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Women On Trial: Translating Femininity Through Journalism

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WOMEN ON TRIAL:
TRANSLATING FEMININITY THROUGH JOURNALISM

A Thesis Presented by
WILLIAM B. OLLAYOS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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WOMEN ON TRIAL:
TRANSLATING FEMININITY THROUGH JOURNALISM

A Thesis Presented by

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DEDICATION

For the Nasty Women who teach, inspire and fight back.
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I would like to thank my committee for their constant support in bringing this thesis to fruition. My chair, Moira Inghilleri, provided me with the direction and incredible revisions needed to keep my scope narrow and argument strong. Jessica Barr brought a strong perspective from her background in feminist theory that helped to connect the many details which comprise my project. Cathy Schlund-Vials, while serving wonderfully as an external member from the University of Connecticut, provided me with a font of resources to build the analytical framework that defines this thesis. I am grateful to all of them for their guidance and constant willingness to go above and beyond in support of their students. I feel more confident as a scholar and ready to tackle other academic pursuits after graduation.

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN ON TRIAL:
TRANSLATING FEMININITY THROUGH JOURNALISM

MAY 2017

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The focus of this thesis is on cultural translation as a means of understanding the relationship between sociocultural identity with respect to bourgeois white female sexuality and interpretations by news journalists, writers and filmmakers. The thesis brings translation scholar Lawrence Venuti’s description of foreign and domestic texts (2008) into conversation with Catherine Cole’s analysis of journalists as active interpreters of newsworthy events (2010) to support my view of the media as a translator of sociocultural identity. The thesis outlines the construction of bourgeois white femininity within the U.S. imaginary and a more detailed account of its direct impact upon journalistic production and reception. I accomplish this by analyzing the media treatment of two white females accused of murder whose criminal cases were brought into the public eye: Aileen Wuornos and Amanda Knox. I examine sociocultural expectations within the United States, as reflected in journalistic accounts, regarding appropriate ‘performances’ of bourgeois white femininity. Referring to the construction of bourgeois white femininity as a performative framework, I track its fabrication in media headlines, televised reports and articles of the Wuornos and Knox cases from sources like The New Yorker, Time, CNN and Fox News. My aim is to discover the different ideations, or translations, of this performative framework in written journalism and consider the repercussions of deviating from social expectations of bourgeois white
womanhood. I then examine documentaries and televised interviews of Wuornos and Knox (from the Discovery Channel, ABC News, Netflix and other sources) where the same performative framework appears within their cinematic depictions. My findings regarding the journalistic translations of bourgeois white femininity reveal a particular form of weaponization of the news media in U.S. society with respect to white women. I extend my discussion to a review of the 2016 presidential election and Democratic party candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton’s own vexing position within the news media as a bourgeois white woman who, throughout the campaign, was accused of criminal activity. By scrutinizing the proliferation of this particular performative framework by the media, I press for more reflective and unbiased journalistic coverage of women in the future.
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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT ON TRANSLATIONS OF

BOURGEOIS WHITE FEMININITY

Translation scholar Lawrence Venuti has argued that a translator’s task is to “signify the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text” when translating from the source language to the target audience (2008: 85). Translators must work to convey certain cultural customs, beliefs and values which appear in the original source text that may be unfamiliar to readers in the target culture (ibid.). The translator must become an ambassador of the foreign culture, directing readers to certain understandings of that culture as represented in the text. Venuti refers here to translators of literary texts who, he suggests, write for a “limited readership, an educated elite” (ibid.) with better access to literacy and education than the general population. The privilege and power of this elite group influences both the types of texts that are translated and the particular translation strategies used. Thus, in dissecting the intentionality behind a translator’s work, Venuti suggests that the values of the receiving culture – and of the elites, in particular – tend to “mediate every move in the translation and every reader’s response to it, including the perception of what is domestic or foreign” (ibid.).

Translation is thus understood as an intermediary process between an original text, in the broadest sense of this term, and the ways in which that text is both selected and interpreted by specific target audiences ‘in translation.’ With Venuti’s ideas regarding power and privilege in mind, this thesis will examine societal regard for certain cultural identities and how these are translated by and through powerful social institutions. In particular, it will
focus on the ‘performance’ of the sociocultural category ‘middle-class, white, female
criminals’1 engaged within the contemporary U.S. imaginary. It will analyze how women
identified in this way are translated in journalism through preconceived notions of bourgeois white femininity.

Two contemporary examples will serve as my case studies: Amanda Knox and Aileen Wuornos, both of whom were accused of murder and underwent very public trials over an extended period of time. These women were chosen for two reasons: first, they share similar sociocultural identities yet are also distinct (particularly along class lines), and second, comparable source materials (e.g. articles and books, film and television media) have been produced and remain publically available regarding their trials. Knox and Wuornos operated in comparable yet notably distinct spaces within the U.S. imaginary. Knox, a financially stable and strictly heterosexual woman, eventually achieved freedom from her accusers while Wuornos, a working-class woman who engaged in a same-sex relationship for most of her life, was put to death. Though they both possessed variations of what is generally understood to constitute bourgeois white femininity, their social differences led to remarkable variations in how they were portrayed to the public.

In 2007, Italian police forces arrested the U.S. college student Amanda Marie Knox for the murder of her white female roommate from the U.K., Meredith Kercher, sparking an international firestorm that continued until Knox was finally acquitted in 2015 (Staff 2015). The Kercher murder trial was fraught with controversy, including tainted DNA evidence,

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1 In referring to individuals who are accused of criminal activity throughout this thesis, I utilize the terms white and female according to Butler’s assertions in Gender Trouble (1999) regarding the intersection of race and gender.

2 Collins discusses the bourgeoisie as the middle economic class. Historically, the bourgeoisie connotes predominantly white populations considered more empowered than the working class and communities of color that experienced economic disadvantages (2000: 59). For the purposes of this thesis, I will utilize the terms bourgeoisie and middle class interchangeably.
accusations of illicit sexual activity and police brutality (Nadeau 2010). Knox stood at the center of the journalistic fervor, simultaneously demonized and lauded as a martyr by different news outlets. The portrayals of Knox in the press ranged from a murderous, sexual deviant to a wide-eyed innocent bullied by the Italian court system. Knox continues to operate in a vexed space within the U.S. imaginary; public opinion of Knox still contains many interpretations of how her identity played into her repeated guilty verdicts and ultimate release.

Aileen Wuornos gained infamy as one of few women sentenced to death and labeled a serial killer in the United States. In 1992, Wuornos was convicted of murdering seven men between 1989 and 1990 while working as a prostitute. She was given six death sentences and held in a Florida correctional institute and prison until her execution by lethal injection in 2002 (Reynolds 2004). She grew into a symbol of depravity as tales of her impoverished childhood, sexual abuse and drug usage came into the public eye (Wuornos 2004). Like Knox, her white female identity played largely into her portrayals by the media, with particular emphasis on her class status and sexuality. Public perception of both women’s actions as betrayals of sociocultural expectations for bourgeois white womanhood served to demonize them in the media.

Through the lens of identity politics, many scholars have explored the power of social institutions to translate different social and cultural identity constructions in specific ways in order to achieve certain aims (Collins 2000; Lavin 2010; Fincher 2014). My thesis contributes to this body of work by critically examining translations of bourgeois white femininity by different media outlets. Performance studies theorists such as Robert G. Lee

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3 Following further research from Butler (1999) as well as Collins (2000), femininity encompasses the gender performance of criminals who present as female.
and Karen Shimakawa have claimed the importance of “placing cultural meaning on the body” via the construction of a performative framework (Shimakawa 2002: 2). My thesis tracks the performative framework of bourgeois white femininity as expressed through journalistic manipulations of real life events in the cases of Knox and Wuornos, linking it to related sociocultural expectations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. It investigates the influence of the news media in published articles as well as in televised interviews and documentaries to show how these individuals’ identities became associated with particular cultural understandings of femininity and were publicly ‘stage-managed’ through different forms of media representation. I argue that the journalistic coverage of their trials invoked a pre-determined performative framework of bourgeois white femininity with respect to these white female subjects, ultimately manipulating the public’s perception. My intention with this thesis is to therefore explore this manipulation of the performative framework as a process of translation beyond the written word (including a study of headlines and articles as well as documentaries and televised interviews).

