Dahmer for killing queers: Dahmer himself was queer. It is difficult not to see a continuity between this kind of omission and the blinkeredness that refused to see Dahmer's own murder as a gaybashing. Ultimately, these types of omissions and blinkers contribute to a culture that condones and promotes such murders/gaybashings.

<sup>35</sup> For further accounts of homophobic harassment and violence in Milwaukee following the publicity generated by Dahmer's arrest, see Schmidt (1994), 88-89; "Debate Rages" (1992), 25; Baumann (1991), 243; Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 205-06; Jamakaya (1991), 15. It's also quite possible, of course, that queer-bashing in Milwaukee after Dahmer's arrest was carried out with mixed or uncertain motives, that people who were angry at the course of events enacted this anger against Milwaukee queers merely because queers have already been set up by government, religious, educational, and social institutions as appropriate targets of persecution, or because the bashers didn't know where else to vent their anger.

Dahmer murdered is conveniently forgotten). Whereas one set of homophobic representations of Dahmer sees him as a homosexual killer (and not as a killer of homosexuals), in this other set of homophobic representations, Dahmer is a praiseworthy homophobe (and, often, a praiseworthy racist) and nothing else. It is the coming together of homosexuality and homophobia in Dahmer that makes conservative commentary on him incoherent, that makes Dahmer so confusing for many liberal heterosexual commentators, and that makes him so difficult for queer commentators.

The way in which Dahmer confused received wisdom about the discourses of rights, identity, subjectivity, and marginalization, is succinctly illustrated in Don Davis's description of the process of jury selection for Dahmer's trial: "Like a couple of farmers, McCann and Boyle picked through the crop, the D.A. weeding out anyone with a bias against homosexuals, while Boyle discarded those who did not like psychiatrists."<sup>36</sup> McCann, the D.A., weeds out anyone with a bias against homosexuals, presumably in order to generate maximum sympathy for the homosexuals Dahmer murdered — but this tactic can only have meaning if Dahmer's homosexuality is suppressed. Davis's own nonchalant description of the jury selection process surely indicates how successful this strategic suppression was, since it doesn't seem to occur to Davis that Dahmer's own homosexuality might complicate the simplistic binary Davis narrativizes — indeed, he seems to have forgotten, for the moment, that Dahmer himself was gay. Thus Dahmer's gayness was erased as much from the minds of right-wing moralists who saw him as the force of avenging heterosexuality as from the understanding of liberal lawyers apparently outraged by Dahmer's murders of gay men.

The denial of Dahmer's gayness may seem to be more benign than the explicit homophobia that usually accompanies representations of him as gay, but, in fact this denial is very much a part of the fabric of the institutional homophobia that might have been partly to blame for Dahmer's murders in the first place. In a *Chicago Tribune* article on Dahmer, Robert Blau and Jean Latz Griffin quote "Bill Williams, a gay activist and music instructor at Columbia College in Chicago": "No one, especially not parents, sits down with a young gay man and says, 'You're starting to date men now. This is how you do it. This is what to be careful of. These are the kind of men to watch out for.'"<sup>37</sup> It is especially ironic that the writers of this article use this quote to point to the lack of gay mentoring for the men Dahmer murdered, an absence that denied them role models and that may have made it easier for Dahmer to kill them,

<sup>36</sup> Davis (1992), 271.

<sup>37</sup> Blau & Griffin (1991), 12.

while the writers fail to acknowledge that Dahmer, too, was gay, and, as accounts of his internalized homophobia suggest, might have benefited from such mentoring. This tendency to assume the universality of a very limited type of heterosexuality develops from the kind of heterocentric naivete that characterizes many retrospective Dahmer narratives.<sup>38</sup> Finally, logically, and most alarmingly, we see the results of the keeping (open) secret of Dahmer's homosexuality in the prison murder of Dahmer himself, and in the way the murder was reported. Because Dahmer's murderer was apparently a black man who hated white people and/or who was enraged by Dahmer's murder of so many men of color,<sup>39</sup> the murder is usually seen only as a racial murder. It is seldom spoken of as a possible gay-bashing as well as a racially inflected killing, despite the evidence that Dahmer was subjected to homophobic taunts in prison,<sup>40</sup> and that Dahmer's killer apparently claimed to be the son of God,<sup>41</sup> a chilling throwback to the homophobic evangelical rhetoric around which Dahmer grew up and was sentenced.

