

Surpassing the word

Aileen Wuornos

Lynda Hart

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Contents

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Still Unrepentant | 8 |
| Delire a Deux? | 19 |
| Notes | 23 |

...so we go into the woods. He's huggin' and kissin' on me. He starts pushin' me down. Andi 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. It doesn't matter, your body will still be warm. 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 said the Visine bottle was one of my surprises. He emptied it into my rectum. It really hurt bad because he tore me up a lot. He got dressed, got a radio, sat on the hood for what seemed like an hour. I was really pissed. I was yelling at him, and 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... I have to say it. I killed them all because they got violent with me and I decided to defend myself... I'm sure if after the fightin' they found I had a weapon, they would've shot me. So I just shot them...¹

(Aileen Carol Wuornos, testimony)

Aileen (Lee) Wuornos figured correctly; no one believed that she killed in self-defense. As of this writing she waits on death row in a Florida prison. She has confessed to killing seven white middle-aged men, all of whom picked her up on Florida's Interstate 75. The first man she killed, Richard Mallory, had a history of violent sexual assaults and was incarcerated for ten years in a Maryland institution after posing as a repairman and sexually assaulting a housewife. This evidence was not presented in the Mallory trial; it was not even uncovered by Wuornos's public defenders and was "overlooked" by the prosecution.²

¹ Aileen Carol Wuornos, "In Her Own Words," testimony in self-defense in the Mallory trial. Reprinted in Phyllis Chesler, "Sex, Death and the Double Standard," *On the Issues*, Summer 1992, p. 31. Even this reproduction of Wuornos's "own words" has been censored for publication. In the trial transcripts, she quotes Mallory saying, "I'm going to kill you now and fuck you after you're dead." She apologizes for using "street language" on the witness stand. It should be noted that it is the man who was raping her who is protected by this "cleaning up," censoring, of *his* words in her testimony. Excerpts from Wuornos's testimony are included in Nick Broomfield's documentary *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1993), hereafter cited as Broomfield.

² For a full account of Richard Mallory's criminal history and how it was "overlooked" by both the defense and the prosecution, see Michele Gillen's "Dateline" interview, November 10, 1992. State prosecutor John Tanner, when confronted with Mallory's history of sexual assaults against women, responded that his office was careless in checking out Mallory's past. Tanner allowed that the newly uncovered evidence was aggravating, because "we may have to try the case again. It may be reversed on appeal and we'd have to try her all over again" (p. 11).

I repeat her words at length here, hoping that somehow they will fill the gaping black hole from which they emerge and ineluctably return. I sink with her in and out of this incredible space. I want her words to stand in for the thing itself—to signify the event transparently—even as I know that testimony can never produce an effect of truth alone. “For the testimonial process to take place,” writes Dori Laub, “there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.”

Aileen Wuornos is waiting—on death row—and I am wondering if it is possible that a listener will arrive in time to save her. I will try repeating her story differently, in a way that perhaps can be heard. I do not, however, believe that I can save her. As her one girlhood friend has said, “She has been living with a death penalty since she was 12.”³ I can only tell one story of how and why she will be sacrificed, and try to document her resistance.

The media and the FBI have called her the first female serial killer. The serial killer has a particular legal and psychological profile. Writing in 1984, Steven Egger explained:

All known cases of serial killers are males... Serial killers commit subsequent murder(s) and they are relationship-less (victim and attacker are strangers)... killings are frequently committed in different or widespread geographic locations and not for any material gain, but a compulsive act for gratification based on fantasies...victims share common characteristics of what are perceived to be prestigeless, powerless, or lower socioeconomic status, such as vagrants, prostitutes, homosexuals, children, single and often elderly women... and most of these murders have a basis of underlying sexual conflicts of sadistic lust. Many of these aberrants vent their hostile impulses through cruelty to animals, but their real hatred is against their fellow man/

Wuornos embodies two incontrovertible reversals in the profile: she is a woman; and her victims were heterosexual, white, middle-class males, not members of powerless groups. The only point left in Egger’s description that doubtless pertains to Wuornos is that the murders were subsequent and ranged over a geographical area. But by naming Wuornos a “serial killer,” the prosecution built its case around the other characteristics—the “psychological” part of the profile—which are all obviously merely inferences in any case. Thus Wuornos has been depicted as a killer who stalked her victims, lured them with promises of sexual favors, and was compelled to repeat the crime because of a lust for domination.

Wuornos’s own story is quite different. In her testimony, she claimed that she was a hitchhiking prostitute, who killed these men because they were raping her and/or

³ Dawn (who prefers not to be further identified), cited in James S. Kunen et al., “Florida Cops Say Seven Men Met Death on the Highway When They Picked Up Accused Serial Killer Aileen Wuornos,” *People*, February 25, 1991, p. 48.

threatening to kill her. Given her evident deviation from the serial killer's profile, even and indeed especially within the realm of what the law and its ministers consider concrete, observable facts, we might ask what purpose it has served to label Wuornos a serial killer, and indeed why she was so named even before the details of the murders were depicted.

Jane Caputi has argued that the hierarchy established between serial killers and their victims indicates that "these are crimes of sexually political import, crimes rooted in a system of male supremacy in the same way that lynching is based in white supremacy."⁴ This obvious point is occluded by the way in which these murders are naturalized *as* deviant; despite the frequency and structural repetitiveness of these acts, each one is invariably represented, paradoxically, as *just* *another* enigma—a pathological aberration—an act that is *outside* of culture and hence a violent intrusion into it. Caputi cites Kate Millett to support her view that "longstanding tradition" (naturalization) impedes the recognition of the serial killer's place *within* a patriarchal symbolic order. Millett writes:

So perfect is [patriarchy's] system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation. Customarily, we view its brutalities in the past as exotic or "primitive" custom. Those of the present are regarded as the product of individual deviance, confined to pathological or exceptional behavior, and without general import.⁵

More than twenty years after *Sexual Politics* first made such startling claims, the tedium of having to repeat them is almost unbearable. But perhaps Wuornos's acts have made a generative wedge in the sociosymbolic. For on a first consideration she would seem to have merely reproduced that order, only reversing it in two of its principal structural elements. But Wuornos has not acceded to her nomination as a "female" serial killer, and, furthermore, her actions on closer examination constitute much more than a reversal.

