

A Feminist Reconsideration of the Story of Aileen Wuornos  
*Hidden in the Shadows of the Media*



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One of the main reasons I so desperately want to be heard and trusted...is to help 100<sup>(s)</sup> [*sic*] of other Women, incarcerated by merely defending themselves from a violent traumatized attack by some sick creep who wound up dead once they did. But then the sick ass system, wanted to side/with [*sic*] the violence the man incurred, simply because he's the same sex "Male"...And here we have a women [*sic*] who was not only physically damaged by a rape as well as mentally, but again "Ravished" by a male chovinist [*sic*] sick ass court system, through deception from the real facts of what really occurred here...

— Written by Aileen Wuornos on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1994  
(Kester et al., 2012: 81)

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# Foreword

This thesis reconsiders the dominant narrative of Aileen Wuornos, a woman sentenced to death for killing six white middle-aged men from 1989 to 1990. Her story is infamous because of the question raised: was miss Wuornos a cold-blooded killer acting out of hate against men, or was she acting in self-defense? In order to reconsider the historical discourse in which she is mostly considered as a cold-blooded killer and man-hating lesbian, I am going to take a closer look at the media representation during, before, and after her trial. In deciding what topic I wanted research and write about, my first decision was that I wanted to incorporate my internship with my thesis. I did my three-month internship as a production-assistant at a well-known Dutch television program and wrote a report on the process of representation behind and in front of the cameras. During the internship, my interest grew stronger with questions about why certain topics did not make the news, how media is sensationalized and about who is in front of the cameras talking about a certain topic. This interest resulted in my decision to incorporate media as well as media representation within this thesis. Why did I want to write my thesis about Aileen? Because she is, in my opinion, the embodiment of injustice against deviant sexualities, deviant whiteness, deviant professions and deviant performance of femininity. As I was conducting research and writing the thesis I was appalled by the lack of juridical effort and the impact of media representation on female criminality. I was even more eager to shed a different light on Aileen's story, and to focus on what she said and felt while her actions, voice and body were being blackguarded from all sides.

I want to thank the people involved in writing this thesis, first and foremost my supervisor. For his support of my ideas, his critical feedback and his communication in these unforeseen circumstances of social distancing in times of corona. On top of that, I want to thank the second reader for taking the time to assess and read my words. Lastly, I would like to thank Utrecht University for their willingness to let students create a thesis that they themselves feel passionate about.

Thank you.

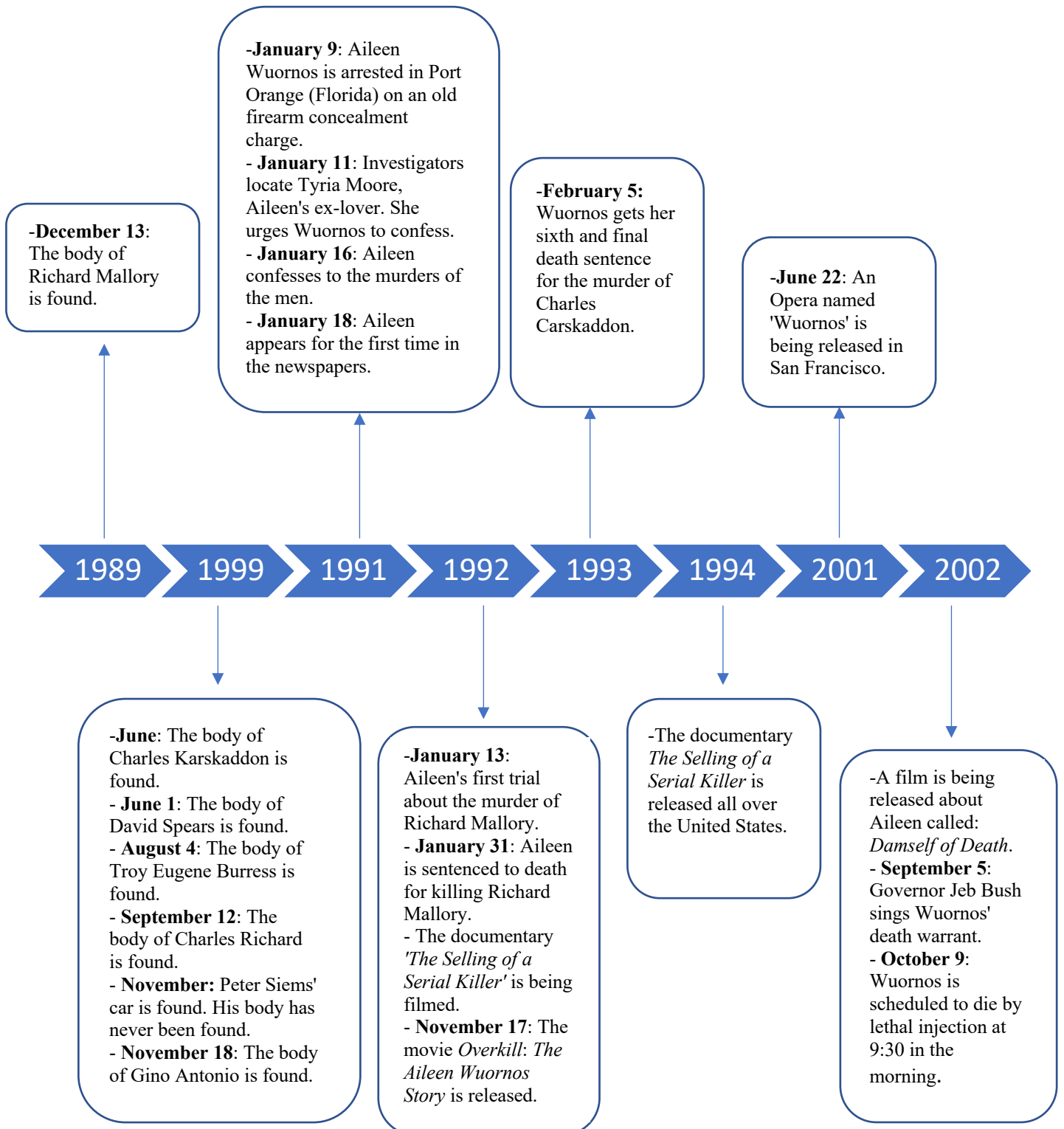
Ingrid Bremmers

—26-06-2020, Amsterdam

# Summary

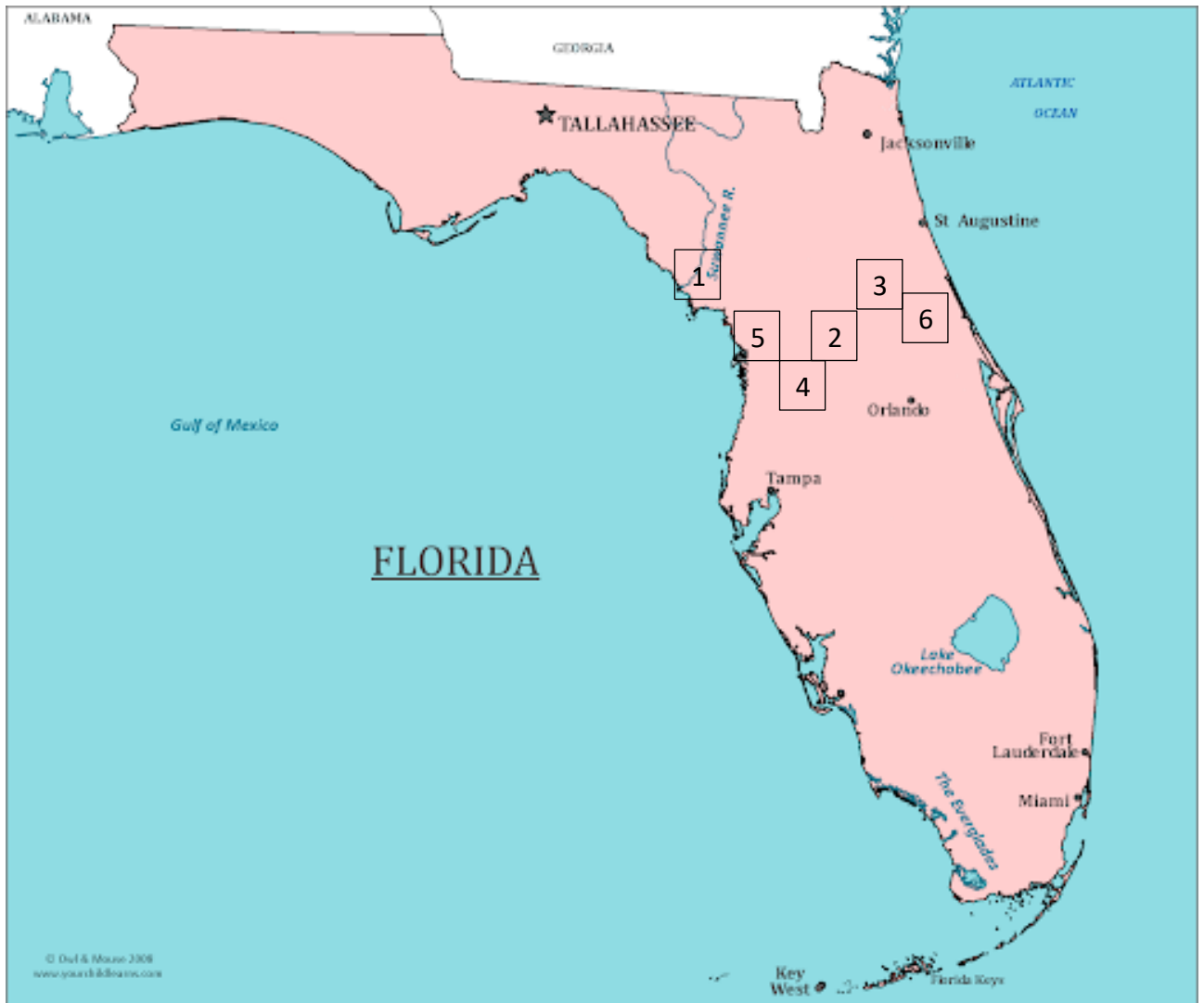
Aileen Carol Wuornos, a woman who confessed to killing seven white middle-aged men in 1989 and 1990, was executed in the state of Florida on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2002. This thesis is going to provide an in-depth case study of how she was represented in the media from the moment she was arrested in 1991, to the moment she died. It is going to show that the historical dominant discourse that surrounded Aileen at the time, that of being a cold-blooded lesbian prostitute who kills men out of hate, should be reconsidered. On the basis of a critical discourse analysis of newspapers and a documentary, the research concludes that the power of creating 'truthful' knowledge lied in the hands of institutions. These male-dominated institutions labeled her non-normative behavior indirectly as challenging the power structures and social norms of femininity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. On top of that, the media spectacle that was created discursively punished her by making her a subject of becoming, unbecoming and gender regulation. Meaning that as a white lesbian prostitute who killed she 'unbecame' white, unbecame human and unbecame female in the eyes of journalists and the general public. Consequently, based on speculation and prejudice, she 'became' a lesbian because of her 'hate for men' and 'masculine gender performance'. Besides the media analysis, this historical analysis exposes that feminists did not do enough to stop her from being reduced to the 'victim' of heterosexual patriarchy. Instead, feminist discourse should have tried to voice her subjectivity and narrative in order to impact the dominant media discourse. On top of that, feminists should have advocated that her agency was part of the resistance against the traditional objectification and victimization of women and sex workers. In researching her own words, she critiqued the victimization, the becoming and unbecoming, and therefore the dominant juridical, feminist and media discourse. This case study shows that the shadows of the media are well hidden, but that a reconsideration of the historical discourse is needed to uncover her success in failure. Turning failure into success in the name of shadow feminism.

