

The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism's "First Serial Killer"

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Contents

About the Author	3
Abstract	3
Introduction	4
The Clean Case	7
“The Butcher Girl”: Trauma, Gender, and Criminality	13

About the Author

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Abstract

Lesbian prostitute Aileen Wuornos was popularly termed “America’s first female serial killer.” Between 1989 and 1990, she killed six men, later testifying they had raped or attempted to rape her. By analyzing media coverage of Wuornos’ story, I argue that Wuornos’ incommensurability with available stories of women who kill illustrates the need to expand the rhetorical resources that make female violence and victimage intelligible. After demonstrating that Wuornos’ gender transgressions were disciplined into intelligible terms by understandings of criminality as an already spatial and gendered category, I conclude by discussing the “trouble” Wuornos poses to feminist and queer cultural politics.

Introduction

Before any visual image appears on screen in Nick Broomfield's 1992 documentary, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, we hear the blurry sound of interstate traffic, acceleration, motion, speed. Soon, we are sitting in the front passenger seat of Broomfield's car, zooming down central Florida's rural Interstate 75. This opening scene allows us to cruise the notorious highway once well traveled by Aileen Wuornos, who "worked it as a prostitute," Broomfield reports, "hitching rides from exit to exit." Between 1989 and 1990, she killed six men, launching the FBI's search for "America's first female serial killer." Since then, Wuornos, who testified that these men had raped or attempted to rape her, has become the subject of talk shows and news programs, a made-for-TV movie, independent films, Court TV documentaries, true crime books, and trading cards,¹ and has inspired artists from multiple sectors of the art world.² Wuornos' execution in 2002 renewed public attention to her case, as did Charlize Theron's Oscar winning performance as Wuornos in the 2003 film *Monster*. Not only is the circulation of her story widespread, but the circulation of Wuornos' body, a "hitchhiking prostitute," is a prominent feature in these accounts. This essay is not, however, a story about the traffic in women. In this sense, this essay is not about violence against women, but about the mechanisms through which violence and victimage become intelligible.

Feminism in contemporary US media is often embodied in the violent "vengeful" woman.³ Despite the popularity of *Charlie's Angels* and *Kill Bill*, lethal women in "deadly doll" films from the early 1990s,⁴ like *Thelma and Louise* and *Basic Instinct*, were accused of polluting the political with a strand of "toxic feminism."⁵ Heralded as a "dark version of *Thelma and Louise*,"⁶ Wuornos earned the rather distinguished honor of becoming "feminism's first serial killer."⁷ And while serving time in prison, she was singled out from her Death Row peers as the "most dangerous woman alive."⁸ Like Wuornos, women who kill or maim men often propel feminism into the mass mediated public sphere not because of violence done to women but, as Melissa Deem argues, because of violence done to the male body.⁹

¹ The commercialization of her story is thematized in *The Selling of a Serial Killer*. On the public fascination with serial killers, see Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998) and David Schmidt, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). For an analysis of Wuornos' story constructed in true crime genres, see Schmidt, 231-42.

² In 2003, Broomfield produced a second documentary about Wuornos, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*. More ephemeral art work includes: Carla Lucero's 1999 opera, *Wuornos*; a 2002 off-off Broadway play, "Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen"; a 1994 play about notorious killers, "Mass Murder II"; songs, performance art, and several museum displays. See Amy Scholder, ed., *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994); Avis Weathersbee, "'Mass Murder' Probes Bellies of the Beasts," *Chicago Sun Times* 17 June 1994, Weekend, 62; Miriam Basilio, "Corporeal Evidence: Representations of Aileen Wuornos," *Art Journal*, Winter (1996): 56; Edward Guthmann, "Killer Opera," *The Advocate* 3 July 2001, 57; Anita Gates, "A Killer; Yes, but She's a Good Old Girl," *The New York Times* 5 June 2002, E4.

³ On this figure's circulation in British media, see Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey, "Imaging Feminism, Imagining Femininity: The Bra-Burner, Diana, and the Woman Who Kills," *Feminist Media Studies* 1 (2001): 153-77.

⁴ Christine Holmlund, "A Decade of Deadly Dolls," in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 127. See also Martha McCaughey and Neal King, ed. *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

⁵ John Leo, "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen," *Time* 10 June 1991, 22.

⁶ Mark MacNamara, "Kiss and Kill," *Vanity Fair* September 1991, 91.

⁷ Richard Greiner, "Feminists Should Gloat Over Their Serial Killer," *Human Events* 25 March 1994, 15.

⁸ Hugh Davies, "'Sort of Sorority' Awaits Execution," *The Gazette* 7 February 1997, B1.

⁹ Deem, "From Bobbitt to SCUM: Re-memberment, Scatological Rhetoric, and Feminist Strategies in the Contemporary United States," *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 511-37.

It is not surprising, then, that feminists have struggled to fit their “first serial killer” into what we might call a “clean case.” The desire for such a case becomes evident whenever a woman who kills does not meet the legal system’s demand for vulnerability and imminent danger.¹⁰ Perhaps this need for purity explains why, of the four major anti-death penalty organizations in the US, none worked on Wuornos’ case¹¹ and why pleas of self-defense made by Wuornos and feminists on her behalf could be rendered unintelligible.¹² The attorney who prosecuted her acknowledged the possibility that Wuornos could have been raped, but disputed the claim that she had killed in self-defense, contending that shooting a man seven times constituted not self-defense but “overkill.”¹³ And while the Coalition to Free Aileen Wuornos displayed a banner encouraging participants at the 1993 March on Washington for lesbian and gay rights to “Support Dykes who Fight Back,” some members of the Lesbian Avengers in New York presumably hesitated to advocate for Wuornos, believing either that she was not a lesbian or that “there were women more worthy of the group’s support.”¹⁴

As these responses to Wuornos indicate, US public culture continues to cling to a rhetorically pure sense of victimage, an increasingly impossible demand to meet as the cry against “victim politics” gets louder. Invoking the traumatized female body is an especially unviable strategy for a politics such as feminism, which has, through the popularity of media friendly feminists such as Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, become associated with “victimology.”¹⁵ Consequently, stories of Wuornos’ killing, which continue with Monster’s release, circulate precisely when feminism is charged with being too powerful (“toxic”) and not powerful enough (“victimized”). This rhetorical gridlock leaves feminists with few resources when a figure such as Wuornos emerges. Rather than sanitize Wuornos, and by extension feminism, through the logic of the clean case, I demonstrate that Wuornos’ story, as told within mass media,¹⁶ both activates and arrests an opportunity to alter the contexts in which we find female violence and victimage intelligible. As a rich archive develops about Wuornos, she has been enfolded into feminist histories of women who kill in self-defense and criminological histories of serial killers. By contrast, my own interest lies less in confirming or contesting her status as a serial killer than in arguing that Wuornos’ incommensurability with stories of women who kill illustrates the need to expand the rhetorical resources that makes sense of female violence and victimage. Expanding these resources is necessary * even if Wuornos is considered a “monster” * as prevailing conceptions of violent women rest on spatial and gender norms narrowly configured around white familial intimacy.