Elaborating the question "Why is *Woman* the Symptom of Man?" Slavoj Žižek identifies the "serial killer" as "the figure which comes closest to [the] role of a scapegoat embodying sacred violence...the madman who, with no 'rational ground,' compulsively repeats murderous acts."⁶ Pointing to the doubleness of the Symbolic Order, which is *both* a "subject-supposed-to-know" and a "subject-supposed-to-know," Žižek elaborates that in the first instance, the Other appears as a "hidden agency," like divine Providence or the "invisible hand of the Market"—a surplus or a "meta subject," which is within itself radically ambivalent as it can serve either to reassure or to terrify. In the first case, it instills confidence and relieves us of responsibility. In the

⁴ Jane Caputi, "The New Founding Fathers: The Lore and Lure of the Serial Killer in Contemporary Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 3 (1990):1-12.

⁵ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. 59-60.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 57.

second, it is a “terrifying paranoid agency” that threatens to rob us of our pleasures. These two mutually opposing qualities of the big Other are “united in the figure of the psychoanalyst *qua* ‘subject supposed to know’ (Lacan).” At the same time however, the big Other functions as precisely the opposite of this “hidden agency”—as an agency of “pure semblance, of an appearance which is nevertheless *essential*, i.e., which should be preserved at any price.”⁷

It is in the latter understanding of the Other (which Lacan designates the Name-of-the-Father) that we can recognize the Symbolic Order as a “dead scheme,” which derives its power precisely because it is “dead” and thereby “dominates and regulates our actual lives...”

This is the way “tarrying with the negative” takes place, this is the way negativity as such acquires positive, determinate being: when the very actual life of a community is structured by reference to symbolic fictions. In our everyday lives, we accept this as something so self-evident that we don’t even notice the oddness of what is going on—to become fully aware of it, a philosophical experience of “wondering” is necessary.⁸ (Author’s emphasis)

Surely feminists from Millett on have been engaged in this “wondering.” There is not much difference between Žižek’s description of the Symbolic Order and Millett’s patriarchy. But the question remains how one goes beyond wondering and intervenes in this sociosymbolic in ways that can alter it.

Although there is not any way “out” of the discourse of the symptom, there are differing interpretations of what the symptom is saying when it “speaks.” Following Lacan, Žižek extols the virtues of “symbolic suicide” as an act of freedom that is beyond the scope of the performative, and hence an eruption of the “Real” into the Symbolic Order. This eruption, however, in itself does not constitute a break with the Symbolic Order; on the contrary, it depends on the Symbolic Order’s function as a barrier between the Real and the Imaginary. Symbolic suicide, as an act of pure freedom, is an act, furthermore, that Žižek curiously allots to the “feminine,” personified most forcefully and paradigmatically in Antigone’s “No!”—an exclusion from and dissolution of the community that does not proffer anything new, any “positive” program to be erected in the void left by her declaration. This “feminine” act is thus constative, unlike the “masculine” performative. Žižek argues that this distinction does not repeat the activity/passivity binarism (and its assumptive gendering), but rather indicates that masculine “activity” is always already “an escape from the abysmal dimension of the feminine *act*” and hence nothing more than a “desperate attempt to repair the traumatic incision of this rupture.” Nonetheless, it would seem that the masculine trauma is an empty space that is “filled” with the feminine “act.” That is, Žižek wants to say that the trauma is without origin, without “real” status, and without any positive content. *But* there remains a need to narrativize the trauma, for something is recovered in the act of

⁷ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

testifying. When this act is designated as feminine, The Woman is reinscribed as the symptom of man. Woman remains the “not-all” that forever exceeds man’s representations of himself; and it is precisely this excess that figures as the necessary condition for man to reproduce his desire. It says nothing of women’s desire; it merely repeats the desire for desire that is produced by a masculine imaginary.

This “feminine” is a not altogether unappealing fantasy scene with which women might identify, for the power of what cannot be symbolized (murdered) should not be underappreciated. Nonetheless, the question remains: on what phantasmatic scene *can* women’s desire take a place? If the symbolic suicide is a pure act of freedom, performed as “feminine” but in order to reproduce the desire of a masculine imaginary, what is the other/alternative to this suicide? Would suicide’s complement, double, or other—murder—also constitute such a pure act of freedom?

Still Unrepentant

The priest must look out for false tears... and putting his hand on the woman's head, he will say the following formula: "I beseech you by the very bitter tears, shed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ upon the cross for the salvation of the world, by the burning tears shed upon the wounds of her son by the most glorious Virgin Mary his mother, on the evening of his death, and by all the tears shed in this world by the saints and God's elect whose eyes he wiped: if you are innocent, weep, and if you are guilty, weep not." It is a perfect trap... everything is the mark, everything is the sign of the devil. 12

The media have dubbed Wuornos "the damsel of death," and have rushed in to stake claims to her story. Movie deals, book contracts, made-for-television specials were all in the works within days of her arrest. This rush to repetitively narrate her story resonates ironically with the nomenclature of the "serial murderer." Robert Ressler, the FBI agent who coined the term, explains that it derives in part from his memories of Saturday afternoons at the movies during his boyhood, when "serial adventures" lured him back again and again with their cliff-hanger endings. Likening these suspense fantasies, remembered from darkened movie theaters, to the repeat offender's desire to make the reality of the murder accord with his fantasy, Ressler explains: "Serial killers...are obsessed with a fantasy, and they have what we must call nonfulfilled experiences that become part of a fantasy and push them on toward the next killing. That's the real meaning behind the term *serial killer*." [Vi]

This is a structure of desire that is presented as if it were pathological, anomalous at best. Nonetheless, it is easy enough to recognize in this description an entirely *normative* relationship between the phantasmatic and the real from a psychoanalytic perspective, in which the "real" is an ever-receding, elusive kernel, an "object" that is retrospectively constructed in the scene of fantasy as perpetually lost. It is constitutive of desire to repetitively construct this lost object in order to renew itself. In a masculine imaginary, as we understand desire in a patriarchal symbolic, desire *is* precisely this perpetual losing and refinding of an object that is not only always already lost but, more fundamentally, *necessarily* lost. "Woman," in this economy of desire, is the *site* that makes this *scene* renewable. Hence the enormous popularity of the "femme fatale" can be understood as the symptom produced by this masculine imaginary. As one reporter writes, "[Wuornos's] story [has] set off a frenzy...to cash in on what is perhaps an unprecedented saga of a highway femme fatale."¹

¹ Mike Clary, "A Mother's Love," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1991, pp. E1-2.