## VII. Race Versus Sexuality

The various discourses that highlighted the race of Dahmer and the races of those he murdered (as well as of the person accused of murdering Dahmer himself), while downplaying or denying their sexual orientation, constructed the Dahmer case as racially overdetermined, or, more subtly, as a case of white gay murderousness (this logic implicitly points to Dahmer's gayness by denying or remaining silent about the gayness or bisexuality of most of the men he murdered). On the day that the Dahmer verdict was announced, Rita Isbell, the sister of Errol Lindsey, one of the

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<sup>38</sup> In a representative instance, Norris (1992) unquestioningly recapitulates the reports of Dahmer's army buddies in Germany: "Dahmer didn't talk about girlfriends either, friends said, even though they remember that he would sometimes go into town to frequent one of the local female prostitutes" (108-09). A blinkered reading of what should by now be a familiar narrative of the ways in which many gay men have had to and continue to have to hide their homosexuality and feign heterosexuality in homophobic societies, must ignore the evidence of hindsight suggesting that Dahmer was gay. Norris and Dahmer's "friends" either assume that Dahmer visited "female prostitutes" or take at face value Dahmer's apparent claim that he did. Whether Dahmer did or did not is beside the point; it is the inability here to conceptualize a non-heterosexual subjectivity that is telling.

<sup>39</sup> Lionel Dahmer (1995), 225-26; "Why" (1994).

<sup>40</sup> Prison homophobia directed at Dahmer is documented and discussed in Kaplan et al. (1992), 50; Schwartz (1992), 35; Baumann (1991), 199. In an afterword to a review of Lionel Dahmer's book in the zine *Everard Review*, the zine's editor notes that the locale of Jeffrey Dahmer's murder (a prison bathroom), as well as other characteristic features of the murder, suggest that it may have been a gay-bashing (see Spiro [1995], 50).

<sup>41</sup> "Serial Killer" (1994); Terry (1994).

men Dahmer had murdered, wore a shirt to court with the words “100% BLACK” printed on it, as if not only to distance herself from Dahmer’s race (and sexuality) with her claim to racial absoluteness, but also to assert race over any other identification. Isbell addressed the court prior to Dahmer’s sentencing:

“Whatever your name is, Satan. I’m mad. This is how you act when you are out of control. [*Voice rising*] I don’t ever want to see my mother have to go through this again. Never Jeffrey! [*Screaming*] I hate you motherfucker! I hate you!”<sup>42</sup>

Isbell then charged the defense table and lunged at Dahmer. Ironically, Isbell was demonstrating the possibility of a shared rage with Dahmer (“This is how you act when you are out of control”) that, given the legend on her shirt, and Dahmer’s internalized homophobia that was not mentioned in court but that may have partly led to his murders, would connect, however crudely, white gay identity with black heterosexual identity, once again at the expense of an unarticulable colored queer identity.