The thesis begins with a brief exploration of how cultural expectations of race, class, gender, and sexuality have intersected historically to construct a nuanced and popularized version of bourgeois white womanhood. This version became the lens through which the behavior of Knox and Wuornos throughout their criminal trials was viewed by the public eye, eliciting social acceptance or disapproval. The first chapter establishes the theory behind the performative framework for my reading of these women as bourgeois white women and as criminals, drawing on the theoretical work of Judith Butler (1999), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Susan Koshy (2004), Michael Rogin (1996), Robert G. Lee (1999), José Esteban Muñoz (1999) and Karen Shimakawa (2002). The second chapter explores the written

In comparing these women through a performative framework (based on sociocultural understandings within the United States regarding bourgeois white women), I also highlight the forces of power that help to create and sustain assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality. The examination of these three women’s experience in the court of public opinion demonstrates how systemic imbalances of power, constructed particularly along racial and gender lines and written into institutions like the media, sustain oppressive social and cultural norms. By entering the public eye under criminal suspicion, Knox and Wuornos became particularly vulnerable to the negative force of cultural translation. In the same way, Hillary Clinton’s run for the presidency brought many aspects of her identity (and the negative opinions of her ability to serve in the position) to the forefront of U.S. history.
CHAPTER 1

THE PERFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK:
GENDER, RACE, CLASS AND SEXUALITY

With a keen regard for the connection between gender and journalism, this chapter explores the following essential questions: how is the performative structure of bourgeois white womanhood represented and reproduced in U.S. journalism and documentary film media? In particular, why did Knox and Wuornos as white, female criminals (who deviated from one another according to their class and sexuality) and Clinton as a white, female politician occupy such a vexing and noteworthy space in the realm of journalism and, by extension, the U.S. imaginary? The societal expectations of bourgeois white womanhood evident in the representations of these three women across various media platforms indicate the institutionalization of sociocultural demands for bourgeois white femininity. Specific behaviors, actions and life paths become ascribed to white, middle-class female bodies. In the public sphere, this performative framework is particularly open to manipulation, construing certain female bodies according to preconceived sociocultural notions, as well as influencing journalistic production where specific representations of gender, race, class and sexuality proliferate.

The media produces articles, interviews and documentaries that reify stereotypes about white, middle-class women. This act of proliferating sociocultural expectations (or, for the purposes of this thesis, ‘translating femininity’) is explored in film critic Jun Tang’s (2008) assessment of the misrepresentation of Chinese culture in Disney’s 1998 film *Mulan.*
Tang underscores the implications of adjusting a foreign concept according to domesticized stereotypes by pointing out the many gross amalgamations of ancient Chinese customs contained in the film. Historical and cultural inaccuracies “serve to construct a ‘Chinese’ flavor” in order to make the foreign setting more relatable to a global audience (2008: 152). Tang draws on Venuti’s description of foreignization to argue that predominant ideologies within a target culture become a lens through which to read the source text. Specifically, he identifies the role of homogenization in the creation of stereotypes that become engrained in cultural artifacts. In the film, the impact of globalization prompted the filmmakers to translate the source “Hua Mulan” legend by including stock characteristics drawn from an international imaginary. Chronological inauthenticity and ethnic caricature constitute familiar though undeniably racist tropes throughout the film. Despite the cultural inexactitudes of Mulan, Tang argues, the expectations of domestic audiences are met and their preconceived notions of what Chineseness looks like are emboldened (ibid.: 53).

Under pressure from a worldwide market, consumer demand often requires strategic translations of foreign cultures, artifacts or bodies in order to find acceptance within domestic spheres (ibid.: 150). In an effort to appeal to such standardizing preferences, Mulan is rife with perversions of China that produce a recognizable flavor of the source culture. For example, the Imperial City of 1420 is featured alongside the Great Wall of the Qin Dynasty (246–206 B.C.), while Western romanticisms replace traditionally Eastern comportments (ibid.: 152). When the character Mulan gives her father the emperor’s sword, his disposal of the object contrasts deeply with ancient Chinese reverence for imperial authority (ibid.). Tang’s catalogue of cultural inexactitudes proves that “Disney’s Mulan is not a faithful English reproduction of the Chinese legend” despite its perception by the global audience as
a realistic cultural artifact (ibid.: 149). The globalization of the film industry demands “a product designed to appeal to a global audience” instead of a faithful portrayal of the source culture (ibid.). Broadening consumer demand contributes to the globalized film industry’s influence on cultural translation in much the same way that political institutions wield translational power over social identity categories. Tang’s agreement with Venuti’s assertions about the boundary between foreign and domestic spheres insinuates that the inclusion of cultural stereotypes allows a domestic audience to easily accept and recognize a foreign source.

Similar forces of translation are at play in the journalism surrounding white female criminals. In both cases, homogenization enforces stereotypical regard for different populations based upon race, class, gender and sexuality. Homogenization can therefore also be used to understand how views of gender, race, class and sexuality are narrowed, concretized and proliferated throughout U.S. society. Cultural translation is a powerful means by which institutions manufacture expectations of certain sociocultural identities. Just as fixtures within the U.S. imaginary of ‘Chineseness’ elicit a predictable response from viewers of Mulan (ibid.: 153), systemic understandings of bourgeois white womanhood give substance and cultural authority to journalistic narratives.

Journalism serves as a tool for the translation of popularized ideals of bourgeois white womanhood by endorsing a particular interpretation of events. Collins’s phrase “dominant ideologies of American womanhood” points to how the domestic U.S. imaginary understands middle-class white women to embody certain values as prescribed by “patriarchal power and authority” (2008:28). In situating translation within this sphere, I examine how journalists imbue their broadcasts with specific, sociocultural expectations of bourgeois white
femininity. They act as cultural translators in manipulating the master narrative, presenting the field of journalism as a key platform for the propagation and ascription of certain interpretations of sociocultural identity upon real-world individuals.

Muñoz has argued that “the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny” embolden a master narrative of bourgeois white womanhood within the United States. (1999: 5). He alludes to the ability of social institutions (such as popular culture and the news media) to maintain control over women by popularizing and propagating specific representations of womanhood. Muñoz identifies a list of cultural logics that create a particular understanding within the greater U.S. imaginary of what it means to be a bourgeois white woman. Muñoz asserts that the problematic logics of white normativity and misogyny work to strengthen state power and proliferate a dominant regard for white femininity (ibid.). Although Muñoz attributes considerable privilege to members of white communities, his inclusion of the term ‘misogyny’ highlights the continued oppression of female bodies. White women may benefit from the privilege ascribed to their race, but their intersections with other identity factors, particularly class and gender, make them susceptible to oppressive norms. The influence of dominant views of white femininity played a strong role in manipulating the portrayals of Knox and Wuornos, with the same problems of cultural translation outlined by Tang (though in the context of the news media and not the film industry) evident in the coverage of both their criminal trials.

The Private Language of Femininity

Butler (1999) and Collins (2000) contend that the societal prevalence of antiquated gender constructs continues to influence the public perception of womanhood. Femininity is already
understood to be the essence of womanhood thought to be controlled by each individual female body but that is actually shaped by modes of socialization that begin at birth. According to their work, these modes of socialization teach young girls how to perform their gender as they mature into adults. Girls subsequently learn how to act based upon preconceived notions of proper female behavior. The same homogenizing forces that impact Tang’s (2008) analysis of Mulan create the modes of socialization taught to children. Butler (1999) and Collins (2000) therefore agree that the process of homogenization applies similarly to performances of femininity, as only specific actions are deemed socially acceptable or ‘ladylike.’ The specific expectations of femininity that proliferate within society encourage young girls to perform their gender according to certain deep-seated strategies, demanding that women translate their gender along systemically homogenized understandings of acceptable female behavior.

Translation scholar Luise von Flotow concurs that the construction of gender is inherent to “public and private life” and is an inescapable influence “via images of women” that fills the lives of young girls (1997: 6, 12) and teaches them specific ways to perform their gender as they mature into adults. Subjugation by the “dominant influences” which saturate a child’s home “culture, subculture [or] ethnic group” compels her to become “the final product ‘woman’” (ibid.: 5). The term ‘product’ underscores the transformative process of young girls coming of age; input from cultural artifacts (such as the news media, articles, and televised interviews) directly influences their performance of womanhood as adults.

Cultural critic Lavin sees the term “woman” as an “umbrella term for a great variety of intersectional identities, ones marked by race, class, gender, ethnicity, employment, sexual orientations, [and] familial relations” in which a “range of behaviors and self-representations
already exist and are performed” (2010: 5). Lavin’s list highlights the simultaneous divisions and interconnections of these identity factors; each sector interacts with the others to create von Flotow’s final ‘product’ woman (1997: 5). Lavin also underscores the distinction between expectations of femininity and a woman’s actual behavior. Lavin and von Flotow agree that cultural understandings of womanhood are dependent upon external influences and thus act as lenses to understand, approve of, or reject the multitudinous lifestyles of female bodies. Lavin states that “culture functions as both the enforcer of accepted norms and the hopeful arena of change” (2010: 4). She scrutinizes women’s “deep relationships between culture and experience” (ibid.: 6) as a means of articulating what von Flotow refers to as women’s “private language” (von Flotow 1997: 12). Both scholars are concerned with the dominant normal, or Lavin’s “accepted norms” (indicating the societal supremacy of bourgeois white males) that appear in a variety of ideations and that constitute the systems of oppression that seek to regulate performances of identity (Lavin 2010: 4).