The first section of the essay shows that Wuornos’ killing brings into relief the spatial norm of domesticity underwriting the two main disciplines that organize knowledge about women who kill: criminology and domestic violence feminism. As Donald Suggs of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation put it, “That a backwater drifter like Wuornos may have blown away ten men * instead of politely poisoning a few nursing home residents like most wannabe female serial killers * seems to

¹⁰ On the gender biases within the self-defense law, see Shirley Sagawa, “A Hard Case for Feminists: People v. Goetz,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 10 (1987): 264-71 and Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 112-47.

¹¹ Victoria A. Brownworth, “Dykes on Deathrow,” *The Advocate* 16 June 1992, 62. A Florida anti-death penalty support group filed an emergency motion for a stay of execution. See Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty, <http://ccadp.org/aileenwuornos-appeal2002.htm> (accessed 2 June 2006).

¹² See Phyllis Chesler, “A Double Standard for Murder,” *The New York Times* 8 January 1992, A19, and Chesler, *Patriarchy: Notes of an Expert Witness* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994).

¹³ *Mugshots: Aileen Wuornos, Female Serial Killer*, Court TV, 2001. The title of the made-for-TV movie about Wuornos, *Overkill*, reinforces the prosecutor’s position.

¹⁴ Karena Rahall, “Aileen Wuornos’s Last Resort,” *Assaults on Convention: Essays on Lesbian Transgressors*, ed. Nicola Godwin, Belinda Hollows and Sheridan Nye (London: Cassell, 1996), 115.

¹⁵ For an analysis of popular and scholarly critics linking feminism to victimization, see Carine Mardorossian, “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,” *Signs* 27 (2002): 748 -55.

¹⁶ In addition to *The Selling of a Serial Killer*, my analysis focuses on news coverage of Wuornos’ story from 1991 to 2003, roughly 150 articles and transcripts available through Lexis/Nexis, EbscoHost, the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, and articles in gay and lesbian magazines not archived in these indexes. This time period captures the police investigation, Wuornos’ arrest, trial, appeals to the Florida Supreme Court, her execution, and *Monster’s* release.

trouble ... experts deeply.”¹⁷ While it is widely acknowledged that her sexual “deviance” as a prostitute and lesbian was used to pathologize Wuornos, an underexplored aspect of her story is the spatial mobility ascribed to her body as a hitchhiking prostitute. The second section of the essay considers the spatial trope of the highway as a mechanism through which she was classified as a serial killer and discredited as a rape victim. She was discredited not solely because of the commonly held perception that prostitutes cannot be raped, but because of a more complex narrative that circulated about her posing as a Damsel in Distress along the highway, one that narratively erased her prostitution. The essay’s third section reveals that the process of making her intelligible as a female serial killer depended on labeling her male and masculine.

Consequently, Wuornos’ story is a rich site for examining cultural conceptions of gender transgression. Modifying Elspeth Probyn’s theoretical position that “personhood is always gendered,” John Sloop argues that in “public discourse (doxa), a major assumption still stands that personhood is, rather, always sexed.”¹⁸ That is, despite the performative turn within interdisciplinary studies of gender,¹⁹ public discussions of “gender trouble,” particularly cases of gender ambiguity and transsexuality, “work to stabilize sex, to reiterate sexual norms, rather than encourage and explore gender fluidity.”²⁰ Though not a story of gender ambiguity, Wuornos’ story circulated as one of gender transgression typified by characterizations of her as an anomalous female killer and sexually deviant. Examining public discussions of female criminality contributes to our understanding of “gender trouble” and the reiteration of gender norms, but Wuornos’ story is particularly apt for doing so, as the discourses that classified her as a serial killer drew upon understandings of criminality as a gendered category. I show that Wuornos’ story incited enormous cultural anxieties that produced, rather than prevented, an instability among gender categories, though not in the way feminist or queer cultural critics might hope. Consequently, the essay’s conclusion examines the “trouble” Wuornos’ story poses to feminist and queer cultural politics.²¹

¹⁷ Donald Suggs, “Did the Media Exploit the ‘Lesbian Serial Killer’ Story?” *The Advocate* 10 March 1992, 98.

¹⁸ John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2004), 54.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²⁰ Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 54.

²¹ The title of my essay is a play on the title of Martha M. Umphrey’s essay, “The Trouble with Harry Thaw,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 9-23, which analyzes how Thaw troubles methodologies in gay and lesbian historiography.

The Clean Case

The clean case involving violent women is predicated on a social imaginary of the domestic space. If, as Lynda Hart argues, “passion and pathology are the key historical constructs for explaining and containing women’s aggression,”¹ the dominant spatial construct encoding female violence is domesticity, circumscribing it within familial intimacy. The fact that half of the female prisoners convicted of homicide in the US killed an abusive intimate partner, typically male, as opposed to a stranger, has generated a conception of a female killer who murders only in response to patriarchy.² Not surprisingly, the centrality of the home appears in much of the work by domestic violence feminists, the tyranny of liberalism’s “privacy” becoming the main object of focus.³ The domus is also a juridical norm. In some states, to even be eligible for legal protection against domestic violence, one must demonstrate cohabitation. Even in states where domestic violence policies extend to some same-sex couples, cohabitation largely remains a prerequisite to full protection under the law.⁴ Florida’s statute, for example, mandates that the party must be “residing in the same single dwelling unit.”⁵

So saturated with domesticity is criminology’s classification of female killers that Wuornos stumped serial killing expert Robert Ressler because she acted violently in a non-domestic space and with strangers. “When there is violence involving women,” he asserts, “it’s usually in the home, with husbands and boyfriends. It’s a close in, personal crime.”⁶ Research on female serial killers, popularly termed “Black Widows” or “Angels of Death,” also places these women in the home or home-like environments, documenting women killing their children and other relatives, and health care workers killing nursing home residents.⁷ Candice Skrapec, however, explains that female serial killers murder people with whom they have varying degrees of familiarity.⁸ Despite this research, which shows that women represent 10 -17 percent of all known serial murderers,⁹ the FBI rendered Wuornos anachronistically the “first” female serial killer.

The domestic space as central to the popular imaginary of violent women and violence against women is possible, however, only if we do not consider the figure of the prostitute, whose circulation through metropolitan cities has functioned importantly in the creation of “public women” in both England and the United States. As the “quintessential female figure of the urban scene” in literary and anthropological texts, the female prostitute has long been considered a source of contagion and object

¹ Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 152.