# Timeline of the events in the Aileen Wuornos case<sup>1</sup>





## Map of the killings<sup>2</sup>



1. The place where the body of Gino Antonio was found on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1990.
2. The place where the body of Charles Richard Humphreys was found on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1990.
3. The place where the body of Troy Eugene Burress was found on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1990.
4. The place where the body of Charles Karskaddon was found in June 1990.
5. The place where the body of David Spears was found on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1990.
6. The place where the body of Richard Mallory was found on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1989.

# Introduction into the dominant narrative of Aileen Wuornos

When the clock strikes 9:47 on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, Aileen Wuornos takes her last breath on this earth. She dies at the age of forty-six by lethal injection after being on death row for ten years in the state of Florida. Leading up to her execution, she was labeled by the newspapers as “the nation’s first female serial killer” (Haire, 24 Jan. 1991: 1B), the “female Ted Bundy” (Lavin et al., 18 Jan. 1991: 1B), the “lesbian serial killer” (Haire, 7 March. 1991: 1B), a “vengeful man-hater” (Brazil, 8 Dec. 1991: 23A), the “Damsel of Death” (Long, 14 Dec. 1991: 13A), and after receiving multiple death penalties she was also labeled a “predatory prostitute” (Lavin, 16 Jan. 1992: 1B). Her trial became a media spectacle, in which book writers, producers and even the police wanted to make profit out of her (Kester et al., 2012: 86), seemingly being the first female serial killer in the United States<sup>3</sup>. Before she went to trial, “Wuornos was entitled to the presumption of innocence. She was, instead, punished before her first trial” (Chesler, 1993: 959). Professor of women’s studies Phyllis Chesler hereby directly links the trial of Aileen to the notion of trial by media. The latter is defined by criminologists Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin as “a dynamic, impact-driven, news media-led process by which individuals—who may or may not be publicly known—are tried and sentenced in the ‘court of public opinion’” (Greer et al., 2011: 29). The labels used to describe Wuornos that continuously returned as newspaper titles or within the articles between 1991 and 2002, were that of ‘lesbian’ and ‘prostitute’. The words ‘prostitute’ and ‘prostitution’ are only used within this thesis when they are being mentioned within a quote or when referring to the seemingly fixed labels. In other moments, to “reduce the stigma attached to the label” (Kissil et al., 2010: 3) the words sex-worker or sex work are used. By both being described a ‘lesbian’ and ‘prostitute’ who was convicted of murdering “six white middle-aged men” (Russo, 2001: 33), the deviance of these marginalized groups was confirmed (Russo, 2001: 33). She crossed the line of power by using violence against men, therefore being sensationalized and vilified within the media, and she became “a symbol of fear and terror” (Russo, 2001: 33). As she was part of a minority within society, the constant returning of the dismissive tone reflects what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai would call the “fear of small numbers”<sup>4</sup> (2006). This fear was initiated by the media and authorities but was never questioned during and before her trial. Only in 2000, two years before her execution, attorney Joseph

Hobson concluded that Aileen ‘Lee’ Wuornos, essentially “had no representation” (Squires, 18 Apr. 2000: 1). The people that did speak out for her such as Arlene Pralle (her adoption mother) and her attorney Steve Glazer, seemed to be in it for money purposes. She desperately tried to speak out, but she was not heard or trusted because she was too late: the media and authorities seemed to be the ones being ‘truthful’ and heard. Therefore, “through her representation Wuornos was essentially convicted twice: once for her crimes she committed and again for the threat she posed to the dominant culture” (Note, 2004; 7). It is the historically existing politics of representation, that this case study is going to question. The purpose is not at all to plead her innocence, instead this research deconstructs that fixed media spectacle that Aileen Wuornos was framed to be. It provides a historical analysis of the media representation between 1991 and 2002 in order for a critical feminist analysis and reconsideration of the dominant discourse. An analysis that will be oriented “on deconstructing that set relation between signifier and signified<sup>5</sup>, on opening it up and making it fluid again, on establishing new relations” (Buikema, 2009: 81). To deconstruct this historical discourse, a critical discourse analysis (Hall, 2013) will be conducted.

The main question that is going to be answered throughout this research is: what subjectivity and discourse of Aileen Wuornos emerge when taking a critical feminist approach to deconstruct the dominant media representations that circulated between 1991 and 2002? The first sub-question that will help operationalize the main question is: how do the documentary *The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1994) and Florida newspapers between 1991 and 2002 construct media representations of Aileen Wuornos? To support the analysis, this research draws on concepts from media studies as well as gender studies: mediated construction of reality (Hepp et al., 2016), imagined violence (Halberstam, 1993), *vertretung* and *darstellung* (Spivak, 1990). A critical discourse analysis on the politics of representation of Aileen Wuornos also demands an intersectional analysis. The next sub-question is: how did feminists and feminist discourse at the time (1991-2002) respond to dominant media representations of Aileen Wuornos? This question will be answered taking cues from the concepts of gender regulation (Butler, 2004) and gender transgression (Butler, 2004). The final sub-question is: how do the processes of (un)becoming, subjectivity and shadow feminism recover the voice and body of Aileen Wuornos? Model of subjectivity (Morrissey, 2003) and shadow feminism (Halberstam, 2011) are considered major concepts in answering this final sub-question. It will show the resistance of the body, the recovering of the voice and body, and therefore a reconsideration of the story.

This case study has both social as well as academic relevance. The academic relevance can be found within different disciplines varying from media studies to feminist studies, and from law to criminology. As criminologist Elizabeth A. Gurian said in 2011: “Unlike with male serial murderers, few researchers have studied the female serial murderer in great depth” (Gurian, 2011: 28). Or as scholar Frances Heidensohn argued: “There has been comparatively little work which has looked at media representations of deviant women or deployed the approaches of contemporary cultural studies to do so...” (Heidensohn, 2012: 131). Besides criminology, this study is in line with research on women and law by authors such as Patricia Easteal as it contributes “to the (re)framing of social understandings and responses” of female violence (Easteal et al., 2015: 39). On top of that, this study is vastly relevant to feminist (media) studies. Feminist scholar Kyra Pearson argues that the case of Wuornos “illustrates the need to expand rhetorical resources that make female violence and victimage intelligible” (Pearson, 2007: 256). Also, the thesis is in line with professor Ann Russo, whom called for the refusal of the “construction of ‘deserving victims’ whose disappearances and deaths are unworthy of social urgency and outrage. And we must publicly defend the right of women, all women” (Russo, 2001: 56). Lastly, there is an urgent social relevance that is mostly shown by statements like “most people could not understand how a prostitute could be raped” (Hart, 2002: 68). By the questions of “what is the value of a woman’s life?” (Russo, 2001: 31), or “who counts as the human?” (Butler, 2004: 17), this particular case study of Aileen Wuornos tries to point out the social relevance in listening to one’s story, one’s subjectivity, in order to never take a life again based on biases, misrepresentation and prejudice against someone with a non-normative femininity, sexuality, class or profession.