But Aileen Wuornos is no femme fatale. A persistent figure of fascination in the texts of modernity, the femme fatale, as Mary Ann Doane describes her, is “a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious agency,” and her “textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject.” Although the femme fatale may often exceed the representations that produce her in order to eradicate her, she is not to be mistaken, Doane cautions, as a “heroine of modernity.” Rather, she is “a symptom of male fears about feminism.”²

Aileen Wuornos has been and no doubt will continue to be represented as a femme fatale, the handiest construct available for reintegrating her into the Symbolic Order. But if the femme fatale is a functional construct of the masculine imaginary, a representation that, at once, expresses (while producing) a patriarchal sociosymbolic order’s fear of femininity and disarms that fear by disabling her, Aileen Wuornos has exceeded this representational formula. In one sense, she is this masculine imaginary’s dream come true—their metaphor realized. Fulfilling that fantasy, her actions confirm the “truth” of their theory, on the one hand; but on the other, she disrupts the theory by prying open its seamless dualism and exposing its deceptive monism. Aileen Wuornos will no doubt be swiftly sacrificed to maintain the illusion of phallocratic sexual difference, but in the interim she may well serve as a kind of subject of feminism who, unlike the femme fatale, does not succumb to upholding the patriarchal sociosymbolic.

On the hand that quite expectedly is not the one the media or the courts are playing, Aileen Wuornos’s story is banal, an all-too-ordinary repetition in a culture of paranoid male fantasies that eroticize their worst nightmares. This time, however, one might say that the fantasy has crossed a certain boundary. The hallucination has been realized. Aileen Wuornos has, quite horribly, acted it out. If the fantasies worked to preclude their actualization, something has gone awry; Aileen Wuornos has violated that barrier.

Elizabeth McMahon, the psychologist who examined Wuornos for a year and a half, makes a plea to save Wuornos from the death penalty on the basis that she has the emotional development of a three- or four-year-old child. “Lee is one of the most primitive individuals I’ve ever met,” McMahon argues: “there’s a whole set of rules out there that everybody else knows about and Lee doesn’t.”³ Michele Gillen, interviewing Wuornos on “Dateline,” asks her if she knows that most people could not understand how a prostitute could be raped. Wuornos responds that she cannot understand how they could *not* understand, then offers some horrifyingly graphic descriptions of just how she was tortured and raped by the seven Johns whom she killed.⁴

² Doane, Mary Ann. 1991. *Femmes fatale: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 2-3.

³ “Dateline NBC,” August 25, 1992, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9:

GILLEN [voice-over]: You understand now that for many people, because you were a prostitute, they don’t understand how a prostitute can be raped.

“Still unrepentant,” the “Dateline” voice-over introduces another segment of the interview. Gillen, again, pressing, incredulous: “Did you say to yourself, I’m out of control, I’m killing people?” “No,” Wuornos answers emphatically, “I thought to myself, ‘Those men are out of control, I’m sick and tired of those men out there thinking they can control us and do whatever they damn well please with our bodies and think they can get away with it.’ Because this is a male-dominant society and ‘we’re going to—we’re going to treat you the way we want to. Abuse you, treat you, destroy you—it don’t matter to us, because we can get away with doing that.’”⁵ And earlier, Wuornos opens the interview: “I’m supposed to die because I’m a prostitute. No, I don’t think so.”⁶ Still unrepentant.

McMahon is partially right: there *is* a whole set of rules out there that Lee Wuornos simply cannot seem to grasp. She does not understand, for example, that it will not bolster her defense to point out repeatedly that she slept with hundreds, thousands, perhaps as many as a quarter of a million men, and only killed seven of them. From Wuornos’s point of view, these statistics are proof that she is not a predatory serial killer; according to her logic, it is not unreasonable to believe that seven out of thousands of men would become violent during a sexual encounter. “I’m *a prostitute*,” she reiterates, as if to bring home to her audience that she is a member of a profession in which the likelihood of encountering sexual violence is somewhat higher than what the general population of women experience. One of the “rules” that Wuornos does not understand is that prostitutes in a patriarchy are both necessary and utterly dispensable. Usually they are the prey, not the predators. Mostly they are the victims, and quite often, since Jack the Ripper, they are the most likely victims of a serial killer. As “Dateline”’s Jane Pauley points out, without seeming to recognize an irony deeper than mere reversal: “This is a story of *unnatural violence*. The roles are reversed. Most serial killers kill prostitutes” (my emphasis).⁷

In an interview with Geraldo Rivera, Evelina Giobbe, president of a support group for ex-prostitutes, confirms the credibility of Wuornos’s account: “Women in prostitution are commonly sexually assaulted, raped, battered, and robbed by customers... So what we’re looking at in Lee’s case...is that she adequately, .used deadly force to defend herself against a real or perceived threat... So Aileen’s fears are not unfounded. Close to 2,000 men a year...used her in prostitution. So to say three to six a day, that

Ms. WUORNOS: I don’t understand how nobody can understand how a prostitute can be raped. Because when a man rapes a woman, he assaults your whole body. He puts his...[censored by network]...down your throat, cramming it down your throat. He tears your hair out of your head. He—beats your face in. He—he rips your...[censored by network]...wide open.

Notice the slide from the interviewer’s “prostitute” to Wuornos’s “woman.” Wuornos responds to Gillen’s question with a graphic, literal description of *how* she was raped. What she does not understand here (nor does Michele Gillen, the woman interviewing her) is that a “prostitute” is *not* a “woman” who *can* be raped in a patriarchal symbolic.

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶ Ibid., page missing in transcript. (Quotation is verbatim from videotape of the broadcast.)

⁷ Ibid.

seven of them may have sexually assaulted her fits with the stats that are in there.”⁸ Rivera has to take a break. He does not return to this subject after the commercials.