² This conception is eroding slightly with media attention to mothers, such as Susan Smith, who kill their children. For summaries of statistics regarding women convicted of homicide in the US, see Schneider, 146. Studies that Schneider cites indicate that, of women convicted of killing a male partner, between 45 percent and 97 percent were abused by them (146).

³ For a more recent example of this line of thought, see Schneider, 87-97.

⁴ Ruthann Robson, *Lesbian (Out)law: Survival Under the Rule of Law* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992), 161.

⁵ Quoted in Robson, 160.

⁶ Susan Edmiston, “The First Woman Serial Killer?” *Glamour* September 1991, 324.

⁷ Hickey suggests that the case of *The Giggling Grandma*, a woman who, between 1925 and 1954, married a series of men and killed them for insurance money, gives new meaning to the term “serial monogamy.” See Eric Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1991), 112 and Bettina Heidkamp, “‘Angels of Death’: The Lainz Hospital Murders,” in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 219-23.

⁸ Skrapec’s account of female serial killers dates to the seventeenth century. Candice Skrapec, “The Female Serial Killer: An Evolving Criminality,” in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 241 -68.

⁹ Hickey, 107.

of pity.¹⁰ Nineteenth-century social purity reformers seeking to rid street corners and back alleys of sexual vice attempted to rescue these “fallen women.”¹¹ The “rescue” of Aileen Wuornos came in the form of a born-again Christian woman, Arlene Pralle, who legally adopted her after seeing pictures of Wuornos in the newspaper following her arrest. When Pralle becomes Wuornos’ official story teller in the mainstream public sphere and when the only sex workers rights organization to speak on Wuornos’ behalf is WHISPER, an organization that seeks to abolish prostitution,¹² we are reminded of this history of sexual politics feminism has inherited.¹³

The domestic space has not always been central to our understanding of violent women, but is in part an effect of a massive re-organization of US public culture’s response to violence against women. Led largely by the anti-rape and battered women’s movements of the mid-1970s, struggles to recognize violence between intimates have culminated in educational training programs and numerous community and legal resources. Such interventions have allowed feminists to change law and language.¹⁴ We can now, among many other things, distinguish between “stranger rape” and “acquaintance/marital rape.” Without discounting the necessity of these interventions, it is important to recognize the manner in which the figure of the prostitute cuts across a strangerhood/intimacy opposition.

Unlike media attention to the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Senate hearings in 1991 and to the death of Nicole Brown Simpson in 1994, which ignited feminist public discourse about sexual harassment and domestic violence respectively, little pedagogy about violence and prostitution accompanied Wuornos’ case. This seems to confirm the claim that murdered prostitutes, cases commonly classified by police departments as “NHI” (No Humans Involved), are not considered newsworthy.¹⁵ Wuornos’ story, though, is not easily accommodated into writings by and about sex workers except to point out that prostitutes are often victims of serial killers, not serial killers themselves.¹⁶ Prostitute women, long considered “fair game,” attest to brutal beatings, strangulation, stabbings, and rape by pimps, johns, and police officers.¹⁷ Acknowledging that “prostitute rape is rarely reported, investigated, prosecuted or taken seriously,” as the Florida Supreme Court Gender Bias Report had the year before Wuornos’ trial,¹⁸ is not sufficient, though, if the prosecuting attorney could concede the possibility she had been raped but classify her acts as “overkill.”

Unfortunately, Monster’s release did little to remedy this. In her acceptance speeches for three separate best actress awards for portraying Wuornos in the film, Charlize Theron never acknowledged Wuornos, nor did she use these occasions to raise awareness of violence sex workers commonly face. This public distancing from Wuornos is striking in light of Oscar-night acceptance speeches by Julia Roberts and Hilary Swank for their respective portrayals of legal assistant turned activist Erin Brochovich and transgendered youth Brandon Teena a few years before. Although it is tempting to explain

¹⁰ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delights: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 21 -22.

¹¹ Walkowitz, 82 -102. See also Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹² A representative from WHISPER appeared on *Geraldo*, “Profile of Aileen Wuornos: The Woman Behind the Murders,” 23 March 1994. The need to rescue Wuornos from prostitution is a consistent assumption made by feminists in the March/April 2004 issue of *off our backs*, 65, that discussed *Monster*.

¹³ For discussions of the role prostitution played in women’s public advocacy in the early to mid-nineteenth century, see Mary Ryan, *Women in the Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 96-129.

¹⁴ On the way that US television and film incorporate and undermine feminist and anti-racist rape reform strategies, see Sarah Projanky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2000) and Lisa Cuklanz, *Rape on Trial* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Sisco, “Forum: I: Women Who Kill,” in *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence*, ed. Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1993), 43.

¹⁶ Wuornos is not discussed in Jill Nagle, ed., *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York: Routledge, 1997) or Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, ed., *Sex Work: Writings By Women in the Sex Industry*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 1998), but is discussed briefly in Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant, ed., *Not For Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 2004), 303-4, and Scholder, ed., *Critical Condition*.

¹⁷ For an extended summary of studies about violence against North American sex workers, see Chesler, *Patriarchy*, 96-103.

¹⁸ The 1990 Gender Bias Report is quoted in Chesler, *Patriarchy*, 99.

Theron's silence by recognizing that, unlike Brochovich and Teena, Wuornos killed people, this explanation only further points to the necessity of expanding the possible mechanisms that make female violence intelligible.

The Damsel in Distress: Highways and Mobility

While the place typically attached to the woman who kills is the home, the place attached to Wuornos is the highway. In contrast to the confines of a home, a highway invokes movement and speed, travel and escape. It is governed not by a code of intimacy but by a logic of anonymity. Beyond the parameters of a neighborhood, a highway is largely populated by strangers, the license plate serving as one of the few markers capable of identifying the origin of a traveler. Along the highway, there is no Block Parent, no Neighborhood Watch. The "comings and goings of 'strangers' can no longer be policed by communal social bonds."¹⁹ With multiple entry points, none of which requires a key, the highway in fact makes room for strangers * the tourist, the drifter, the traveling salesman just passing through town * with rest stops offering shelter for the weary truck driver or an anonymous sexual encounter.²⁰

This strict division between the highway and home, however, belies the way that highways are home for some such as homeless or transient people like Wuornos. The highway, thus, could be used to reconfigure conceptions of domesticity and kinship within criminology and feminism to argue that Wuornos did kill in a home. But this is not what happened. As the site for picking up the men Wuornos killed, the Florida highways played a prominent role in these narratives by ascribing excessive mobility to her body. The interstate highway, functioning in part to improve police surveillance of criminals, ironically afforded Wuornos the space she needed to make a living through prostitution. By some accounts, this was a practice she began in her early teenage years after her grandfather threw her out of the house.²¹ As one investigating police officer described her life, "She was constantly on the move."²² In the popular press, she is never referred to as a "streetwalker," but rather a "highway hooker" or "hitchhiking prostitute," locating her not within metropolitan centers but on the open, endless freeways. Roaming from exit to exit, Wuornos would pick up men who stopped along the highway and then accompany them into the woods. The anonymity of her movement, though, allowed Sergeant Munster of the Marion County Sheriff's Department to draw a connection between her transience and her alleged serial killing. Munster explained that the "state is a haven for serial killers" because of the "large transient population." As a result, serial killers, "fit right in."²³ Although the US Justice Department tends to overestimate the mobility of serial killers in order to expand its jurisdiction,²⁴ emphasizing Wuornos' mobility allowed the FBI to "fit her right into" their profile.

