

# Reconfiguring Wuornos:

An analysis of the public and literary representations of Aileen Wuornos

by

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Dedicated to my recently passed Grandfather,

James Stewart Munro

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## Abstract:

In his essay "*About the Concept of the Dangerous Individual in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*," Michel Foucault recognizes that there is a disconnection between a criminal action and the criminal who is punished. Crimes are not committed in a vacuum; there is a context to the criminal event. Foucault asserts that in modern criminality, the connection between a criminal action and the criminal agent is made through the use of pathologizing discourse that positions the action as a result of the subject's status so that punishment can be understood by the general population. Foucault argues that through this process that pathologizes the criminal, behavioral and social norms are maintained as the violator is positioned outside of "normal" society.

Foucault's analysis provides me with an initial framework for my discussion as I analyze the popular media and literary representations that have facilitated a specific understanding of "the damsel of death," Aileen Wuornos. Often termed "America's first female serial killer," Aileen Wuornos was executed in 2002 in retribution for the murders of six men in the early 1990s. Her case has been a lightning rod for media and literary portrayals. I will examine how Wuornos has been represented across multiple genres of discourse ranging from news media portrayals to true-crime novels and film. After introducing Wuornos's case, I analyze how media representations have portrayed Wuornos as an outsider due to her violation of norms of gender and criminality. Such representations of Wuornos position her as a threat to patriarchal institutions like marriage and gender normativity as a whole. In the next section, I examine how representations of Wuornos's status as a lesbian provide a way that her behavior can be understood so that she does not threaten expectations of female behavior by establishing Wuornos as a non-Woman. In section IV, I analyze media representations of Wuornos that appeal to her history and lower-class "typical criminal background." These representations reflect social anxieties about a woman who operates outside of the domestic sphere.

In the final two sections of my thesis, I analyze the two most popular literary and film representations of Wuornos's case—the true-crime novel, Dead Ends, by Michael Reynolds, and the 2003 film, "Monster," starring Charlize Theron. While in Dead Ends, Reynolds seems to apply much of the media-supported representations of Wuornos in his portrait of her as a vengeful man-hating prostitute, in "Monster" director Patty Jenkins offers a narrative of Wuornos that acknowledges her status as a victim rather than typing her as a predator. The fundamental argument of my thesis is that throughout Wuornos's case the discussion of Wuornos as a victim, both the hardships she faced in her life and during her encounters as a prostitute, has been suppressed with discourse that makes sense of her actions by appealing to her status as a dangerous other, a non-woman. Yet the categories to which Wuornos has been attached—the vengeful lesbian, the non-Woman, and the lower class criminal—exist far beyond Wuornos and her case. These categories and the ideology they support functions to maintain the status quo of patriarchal dominance and the limiting definitions of womanhood. Thus, through my discussion I hope to generate a more compassionate portrait of Aileen Wuornos that can provide the impetus to both acknowledge systematic victimization of female gender transgressors, and expand the limiting definitions and expectations of womanhood in the public sphere.

## CONTENTS:

Preface:	Page 1.
Section I: Introduction to Wuornos's Case	4.
Section II: Wuornos as an Other; Her Violation of Gender and Criminality Norms	7.
Section III: Wuornos as a Lesbian and non-Woman: A Space to Understand Her Violation	18.
Section IV: Wuornos as a "White-Trash" Predisposed Killer	27.
Section V: An Analysis of Michael Reynolds's True-Crime Novel <u>Dead Ends</u>	35.
Section VI: "Monster:" A More Empathetic Portrayal	47.
Section VII: A Final Note	55.
Works Consulted:	56.

Preface:

On October 9<sup>th</sup> 2002, the “highway-killer prostitute” Aileen Wuornos was executed by lethal injection at a Florida prison in retribution for the murders of six men—murders that she committed in a period from 1989 to 1990. As a so-called “female serial killer” convicted for the murders of men who have been portrayed, often falsely, as good family breadwinners, Wuornos violates not only the norms of society but also those of female criminality. Wuornos’s case has perplexed and horrified many who find it difficult to understand this woman. She has been termed by media outlets as the “Damsel of Death,” a lesbian man-hater, “Feminism’s first serial-killer” and, as the Academy Awarding winning film based on her life is titled, simply a “Monster.” These labels that have been placed on Wuornos through media and literary representations contribute to a general cultural attempt to understand Wuornos and her behavior.

In his essay “*About the Concept of the Dangerous Individual in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*,” Michel Foucault recognizes that there is a disconnection between an actual crime action and the criminal who is punished. Indeed a crime is not committed in a vacuum; there is a context to the criminal event. Foucault asserts that in modern criminality, the connection between a criminal action and the criminal agent is made through the use of pathologizing discourse that positions the action as a result of the subject’s status so that punishment can be understood by the general population (Foucault 209). This status consists of those characteristics that are presumed to inherent to that person’s identity. Foucault argues that through this process that pathologizes the criminal, behavioral and social norms are maintained as the violator is positioned outside of “normal” society.

The notion that the penal system reinforces social norms seems rather intuitive. Yet I am more interested in how the *discourse* within and around a criminal action functions both as a reflection of and as a tool for enforcing social expectations of behavior. While I would be reluctant to argue that these processes operate through some definable agent like *the* patriarchal state, I feel that it is appropriate to invoke the idea of a dominant ideology that functions to maintain a degree of stability while simultaneously victimizing those who transgress its limiting definitions of womanhood and criminality.

Foucault's analysis provides me with an initial framework for my discussion as I address the popular public and literary representations that have facilitated a specific understanding of Aileen Wuornos and her actions. Thus I will examine how Wuornos has been represented across multiple genres of discourse ranging from news media portrayals to true-crime novels and film. After introducing Wuornos's case, I analyze how media representations have portrayed Wuornos as an outsider due to her violation of norms of gender and criminality. Such representations of Wuornos position her as a threat to patriarchal institutions like marriage and gender normativity as a whole. In the next section, I examine how representations of Wuornos's status as a lesbian provide a way that her behavior can be understood so that she does not threaten expectations of female behavior by establishing Wuornos as a non-Woman. In section IV, I analyze media representations of Wuornos that appeal to her history and lower-class "typical criminal background." These representations reflect social anxieties about a woman who operates outside of the domestic sphere.

In the final two sections of my thesis, I analyze the two most popular literary and film representations of Wuornos's case—the true-crime novel, Dead Ends, by Michael



Reynolds, and the 2003 film, “Monster,” starring Charlize Theron. While in Dead Ends, Reynolds seems to apply much of the media-supported representations of Wuornos in his portrait of her as a vengeful man-hating prostitute, in “Monster” director Patty Jenkins offers a narrative of Wuornos that acknowledges her status as a victim rather than typing her as a predator. Throughout my discussion, I do not purport to know exactly what happened on those nights when the killings occurred. Rather a key goal in my analysis is to point out that throughout Wuornos’s case the discussion of Wuornos as a victim, both the hardships she faced in her life and during her encounters as a prostitute, has been suppressed with discourse that makes sense of her actions by appealing to her status as a dangerous other, a non-woman. Yet the categories to which Wuornos has been attached—the vengeful lesbian, the non-Woman, and the lower class criminal—exist far beyond Wuornos and her case. These categories and the ideology they support functions to maintain the status quo of patriarchal dominance and the limiting definitions of womanhood. Thus, through my discussion I hope to generate a more compassionate portrait of Aileen Wuornos that can provide the impetus to both acknowledge systematic victimization of female gender transgressors, and expand the limiting definitions and expectations of womanhood in the public sphere.

Section I:

Introduction to Wuornos's Case:

I begin with an examination of the media's discourse about Aileen Wuornos's case, for the media is actively involved in filtering and disseminating ideologies throughout the public sphere. The case itself began on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1989 when an abandoned vehicle belonging to 51-year-old Richard Mallory from Clearwater, Florida, was discovered by a deputy in Volusia County (Macleod 2). Less than two weeks later, in a wooded area a few miles from the recovered vehicle, Mallory's body was discovered. It was determined that Mallory had succumbed to multiple gun shot wounds. Beginning the following June, a series of five bodies of white middle aged men, similarly with multiple gun shot wounds, began turning up in woods along Interstate 75 in central Florida.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> 1990, after three bodies had been recovered, the police discovered the vehicle of the still missing Peter Siems and received their first lead—a witness had seen two women leaving the abandoned car. A sketch was put out by the police department and the media circus began with warnings of “Damsels in Distress” who prey on helpful middle-aged men (MacNamara 96). The frenzy was only exacerbated January 6<sup>th</sup> with an arrest following a witness's recognition of the women in the sketch as Aileen Wuornos and Tyria Moore. Sadly, this same middle region of Florida was reeling from another serial killer, the Gainesville Ripper, who a year before had brutally killed five college students (Macleod 4). Yet as soon as the police statement came out concerning the “highway hooker” who seemingly hunted men, the floodgates opened as the public and media caught their first supposed glimpse of America's “first female serial-killer.”

The first police sketches were of two unidentified women. The sketch of the woman who would later be arrested as Aileen Wuornos appeared much softer and more feminine than that of Tyria Moore, whose butch haircut and wide face gave some the impression that these were lesbian killers who preyed on unsuspecting men. The newspapers and police reports supported this view and at first portrayed Tyria as the instigator of the crime and Aileen as her accomplice. The witness herself said that the two women appeared to be “lesbians” and the plethora of articles following the arrest reflected her supposition (Haire 1-19-91). Before the final arrest of Aileen Wuornos, Tyria Moore, who had fled to her Christian middle class family in Ohio, turned state’s witness and convinced Aileen in a recorded telephone conversation to turn herself in (Kennedy 143). Aileen did exactly that and immediately the portrayals of the two women by the prosecutors and media shifted. Tyria, who was often mentioned only briefly, was nevertheless portrayed as softer and less threatening than Aileen—who was not just sensationalized but masculinized. In a Vanity Fair cover story, an assistant District Attorney is quoted and describes Tyria as a “concerned...cooperative...lady,” while an acquaintance of Wuornos explained that “[Wuornos] 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” (MacNamara 98). Tyria and the witness seemed to pay homage in their momentary admiration of a masculine, good-looking man, while Wuornos is cast completely in opposition not only to men, but also her own expected femininity.

