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PROFILING A UNIQUE FEMALE SERIAL KILLER: AILEEN WUORNOS'S LIFE OF VIOLENCE

Phyllis Chesler

Phyllis Chesler, Feminist Writer

KEYWORDS

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Like the great, late Ann Rule (Rule, 1980), I, too, am haunted by my time with a high-profile serial killer.

I am talking about Aileen Carol Wuornos. There has never been a female—or male—serial quite like her, not before or since (Chesler, 1993; Chesler, 2020, Kester and Gottlieb, 2012; Russell, 2002; Shipley and Arrigo, 2004).

Wuornos was seen as a “monster,” as an unacceptably “bad” girl (Fahs, 2014; Hart, 1993). Male serial killers (Caputi, 1987; Hickey, 1991; Larsen, 2003), who have been known to kill scores of girls and women are often glorified and portrayed again and again in books and films. Many people, especially women, including some feminists, found Wuornos too “hot to handle,” not a good role model for a feminist movement under siege. There were, of course, many exceptions who were drawn to her as something of a folk hero, as their kind of outlaw.

No one, including myself, recognized exactly what kind of a killer she was. Although I had many phone conversations, exchanged letters with her, and visited her on Death Row, it still took me many years to profile her. There were no guides.

How many in-depth, literary portraits of women killers exist?

Have Austen, the Brontes, Eliot, Woolf, Colette, Wharton, Stein, Barnes, de Beauvoir, or Lessing ever given us a portrait of homicidal fury in female form? I don't think so, but neither have Doestoevski, Melville, Baudelaire, Zola, Dickens, Celine, Genet, Camus, Burroughs, Miller, Wright, Ellison, Mailer, or Capote. Few pre-feminist writers have ever dared to imagine the lives of women killers. Not one character comes to mind: no female Raskolnikov, Meursault, or Bigger Thomas. How could so many great writers have resisted this temptation?

To the best of my knowledge, at that time, there were only two relevant novels, both of which I found after I entered this case: Nawel el-Sadawi's brilliant book, *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), about a Cairo prostitute who finally killed one of her tormenters; she told her story as she was awaiting execution, and Helen Zahavi's equally brilliant and unsettling book, *The Dirty Weekend*, about a British prostitute

who killed seven different men in the course of a single weekend—men who had harassed, menaced, cornered, and death threatened her (El Saadawi, 1975; Zahavi, 1991).

At the time, I had only a handful of guides. Ann Jones's superb *Women Who Kill* was one (Jones, 1980). The case of a slave girl/woman, Celia, who finally killed her rapist-master in Missouri in the 19th century was another. Her lawyer argued that she had the right to kill the Master who had been raping her—and in self-defense. (McLaurin, 1991).

I also knew something about sex-based double standards in general. It proved a useful way of understanding criminal justice matters too (Chesler, 1972; Chesler 1986).

Women are held to higher and different standards than men. People *expect* men to be violent; they are also carefully taught to deny or minimize male violence ("I don't believe any father would rape his own child"), and to forgive violent men ("He's been under a lot of pressure," "He's willing to go into therapy"). On the other hand, people continue to *blame women* for male violence ("She must have liked rough sex if she stayed married to him," "She provoked him into beating her").

People do not expect and will not permit women to be violent—not even in self-defense. In fact, most people consistently confuse female self-defense with female aggression. Such psychological double standards of perceived violence result in a double standard of punishment (Brown, 1987, Walker, 1979; Walker, 1989).

For example, according to the 1990 Florida State Supreme Court Gender Bias Report (the year that Wuornos was killing), "despite the perception that the criminal justice system is lenient to women, . . . women [in Florida] are treated more harshly than similarly situated male offenders." Generally, whatever their crime, men in jail and prison have greater access to libraries, educational and rehabilitation programs, modern gymnasiums, etc. than do women; men's jails are also more conveniently located for family visitation than are women's jails.