Once labeled a serial killer, Wuornos was transformed into a predator whose hitchhiking is read as an act of enticing innocent and good-hearted men who think they are stopping for a "Damsel in Distress" stranded on the highway, when, as Time put it, they meet the "Damsel of Death."²⁵ Calling her a "highway femme fatale," The Los Angeles Times wrote that Wuornos admitted to "luring at least six men to their deaths along Interstate 75, the north - south highway that slices through the rolling hills of central Florida like a twin-blade knife."²⁶ Even Wuornos claimed to be an "exit to exit hooker who worked all the roads in Florida," her own description expanding the reach of the "twin-blade knife."²⁷ If

¹⁹ Camilla Griggers, *Becoming Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 98.

²⁰ For analyses of non-commercial public sex among men at rest areas and truck stops, see Jay Corzine and Richard Kirby, "Cruising the Truckers: Sexual Encounters in a Highway Rest Area," *Urban Life* 6 (1977): 171 -92; John Hollister, "A Highway Rest Area as a Socially Reproducible Site," in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 55-70; and John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 110-15.

²¹ MacNamara, "Kiss and Kill," 96.

²² Chris Lavin, Steven Drummond, and Ken Moritsugu, "Suspect in Highway Slayings Has Troubled Past," *St. Petersburg Times* 18 January 1991, B1.

²³ J.S. Kunen and M. Grant, "Florida Cops Say Seven Men Met Death on the Highway," *People* 25 February 1991, 45.

²⁴ According to Schmidt, the US Justice Department, in the 1980s, began highlighting spatial mobility as a defining trait of serial killers to justify its "requests for expanded funding and jurisdictional power." Schmidt, 80.

²⁵ "Damsel of Death," *Time* 10 February 1992, 31.

²⁶ Mike Clary, "A Mother's Love," *Los Angeles Times* 17 December 1991, E1.

²⁷ "Why U.S. Seldom Kills Women," *Daily News* 29 July 2001, 30, my italics.

not confined to the path paved by I-75, the cartography of prostitution, public sex, and murder knows no bounds. Importantly, this terrain expands because of Wuornos' roaming body, not because of the men who travel along the freeways. Their bodies decompose in the woods just off highway; hers survives.

The anonymity afforded to Wuornos through the highway paradoxically allowed her entrance into familial categories of belonging that were otherwise unavailable to her. One of the only moments that she gains access to traditional heterosexual womanhood is the story of her posing as a stranded motorist. As the Damsel in Distress, a woman who seeks and depends on the help of "benevolent" men, Wuornos embodies hyperfemininity. Of course, Wuornos' ability to inhabit this position serves, in this narrative, to highlight what the police believed to be her calculated methods, her predatory nature. And thus, it is swiftly used to condemn her. As Sergeant Munster put it, the "ruse was, 'The kids are sick,' or 'The car's broken down.'"²⁸ As proof of the former, she would show pictures of children who she claimed to be her own, but who actually belonged to her aunt. Although Wuornos admitted to this routine as a strategy to solicit clients, her Damsel in Distress performance is read as a strategic attempt to hunt down men to their deaths. In fact, in sustaining his claim that this act was just a ruse, Sergeant Munster offers the police surveillance strategy that culminated in Wuornos' arrest. When explaining how they located her, Munster reveals their decision to look for Wuornos and her lover "in a certain kind of bar in the hopes that they would show up."²⁹ According to reports, by the time the police arrested Wuornos they had learned that she had been spotted in the Daytona area with her lover. Their suspicions were confirmed when Wuornos walked into The Last Resort, a Daytona bar where "tattooed bikers play pool beneath an array of bras and panties dangling from the ceiling."³⁰ Sergeant Munster determined, "It's not the kind of place you'd take the family."³¹ Because they anticipated finding them there, Munster implicitly confirms his ruse theory by exposing her proximity to workingclass biker-bar culture. In other words, her placement within the bar becomes evidence for Wuornos' "theft" of the domain of motherhood and heterosexual femininity. The "ruse" implies that this domain was never really hers to begin with. Wuornos' arrest, then, becomes a move to protect more than just an endangered public but the boundaries of communal and familial norms.

Quite obviously, the story of her posing as a Damsel in Distress functions to exonerate the deceased male drivers of any wrongdoing. By positioning them, a priori, as rescuing a distraught woman, the narrative overdetermines their motive for stopping as heroic. According to testimonials from family members, these men had a habit of stopping for stranded motorists, a philanthropic alibi that linked them to familial intimacy. Most of these men were reportedly on their way home from work to their wife or traveling to see their fiancée. As the sister to Troy Buress, one of the victims and "father to two daughters," vouched, "He would never have passed by someone in distress, especially a woman. He'd think of his wife or daughters, or of me."³² Another victim's mother confirmed, "I've been with my son when he would stop and fix tires for people broken down on the road."³³ They are never sexual predators, nor even sexual. Despite the fact that the police reported finding used condoms and/or empty condom wrappers among the bodies, sex and sexuality fail to stick to these good family men.³⁴

Not all of the men, however, were painted as pristinely. For example, Richard Mallory's wife acknowledged her husband's propensity for unpredictable threatening behavior, but then maintained his gentlemanly posture toward women in need, as she recalled, "He was so sweet, . . . and then ten minutes later he would scare the heck out of you. But if he saw a woman in distress, he would stop and help her."³⁵ Her comment suggested, as domestic violence feminists have, that women are more likely

²⁸ MacNamara, 100.

²⁹ Kunen and Grant, 46.

³⁰ Kunen and Grant, 46.

³¹ Kunen and Grant, 46.

³² Deborah Sharp, "'Damsel of Death' Trial Starts in Florida," *USA Today* 13 January 1992, 3A.

³³ Bill Montgomery, "Suspected Female Serial Killer Makes Roadside Case Unusual," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* 20 January 1991, A13.

³⁴ *Monster* complicates this image, depicting only two of her victims in this way.