This erasure was exacerbated in the ways in which sexuality as an explicitly named category of identity and analysis fell completely out of the binary in other contexts related to the Dahmer case, as if the difficulty of conceptualizing queer race — conveniently enough — made impossible any kind of conflictual subject positionality (i.e., a situation in which one finds oneself at odds with someone with whom one might in some way identify). The racial polarization was symptomatically reenacted after Dahmer’s trial in the ruckus that erupted around the Dahmer comic book produced by Hart Fisher. While those protesting the comic book on TV talk shows and in a street demonstration outside Fisher’s house were overwhelmingly black and presumptively heterosexual, those defending the comic book on TV and in shows of solidarity at Fisher’s home were overwhelmingly white and presumptively heterosexual.<sup>43</sup> It was as if not only the media and others responsible for representing the story needed to circumscribe the conflict around one clear set of opposing identities, but also the protestors and counter-protestors themselves were unable to imagine any other way of making politics. That the liberal discourses of identity had learnt nothing from the horrible chain of denials and violences in the Dahmer case was well illustrated by Wisconsin State Representative Gwen Moore’s pat reflection on the aftermath of the

<sup>42</sup> Schwartz (1992), 216.

<sup>43</sup> In some cases, rallies and protests in Milwaukee did articulate anger at both racism and homophobia: the prejudices of a police department that had failed to vigorously investigate the reports of missing men at the time of the murders, and the societal racism and homophobia that Dahmer seemed to exemplify.

Dahmer case: "Everybody was mad at somebody else. It really elucidated the kinds of division that exist within the community, black versus white, homosexual versus heterosexual, the community versus the police, the police chief versus the police union."<sup>44</sup> Once again we are left with discrete oppositions of race and oppositions of sexuality that fail to recognize each other in each other, and that reproduce the understandings of identity that relegated Dahmer's victims to shadow lives long before they met Dahmer himself.<sup>45</sup>

### VIII. *Desiring Jeffrey Dahmer*

Because of the particular (racial and sexual) identities associated with Dahmer and the men he murdered, it is difficult to intervene into dominant Dahmer discourse without restaging racist and/or homophobic desires, fears, loathings, and prejudices. When such interventions are attempted, they inevitably privilege one particular set of alliances over others, thus showing how the inability to think through queer race has drastically limited the kinds of queernesses that can be imagined, and reduced the political potentialities of any identity in which racial and sexual identifications are overdetermined. It is usually clear how the rare right-wing celebrations of Dahmer are racist and/or homophobic, yet it is also true that straight white counter-cultural appeals to Dahmer are compromised insofar as the politics of race and the politics of sexuality make any such appeals transparently suspect, and that white queer Dahmer apologists must be problematized to the extent that an articulation of racial identity will interrogate particular understandings of queerness, queer theory, and queer politics. In this sense, to think through race in the context of queer theory is also to profoundly undermine any singular understanding of the productive negativity in queer (for more on this, see section IX below).

Given that Dahmer was white and that 14 of the 17 men he murdered were not, and that all observations or conclusions about the murders and the case have been racially overdetermined, it is far easier to make a case that Catherine Trammel is an oppositional figure in *Basic Instinct* than it is to read subversion in Dahmer. This is because the men she kills are

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<sup>44</sup> Qtd. by Schwartz (1992), 182. See also Dvorchak & Holewa (1991), 184.

<sup>45</sup> The "black versus white" figure also erases other racial identifications and recenters whiteness by foreclosing any discussion of racial conflict between different peoples of color. This is a familiar collapse in U.S. culture, as has been illustrated in the reduction of the intersecting and competing interests of Korean-Americans, Latinas/os, Whites, and African-Americans to a black/white conflict in rhetorical retrospectives of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising.