To avoid jail overcrowding in Florida, male criminals were often plea-bargained into lesser sentences by prosecutors who feared they might otherwise be set free. Since women committed fewer crimes, there were fewer, less overcrowded women's prisons, and less motivation to plea-bargain with women in order to save jail-space. Thus, women often inadvertently served longer sentences for lesser crimes in more ramshackle jails than men serve for more serious crimes in more modern jails.

Nearly 30 years had to pass before I decided to revisit the Wuornos case. I resurrected and re-read my entire Wuornos archive which consisted of my interviews with lawyers, potential expert witnesses, legal transcripts, the videos of her trial, and the articles, books, and films about her case. Above all, I read every study and memoir I could find both about prostitution, women killers, and about serial killers before I could come to grips with this case. I wanted to expand the battered woman's syndrome to prostituted women in a court case and to argue that prostituted women were routinely in extreme danger and had the right to defend themselves (Hughes, 2000; Hunter, 1991; Raphael, 2015; Raymond, 2013; Schon and Hoheide, 2021).

Long before the #MeToo movement gained momentum in the world, I was on a prescient feminist mission. Talk about sexual harassment on the job! It exists—but it's a pale reflection of a prostitute's working life. Although, in my view, prostitution is not "work"—in Wuornos's view it was her job, her way of surviving. She was proud of her ability to do so. What angered her was the violence that came with her "line of work,"

the danger she faced both from Johns and from law enforcement. Perhaps she was trying to outrun shame, “owning” her fate and daring it to break her.¹

I wanted a jury to understand how dangerous and how violent the so-called “work” of prostitution really is, to both body and soul, how Wuornos had to endure a toxic level of contempt and the most extreme kind of violence. I wanted jurors to consider the fact that Wuornos may indeed have killed in self-defense, at least that first time. The first man she killed, Richard Mallory, had a long history as a whoremonger and pornography addict, and had done time in an institution for an attempted rape.

As a psychologist, I believed that the hundreds of violent rapes and gang-rapes that Wuornos experienced and which she described to me could easily have led to the kind of paranoia, terror, and rage that could account for (but not justify) her murder spree. She killed seven men, all strangers to her. At least three, perhaps four of them, were Johns, because they were found naked or with their pants in disarray.

As noted above, I also wanted to expand the battered woman’s defense to include prostitutes. Wuornos was my way of doing so. I was also a bit thrilled that a woman, a prostituted woman, may have finally started fighting back, had stopped being prey.

The woman whom I got to know was not a feminist—although she was a quick study, and knew how to adopt everyone else’s lingo. She had to. With one person she was a Born Again Christian. With me, she talked about how “men hated our guts,” how “she needed to keep a gun with her in order to save her life because so many whores had been attacked, tortured, murdered, right here in Florida.”

Here’s how it began. One Florida winter in 1989-1990, adult, white men started disappearing, one by one. Their bullet-riddled bodies were discovered in wooded areas along Florida’s highway I-75. As the body count mounted up, and new evidence was found, police shocked the world by stating that one, or possibly two female serial killers were on the loose.

I wanted the jury to know that most of the corpses strewn along Florida’s highways were *female* prostitutes murdered by *male* serial killers. In this rare instance, a *whore* had flipped the script, turned the tables, and had begun murdering Johns.

I wanted the jury and the world to understand that prostitution is usually a forced, not a free choice (Jeffreys 1997; Moran, 2013; Norma and Reist, 2016; Raphael, 2015; Raphael, 2020; Stark and Whisnant, 2004); that girls and women, mainly of color, are trafficked into it by pimps and sex slavers; that girls of all colors are tracked into it by childhoods of extreme violence; and that the nature of the “sex work” destroyed most women.

A prostitute is being paid to be raped—but she does not sign on to be cursed, humiliated, battered, gang-raped, forced to engage in sadistic and painful sex acts, robbed, mutilated, death threatened, tortured, or murdered (Caputi, 1987; Levine, 1988).

¹ Ideological paradigms must yield to individual realities. Wuornos did not seem to think that anyone had “prostituted” her. She acted as if she was the one in charge of the decision to make money by selling sex to men. She had no pimp, she worked alone, she was cagey, savvy, careful, and had managed to survive for many years. She liked having “a good old time,” but hated those Johns who were sexually sadistic and physically violent, and she sometimes physically fought with them. As a psychologist, one can only try to understand a particular woman without expecting or demanding that she think in radically feminist ways.