From the dominant cultural perspective, Wuornos’s acts have produced something like a double negative. Whereas male serial killers are “naturally unnatural,” as a woman Wuornos has committed *unnatural unnatural acts*. The “unnaturalness” of her crimes has, of course, everything to do with the fact that she is a woman. Women do not kill, lesbian philosopher Jeffner Allen reminds us; their passivity is a heterosexist/patriarchal imperative: “The heterosexual virtue that dictates what is a woman also prescribes *what is violence*. Violence is defended as the right to limit life and take life that is exercised by men, for men and against women. A woman, by definition, is not violent, and if violent, a female is not a woman.”⁹ The heritage of nineteenth-century criminology demands a certain repentance. In order to reinstate themselves within the category “woman,” they must experience remorse. This is a symbolic mandate that Wuornos has refused. She is not only, as she insists, “not guilty” because she was acting in self-defense; she is more profoundly not guilty—she will not allow herself to be sacrificed. Wuornos’s persistent refusal to repent is the theme that runs throughout interviews:

WUORNOS: I am not—I do not regret it. I do not regret it. They were going to kill me. I killed them. That is a normal thing to do.

GILLEN [voice-over]: Why does she have no remorse? Who is Aileen Wuornos?

GILLEN: Do you realize that what you did was wrong?

WUORNOS: No... Here’s a message for the families: You owe me. Your husband raped me violently, Mallory and Carskadden. And the other five tried, and I went through a heck of a fight to win. You owe me, not me owe you.¹⁰

Appealing to her newly born Christianity, Rivera almost succeeds in persuading her to repent:

RIVERA: Why don’t you say, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I killed those men”?

WUORNOS: I am sorry I killed those men now, now that I’m into religion. I mean, I’m sorry it happened. I wish it never would have happened.

RIVERA: But do you understand why they say that you don’t show any remorse?

WUORNOS: Because why should I? The cops made me so mad about all the lying and everything, I can’t show any re—remorse.

Rivera tries to assume the role of father confessor, which only makes Wuornos dig in deeper:

RIVERA: But deep down—here, I’m not a cop—I want you to say you’re sorry to the fam—the innocent families.

WUORNOS: The innocent families? Those families aren’t innocent.

RIVERA: Why not?

⁸ “Geraldo. Profile of Aileen Wuornos: The Woman behind the Murders,” March 23, 1993, pp. 19-20.

⁹ Jeffner Allen, *Lesbian Philosophy: Explorations* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1986), p. 38.

¹⁰ “Dateline NBC,” August 25, 1992, pp. 7 and 13.

WUORNOS: Those men aren't innocent. I'm not giving in. Those men are not innocent.¹¹

We not only escape *from* guilt, Zizek reminds us; we escape *into* it. For the assumption of guilt, the readiness to become the sacrificial victim, is what saves the Symbolic Order from "the devastating knowledge of its inconsistency, impotence, inexistence."¹² Zizek explains that the Other is an agency that functions, in its mode of "pure semblance," the mode that is the exact opposite of the Other as a "hidden agency," as a subject "supposed *not* to know."¹³

If, for Lacan, the willingness to be sacrificed guarantees the desire (and hence existence) of the Other, it is this role that Wuornos has refused. Her acts are so incomprehensible because she has resisted the temptation of the sacrifice. Like Zizek's paradigmatic example, Job, who consistently asks what the Other wants of him, rather than simply following its mandates blindly, Wuornos has precipitated that "uncanny scene in which it is not simply a subject but the thing itself which starts to talk."¹⁴ When they ask her about *her* desire, *her* motivation, *her* intentions, she turns the questions back around on them. What she has recognized, simply, is that the Symbolic Order is not a neutral agency with an ontological consistency; the big Other has a desire of its own. And Wuornos wants to know what it wants of her.

The "scapegoat embodying sacred violence is a substitute," a double. Zizek's theorization of the serial killer's function alludes to Rene Girard's theory of the sacrificial crisis, which demands a scapegoat in order to interrupt what would otherwise be an interminable cycle of reciprocal violence precipitated by mimetic rivalry. The violence of the sacrificial crisis is propelled, according to Girard, *not* by differences but by their loss, which "forces men into a perpetual confrontation, one that strips them of all their distinctive characteristics—in short, of their 'identities.' Language itself is put in jeopardy."¹⁵ In order to subvert this crisis, a scapegoat is selected to intervene as a third party, whose death then terminates the mimetic rivalry. This sacrificial victim must be a carefully chosen "ambivalent" object, one that is not quite *not* like the mimetic antagonists. In other words, the scapegoat must bear a certain resemblance to the antagonists, while also remaining distinguishable in some way. For if the scapegoat is too much like the antagonist, the cycle of vengeance would be perpetuated. Nonetheless, if the scapegoat is too different, then the sacrifice would not be efficacious. Using the Old Testament example of Jacob's substitution of himself via his imposture of the favored brother Esau, Girard explains that sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the

¹¹ "Geraldo," p. 18.

¹² Zizek, Slavoj. 1991. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 39.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁵ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 51.

displacement upon which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim; without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy.¹⁶

Thus the sacrificial substitution might be understood as a *misrecognition* that takes the form of (appears as) a recognition. And the intervening “third party,” the sacrificial victim, is never the *object* of the sacrificial rite; on the contrary, this “object” is nothing more than/other than the subject(s)—the antagonist(s)—himself/them- selves, who are themselves nothing more than each other’s doubles. In the mimetic economy of “sacred violence,” then, two who are the “same” maintain their Active distinctiveness (and thus autonomy) by erecting a third party to absorb the violence that would otherwise be directed at themselves. In short, the scapegoat serves the function of a symptom. Without “woman” as man’s symptom, men are left without this object to exchange and are confronted with the commerce between themselves. How altogether fittingly ironic that a hitchhiking lesbian prostitute, Aileen Wuornos, has not only made this traffic in women apparent, but has also turned the brutality of this exchange back onto the primary players.

According to Girard, there is no violence that is not implicated in this “sacred” economy and, furthermore, it is readily apparent that sexuality partakes of this violence. Not only, however, do sexuality and violence share certain common characteristics, such as the tendency to “fasten upon surrogate objects” if the original object is inaccessible, or the accumulation of “energy that sooner or later bursts forth,”¹⁷ but they also share the same structure. Girard does not quite come to this latter conclusion explicitly, but it is everywhere implicit in his analysis.