By behaving according to certain deep-seated strategies, women essentially translate their gender in accordance with dominant understandings of normalcy; translation in this sense can be understood as “a trope to describe what women do when they enter the public sphere; they translate their private language” (von Flotow 1997: 12). The term ‘private language’ connotes femininity, the essence of womanhood held by each individual female body, but nonetheless shaped by the modes of socialization that begin at birth where one trait, gender, intersects with others to render a framework of expected performativity. A woman’s decision to translate her ‘private language’ is therefore not truly a means of self-actualization, but yet another instance of social policing. Furthermore, translations of gender can be regarded in two forms: traditional manipulations of rhetorical strategies that construct
fictional women, and the metaphoric translation of real-world gender performances as influenced by dominant cultural norms.

**Constructing Whiteness**

Critical race theorists explore how the construction of whiteness has drastically altered U.S. society’s understandings of its diverse population. Lee offers strong legal evidence from the turn of the nineteenth century that describes race as “not a category of nature” but as “an ideology through which unequal distributions of wealth and power are naturalized – justified in the language of biology and genealogy” (1999: 2). Lee’s assertion endorses the views expressed by other scholars that race along with other identity factors are social constructs (not biological determinants) that result from external influences. He specifically cites a 1922 Supreme Court case *Takao Ozawa v. United States* as a “prime example of this social constructedness of race” founded upon the designated of “yellow as the racial color of the Oriental” (1997: 2). Takao Ozawa, who emigrated from Japan, was denied the right to become a naturalized citizen because his skin was “of a paler hue than many European immigrants” who had already been legally accepted as white (1997: 2). The court’s determination that Ozawa’s skin tone could not pass as white (unlike other immigrants from European nations who were identified as passably white) therefore contributed to the social spread of colorism, or discrimination based upon skin tone. The coloristic focus upon Ozawa’s skin tone therefore reinforces the notion of the constructed nature of whiteness, wherein an institution can deem a certain hue as socially acceptable while still rejecting others (and robbing those rejected bodies of the rights and privileges granted via U.S. citizenship).
In an extension of Lee’s argument, performance studies theorist Shimawaka then analyzes whiteness as an exotifying force that renders “Chinese Americans as fundamentally different from (and inferior to) a ‘norm’” (2002: 2) wherein the term ‘norm’ constitutes white U.S. Americans. Similarly to Lavin’s list of sociological factors, Shimakawa describes the “collapsing of nationality, race, ethnicity, and bodily identity” that became “popularized in the nineteenth century” via “newspaper editorials, legal decisions, literature, and theatre of the period” (ibid.). Shimakawa highlights Lavin’s understanding of intersectional identities within the context of cultural production in his exploration of “the production and performance of Asian Americanness” within “dominant U.S. culture – a discursive formation that both describes a demographic category and calls that category into being” (ibid.). Asian Americans, and other nonwhite populations by extension, are therefore understood as intrinsically different from normatively white people due to their existence outside the ‘demographic category’ or ‘dominant U.S. culture’ (ibid.).

Muñoz outlines the expectations of white normativity, a set of cultural logics that reinforce middle-class white men as the standard of social acceptability and leaves all other persons as “other” and often undesirable (1999: xii). Thinking again about Venuti’s discussion of foreignization, wherein certain markers of a translated text make it recognizably foreign to a domestic audience, the social forces that render Shimakawa’s Chinese Americans as foreign undesirables simultaneously sets specific expectations for domestic persons – in this case, white bodies. Race constructs “non-white” persons as foreigners or, in Lee’s terms, “aliens, outsiders who are inside” with the attached understanding that “aliens are always a source of pollution” (1997: 3). This development encapsulates the impact of the domestic versus foreign dichotomy as applied to race
relations; the deeming of nonwhite persons as negative and unwanted asserts the virtue and desirability of white bodies. It is important to note the demonization of nonwhite persons within the legal system because every undesirable trait ascribed to foreigners creates a contrasting expectation for white bodies in the U.S.

The foundational notion of nineteenth century miscegenation between white women and black men, which insisted that white women be “‘scrupulously and justifiably’ forbidden to African American men” (Rogin 1996: 6), is another case in point. The anti-miscegenation laws which enforced racial segregation along romantic and sexual lines relied upon “the constructedness of categories of race, gender and nationality” in order to determine which populations could not interbreed (Koshy 2004: I). Venuti’s dichotomy of domestic versus foreign can be seen in the historical taboo regarding the coupling of white women (the familiar, domestic object) and black men (the unknown, foreign subject) in the U.S. imaginary. People living in the United States began to navigate their lives around this prohibition and the legal restrictions that were enacted, thus reinforcing homogenized expectations of race and gender. This capacity of the state to ban relationships according to subjective determinants is a clear example of cultural translation; powerful social institutions are able to translate public perception, deeming some relationships as ‘illegal’ or ‘unworthy.’ These institutions, such as the law, are therefore successful in manipulating mass opinion and affecting public policy. Miscegenation allowed the legal system to reduce white women to innocent, helpless objects that needed protecting from the subject of malicious intent: black men.

These examples of domestic and foreign categorical binaries can also be seen in policies with regard to gender. The U.S. Supreme Court case Muller v. Oregon that occurred
in 1908, prior to *Takao Ozawa v. United States* in 1922, challenged an Oregon law that prohibited women from working more than ten hours a day as unconstitutional. The documents of the case, housed in Cornell University Law School’s Legal Information Institute, list “the reasons for the reduction of the working day to ten hours” including “(a) the physical organization of women, (b) her maternal functions, (c) the rearing and education of the children, (d) the maintenance of the home” (*Muller v. Oregon*). The Supreme Court unanimously agreed in favor of the decision, supporting the law that limited the length of women’s working hours and setting a precedent that endorsed gender discrimination while hindering progress for women in the workplace. This Supreme Court case reflects the institutionalization of stereotypes about women, endorsing the sexist perception of their commitment to household and familial duties. Additionally, the precedent set by the Supreme Court supported a general notion of weakness in regard to women; in both mental and physical terms, women were deemed not able to work for more than ten hours a day. Just as *Takao Ozawa v. United States* relied upon the constructedness of race (white vs. non-white), *Muller v. Oregon* drew from generalized expectations regarding women as wives, mothers and homemakers (male vs. female). The foreignization of ‘nonwhite’ and ‘female’ bodies takes place through the category and reification of ‘white, heterosexual male’ bodies which “come to matter or function as centralized within social discourse” (Shimakawa 2002: 4).

The Creation of a Bourgeois Sensibility

Lee (1999) and Rogin (1996) have both suggested a link between race and the creation of the category ‘middle-class’ as a response to immigration into the United States that took place in the nineteenth century. Lee argues for the importance of understanding class as a
sociocultural identity and the effects it has on “the structures, relations, and meaning of families, gender and race” (Lee 1999: 11) in the U.S. imaginary. Rogin observes that “by 1850, the working class was largely born outside the United States” (Rogin 1996: 56). The initial creation of the working class was characterized by its “foreignness” in the form of large numbers of immigrants entering the domestic arena for the first time (ibid.). After the Second World War, a later shift took place during the second half of the twentieth century in the form of the “Fordist Compromise,” creating a new relationship between labor forces and management as “a working class that had the social characteristics of a middle class.”

Encouraging a form of capitalism touted by Henry Ford, the Fordist Compromise ensured “permanent entitlements for the new ‘middle’ class” (Lee 1999: 154) including benefits such as financing for education, unemployment insurance as well as the “reinvigoration of the patriarchal nuclear family” (ibid.: 155).

In contrast to what was afforded to the emergent (mostly white) bourgeoisie, however, the common laborer continued to be a “morally suspect category […] often unmarried, migratory, and poor” (ibid.: 57). The divide that Lee draws between the working class and the middle class, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, in many ways mirrors the binary of Venuti’s foreign versus domestic characterization of translation. As Lee describes the historical tendency for working-class communities to find employment as day laborers, he explains the creation of stereotypes that connect low-income populations with literal brutishness, physicality and, by extension, moral depravity. In contrast, expectations of the bourgeoisie are of a heightened intellect, cleanliness and moral superiority. Within this dichotomy, the category of ‘bourgeois white woman’ occupied an incredibly virtuous positioning within the U.S. imaginary, with clear expectations regarding their comportment
as upright and moral. This does not mean that actual bourgeois white women were without struggles as a sociocultural population. Their position within the U.S. imaginary was and is problematic where they are depicted as equal beneficiaries of Lee’s idealized list of guarantees of the middle class: insured income, privileged access to education, intact nuclear families and domestic bliss.