The world media descended on Ocala, Florida, like locusts. The police allegedly started making deals with movie companies—and many wives started telling their husbands not to pick up any female hitchhikers; some accompanied their husbands on their routes (Chesler, 2020; Russell, 1993).

As soon as I could, I flew down to Florida, not as a journalist, but as a feminist organizer and potential courtroom witness. I could not get the public defender to return my calls and so I found a way of getting Wuornos to call me at my motel.

And so I became involved behind the scenes, first with Wuornos herself, then with her wary, reluctant, and out-of-their-depth public defenders. I organized a pro bono team of experts to testify about violence against prostitutes and a prostitute's right to defend herself. I hoped we could also address the level of complex, post-traumatic stress from which she and all prostitutes suffer.

None of us were ever called.

Had Wuornos been born “bad” or did her traumatic history inevitably lead her into dangerous situations and self-destructive behavior?

Wuornos's biological father had been a wife-beater and a pedophile. He hung himself in jail. Her biological mother had been forced out of town by her parents and did not look back. Wuornos herself had a very bad temper and probably suffered from organic brain syndrome or a traumatic brain injury. At trial, the forensic psychologists said as much. They also saw her as child-like, primitive, but she was also canny, street-smart, and a talented artist. Given all her impairments, and the absence of any family support, it is a miracle she managed to survive at all.

Wuornos was an alcoholic—a beer drinker. She also suffered from visual and auditory impairments that were never addressed when she was a child. She was beaten by her adoptive father who, unknown to her, was really her biological grandfather; raped and impregnated at 13 or 14 by a purported friend of his; forced to give up her child for adoption.

Thereafter, she lived “rough,” in an abandoned car in the Michigan winter, sold sex for food and beer money. At 15-16, she hit the road, selling sex along the way.

I wanted to conduct a public forum on what prostitution is and what it does to most prostitutes. I wanted to ensure that Wuornos, no matter how foul her language, no matter how explosively angry she could get—that, she, too, deserved a fair trial.

She certainly did not get one. Few poor people ever do.

Wuornos was tricked into confessing—and she did so without a lawyer present. However, she still claimed that the killings were in self-defense 16 times. The jury never got to hear this. Someone had edited out these 16 statements from the video shown to the jury.

Apart from her own testimony, the jury never got to hear any evidence about violence towards prostitutes in general, or about her first victim, Richard Mallory's history of violence towards women in particular—evidence that might have helped them evaluate Wuornos's much-derided claim of self-defense.

Wuornos's Prosecutor, John Tanner, had been Ted Bundy's “spiritual advisor.” He viewed prostitutes as pure evil and had published his views in the media (Chesler, 2020). Tanner was also a long-time friend and colleague of the presiding Judge.

Could she get a fair trial in Ocala? Not likely. How would her public defenders fare in their old boy's network if they became known as the defenders who actually got the man-hating dyke-whore off? In my view, Wuornos was not a man-hater, not at all. She considered many of her Johns to be her "boyfriends," and she had many boyfriends.

Was Wuornos really competent to stand trial? In my opinion, she was not but she absolutely refused to consider an Insanity defense.

Wuornos probably did not have a true understanding of the charges against her. Based on her own experience, she also had no faith in the system—and lacked the requisite patience required to work with an attorney. Wuornos was entirely credible in conversation and on the stand in terms of having killed Mallory in self-defense. She did not expect the judicial process to believe her. (She also later retracted this claim but I did not believe the retraction.)

It is difficult to "fit" Wuornos into an existing forensic category because, in a sense, we are dealing with a victim of torture and someone with an organic and/or traumatic brain injury.

Are serial killers on trial in Florida treated equally in terms of sex? No two trials are exactly alike but here's one comparison.

Given the massive publicity, serial killer Ted Bundy's legal team asked for a change of venue to Miami and got it. Wuornos's legal team asked for one too but was not granted another venue.