³⁵ John Bankston, "Florida Shocked By Case of Lesbian Accused of Serial Murders," *The Advocate* 21 May 1991, 50.

to experience violence from an intimate than from a stranger. As the Damsel in Distress, Wuornos functioned as the exception to male violence and, as such, is made to show that Mallory, despite his prior sexual assault of a woman,³⁶ operated according to a higher code. Always the Good Samaritan to young women stranded on the road, these men do their part in making the highway safe by imbuing it with familial or communal relations.

In biting the hand that breeds, Wuornos, by contrast, is viewed as preying upon these very familial relations. The long-term effects of Wuornos' voracious appetite are pronounced in the account offered by Florence Carskaddon. Grieving the death of her son, Charles, Florence stated, "My husband died years ago, and Christmas was so empty without my son I have so little sympathy for this person * she took the

only Carskaddon there is left."³⁷ While Wuornos may have killed and robbed Charles, she also appears to be guilty of stealing his future lineage. That she "took" presumably the only reproductive "Carskaddon" remaining makes her accountable for the death of more than just Charles, but the family name and the family line itself. Florence's comment, of course, assumes that Charles would have had children, an expectation to which Charles himself may not have risen.

In the United States, prostitution has always been viewed as detrimental to the white heterosexual family unit, the female body of the prostitute a reservoir of contagion and infection.³⁸ Laws configuring prostitute women as "vectors" for the transmission of STDs have renewed vigor in the advent of HIV/AIDS.³⁹ But in this Damsel in Distress narrative, Wuornos is not configured as a prostitute. Her actions are understood as those of a predator who lures men through communal norms, not through seduction or the promise of paid sex. She may label herself an "exit to exit hooker" but the moniker assigned to her in the Damsel in Distress narrative is the "highway femme fatale." With her hitching, not her hooking, organizing the narrative, the Good Sam could hardly become a Bad John.

The highway and its concomitant practice, hitchhiking, are thus crucial to rendering the men safe and Wuornos dangerous. When simply standing on a street corner has warranted arrest for prostitution in recent years,⁴⁰ Wuornos' highway ingenuity side-stepped traditional police surveillance strategies. The highway, as a result, makes her illegible as a prostitute. Her anonymity is derived from this constant movement and is assumed to make these men particularly susceptible. Not even Charles Humphreys, the police officer, could recognize signs of danger; nor could he escape alive. In this case, the hitchhiker, rather than the prostitute's body, functions as the "vector" that harms the white heterosexual family. According to Packer, the cultural acceptance and rejection of hitchhiking, as revealed in popular stories, have undergone four phases since the 1930s.⁴¹ Much like the philanthropic male drivers who stop for Wuornos, the motorist in each phase is a trusting, dutiful citizen, whether driving college students to school or GIs to their military bases, or offering young women an adventurous ride. The only exception, Packer notes, is the more recent 1970s phase which reconfigures the relationship between male drivers and female hitchhikers through stories of women raped by the driver. Though consistent with Wuornos' self-defense plea, this more recent phase is unable to register.

News reports repeatedly identified the men Wuornos killed by race, age, and occupation, marking them as middle-aged white men of working- or middle-class status. The fact that the men and Wuornos

³⁶ Mallory served a ten-year sentence for the violent sexual assault of a woman, a fact that did not emerge during Wuornos' trial for Mallory's death even though charges against her for the deaths of the other men were allowed. Chesler, 103 -4.

³⁷ Bill Montgomery, "Alleged Serial Killer Going on Trial," *The Atlanta Journal * Constitution* 13 January 1992, A3.

³⁸ See Ruth Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Priscilla Alexander, "Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. J. Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 87-88.

³⁹ During the 1980s, eleven states increased prostitution to a felony for HIV positive prostitutes (Alexander, "Feminism," 88.) See also Carol Leigh, "P.I.M.P.," in *Policing Public Sex*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 260.

⁴⁰ Alexander, "Feminism," 85.

⁴¹ Jeremy Packer, "Mobility Without Mayhem: Disciplining Mobile America Through Safety" (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 2001), 96-113. On the gendered dimensions of driving discourse in professional racing, see John Sloop, "Riding in Cars Between Men," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 191 -213.

were white was a relatively unremarkable part of the story, but it is not irrelevant to the men's access to the Good Samaritan discourse. Though not understood to be "about" race, Wuornos' story incites anxieties grounded in white familial intimacy, a force that has long animated the surveillance of racial and sexual bodies on the interstate. Enforcement of the 1910 Mann Act, which made it a crime to transport a woman across state lines for "immoral purposes," including prostitution, was also used to police interracial relationships, particularly black male drivers and white female passengers.⁴² Despite the absence of a black male in Wuornos' story, the Damsel in Distress narrative enacts the terms of what is now an all too familiar trope in US public argument about race and rape. The myth of the black rapist, designed to police the boundaries of citizenship after the legal enfranchisement of black male slaves, demonized black men as violent rapists of white women while securing the position of white men as protectors of white women.⁴³ Consistent with the Damsel in Distress narrative's erasure of Wuornos' prostitution, the myth of the black rapist configured white women as asexual, chaste, and therefore rapeable, in contrast to its classification of black women as hypersexual and therefore seemingly unrapeable. Accordingly, the motivation of the white male Good Samaritan is not sexual desire or violence toward white women but the protection of white womanhood, thus explaining how the men's motivations were largely de-sexualized even when used condoms were found at the scene. By acknowledging that Wuornos could have been raped, just not by these men, the Damsel in Distress narrative reveals what Lisa Duggan calls the "overlapping operations of the institutions of publicity and the state in defining the sanctity of the 'white home' as the central symbolic site of the nation."⁴⁴

In sum, the highway, as a spatial trope in the Damsel in Distress narrative, serves several purposes: first, it generates a discourse of mobility that collapses her transience with serial killing behavior; second, Wuornos' occupation of the highway occludes her occupation on the highway * that is, prostitution, which distances the men from the act of commercial sex; and third, it propels her and the men into a hitchhiking and rape mythos, giving the men access to white "chivalry" and Wuornos access to white heterosexual femininity, only to confer a predatory tendency upon her adoption of such discourse. In this way, Wuornos is said to obtain mobility not only through geographic space, but within familial and gender categories, particularly that of the "mother." So disturbing is the roaming female killer who performs such a "ruse" that the investigating police deviated from regular protocols by asking media outlets to issue warnings about female hitchhikers. As Sgt. Munster reported, "We don't normally go to the press, ... but we felt we had a responsibility to warn the public of the danger in picking up female hitchhikers or females posing as women in distress."⁴⁵ As the Damsel in Distress, Wuornos posed a danger precisely because she offered no warning * because she appeared non-threatening. In effect, she turned the hyperfeminine into a dangerous threat. Consequently, the cultural anxiety emerging from Wuornos' case is not only the physical threat that the "first female (lesbian) serial killer" poses to the public, or to the male heterosexual body in particular, though vivid journalistic descriptions of a vulture feeding upon Richard Mallory's rotting flesh attest to the latter. Instead, she is accused of preying upon familial and communal logics, which it is assumed she is not entitled to claim.