Queering the Framework

The final component of the performative framework, sexuality, draws on similar expectations of ‘normalcy’ as outlined above. In most societies, categories and constructions of class, race and gender presuppose heterosexuality despite the actual identities of their members. The same principles of otherness and its negative connotations therefore extend to the conversation around gender and, relatedly, sexuality. Putting Lee into conversation with Muñoz adds a queer level of expectations for the performative framework of bourgeois white femininity. Muñoz previously outlined “heteronormativity” as an “ideological formation” that is “not linked to predetermined biological coordinates” despite popular belief (1999: xiii). Muñoz supplements the dominance of heteronormativity by writing, “with hate crimes and legislation aimed at queers and people of color institutionalized as state protocols, the act of performing and theatricalizing queerness in public takes on ever multiplying significance”(ibid.: 1). Muñoz refers here to the 1986 legislation of Bowers v. Hardwick, a U.S. Supreme Court case that criminalized oral and anal sex between consenting adults and, according to Muñoz, “efficiently dissolved the right to privacy of all gays and lesbians” (ibid.). His assertion about public versus private performance in the context of queer theatre underscores the subversive nature of nonheteronormative behavior; public exhibitions of
homosexuality drastically contrast with the heterosexual expectations of the U.S. imaginary.

Lee offers further historicization of heteronormativity by describing the “Victorian Cult of Domesticity” which sought to establish “an increasingly binary and naturalized code of gender and sexuality” meant to “restore order to sexual behavior” (Lee 1999: 88). The “doctrine of True Womanhood” originated in the nineteenth century and persisted into modern U.S. society as an understanding of “sexual passion in woman as unnatural, deviant, and a marker of degraded lower-class status” while constructing “the bourgeois family as a private sphere of chastity and piety” (ibid.). Lee further positions white women as the bearers of this doctrine due to the labeling of foreign bodies as “an erotic threat to domestic tranquility” within the Western literary tradition of Orientalism (ibid.). Muñoz’s structuring of queer behavior as a subversive public display therefore challenges the U.S. demand for privacy around sexual activity.

The avowal of privacy under the cult of domesticity gave further weight to the Bowers v. Hardwick decision that forced queer bodies to challenge the dominant heteronormative norm, not only as homosexual beings but also by thrusting their arguably private comportment into the public arena. Lee and Muñoz both perceive the U.S. imaginary as including an image of bourgeois white women as essentially asexual (but romantically inclined towards men), dedicated to their chastity and only willing to privately engage in heterosexual activity for the purposes of reproduction. This two-dimensional, hollow depiction of bourgeois white women (which assumes both privilege and a commitment to domestic bliss) also requires their devout obligation to heterosexuality and their rejection of sexual lust. Applying Venuti’s foreign versus domestic dichotomy, non-heterosexual bodies thus become viewed as ‘foreign’ and potential purveyors of depravity.
CHAPTER II

CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS VIA U.S. JOURNALISM

Journalists are active intermediaries between an occurrence and the public perception of that same event. For example, Catherine Cole identifies how representatives of the media reporting on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission became key actors in the process of cultural translation (2010: 66, 67). She notes that reporters maintained a capacity for information distribution parallel to literary translators, as they claimed ownership over stories they reported to a particular audience through the selection of specific aspects of the TRC testimonies. Cole’s work supports Venuti’s (2008) view of translation, in the broadest sense of the term, as a connection between an inciting moment and a target audience. Cole observed that journalistic control over what information entered the public sphere acted as a form of manipulation of events, creating a particular perception of the TRC proceedings for the target audience in the articles, news broadcasts and documentaries produced by the media. Like the interpreters who initiated certain translation strategies at the Commission, reporters were at once audience members and active participants in the trials on which they reported. The public thus became a secondary witness, able to form opinions only based on the details shared by the media.

Drawing from mass media scholars Patricia Bradley (2003: 176, 196) and Meaghan Morris (2006: 81, 175), I argue that journalists, as primary witnesses, are in a position to selectively adjust (and gender) reports that include female bodies. They are, therefore, endowed with considerable social power to manipulate widespread understanding of such
events. Cole’s description of broadcasting as a “theatre of power” (2010: 65) is a useful reminder that journalists can and do act as biased intermediaries to reshape media coverage. My focus in this chapter is specifically on the journalism surrounding criminal trials within the United States since 2000, the political agendas of certain news sources – strengthened by their desire to boost their readership – with respect to homogenized understandings of femininity, and how these influence their portrayals of criminal trials.

Turning first to print journalism, Bradley interrogates the role of the mass magazine industry in homogenizing perceptions of womanhood “with an appeal to women across lines of class, color, and ethnicity” by citing commonalities “of house and home, as the women’s service magazines would have it” (Bradley 2003: 176). Bradley specifies how the mass production of written media endorses specific views of womanhood through the “familiar women’s magazine theme that women at home had to be mistresses of many arts” and examines cover art, editorials and other articles to show that “mass media meanings could exist beyond their surfaces” (ibid.). Bradley’s mention of ‘meanings’ that travel ‘beyond’ magazine ‘surfaces’ is a subtle reference to the proliferation of specific norms for middle-class white women that permeate U.S. culture and history.

The concept of meaning making offers insight into how journalists allow their words to simultaneously borrow and endorse ideals of womanhood from within the U.S. imaginary. The criminologist Ngaire Naffine states that writers, journalists and reporters are “meaning-makers” who are “obliged to deal with meanings already constituted (by others)” while playing “an active part in reconstituting those meanings” (Naffine 1996: 122). Naffine therefore agrees with Cole’s (2010) assertion that journalists are active intermediaries between an occurrence and retellings of that event; journalists are in the business of helping
their audiences make meaning about newsworthy stories. The role of journalists as shapers of reality both creates and calls into question the possibility of their influencing public perception and propagating opinionated notions of particular events masquerading as the unbiased truth. Mark Seltzer furthers this perception of the media’s direct influence upon public perception by adding that “the reality of the known world is the reality of the mass media” (2007, 22).

Naffine further indicates the possibility of journalists inserting permutations of the performative framework into their work (in other words, allowing sociocultural expectations for white femininity to influence their reporting). As described earlier, “if the making of meaning is already a creative process, then there is no hard division between the creative nature of writing about crime fact and the creativity involved in crime fiction” (Naffine 1996: 122). Naffine’s concept of ‘creativity’ therefore creates a selective distance between the subject of a news story and the report itself; intentionally or not, journalists can adjust, gender, glamorize or vilify aspects of the narrative that ultimately informs the audience’s perception of a middle-class, white, female criminal.

In my archive of journalistic articles regarding Knox and Wuornos, the language used in headlines and articles to glamorize, martyr or vilify these women highlights multiple instances in which the performative framework of bourgeois white femininity is apparent, acting as an undeniable influence on the journalistic production surrounding these alleged criminals. According to Naffine, “to understand crime is to engage in a positive act of creation – something requiring invention and imagination” (Naffine 1996: 122). In other words, public engagement with the media coverage of criminal trials and investigations requires, at times, creativity on the part of the journalists. The choices a reporter makes
regarding what details to include in their coverage allow their audience to make meaning out of the events and can, therefore, ultimately contribute to already existing stereotypes regarding proper performances of femininity. Naffine intends to stress the agency of these journalists who document such cases in which they create arguably fictitious characters for public consumption out of real-world women.

Amanda Knox: Pretty Lady, Strong Enough to Kill
Amanda Marie Knox was born on July 9, 1987 in Seattle, Washington. During her junior year at the University of Washington, she studied abroad in Perugia, Italy where she lived with her roommate, Meredith Kercher. Kercher was a white female student from the United Kingdom who was found dead in their shared apartment on November 1, 2007 (Burleigh 2011: xvii). On November 6, 2007, Knox was arrested with her boyfriend at the time, Raffaele Sollecito, as well as Diya “Patrick” Lumumba, the Congolese owner of the pub where Knox worked while studying in Perugia (Staff 2015). Lumumba was ultimately freed while Rudy Guede, a resident of Perugia born in the Ivory Coast, was convicted of Kercher’s murder in a separate trial.

On November 9, 2007, a transcript from “The Big Story With John Gibson and Heather Nauert” (a television program that premiered in 2000 on the Fox News Channel) was published on the Fox News website. Fox News holds a reputation of appealing to U.S.-based readers with a “conservative slant” and a general preference for the Republican political party (Compton 2004: 204). The headline of the article read “U.S. Student Studying Abroad Accused of Stabbing Roommate to Death” and opened with the phrase: “Every year thousands of kids beg their parents to let them study abroad. Those parents, though, may feel
differently about it after hearing this story” (Nauert 2007). The article immediately targets an audience of parents, establishing the forthcoming news about Kercher’s murder as a warning tale (and a must-read article) for any readers who have children. The article then posits that Kercher “was stabbed to death while fighting off a sex attack” and describes how “Knox says she is innocent but she has already changed her story once to the police” (ibid.). Running alongside photographs of Knox, the phrase ‘sex attack’ immediately contrasts with the widespread expectation of middle-class white women as chaste; instead of portraying Knox as an abstinent and therefore socially acceptable woman, the article evokes public outrage over her perceived sexual aggression.