In Bundy's case, the jury required a lot of time to make their decision. Not so in Wuornos's case. Her trial was over within five days. The jury voted "guilty" in one hour and 31 minutes. They also recommended the death sentence in one hour and forty-eight minutes.

Bundy's jury took seven hours to find him guilty and seven and-a-half hours to sentence him to death. And he may have killed 100 girls and women. Bundy was also offered a sentence of life with no parole; Wuornos was not.

It took me a long time to understand that Wuornos was not like *male* serial killers—nor was she like other *female* serial killers. Wuornos was also unlike other *women* who had been similarly and severely abused in childhood.

Jane Caputi, in *The Age of Sex Crime*, describes the serial sex murders of women, often prostitutes, as similar to a "lynching;" those serial killers who pose their victims afterwards in a parody of a "gynecological exam" (the Boston Strangler did this), or "spread-eagle with their legs apart and their knees up" (the Hillside Strangler did this), are signifying the patriarchal triumph over female humanity, and over women's sexual and reproductive power (Caputi, 1987).

Such male serial "lust" killers are therefore romanticized in books, articles, plays, operas, songs, and films. There are thousands of books and thousands of articles about Jack the Ripper. Ted Bundy, The Boston Strangler, Son of Sam, the Hillside Strangler, and the Zodiac Killer. They have, collectively, been written about and their stories filmed many thousands of times. The obscene fascination with murdered women, murdered prostitutes, seems to be unending.

The FBI has characterized most serial killers as mainly (but not only) white men who had been abused by their families in childhood; who had often set fires or tortured and killed small animals; and who were bullied and socially isolated.

Their motives were often sexual—they were fetishists, “partialists,” or necrophiliacs; angry, thrill- or attention-seekers, and/or they wanted money. They killed more than three people; they acted alone; they were mentally ill; engaged in petty crimes, were drifters, had trouble staying employed, took menial jobs. Many (but not all) tended to have low IQs (92.8), especially the “disorganized” or impulsive serial killers who were loners with few friends.

Are women serial killers too?

Well, doesn't the FBI list above begin to sound a bit like Wuornos? Abused in childhood, bullied, socially isolated, she set a few fires, *possibly* had a low IQ (81-82), had PTSD/was “mentally ill,” had trouble staying employed, and was a drifter and a loner; she also engaged in petty crimes, and killed more than three people all on her own. But in her case, there's even more.

She was impregnated via rape at 13 or 14 and forced to give a child away for adoption. This is psychiatrically catastrophic for most women and something that male serial killers cannot suffer.

There's still more. When Wuornos-the-child was being beaten, and beaten badly, no neighbor reported it and no social worker, teacher, or police officer stopped it. When she was thrown out and had to sleep in the snow and in an abandoned car, and sell “sex” for cigarettes, beer, food, and drugs—not a single adult came to her aid. No social worker, and no school counselor, offered her any refuge, or took her for hearing and vision tests, something even her allegedly loving but alcoholic grandmother/mother failed to do. When Wuornos stopped going to school, no one came to find her.

And so Wuornos hit the highway—a loud, belligerent, incorrigible teenager. She managed to get herself married and divorced within months—she beat her wealthy, elderly husband and he took out a restraining order against her. She was arrested many times for stupid stuff: driving under the influence, shooting a gun into the air while driving drunk, hitting a bartender, speeding, resisting arrest, assaulting men (!), trying to pass a phony check, holding up a convenience store for chump change. She hit many boyfriends or hit them back—and could never understand why the relationships all went south (Chesler, 2020).

She belonged nowhere, she fit in nowhere. She made at least one serious suicide attempt and perhaps two more. In jail, she was written up for fighting and uncooperative behavior.

Here's how Wuornos is different from other known *female* serial killers of men: she killed strangers on the highway of life—outdoors, not inside at home; and with a gun, not with poison.

Other female serial killers mainly killed male intimates, and they did so for money, (insurance policies, real property), pure and simple. Dubbed “black widows,” female serial killers married and killed men again and again, in order to obtain money. Their names are legion.