Such juxtapositions that emphasize Wuornos's aggressive behavior and status as an other in an androcentric society, illustrate how representations can appeal to ideological assumptions of femininity, and thus help reify such identifications to expectations of actual behavior. As we will see, representations of Wuornos that again and again identify her status as a hyper-masculine vengeful lesbian killer with a troubled past reflect norms of gender and class behavior by demonstrating what is *not* acceptable in the social order.

## Section II :

### Wuornos as an Other: Her Violation of Gender and Criminality Norms

The common thread within public representations of Wuornos is an emphasis and development of her status as a violator of gender norms and gendered constructions of criminality. A key component of this narrative is Wuornos's operation outside of the domestic realm, which itself carries assumptions of female passivity and subservience. The initial reports following her capture sensationalized Wuornos's actions in a way that only fueled the public's interest by focusing on the rarity, the violation of expectation, that Aileen Wuornos embodies—a female criminal who commits masculine murders. The first full report of Wuornos's arrest by the *Orlando Sentinel* ends with analysis by criminal psychologist James Fox, co-author of the book *Mass Murder: American's Growing Menace*. He explains how “The idea of a woman abducting perfect strangers at random and killing them is extremely rare... Male serial killers are typically sadistic, seeking to inflict pain and torture on their victims. Female serial killers are generally less violent and do not demean victims...but there may have been a role reversal in this case” (Hair 1-18-91). The obvious assumption is that there *are* specific gender roles within criminality. Dr. Fox's emphasis on the random nature of the crime and the emphatic description of “perfect strangers” assumes that when women kill, they kill those with whom they have some level of intimacy.

Although, as I will argue, the notion of womanhood is in many ways mutually exclusive from criminal behavior, one possibly acceptable realm in which female killers can operate is within the confines of the domestic. Over the past few decades, a type of

female-killer who has garnered much attention has been so-called battered women who kill an abusive husband or lover (Coughlin 19). Such women kill men with whom they have some degree of intimacy, almost exclusively in the literal domestic setting of a home. Representations of past female serial killers have also emphasized this level of intimacy and domestic norms. Portrayals of such serial killers, popularly termed “Black Widows,” place women in home-like environments killing intimates or weak elderly individuals and children often with poison or other less aggressive means (Pearson 257). Yet Wuornos does not fit the mold and thus, although she was technically America’s 35<sup>th</sup> female serial killer, from the beginning of her case, Aileen was almost exclusively referred to as the “first female serial killer” (Haire 1-18-91)<sup>1</sup>—the assumption being that she is the first *actual*, the first truly masculine, female serial-killer.

Thus Wuornos’s behavior seemed dangerous precisely because of its non-intimate, non-domestic nature. Immediately following his statement that “there might have been a role reversal in this case,” Doctor Fox speculates on Wuornos’s motivations by explaining, “In a way, she’s exploiting men...it gives her a great deal of satisfaction if she can overpower these men” (Hair 1-18-91). Here Dr. Fox posits the events that he believes to be true: that Aileen did not act in self-defense and was instead the predator of innocent men; she aggressively asserted power over men. While his earlier statement establishes the bright-line between the typical male serial killer and the less aggressive,

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to Wuornos as the first female serial killer is present within 11 of the 36 newspaper and magazine articles that I collected. Eight of these articles were published during the early stages of the case, from Wuornos’s capture to the beginning of her first trial. Two of the articles mentioned that she was actually the 35<sup>th</sup> female serial killer, yet both times they referred to the common public perception that Wuornos was the first. See: MacNamara’s “Kiss and Kill” article from *Vanity Fair* and Edmiston’s “The First Woman Serial Killer?” from *Glamour Magazine*.

less violent, female killer, Fox's supposition that Wuornos achieved pleasure through "playing" the role of man turns the focus away from any possible support for Wuornos's claim that she acted in self-defense by positioning Wuornos as the exception to the rule of female criminality—Wuornos had a motivation for the killings out of an urge for "power over men." More than just the exception, Wuornos is a threat to the understandings of female behavior.

Such gender defining sentiments are in no way unique to that particular article and operate throughout the representations of Wuornos and her case. The portrayals of Wuornos reflect the general understandings of the qualities of a woman that have developed throughout history. Indeed, the history of female criminality is fraught with the same stereotypes and strictures related to female passivity that have been prevalent throughout general society. In western culture, femininity of the "fairer sex" has been a synonym for weakness, frailty, and a lack of rationality (Freedman 2). The mere notion of a female criminal has, in many ways, been portrayed as oxymoronic. *The Female Offender*, the first substantive work addressing female criminality, was published by the "father" of criminal anthropology, Caesar Lombroso, in 1893 (Hart 11). Lombroso asserted that the true "born" female criminal was not truly a woman, explaining how she "belongs more to the male than the female sex" (Lombroso 174, Hart 13). Although her sex is that of the female, she is characterized by male attributes (Lombroso 174). Permutations of such accepted notions remain today and are expressed, for example, within the *Orlando Sentinel's* first story on Wuornos where Doctor Fox explains that Wuornos's behavior is "typical of the way males work...All the [random] victims were

shot several times,” rather than killed through more feminine methods such as poison or even fewer bullets (Haire 1-28-91).

Such gendered sentiments reflect a deep-rooted societal anxiety regarding women who defy typical understandings of womanhood. These anxieties, while underlying much of the public and judicial discourse of today, are explicitly evident in such court decisions as the widely disseminated 1892 case opinion in *State v. Baker* 1892 in which the judge finds the defendant guilty of murdering her husband. He laments, “We can but regret for the sake of humanity that she could not have been shown innocent of the charge...it is hard to conceive of such a crime by a woman, and that woman a mother” (Coughlin 4). The judge referred to the notion of a woman committing murder as inconceivable and explicitly invoked the expectations of servile motherhood as incompatible with the masculine act of murder. This general anxiety when confronted with a woman who defies the ideals and expectations of sacred womanhood is a central theme within the media-constructed narrative of Aileen Wuornos as she is positioned as a double-violator, violating both the law and the expectation of female non-aggression. For despite the progress gained through the women’s Suffrage and women’s rights movements, the underlying expectation for women calls is passivity and relegation to the domestic realm.

Indeed, not only is Wuornos constructed as a violator of female passivity, she is portrayed as a veritable threat to patriarchal and heterosexual norms. This portrayal is often reliant on configuring the actual murders so that Wuornos seems a predator with deep-rooted motivation to kill masculine bread-winners. Fueled initially by comments made by police officers and prosecutors, discourse quickly emerged typing Wuornos as a woman who used sex or other forms of malicious deception to lure unsuspecting men by



posing as a “Damsel in Distress” and then turning against her would-be rescuers in a fit of rage. Time Magazine was the first of many news sources that referred to Wuornos as the “Damsel of Death” (Staff Writers 2-10-92), a term reliant on the unmistakable juxtaposition of feminine weakness expressed in the allusion to a damsel in distress, and the perceived reality of her *unexpected* masculine killings. In a rather dramatic article published by the *Orlando Sentinel* in their Sunday December 8<sup>th</sup> 1991 issue, author Jeff Brazil explained, while recanting the events leading up to shooting death of 51-year-old Richard Mallory (Wuornos’ first victim),

Somewhere along the way he met up with a husky blonde hitchhiking along the roadside. Maybe she gave him a sob story and told him she was stranded. Maybe she offered him sex. Whatever it was, she slid into the car, and it was not long after that that Aileen Wuornos pulled back the hammer on her .22-caliber pistol and became something other than a down-on-her-luck hooker. (Brazil 12-8-1991)

The loaded diction and imagery within such discourse is illuminating as the author identifies Wuornos with the masculinity-enforcing term *husky* juxtaposed with the emasculating and feminizing *sob story* that the author imagines Wuornos used to entice her unsuspecting victim. Such terms portray Wuornos as both directly violating femininity with her body (husky rather than soft), and with the deceptive use of her own proclivities for weakness through the use of a *sob story*.

The sort of purportedly factual imagining that the author performs with the pair of *maybes* reflects the expectation of the author and audience alike. For what other reason would a generous white male pick up a woman on a lonely expanse of highway—a woman who is far from the safety of domestic confines? Mallory's picking up of Wuornos could be viewed as a gesture enforcing a level of patriarchal control—offering a degree of safety to an understandably troubled woman operating outside of her home. Furthermore, the description of Wuornos cocking back the pistol to release it on this seemingly innocent man seems to hold phallic connotations and the idea captured, for example, in The Beatles's song "Happiness is a Warm Gun" where the gun's release serves as a metaphor for ejaculation and orgasm. Seemingly without conscious intention, the author posits Wuornos's action as an act of sexual subjugation of Mallory—an attack on his masculinity—which follows her entrance or "slid[e] into the car." Here penetration of Mallory's space precedes orgasm and subsequent defeat of Mallory's patriarchal status. Thus Wuornos is positioned not merely as a woman who committed masculine acts of murder outside of a domestic setting, but as an incessant threat to masculinity as embodied by her white, middle-aged male victims.

Such anxieties over a woman who defies typical definitions of womanhood and has aggressively taken the lives of multiple men are often expressed by repositioning Wuornos in relation to her victims and their families so that the threat that Wuornos represents can be acknowledged. This positioning relies on contrasting Wuornos's status as a hyper-masculine outsider to her "righteous" victims and their families. Whatever the platform, from the prosecution's arguments within the courtroom to news publications, the portrayal of such victims seems paramount as Wuornos is actively constructed as a

threat not just to the male body and his status, but to patriarchal institutions, such as marriage and heterosexuality as a whole. Returning to the constructions of Wuornos's first *victim*, although the prosecution claimed that Mallory had no history of sexual violence, it was later discovered that he had served ten years in prison for attempted rape in Maryland (Hart 142). Yet throughout Wuornos's trial for the murder of Richard Mallory, the first and only murder for which Wuornos was taken to trial, not only was evidence presented praising the character of Mr. Mallory, but evidence related to the *victims* of the other murders that Wuornos was separately charged with were allowed in under Florida's William's rule. Interestingly, the Williams rule, which allowed similar-fact evidence to be presented in criminal cases, was granted in Wuornos's trial but not in the contemporaneous rape trial of William Kennedy Smith, where the judge refused to allow testimony from other women who have made similar allegations against Smith (Hart 142).<sup>2</sup> Understandably, the allowance of evidence related to the upstanding moral character of the other men for whose murders Wuornos had not been to trial gave those on the defense team the feeling that "Mr. Mallory's case [would] be lost in the shuffle" as Wuornos had to defend herself from all of the seven killings (Brazil 1-18-92).