Thinking particularly about the doctrine of True Womanhood as discussed by Lee (1999), bourgeois white women were historically held to be private, calm and without sexual passion. The incendiary term ‘sex attack’ coupled with the description of Knox’s changing story (and the implication that she is lying to the police) condemns her as an amoral vixen in just the first few lines of the article. Furthermore, the introductory call for Fox News readers to protect their children casts this crime as a violation of family values. Knox’s alleged actions are perceived as drastic contradictions to the cultural tenets of femininity, which the U.S. imaginary argues should be safeguarded by women. The Fox News reporters appealed to their readers’ familial sensibilities while constructing Knox as the opposite of socially accepted norms for middle-class white women. Their plea to parental worries harkens back to Lee’s intersectional view of race, class, gender and sexuality as culminating in the “patriarchal nuclear family” (ibid.: 155) and therefore positions Knox as a threat to that sanctity. This viewpoint then serves as a roadmap for journalists to transform witnessed events into ‘characterizing moments’ for public perception of Knox. In the process of
‘making meaning’ and through the art of ‘creativity,’ as understood by Naffine’s discussion regarding the distribution of crime fact (1996: 122), Knox loses her autonomous ability to define herself in the public eye and, instead, becomes a character with traits determined (and translated) by the media.

I am not arguing that all journalists intentionally attempted to promote a specific view of the Knox trial (though I do believe that some journalists failed at the unbiased presentation of facts in their reports). Nevertheless, maneuvers in journalists’ word choices and the angles with which they present a case irrefutably ascribe to agreements and disavowals of the widespread ideology of ‘proper’ bourgeois white femininity that permeates the U.S. imaginary. Following (or rejecting) these set expectations can evoke strong reactions from the public at large. For example, Knox’s changing testimony (as referenced in the Fox News article) was later proven to be the result of police brutality and mercilessly long interrogation sessions (Burleigh 2011). However, damage to her public reputation was already done, as the media characterized her as untrustworthy and thus contributed to mass cultural disapproval for her actions.

Others news sources ran similar articles around the start of the Kercher murder investigation that seemed to preemptively imply Knox’s guilt. Published in December of 2007, an MSNBC article by correspondent Dennis Murphy entitled “Deadly Exchange” detailed the gritty drama thus far, including an attempt at examining the media’s role in vilifying Knox. After only a month into the case, Murphy’s article identified that “the media had a field day when it found Amanda's MySpace webpage. Her online nickname was ‘Foxy Knoxy’” and she “posted a leggy glam shot of herself” (Murphy 2007). The fascination with sexuality permeated the rest of the case; after the autopsy confirmed that Kercher was the
victim of sexual violence, the tabloids responded en masse by printing the name ‘Foxy Knoxy’ across their publications (Bell 2010). As Murphy states, Knox’s social media presence became a weapon against her in the court of public opinion, allowing her previously innocent posts to pathologize her as the “the American with the ice-cold eyes” (ibid.).

Murphy’s article is not without his own editorializing, as he adds that “Amanda cracked and came out with a totally new story” (Murphy 2007) in response to her arrest. Similar to the Fox News article, the insinuation of deceit and of Amanda’s mental ‘cracking’ contrasts with the expectation of middle-class white women as virtuous. The journalistic portrayal of Knox as rebuffing social expectation encourages a specific response from MSNBC’s readers, building her as untrustworthy because of her disavowal of cultural norms and guilty by extension. Although the journalist may not have intended to suggest that Knox did indeed murder her roommate, proliferating the gendered notions of sexuality in tandem with the view of Knox as dishonest drew an aggressive response from their readership. His portrayal of Knox contributed to widespread perceptions of her dishonesty, ultimately contributing to the international pressure that demanded she be punished for Kercher’s murder (despite the lack of concrete DNA evidence). Murphy concluded that “if and when charges are brought a three judge panel will render a verdict based on hard forensic evidence and not blogs and YouTube postings” (ibid.). However, on December 4, 2009, despite the lack of credible DNA evidence and under immense public scrutiny from the Italian and international press, Knox received her first guilty conviction and was sentenced to twenty-six years in prison. Sollecito, her then-boyfriend, was given only twenty-five years (Burleigh 2011: xxvii).

The discussions of sexuality throughout Knox’s trials were tied closely with her
perceived physical attractiveness, as summarized by the title of journalist Nina Burleigh’s nonfictional account: *The Fatal Gift of Beauty* (2011). Burleigh describes the media’s fascination with “the theory that the pretty girl only looked naïve, trusting, and innocent” and how “reporters with wads of cash to soften up sources scoured the town looking for anyone who could share the real goods on the pretty psychopath” (2011: 53). Muñoz has discussed the standards of white normativity (1999), a notion supported by other scholars, that underscores how cultural platforms such as the media and the entertainment industry label pale skin and typically European features as more desirable than the standard phenotypes for people descended from other geographic areas. “Even more fundamental to American whiteness,” adds Shimakawa about white normativity, “are the conceptual or perceptual ways law has constructed race in the United States” (2002: 5). Lee’s description of the 1922 Supreme Court case *Takao Ozawa v. United States* illustrates how the color of one’s skin could once be used to deny citizenship (1997: 2). Although Shimakawa specifically labels law as a tool for social construction, I extend that definition to also include the role of the media in endorsing the supremacy and general desirability of whiteness within the U.S. imaginary. By building Knox as the opposite of social expectations for femininity, vilifying her as a sexual deviant while playing up the desirability of her appearance, the media succeeds in casting her as catastrophic figure, a woman who could have been as successful as she was beautiful if not for her murderous heart.

The tragedy and allure of the Amanda Knox character made for a truly captivating, though largely fictional, story that attracted readers by giving a more evocative and publically engaging angle to the media outlets covering her trial. The media engaged in a similar act of cultural translation as the precedents set by Supreme Court cases *Takao Ozawa*
v. United States, Muller v. Oregon and Bowers v. Hardwick, wherein a powerful institution (such as the law or journalism) determined socially acceptable performances of intangible sociocultural factors (such as race, sexuality and gender). With both the Supreme Court cases and the journalistic production around Knox’s trial, sociocultural identity became a tangible force that could be manipulated. Just as laws institutionalized notions of bourgeois white women as desirably pretty, weak and heterosexual, the media also served to ground and proliferate the performative framework vis-à-vis specific views of middle-class, white, female criminals. Burleigh therefore highlights how social expectations informed the media’s storyline of Knox as a ‘pretty girl’ who was really a ‘pretty psychopath’ and therefore an ardent repudiation of what readers wanted her to be (2011: 53).

Naffine further contextualizes the discussion regarding sexuality and white female criminals in order to highlight the role of sexual violence in understandings of the Kercher murder investigation and the subsequent condemnation of Knox. Naffine states that “our understandings of [rape] depends on certain critical assumptions about the nature of relations between the sexes” and that “our understanding is a product of a certain way of looking at heterosexuality that can be constructed quite differently from a feminist perspective” (Naffine 1996: 122). Naffine’s description of heterosexuality and cultural assumptions about the relationships between men and women further explains the media firestorm around Knox’s trial. Not only did her alleged engagement in a malicious ‘sex attack’ violate the standard presumptions of middle-class white women as virtuously abstinent, the queer angle of a woman-on-woman sex crime additionally disrupted the mass cultural presumption of her heteronormativity.

Knox’s sentence was one year longer than that of her boyfriend’s, who was
considered equally guilty of murdering Kercher at the time of sentencing; the court ascribed the extra year in Knox’s sentencing to perjury, a result of a lie she told during her brutal interrogation by the Italian police force (Burleigh 2011: xxvii). Despite their shared guilt, Sollecito never achieved the same level of notoriety as Knox, particularly in the United States. While Knox’s status as a U.S. citizen likely bred a greater sense of connection with U.S.-based audiences, the heightened level of her punishment in comparison to Sollecito’s nevertheless indicates a heavier sense of mass disapproval. Knox’s betrayal of social expectations evoked a more aggressive response from the court of public opinion and, subsequently, the literal court of justice.

Knox was finally declared innocent by Italy’s highest court in March 2015. On September 8, 2015, The Washington Post ran an article entitled, “Amanda Knox verdict explained by top Italian court in final, final word on epic case” by Justin Moyer. The doubling of the word ‘final’ plays upon Knox’s repeated convictions and sentencing over the years. The article read altogether less abrasively than the press during the height of Knox’s trial; gone are the blatant accusations of her sexual deviance and general maliciousness. Instead, the characterizations are more subtle, as Moyer opens by stating that Knox “by some accounts, badly behaved” (2015), raising the question of which of Knox’s actions he finds unconscionable. However, the rest of the text sticks strictly to the facts of the case, outlining Knox’s repeated convictions and the court’s final decision that “that there was no evidence Knox had committed the crime and that the international spotlight helped derail the investigation” (Moyer 2015). The ‘international spotlight’ encompasses pressure from the media at large, which condemned Knox for her violation of social expectation and demanded repercussions from the court system.
Moyer also quotes Knox and her supporters, including a snippet from her 2013 memoir *Waiting To Be Heard*, “What if I hadn’t gone on a campaign to have casual sex?” and a 2011 tweet from the then presidential candidate Donald Trump, “Everyone should boycott Italy if Amanda Knox is not freed---she is totally innocent” (Moyer 2015). The inclusion of both quotations are an odd pairing, as Moyer uses Knox’s own words to dredge up the accusations of her sexual promiscuity despite the court’s findings. Additionally, Trump’s tweet was issued in 2011, long before the 2015 verdict and publication of Moyer’s article. Knox never specifically thanked Trump and the inclusion of his tweet in an article about Knox’s acquittal seems out of place. At the publication date of the article, Trump was a truly controversial figure as the Republican frontrunner in the 2016 presidential race; his macho façade was documented in as many articles as Knox’s purported lechery (Sexton 2016). Including his tweet in the documentation of Knox’s new freedom is, superficially, a nod to his rising public persona and involvement in the mass discourse around her numerous trials. However, the alignment between Knox and Trump in Moyer’s article also plays off the notion of female weakness. Moyer reminds his audience that Knox once was a sexual deviant and then lends credence to the verdict by borrowing from the growing public approval of, and trust in, Trump’s masculinity.