In sum, this case study is going to focus on a reconsideration, a recovering and a re-telling of the story of Aileen Wuornos. By doing a critical discourse analysis and having findings speak back to media and gender studies, this research hopes to step away from the fixed polemic historical discourse and diversifying it through analyzing it through different registers. The feminist motivations behind this case study is to shed light on how media and thus also language can preserve heterosexual patriarchy, but also show that the resistance of one body and one voice can expose power “as empowerment (potential)”, and not only as entrapment (Braidotti, 2019: 33). Hence, Aileen had the same feminist motivation as this case study: to bring attention to inequality based on class, gender and sexuality within society and within multiple (academic) disciplines such as law and media discourses. Based on new perspectives on the existing dominant discourse, this new interpretation of the story of Aileen tries to step

away from the shadows of the media<sup>6</sup> and into shadow feminism. In order to reconsider the existing dominant discourse and to come to shadow feminism, the seven steps of the analysis and how the data was collected are discussed in the first two chapters. After that, the point of departure is analyzing the data that was retrieved from the empirical research. The data will be critically analyzed by answering the first six questions of the critical discourse analysis. In chapter four, the initial dominant response from feminists on the media representation is going to be discussed. The last question of the critical discourse analysis is answered in the fifth main chapter of the thesis, as it focuses on a reconsideration of the dominant narrative by analyzing Aileen Wuornos' own subjectivity and taking a critical feminist approach to deconstruct the dominant media representations and initial feminist response. The last step of the critical discourse analysis is at the same time the common thread throughout this case study: acknowledgement that a different discourse will arise at a later historical moment (Hall, 2013: 30-31). Therefore, the critical discourse analysis (Hall, 2013: 30-31) contributes to the structure of the thesis. An important note is that this thesis is bringing theory into dialogue with the gathered information and that the academic concepts are interwoven in the text in order to invigorate the findings and to come to the conclusion. The case study is going to end with an urgent plea for future research and societal focus on power relations, female criminality, victimization, gender regulation, classism, sex workers and law. In short, this case study incorporates different scientific discourses to work together in the aim of justice.

## **1. Critical discourse analysis**

Within feminist media studies, there is the underlying tenet “that mainstream mass media function through dissemination, repetition, and support of central ideas that are accepted by the culture in which the medium under examination is produced” (McIntosh et al., 2014: 266-267). As pointed out before, these central ideas might be true within a specific historical context, but they are not fixed (Hall, 2013: 31). By conducting a critical discourse analysis (Hall, 2013: 30-31) this research seeks to contribute “to our understanding of the operations of power within mediated texts” (McIntosh et al., 2014: 267). Drawing on Hall's approach to the critical discourse analysis (Hall, 2013: 30-31), there are seven questions that are being asked while watching the documentary *The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1994), while reading the newspaper articles about Aileen between 1991 and 2002, and while also reading the book called *Dear Dawn: Aileen Wuornos in her own words* (2012). The first question is: what are the statements or images that provide us with knowledge about Aileen Wuornos? To answer this first question there is a main focus on the constant reappearing of a dismissive tone used to describe Aileen

in words and images. Words and images that are used in the newspapers as well as the documentary. Secondly, what are the implicit and explicit rules that prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and exclude other ways? Hereby, the statements that were used to describe Aileen point directly at societal norms and therefore also implicit and explicit rules. Thirdly, what is sayable and thinkable about Aileen within a particular moment or context? What is taboo? This third question of the critical discourse analysis points directly at how the power relations are at play, how *darstellung* is operationalized. What is sayable points at the power relations as most statements that are not in line with the statements made by authority, are considered taboo. Fourthly, what attributes do we expect Aileen to have given the knowledge about her? The knowledge that was retrieved from the statements about her did not only provide knowledge about her life, it also gave a lot of information about her assumed behavior. Fifthly, how did the knowledge get its authority? In other words, who made sure this was seen as truthful? The sixth question is: how do institutions deal with Aileen? Whose behavior is being regulated and who's not? The fifth and sixth question point again at the power relations, but instead of focusing on how they operate, these questions focus on by whom her fate was controlled. These first six questions will be answered in the third chapter on news discourse, when the media research that was conducted shows the power relations and construction of the dominant narrative.

## **2. Data collection method**

I have made several decisions in selecting the newspaper articles. The first decision was based on the location of the murders. The murders and trials took place within the state of Florida (see the map on page 8), the United States of America. As this research is focusing on the forming of the public opinion and its impact on the trial, the newspapers that are selected are solely based in Florida. However, with the aim of avoiding similarity, the three selected newspapers do not operate in the same area: *The Miami Herald* is located in Doral, *The Orlando Sentinel* is based in Orlando and the headquarters of *Tampa Bay Times* can be found within the city of St. Petersburg (Florida). According to an online archive<sup>7</sup>, these newspapers are the ones with the most matches on Aileen Wuornos in 1991 and 1992. At that time, she was at the center of a new media spectacle: entertainment and spectacle entered into the domains of politics and transformed Aileen's life into an enterprise (Kellner, 2003: 4). All three newspapers were at the base of the enterprise impacting that public opinion and historical discourse. Another decision that was made before collecting the articles was to only focus on a specific time period. The time period starts on the day she was first mentioned within the newspapers, on January

18<sup>th</sup> 1991, until her execution on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2002. This critical analysis thus only focuses on the historical discourse while she was alive. Therefore, the documentaries, movies, books and newspaper articles that were released or published after the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, will not be used to take Aileen's story into (re-) consideration. On top of that, the decision has been made to focus more specifically on the newspapers from 1991 and 1992. The newspapers during those two years have created the media spectacle around Aileen and have impacted the trial and triggered the overall framing of Aileen Wuornos the most. Therefore, the number of articles selected these two years was different from the other years. Namely, thirty articles have been selected in both 1991 and 1992, ten from each newspaper each year. After 1992, when she had received multiple death penalties, two articles have been selected per newspaper each year, coming to six articles per year. However, sometimes she was not mentioned at all one year or only when the movie *Overkill* or a documentary was being broadcasted on television, these latter short announcements were not selected. This resulted in sometimes selecting less than two articles per newspaper in for example 1997. In the end, it all resulted in a total selection of 110 articles. All articles were selected based on their news coverage, meaning that when selecting the articles, they should contain different news, or a slightly different approach to the news than the other article had. For example, if one article talked about her execution from the standpoint of the family of the victims, another newspaper was selected when they also talked about her execution but then from a standpoint of the defense attorney or Arlene Pralle, her adoption mother. Unfortunately, many newspapers covered the same news and used the same resources. But even though the news could be completely the same, the labels used to describe Aileen differed from author to author, and from newspaper to newspaper. On top of that, the articles were selected if they frequently used labels such as 'lesbian' and 'prostitute' in their articles or titles when talking about Aileen.

To come closer to supplanting the existing historical discourse, that was mostly fixed and framed by the newspapers, the documentary *The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1994) that was produced by Nick Broomfield and the book *Dear Dawn: Aileen Wuornos in her own words* (2012), were selected to go against the mainstream dominant discourse. Even though the book was published in 2012, the letters that the book contains are written by Aileen Wuornos during the same time period (from 1991 to 2002). The letters show that she tried to go against what the media had made society to believe of her. Or as Aileen wrote herself on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1992: "Society apparently doesnt [*sic*] understand this [rape of a woman working as sex worker], nor cares to, expecially [*sic*] if you're a hooker. There [*sic*] allowed to treat you like this, and also kill you..." (Kester et al., 2012: 40). What leads to asking how she was portrayed.

What were statements made about her? Who had the authority to tell ‘the truth’? How do the documentary *The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1994) and Florida newspapers between 1991 and 2002 contribute to constructing the media representation of Aileen Wuornos?

### **3. The dominant media representation of Aileen Wuornos**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1991, the day that Aileen Wuornos first appeared in the headlines of the newspapers, her name and body were immediately blackguarded. Her voice was immediately silenced. Her body became questionable of living, vulnerable in the unequal relation between established authority and marginalized body. On the first day of being in the news she was named a “drifter” (Long, 18 Jan. 1991: 1A), a “troubled woman” (Rozsa et al., 18 Jan. 1991: 5A), and “the female Ted Bundy” (Lavin et al., 18 Jan. 1991: 1B). She was deemed a man-hater by statements such as “I got the impression she wasn’t real fond of men” (Rozsa et al., 18 Jan. 1991: 5A). Framing, which involves the act of persuasion, constructed a believed ‘reality’ about Aileen based on stereotypes, prejudice and comparisons to other serial killers, women and sex workers. The process of framing has been defined by professor in media studies Srinivas Melkote as “the ways in which news media organize, treat and present issues, events and news objects such as news makers” (Melkote, 2009: 549). That first month, framing was even more present: every other day there was an article about her describing her with new labels that contributed to othering. Othering is a process “through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship” (Cragg, 1998: 61). And it “thus sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group” (Brons: 2015: 70). Wuornos is “the nation’s first female serial killer” (Haire, 24 Jan. 1991: 1B), a “prostitute and transient” (*The Miami Herald*, 24 Jan. 1991: 1B) and a “lesbian” (Long, 31 Jan. 1991: 5B). All these mentioned labels made her fit the inferior out-group based on ‘being different’ from what is considered normal. The particularly imbalanced framing of othering is achieved through placing her numerous of times on the front page, through the tone of the presentation which in this case is belittling, the mentioned labels and the visual effects (Parenti, 1986: 220). Visually she was framed by the numerous pictures of her showing her teeth in the courtroom<sup>8</sup>, therefore her anger, her unfemininity. In this crucial first month in the media, Aileen was never interviewed herself and she was constantly re-presented (*darstellung*) in a distorted way. *Darstellung*, re-presentation that “can be understood as presenting again (Fang, 2016: 11) or “as portrayal” (Ponzanesi, 2009: 91), was in this case constantly at play due to the framing with words, images and sources that marginalized her. Another example of how she was re-presented comes from a quote by her public defender Ray Cass who told *The Miami Herald* that Wuornos is a “genuine act of



pity” (29 Jan. 1991: 2B). With this comment, Ray Cass already points at the question of who has the authority, who has the ability to speak and who is silenced in this process since pity is the complete opposite of empathy. Where empathy implies a feeling based on equality, pity “assumes the one pitying holds the power over the pitied” (Balaji, 2011: 51), directly pointing to the feeling of pity as a process of othering. As professor in communication studies Murali Balaji pointed out: “we tend to pity them when they do not share anything in common with us, at least in mediated representations” (Balaji, 2011: 51). A deviant sexuality and profession are in this case central to how pity can be conceptualized and enacted.