⁴² Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3-4.

⁴³ See Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 172-201 and Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 95-107.

⁴⁴ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴⁵ Bankston, 50.

“The Butcher Girl”: Trauma, Gender, and Criminality

Following Wuornos’ arrest, reporters introduced the public to its “first female serial killer” through biographical information. While characterizations of her as an anomalous female killer classified her as a murderer who should not, by definition, have existed, biographies about her life preceding the murders suggested that her killing was inevitable. Though contradictory, these claims mutually reinforced one another by drawing upon criminality as a gendered category. The logic was: she was anomalous because she killed like male serial killers do, and her killing was inevitable because Wuornos’ upbringing had predisposed her to a life of crime, invoking criminality as a category that seemingly confirms masculinity.¹

Unlike family testimonials provided for the men she killed, Wuornos’ biographies do not serve as routes toward respectability but as windows into her traumatic past. The history of abuse that unfolds, documented in practically every news account of her case, was, however, unable to garner sympathy for Wuornos. Instead, it was incorporated into her “profile” as a serial killer, functioning as evidence of her criminality. As a result, her killing was configured as the “logical” outcome of divorced parents, teen pregnancy, incest, child abuse, and drug and alcohol use. For example, *Glamour* leads off a description of her childhood by asserting that “Aileen Wuornos had a typical criminal background.”² Because *Glamour* concludes that Wuornos shared “all the background traits of stereotypical killers * past physical abuse, sexual abuse, and abandonment,”³ such an upbringing functions as a breeding ground for adult criminal behavior, particularly killing, rather than attesting to inadequate public resources for teenage runaways, incest survivors, abused children, pregnant teens, or drug addicts. This conclusion is shared among Florida reporters who claim that “[f]rom birth, Wuornos faced obstacles that are familiar to those who have traced criminal lives.”⁴ The inevitability of Wuornos’ killing is crystallized in *People’s* account, in which a childhood friend remarks, “She has been living with the death penalty since she was twelve.”⁵

These biographies, far from generating sympathy for Wuornos, instead only further developed her predisposition for violence by drawing attention to the close resemblance Wuornos’ life bore to her own father’s. For several reporters, this resemblance is especially uncanny because Wuornos never had contact with him.⁶ Like Wuornos, her father was abandoned by his mother in infancy, and then adopted by his grandmother. As an adult, he was imprisoned for “kidnapping, rape, and crimes against nature,” eventually committing suicide in jail.⁷ Although Wuornos, too, was abandoned by her mother, raised by grandparents, and attempted suicide several times, she was never charged with kidnapping, rape, or “crimes against nature.” Before her arrest for murder, her criminal record included disorderly conduct, driving under the influence, forgery, and armed robbery.⁸ Because the specific nature of their crimes is seemingly less significant than the fact that they both were caught participating in illegal acts, this connection between Wuornos and her father, a blood relative, implicitly upholds a genetic explanation

¹ For discussions of early criminological treatments of female offenders as male, see Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 4-11 and Lynda Hart, 11 -14.

² Edmiston, 305.

³ Edmiston, 325.

⁴ Chris Lavin, Victoria White, Jim Ross, “Suspect in Serial killings has Long, Troubled Past.” *St. Petersburg Times* 2 June 1991, 1B.

⁵ Kunen and Grant, 48. This theme is reiterated in *Vanity Fair*; see MacNamara, 96.

⁶ Edmiston, 322; Chris Lavin, “The Storm Within,” *St. Petersburg Times* 4 August 1991, 1D.

⁷ Edmiston, 322.

⁸ This arrest history is documented within many of the news reports I examined.

for her criminal behavior. The biological origin of crime is reinforced by the continuous need to point out that Wuornos never knew him. Her aunt even attributed Wuornos' anger to genetics, recalling that both "Aileen and [her brother] had raging tempers. Maybe it had to do with their real father."⁹ If, in drawing this connection, the specificity of their crimes is insignificant, why is Wuornos not compared to other people in her life who also engaged in behavior deemed criminal, like the number of friends she smoked marijuana with or "the neighborhood pervert" who Wuornos said raped her?¹⁰ Because these comparisons are made to her father, a biological male relative, and because she is continuously shown to deviate from other women through her failure to desire men, Wuornos is understood not only to be genetically hard wired for crime, but to inhabit a body more closely linked to the male. She must, in other words, continuously be made male-identified in order to confer the status of serial killer upon her.

The cultural link between crime and maleness hailing from criminology is not new,¹¹ but what is noteworthy in Wuornos' case is the fluid manner in which this takes place. Between the time of the police investigation and her arrest, a transformation in public discourse occurs. Initially, police officers had been looking for two women they thought were responsible for the men's deaths: Wuornos and her lover, Tyria Moore. The police composite sketch of the "Angels of Death" initially cast Wuornos as feminine in relation to her more physically "butch" lover Moore, a rendering that reversed its terms upon Wuornos' arrest.¹² Once deemed the "real" criminal, Wuornos was inscribed within a discourse of masculinity. An acquaintance quoted in a deposition used Wuornos' comportment, muscular body, and failure to desire men as evidence of Wuornos' aggression, explaining:

She struck me as a very aggressive person..... The way she carried herself, the way she flexed her muscles. Whenever a nice looking male customer would come in *I mean, I looked, Ty looked, but Lee didn't look. Or if she did, she snarled.¹³

As this comment also suggests, after Moore agreed to comply with the police investigation and testify against Wuornos, public discourse treated Moore with gentility. Not only is Moore shown performing a nod to heterosexual femininity by looking at men, she is, according to one police officer, "a very sweet, likable person, not a trashy person."¹⁴ Film reviews of *Monster* mimic these earlier discourses that first feminize and then masculinize Wuornos by marveling at the corporeal transformation the conventionally feminine actress Charlize Theron underwent to play Wuornos.¹⁵ The links between masculinity, criminality, and the violent lesbian forged within the popular and criminological imagination since the nineteenth century are reiterated in the title of the *Village Voice's* review of *Monster*, "The Butcher Girl."¹⁶ Clearly, attempts to stabilize Wuornos' sexuality around the category of lesbian functioned to criminalize her, as several critics have pointed out,¹⁷ but this process was not achieved without the gender reconstitution of Moore and Wuornos.

Miriam Basilio argues that this strategic deployment of the masculine and feminine demonstrates the all too common propensity to ascertain the identity of prostitutes and lesbians through dress and physiognomy.¹⁸ What does it mean, though, that Moore's and Wuornos' bodies become interchangeable?