apparently white, and, to a lesser extent, because they appear to be heterosexual (as I have indicated, there has been a reluctance in various quarters to dwell on the sexuality of the men Dahmer killed, so sexual orientation has become less a site of political significance than race has in the Dahmer case). The cult around Dahmer that has developed in various political and cultural arenas is thus constituted almost exclusively by those who appear to be white and heterosexual. Dahmer received numerous supportive letters and gifts in prison.<sup>46</sup> In addition, a more public Dahmer cult developed between the time of his imprisonment and death, and in some cases continues today. Dahmer's Diner, a band from San Diego, California, explains its fascination with Dahmer as a strategy for shocking people: "The thing I think is great is that it just goes against society so hard," one of the band members explains.<sup>47</sup> Whether the "it" here refers to Dahmer's doings or the band's own relationship to Dahmer is unclear, but either way the sentiment seems to be specifically white and heterosexual:<sup>48</sup> to celebrate Dahmer or denigrate those whom such a celebration outrages might be to critique various networks of social hypocrisy and political simplicity, but at the expense of appearing insensitive to already-existing material apparatuses of racism and homophobia. The "Dahmer's Diner" T-shirts that have been sold at the band's performance venues take on a similarly problematic character in the context of the "100% BLACK" shirt worn by Rita Isbell at Dahmer's trial: despite protestations to the contrary (one band member insisted "It's not that we don't care about the people he killed ... It's not like, 'They were fags, they deserved it'"<sup>49</sup>), these Dahmer representations cannot escape black/white gay/straight race/sexuality polar inscriptions: they are taken to stand for whiteness against blackness, straightness against gayness, sexuality against race, or race against sexuality, and not, for instance, whiteness against straightness, or straightness against whiteness. Similarly, Jeffrey Dahmer T-Shirts bearing the legend "Milwaukee's Best," sold by Boneyard Press, the publisher of the controversial Dahmer comic, could equally be read as a satiric indictment of racism and

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<sup>46</sup> For documentation of the mail, monetary, and other gifts Dahmer received in prison, see "For a Serial Killer" (1991); *Lionel Dahmer* (1995); 217-18; Holleran (1992). Much of the mail was from women (Holleran [1992], 3), another possible indication of the erasure of Dahmer's gayness; I have no information on the races of the senders of the letters and gifts.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. by Brizzolara (1993), 25.

<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that lesbian and gay writers, filmmakers, zines, etc. identified with a "queer" sensibility have not also celebrated gay-bashing in their suspicion of the possibility of a unified "gay community" or of the imperative for "positive" gay representation. See Barnard (1996a, 1996b).

<sup>49</sup> Qtd. by Brizzolara (1993), 25.

homophobia in Milwaukee as they could be seen as a celebration of this racism and homophobia.<sup>50</sup>

The difficulty with any kind of Dahmer-worship, then, is that while it might contest particular complacencies and bigotries, it is also inevitably racist (and homophobic?). This racial coding is complicated rather than merely reinforced by the (homo)erotic nature of Dahmer's killings. A rare gay celebration of Dahmer is Andrew Holleran's *Christopher Street* article, "Abandoned", in which Holleran argues that Dahmer exemplifies a refusal to tolerate the dominant codes of gay male culture that normalize uncommitted sex and mandate the acceptance of abandonment. Dahmer refused to be abandoned, by killing those who would abandon him. Holleran views Dahmer as a subversive figure who refused to play by the rules.<sup>51</sup> Here race and a sexuality that is itself conflictedly politicized override each other: it is difficult to imagine anyone who is not white celebrating Dahmer in this way. In this sense what could potentially be celebrated as a queer perversity is limited by racial specificity.<sup>52</sup>

The notorious Dahmer comic complicates the questions raised by Holleran's article because it is not framed from a gay perspective, and thus cannot be assumed to speak from an anti-homophobic politics. A panel in the comic depicts Dahmer performing oral sex on Ricky Beeks, one of the men he murdered.<sup>53</sup> The picture could be considered disturbing not only because of its possible eroticism, but also because the racial codings of the two figures are so undeniable, emphasized by the sharp color opposition of the black and white drawing. In fact, it is probably the combination of gay eroticism and racialization that is particularly disturbing (III.). Is this picture merely a depiction of "fact," as Fisher claims of the entire comic? Is it an attempt to make Dahmer's crimes attractive? Is it the inextricable interconnection of racism and eroticism that is disturbing, or the apparent invitation to separate the two out from each other? Is eroticism even "eroticism" in this context?