The media did also make statements about Aileen’s personality as having an “icy interior”, behaving “arrogantly” and walking around “with fiery eyes” (Lancaster, 27 Aug. 1992: B4). By stating all this, the attributes she would have in the eye of the public, would be that of an angry, careless, cruel, greedy and vengeful killer. This latter sentence can only end with the word ‘killer’: her depiction as a woman and human being disappeared from the statements about her. Placing Aileen in the inferior out-group, as she was not adhering to the social norms of womanhood and being human. On top of that, she was labeled white trash, marginalizing her as a ‘poor white’ whose behavior, appearance and lifestyle does not “conform to dominant white culture” (Note, 2004: 6). Placing her outside of the dominant understanding of hegemonic femininity. Also, the characteristics that the media insinuated her to have “constitute a refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination and therefore are threatening to male dominance” (Schippers, 2007: 95). Sociologist Mimi Schippers continued that these deviant characteristics, these pariah femininities, also “constitute a refusal to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by gender hegemony” (Schippers, 2007: 95). The women who embody these pariah femininities, are stigmatized, sanctioned and undesirable (Schippers, 2007: 95), only based on the spread of labels, visuals and the sensationalized story. The sensationalized anger and violent characteristic of Aileen that goes against hegemonic masculinity can be called “imagined violence” (Halberstam, 1993: 199). Imagined violence “is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from ‘the wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality and the wrong gender’” (Halberstam, 1993: 199). Complicating the assumed established and fixed “relationship between women and passivity<sup>9</sup>” (Halberstam, 1993: 199).

As Aileen’s femininity has been called into question during the first month after her first appearance in the newspapers, the response from her adoption mother Arlene Pralle and her childhood friend Dawn Botkins both become inserted in the discourse too late. They tried to go against what has been said already, by stating that she is a “kind woman” (*Tampa Bay*

*Times*, 27 Feb. 1991: 1B), a “deeply religious woman” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 27 Feb. 1991: 1B) and that “she had a good side” (Lavin et al., 2 June. 1991: 5B). Based on the media representations and the sayings by Arlene Pralle and Dawn Botkins that were considered unthinkable and taboo in this particular historical context, Aileen’s femininity was definitely not considered a normative femininity. Thus, this case study disagrees with what author Camilla Griggers said in 1995: “the lesbian serial killer is not an aberration of femininity, but that it signs a new symptomatology of ‘normative’ femininity which we see emerging in postmodernity” (Griggers, 1995: 163). With this inside we can argue that the media representation constructed her as the other, as anything but ‘normal’ compared to normative society.

### **3.1 Intersecting categories and rules**

Being labeled a female serial killer, prostitute and lesbian, there were implicit and explicit rules about how Aileen Wuornos was talked about. Firstly, by using the word ‘woman’, the societal expectation about Aileen is that she is feminine. The unspoken rules and assumptions in this case are that she needs to be gentle with men, not strong, and definitely not outspoken. But the media representation denies talking about her as if she is a woman, she is icy and husky, therefore cannot be a woman. Secondly, how can a woman be a serial killer? This question is one of the first questions journalists asked within their articles the first week after her arrest. The dominant expectation is that a serial killer is a man, otherwise how can the person be categorized as a serial killer? Already on the first day this is answered in the newspapers. “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. In a way, she’s exploiting men. It gives her a great deal of satisfaction if she can overpower these men. In this case, the motivations are very similar”, said professor of criminal justice James Alan Fox (Haire et al., 18 Jan. 1991: D12). The rule that serial killers are men is therefore broken and because it is not accepted that a woman may become a serial killer, Aileen became rendered a sub-woman. Thirdly, throughout all the newspaper articles and even in the documentary, it feels as though sex workers are less worthy to be human and to be saved from a death penalty. Like her defense attorney asked the potential jurors before the trial: “Do you believe a prostitute can be raped?” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 14 Jan. 1992: 6B). Aileen defended herself by saying that she was working as a sex worker who had experienced a lot of violence throughout the years. “I am no serial killer. What I was, was a prostitute” (Lavin, 1 Feb. 1992: 8B). She did not understand, that by saying she was a sex worker, it

definitely not helped to get the jurors on her side because of the process of othering: none of the jurors claimed to have any experience in and with sex work, and distanced themselves from the profession by sayings such as “there seems to be a demand for it” (*The Miami Herald*, 14 Jan. 1992: 4B). Professor of English Lynda Hart concluded in her book *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (1994) that “prostitutes in a patriarchy are both necessary and utterly dispensable. Usually they are the prey, not the predators” (Hart, 2002: 69). Aileen mentioned the position within society of sex workers again in a letter to Dawn Botkins in June 1993: “Like havin [*sic*] “Sex” is such a higher crime then the rapist and murder’s [*sic*] was. I am so sick of them downin [*sic*] prostitutes as major criminals, worthy of death, just because of sex. Like I’ve said before. “We all Fuck!” (Kester et al., 2012: 67). Lastly, the word lesbian functions as a form of stigmatization. Every time, which is a lot of times, the word lesbian is used within an article, it is in combination with serial killer and man-hater. Putting out the message that “lesbians hate men and hate them enough to kill them” (Froelich, 4 Aug. 1992: 2D). Even in the documentary, a bartender at the bar that Wuornos visited a couple of times before her arrest, said: “She was a flat cracker [a lesbian] so nobody in here tried to piss her off.” Again, pointing at the aggressiveness of Aileen.

All the mentioned rules show intersecting patterns of how Aileen is being positioned in multiple categories. The socially constituted categories show that Aileen was caught in the system of oppression based on class and sexuality, and that the superior groups which she would initially be considered a part of based on her whiteness, she was now considered the inferior out-group. On top of that, her profession of working as a sex worker assigned her to a lower status within society, based on “the criminalization of prostitution” (Lucas, 1994: 47). The mainstream legal and media discourses in the case of Aileen Wuornos inform feminist studies that sex workers and lesbians, are positioned within these discourses as overturning “the conservative and dominant hegemonic viewpoints” (Morrissey, 2003: 64). Ann Russo, a feminist scholar, continued on Aileen’s labels of lesbian and prostitute: “By defining lesbians and women working in prostitution as social outcasts, the media constructs them as legitimate targets of violence, which in turn reinforces social hierarchies” (Russo, 2001: 32). On top of that, by labelling Aileen Wuornos as a greedy and bad female serial killer, suggests that she “was not a human woman but a personification of evil. Understanding of human female criminal agency therefore remains non-existent” (Morrissey, 2003: 34). The intersection between sexuality and class, becomes even more apparent when she is seen as white trash. The intersection of these inferior out-group categories is constantly repeated by the ones in authority. However, the intersecting identities did not “dramatize society’s conflicts” (Kellner,

2003: 94) around class, sex work, gender and sexuality. This is in stark contrast with what American academic Douglas Kellner wrote about the trial of O.J. Simpson in 1995: “The O.J. Simpson murder case...dramatized society’s conflicts around race, gender, class, and celebrity and demonstrated that contemporary US politics was being fragmented into what became known as ‘identity politics’” (Kellner, 2003: 94). Instead, the case of Aileen Wuornos shows that the United States politics was not as concerned about people that inhabited only inferior out-groups and the impact on the outcome of the trial thus differs based on which categories intersect.

### 3.2 Regulation of ‘truthful’ knowledge

While researching the labels, it was found that out of all the journalists that had written an article in their name, 79% were male whereas only 21% was female<sup>10</sup>. In the beginning stage of framing, most writers were male, only after Aileen had received the death penalty multiple times, female journalists started writing about the case. Most of them continued to use the already existing labels about her. Another major contribution to the early stages of framing comes from the police officers involved in the case. All six officials cited are identified as male. For example, Bruce Munster, the Marion County Sheriff, called her a “predator” (Brazil, 8 Dec. 1991: A23). Or the former Ocala sheriff Steve Binegar said “[Wuornos] is a pathetic creature” (Long, 6 Oct. 2002: 2B) and Robert Douglas, a Marion County Sheriff, said in January 1991: “Her hating men, that’s what seems to be the only motive for the killings” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 20 Jan. 1991: 8B). The latter motivation for the killings is a type of manipulation of the public opinion that psychologist Irwin P. Levin called “goal framing, in which the goal of an action or behavior is framed” (Levin et al., 1998: 150). What was manipulated and therefore considered truthful was the opinion and words from the figures in authority, the journalists and police officials, to ensure the power relations and keep the politics of citation in one place: “the politics of who is cited” (Wekker, 2009: 56) and who is thus in control of framing. Aileen Wuornos did not have any say over who treaded in her shoes (Spivak, 1990: 108): the *vertretung* or representation was constantly conducted by the institutionalized voices. The representation was consequently inaccurate as her agency is deemphasized and she is usually passively *vertreten* “by intellectuals and representatives” (Fang, 2016: 11). The politics of citation and the process of *vertretung* and *darstellung* was there for the media and authorities to construct reality, showing the impact of mediated communications on the regulation of one body, one voice, and one life.