⁹ Kunen and Grant, 48.

¹⁰ MacNamara, 96.

¹¹ Hart, 11 -14.

¹² Basilio, 58.

¹³ MacNamara, 100.

¹⁴ Kunen and Grant, 46.

¹⁵ See David Denby, "Killer: Two Views of Aileen Wuornos," *The New Yorker* 26 January 2004, 84; Roger Moore, "Theron Has Always Wanted a Killer Role," *Los Angeles Times* 16 March 2003, E13; Diane Anderson-Minshall, "Making a Monster," *Curve* June 2004, 32; Thomas Doherty, "Aileen Wuornos: Superstar," *Cineaste* Summer 2004, 3.

¹⁶ Laura Sinagra, "The Butcher Girl," *Village Voice* 30 December 2003, 68. For an analysis of installation artwork about Wuornos that intervenes in nineteenth century systems of classification pathologizing lesbians, see Basilio, 56 -61.

¹⁷ See Suggs, 98; John Bankston, "Florida Shocked by Case of Lesbian Accused of Serial Murders," *The Advocate* 21 May 1991, 50; Lindsay Van Gelder, "Attack of the 'Killer Lesbians,'" *Ms.*, January/February 1992, 80- 82; Brownworth, 62.

¹⁸ Basilio, 58. See also Joan Nestle, "Lesbians and Prostitutes: A Historical Sisterhood," in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, 2nd ed., ed. Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 1998), 247-63.

Would ascribing masculinity to Wuornos after her arrest not challenge the credibility of the Damsel in Distress story, one that necessitates a hyperfeminine hitchhiker? And what is the place of her snarling speech? As I have shown, attributing maleness to Wuornos is a central part of naming her a serial killer. She may “look” feminine, as the police composite assumed, but what she says and does * her snarl and flexing muscles * betrays the helpless heterosexual womanhood she embodied as the Damsel in Distress. Rather than challenge the damsel narrative, though, this fluidity between gender categories helps justify why the unsuspecting Good Samaritan could fail to detect danger while coasting along the highway. This “Jekyll and Hyde” quality was also attributed to Jack the Ripper.¹⁹

Significantly, scenarios in which Wuornos is described as obnoxious are interactions with men who are not her clients. The convenience store clerk quoted above was referring to a man who had entered the store while Wuornos and Moore had been shopping. Not even the sacrosanct space of a courtroom earned her respect. She flipped off the judge presiding over her trial when he issued her death sentence, and told the prosecuting attorney that she hoped his wife and children get raped.²⁰ Making no distinction between male servants of the court or male convenience store customers, Wuornos, when not working, did not invest a great deal in propriety.

Although rage has become her most notable rhetorical gesture,²¹ descriptions of her conduct with clients emphasized her adherence to bourgeois polite sociability. We see this in her interview with Broomfield from *Death Row*. Referring to the men she killed, Wuornos insisted:

I never provoked them. I never showed any provocations whatsoever. I was very nice, very decent, very clean, very lady-like. I didn't even swear in front of my clients. A lot of my clients [and] I talked about Jesus and talked political, both together. And we never argued. There was no need to look for the nearest weapon in the vehicle to rape me. Two did and five tried.²²

Here, she uses codes of decency to explain why she had done nothing to incite their violence. Her expectation is that adopting traditional expressions of femininity in encounters with her johns should shield her from physical and sexual violence. The performativity of gender is not lost on Wuornos as she, in Judith Butler's words, is “compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject.”²³ Prosex feminist scholarship by and about sex workers recognizes that female sex workers with male clients, regardless of their sexuality, often engage in an “endless repetition of heteronormative gender codes for economic gain.”²⁴ From such a perspective, Wuornos' failure to replicate these codes of decency and femininity for men with whom she has not enacted an economic relationship signals a refusal to engage in the polite sociability of heterosexual exchanges when not paid to do so. Openly acknowledging her participation in these norms with her johns and then adopting them when she is talking to Broomfield to “qualify and remain a viable subject” does not, however, benefit Wuornos. Attesting to “lady-like” speech may interrupt the post-arrest attempts to masculinize her, but it feeds, even as it attempts to challenge, her status as a predatory serial killer. The fact that she claims having engaged in ladylike speech is all too easily accommodated by the Damsel in Distress narrative, and thus does not exonerate her. The two modes of address attributed to her * rage and polite sociability * do not cancel each other out, but function together to corroborate the Jekyll and Hyde persona ascribed to her.

¹⁹ Walkowitz, 227.

²⁰ Mugshots: Aileen Wuornos, Female Serial Killer, Court TV, 2001.

²¹ Intrigued by Wuornos' courtroom outbursts, Greiner encouraged feminists to “gloat over their serial killer,” for in “boiling over with rage,” she graciously gave up the role of victim. Greiner, 15.

²² Nick Broomfield, *Selling of a Serial Killer*.

²³ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993), 23.

²⁴ Eva Pendelton, “Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 79. See also Alison Murray, “Femme on the Streets, Butch in the Sheets (A Play on Whores),” in *Mapping Desire*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (New York: Routledge, 1995), 66-74.

Exit Strategy

In 2001, Wuornos requested that the state of Florida hasten her execution. She recanted her self-defense plea, explaining, “I just flat robbed [and] killed them, and there was a lot of hatred behind everything.”²⁵ She maintained, “I am a serial killer. I would kill again.”²⁶ By rejecting self-defense and psychological injury, Wuornos, some might argue, confirms her own duplicity. But we can also read Wuornos’ reclamation of the serial killer category * and her story more broadly * as a productive challenge to invent new rhetorical resources about female violence and violence against women, given the limited ways female criminality circulates in US public culture. As serial killer expert Robert Ressler argued, “If Wuornos is seen to be a serial killer, ... we have to rewrite the rules.”²⁷ If she is considered an anomaly, however, criminologists have no incentive to change “the rules,” her status as a “rare breed” seemingly confirming existing understandings of criminality.

The “trouble” Wuornos poses is not restricted to the science of criminology but extends to feminist and queer cultural criticism. Her story highlights the way that white familial intimacy, as a purifying and normalizing mechanism, structures stories about violence against women and female violence that circulate within the mass mediated public sphere.²⁸ Attempts to exonerate Wuornos by invoking the violence she endured/feared proved futile, as the trauma she experienced in her life was incorporated into her profile as a serial killer. Indeed, the clean case’s focus on white familial intimacy produces the very logic that Wuornos is accused of preying upon.

My goal in this essay has not been to sanitize Wuornos or feminism though the clean case. Instead, I have demonstrated that Wuornos’ story presented an opportunity to expand the rhetorical resources for making female violence and victimage intelligible, but these opportunities were closed down within the highway and gender discourse that “made sense” of her. The spatial trope of the highway in Wuornos’ story provided leverage to unanchor the female killer from spaces of domesticity, but Wuornos’ deviation from that spatial norm served as evidence of the mobility characteristic of male serial killers.