The construction of Wuornos's victims within public discourse relies both on clearly establishing their masculine identities while emphasizing their specific and honored role in the traditional heterosexual family unit. They are typically depicted as bold, chivalrous men who were unfortunately deceived by the lesbian "transient," Aileen

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<sup>1</sup> The Smith trial was also a widely publicized event as Mr. Smith, a wealthy physician, spent most of the night in question drinking in the company of both the accuser and his uncle, Senator Ted Kennedy. Despite evidence and testimony leading the main investigator to claim that he was "99 percent sure" a rape occurred, Smith was eventually acquitted yet was later found guilty of a separate accusation of sexual harassment in 1996 (Macleod, Court TV 92).

Wuornos (Haire 1-28-91). In an interview, Richard Mallory's wife did reference some anger issues by explaining how "[Richard] was so sweet... and then ten minutes later he would scare the heck out of you." However she was quick to qualify such remarks with, "But if he saw a woman in distress, he would stop and help her" (Sharp 3A). Such portrayals of the men as upstanding characters who only want to help a woman in need reflect the general consensus within much of the public discourse about the case, despite evidence found at the scenes including opened condom wrappers and other items consistent with a sexual encounter (Pearson 263). Shirley Humphreys, widow of Wuornos's second victim Dick Humphreys, explained how she "can't fathom how [Aileen] could have gotten to him unless it would have been through this poor-pitiful-me stuff...he was not a hitchhiker picker-upper...but he was a compassionate man" (Brazil 12-8-91).

The positioning of the widowed women through media representations is interesting in itself since they juxtapose the women's loyal affirmation of their husbands' moral character with Aileen Wuornos's incessant drive to destroy the victims' traditional family by killing the head of the household. In a February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1991 article in *The Orlando Sentinel* titled "An Ex-Wife Feels Loss, Fears Future," the author explains how Ima Spears, the ex-wife of Wuornos's last victim, "who left school early, fears she won't find a good job" (Haire 2-2-92). Ima's reliance on her ex-husband who had fallen victim to Aileen Wuornos is condensed into the accompanying single photograph of Ima and her two children, which bears the caption, "Ima Spears sits with children Deanna and David Jr. She hasn't had to work before because Spears always brought her his paycheck" (Haire 2-2-92). The emphasis is clearly placed on Ima's role as a traditional housewife

who leaves her education unfinished in order to take care of her husband's children—perhaps most importantly *David Jr.* By emphasizing the widows' status as trustworthy wives and mothers, the media strikingly positions Wuornos not only as a more ruthless cold-blooded killer, but as a threat to basic gender roles and the patriarchal institution of marriage. Perhaps due in large part to such commentary, it seemed unfathomable to many in the general public that these men were anything less than chivalrous characters deceived by a hateful Wuornos.

The positioning of Wuornos in relation to both her masculinized "victims" and their wives and families serves to perpetuate the traditional roles for women as operating within the domestic ideology of male-over-female—acting to protect constructions of womanhood. Kyra Pearson, in her essay "*The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism's 'First Serial Killer,'*" analyzes another facet of this effect as she explores portrayals of Wuornos's mobility as a "highway to highway hooker" in relation to the historical representations of hitchhiking. She argues that the emphasis placed on Wuornos's mobility as a highway hooker grants her victims access to a good Samaritan discourse associating them with notions of "trusting, dutiful citizens...whether driving...GIs to their military bases, or offering young women an adventurous ride" (Pearson 263). Pearson argues that although such portrayals continue to be a part of the connotations associated with those who pick up hitch-hikers, there is a more recent construction, which developed in the 1970s, that configures the relationship "between male drivers and female hitchhikers through stories of women raped by the driver" (Pearson 263). Such a scenario is indeed consistent with Wuornos's argument of self defense, yet it was barely acknowledged amidst the breadth of opposing discourse presented.

Pearson points to this irony and acknowledges how by taking Wuornos's behavior out of a narrative of victimization into one where she is positioned as a traditional damsel in distress, the history of the victimization of female prostitutes is rendered even more unintelligible. Indeed, cases where prostitutes are murdered are commonly classified by police departments as "NHI...no humans involved" (Pearson 266). Attempts like those that serve to dehumanize and devictimize such women mirror the representations of Wuornos that establish her as a non-victim due to her status as an aggressive non-woman. Newspapers and prosecutors claimed that the number of bullets that she used on the victims amounted to "overkill" and thus incontrovertible proof that Wuornos was not acting in self defense (AP 1-20-91), while the portrayals of the "Good Samaritan" victims of Aileen Wuornos construct her victims as "[protectors] of white-womanhood" (Pearson 264). The continued construction of Wuornos's victims as upstanding masculine figures with traditionally dependent wives only makes more appalling their downfall at the hands of a woman operating far outside her sphere.

Such expressions of Wuornos as a threat and a violator of womanhood developed further in the trial and reporting. For instance, the *Orlando Sentinel* reported, "Confidently taking the podium, State Attorney John Tanner [explains], '[Aileen's] appetite for *lust* and *control* had taken a lethal turn'" (Brazil 1-16-92). The idea that Wuornos was motivated by an urge to gain control over praiseworthy male bread-winners constructs the murders as compromising the power that these men have—power that Wuornos is shown to covet. The state's masculinity is again reaffirmed with the description of its attorney as "confident," as in control. The anxiety amongst the general society towards a woman who shatters the boundary between traditional womanhood and

masculine behavior does not end with an emphasis of Wuornos's dangerous masculinity. Rather, such an emphasis functions as a base to which the narrative of Wuornos is developed. She must first be established as a non-victim, an other, and a threat.

### Section III:

#### Wuornos as a Lesbian and non-Woman: A Space to Understand Her Violation

Thus far I have examined how media portrayals represented Aileen Wuornos's actions and behavior as operating outside the domestic realm for both women and women who kill. Yet it is not just her behavior that is portrayed as such a threat to white-male patriarchy. The attention given to Wuornos's lesbian sexuality plays an important role in the discourse about Wuornos. In actuality, Wuornos never identified herself as a lesbian. Although she and Tyria Moore had a tumultuous romantic relationship leading up to and during the killings, Wuornos seemingly maintained a more fluid sexual orientation than the surety expressed with the term lesbian. The incessant emphasis and sensationalized portrayals of Wuornos's lesbianism actively reinforced notions of gender normativity, especially in regards to criminality, both by exploding her arguable status as a lesbian, a non-woman, and by positioning Wuornos's lesbian status as a reason or factor that contributed to her actions. She is veritably fit into the stereotyped category of the angry, man-hating lesbian.

Beginning with initial news reports on the two suspects as "lesbian damsels of death" (Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, 1994), Wuornos was almost universally identified by her sexual preference. Of the thirty-six newspaper publications that I reviewed on Aileen Wuornos, twenty one referenced Wuornos's lesbian activity and relationships. Fifteen of such inclusions occurred at the beginning of the case as Wuornos's identity and persona were initially established—from the period prior to



Wuornos's arrest to the start of her trial for the murder of Peter Siems. Despite some evidence at the scene such as condom wrappers, Peter Siems's history of sexual assault, and Wuornos's own confession in which she explicitly asserted that she acted in self-defense, Wuornos's actions were folded into a narrative of a vengeful, man-hating lesbian. One of the earlier articles published after Wuornos's arrest refers to Wuornos as a "lesbian prostitute" (AP 1-20-91). The article quotes Marion County sheriff Sgt. Robert Douglass: "Her hating men, that's what seems to be the only motive for the killings," and it reports that "Wuornos, 34, posed as...a motorist in distress and as a panhandler to lure men to their deaths as they traveled on business" (AP 1-20-91). There is an immediate juxtaposition between the masculine men who were all apparently on *business*, and Wuornos's hatred of men as implicitly tied to her status as a lesbian. Ironically, the men, as johns, participated in what is often referenced as the clichéd "first profession"—the sexual economy of prostitution. Yet it is not that business with which the authors of such representations are concerned. Rather, the description of the men on business only cements their role as bread-winners whose esteemed heterosexual lineage depends on their business and further emphasizes Wuornos's location outside of the domestic institution.

Media In one of the first substantive Associated Press reports, published Sunday, January 20, 1991, the reporter mentions an elderly couple and owners of a Yugoslavian restaurant who met both Wuornos and her lover Tyria Moore when they confronted them by saying, "We're lesbians...can you help us? We feel everyone's against us" (AP 1-20-91). The elderly couple let Wuornos and Moore cheaply rent a room in the back of their

restaurant where the two stayed for two weeks before being asked to leave. The story continues,

They returned to the motel, where the manager recalled a night when the police came to break up a violent fight between a wife and husband. The next day, the manager asked Wuornos why she stayed in her room through the uproar."

"That man is evil," Wuornos was quoted as saying of the husband. "He's Satan."

"I got the impression she wasn't real fond of men," the motel manager said.

(AP 1-20-91)

Wuornos is first established by the author as a lesbian and seemingly a member of the lesbian community—the *we* who feels as if everyone is *against* them as outsiders of a heterosexual society. Immediately thereafter, the author presents an instance of Wuornos coming into direct contact with the institutions of heterosexual patriarchy found within the domestic realm. Ironically, the author includes details of Wuornos's experience of hearing a violent struggle between a husband and his wife—a reminder perhaps of the prevalence of violence against women within the domestic sphere. Yet rather than this event serving either to reinforce Wuornos's arguments that she acted in self-defense or even open a discussion regarding the victimization of women, it is used to reinforce the portrayal of Wuornos as a dangerous, man-hating lesbian.