Another major outcome of the critical discourse analysis that was used to analyze the newspapers and documentary, is that the ‘truthful’ knowledge that was constructed by the media and authorities was interwoven with politics and society. Accordingly, mediatization reached “a new point: a phase of deep mediatization, when the nature and dynamic of interdependencies (and so of the social world) themselves become dependent upon media contents and media infrastructure” (Hepp et al., 2016: 2015). Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry, professors in media and communication studies, continue on this notion of deep mediatization to show that when the media is constructed to sustain and form everyday reality, “practices of communication become institutionalized, the mediated construction of reality comes to appear ‘natural’, and, in that way, processes of mediated construction become reified” (Hepp et al., 2016: 222-223). Therefore, this case study also illustrates what sociologists Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger (1966) called the social construction of reality. Meaning that “reality is called social because it is above all made, institutionalized and maintained by people, and objective because it is independent of individual introspection” (Bulck, 1999: 6). However, what should be included is that the media has an enormous impact on shaping that construction, that symbolic reality. A reality in which knowledge is gained from three sources: “peers, institutions and the media. This consists of facts that you have not witnessed or personally collected but believe to be true and to have occurred” (Alitavoli et al., 2018: 2). It is the deeply mediated construction of reality by framing, representation and re-presentation that withheld Aileen from communicating her own subjectivity. It can therefore be concluded that Aileen’s voice and body were being regulated by the institutions, resulting in the ultimate regulation of the body: execution. The institutions that are at play in this case, the media and authorities, seemed to be working together in regulating the story and therefore also Aileen’s life. “Immediately after her arrest last month, Wuornos was besieged with offers from writers, producers, and agent seeking to tell her story. So were police and so was Ty Moore” (Long, 4 Feb. 1991: 1A). Later on, in court, it seemed that the authorities did not really care about Aileen’s voice or body. Even though judge Blount moved the trial to a small courtroom because of all the media attention, he still wanted to profit from the high-profile case. “During one lull in the proceedings, the judge looked back, over the head of defendant Wuornos and into the lone television camera lens he has allowed in court. “Hey, Mr. Cameraman, is my make-up still okay?”” (Lavin, 16 Jan. 1992: 6B) The connection of the media and authorities show that the “media culture provides rituals and spectacles that celebrate the society’s basic institutions and values and plays an important part in social reproduction” (Kellner, 2003: 117) and social regulation.

After Aileen received the death sentence, in 1993, the court received fierce scrutiny from public defenders. As assistant public defender Chris Quarles said after it was found out in October 1992 that the first victim, Richard Mallory, was actually a convicted rapist: “the court shirked its responsibility and failed to make any findings” (*The Miami Herald*, 4 Nov. 1993: 5B). Another public defender, Paul Helm said in 1994, that “the system had worn Miss Wuornos down. She had given up. She did not believe it was possible she would have any conclusion expect she would be executed” (*The Orlando Sentinel*, 2 Sep. 1994: C4). Or even later in 2000, attorney Joseph Hobson told the *Tampa Bay Times*, that “essentially, she had no representation” (Squires, 18 Apr. 2000: 1). Many decisions made and players involved in the case of Aileen Wuornos resulted in wrongdoing before her trial had even started and during her trial. This case therefore “signifies the triumph of the media spectacle over reality and the immense power of culture to define what is real” (Kellner, 2003: 102), as American academic Douglas Kellner also concluded about the O.J. Simpson murder case back in 1995. After it became known that many things went wrong during the trial, the documentary could have stepped in. Producer Nick Broomfield tried to show a different version of her story by finally interviewing her and hearing her out when she talked about self-defense. But even though the viewer was able to see that she did not have that husky voice that everybody believed her to have based on the newspaper articles about her, Broomfield still stuck with describing her as a hitchhiking prostitute, a drifter and the first female serial killer. Based on her getting to speak for herself, having conversations with the people that are supposedly on her side, his intention seems to be to show a different side to the story that was portrayed in the media. But by still using the existing stigmatizing labels, not critiquing heteropatriarchy, not addressing social norms and violence against sex workers, the historical discourse was reinforced. A discourse in which she is dehumanized, de-womanized, and her ‘lesbianism’ is used against her, same for her profession. At one point, her rough childhood is being mentioned, but it does not compete with how the media already labeled her as that monster. How did the feminist discourse and feminists react to this dominant media representation of Aileen Wuornos at the time?

#### **4. Initial feminist response to the dominant media discourse**

The media representation of Aileen Wuornos between 1991 and 2002, show that she is not considered to be feminine based on her angry characteristic and the violent acts towards men. But that she is also not considered a man based on her appearance, profession and the labels of “lesbian” and “Damsel of Death”. Stepping away from the institutionalized gender hegemony and into the role of a gender transgressor. Gender transgression includes behaviors that cross

“gender boundaries in appearance, occupation, or activity” (Levy et al.,1995: 519). The apparent masculinity of her behavior is constantly reinforced by words like ‘violent’ and apparently showing no remorse towards the men she killed. Aileen goes against the heteropatriarchy and social norms in her unconscious positioning as she transgresses intersectional categories: sexuality, white trash, class and gender. In this chapter, the initial response from feminists inside and outside of academia is going to be discussed. In looking back at how Aileen was perceived and received by feminists, four concepts will pass the revue: gender regulation, sexuality, agency and sex work. Together they show that, the feminist discourse that was used to defend her case during the trial, had failed her by only focusing on regulation and gender norms based on her gender performativity and sexuality, the theory of oppression based on womanhood and passivity, and the relation between precarity and sex work. These reactions show the lack of reflexivity on the representation and re-representation as feminists only focused on giving in to the dominant media representation. Instead of listening to her narrative and therefore her resistance to the injustice being done.

In January 1992, the trial of Aileen was at the center of the media spectacle. Many people wanted to attend the trial to see a woman who was able to kill seven men up close (Somerville, 18 Jan. 1992: A14). But there were some other voices in the crowd of spectators. One woman, who wanted to stay anonymous said to journalist Sean Somerville of *The Orlando Sentinel*: “I’m interested in how the system treats a woman who says she was protecting herself.’ The woman called the country a patriarchy” (Somerville, 18 Jan. 1992: A14). There was thus a counterargument that was being coined. But the follow-up reaction on this statement from feminists or feminist academics remained silent. The social punishment of isolation and execution that followed up on her gender transgression could therefore continue to be “a regulatory means for the production and maintenance of gender norms” (Butler, 2004: 55) and patriarchal society. She seemed stuck between the constant misrepresentation on the one hand, and the gender norm on the other hand. “A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization” (Butler, 2004: 41). By not conforming to the social norm of masculinity and femininity, being described as the “androgynous type” (Lavin et al., 20 Apr. 1992: 6B), Aileen shows that the normalized regulatory power is there to maintain the binary between man and woman. The disciplinary regulatory power over the so-called man-killer shows that the living are the objects of bio-power and biopolitics. As philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out: “Techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions” (Foucault, 2008: 141). These regulatory power relations

that were imposed on Aileen's body and voice acted as factors of social hierarchization, "guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony" (Foucault, 2008: 141). But the discussion on how patriarchal society handles women acting out of self-defense or women who go against the established gender norm, did not find its way to the media discourse.

It seems to be though, in the case of Aileen Wuornos that the regulatory power moves beyond sustaining the gender norm and to completely controlling the narratives told about one (Morrissey, 2003: 53). Resulting in this case not only in gender regulation, but in a double regulatory power to which Aileen is oppressed: not behaving according to the gender norm, as well as not behaving according to heteronormativity. As philosopher Judith Butler stated in a lecture in 2009: "We are transformed and acted upon prior to any action we might take. And though we radically rework our genders or even try to rework our sexualities (though often failing), we are in the grip of norms even as we struggle against them" (Butler, 2009: xii). In the case of Aileen, her sexuality was imposed on her on the first day of appearing in the newspaper. How did the journalists know she called herself a lesbian? The police investigators told them, and they went along with it. Aileen never got the opportunity to speak out about her sexuality. It is to say that the police officers *vertreted* Aileen, that they produced her sexuality as a means of creating even more otherness. Or as Judith Butler stated: "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (Butler, 1996: 371). Producing her sexuality based on how they interpreted her performance was a form of oppression by the ones in power. The media took the words of authority for granted and continued to reproduce her non-normative sexuality. This case study on media representation and the producing identity categories is therefore a critique on what Butler said during an interview: "Although certain kinds of cultural movements [like the media] might make it possible to lead a lesbian or gay life, they don't determine that. They don't produce that" (Big Think, How Discourse Creates Sexuality). Instead, cultural movements like the media did in this case contribute to producing a sexuality in the name of power: seemingly the media produced her sexuality as they wanted to see her executed for being that 'threat' to white heteropatriarchy and 'normative' femininity. In her letters to Dawn Botkins she tried to rework her produced sexuality in order to reestablish her image by saying: "I now am totally against lesbianism...It's a "Royal" strike against God, and his laws of nature. So Ive [*sic*] tossed any sick ideas as these, way out of the window. But I really love her "Bad" [Tyria Moore] as a sisterly image thing" (Kester et al., 2012: 55). From the newspapers it becomes clear that both journalists as well as the police investigators thought about sexuality in a binary form: you are either heterosexual or homosexual. The fact that Aileen had been married to a man for a short period of time, or that she had boyfriends while



living on the road, did not seem to keep the journalists away from framing her as a lesbian. This is not saying that she was not a lesbian, it is pointing towards the inadequate conclusion of her sexuality and the lack of feminist sensitivity of feminist scholars and activists involved in representing her case. Though she had a community behind her called the Coalition to Free Aileen Wuornos, that participated “at the 1993 March on Washington for lesbian and gay rights” displaying a banner that stated “Support Dykes who Fight Back” (Pearson, 2007: 257), most coalitions and organizations hesitated to advocate for her believing that she was not a lesbian (Pearson, 2007: 257). The thought that she is not a lesbian did not appear once in the selected newspaper articles. Maybe, if that voice of hesitation would have been louder, her attempt to rework her sexuality would have succeeded and the dominant historical discourse would have been different.