Sociocultural understandings of identity thus have an immense impact upon the process of journalistic production. Seltzer encapsulates the connection between the intangible assumptions of the U.S. imaginary, journalism and the real world: “the technical infrastructure of modern reflexivity is the mass media” (Seltzer 2007: 17). He labels the news media as a ‘doubling machine’ and “points to the fact that the real world is known through its doubling machines, the doubling of the world in the mass media that makes up our situation”
A ‘doubling machine’ therefore indicates any institution that can create multiple meanings out of an event, rendering witnessed occurrences as pieces of larger cultural understandings and not simply isolated incidents. The widespread condemnation of Knox, and specifically the fixation on her betrayals of the expectations that reside in the U.S. imaginary, contributed to her repeated guilty verdicts. Without any concrete evidence, the proliferation of bias and the angering of the public prompted the Italian courts to find Knox guilty in 2009 and again in 2014, where she again received a heavier sentence (twenty-eight and a half years) than her male counterpart (Sollecito, who received twenty-five years). Several authors cite pressure from the local and international media sources as a cause for Knox’s guilty verdicts; in response to the aggressive media campaigns, the public demanded Knox’s condemnation, and the Italian court system felt obligated to oblige (Moyer 2015, Burleigh 2011). The performative framework creates expectations for real women that cannot actually be met, but the impact of these ideologies still have direct results upon lived realities. Journalism’s control over the public renders “this media witnessing as a kind of parasitism” (Seltzer 2007: 25) wherein the retelling of events can do damage to the characters involved. Seltzer concludes that by propagating stereotypes via journalistic platforms, “real life seems to yield to its fictionalization (or to what is euphemized as the ‘social construction of reality’)” (ibid.).

**Making a Female Serial Killer: Aileen Wuornos**

*Dead Ends*, a book originally published by reporter Michael Reynolds in 1992 and then rereleased in 2004 following Wuornos’s execution, includes numerous examples of paratextual evidence that serve to characterize and vilify Wuornos even before opening the
book. As with the media’s hypersexualization of Knox, Reynolds’s subtitle reads: “the pursuit, conviction, and execution of female serial killer Aileen Wuornos, the damsel of death” (Reynolds 2004). The label ‘damsel of death’ serves multiple purposes, functioning as a marketable alliteration that also casts Wuornos as a malicious villainess who used her sexuality to slaughter innocent men. The vilification of Wuornos draws directly from her noted engagement in unrestrained sexual encounters, violating Lee’s doctrine of True Womanhood (1999) and, like Knox, the presumption of female abstinence.

A quotation from Wuornos lies atop the text’s back cover in lurid red font: “I killed so many guys. Like, I feel guilty, you know? Other times I’m happy. I feel good. Like a hero” (Reynolds 2004). The image of a grinning, manic Wuornos sits beside the quotation, bolstering the callousness of her words and inviting readers to tremble at the thought of such evil. Finally, Reynolds’s summative descriptions on the back cover call Wuornos a “remorseless drifter” who became “the rarest of criminals – a female serial killer” (ibid.). The fabrication of Wuornos as a heartless character starkly contrasts to the normative presumptions of bourgeois white women by evoking stereotypes surrounding the working class as morally bankrupt and migratory (Lee 1999: 57). Wuornos initially defies the notion of bourgeois normativity due to her status as a member of the U.S. working class whose life was marred by poverty, a fact that carried many negative stereotypes which would be exploited by the media. A letter from the editor on the inner flyleaf labels Dead Ends as the “latest bestseller from the St. Martin’s True Crime library” and dubs Reynolds “the leader in true crime” via a quotation from The New York Times (Reynolds 2004). The positioning of Reynolds as a reliable journalist combined with his clear use of stereotypes to spectacularize Wuornos calls into question the credibility of his reporting. In particular, Reynolds selected
stereotypes that would evoke a strong response from his readership because they run counter to U.S. expectations for white femininity. Although he may state the facts of the case verbatim, his strong situating of the Wuornos trial as a disavowal of white femininity (as outlined by the U.S. imaginary) serves to incense his audience and, ultimately, sell more books.

Sociocultural expectations are therefore malleable items in the hands of large institutions such as journalism. Lee describes how the Supreme Court, in a process that legitimized stereotypes about race, dismissed “what social or physical scientists at the time may have had to say about it” in favor of “how it was ‘popularly’ defined” (1997: 4). Popular definitions (also known as stereotypes) are truly pivotal to the formation of mass understandings of particular events, such as criminal trials. Seltzer again describes the ability of journalists to sculpt reality given that “what has emerged on the contemporary scene is a style of sociality in the media spectacle of crime” (2007: 53). Seltzer’s ‘style of sociality,’ or the inclination for journalists to spectacularize criminal investigations, encapsulates the ability to shape mass perception of a criminal trial according to certain preordained and recognizable stereotypes. The published works by reporters like Reynolds who propagated the marketable term ‘damsel of death’ are an act of cultural translation. By highlighting the multitudinous ways in which Wuornos failed to meet the sociocultural expectations of a bourgeois white woman, Reynolds invited public disdain in much the same way that the phrase ‘Foxy Knoxy’ in the journalism around the Knox trial publicly castigated her socially unacceptable behavior.

As one of only a few women sentenced to death, Aileen Wuornos remains a tragic and complex figure in U.S. history. Writing specifically about Wuornos, Lynda Hart, a
gender studies scholar, focuses on how “the media and the FBI have called her the first female serial killer” (1994: 136) and on the mechanisms that led to the circulation of that label. Wuornos confessed to killing seven white middle-aged men between 1989 and 1990, each of them picking her up along Florida’s Interstate 75 where she labored as a sex worker (ibid.: 136). “Wuornos has been depicted as a killer who stalked her victims,” argues Hart, detailing how the court believed that Wuornos attracted these men “with promises of sexual favors, and was compelled to repeat the crime because of a lust for domination” (ibid.: 137). The court accepted these motivations of sinful lechery which mirror the implications of the paratext surrounding Reynolds’s book as an explanation for Wuornos’s crimes.

The fixation upon Wuornos’s promiscuity and its linkage to her criminality (both in the law court that sentenced her to death and in media headlines) resulted from the aspects of her lifestyle that deviated from the view of bourgeois white femininity held within the U.S. imaginary. Hart interprets the Wuornos trial as a travesty of justice wherein an impoverished and socially disadvantaged woman eventually became a martyr. She suggests that Wuornos died to satisfy the public’s need to punish a woman whose perceived sexual liberation resulted from, among other factors, her economic disenfranchisement. Wuornos’s sentencing was arguably inconsistent with precedent, as Norwich University professor Elizabeth Gurian argues that “traditionally, women are more likely to be sentenced to life imprisonment for acts of serial murder whereas men are more likely to be sentenced to death” (Wertlieb 2016). Gurian adds that Wuornos defied the standard treatment of female serial killers likely due to her disavowals of cultural presumptions for femininity, as “Wuornos was a prostitute who killed her victims by shooting them and a gun is typically a very masculine form of murder” (ibid.).
With reference to the social construct of the ‘femme fatale,’ Hart states that “Aileen Wuornos has been and no doubt will continue to be represented as a femme fatale, the handiest construct available” (1994: 141). *Lethal Intent* (2002), a Wuornos biography by internationally syndicated reporter Sue Russell, leads with the label “SEXECUTIONER” on the book jacket. This proclamation is followed in the book by an intense description of a victim’s death at Wuornos’s hands. The introductory line of this section of the text reflects a similar level of aggression that works to condemn Wuornos: “Snarling with rage, she rammed the barrel of her .22 revolver into Dick Humphrey’s ribs with such violent, malevolent force” (Russell 2002: 9). Russell, like Reynolds, embraces the narrative of Wuornos as a deviant murderess, triggering mass cultural disdain for her character. Hart, however, challenges Russell’s and Reynolds’s portrayals, arguing that “on the hand that quite expectedly is not the one that media or the courts are playing, Aileen Wuornos’s story is banal, an all-too-ordinary repetition in a culture of paranoid male fantasies that eroticize their worst nightmares” (1994: 141). Hart does not find the spectacularization of Wuornos and her crimes as surprising; similarly to Lavin (2010), Hart cites a history of female subjugation, wherein men fetishize and decry socially unacceptable performances of femininity, as the cause for Wuornos’s treatment by the media. Hart believes that the media transformed Wuornos into a horrifying character in order to help the public understand her and to reduce discomfort from her socially unacceptable performances of femininity. As Wuornos’s poverty and promiscuity so greatly defied social expectations of bourgeois white femininity, these very expectations are enhanced in order to judge and condemn her in the public eye.