Similar questions could be asked of the interconnection of homophobia and homoeroticism in Dahmer's crimes. In an interview with *The Advocate's* Lance Loud, the director of an independent film on the Dahmer story highlights the unsettling nature of these separations/intricacies by referring, perhaps satirically or sarcastically, to the "love scenes" and "cute guys" that are supposed to be a draw in his film.<sup>54</sup> To

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<sup>50</sup> The T-Shirts are advertised in *The Further Adventures of Young Jeffy Dahmer*, the sequel comic to the infamous *Jeffery* [sic] *Dahmer* comic, both created by Hart Fisher.

<sup>51</sup> Holleran (1992), 3.

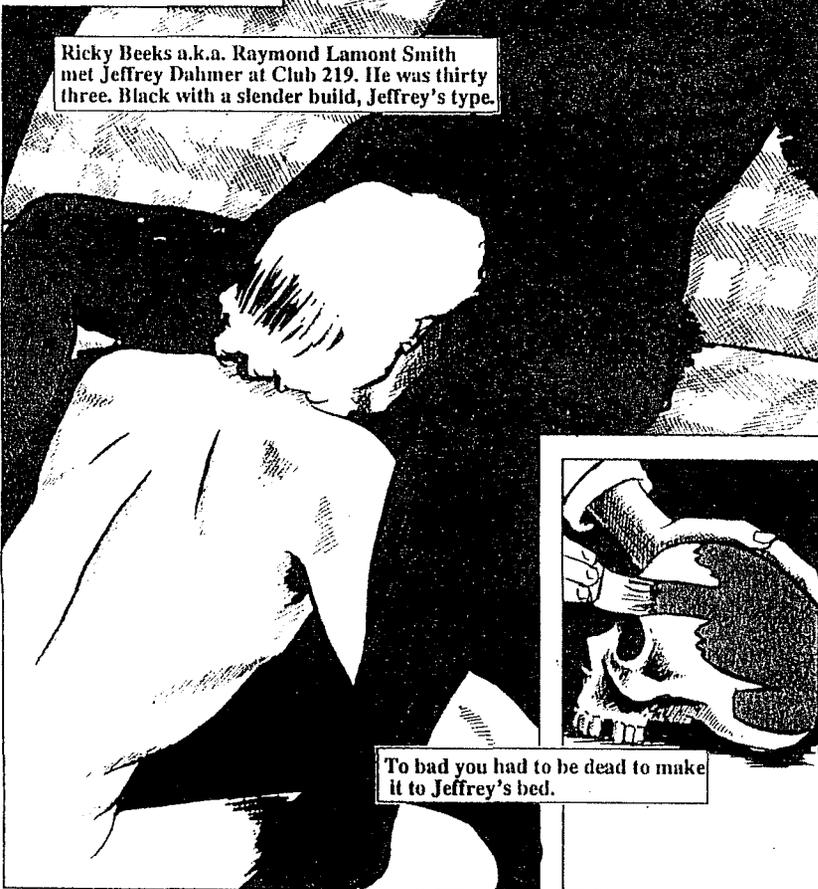
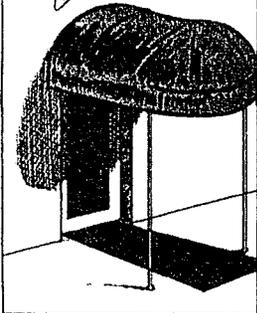
<sup>52</sup> For an even more problematic white gay male identification with Dahmer, see Peck (1993).

<sup>53</sup> Fisher (1992b), 11.

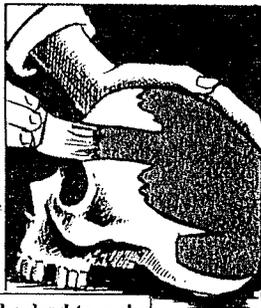
<sup>54</sup> Loud (1992).

July 14th.

219



Ricky Beeks a.k.a. Raymond Lamont Smith met Jeffrey Dahmer at Club 219. He was thirty three. Black with a slender build, Jeffrey's type.