If Wuornos is in many ways non-woman, as is expressed through her construction as hyper-masculine and her placement outside of the heterosexual binary, then representing her as a lesbian provides a way that her actions do not challenge constructions of womanhood and gender-behavior. Yet such a process did not begin with Wuornos, for representations of female criminals have historically been fraught with the images of lesbians and their connotations as hyper-masculine, aggressive, and threatening (Freedman 6). David Greenberg, author of *The Construction of Homosexuality* (1988) found that while discussions of homosexuality among males, and especially male-criminals, were relatively common-place, there was little explicit mention of lesbian behavior in general prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hart 1). Much of this lack of discussion, Greenberg argued, was due to the veritable secrecy about lesbianism caused by a social anxiety that such acknowledgements would encourage lesbian behavior among the often weak-minded women (Greenberg 16, qtd. in Hart 11). Such sentiments were echoed during an early 20<sup>th</sup> century parliament hearing in England regarding the implementation of legal sanctions for lesbianism when Lord Desart, who opposed the legislation, argued, "You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamt of it" (Weeks 105, qtd. in Hart 1). Those in power, men specifically, were fearful of lesbianism's presumably threatening capability to de-womanize white females.

The perceived threat of lesbianism relies on the assumption of its capacity to shift power over women away from patriarchal control, where their actions can be relegated to a homemaker and domestic housewife, to other women (Price 120). Some feminist theorists have argued that portraits of lesbianism in public representation position lesbian

behavior as an act of narcissism. Drawing on a tradition that women are vain “narcissists capable of completely losing themselves in self-admiration,” these theorists argue that lesbianism has been perceived as the ultimate example of self-love as a woman’s attraction to her own image in a mirror (her narcissistic self) is transmuted to another woman (Dijkstra 151).<sup>3</sup> A woman desiring another woman seems threatening because it removes the women from controlling aspects of the heterosexual binary. As Barbara Creed argues, “the lesbian double [the relationship between the two lesbians as an image and example of her own narcissism] threatens because it suggests a perfectly sealed world of female desire from which the man is excluded” (Dijkstra 151). We’re reminded of the description of the murders that Wuornos committed as “her appetite for *lust* and *control* had taken a lethal turn” (Brazil 1-16-92). Wuornos acted out the urges that stereotypical representations of lesbians purportedly have—urges to escape the domestic space and assert control. Thus she presented a danger to the normative expectations of femininity and female behavior.

The discourse about lesbianism within criminality has consistently served to separate female criminal behavior from definitions of womanhood. Discussions of lesbians became a conduit for both discussing female criminality and maintaining the ideal of the passive woman. At first, there was an effort on the part of criminologists and

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<sup>3</sup> In her chapter entitled “The Lesbian Glass,” Dijkstra invokes the image of a woman kissing herself in a mirror explaining: “Woman’s desire to embrace her own reflection, her kiss in the glass, became the turn of the century’s emblem of her enmity towards men.” She references the heroine figure from the film *Lulu*, a femme fatale who attracted both men and women, and her depiction of being completely self-absorbed. The character at one point says “When I look at myself in the mirror I wish I were a man...my own husband.” Found first through Price and Shildrick’s *Feminist Theory and the Body* page 121

sociologists to protect sacred white-womanhood even within same-sex pairings of women in prison. This effort was facilitated by much of the racial discourse at the time that saw the black woman prisoner as hyper-masculine and lustful (Freedman 3). Those representations of lesbian criminals positioned black females as the aggressors and white women as the passive femmes who viewed the often masculinized black female as a replacement for men and, following their release, returned to heterosexual behavior (Freedman 3). Margaret Otis in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* wrote in 1913 how “the love of niggers” had become a practice where Black female inmates courted whites, often resulting in “intensely sexual” relationships. Yet Otis pointed out that following their release, white girls “rarely had contact with the colored race...nor women lovers” (Otis 112, Freedman 3). In this instance, the passive ideal of the white woman is maintained and the more assertive black female takes the place of the aggressor and instigator of lesbian behavior. Such discursive efforts to maintain sacred white-womanhood continued through the decades and soon shifted from racial discourse to one that at once acknowledged the capacity for white women to become lesbians—making an even more explicit effort to separate such lesbians from the constructed category of womanhood. The lesbian could in fact be white yet now was more criminal than woman.

In her 1954 published study “*Homosexuality in Women*” Albertine Winner discusses “the greater tendency of the [female] psychopaths to engage in sex acts with other girls” (Winner 220 from Freedman 7). In a popular book titled “*Girls on Parole*” from 1956, Katherine Sullivan warns of the primitive and violent behavior of many lesbian criminals, explaining how when motivated by jealousy related to their female lovers, a lesbian “may suffer an acute attack of homosexual panic, with violent screaming

and frothing at the mouth, followed by a period of wan anxiety” (Sullivan 112). The emphatic emphasis on Wuornos’s lesbianism and relationship with Tyria Moore indeed positions Wuornos as such an aggressive (non-woman) lesbian. Through this characterization, the bright-line between passive woman and aggressive lesbian is accentuated, the entire category of lesbianism becomes a place where, as Lynda Hart argues in the book *Fatal Women*, feminine aggressivity, *lust* and *control* find their place (Hart 5). That is to say, if a woman is a passive vessel relegated to the domestic realm, then masculine qualities like aggression can be projected onto this third gender category, the lesbian. An other is created to absorb the qualities that challenge the expectations of womanly behavior as passive and domestic. Wuornos’s capacity to expand the sphere of women, not necessarily through the murders but through her masculine qualities and non-domestic behavior, is thus greatly limited by her placement and emphasized status within the category of lesbianism. Moreover her status as a victim of a patriarchal society, the economy of prostitution and abuse by men throughout her life, is replaced with a narrative typing Wuornos as a vengeful lesbian.

Furthermore, representations of Wuornos actively attach her to a veritable lesbian class as if she were a representative *for* the lesbian community. One way this occurs is through labeling those who may be supporting Wuornos as possible lesbians themselves. This has two effects: first, it advances the narrative establishing Wuornos as a non-woman, and second, it mitigates arguments of support for Wuornos, which can be written off as motivated merely by a perceived mutual hatred of men. A prime example of this focus occurs during discussions of one of the stranger events of Wuornos’s case—her legal adoption by “born again Christian” Arleen Pralle (AP 11-8-91). A few months

after Wuornos's arrest, Aileen was contacted in prison by Mrs. Pralle through a four-page letter offering friendship and support. The two women quickly began having long telephone conversations and Arleen legally adopted Aileen months later. The first discussion that reporters had with Arleen Pralle was published by the *Orlando Sentinel* December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1991, and follows,

How old are you?

"Forty-four."

Are you a lesbian?

"No. I am not now, nor do I ever intend to be, Aileen Wuornos 'lover.'"

Then *why* [my emphasis] are you doing this?

"Because I love her, and I want her to know what it's like to have a family..." (Brazil, *Orlando Sentinel* 12-9-1991)

The immediate assumption is that because Arleen is a woman and is supporting Wuornos, Arleen must be a lesbian, which demonstrates how pervasively Wuornos has been typed as a lesbian in the public sphere. We're reminded of lesbian connotations of non-womanly lust with Arleen's assurance that she will never be Wuornos's lover—as if Wuornos herself had an uncontrollable lust for women. There is even the expectation on the part of the interviewer and general public that to support Wuornos, one could or should be a lesbian.

Another article investigating Arleen Pralle's relationship with Wuornos, published in the *Orlando Sentinel*, quotes Pralle as she *responds* to a question regarding her possible lesbianism, Pralle asserts that Wuornos "became homosexual only after a

lifetime of abuse from men” (Haire 2-21-91). Such statements clearly reflect how lesbianism has often been constructed as a pathological defect due to traumatic life experiences—an assumption that serves to further minimize the lesbian community by pathologizing their sexuality and assuming that they aren’t really lesbians but rather the products of sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences. Moreover, rather than opening a dialogue about female victimization and thereby supporting Wuornos’s self defense argument, the description of Wuornos’s “lifetime abuse from men” is used only to give Wuornos a more firm motive, fitting her into the category of stereotypical man-hating lesbians.

The association between Wuornos the lesbian and the lesbian community as a whole possibly risks further marginalizing the “category” of lesbianism and the lesbian community. For if Wuornos is a control-seeking dyke who lured unsuspecting breadwinners to their deaths out of a hatred of men, then such negative stereotypes and constructions of lesbianism are reinforced. Regardless, public media representations of Wuornos’s lesbianism functioned to deny the capacity of Wuornos’s actions and persona to loosen domestically-constrictive expectations for women or increase the rhetorical tools necessary to make victimage of females more intelligible—Wuornos was not a victim, merely a hateful lesbian who played a little “role reversal” (Haire 1-28-91).



Section IV:

Wuornos as a “White-Trash” Predisposed Killer

She had kept a gun with her for as long as she had been alone, and that, it seemed, was as long as she could remember.

Since before her father hanged himself in his jail cell with a bedsheet.

Since before her mother turned to the booze. And before an old man in the neighborhood touched her that way.

You never know when you might need it, she told her lover, Tyria Moore or want it (Jeff Brazil, *Orlando Sentinel*, December 8<sup>th</sup> 1991).