Another voice that should have been louder from the feminist side is that of neglecting the theory of oppression. Her abusive childhood only came to attention in June 1991, when journalist dug into her past and found out that she was verbally and physically abused as a child. The defense took advantage of this newly added detail of Aileen’s life, attempting to utilize the portrayal of the victim (survivor), and choosing to focus on her trauma and abuse. “They argued that she killed in metaphorical revenge against the men who had raped and beaten her throughout her twenty-year career as a prostitute and her grandfather and brother who had sexually assaulted her as a child” (Morrissey, 2003: 39). They made a crucial ‘error’ by saying that she had been raped while working as a sex worker, but never supported her claim for self-defense (Morrissey, 2003: 39). Stripping away Aileen’s “agency, autonomy rage and rationality” (Pa, 2002: 54). Again, giving in to the system of oppression and heteropatriarchy. Closely in line with the critique that the feminist oppression theory can receive in the case of Aileen Wuornos. “This theory rejects the proposition that women’s aggression is a set of autonomous responses, or fully vocalized desires emancipated from oppressive patriarchal orders” (Pa, 2002: 52). Aileen reacted to the oppression theory in 1994, but was never listened to: “If I was incompetent I wouldn’t of [sic] known what fight meant., in bravery to do so, nor gun, and how the trigger is pulled...No I was a fully grown women [sic]” (Kester et al., 2012: 82). The incommensurability about female criminality within public discourse, besides that of hating men as motive, is thus once again shown. And by misrepresenting Aileen this time as a ‘victim’ of male violence, she is again labeled incorrect according to her own words. Again, not only by media discourse, but also by feminists.

Apart from feminist studies and feminists not going against the dominant media representation about gender regulation and her produced sexuality, the label prostitute was never questioned by feminists or scholars that got to speak out in the selected newspapers. The “social structures of patriarchy, classism and heterosexism” (Kissil et al., 2010: 3) consequently had a clear path to keep Aileen marginalized (Kissil et al., 2010: 3). Her profession as a working sex worker induced her vulnerability to forms of aggression that are both enacted by the state not providing protection, as well as by the citizens of the state as automatically placing ‘them’ (the other) in a lower social status, and thus to keep ‘them’ marginalized. Precarity and low-status citizens are therefore directly linked to gender norms, “since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence” (Butler, 2009: ii). By engaging in sex work, she threatened the “patriarchal hegemony of a whitened view of sexuality” (Schatz, 2018: 51). On top of the process of othering by being called white trash and lesbian, the label of prostitute produced Aileen according to philosopher Shannon Bell as “the other of the other: the other within the categorical other, woman” (Bell, 1994: 2). The othering process in this case, constructs the body of Aileen as the body of a sex worker: dichotomizing “the female into the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ woman” (Bell, 1994: 2). Unlike the contemporary postmodern view on sex work where sex workers are assumed to have their own subject position, subjectivity and political identity, Aileen’s body was already marked and defined “as marginalized social-sexual identity” (Bell, 1994: 40). By being an (outspoken) white sex worker she was located on the line of good and virginal “on a continuum somewhere between sameness and difference” (Bell, 1994: 40), but she always took the deprived position compared to the ‘good’ wife, mother and daughter (Bell, 1994: 40). Thus, Aileen falls outside of what is counting as normative gender performance based on her profession as well as her overall behavior. Within this historical discourse she did therefore not count as a subject of high care at that time. Or as Butler again concludes: “The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility” (Butler, 2009: iv). Aileen’s life seems to be less worthy of living by failing the constructed norms within the media and by the reaction of feminists. The reaction of feminists during the trial of Aileen is in stark contrast with what Douglas Kellner wrote in his article on the trial of O.J. Simpson. Kellner concluded that the politics of difference, the issues of identity, became at the center of academic attention in the 1980s and 1990s because of the introduction of media spectacles (Kellner, 2003: 94). But the critical discourse analysis on the media representation and the feminist response on the case of Aileen Wuornos show that the media discourse did not focus

on the issues of multiple marginalized and constructed identities, instead they only used the constructed identities for their own enterprise in the media spectacle. The feminist discourse on the other hand did not focus on the issues of identity as they did almost nothing to deconstruct the preconceived narrative about sex work, gender and sexuality.

## **5. Reconsidering the dominant historical narrative**

What was written about Aileen in the newspapers between 1991 and 2002 was generally negative and illustrates the workings of hierarchical power relations. The response of feminists and from feminist studies that reached the public, failed to rework the norm and normalized realities, resulting in a body that did not matter nor was it grievable, at least within the specific historical context. Her voice was not listened to and the dominant narrative that was constructed in 1991 and 1992, remained to be dominant until she took her last breath. But if the media representation is reconsidered, and a different approach to feminist studies is utilized, a new discourse resurfaces which might be able to reconsider the historical discourse that once seemed static.

In the case of Aileen Wuornos, her subjectivity is constituted through the narratives she tells herself and those told about her in the media as well as in the courtroom (Morrissey, 2003: 53). Her sexuality, gender, class, and actions have been interpreted as her subjectivity, resulting in the impossibility of an objective trial. She said: “The only reason I’m giving up and expecting death, is because of how I was railroaded at the Mallory trial. That, I’d never get a fair trial, ever, that because of this corruption that carried on, leaves it senseless to fight...but ‘who cares’ she’s an ex-hooker...” (Kester et al., 2012: 62). The question of authority, that was answered before, points to the power of institutions, points to “which narratives of subjectivity are allowed and which are not” (Morrissey, 2003: 56). It answered who could represent her and how she was re-presented in the process of framing and othering. The exclusion of her story, a story that was based on self-defense and against heteropatriarchy, demonstrates, according to social scientist Belinda Morrissey, “that the abjection of certain kinds of subjectivities can have decidedly visceral consequences: silencing can lead to death” (Morrissey, 2003: 56). In the dominant narrative it is seemingly impossible to kill seven times<sup>11</sup> out of self-defense, impossible to be raped as a sex worker, she herself says in the documentary: “Arlene Wuornos killed 7 people, she deserves to die. Who gives a darn? Let’s make some money and forget about her. But that is not the point. I say the principle is self-defense. They say it’s a number. It has nothing to do with the number of kill. It is the principle [of self-defense]. But they are

saying there is a number. NO. Self-defense is self-defense no matter how many times it is” (Wuornos in *The Selling of a Serial Killer*). In her fight for justice, she responded to the media narrative that was circulating about her. If only her own subjectivity would have found a way into the media narrative, the dominant narrative would have probably been different.

Firstly, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1992 she made a comment about the label of being a serial killer: “OK! answer to what makes everyone classify me as a Serial Killer? Well actually no one had. The cops labeled me this on the fact that a number of men where [sic] killed . . . For Serial [sic] Killers—Real ones stalk as often as they can. And if theres [sic] a cooling off period its [sic] only in a matter of days. Not months. Plus there [sic] brutal in these deaths. These men where never tortured nor dismembered. Richard Mallory raped me. Where as [sic] he tied me to the steering wheel, then proceeded to vaginally and anally rape me. For nearly 2 hours” (Kester et al., 2012: 21). Secondly, her claim for self-defense was: “Why cant [sic] people see it was self defense [sic]? Is because the crooked scum. [sic] Started slashing slanderous crap all through the media, and magazines” (Kester et al., 2012: 21). Like Morrissey concluded, this points to the “denial with which mainstream legal and media discourses greet stories of female agency, especially those, like Aileen Wuornos’, which assert self-defense” (Morrissey, 2003: 64). Thirdly, as a ‘lesbian who killed men’ she was deemed a man-hater, to which she responded: “Do I hate men. [sic] Not really. Just ones that think like this. Cause their brains are in there [sic] ass and penis” (Kester et al., 2012: 22). Fourthly, the media image that shaped the narrative about Aileen was one of disgust, of someone icy and not deserving to live. However, she described herself as “I love to give love...I know I’ve hurt myself, over being this away [sic]. But the pain, doesn’t feel, so bad, when you know your [sic] struggling to give love, for a cause that really pays off...” (Kester et al., 2012: 41). “To [sic] bad society has me all wrong, from all the cop lies and defamations put out on me. Because really, I was all love” (Kester et al., 2012: 53). Lastly, as Judith Butler asks the question “of who counts as human, and the related question of whose lives counts as lives” (Butler, 2004: 17), Wuornos shows her determination and opinions to change the existing heteropatriarchy in society. She said: “Although I’m guilty of killing 7. [sic] I weigh my sins on the male dominate society. They will treat women, girls, teens, don’t matter, like shit. And never think twice about what they’ve done...As if females are not human. Just automations for their pleasures and commands...” (Kester et al., 2012: 58-59). By becoming attentive to the workings of heteropatriarchy, institutions and in this case the juridical power, it shows the social vulnerability of the body of the other. In this case, the vulnerability of her body is not only based on her belonging to the other, it is also based on her life and subjectivity not worthy of saving based on the overall

media representation. She does not fit the “dominant frame for the human” (Butler, 2004: 25). In her final letter to Dawn Botkins, Aileen is pointing at this power over a human life, to the injustice of a body that does not seem to matter, “to, TERRORISE” human life that defends itself, no matter, how, what, or why, has really sent an insane message . . . So whose leaving “SANE” and [with] “THE BRAINS” [Me] . . .man. Fully “AWARE” to all of everythings thats [sic] gone on here . . . And thats [sic] how I feel about it and will certainly believe it all “PERIOD!” (Kester et al., 2012: 284). Therefore, Aileen is constantly ready the speak, rather than to be spoken for, but it seems as though her version of events cannot be “integrated into public rewritings unless they fit a previously existing format” (Morrissey, 2003: 39). The constant silencing and attempts to render her defense as false, reveal the mediated construction of a spectacle instead of reality and illustrate “the power of narrative” (Morrissey, 2003: 64). But in the aim to supplant the historical discourse, any representations need to be viewed “as necessarily partial” (Morrissey, 2003: 64), and the model of subjectivity should be constantly reflected upon in order to not overshadow one’s personhood within the world. On top of that, the processes of *vertretung* and *darstellung* in the case of Aileen Wuornos show the almost inability of reproducing reality when media representation holds its power over minorities. As cultural studies professor Keya Ganguly adds to the social debate on power relations within the media representation is “a need to disavow the myths of authenticity and “real” experience that underlie accounts aspiring to present women’s experience in direct, ‘pure’ forms” (Ganguly, 1992: 63). With this inside we can argue for a reconsideration of the dominant subjectivity within the historical context and reflect on any re-presentation and representation at the time.