What is left unarticulated in *Violence and the Sacred* is the gendering of violence itself, and the heterosexual imperative that compels it. One thus finds Girard attending to women in such special categories as in his discussion of culturally ambivalent responses to menstruation. Here he raises the question of whether there is not “some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women,” even going so far as to suggest that a “monopoly [has been] established that is clearly detrimental to the female sex.”¹⁸ He nonetheless fails to recognize that this supposition is not confined to various symbolizations of female biological processes, but that indeed, the sacrificial crisis with its resolution through substitution is a virtual paradigm for the structure of “desire itself,” a Desire that holds a monopoly in a phallogocentric sociosymbolic.

The correspondence between Girard’s theory of violence and Lacan’s mirror stage reveals some interesting convergences on this question of the production of The Woman

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

as symptom. In his early essay “Motifs du Crime Paranoïaque,” Lacan wrote about Christine and Lea Papin, the infamous “murderers of Le Mans”:

For [Christine and Lea Papin] a common metaphor of hate, “I’ll tear his eyes out,” became reality. Public reaction to the crime is evident in the application of the maximum penalty. It is clear that the adage used by those who fear psychology, “to understand is to forgive,” is only applicable within certain societal limits and that outside these limits to understand is to condemn.¹⁹

On the basis of this “secret shared in common by, .female crimes” Catherine Clement argues that “Lacan makes the discovery that becomes the source of *all* his subsequent thought.”²⁰ This discovery is the mirror stage, the foundational moment in Lacanian thought, which is based on his lifelong fascination with female criminals—specifically female “paranoïacs” whose violent acting out manifested a repressed homosexuality. What was the “secret” shared by these women that led Lacan to theorize the mirror stage? Clement offers some intriguing suggestions: “the danger of too much closeness,” the possibly disastrous consequences of “one person’s identification with another,” the notion of a “perfect love” that will inevitably explode in aggressivity when forced to “confront the Other.”²¹ From these cases, Clement concludes, Lacan must have observed that the “correct distance is the *opposite* of the feminine” (my emphasis).²²

The negotiation of the “correct distance” is, let us not forget, what the mirror stage both is meant to accomplish *and* forever fails to achieve. If this is the moment when the child assumes a (Active) identity, which will forever serve him as the shield that permits access into the Symbolic Order, it is an identity that is predicated on a misrecognition of himself as whole, autonomous, complete, and separate. It is this “jubilant assumption” of an identity that serves as a barrier between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. This identity is “orthopedic” because it enables the child to function within the illusion that “reality” is the real. It is an “achievement” that is necessarily always already *not* achieved. In the mirror stage, the child distances “himself” from the other by misrecognizing himself as a separate “self.” The Other (the Symbolic Order) comes into existence for the child along with the mirror stage because this is the moment when the child disavows that he is lacking (incomplete).²³ Thus, paradoxically, the child’s identity becomes an object of belief that is predicated on an *identification* with the other, who is aggressively incorporated into the illusion of one’s separateness. But because the other is an absence, separation can never be more than a precarious distance that threatens to close up and engulf the subject, rendering the boundaries

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, “Motifs du Crime Paranoïaque: Le Crime des Soeurs Papin,” *Minotaure: Revue Artistique et Littéraire*, February 15, 1933, pp. 26-27 (my translation).

²⁰ Clement, Catherine. 1983. *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*. Trans. by Arthur Goldhamer. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²³ Lacan, Jacques. 1977. “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” in *Ecrits*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

between “self” and “other” inchoate. In the mirror stage, as Clement points out, the child “in obtaining its identity...in fact only manages to achieve identification.”²⁴

Although Lacan posits the mirror stage as a universal psychic phenomenon, we might pause to wonder why this most critical moment in the child’s psychic formation came to him by way of observing the “secrets” of female paranoiacs. As Clement points out, it was the “inseparability” of these women that led to their violent actions. The mirror stage is structured around a fundamental tautology; for the dangerous proximity that inevitably erupts into a violence that will characterize all subsequent desire was *already* gendered as feminine. The violence of identification that the mirror stage presumably produces is a reconstruction based on the observation of female criminals whose actions would become the paradigm for a generalized theory of femininity per se. Whereas male criminals would always be classified as anomalies, departures from the norm, female criminals would become the rule derived from these exceptions.

I return to the young Jacques Lacan, working on his thesis for accreditation in psychiatry, by chance observing a remarkable crime that would fascinate him throughout his career. In the small provincial town of Le Mans, France, in the year 1933, the year that Hitler became absolute dictator of Germany and Freud published “On Femininity,” Christine and Lea Papin were quietly performing their domestic duties when they suddenly erupted into an outburst of violence unparalleled in the annals of French criminology. Madame Lancelin and her daughter came home to find their house in darkness and reprimanded their maids for blowing a fuse while ironing. Christine and Lea were later found huddled together in their garret bedroom; their employers’ bodies were found

lying stretched out on the floor... frightfully mutilated. Mademoiselle Lancelin’s corpse was lying face downward, head bare, coat pulled up and with her knickers down, revealing deep wounds in the buttocks and multiple cuts in the calves. Madame Lancelin’s body was lying on its back. The eyes had disappeared, she seemed no longer to have a mouth, and all the teeth had been knocked out. The walls and door were covered with splashes of blood to a height of more than seven feet. On the floor [were] found fragments of bone and teeth, one eye, hairpins, a handbag, a key ring, an untied parcel, numerous bits of white, decorated porcelain, and a coat button.²⁵

The leftist newspaper *L’Humanité* championed the maids’ revolt against the oppressive bourgeoisie. Anarchists baptized the sisters as “angels of the revolution.” It was two years before the formation of the Leftist Popular party. And it was a time in which the “nature” of female sexuality was at the center of debates within intellectual circles. The young Lacan joined the endless stream of commentators on the crime to diagnose Christine and Lea as a “*delire a deux*,” a paranoid disorder that is “among the

²⁴ Clement, *Lives and Legends*, p. 91.