Just as Wuornos’s status as a lesbian becomes a place where the general public can place such unwomanly behavior as aggression and assault on the family unit (Wuornos’s murder of chivalrous breadwinners), media discourse pathologizes Wuornos’s behavior and identity by appealing to her past and lower-class upbringing. Discussions of Wuornos’s class identity and history, rather than garnering sympathy for Wuornos as they speak of the victimization many underprivileged criminals and female prostitutes face in society—rather than serving to mitigate her culpability—are only used to condemn. Throughout my discussion of Wuornos’s past and history one should notice how the line between non-criminal and lower-class criminal mirrors, and in some way overlaps with, the distinction between Woman and lesbian in regards to expectations of behavior. Just as Wuornos is typed as a non-woman and therefore a lesbian she too is portrayed as a predisposed killer rather than a victim of violence. *Glamour Magazine*

summed Wuornos up by explaining how she has a “typical criminal background” (Edmiston Sep.1991). All that the reading public has to do is go down the checklist with “past physical abuse, sexual abuse, and abandonment” (Edmiston Sep.1991). While such observations could indeed speak of the “inadequate public resources for teenage runaways, incest survivors, abused children...[or] pregnant teens” (Pearson 265), they instead aim to type Wuornos as a predisposed life-long criminal whose actions seem both understandable and condemnable. I am not claiming that just because these sources discuss Aileen Wuornos’s past, they are therefore contributing to this narrative of Wuornos as a fully culpable outsider from regular society. Indeed, an understanding of Wuornos’s past and circumstance seems a vital step to developing a more sympathetic portrayal of the woman. Yet rather than garner such sympathy or even open a discussion on those who have been victimized in society, media representations utilize her history to fit her into a category of an other—a member of a criminal class.

By emphatically connecting Wuornos with a criminal class, public representations of Wuornos position her aggressive behavior and assaults on heterosexual normativity outside the sphere of womanhood and gendered expectations of behavior. This process begins with positing a genetic link to Wuornos’s behavior that establishes her connection with an other, an insidious under-class. Then public discourse reinforces Wuornos’s placement by using her traumatic past against her by emphasizing her “primitive” qualities and behavior (Haire and Quintana 1-18-91)—“primitive” serving much the same function as “lesbian,” signaling her status as a non-Woman.

In the first substantive article about Wuornos in the *Orlando Sentinel*, author Jeff Brazil begins with the passage that serves as the epigraph for the beginning of this section.

Taken literally, the passage makes little sense; Brazil's intention could have been to assert that she had been alone since before the events around her father's death, yet it seems as if Brazil is claiming that just as she was alone during those times she too owned a gun. Aileen's father, who she never met, killed himself while she was a child and from all accounts her mother had been an alcoholic since before Aileen was born. The first two clauses of the second paragraph establish a pattern of deviant behavior within Wuornos's family. The reference to the neighborhood man could either refer to the deviant community to which Wuornos belonged or serve as a metaphor for those outside forces that victimized Wuornos throughout her life. Either way, the narrative that develops is that these *events* did not cause Wuornos's behavior, rather, she always already "owned a gun...[and] *want[ed]* it." This suggests that Wuornos was born with her aggressive and non-womanly persona. In the next paragraph, Brazil directly addresses Wuornos's past and enforces the idea that she was born an other, a member of the criminal class.

[Wuornos] was abandoned by her 16-year-old mother, Diane, six months [after birth]. Her father, Leo Pittman, a 19-year-old handyman who left his young wife shortly after Aileen's birth, was in jail on a charge of raping a 7-year-old girl when he hanged himself. Like his daughter, Pittman had been abandoned by his parents and had to be reared by his grandparents....

(Brazil 12-8-1991)

The commentary on her father's pedophilia and the other references to Wuornos's family members type Wuornos as part of a cycle of abandonment and criminality. The frequent

discussion of Wuornos's father is illuminating for she never met the man. Yet again and again, his story comes up when published reports of Wuornos's "shocking past" are distributed. Such emphasis on Wuornos's father's case implies a genetic explanation for Wuornos's behavior. In response to questions regarding Wuornos's father and her family background, Wuornos's aunt supported such a supposition by explaining that "Aileen and [her brother] had raging tempers...maybe it had to do with their real father" (Kunen and Grant 48). The threat lies not merely within Wuornos for Wuornos's father spread the aggressive criminal propensity to his other children. The inference as to the heritability of such traits in some ways mirrors the previously discussed cultural anxiety over lesbianism spreading to "normal" women; it positions Wuornos as an outsider, a born-criminal (and lesbian), rather than a Woman who remains in the domestic framework.

The explicit references to Wuornos's father whom she never met, coupled with other representations of Wuornos's class status evident in the acknowledgement of a pattern of criminal behavior in her family and surroundings, mirror much of the pathologizing discourse that emerged in the late 1800's within the eugenics movement; such references operated to distinguish the non-criminal white citizen from the underbelly of society, a criminal class. The eugenics movement began in England in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, began studying families based on common traits (Rafter 44). The method was picked up by some in the United States who formed the Eugenics Record Office in 1910. An early bulletin by the group titled *How to Make a Eugenical Family Study* highlighted some of the organization's beliefs: "Eugenics has to do with the racial, inheritable qualities of a population. The peculiar [quality]...that inevitably passes through the generations"

(Rafter 44). This movement blamed “inferior heredity” for many of the social ills including “alcoholism, feeble-mindedness, harlotry, vagabondage, [and] crime” (Rafter 43). Such a belief was based in part on the movement’s quintessential image: that of “the degenerate hillbilly family, dwelling in filthy shacks and spawning endless generations of paupers, criminals and imbeciles” (Rafter 44). The hillbilly existed outside of “regular” society. His characteristics and dangerous behaviors spread amongst those with whom he lived in an endless cycle of criminality and moral depravity.

The descriptions and portrayals of Wuornos within public discourse not only establish a link between genetics and Wuornos’s behavior, but also actively identify her with the similar connotative image of the hillbilly degenerate. Indeed, Wuornos is frequently described by psychologists like the previously mentioned Doctor Fox as “primitive” in behavior, with “a background highly suggestive of some sort of mental defect” (Haire and Quintana 1-18-91). These are traits consistent with the hillbilly image—the mental defect caused by generations of “unmitigated inbreeding and incest” (Rafter 38). The fact that she is found completely competent to stand trial demonstrates that her deficiencies are not enough to mitigate her culpability.

Rather, such discussions emphasize Wuornos’s existence within an ignorant and aggressive criminal class. One article published in the *Orlando Sentinel* in January 1991 begins with the image of Wuornos in the low-class bar that she often frequented called “The Last Resort.” The bar is frequently mentioned in articles about Wuornos even though according to the head bartender, nicknamed Cannonball, Wuornos only came to the bar a “handful of times...because she lived right down the road and didn’t have a car” (Broomfield 92). It provides the perfect back-drop for identifying Wuornos’s class.

Decorated with a collection of women's undergarments strung from the rafters, The Last Resort is frequented by bikers and other low-income clientele. The article from *The Sentinel* begins,

The stocky stranger in shorts and T-shirt often punched No. 136 on the corner jukebox at The Last Resort bar.

She would sit on a bar stool sipping beer and singing along with the country hit, "Diggin' Up Bones."

She drifted in and out of the biker bar for a month, sometimes drinking with men, sometimes there alone. (Brazil 1-28-91)

Taking the first sentence in a vacuum, one would think that this "stocky stranger" dressed in shorts and a t-shirt leaning over a juke box was a lower-class man. By beginning the entire article with the ambiguous noun "stranger," the author plays off the audience's expectations and then emphasizes Wuornos's sex with the following two sentences that begin with "*She* would....*She* drifted." Thus the passage emphasizes Wuornos's masculine appearance and qualities while connecting her with perhaps the most allegedly masculine-aggressive segment of the male population, the southern "white-trash," alcoholic man. Such a portrayal is supported by the deliberate description of the song she chose as a *country* hit—meaning not a hit for white middle-class America—and the explicit reference to The Last Resort as a "biker bar" where Wuornos spent time with "men." Bikers are indeed often associated with criminal elements and the lower-class, as

is evident with the pervasive construction of reengage biker gangs such as the Hells Angels or The Warlocks (Rubin 356).

In his 1992 documentary, "The Selling of a Serial Killer," British director Nick Broomfield emphasizes Wuornos's lower-class status as he inserts himself into the circus around Wuornos and develops a composite journalistic look at the evolution of Wuornos's case. With a tone of voice and demeanor approaching that of Robert Downey Junior's character Wayne Gale in Oliver Stone's satirical "Natural Born Killers," Broomfield awkwardly enters The Last Resort, camera in hand, and asks where he can see "The Human Bomb," a man Broomfield has heard who knows Aileen Wuornos (Broomfield 92). Broomfield takes the viewer out back where the human bomb is about to perform. Panning slowly across a crowd who is dressed in denim overalls and old t-shirts and who sports mullet hairstyles, the camera turns to the human bomb just as some concoction of fuses and gun powder bursts into flames that briefly engulf the overweight man wearing a make-shift padded suit and helmet. Immediately, Broomfield moves over to the slightly delirious man and asks, "So you know Aileen Wuornos quite well eh," to which the man replies, "Yesir I do, wouldya excuse me as I gotta walk dis off" (Broomfield 92). As the man slowly stumbles around a yard filled with bits of wood and small trailers, Broomfield cuts the scene and jumps to an interview with one of the sheriff deputies involved in the case—ending the discussion on the human bomb and his relationship with Wuornos. Rather than interviewing the man and finding out the extent to which this interesting character knew Aileen Wuornos, Broomfield leaves the viewer with the scene of rampant drunken foolishness and idiocy. As a representative of the logical, normative society, Broomfield infiltrates this underbelly of American society of

which Wuornos is a part. Within such popular representations of Wuornos she seems both biologically a part of criminal class and embodies, through her characteristics and behavior, the connotative image of an inbred degenerate.

The belief that social problems are not only biologically based but also biologically linked serves in a very real sense to shift focus away from the victimization of those who face social injustices that contribute to their impoverished lifestyle, and it placates fears that many of higher-economic status have of the lower class—fears of their aggressive criminal behavior. Within the eugenics movement, the image and connotations of this other, the hillbilly criminal, masked the underlying causes, namely poverty and a lack of community support, as reasons for his condition (Rafter 46). Ideals of eugenics were often used as arguments against increasing resources for such communities as the status of the resident criminal imbeciles “could not be helped” (Rafter 51). Proponents hope that the community would collapse and the criminal qualities of their lineage would breed out. Similarly, rather than the discussion of Wuornos’s past and lower-class status serving as a signal to the general public that increased resources should be made available to abused children and impoverished communities, and for criminal rehabilitation, these representations merely fit her into the stereotype of a criminal class and reinforce her culpability. Portrayals of Wuornos do often acknowledge environmental factors associated with her life experiences. However, the incessant *focus* on her past binds her to an impoverished criminal class rather than fully accounting for the history of victimization Wuornos faced in her life and the very real possibility that she acted in self-defense. Thus, Wuornos’s status as an other, a violent lesbian, and born-criminal, is fervently used within dominant media discourse to condemn her.