In addition, as her life seemed not to matter based on dehumanization as Butler also said that “women have not been fully incorporated into the human” (2004: 37), when the media representation is put aside, we can recover a different answer. Her life did matter. She opposed the oppressor. And yet she was not listened to, she did not quit for her fight in justice. Professor of women’s studies Phyllis Chesler wrote it well in 2012: “You are a real folk hero-outlaw, like Jesse James or that rebel-without-a-cause, James Dean... You sure fired some shots heard round the world—shots that told male serial killers that they might just end up dead if they continued to rape and murder prostitutes. As the so-called first female serial killer, you’ve made headlines, not for what has been done to you, but for what you’ve done. Your bullets shattered the silence about violence against prostituted women, about prostitutes fighting back, and about a prostitute’s revenge” (Kester et al., 2012: 4). Would this have been the main narrative, she might still be alive wearing one of the franchise t-shirts made about her. However, the lethal injection came too soon. Her trial came too soon.

After her trial, in which she unbecame human, unbecame woman, became white trash and a lesbian in the eyes of the mainstream media, she became depressed. The power relations that created the dominant discourse seemed to constrain and limit her in the ability to speak up and to tell her story. She experienced the sadness and depression of being “subjugated by the power of another, *potestas*” (Ruddick, 2008: 2597). In her realization of power domination and structures, she repeatedly asked for a rushed execution with the reason that she did not kill out of self-defense. Her own subjectivity and subject construction can therefore always be considered a process of becoming and unbecoming (Morrissey, 2003: 55). Her opinion and agency points to a radical shift in the traditional historical discourse surrounding female criminals, in which they depended on a fixed idea of self and denying female agency, complementing passivity. The turn to the importance of subjectivity for the female criminal as well as the women in patriarchal society and being responsible for the acts, shows that “Aileen Wuornos effectively reversed the long ideological history of subject/object relations existing in Western societies” (Morrissey, 2003: 32). Aileen was the subject in this case. The becoming of a minoritarian within different intersecting categories should “force a re-alignment of the basic parameters of subjectivity” (Braidotti, 2003: 60) in which the power of *potestas*, the dominant discourse, “would have to confront the equally powerful power of potential” (Braidotti, 2003: 60). Subjectivity that potentially could have shaken the political and juridical power forces on minorities. Therefore, she was the signifier trying to adjust the knowledge known about the signified. A process that, just like her body, does matter when adding a different perspective to the historical discourse.

Yes, Aileen Wuornos was not considered human or woman, became a lesbian and non-white in the eye of the public. But if listened to her story, the unbecoming and becoming was a site of resistance. She refused to be called a woman if that meant she was sub-ordinate to men and could not have acted out of self-defense, meaning that she would have no control or agency over what happened while she was raped. Her unbecoming of woman allows “for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference”, which gender theorist Jack Halberstam describes as a form of radical passivity. A passivity that offers a non-becoming of woman, and “thereby propping up the dominance of man within a gender binary” (Halberstam, 2011: 144). As Aileen Wuornos constantly spoke of her agency and stood by her argument that she was in control, she violated the norms of becoming that woman. She took her resistance as far as not being in this world, therefore she was “undoing, un-becoming, and violating” (Halberstam, 2011: 4) the explicit rules that came out of the critical discourse analysis. She is a shadow feminist that operated in

the shadows of the media. Her body mattered, her unbecoming and becoming were part of resistance and she was that feminist by going against the established order and binary from an oppressed position. A shadow feminist that wanted to sacrifice herself: “I guess if I have to die, in order to bust the crooked cops I will!”, Wuornos said in June 1992 (Kester et al., 2012: 26). A shadow feminist that spoke in the language of antisocial femininity and refused the “patriarchal forms of power” (Halberstam, 2011: 124). Therefore, even though her unbecoming and becoming of woman, human, white trash and lesbian, was first associated with negativity, the stepping away from the social order, critiquing and transforming it, made her make a powerful statement of refusal during that time.

## **6. Further research and actions**

The mediated and juridical injustice of violence against raped or killed sex workers, is an area in urgent need for research. As professor of law Michelle S. Jacobs points to the partially successful effort to eliminate violence against women (1999: 459), feminist legal theorists should take action to “eliminate the existence of violence against women in every conceivable field touched by the law, including the criminal justice system” (Jacobs, 1999: 469). At the time of Aileen Wuornos, a research showed that in 1991 twelve rape complaints were made and put into the criminal justice system, but no man or woman, was ever convicted (Chesler, 1993: 950). The case of Aileen Wuornos, even though it happened thirty years ago, is still relevant today in prosecuting those “who raped sex workers” (Sullivan, 2007: 127), as sex workers who are raped are still not considered ‘real victims’ according to a research by psychologist Jericho M. Hockett and scholars (Hockett et al., 2016: 140). The research concluded that the United States “is a society with high prevalence of rape but a low prevalence of perpetrator arrests” (Hockett et al., 2016: 161). The amount of rape in the United States of America is thus considered high, and directly points to a limitation of this research: it has only focused on one case of violence against people working as sex workers. More historical discourses need to be researched in order to change the dominant narrative and with that change the circumstances for people engaging in sex work.

On top of that, more research should be conducted on the trials of women who kill out of self-defense. As professor of law Elizabeth M. Schneider pointed out, “the sexual stereotypes of women and male orientation built into the law prevent judges and jurors from appreciating the circumstances of battered women’s acts of self-defense and their perceptions” (Schneider, 1980: 623). Meaning that women who act out of self-defense are rarely listened to in court. Even today as pointed out by professor in social justice Corey Shdaimah when stated

that “lawyers, judges, and probation officers might not recognize women’s manipulation or aggressive behavior as survival strategies” (Shdaimah et al., 2015: 339). Again, this case study is only one example that illustrates the need to expand the research on women who kill out of self-defense. What are their motivations and what is their story? Ideally suggesting that “each case should be evaluated as a whole on its own merits” (Farrell et al., 2011: 245). But also suggesting that further research needs to focus on the agency of women who kill and not presume the mediated construction of reality as true: a reality in which “women aren’t culpable or responsible for their acts of violence” (Kruttschnitt et al., 2006: 324).

Furthermore, the definition of a serial killer is historically described as “serial killing generally means the sexual attack and murder of young women, men, and children by a male who follows a pattern, either physical or psychological” (Hickey, 2013: 32). Criminologist Eric W. Hickey hereby pointing at serial killers having a sexual motive and being mostly men. The definition of a serial killer should thus be researched within academia, in order to include an intersectional understanding of the motivations as well as possible specific gender differences. On top of that, according to sociologist Amanda L. Farrell and her co-writers, “there is a conspicuous absence of knowledge about motivation and behavioral characteristics of female serial murderers” (Farrell et al., 2011: 228-229). The way Aileen was portrayed, as an angry killer, more masculine than feminine based on her behavior, had an impact on her trial. Female offenders who are able to retain or ‘keep’ their femininity in the eye of the public are treated not “as harshly as their feminine counterparts” (Farrell et al., 2011: 233). When a female is perceived more masculine, she is more likely to get the death penalty (Farrell et al., 2011: 233). Therefore, masculinity and femininity in criminal cases should be researched more in order to not interpret the embodied behavior of female warriors (Ponzanesi, 2009: 96) like Aileen as masculinized lesbian (Zarzycka, 2017: 111). Indirectly resulting in a further inquiry that should seek to “determine whether male serial murderers are also less likely to be charged, tried, and convicted” (Farrell et al., 2011: 245-246). Pointing the finger at the difference between the media representation of female serial killers as well as male serial killers. The difference between female and male serial killers was not incorporated into this research, accordingly further research needs to be done to look at the connection between media representation and criminal conduct by female criminals as well as male criminals. Lastly, perhaps most importantly, this case study points the finger at the importance of different discourses coming together in the fight for justice. For example, the feminist media discourse and juridical discourse should come together because their constructions of events “legitimize and reinforce one another” (Kruttschnitt et al., 2006: 324).