²⁵ “The Maids of Le Mans,” in *Infamous Murderers* (London: Verdict Press, 1975), p. 112.

most ancient recognized types of psychosis.” Lacan dubbed the murders in Le Mans a “social masterpiece.”²⁶

In his article on the maids published in *Minotaure*, Lacan compared the Papin sisters’ crime to that of Aimee, the subject of his 1932 thesis, “De la psychose Paranoïaque.” Aimee also had a sister with whom she constituted a “delire à deux.” Her crime was much less noteworthy than that of the Papin sisters: Aimee had attacked a famous Parisian actress as she entered the theater. Madame Z had blocked the blow from Aimee’s knife, suffering only two cut tendons in her fingers, and declined to press charges. Aimee was sent to Sainte-Anne, and her official diagnosis was “persecutory insanity based on interpretation and with megalomaniac tendencies and an erotomaniac substrate.”²⁷ It would be through his observations and study of the “female paranoiac” Aimee that Lacan would discover a

“novel form of syntax, which enlists its own peculiar means of comprehension for the purpose of affirming the community of mankind.”²⁸

An aspiring writer herself, Aimee had written poetry and prose. Her attack on the actress was apparently motivated by the belief that Madame Z was in conspiracy with a novelist who threatened to expose Aimee’s private literary life. Lacan wanted to compose a thesis that would expound the unconscious meaning of Aimee’s paranoia. He theorized that “the figures of persecutory females were surrogates for a feminine imago.”²⁹ Aimee’s elder sister, as well as her mother, were the “original” imagoes, delusions that were later displaced onto other women, culminating in the attack on the actress. The “erotomaniac” component of her paranoid disorder, Lacan demonstrated, “went hand in hand with a homosexual dimension. Aimee became attached to famous women because they represented her *ego ideal*.”**

In the case of the Papin sisters, there too a certain “repressed homosexuality” was the final explanation for their violent behavior. When Lacan learned of the “murders in Le Mans,” he understood at once, argues Clement, that the separation in prison of the French maids, Christine and Lea Papin, caused the delirium of Christine, the older sister, “just as the close relationship between the two sisters was the cause of the crime.”³⁰ The sisters’ incestuous desire, as I have discussed at length elsewhere, was the obsessive focus of the trial proceedings during the height of the “woman question” in psychoanalysis.³¹ If “repressed homosexuality” was the French law’s final explanation

²⁶ Clement, *Lives and Legends*, p. 56.

²⁷ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 113.

²⁸ Clement, *Lives and Legends*, p. 57.

²⁹ Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan Co.*, p. 113.

³⁰ Clement, *Lives and Legends*, p. 72.

³¹ Lynda Hart, “‘They Don’t Even Look Like Maids Anymore’: Wendy Kesselman’s *My Sister in This House*,” in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 131-146.

for the unprecedented violence of the Papin sisters, it was not, for Lacan, the first explanation for the mystery of a distinctly feminine paranoia. As Clement points out:

The first explanation involved language: this trail is already familiar to us. It begins with words and leads to action. In order for a paranoid crime to be committed, a metaphor must enter reality. “I’ll tear her eyes out”—this is hatred speaking, hatred at its most harmless. But when the metaphor is realized and the barrier between fantasy, imagination, and reality is eliminated, most people, Lacan tells us, react to the magnitude of the deed: their reaction is “ambivalent, double-edged, a product of the emotional contagion of the crime and the demand for punishment raised by public opinion.”³²

The trail from words to actions, from metaphor to deed, is one that is traveled by “madmen,” “mystics,” and “criminals.” It is the path followed by one for whom the “talking cure” no longer suffices. The psychotic is one who takes things literally. Lacan bases his distinction between neurosis and psychosis on the subject’s relationship to metaphor: the psychotic believes the voices, whereas the neurotic only believes *in* the voices.³³

Psychoanalysis takes place within the scope of the performative. Its very kernel, as Žižek reminds us, is in “the dimension of language as speech *act*,” for is it not “confined to this dimension by the very fact that it is a *talking cure*, an attempt to reach and transform the real of the symptom solely by means of words, i.e., without having recourse to an immediate operation on the body... ?”³⁴

And yet there is some small particle of difference to which we cling, some distinction that we hold on to between words and acts, between representations and “the things themselves.” Furthermore, it is precisely these “impossible” acts that constitute the “real”; hence Lacan’s formulation that the “real is impossible.” For Lacan, suicide is the only act that is more than a recollection, more than an *effect* of truth. It is the one “pure act” that is a deed, not a word. As Žižek demonstrates through the work of the Italian film director Rossellini, suicide is the “impossible” act of freedom beyond the scope of a performative.³⁵

“I’ll tear her eyes out”: metaphor enters reality when the Papin sisters gouge out the eyes of their mistresses. For Freud, the edifice of psychoanalysis was built on his case studies of female hysterics, whose acting out was performed on their own bodies. For Lacan, female paranoiacs, whose language constituted a different syntax, and who acted out their family romances through violent assaults on the bodies of other women, was the cornerstone of his theory.

³² Clement, *Lives and Legends*, p. 73.

³³ Lacan, Jacques. 1982. “God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. Ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. Trans. by Jacqueline Rose. London: Macmillan, pp.137-161.

³⁴ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

If Aimee was “inseparable” from a series of feminine “imagoes” that originated with her mother, her displacements onto other figures of threatening females, Clement argues, were what “probably... allowed her to stop short of murder,” whereas Christine and Lea were two sisters who, “because they were brought up together, never had to face up to the existence of the Other, man.”³⁶ In both of these cases of “*delire a deux*,” there would be found the “clue” that the psychoanalyst would have been looking for—the masculine dimension always present in the paranoiac.”³⁷

Both the French legal prosecutors and the analysts called in to deliver their opinions on the sisters’ sanity made much of Christine Papin’s statement that in another life she believed she had been, or would be, her sister’s husband. Aimee imagined herself being “received as a bridegroom,” who “shall go to see [his] fiancée.”³⁸ Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage would seem to be built on the observations of the dangerous proximity of women to *other* women; and furthermore, of a proximity, closeness, or inseparability *between* certain women—women who repressed their desire for women. Thus the mirror stage, the cornerstone of Lacan’s conception of the formation of (split) subjectivity, is grounded in the heterosexual presumption. If the “proper distance” is the “opposite” of the feminine, “difference,” it would seem, cannot be obtained by two who are alike. In the specular economy of the mirror stage, “same-sex” desire can only be thought of as resemblance—two who are “alike” are terrifying doubles, twinned copies of an ideal (ego). And it was precisely this doubling—the women’s *proximity*—that was theorized as the cause of their aggression.