Understanding Wuornos and her crimes requires a keen awareness of her background and mental health, two factors that were not thoroughly interrogated by the media or the
court system. Criminologist and journalist Christopher Berry-Dee writes in the forward to Wuornos’s autobiography *Monster: My True Story* that “apart from Jack the Ripper, it is possible that more books have been written about [Wuornos] than any other criminal, or serial killer, who has ever lived” (Wuornos 2004: xiv). Berry-Dee encapsulates the spectacularization that surrounded Wuornos’s life and death; the U.S. public could not get enough of her storyline, and the media ensured that their audiences received a steady input of her tales of depravity. Wuornos was born on February 29, 1956 in Michigan to a 14-year-old mother and her child-molesting husband. Berry-Dee describes Wuornos as born “with both small feet on the wrong side of the tracks in small-town America” (ibid.: 4). Raised by her abusive grandfather, Wuornos’s childhood was plagued with incest and frequent stints of homelessness; she began her life as a sex worker at the early age of nine (ibid.: 7). Even into her adult life, Hart documents Wuornos’s decreased mental faculties by referencing “Elizabeth McMahon, the psychologist who examined Wuornos for a year and a half” and who made a plea “to save Wuornos from the death penalty on the basis that she has the emotional development of a three- or four-year-old child” (Hart 1994: 141). Finally, with what Berry-Dee calls “her fearsome trailer-trash defiance” (Wuornos 2004: 8), Wuornos shot and killed a man on December 13, 1989 after claiming he raped her. She would go on to murder six more men throughout 1990 and describe each murder as self-defense in response to their attempts at sexual assault (ibid.: 59).

Berry-Dee’s terms ‘trailer-trash’ and ‘small-town America’ recall the work of Lee (1999) and Rogin (1996) regarding the link between race and the creation of the middle-class during the nineteenth century. Responding to numerous waves of immigrants into the United States, Lee understands class as a sociocultural identity that impacts the significance of
gender and race within a performative framework (Lee 1999: 11). Additionally, Rogin describes how the working class was primarily comprised of persons born outside of the United States, thus associating poverty with societal foreignness (1996: 56). Lee adds that “alienness is both a formal political or legal status and an informal, but by no means less powerful, cultural status” (Lee 1997: 3). The notion of ‘alienness’ illuminates well the spectacle of Wuornos’s trial.

The dedication of Hart’s text reads: “For Aileen Wuornos and for all the women who have been vilified, pathologized, and murdered for defending themselves by whatever means necessary” (Hart 1994). The constructed category of bourgeois white femininity both suggests a doctrine of sociocultural expectations and serves as a tool for rebuking any female bodies that publically disavow its tacit rules. The written word can become a weapon in the hands of the media to uphold such social constructions. In the case of Wuornos and Knox, journalism did just that by characterizing these women through a stereotypical lens rather than presenting a less-biased account. The field of journalism can be and is all too often used as a key platform for the production and dissemination of cultural translations of gender that serve established or emergent master narratives of a criminal investigation rather than challenge them. Similarly to the printed word in the hands of Venuti’s literary translators, in the media coverage of criminal trials involving women, journalists end up providing interpretations of femininity more geared to accommodating their audiences’ prior expectations than challenging them.
CHAPTER III

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE CRIMINALITY

Like the capacity of the written word to uphold sociocultural constructions via articles and news headlines, televised broadcasts serve a similar role in relation to the construction of the U.S. imaginary. Political scientist Richard Collin describes the ability for social constructs to transcend media as “some linguists believe that all natural languages possess what is awkwardly called effability” also known as “the capacity to express any idea” (2012: 2). Collin extends his description of ‘effability’ to the realm of translation and political discourse and argues that a “concept in any source language should be directly translatable into its precise semantic equivalent in any target language” (ibid.). He also suggests that “words and texts are defined solely or principally from the point of view of a given culture” (2012: 3). Specifically, he describes how words like ‘democracy’ and ‘justice’ can be “individually conceived in speakers’ minds on the basis of their lived experience and the complex or emotional connotations that have grown up around the word and its underlying concept” (Collin 2012: 4). Words, whether written or televised, must thus be understood as perpetually fluid with a variety of meanings that are dependent upon each receptive audience member or witness to the written or televised news report.

Just as the field of written journalism often plays a role in the spread of particular cultural translations of gender, televised broadcasts regarding criminal trials of women can also undergird and disseminate gendered characterizations via problematic tropes. Reporters, interviewers and documentarians, consciously or not, can create biased readings of
femininity that support (rather than challenge) familiar stereotypes based upon certain widely held preconceptions of their particular viewers. Describing the connection between the media and public perception, Seltzer views the realm of broadcast journalism as “carrying the news to the outside” where he suggests “the uncertain fascinations of the visible, the fugitive reality of things that move, vanish, and regularly return, become the everyday compulsion of the motion industries” (2007: 2).

The differences in meaning Collin describes between one language and another in terms of how “we are nudged or even constrained to think one way in a given language and another way in a second tongue, making real translation – particularly of complicated concepts deeply encoded in specific cultures – difficult or impossible” (2012: 3), can also be seen in the contrast between reading and viewing the same narrative. Written and broadcast journalism are in this sense different ‘languages’ working to express the same effable notion. Though all of the printed and televised reports I discuss regarding Wuornos and Knox originally appeared in English, the nuances in meaning in the written word are sometimes very different from those of the televised broadcasts. Aspects of the women’s characters are presented differently in the televised format, with additional attention paid to body language, clothing and general aesthetic decisions. Intentionally or not, journalists succumbed to gendered stereotypes when disseminating their reports and the public’s increased hunger for sensation became the road map with which the television media navigated the complexity of words and images surrounding the women’s trials. Although the performative nature of identity in some sense requires such acts of interpretation, the ascription of certain identity markers and not others upon individual bodies also reveals the artificiality of many sociocultural distinctions. Powerful institutions are often complicit in translating certain
populations, subjugating them and reinforcing their exotification as a result of their presumed identities. Returning to the idea of the effability of language, the connection between journalism and identity forms because “the language we speak conditions or affects (but does not absolutely control) the way in which we perceive reality” (Collin 2012: 5).

In order to illustrate the relationship between broadcast journalism and sociocultural expectations for bourgeois white femininity, I will compare nonfictional, cinematic depictions of Knox and Wuornos. I will begin by reading specific news segments featuring Knox including *Amanda Knox: The Untold Story* (CBS News 2011) and *A Murder. A Mystery. Amanda Knox Speaks.* (ABC News 2013) as well as the documentary, *Amanda Knox* (Netflix 2016). I will then analyze the portrayal of Wuornos in *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield 1993) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield 2003) as well as an episode entitled “Predators” of the Discovery Channel’s mini-series *Deadly Women* (Hawker 2009).

**Televising Knox’s Grief**

In highlighting the media’s relationship to public perception, Seltzer remarks that “the known world is indissociable from its media situation” which imperils “the reality and credibility of the known world” (2007: 22). His term ‘indissociable’ underscores the media’s part in the translatability of perception and reality, endowing it with significant social power and influence. Knox found herself trapped in this reflexive loop, where her engagement with the media via interviews and documentaries shaped her immediate reality. In 2011, *Amanda Knox: The Untold Story* premiered on *48 Hours*, a U.S.-based documentary television series produced by CBS News (“48 Hours - About Us” 2016). Self-described as “television's most
popular true-crime series,” *48 hours* claims that their “impact journalism” touches “on all areas of the human experience including greed and passion” and has served to “exonerate wrongly convicted people, caused cold cases to be reopened and solved, and along the way changed lives” (ibid.). The lauded reputation of *48 Hours* evokes Cole’s description of theatres of power (2010: 65); Knox’s admittance to this televised platform undeniably came with a host of social implications and the potential to affect perceptions of her legal troubles.