Most notorious was Belle Gunness, a first-generation Norwegian-American, known as the “female Bluebeard with a profit motive.” In 1900, Belle's first husband died under suspicious circumstances; she received a life insurance payout. Belle married again—and sure enough, her second husband was also found dead under mysterious circumstances—another insurance payout. Immigrant men, lured by her ads for “partners” and “hired hands” went to work for Belle and were never seen again; so

were wealthy bachelors who were interested in marriage. They came bearing cash and trunks laden with valuables (Schechter, 2018).

Law enforcement believed that Guinness was responsible for at least 25 murders and was suspected of twice that number; she was accused of doing this mainly for money, but also for the sheer joy of it. Guinness literally butchered these men and then buried them on her Indiana “murder farm,” a fact that became clear when the police dug up their bodies. Guinness presumably died in a fire before she could be arrested, but people also contended that she had escaped.

Wuornos is quite the light-weight compared to Guinness.

Some female serial killers have lured girls into brothels with false offers of employment, where they immediately had them gang-raped, beaten, deliberately hooked on heroin and cocaine, forced to work as prostitutes, and later murdered. The punishment for rebellion was horrendous.

One terrifying example took place in Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s. Two sisters, Delfina Gonzalez and Maria de Jesus Gonzalez, enticed and killed many hundreds of girls, all of whom “disappeared.” In 1963, the police found the remains of 80 girls, buried on the brothel grounds. Those who were still alive and whom they liberated were “nervous wrecks.” The sisters were sentenced to 40 years; their collaborators were also found and sentenced (Hickey, 1991).

Another kind of female serial killer are those who kill their elderly patients for their social security checks or their insurance policies which they had signed over to their nurses. Their names are also legion, both in the United States, Europe, and around the world.

Some female serial killers had once been paid to find homes for out-of-wedlock newborns; they just killed them, one after the other, and kept the money.

Always, their motive for killing was money, as much as they could get. What was Wuornos’s relationship to money? Throughout her life, it seems that she thought she had “enough” money if she could pay for two days’ worth of beer, food, loud music, and a motel room. Wuornos was not thinking far ahead; she did not act as if she had a future.

But once she was jailed and saw how others were making money “off” what she alone had done—it unsettled her, obsessed her, especially now that she was “famous.” Her focus on her place in history and her notoriety resembles that of many jailed male serial killers. Wuornos was far more interested in “cutting deals” than in talking about a legal defense team or appealing her death sentences. She was utterly fixated on the “crooked cops” who allegedly were making money from movie deals even before she was arrested.

Would I get involved in this case now? I doubt it. Would I focus more on the murdered men? Probably not—because it was the smell of female blood, the acres of broken female bones, quickly forgotten, that drew me down to Florida. At the time, I focused more on this than on the fact that Wuornos really was a serial killer, similarly obsessed with her fame, proud that she now had a “place in history.”

Now, she was obsessed with money, enraged that others, not her, would be making it from what she alone had done.

I have since discovered that Wuornos has many fans, many admirers, who view her as an Outlaw, like Jesse James, a nobody, meant to die alone and anonymously—

but who became a Somebody, a woman who gave the “royal” finger to Authority, who even took down cops, a biker-style rebel.

Over time, grassroots fans were drawn to Wuornos as a woman who was meant to die an awful, anonymous death—but who instead turned on her tormentors, got even, and got famous.

Wikipedia, in its entry for her birthplace, Troy, Michigan, lists Wuornos as one of their Notable People, right along with a Hall of Fame baseball player, a Tony-Award-winning actor, an NHL defenseman, an MLB pitcher and coach, a rapper, and another high-profile female killer: Carolyn Warmus (!!).

The Last Resort Bar (the one I visited, and where she spent her last night in freedom) now has a large photo or painting of Wuornos behind the bar together with a list of the names of the men she killed. The Bar claims that business is booming.