The theory of slight variation among women—the notion that all women are basically alike, which was so prevalent in the discourses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, sexology, and criminology—would seem to have in some sense been verified by Lacan’s observations of Aimee and Christine and Lea. This particular masculine imaginary not only leaves its trace in Lacan’s mirror stage; it is also reproduced there and perpetuates a heterosexual imperative.

³⁶ Clement, *Lives and Legends*, pp. 73-74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Delire a Deux?

*People are going to try to make [our love] into a “sexualperversion,” but it’s not like that at all. It’s a soul binding. We’re like Jonathan and David in the Bible.***

(Arlene Pralle, Wuornos’s adoptive mother)

Not surprisingly, the “inseparable” bond that Aileen Wuornos had with her lover, Tyria Moore, the woman for whose sake she confessed to the murders, has been implicated as the “cause” of her criminality.¹ Prompted perhaps by her legal advisers, Wuornos has eschewed the label “lesbian” and has insisted that her relationship with Moore was a spiritual bond. But Wuornos has not abandoned her devotion to women. During her incarceration, she has formed another “inseparable” relationship, one that has been represented within the relatively safe confines of a mother-daughter bond.

A born-again Christian who has legally adopted convicted murderer Lee Wuornos, Arlene Pralle fervently believes that in Wuornos she has found her soul sister; the bond between them surpasses any love she has known before. Pralle’s dream—that Wuornos’s appeal will be successful and she will be released to live with Pralle forever on her horse farm northwest of Ocala, Florida—is not likely to be realized. From her intensive-care hospital bed, recovering from a riding injury, Pralle emphasizes that her

¹ Implicitly or explicitly, Wuornos’s lesbianism has been a major concern for the media, the courts, and the criminal and psychiatric “experts.” The question of whether she “hated men,” which is an all-too-obvious euphemism for lesbianism, comes up in every interview. The fact that she is repeatedly labeled the *first* “female” serial killer, when even the same reports acknowledge that this is technically inaccurate, points to the persistent confusion of her sexuality with her criminality. What can be deduced from the substitutions and deletions is that Wuornos is the first “real” female serial killer (i.e., *real* because she fits the male serial killer’s profile more closely than any other woman in history) *because* she is a lesbian. Conversely, because she is a lesbian she has been made to fit the profile of the male serial killer. The feminist, lesbian, and gay communities have not been quick to respond to the obvious homophobia that is running the course of Wuornos’s case. There have, however, been a few good commentaries on this issue. See Lindsay Van Gelder, “Attack of the ‘Killer Lesbians,’” *Ms.*, January/February 1992, pp. 80-82; Victoria A. Brownworth, “Crime and Punishment,” *QW*, October 25, 1992, pp. 24-26; and Donald Suggs, “Did the Media Exploit the ‘Lesbian Serial Killer’ Story?” *Advocate*, March 10, 1992, p. 98. Without any critical commentary, Susan Edmiston reports the FBI agent Robert Ressler’s opinion: “There may be an intrinsic hatred of males here, as well as an identification with male violence which helped push her across the line into what has been considered a ‘male’ crime.” And a Dr. Morall who opines: “You might not expect a woman of clear sexual identity to do this. I see her as a woman whose sexual identity is distorted. If this woman’s makeup is such that she takes pride in being masculine, her motivation would be a psychological challenge to the male—I’m more masculine than you.” Quoted in “The First Woman Serial Killer?” *Glamour*, September 1991, p. 325.

will to live has everything to do with Lee: "Pm the one person Lee's bonded with in her whole life, and without me she'd have nothing."²

Too much closeness? The perfect scene for a "delire a deux"? But Wuornos has not played by the rules. Her "feminine imagoes" are not the targets of her violence. She does not understand how the Symbolic Order works. No condensation, no displacement. Perhaps Aileen Wuornos does not "have" an unconscious, or at least not a paranoid one. "They were going to kill me, I killed them," she says. She will not relinquish her Old Testament judgment, even though she has ostensibly found Jesus. McMahon, her psychologist, says that Wuornos cannot be held accountable for her decision (which she later reversed) to ask for the death sentence. McMahon claims that Wuornos does not understand death, does not grasp that if she were put to death she would not be here anymore. Why, then, did she change her mind and decide that she wanted to live after all? Why is she asking for appeals, fighting for her life, claiming that had anyone been through what she went through "in those woods...with these scum," she would have to conclude that "this woman deserves *nothing* [no punishment]."[56] Perhaps Wuornos knows more about death than most of us do. Maybe she has made a passage *beyond* death and has arrived, ironically, only at the point of death, at a place where she can assume her life.

Initiating the feminist defense of Wuornos, Phyllis Chester stops short of proclaiming Wuornos the leader of a "feminist liberation army," but she admits to identifying with her deeply, understanding what motivated her actions. The feminist case for Wuornos's appeal, however, will not proceed on these terms, will not pursue the question "What would it mean if women started to defend themselves?"[57] Rather, the case is being made for her as a deeply disturbed victim of sexual abuse. The appeal will rest on the very pathology that reproduces the social conditions in which Aileen Wuornos performed her desperate actions.

Women may kill their children in the throes of postpartum depression; they may kill their lovers or husbands in fits of jealous passion. Sometimes, recent evidence has begun to allow, women kill their batterers, occasionally when they are soundly sleeping. In a few rare cases, these women have even been acquitted, when "battered women's syndrome" can be effectively diagnosed. Passion and/or pathology have been the key historical constructs for explaining, and containing, women's aggression. Women like Aileen Wuornos are not supposed to exist.