To bad you had to be dead to make it to Jeffrey's bed.

refer to “love scenes” in this context is bound to outrage many, and especially anyone associated with those Dahmer murdered, as the reference seems to romanticize the murders and thus imagine them from Dahmer’s perspective. Similarly, what is otherwise — probably mistakenly — taken to be a harmless phrase, “cute guys,” here seems to imagine Dahmer’s victims from his predatory perspective, or alternately, to see Dahmer himself as an attractive figure, if he is one of the “cute guys”. The shock effect of these phrases depends simultaneously on an ability to separate race from sexuality, and sexuality from other (social, economic, political, cultural) contexts, as well as a discomfort with such a separation, illustrating the crisis of identity that marks an historical moment in which the politicization of desire, although marking an elusive trajectory, nevertheless is consistently misread, misunderstood, and made impossible demands of.

One of the taboos surrounding the Dahmer case involves the sexual attraction that many white gay men feel toward Dahmer (I have yet to hear a man of color admit to such an attraction). Usually this is something that cannot be spoken publicly, and only with difficulty privately. Holleran’s article, in which Holleran describes Dahmer as handsome and confesses, “I’d have gone home with him in a second,” is unusual in its public confession of white gay desire for Dahmer.<sup>55</sup> Other kinds of identifications with the Dahmer case point to the ways in which the divergent imbrications of homoeroticism in Dahmer discourse are connected to and symptomatic of apparently anomalous processes of identification and denial: in this sense the analysis of racialized queernesses not only makes queer identities central to discussions of culture in general, but also describes the coming-to-political-identity of subjectivity in general. For instance, what is a familiar refrain in the representation of serial killers — their ordinariness —, has become, in the Dahmer case, a racially determined identification that gestures to the underlying but even less apparent racial meaning of the familiar theme. To point to the normalcy or everydayness of a serial killer has become part of the chill of and fascination with serial killers — “The lesson from Jeffrey Dahmer’s life is that he is no monster at all. He is all too human,” Forrest Sawyer concludes his 1993 *Day One* television program on Dahmer<sup>56</sup> —, and also a way to critique the social institutions that produced the killer, or that symbolically permit the killer’s actions, or that the killer’s ordinariness is taken to exemplify. To claim some connection to a notorious murderer (or any other celebrity) is a commonplace way of attempting to find some

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<sup>55</sup> Holleran (1992), 3.

<sup>56</sup> “Dahmer” (1993). For further discussions of Dahmer’s “ordinariness,” see, for instance, Masters (1991), Sproul (1991), Suplee (1991), DeRamus (1991).

fame of one's own. But in the Dahmer case this convention becomes increasingly suspect as the slew of connections and identifications around it points to the racially and often sexually specific permutations of this universalizing logic in other contexts, too.

Processes of identification and disidentification around Dahmer not only have emphasized the precarious nature of ever-anxious distinctions between the normal and the abnormal, but also have closed the gap between the queer and the nonqueer, as queerness comes to stand for the perverse, and as Dahmer fallout queers the ever widening circle of subjects associated with "Dahmer" as a person, media event, and social phenomenon. What Dahmer's lawyer did unconsciously by attempting to distance himself from Dahmer, other commentators on the case do quite openly. In the trial, the more Dahmer's attorney, Gerald Boyle, attempted to show how abnormal Dahmer was, the more normal Dahmer became. In one particularly disjunctive moment in his closing argument, Boyle tried to prove Dahmer insane by way of contrast with himself: after he used a star chart to adumbrate Dahmer's perverse qualities, explaining that Dahmer's insanity included "masturbating four, three four times a day, two three times a day as youngster ... masturbating all over the place," Boyle continued, "This is Jeffrey Dahmer. My little star, my little circle, would say lawyer, father, sports, happy. I have only positives."<sup>57</sup> Some of Boyle's listeners would no doubt outwardly share his disgust about Dahmer masturbating "all over the place" or "two three times a day" as a youngster, but nevertheless be aware that their own sexual obsessions, and masturbatory desires and practices mark them more like than unlike Dahmer in this respect. Others might wonder exactly what about masturbating frequently and in various locations is insane, or might quite happily admit that they do so, and question the normalcy of someone who has "only positives". Boyle makes the distinction even more slippery by interspersing the "normal" ("masturbating ... two three times a day ... masturbating all over the place") with the "abnormal" ("masturbating into the open parts of a human being's body") in his list of Dahmer's perversities.