## 7. Conclusion

The question of what is the value of a woman's life runs throughout this case study. Aileen Carol Wuornos, the woman who confessed to killing seven men in 1989 and 1990, was deemed unworthy of living by the jurors. This outcome of the trial was vastly impacted by the media representation distributed in the state of Florida from 1991 to 2002. Neither her voice nor her body mattered. As one victim's wife said: "Florida has put out enough money on this case. I wouldn't ask them to pay my way down there again. I don't believe she deserves an audience [while dying by lethal injection]" (Squires, 9 Oct. 2002: 7A). Didn't she? Why wasn't she worth being listened to at the time? How did the media impact her case and her reputation? What subjectivity and discourse of Aileen Wuornos emerge when taking a critical feminist approach to deconstruct the dominant media representations that circulated between 1991 and 2002?

This case study is an example of how news articles and documentaries have an impact on the polarization of society as it reinforces binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality, white upper class and 'white trash', upper class and lower class, and feminine and unfeminine. The media representation of Aileen Wuornos during 1991 and 2002 has impacted her case in such a way that public opinion and social norms constituted her verdict. That the legal system has, like other women who claimed self-defense throughout the years, failed to consider and hear the story that Aileen Wuornos tried to tell in court. Her shaking, stress and reliving of the trauma while explaining in court what happened before she murdered her first 'attacker', was not considered the 'truth', since she was not recognized as having authority to produce knowledge about her. She soon figured this out as she was continued to be called a monster and predator. The statements that were made about her were controlled by the institutions in power: the police officers and journalists. Directly shedding a light on one of the feminist motivations behind this case study: to show how language (in the documentary and in the newspapers) is an instrument to keep patriarchy in place and to continue silencing female subjectivity based on not giving them a chance to speak. Resulting in having the power over life in the name of stabilizing social norms, gender norms and going against the gender transgressor who did not live according to the rules within society. This case study on power structures therefore exposes, as pointed by Rosi Braidotti in 2019, "the repressive structures of dominant subject-formations (*potestas*)" (Braidotti, 2019: 34). On the other hand, this case study also exposes the limitations of rallying by the feminist coalition at that time: they did not do enough to go against the established grain and to put focus on objectivity instead of

subjectivity. They did not take enough effort to point the finger into the direction of resistance against heteropatriarchy, autonomy of the body, her own subjectivity, and stayed with the existing theory of oppression or questioned her sexuality. The acknowledgement of the possibility of a new discourse came after her execution, when she was labeled a cult hero or when questions were raised about why she never got the possibility to speak, and why journalists, officials and feminists did not research the motivations behind her actions and resistance. These questions point at the “direct relationship between media portrayals, legal outcomes and public opinion” (Easteal et al., 2015: 39), and therefore focuses again on the importance of discourses working together in their aim for justice.

A new perspective on the historical discourse around Aileen Wuornos arises once the question of authority is asked. By using the critical discourse analysis as a method to find out the power relations within media representation, it needs to be stated that the interpretation of the media discourse within this case study will always be “open to interpretation and negotiation” (Mogashoa, 2014: 111), therefore does not give a new fixed understanding of the historical discourse. However, the method of analyzing data by using the critical discourse analysis has helped to understand the historical discourse and give a reconsideration of the dominant narrative. This new perspective emerged once an impression of the vast differences in speaking truth to power appeared in the analysis, recovering her feminist voice and body. The issue that is raised about the (lack of) representation of Aileen Wuornos, is focused on the epitome of femininity, sexuality, serial killers, othering, and class. Her body that mattered, and still matters, because of the political resistance and issues she raised. She raised and tried to expose the *potestas*, the dominant power relations, and her embodied resistance sheds light on the point made by feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti: the powerful statement of Aileen Wuornos to embody the resistance and pay the price of life by incorporating herself in the political struggle for justice by resisting “the separation of self from society” (Braidotti, 2003: 60). She did deserve that audience when looking at her case from a perspective of self-defense, agency and struggle against heteropatriarchy. The legal as well as media discourse did not get to know her, her subjectivity was smothered by the voice of powerful institutions. The argument of this case study being in line with Belinda Morrissey: “Recognition of her radical alterity and the inability of her judges to ever fully ‘know’ her leads to a greater emphasis on examining her tale of events rather than merely dismissing it with contempt,” (Morrissey, 2003: 63) or with pity. Her agency on the other hand was smothered when taking into consideration the explanation of the oppression theory, taking away her agency and doubting her subjectivity as a whole. The need

to see subjectivity and power relations as partial and always in a state of becoming, is important in finding that new historical perspective. On top of that, the unbecoming of woman, human, and becoming of lesbian, becoming of white out-group, is part of the intersectional analysis and shows that humans are always living in a dynamic state of becoming. In the resistance that Wuornos showed by curling her hair, not having that husky voice and under the claim of self-defense, she shows that she resisted against her unbecoming of woman, as she is a woman who was aware of her agency. She failed in making her agency heard. Feminist activists failed her. The legal system failed her. But with this new perspective on failure that in the end finds its purpose to stand up for women working as sex workers, standing up against heteropatriarchy, is where shadow feminism may be found. Aileen was motivated by the political inequalities and sought to see the diversity and difference that she embodied as positive, turning ‘a pathetic creature’ into a woman with agency and control. But in the dominant discourse, in the shadow of the media circus, “Wuornos stopped being merely human. She became a scrim, a screen for the projection of our desires and fears, writ large. A feminist cause célèbre. The avenging angel” (Kester et al., 2012: 9). The avenging angel that shows the workings of the shadows of the media, and reveals the importance of the newspapers and documentaries, in which they should “act as an agent of social and legal change” (Easteal et al., 2015: 39), by looking at events and news from different perspectives. By portraying social problems, social structures and female criminality from the point of view where *vertretung* mainly comes from the inferior out-group, “the media can contribute to the (re)framing of societal understandings” (Easteal et al., 2015:39), of re-framing the intersectional oppressed categories. The many images and words that were used to describe Aileen Wuornos exemplify how she was made into a specific embodiment of homophobia, sexism, prejudice and classism. The acknowledgement that Aileen’s story and her historical discourse is exemplary for the systematic injustice against female sex workers, women, and for self-defense claims by female defenders, is in many respects a tragic history. But looking at her case from a standpoint of feminist motivation, she brought attention to inequality: taking responsibility for her actions denying female passivity, from standing up against heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity and singular understandings of femininity. She then becomes the subject, the main focus of subjectivity within media discourse and legal discourse. She is the subject in control and the seven murdered men become the dispensable objects (Morrissey, 2003: 32) for the cause of justice in the future. Meaning the shadows of the media can disappear once institutions are not the only ones in control of constructing subjectivity. Meaning feminism that seeks to be defined by the success stories, need to seek their failure and turn that discourse around. Then shadow feminism is born, and

failure is once again turned into success. Leading this research to conclude, “the continuing commotion with respect to the question of how this history should be represented appeals to the worldwide belief in the power of imagination” (Buikema, 2009: 83).

# Notes

1. The data from this timeline is mostly retrieved from *The Orlando Sentinel*. It was written on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2002 by journalist Beth Kassab. The information about the opera comes from an article in the *Tampa Bay Times* from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2001 on page 5B. The information about when the bodies were found comes from an article in *The Miami Herald*, written by journalist Phil Long. The latter was published on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1991 on page 5A.
2. The information on this map is retrieved from *The Miami Herald*, published on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1991. The writer was journalist Phil Long and the page number is 5A.
3. The word ‘seemingly’ is used since she appears to be the first nation’s female serial killer by the portrayal of the media and the statements of the police, but she is not. “A female poisoner known by the name of Locusta, active in Rome during the first-century AD, is likely the first known serial killer chronicled in history. Within the United States, the first recorder female serial murderer, Lucretia Patricia Cannon, was active between 1802 and 1829 in Delaware” (Farrell et al., 2011: 229).
4. In his book, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (2006), anthropologist Arjun Appadurai questions why there is such a rage surrounding minorities in the globalizing world. “The puzzle is about why the relatively small numbers that give the word minority its most simple meaning and usually imply political and military weakness do not prevent minorities from being objects of fear and of rage” (2006: 49).
5. The relation between signifier and signified is in most academic texts described as the signifier (the body) on the one hand, and the signified (attributes, qualities, agency) on the other hand. This relation is fixed for a period of time and within a specific context (Buikema, 2009: 81).
6. The concept of ‘shadow of the media’ is an adaptation of the concept of Shadows of War initiated by anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom. She wrote a book called *Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the twenty-first century* (2004).
7. This online archive can be found on newspapers.com, all data was retrieved between the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2002 and the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2020.

8. This picture from taken out of *The Orlando Sentinel* (Brazil, 17 Jan. 1992: A1) is an example of how Aileen Wuornos was visually represented in the newspapers. The returning pictures of her showing her teeth in the courtroom are an example of her anger and unfemininity.



9. The debate around female passivity has been going on for quite a while. Theorists have depicted “the traditional woman as a nonindividual, and see her as having been psychologically and institutionally dominated. She was the ‘other’, a passive and brainwashed victim of the patriarchy. These theorists feel that the traditional male roles were far more desirable...” (Mirkin, 1984: 39).
10. This research selected 110 newspaper articles in total. Out of all the articles written, 35% was written by an unknown writer. The writers that were known were mostly male and some articles were written by two authors. Therefore, bringing the total to 72 writers that are known. Out of the 72 writers, 57 were male and 15 were female. On top of that, many articles were written by the same male journalist. For example, Phil Long wrote for *The Miami Herald*, Jeff Brazil wrote for *The Orlando Sentinel* and Chris Lavin wrote multiple times for the *Tampa Bay Times*.
11. Aileen confessed to seven murders. However, only six bodies were found, therefore, in the main discourse surrounding her case, there are only six people she killed.

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