## Section V:

### An Analysis of Michael Reynolds's True-Crime Novel Dead Ends

In these final two sections of my project I shift gears and examine the two most widely distributed literary pieces about Aileen Wuornos, the bestselling true-crime novel Dead Ends by Michael Reynolds, and the more recent Academy Award winning film "Monster," starring Charlize Theron. As these pieces represent the most widely consumed literary and film representations of Wuornos and her story, I aim to demonstrate how the positioning of Wuornos's case within the works helps to "fill the void" and cement the already established connections between her actions and status. While Michael Reynolds presents the reader with a misogynistic portrayal of a woman whose status precludes pity, "Monster," although it is far from perfect—does seem to open a space where more sympathetic discourse of Wuornos can be developed, discourse that could acknowledge the ways that Wuornos's status as a non-woman and victim has been used to condemn her. "Monster" represents the most mainstream and widely disseminated work that reorganizes the discussion about Aileen Wuornos away from her lesbian and class identity to a woman who has slipped through the cracks in society. It is perhaps the first step towards reconfiguring Wuornos's status from such a vengeful, man-hating predator to a woman whose story speaks of the continued injustices that operate to maintain established gendered norms of behavior.

Michael Reynolds published Dead Ends in 1992, shortly after Wuornos's first death sentence in the Richard Mallory case. More than any other representation of Wuornos, this piece embodies the sensationalized, fearful, and vengeful narrative that had

been propagated by the news and print media. The story is a window into the theme of Wuornos as an other. Michael Reynolds was actually present for much of the trial and did a fair amount of interviewing of people involved in the case, albeit mostly individuals involved in her prosecution. The headlining description on the cover of the book purports to, “for the first time,” tell the “whole story of Aileen Wuornos, serial killer” (Reynolds). Reynolds immediately seeks to establish the credibility of his tale—a narrative in which he takes the liberty to recreate key scenes and dialogue. Yet starting with the headlining caption on the back-cover of the novel, the presumptiveness of his “true” understanding of Wuornos is clear. In large red letters, a brief synopsis explains, “Poisoned by twisted obsessions and mounting rage, she was driven to kill and kill again” (Reynolds). As if standing as the thesis statement to an argumentative essay, this line exposes the central theme within the representations of Wuornos that seek to “make sense” of her behavior. Of course such an argument relies on the positioning and portrayals of Wuornos within the text; through this one “true” narrative, Reynolds demonstrates his absolute disdain and lack of empathy for Aileen Wuornos.

Reynolds takes a very hands-on approach to establishing and affirming Wuornos’s lust for masculine power as a driving force behind her cold-blooded killings. As within public representations of Wuornos, the conclusion that Aileen was not a victim but rather a vengeful serial killer requires that the text establish those masculine qualities that Wuornos is shown to covet. For one, the masculinity of state police and the prosecutor’s office is emphasized as they are positioned as staunch adversaries to Wuornos and her efforts to usurp their masculine identities and assault the domestic male-female binary. When we first meet Captain Steve Binegar of the Marion County

Sheriff's office, Reynolds explains that "he had the look of a homicide cop out of central casting—close-cropped dark hair that receded from a widow's peak, a tightly manicured mustache, steely eyes, and an athletic body" (Reynolds 75). Such a description sounds like it came from a poorly written romance novel and appeals to the stereotype of the hyper-masculine "tough-guy" investigator—a hard, steely-eyed investigator oozing with testosterone as evident by an athletic body. An even more loaded discussion occurs as Reynolds describes the captain's aggressive and nearly misogynist way of getting to the bottom of cases. Reynolds says, "The captain was known for taking a case by its throat and wringing it till it coughed up a perpetrator...he expected his men to do the same" (Reynolds 79). The idea of an aggressive male wringing a "case" by its throat seems reminiscent of very frequent scenes of spousal abuse where an aggressive male assaults and chokes his wife or lover—asserting control and dominance.

In much the same way, these police officers are established as the enforcers and defenders of white-patriarchy through not just their own masculine qualities but through their defense and Reynolds's portrayals of Wuornos's "victims." The most powerful example of this occurs as the narrator takes his reader into the scene where police officers are investigating the death of Wuornos's first victim, Richard Mallory. Reynolds explains, "In the living room they found a collection of X-rated videos...plus a stash of off-the-rack soft-core magazines and personal photographs of unidentified naked women" (Reynolds 15). At first, a description of the highly-sexual porn-addicted Mallory seems like it would lead to a discussion or even a mention of his past conviction for sexual assault—thus opening, if only a little, a real crack in the narrative that Wuornos did not act in self defense. Instead, such descriptions are used to establish, and in a sense praise,

Mallory's strong masculinity. As if bragging in a locker room, the dialogue between officers includes descriptions of the guy as "puss-crazed" (17) and someone who just "thinks with his dick" (28).

Never in the novel during segments and recreations of Wuornos claiming self-defense does Reynolds bring up Richard Mallory's documented past nor his "puss-crazed" persona. Rather, Reynolds positions the state as represented by the investigators as sympathetic not to Wuornos and her status but to Richard Mallory's. At one point, Reynolds recreates a dialogue between two of the officers where one asks, "What's the deal with this guy? We're getting nothing dirty on him. He's just like...paranoid and pussy-crazed, with bad business habits" (Reynolds 22). Mallory's misogynistic behavior and past do not qualify as troubling behavior even with Wuornos's assertion that she acted in self-defense and was in fact raped by Richard Mallory (Kennedy 144). Rather, such representations merely position and affirm masculine normativity, which Wuornos assaults with her "cold-blooded" killings (Reynolds 12).

Not only does Reynolds emphasize the masculinity of those forces that Wuornos fights against, he also strikingly defines the expected roles for femininity and behavior. Following leads of Richard Mallory's "romps with prostitutes," the investigators involved in the case first investigate a young prostitute named Chastity (Reynolds 28). With little case information provided through the events around Chastity, as the lead for her represented one of dozens that the police officers investigated, it seems odd that Reynolds even takes the time to address the event. Yet Reynolds does take the time to establish precisely who and what the woman is. Chastity is a woman who meets the investigator's expectations of a female prostitute, and thus serves to emphasize the realm

within which Wuornos should operate. Chastity is described as a blond with “big breasts...who clacked across the tiles in her high-heeled boots” (Reynolds 31). Reynolds explains, “Chastity was working the only advantage she’d ever known, her body. But it soon became clear that these two cops weren’t interested in her body, but in her statement. She reluctantly answered their questions” (Reynolds 32). The feminizing description of the ironically-named Chastity positions her as an object that uses her one advantage over men to make a living. She is a part of the sexual economy that seems to be revered judging by the locker-room type banter used to describe Richard Mallory as “thinking with his dick.” The police quickly realize that Chastity isn’t the “type” to “riddle these men with bullets” and citing an alibi for one of the murders, they lose interest in pursuing Chastity as a suspect (Reynolds 44). The expected victim status of women within the sexual economy is further emphasized during Reynolds’s descriptions of the rarity of white-middle class men as victims. He explains how law enforcement agencies responding to missing person calls are almost always confronted with cases of “runaway teenagers, lost wives and girlfriends....White middle-aged males are almost always as the bottom” (45). The assumption seems to be that men are far more apt to be the perpetrators of such crimes rather than the victims. Abducting or randomly killing a person usually requires a great deal of force and aggression. Such qualities are “not normal behavior” for female criminals (Hair 1-18-91).

Due to Reynolds’s inclusion of the section on Chastity, which demonstrates the expectations of female criminals within the sexual economy and the established masculinity of Wuornos’s victims, Wuornos’s emphasized status functions even more to highlight the danger she presents to gender normativity. Yet it is in portraying Wuornos

and her actions that Reynolds's misogynist views truly come to light. The first page of the novel establishes Wuornos's identity as an other and non-woman. First, Reynolds presents the image of a woman who "holding her thin wrists...lifted her hands to her breasts, the sleeves of her cranberry-colored jumpsuit sliding down her pale arms as the deputy slipped the chain from around her waist" (Reynolds 1). Wuornos seems at first a woman with feminine qualities like thin wrists, breasts, and fair skin. Yet even if the reader knew nothing about the background of the story, she would know something is wrong; this woman has done something to merit the chains around her waist and feminine wrists. Less than a paragraph down the page, Reynolds explains that

She was in the center, at last. On the other end of the stick....Now she was on top, she was running things...*her way* [his emphasis]. And she was going to let them all have it. Just like she did with those seven bastards she'd left in the woods. (Reynolds 1-2)

Reynolds's lack of empathy and his disdain for Wuornos is clear merely through his word choice and tone—"those seven bastards she'd left in the woods". The positioning of Wuornos is also clear. Wuornos has acted outside of her expected role within the sexual economy. The description of her being on "the other end of the stick" clearly implies that she has turned this normativity on its head. She wasn't an object this time, "those bastards" were. She is finally "on top;" she "fucked"(Reynolds 123) them not the other way around—reminiscent of Jeff Brazil's article that addressed Wuornos's attack on Richard Mallory's masculine identity. This narrative of Wuornos acting to usurp the power relegated to men in society is supported by the same pathologizing arguments that

exist in public discussions of Wuornos; Reynolds describes female killers as “quiet-killers, working within a home...or care-center. Lee was certainly not quiet and searched out her victims, all strangers” (Reynolds 234).

As I have previously discussed, Wuornos’s lesbian status has already been developed and disseminated through the public sphere. Thus rather than point out the moments in the text where Reynolds specifically uses the term lesbian to describe Wuornos’s status, I am more interested in those moments where Reynolds’s narrative appeals to the perceptions and expectations behind the term “lesbian”—those moments where the characterization of Wuornos invokes constructed ideas of lesbian aggression, especially towards masculine gender norms. Indeed, Wuornos’s positioning as a gender transgressor fits well with her emphasized status as a hateful and envious lesbian who is perceived as having not just masculine characteristics but a drive to act as if she has a penis, to be “on top” (Freedman 15).