Wuornos is undoubtedly a victim of years of sexual abuse. Leo Pittman, Wuornos's father, was a habitual sex offender who hanged himself in prison where he was serving time for raping a seven-year-old girl. In 1969, the year of her father's suicide, Wuornos was sent by her grandparents to a home for unwed mothers, where she was forced to

² Arlene Pralle, quoted in MacNamara, "Kiss and Kill," p. 106. 56. Aileen Wuornos, "Dateline NBC," November 10, 1992, p. 12. 57. Phyllis Chester, quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1991, p. E3.

give up the child that she claimed was conceived in a rape. At the age of fourteen, Wuornos began prostituting. Up to this point, Wuornos's story is tragically ordinary.

Despite the evidence that "Dateline's" interviewers have uncovered, which all but confirms Wuornos's story that Richard Mallory, her first victim, was a habitual and violent sex offender, this "truth" is not going to set Wuornos free. No amount of "evidence" has the power to counter the systematic violence of white racist patriarchy. As Victoria Brownworth reminds us:

Over 84 percent of the men and women on Death Row were convicted of killing white victims—regardless of the race of the perpetrator. The majority were also convicted of killing men. In case after case before the US Supreme Court, it has been determined that the "value" society places on the victim is the factor that determines sentencing.³

Sexualized trauma, in particular, is an ineffective defense. Traumas, we believe, are in the past; when these histories are acted out in the present, "time" itself undergoes a radical disruption. The subject who repeats "them might win some sympathy, but the actions themselves are condemned, and she pays the penalty for upsetting the fiction of a chronological procession.

Aileen Wuornos is "guilty" under the law; but she refuses to enact the "guilt" that secures the fiction of law's justice. She confesses to the acts but is still unrepentant. And although we might find her incredible when she insists that her "past" has nothing to do with the crimes she has committed,⁴ there is something fascinating, and unnerving, in her implacable self-defense, her disregard for a linear narrative of a life's trajectory that begins with victimization and ends in retaliation.

By refusing to accede to the narrative of her "traumatic past," Aileen Wuornos repudiates not just a personal history but also the story of "vengeance," with its ever-threatening promise of repetition, that instigates the sacrificial crisis. She will not, in short, identify herself as man's symptom. Wuornos is caught between the logic of the law, which, as Peggy Phelan points out, "seeks to draw a line between the truth of the real and the fiction of the lie," and the psychoanalytic discourse of the symptom, "whose logic operates within the always unbalanced economies of displacement, disavowal, and

³ Brownworth, "Crime and Punishment," p. 27.

⁴ Wuornos, "Dateline NBC," August 25, 1992, p. 10. Under pressure from Gillen, Wuornos admits that she "didn't like [her] childhood," but that she "didn't dwell on it. It didn't mess [her] life up." I am not trying to argue that Wuornos, or anyone, can just "take [their] past and...[throw] it in the river." But what is alarming in this case is how the "trauma theory" has been swiftly mobilized to *condemn* her. While Wuornos has insisted all along that in *each* incident she was being raped or threatened (two of the men did rape her; five tried, she said), the impact of evidence about the first "victim," Richard Mallory, concerning his history of sexual assault has served to fuel the theory that Wuornos was repeating an early trauma. Even those who seem to agree that Mallory probably was raping her have simply substituted the Mallory rape for an earlier sexual violation— by her father, grandfather, brother, or the unidentified man who got her pregnant when she was fourteen. Wuornos is intelligent enough to surmise that the trauma theory is not working in her defense.

the unconscious yes.”⁵ The only chance she seems to have is to appeal to her traumatic past. If the appellate courts can be convinced that Wuornos’s actions are attributable to “post-traumatic shock syndrome,” she may stand a chance of being delivered from death. This appeal, however, will not effect a decision that the phantasmatic repetition of her sexual abuse justifies her claim to self-defense. On the contrary, it will even more powerfully assert that Wuornos’s perception of a “clear and present danger” was not *real*.

Finally, it is the question of what is being *repeated* that is at stake here. Wuornos killed not once, not twice, but *seven* times. She killed serially; serial killers repeat: she is a serial killer. The law will undoubtedly prefer witnessing her wounds opening, closing, reopening, reclosing—the beat, beat, beating of her personal, tragic trauma—to recognizing a cultural, collective trauma, a systematic, normative violence in which straight, white, middle-aged “everymen” repetitively assume their right of access to women’s bodies. Wuornos knows this: “I say it’s the principle,” she says, “they say it’s the number. Self-defense is self-defense, I don’t care how many times it is.”⁶

We all know how it is supposed to work: “the exchange of women” derives from guilt; and their guilt—women’s guilt—comes from the transgression of this exchange... *The woman must circulate, not put into circulation*”(author’s emphasis).⁷ As an “unrepentant” prostitute, Wuornos circulated herself; and as a lesbian, she simultaneously insisted on controlling the terms of that exchange. The historical conflation of the prostitute and the lesbian, both of whom have been signified in patriarchy under the sign of transgressive sexuality,⁸ returns to haunt a masculine commerce in the figure of Aileen Wuornos. By occupying *both* positions simultaneously, Wuornos has forced a recognition of this paradoxical commerce, in which the “woman” is phantasmatically constructed as an object that must submit to its status as a “real” object of exchange while failing to disclose the object’s function as a cipher that holds open a space for the renewal of male subjectivity.

What happens when a woman refuses to be the symptom of man? It is an impossible position to occupy within this sociosymbolic order. And yet Wuornos has exceeded the representational. She bears witness to that unseen other/scene—the mimetic rivalry between men acted out on the bodies of women. And it is for making this homosocial order visible, for calling its terms to account, that Aileen Wuornos waits on death row.

⁵ Peggy Phelan, “Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: Law, Psychoanalysis, and Sexual/ized Rumors” (Paper delivered at the 108th Convention of the Modern Language Association of America, New York, December 30, 1992).

⁶ Broomfield documentary.

⁷ Cixous and Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 53.

⁸ The association between lesbians and prostitutes, and the tendency of the judicial system to conflate them, is discussed by Joan Nestle in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1987) and by Ruthann Robson in *Lesbian (Out)law: Survival under the Rule of Law* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1992).

Notes

Eds' Note: Aileen Wuomos was executed on October 9,2002. She was the tenth woman executed in the U.S. since capital punishment resumed in 1977. Oklahoma has put three women to death; Florida and Texas have executed two each. (From *The New York Times* 10/10/02.)

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Surpassing the word
Aileen Wuornos
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