Emily E. Demers
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**Aileen Wuornos and the Public Sphere**

Aileen Wuornos' case first caught my attention one night while I was babysitting. The kids were in bed and I was watching T.V. I flipped to the A&E channel which was airing a special documentary titled “Women Who Kill.” It just so happened that Wuornos' case was the one being featured at the time. Her story immediately drew me in and although the murders and trial took place in the late 80's and early 90's, before I was old enough to really understand the significance of the case, I remembered hearing the exact same story once before. It finally dawned on me that I had heard the story in a movie called *Monster*, which starred Charlize Theron. The film was based on Aileen Wuornos' story and in it Theron played the part of Wuornos, a woman who suffered a lot of mental, physical and sexual abuse as a child and went on to lead a very destructive life, which eventually led to her own execution for the murders of seven men from in and around central Florida. After watching the A&E documentary, I became exceedingly interested in Wuornos' story, and I was determined to learn more.

I was presented with an assignment in one of my 600 level Communication courses called Spectacle, Scandal and the Public Sphere, which entailed writing a 20 page research paper on a topic of interest that involved a sort of spectacle within the public sphere. I knew right away that I would use Aileen Wuornos' story for my case study. Now, for time's sake I will be giving you all a shortened version of the paper.
I would like to begin this presentation with one of the topics we discussed in the class, which is that our society as a whole has become obsessed with the rigid identity constructs that have been formed throughout generations. We are at a point where it has become impossible not to categorize one another by our social and economic status, sexual preference, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. When we first meet a person we automatically think, “Oh, he could be gay,” or “I think they’re lesbians” and if the person we are trying to place into one of our “categories” doesn’t really “fit,” we get upset and it becomes almost hard to handle. We label one other with the names we use for these constructs such as gay, lesbian, straight, man, woman, transgender, black, white, asian, and the list goes on. My point is that these “titles” define who we are not only to ourselves, but also to the rest of the world.

Throughout the research process, I realized that somewhere within all of the public discourse I had been reviewing about Aileen Wuornos' case, were many different assumptions and stereotypes linked to her name. Because the press used such words as “manly,” butch,” “lesbian,” “hooker,” and even “The Damsel of Death,” this would then set the tone for the way the public would view her; as a sort of spectacle. According to Miriam Basilio, ‘The case has become a sensationalized media spectacle in a climate of anxiety about the assignment of gender roles, the ostensible causes of homosexuality, the definition of sexual harassment, rape and self-defense, and the causes of economic decline.”

For those of you not too familiar with the case, Aileen Wuornos was arrested on January 9, 1991 on outstanding warrants, as the police did not have all of the evidence
they needed in order to proceed with her prosecution for the murders of the aforementioned seven men from Florida. On January 27, 1992 after deliberating for a mere 90 minutes the jury assigned to her case found Aileen Wuornos guilty of the first degree murder of Richard Mallory despite Wuornos’ claims of rape and murder in self-defense. Two days later, on January 29, 1992, the jury recommended death and the following day Wuornos was formally sentenced to die. In April of 1992, she pled guilty to the murders of Mr. Eugene Burress, Dick Humphreys, and David Spears. For this, Aileen Wuornos received a second death sentence in May of 1992.

On November 10, 1992 a woman named Michelle Gillens, of Dateline NBC, stated, “Thus far, Aileen's defenders and Florida prosecutors alike had failed to unearth any criminal record for Richard Mallory that would substantiate Aileen's claim of rape and assault. In the officials’ view, Mallory was clean, if somewhat paranoid and sex-crazed.” However, Gillen had no trouble at all “finding out that one of the murder victims, Richard Mallory, had served ten years for a violent rape in another state, facts easily obtained by checking his name through the FBI's computer network.” The coverage of Wuornos' case serves as proof that the media's interpretation of stories such as this one plays such a significant role in the way the public comes to understand certain stories and people featured within those stories. Apparently the coverage had an even bigger impact on the police handling her case, as they felt that their investigation did not require any background checks on the victims.

Aileen Wuornos’ case was one of the biggest murder cases involving a woman to hit the media in a long time. Because of this, Wuornos received a lot of negative
attention. The media published certain pictures making her look absolutely vicious. Like this one for example. The way Wuornos is exposing her teeth makes it seem as though she was purposely trying to give off a very evil, threatening representation of herself. Miriam Basilio deems these pictures along with many others, “Representations of Wuornos in print and television media that are typical of images of pathologized lesbians that emerged in the nineteenth century and intersect with gendered and classed terms to reveal deep-seated anxieties about attempts to redefine social and legal categories.”

In her essay titled “Disciplining Gender; or are Women getting away with Murder?” Rene Herberle focuses on the idea that because women are able to conceal certain things such as their menstrual cycle, coupled with the fact that the ideology of privacy places the home and intimate relations beyond public scrutiny, means that women’s criminal behaviors may also be successfully concealed. This leads to the controversy involving the difference between men and women and the ways they are positioned within the system of capital punishment. According to Herberle, “When women commit violence in the private sphere, they are breaking the rules of gender and must either be refeminized – often a difficult task – or severely sanctioned. When men commit violence in the private sphere, they are in a sense fulfilling the grim assumptions society holds about masculinity. They do not have to be remasculinized to be considered redeemable or “human.” Instead, judgment turns to weather or not they took their masculinity too far.”

When we think of men and women on death row, we think of those who have committed the most heinous of crimes and should never be allowed back into civil
society. Herberle says that “most men on death row are predominantly black, poor or are there for the murder of a white person and the women on death row today, are usually there not because they have committed an awful crime, but because they do not enact a properly feminine gender identity.” She goes on to mention that “subject to a social order that requires a certain complimentary, dualistic gendered economy, the women on death row are marked as monstrous, as beyond the point of not just human, but particularly feminine behavior.”

So much of the profiling and stereotyping that Wuornos received through the coverage of her case involves what Basilio considers “Prosecutors and most media commentators combining Wuornos’ presumed job descriptions a highway sex worker, along with the FBI profile of a male serial killer, with the stereotype of the predatory, masculine lesbian.” I am not placing all of the blame on the media for society’s view of Wuornos; however, I do think they deserve the majority of it. Without the media’s representations we would never have been exposed to Aileen Wuornos in such a negative light, and therefore we would never found it necessary to label her a violent, butch lesbian, who was past the point of no return and who could never be “refeminized.” We used such rigid identity constructs in identifying what kind of person Wuornos was in order to simply dismiss her case and essentially right her off as “damaged goods.” The law today is in a sense rhetorical because it is embedded within a cultural moment where it is deemed acceptable to sentence a woman, seen as a monster by so many, to death than to spend time repairing her identity.