Reynolds’s description of investigators within the crime scene where Richard Mallory lays dead includes a grotesque mention that “the man’s genitalia was missing” (Reynolds 47). Although the missing genitals were due to decomposition, their mention within this text represents Wuornos’s de-masculinization of her victims, her incessant urge to take the power that she has been denied as a woman. Reynolds’s recreation of the scene where an investigator asks a pawn-shop saleswoman about the gun that Wuornos used in the killing demonstrates the perceived drive within Wuornos to usurp the masculine status of men. The investigator asks the woman what the gun looked like, to which she replies, “‘I don’t understand very much about gun[s]. Like this long.’ Vera spread her sinewy little hands about ten inches” (Reynolds 134). Notice the juxtaposition

between the feminine Vera who doesn't have knowledge of weapons with her little hands and the description of the gun as ten inches long. It seems as if Vera gauged the length of a phallus, the one that is used by Wuornos to play a little "role reversal" and de-masculinize her victims.

During the two most sensational scenes, Reynolds recreates for the reader the actual events of two of Wuornos's murders. Despite her claims of self-defense, Reynolds positions Wuornos's actions as explicitly vengeful. In the middle of the first scene Wuornos finally pulls her .22 caliber gun on Dick Humphreys and in what almost seems like an assertion of "mine is bigger than yours," Reynolds writes that Mr. Humphreys thought "Hell, just a .22, even if she did get a shot off there's a good chance it wouldn't be a kill" (Reynolds 70). The passage continues

"The bullet hit him down there. In the gut....He dropped to the ground. Make a small target. Roll. His back. And another. They were all over him.... He fell back against the concrete. He was choking.... He felt her close. She was close. She was all bright white and red. "Die motherfucker!" He saw the gun coming in. The long steel finger against his chest. Funny how he felt that. Everything was cold and wet. But right there it was hot. And then there was nothing at all. Dick Humphreys was gone when her last hollow-point round rocketed behind his left ear, and through his skull, spraying fragments of lead and bone through his abandoned brain. (Reynolds 71)



I include this lengthier quote to demonstrate how ruthless Reynolds is in the tone he uses. Of course Reynolds includes the description of Siems feeling the heat stemming from “the long steel finger against his chest” as he awkwardly tries to contrast that sensation with the cold wetness of Siems’s surroundings. Terrible writing notwithstanding, the horrific imagery that Reynolds uses, skull fragments flying while an angry Wuornos pulls the trigger in a rage, is painfully consistent with the narrative of Wuornos as a power-hungry, vengeful non-woman. In the second murder that Reynolds recreates he imagines, since Wuornos’s story of self defense obviously tells a different story, the incredibly salacious motivations behind Wuornos’s actions. Wuornos screams at the man “You’re not going anywhere at all. Get down on your knees!” (Reynolds 96). According to Reynolds’s imagining of the scene, the man, whom Reynolds mentions as an ex-police officer, begins to whimper and Reynolds writes, “It sounded like begging. She wanted that. She focused on his pale white body. Real white, a pale soft thing. It seemed to kind of glow.... ‘No badge, no gun. You ain’t much at all’” (97). Wuornos shoots the man dead and Reynolds describes how when she bent down and picked up his dentures from the ground, “She couldn’t help but laugh” (97). Wuornos first tells the man to strip down, take off his clothes and badge. Naked and obviously not in control, the man has been de-masculinized while Wuornos seems fixed on the “glow” of his white-body. She wants him to whimper to demonstrate to Wuornos that now she is in control. The shot rings out and to further this demonizing portrayal of Wuornos, Reynolds imagines her laughing as she picks up his dentures.

These scenes taken together present not just a sensational recreation of the murder events but an embodiment and expression of Wuornos’s identity as a man-hater, a non-

victim. Wuornos does not participate in her expected role within the sexual economy. *She* puts herself on top. With such portrayals, we find all the connotations that have served as identifiers of lesbians and lower-class criminals—connotations of a dangerous other. As within public representations of Aileen Wuornos, Michael Reynolds emphasizes Wuornos's lower-class status and background not as a suggestion that she has been a victim of society and her expected—Chastity-like—role in the sexual economy, but as a tool to further emphasize her status as a non-victim. Perhaps the most popular locale to establish Wuornos's status, *The Last Resort* makes an appearance in Reynolds's story. Reynolds describes how the customers in *The Last Resort* “wear blunt expressions of defiance, injury, drunkenness, mistrust, stupidity, and manifold grievance” (Reynolds 142). Such characteristics, especially *defiance*, *drunkenness*, and *stupidity* seem as if they came straight from the *How to Make a Eugenic Family Study* bulletin from the 1800s as they signal the dangerous proclivities of those within this other group, a group distinct from normal society. *The Last Resort* is portrayed as the space from which Wuornos has emerged. Just as with media representations, Reynolds binds Wuornos to such negative connotations of the lower class not just by pointing out her physical characteristics or failing to mention that Wuornos in fact only stopped by the Last Resort a handful of times, but by making that genetic link reminiscent of the cycle of depravity bred within white-trash groups.

Reynolds even uses the genetic connection as an excuse to deny the value of Wuornos's claims of self-defense. He describes how her father “was a pedophile and violent predator. He was also a remorseless sociopath...and totally immersed in denial. His daughter, Aileen, later showed the same proclivities” (Reynolds 253). Apparently

Wuornos's father had blamed his actions on a combination of unknown pills and alcohol. Reynolds explains, "Years later, his daughter's confession echoed the same lame denial, the same excuses" (Reynolds 253). First, there is an assumption that Wuornos carries within her the same proclivities of sociopathic behavior and aggression. Just as her father was a lower class criminal, so is she, even though as Reynolds points out "she was just a baby in a crib" when he was imprisoned for raping the child. It of course doesn't matter that Wuornos was never raised by the man. They were both a part of the same degenerate cycle, the same criminal community. Wuornos's claims of self-defense are presumed by Reynolds to be lies and excuses.

Yet for Reynolds's narrative, it seems that even exploding Wuornos's status as a dangerous other is not enough; Reynolds must give a final reason for Wuornos's behavior. During the discussion of Wuornos's past, Reynolds mentions that Wuornos "learned quite quickly how to use sex for more than kicks. Boys were good for money. They wanted sex and they were willing to give something for it" (Reynolds 255). And after dismissing Wuornos's claims of self-defense, Reynolds attempts to fit Wuornos back into her place within the sexual economy and define, not speculate on, the basic reason Wuornos killed those men in "cold-blood."

But the years and the miles, the alcohol and dope and crimes, had taken their toll, and at thirty-three years of age her market value as a sexual product was at the bottom. The old hustles didn't work. So she packed up her .22 Double Nine and hit the highways with something else in mind, something final.

Murder. (Reynolds 262)

In this concluding moment of the text, Reynolds makes an attempt to reinsert Wuornos into the same patriarchal structure, the same system, to which she has been, a victim.

Reynolds suggests that the killings were not premeditated. Somehow her choice to lure and murder these men was due to her failures within the sexual economy. With this last motion, Reynolds seeks to close the space where alternative discourses could emerge.

This woman is now not merely a hateful lesbian who has been born an other as a member of the criminal class; she is simultaneously *just* an object whose value had fallen. At the same moment, Reynolds solidifies the narrative of Wuornos as an other, and reassures his audience that Wuornos is not a heroic figure for those who have been victimized due to their status as “non-womanly” women or members of the lower-class. There is no need to open a discussion on the inadequacies of the public system, or the constricting behavioral norms for women in society. She is still only an object, just like the rest.

Section VI:

Monster: A More Sympathetic Portrait

The 2003 Academy Award winning film “Monster” fundamentally differs from Reynolds’s Dead Ends. Whereas Reynolds makes an explicit attempt to attach his work to the genre of “true-crime” literature and establish the truth of his tale, the creators of “Monster” begin the film with the “based on a true story” caveat. Although such a statement is an often-used convention, it shows the audience that the portrayals in the film are not infallible; the creators need not include every detail and event within Wuornos’s case in the true way that Reynolds purports to accomplish. Thus, this piece does not attempt to put forth a complete understanding of Wuornos; in many ways its portrayal of Wuornos is complex. Thus, I am interested more in the overall theme within the film—its overall narrative of Wuornos—that, more than any other popular portrayal of Wuornos, opens up a space where her victimization can become intelligible.

Wuornos’s status as an object within the sexual economy, both as a prostitute and as a victim of injustice, is evident within the film. Yet the fundamental difference between this piece and the dominant public and literary constructions of Aileen Wuornos’s case is that within “Monster,” such expressions are meant to garner some true empathy for Wuornos’s plight. Wuornos is not othered as a man-hating lesbian or white-trash imbecile. Rather, she is a woman who has faced first-hand the tangible injustices for many who grow up abused and objectified. Her plight speaks to those who continually operate within the sexual economy either as prostitutes or as subjects within the domestic sphere.

Unlike the representations of Wuornos that type her as a liar and completely dismiss her claims of self-defense, "Monster" finally gives Wuornos a voice as a woman who was brutalized by many of her "victims." The most disturbing moment of the film is the recreation of Wuornos's encounter with the man for whose murder she was found guilty and sentenced to death, Richard Mallory. The scene is based on Wuornos's chilling testimony, testimony that was left out from Reynolds's interpretation and hardly acknowledged in public discourse. Here I have excerpted a passage from that testimony, which speaks of the event that is partially recreated within "Monster."