Fans take “true crime destination vacations” by visiting the bar and sleeping in the motel room at the Fairview (now renamed the Scoot Inn), where Wuornos once slept. They can also choose from among 80 online mementos as a way of vicariously giving authority the finger.

Everyone in Wuornos's life: Her family of origin, her childhood neighbors, teachers, the home for unwed mothers, the Michigan juvenile and Florida adult correctional facilities, the lesbian lover who took the stand against her, (and whom I interviewed), the prosecution, the defense, the private lawyer whom she hired after her first death sentence, the judges, the juries, the investigating police officers, Hollywood, and the media—even We, the People—conspired, through acts of commission, omission, indifference, and negligence, to deprive Wuornos of the most minimal justice.

Her lead defense attorney, Trish Jenkins, was used to defending male rapists and male serial killers. This was a completely different challenge. Jenkins was probably used to tried-and-true methods and was unwilling to risk a “political” defense in lieu of something familiar. Jenkins did try to obtain a sentence of life without parole for her client but this failed when one county prosecutor refused to go along with it. (All counties had to agree on this.)

Please allow me to end this article by quoting from the end of *Requiem*.

If you had been on that jury, would you have voted to put her to death? Or to keep her in isolation for nearly eleven years, where she would inevitably become even crazier than she already was? Or would you have chosen to stash her in a state mental institution on heavy medication for life?

Lee is long gone—but she still lives on in my imagination and memory. I titled this book *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer* because this is my way of finally laying her to rest—by memorializing her life, her deeds, and her death. A dirge of sorts, to mourn what can happen to a girl in this world, a horrifying and pitiful tale with an inevitably sordid ending.

Yes, I know she was a raging drunk, a foul-mouthed, obnoxious, unstable, contrarian—and a serial killer as well—and yet, now that I more fully understand what rape and prostitution can do to an adolescent and to a woman, and what a pitifully damaged child-woman she really was, I have more, not less, compassion for her.

When I leave this book, I leave off, perhaps forever, continuing to grapple with the issues raised by her case.

Now, it is in your hands.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Phyllis Chesler, Ph.D., is an Emerita Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at City University of New York. She is a best-selling author, a feminist leader, a retired psychotherapist and an expert courtroom witness. Dr. Chesler is a co-founder of the Association for Women in Psychology (1969), The National Women's Health Network (1974), and The International Committee for the (Original) Women of the Wall (1989). She is a Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Global Anti-Semitism and Policy (ISGAP).

Dr. Chesler was an early 1970s abolitionist theorist and activist: She wrote about and delivered speeches which opposed rape, incest, pornography, sex and reproductive prostitution, and sex trafficking. She organized and/or participated in demonstrations outside the movie *Snuff*; outside Dorian's Red Hand to protest the murder of Jennifer Levin by Robert Chambers after a night of drinking there; organized repeated demonstrations outside the Hackensack, New Jersey courthouse where the Baby M hearings were underway and outside the surrogacy pimp Noel Keane's NYC clinic; outside the courthouse when Joel Steinberg was sentenced for the murder of Lisa Steinberg; and in numerous ways that concerned the trial of Aileen Carol Wuornos for which she assembled a team of expert witnesses which were never called upon.

She is the author of 20 books, including the feminist classic *Women and Madness*, as well as many other notable books including *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood*; *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody*; *Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M*; *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*; and *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*. After publishing *The New Anti-Semitism* (2003), she published *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom* (2005) and *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013), which won a National Jewish Book Award. In 2016, she published *Living History: On the Front Lines for Israel and the Jews 2003-2015*, in 2017 she published *Islamic Gender Apartheid: Exposing A Veiled War Against Women*, and in 2018, she published *A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killings, a Memoir: A Politically Incorrect Feminist*, and *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*.

Dr. Chesler has published four studies about honor-based violence, focusing on honor killing, and penned a position paper on why the West should ban the burqa; these studies have all appeared in *Middle East Quarterly*. Based on her studies, she has submitted affidavits for Muslim and ex-Muslim women who are seeking asylum or citizenship based on their credible belief that their families will honor kill them. She has archived most of her articles at her website: www.phyllis-chesler.com

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