The rush to claim kinship with Dahmer has also been more overt. As newspaper reporters remark on how normal Jeffrey Dahmer was (just like us...), so old acquaintances of Dahmer speak out on their supposed perceptions of him, an academic writer mentions that Dahmer was her friend,<sup>58</sup> and a journalist-turned-book-writer insists on meticulously recounting her own personal involvement in the unfolding Dahmer case.<sup>59</sup> In his book about his son, Lionel Dahmer agonizes over the

<sup>57</sup> *The Trial of Jeffrey Dahmer* (1992), Court TV/Video.

<sup>58</sup> See Schmidt (1994).

<sup>59</sup> See Schwartz (1992).

qualities he shares with Jeff, asking if he might in some way be responsible for his son's crimes.<sup>60</sup>

Are these claims to personal acquaintanceship and kinship in sensibility, and these insistences on Dahmer's normalcy, shaped by Dahmer's maleness, whiteness, and middle-class upbringing (his gayness must again be erased here)? Would these white reporters be so quick to see Dahmer as an Everyman if he were a middle-class white woman, a person of color, or a white man from a working or lower class family? And do the claims of his representativeness also suggest an understanding of normative whiteness as racist whiteness? When whiteness is delineated it is usually to chart racism. Does whiteness have a content beyond or besides racism?<sup>61</sup> In the case of Dahmer, if whiteness is to be understood as racist whiteness, this racism and whiteness are displaced onto a serial killer whose gayness is well-known but little mentioned. Racist whiteness envisages itself in terms of gayness. But because race and sexuality are seldom articulated simultaneously, racism is conflated with gayness itself, rather than with white gayness in particular, and gayness is blamed for racism.

### IX. Conclusion: *Queer*

I have subtitled this essay "The Queer Case of Jeffrey Dahmer" in order to make strategic uses of some of the recent political and intellectual strategies and epistemologies that have been made available under the rubric of "queer". "Queer is not a substitute for gay," the editors of the zine *Rant and Rave* proclaimed in 1993.<sup>62</sup> I take this injunction seriously. Four particular resonances of "queer" as the term collides and coincides with "gay" are particularly relevant to this article. Firstly, and most simply, I use "queer" to signify the shifting, unmarked, unclear, but homoerotic (in different degrees and forms) sexual orientations of Dahmer and those he murdered. Secondly, "queer" signifies what Isaac Julien has called an "epistemological break with 'positive representations,' that rallying call to be represented within an assimilationist acceptance."<sup>63</sup> The slogan "gay is good" becomes boring very quickly, and "queer" provides the opportunity to explore "negative" representations and experiences of, for instance, homosexuality, without having to condemn them as homophobic. Thirdly and relatedly, because "queer" implies a recla-

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<sup>60</sup> Lionel Dahmer (1995).

<sup>61</sup> For one answer, in the negative, to this question, see Haney López (1995).

<sup>62</sup> "Queer" (1993).