...so we go into the woods....He starts pushin' me down. And I said, 'wait a minute, you know, get cool. You don't have to get rough, you know. Let's have fun...I said I would not [have sex with him]'. He said, 'yes, you are, bitch. You're going to do everything I tell you. If you don't I'm going to kill you [and have sex with you] after you're dead, just like the other sluts'.... He tied my wrists to the steering wheel, and screwed me in the ass. Afterwards, he got a Visine bottle filled with rubbing alcohol out of the trunk....He emptied it into my rectum. It really hurt bad because he tore me up a lot. I was yelling at him, struggling to get my hands free. Eventually he untied me, put a stereo wire around my neck and tried to rape me again....Then I thought, well this dirty bastard deserves to die because of what he was trying to do to me. We struggled. I reached for my gun. I shot him. I scrambled to cover the shooting because I didn't think the police would believe I killed him in self-defense. (qtd in Hart 135)

The film recreates this terrible event, showing Wuornos tied to the steering wheel while being thrust upon by Mallory and subsequently sprayed with rubbing alcohol. Before the man—who is never named in the film—pours the alcohol on Wuornos, he says to her, “Scream, let me fuckin hear it. You wanna die. I’m gonna clean you up cuz we got some fucking to do” (Monster). The brutality of the scene is far different than Reynolds’s seeming glorification of prostitution through his passages about Chastity, or his reasoning that Wuornos had planned to kill the men after she realized that her “value” as a sexual object had dropped. Nearly immediately, as this scene is one of the first of the film, Wuornos the lesbian man-hater becomes Wuornos as herself, in her own words, a victim.

Yet I should also point out that starting after this first brutal rape and Wuornos’s self-defense, the recreated killings (only three more are shown) progressively show the men as less threatening to Wuornos. In the film, the next killing occurs after Wuornos spots a gun in a man’s car and fearfully reacts by shooting him. Such representations of the murders seem less than empathetic to Wuornos’s claims that she acted in self-defense in each of the killings. I believe that writer and director Patty Jenkins had to walk a tight-line between capturing the essence of Wuornos’s case—her life long struggle to survive amidst the brutality she faced—and sounding too much as if she were cheering for Wuornos as a heroic figure. Again, I do not suppose to know exactly what happened on those nights when the killings occurred, but I have endeavored to point out that the discussion of Wuornos as a victim, both the hardships she faced in her life and during her encounters as a prostitute, have been suppressed with discourse that makes sense of her actions through appealing to her status as an other. “Monster” is the most mainstream

representation of Wuornos that grants this space where Wuornos's victimization, and that of many of women, can be acknowledged. Returning to the film, in each subsequent murder scene the hopelessness of Wuornos's situation shines through. She acts anxious and paranoid, waiting for the man to make a threatening gesture or comment. The portrayal is of a woman who has been broken down by the sexual economy in which she has participated out of necessity. Indeed, the common thread throughout the film seems to be Wuornos's constant struggle to survive while being cast away by society, written off as a woman who deserves to walk the streets.

Wuornos's status as a victim is indeed evident through the filmmaker's positioning of her prostitution as pretty much the only viable option for a woman like Wuornos who has grown up abused and objectified. In the film, Wuornos attempts to quit prostitution following her self-defense killing of Richard Mallory. She tells her then lover and sole confidante, Selby Wall (an adapted version of Tyria Moore, played by Cristina Ricci), that she wants to get a real job, and make some money so they can start a new life together in the Florida Keys. Wuornos fantasizes with Selby about how she'll buy her a nice house and they'll live away from Selby's homophobic relatives who live in the area; they'll be free to live as "normal people." Almost in the same breath, Wuornos tells Selby, "You know what I always wanted to be, President of the United States" (Monster). Both the women laugh as if acknowledging the similar impossibility of their initial plans. In moments like these, filmmaker Patty Jenkins seems to acknowledge the obstacles in the path of the often idealized American dream—a dream that is available to some but not all. It's interesting how Wuornos describes herself as the provider for Selby, "I'll buy you a little house and everything you want" (Monster). Within such comments we see a



woman who wants to inhabit an assertive role as a provider. Yet with no opportunities, she is forced to use “the only advantage she’d ever known, her body” (Reynolds 31).

Following Wuornos’s discussion with Selby, Wuornos dresses in nice clothes and goes to a number of interviews for traditional secretary work and other job openings. Turned back wherever she goes, she is at one point lectured by a man at a law-firm who insults Wuornos for her lack of a resume and work experience. During the tirade, he tells her that “when the beach party is over you don’t get to say well I’d like to have what everyone else has worked for, it doesn’t work that way” (Monster). Such statements seem to echo the pervasive understanding of Wuornos in the public sphere that positions her as a non-victim and degenerate who fully chose to be an outsider from the normal economy. This notion is not only personified by the man who interviews Wuornos, but by other characters as well, especially Selby’s relative with whom she lived at the start of the film. After the first encounter between Wuornos and Selby, Selby offers Wuornos a place at her relative’s house. As Selby explains, a girl from her church back home in Ohio spread rumors that Selby tried to kiss her. Her family, being devout Christians who saw lesbianism as a sin, sent Selby to live with relatives in Florida. The night Wuornos stays with Selby they do not engage in a physical relationship, Selby just offers her room to Wuornos as a friend. Yet the next morning, Selby’s relative confronts her and bluntly says, “Did you check your stuff? She might’ve stolen something...a person like that, no mam, we have no business with people like that” (Monster). Wuornos is not a member of normal society; she is an outsider. With the emphasis on Selby’s family and relatives as devout “Christians,” Jenkins seems to portray the Judeo-Christian patriarchal society as

hypocritical. The sentiment that those with resources have “no business” helping Aileen Wuornos has been prevalent throughout Wuornos’s life.

Perhaps the clearest instance when Jenkins uses a character to show the misogyny and lack of empathy to those who have been victimized in society occurs later in the film after Selby tells her relative that she is moving away with Wuornos. Selby’s relative explains that

She’s screwed up and people are like that for a reason...I’m not talking bout bein born a nigger [Selby gasps and tells the woman that she shouldn’t say nigger]...No I’m sayin its not their fault. The point is people make bad choices and they pay for them just like all these miserable street people. And we see you choosin this life, [in a whisper] this gay life even more than that the easy life with this woman...honey many people have bad lives and they still choose to move towards the light otherwise we’d all choose to be hookers because someone yelled at us or we had a mean mom. Someday all your’re gonna want is a roof over your head, and that means you’re gonna have to sleep with a man to get it.

(Monster)

The inclusion of the racially loaded term “nigger” to describe another group that has, through the centuries, been victimized and othered through pathologizing discourse echoes the similar representations of gender transgressors and specifically Aileen Wuornos. The idea that such people like Wuornos had a fully-formed choice to be in the state they are in is juxtaposed with the earlier scenes where Wuornos attempts to gain

acceptance within the patriarchal normative society yet is turned away. Finally, the last line speaks directly to the gendered system in society as Selby's relative explains that the necessary condition to gain access to the normative lifestyle, to be safe and have a roof over one's head, is to be a man's subject—not to demonstrate resolve and assert control over her own life, or even to join in an equal union with a significant other or man. Rather, a woman must be the direct sexual object of a man, she's "gonna have to sleep with a man to get it" (Monster).

Indeed, the film's positioning of Wuornos does differ greatly from the popular media's discourse that has typed her as a non-victim and an other. Thus it seems that the film could serve as a pivotal first step in reconfiguring the overall narrative of Wuornos's case to a story a woman who, like many others, finds herself victimized within a constricting social and economic system. However much of the reception of the film severely limited the film's capacity towards expanding the discussion on the victimization of such women in the public and private sphere. Although the film received average reviews, Charlize Theron's performance was praised. Yet too often the discussion was not about Wuornos's story, but rather Charlize Theron's transformation. As David Rooney of *Variety Magazine* wrote, "[the performance is one that] erases the actress's creamy-skinned softness and classic beauty in a radical transformation rendering her virtually unrecognizable" (Rooney 35). There is indeed much to be said about a woman who is so womanly occupying the space, even if only within a film, of a woman who defies traditional definitions of womanhood. That said, there seems to be an undercurrent within such discussions of Charlize Theron's physical transformation that continues to define Wuornos's behavior through her masculine appearance and qualities.

In the *People Weekly* article titled “Killer Performance: Beauty-turned-Monster Charlize Theron puts the Academy in her sights,” author Jason Lynch explains, “It’s the kind of beauty-plays-beast turn that makes Oscar voters swoon—unless they’re jealous of how quickly she snapped back to her stunning self” (Lynch 63). Lynch identifies both Theron and Wuornos with gender-loaded terms—the feminine beauty and the masculine beast. The light-hearted joke concerning the Academy becoming jealous of how quickly Theron transformed back into her beautiful self seems out of place when speaking of a film where the “beast” is brutally raped and victimized. Kyra Pearson points out that during Charlize Theron’s acceptance speech she did not once mention Wuornos’s plight the way that actresses who have played victimized women like Julia Roberts for her character Erin Brockovich and Hilary Swank for transgendered Brandon Teena, did when accepting their awards (Pearson 270). Through such discussions, the real story of the real Wuornos is glossed over. The film loses an opportunity to open a discussion about the victimization of not only Wuornos but of many women who have been victimized and objectified within the sexual economy. Instead, the audience remained fixed on a woman who, once again beautiful, briefly inhabited the space of an ugly, overweight, lesbian killer.

## Section VII:

### A Final Note:

To “Monster’s” credit, the film confronts its audience with a portrayal of Wuornos that demonstrates that she is more than merely her “masculine” persona and rough upbringing. Yet the public reception of the film shows that it takes more than simply a sympathetic portrayal of Wuornos to undo much of the negative portrayals that have developed; there must be a paradigm shift within general society so that such a sympathetic portrayal can resonate. This ideological shift requires that we acknowledge Wuornos’s status as a victim rather than just “America’s first female serial-killer.”

Throughout my project, I have endeavored to uncover and critique the dominant discourse about Aileen Wuornos that has typed her as an other and non-victim. Yet this reaction to a woman whose status and behavior challenges the dominant ideological framework did not start with Wuornos’s arrest or end following her execution in October of 2002. The categories that Wuornos has been identified within, such as the man-hating lesbian or criminal degenerate, continue to support expectations of female subservience while encouraging those within “normative” society to turn their backs to these “outsiders” who continue to be victimized. We should not have to wait for the next victimized woman to behave less a victim than a predator for there to be a discussion on these issues. More than anything, the case of Aileen Wuornos shows us the moral imperative we have to work towards a cultural understanding that reacts preemptively to prevent a victim from becoming a “threat.”

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