These opportunities were further contracted within the gender discourses about Wuornos. Much like the deception narrative John Sloop analyzes in the case of Brandon Teena, Wuornos’ gender performance along the highway was interpreted as a predatory “ruse.”²⁹ While determining Brandon’s “true” gender occupied the attention of mass mediated accounts, the question driving Wuornos’ story focused on her criminality, whether she was, as Glamour put it, “a “hooker with a heart of gold? Or a killer who shook hands with the devil?”³⁰ Criminality, though, is a gendered category, which, given the presence of criminology in public discussions of Wuornos, has implications for our understanding of rhetorics of public personhood concerning gender transgression. Brandon Teena’s successful performance of masculinity was read as deception because he was thought to be “really” female, a conclusion that equates gender with genitalia. Wuornos’ successful performance of femininity as the Damsel in Distress was read as deception, in part, by defining her femininity as dangerous and constructing her as male and masculine. Rather than collapse gender with genitalia, public discussions about Wuornos momentarily released gender from its anatomical definition, producing an instability among gender categories. Though still operating within a binary gender framework, the discourses that feminized and then masculinized her meant that calling her the “first female serial killer” depended on labeling her male and masculine. Her femininity did not disappear in this process, though, since reading her as “luring” men, as the police had done, depended on recognizing Wuornos’ ability to perform heterosexual feminine vulnerability. Given this paradox, one might invoke the argument that Wuornos’ case resurrects the conclusions of nine-

²⁵ “Florida Serial Killer Wants Death Penalty,” *The Advocate*, 3 July 2001, <http://www.advocate.com/html/news/070301> (accessed 27 October 2001).

²⁶ “Woman Serial Killer Wants to Die,” *Chicago Sun-Times* 20 July 2001, 3.

²⁷ Edmiston, 324.

²⁸ News coverage of Nicole Brown Simpson’s murder exemplifies this tendency with its accompanying photographs of white women battered by their male partners. See Jill Smolowe, “When Violence Hits Home,” *Time* 4 July 1994, 18 -25.

²⁹ Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 57-61. Thanks to Bonnie Dow for suggesting this connection.

³⁰ Edmiston, 304.

teenth century criminal anthropology and sexology, whose shared assumptions linked the figure of the lesbian to the female offender.³¹ Both disciplines determined that a “female was always a woman, ‘fallen’ though she might be, unless she transgressed a certain sexual boundary or performed extraordinary acts of violence.”³²

Therefore, despite criminology’s reluctance to “tak[e] into account the most basic tenet of feminist theory*that sex and gender are not synonymous,”³³ criminology seemed, in Wuornos’ story, to disentangle the two, functioning as a vehicle for a discourse of gender fluidity within public discourse. In queer theory, gender fluidity * or the denaturalization of gender binaries *has been regarded as a site of transformation, particularly within work on transgenderism.³⁴ Such optimism might be tempered when applied to mass mediated accounts of Wuornos, who was not transgendered but who was captured in part by a rather mobile gender discourse that hails from criminology. By this, I do not mean a shift in Wuornos’ body but a shift in the public perception of her, a rhetorical reconstitution of her body. This “fluidity” of sorts describes both the movement within the category of woman that her spatial mobility was said to allow (prostitute/ mother), and between categories of gender (inhabiting a female body as the Damsel in Distress and a male body as a serial killer). Her lived mobility allowed her to elude detection and make a living along Florida highways using the Damsel in Distress performance, at the same time ascriptions of mobility, both spatial and gender, were invoked to pathologize and eventually criminalize her. Such is the mobility of the “most dangerous woman alive.”

By arguing that gender fluidity became a disciplinary apparatus integral to the rhetorical process of naming her a serial killer, I am not making an argument against gender fluidity as a lived experience or conceptual resource for queer and feminist politics and theory. What it does suggest is how difficult it might be for dominant culture to take up C. Jacob Hale’s suggestion that we speak of a person’s gendered status as embedded “in a given cultural location, at a given time, and for a given purpose,”³⁵ without reading that performance as deceptive or criminal. Wuornos’ gender performances were seen as situationally specific: verbally aggressive with men not her clients and polite with johns/the men she killed. Although performing heterosexual femininity is not uncommon for sex workers with male clients, the Damsel in Distress narrative that circulated elided her prostitution. This worked to distance the men from the queer act of commercial sex, establish their chivalry, and remove an economic basis from their interaction.³⁶

To be clear, my call for expanding the available resources for making female violence intelligible is not a call for flexible discourse sympathetic to Wuornos, as it was flexible discourse that ultimately criminalized her. What might it mean, then, to expand these resources? Given the limited ways in which female criminality circulates in public discourse, we, as critics concerned with rhetorics of gender transgression, ought to create new contexts for making sense of female violence and victimage, ones other than the spatial imaginary of heteronormative domesticity. The purpose is not to replace the home with other spatial tropes such as the highway but to attend more closely to contexts that may interrupt the white familial intimacy buttressing imaginaries of female violence and victimage. Nayan Shah’s concept of queer domesticities, for example, provides a resource for considering modes of sociability and

³¹ Hart discusses the shared assumptions of sexology and criminal anthropology that criminalized the female invert (their name for a female exhibiting same-sex desire) and that made the female criminal a lesbian. Hart, 11 -14.

³² Hart, 13.

³³ Hart, 13.

³⁴ For example, Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) and C. Jacob Hale, “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex Without Women or Men,” in *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 61 -70. For a helpful literature review of this scholarship, see Sloop, *Disciplining Gender*, 6-11.

³⁵ Hale, 67.

³⁶ Investigators read Wuornos’ stealing objects from these men as “memento collecting” characteristic of serial killers, rather than a means of economic survival. Sharp, 3A.

relations of intimacy not predicated on the white family home.³⁷ Furthermore, whether Wuornos is a “monster” or innocent, her story invites feminist and queer critics to question an investment in sites of mobility (such as gender fluidity or spatial mobility) as routes for escaping normative conceptions of gender. Sustaining optimism in mobility is a daunting task if we consider the ways that criminology can activate discourses of mobility to discipline gender transgression. Wuornos’ story, in short, reveals the degree to which dominant regimes of truth, as sense-making mechanisms, will bend in order to police the boundaries of gender, sexuality, criminality, and knowledge itself.

³⁷ Shah identifies several nineteenth century queer domesticities within San Francisco’s Chinatown, including opium dens, all female boarding houses, and all male workers’ bunkhouses. See Shah, “Perversity, Contamination, and Queer Domesticity,” in *Queer Studies*, ed. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 124-32.



The Library of
Unconventional Lives

Kyra Pearson

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