<sup>63</sup> Julien (1994), 1.

mation of negativity (the formerly derogatory term “queer”), it also suggests a militancy and political radicalism not necessarily connoted by “gay,” and often in conflict with “gay”. The critique of gay civil rights discourse in this article is “queer” in this sense. And because “queer” carries political clout, I perversely use “gay” in some characterizations of Dahmer to distance Dahmer from the goals of a progressive “queer” politics. Fourthly, the sense of difference implied by “queer” makes it especially amenable to an understanding of sexual identity as formatively shaped by, for instance, race, as opposed to an identity politics model that must premise its generation of subjects on the assumption of commonalities among “queers” (as it also constructs monolithic communities marked by race, gender, and so on). Because a queer commitment emphasizes the differences among and within queers, rather than positing a transhistorical queer universality, it is less likely to prescribe a single model of sexual identity or sexual liberation and to assume white male normativity in its constructions of, for instance, lesbian and gay “communities”. Concomitantly, as the linking commonality between queers become less identifiable, and a plethora of queer identities is articulated, so race can be seen as a marker of queer identity and a determination of the meaning of any queer identity as much as sexual orientation or any other identification is. Phillip Brian Harper has intimated that “queer”’s destabilization of singular and unitary paradigms of sexuality could usher in a truly “multicultural” lesbian and gay epistemology:

we could see multiculturalism as a challenge whereby the lesbian and gay community has to face up to the already multiple nature of lesbian and gay culture itself. This would mean recognizing the diversity of what we already consider to be lesbian and gay culture — recognizing its own diversity in terms of race, class, gender identification, ethnicity, and so on. For me as a Black man, this would have to entail, in particular, more direct treatments of racial difference in what most of us think of as lesbian and gay literature ... Frankly, as far as I can tell, the phenomenon of racial difference, discussion of racial difference, are all but absent in most of what is currently promoted as gay (male, in particular) literature. This latter way of thinking about multiculturalism would enable a fundamental change in how most of us think about gay identity. That’s something I find particularly useful, potentially: that gay identity itself would begin to encompass a whole range of cultural differences within it. It might be precisely this change that constitutes a difference between what we have thought of as lesbian and gay culture, on the one hand, and queer culture, to use the *au courant* term.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Harper (1992), 29.

I take “queer,” then, as a means of articulating the conjunctions between race and sexuality, while at the same time critiquing the evacuation of race and thus the normalization of whiteness in much “gay” discourse and even in much “Queer Theory”.

By implication, this essay has offered an alternative reading of “queer” from that implied by the more common impetus to see “queer” as utopian and politically radical (as in “Queer Theory,” and in the activist groups, “Queer Nation”), and thus also an interrogation of my second claim above for “queer” as designating a progressive politics. The Dahmer case suggests how a dystopic queer epistemology is as important a tool for understanding the constitution of racialized sexuality as is a politically progressive queerness. If the hermeneutic manifestation of the slogan “gay is good” allows, by counterpoint, for an articulation and celebration of negativity in “queer,” in academic queer theory this negativity is nevertheless implicitly taken to enact a progressive political understanding of identity and opposition. Where does that leave a homoerotic serial killer? Jeffrey Dahmer is, apparently, as inappropriate a hook for this queer campaign as he is ineligible a mascot for a “gay is good” agenda: Sharon Stone, after all, killed obnoxious straight white men in *Basic Instinct*; Dahmer killed mostly poor gay men of color in “real life”.

The Dahmer case thus helps us to redefine “queer” in several ways. While it suggests the limits of liberal gay political discourse, to the extent that we scrutinize the racialization of the Dahmer case, it also problematizes any easy gay/queer binary by showing the inadequacy of a queerness that merely reacts against gayness or against anything else, or is merely a reclamation of negativity. Here it is apparent that even “queer,” when it is not further elaborated, cannot rescue “gay” from its current apolitical “lifestyle” connotations. Conversely, only to discern queer in terms of a conventional understanding of progressive politics is to impoverish the potential of queer theory to diagnose the codifications of desire where the meanings of “queer” generated by the interstices of gay desire and racial identification are most elusive and disturbing. “Queer” is thus doubly queer both insofar as it queers “queer” and destabilizes the (dis)connection between “queer” and “race”.

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