At the premiere of the interview, Knox had just returned to Seattle after an Italian judge cleared her of Kercher’s murder for the first time. Her acquittal would be overturned once again in 2013. Concern for the media’s role in Knox’s condemnation had started to grow, and *Amanda Knox: The Untold Story* opens with a montage of media clips covering her trial. “You’re a character to them,” states Madison Paxton, Knox’s best friend, who tries to comfort her after another inflammatory news cycle, “you’re not a person, you’re a character” (CBS News 2011). *48 Hours* takes a critical approach to the media bias which drastically shaped Knox’s years in Italian prison, with particular attention to how gender and sexuality played in the press. Investigative journalist Bob Graham explains how a small clip of Knox kissing then-boyfriend Sollecito caused an immediate firestorm in the Italian public: “With those series of kisses, Amanda Knox was demonized in the Italian mind” (ibid.). Knox’s perceived promiscuity contributed to her characterization as a brutal murderess; the media looked unfavorably on a middle-class white woman who demonstrated anything but chaste behavior, particularly given the circumstances of her roommate’s murder. Paxton proceeds to state that “it definitely sells more papers if you have two beautiful, beautiful women and headlines that there was some attempt at an orgy” (ibid.).

Further investigations gave credence to Seltzer’s connection between media
perception and reality. CBS news reported that police administrators had interrogated Knox for long hours on the sole topic of sexual activity, supporting the prosecution’s condemnation of her as a “sex-crazed she-devil” (CBS News 2011). Frequent questions about her sexual partners and preferences seemed rooted in an effort to intimidate Knox into vilifying herself, as the media provided additional testimony to support the public’s negative view. The media thus became a factor in the legal proceedings; the prosecution’s continued tactic of character defamation ultimately gained Knox an initial sentence of twenty-six years in prison. 48 Hours remained critical of the emotionally driven and, at times, fact-free media response to Knox’s behavior up until 2011. However, further coverage of her trials still tended to characterize her within a gendered and normative framework. Despite the overwhelming evidence that Knox was a victim of journalistic fervor, it was impossible for her to distance herself from the social construction of a bourgeois white woman gone bad. In March 2013, the Italian Supreme Court ruled that Knox and Sollecito should once again stand trial for Kercher’s murder, and the retrial began in September of that year.

A Murder. A Mystery. Amanda Knox Speaks. premiered in April 2013 on 20/20 (a televised newsmagazine from ABC News) as an interview between Knox and television journalist Diane Sawyer. Coinciding with the release of Knox’s autobiography Waiting To Be Heard (2013), the line of questioning focuses upon the accusations that support the vilification of Knox. Sawyer does not interrogate the media’s role in that characterization. “For all intents and purposes I was a murderer, whether I was or not,” states a teary-eyed Knox, “I’d like to be reconsidered as a person” (ABC News 2013). Her plea to be “reconsidered as a person” highlights the faulty reporting that influenced her legal proceedings. After reading a list of defamatory headlines concerning the trial, Sawyer adds,
“I keep thinking about Meredith Kercher’s family” (ibid.).

Though Sawyer’s emphasis on the Kercher family places appropriate focus upon the victim of the crime, it also ignores Knox’s statements about her translation via the press. Subsequent questions from Sawyer challenge Knox to defend herself against the accusation of her disparagement by the media. “What if I had not gone on ‘a campaign for casual sex?’” quotes Sawyer from Knox’s memoir, and then asks, “You thought that’s what liberated, free-spirited girls did?” These questions bring the socially constructed bourgeois white woman into the frame; both Sawyer and Knox’s definitions of ‘casual sex’ become essential to their conversation. Jezebel, an online newsmagazine geared toward female readers, blasted the interview with an article titled: “Amanda Knox's First TV Interview Is Heavy on the Slut-Shaming” (Davies 2013). The term ‘slut-shaming’ functions, for Jezebel readers, to define any actions that malign women for their sexual behaviors. Knox’s sexuality and gender performance are therefore critical aspects of A Murder. A Mystery. Amanda Knox Speaks. Sawyer’s questions force Knox to defend more than just opinions about her sexuality, when she asks “How high were you?” and “You can see that this does not look like grief?” (ibid.). The questions serve to interrogate Knox’s behavior, calling into question not only her actions as a bourgeois white woman, but as any human experiencing grief. The interview reconstructs the depiction of Knox as a murderess; Sawyer asks about the accusations hurled against Knox, but not about the motivations of the media.

Knox defended herself against Sawyer’s accusations: “I think everyone’s reaction to something horrible is different” (ibid.). Similarly to the 48 Hours coverage of her kiss with Sollecito, the media’s policing of Knox’s performance of both gender and grief played a large role in the prosecution against her. In an effort to pay full tribute to the Kercher family
as well as to acknowledge the issues of police brutality, fabricated evidence and prejudicial prosecutors that functioned within these trials, Sawyer forgoes any focus on the weaponization of the media against Knox. “I could have been more sensitive” (ibid.) Knox admits when asked why she would kiss her boyfriend after learning about Kercher’s death, or why she would stretch her legs after waiting for a lengthy period at the police station. Her statement, which is not quite an apology for her actions, comes only at the behest of the media; although Knox’s behaviors seem perfectly natural to her, she understands their negative connotations by the public at large.

In January of 2014, the Italian appeals court convicted Knox and Sollecito on murder charges, increasing Knox’s sentence to twenty-eight years and six months (Staff 2015). The court’s decision was appealed, for a final time, in March of 2015; given the lack of DNA evidence, Italy’s Supreme Court overturned the murder convictions of both Knox and Sollecito, closing the case permanently (ibid.). The court cited pressure from the international media spotlight as a factor in the harried, erroneous prior convictions (ibid.). With Knox’s case finally concluded, Netflix tackled the challenge of documenting her many trials, paying careful attention to the role of media bias and the prejudice of the Italian court system in the documentary Amanda Knox (2016). While the documentary does not completely account for the role of the sociocultural performance of identities, it does make a strong argument for the impact of media bias upon real-world court proceedings.

The film opens with a warning from Knox: “Either I’m a psychopath in sheep’s clothing, or I am you” (Netflix 2016). Her warning, and summation of her experiences, indicates that the unfortunate circumstances, which irrevocably changed her life, could easily befall any of the documentary’s viewers. Amanda Knox proceeds to explore similar topics as
the 48 Hours and 20/20 specials, including media bias, the implication of sexual deviance and the various faulty aspects of the police investigations. The film opens with clips from previous interviews, including Knox’s conversation with Sawyer and her accusatory questions. However, the novel contributions of Netflix’s special stem from the insights provided by Nick Pisa, a freelance journalist who covered the Kercher murder investigation for a British publication entitled The Daily Mail.

Pisa offers immense details about the media frenzy that consumed the coverage of the trials. He describes the immediate stressors that affected the Italian investigators working on the case as the “police found themselves on the international media map and they just wanted to show that they were capable of dealing with something of this scale” (ibid.). However, pressure from the public eye only served to complicate the police investigation. For example, Pisa describes how the post-mortem conclusion that “there had been some sexual interference” with Kercher’s body spiraled into the prosecution’s narrative of a “group crime, a sex game gone wrong” (ibid.). Pisa endorsed this interpretation of the medical report, which he delivered “to the British press before anyone else” because “that was the scoop that we had, and it made headlines all over the world” (ibid.). The notion of a ‘scoop’ became the driving force for the misinformation that plagued Knox’s trials. Pisa thoroughly describes the rush between news outlets to cover the emerging details of the case before their competitors. The often-salacious details of the investigation drew immense public attention because of their divergence from social norms; the media was quick to spin tales of a beautiful girl from the United States engaging in very unladylike behavior. The performative framework therefore drove the public appetite for drama in the Kercher murder investigation, and international journalistic ethical obligations to report the unbiased truth were sacrificed
amongst media sources competing to get the latest ‘scoop’ (ibid.). Although the press did not necessarily report biased falsehoods intentionally, processes of fact checking were nevertheless overlooked in favor of publishing before other media outlets.

**Sacrificing Wuornos on Camera**

The criminological profile of a serial killer traditionally identifies men as murderers of powerless individuals such as children or elderly women. Wuornos’s acts of murder did not fit this profile, as she was a woman who killed heterosexual, white, middle-class males and who claimed that she acted in self-defense. This undoubtedly added to the journalistic frenzy (1994: 137) regarding her crimes. Despite her claims of self-defense, however, the label of ‘first female serial killer’ spread throughout the media, after which no one would accept her account of the motive behind the murders. She was depicted as a “killer who stalked her victims” with great intention (1994: 136). Condemned within the media and, subsequently, the courtroom, she received the death penalty from a Florida court in February 1993 and was executed in October 2002. Hart explains the impotence of Wuornos’s attempts to offer an explanation for her crimes, suggesting that “testimony can never produce an effect of truth alone” (ibid.). In the end, Wuornos’s claims of sexual assault and medical reports citing her impaired mental faculties did not sway the jury’s or the public’s view of her crimes.

The English documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield came to know Wuornos over a period of ten years during which time he created two films about the murder trials and her incarceration on death row, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield 1993) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield 2003). Known for his self-reflexive style of filmmaking, wherein the final product features both the intended subject matter and
the making of the documentary itself, Broomfield’s films offer close scrutiny of the multiple systems of oppression that took advantage of Wuornos’s gender (“Bio – Nick Broomfield's Official Website”). His first release, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, which appeared soon after she received six death sentences, questions the fairness of her trial given the impact of the media on the police and certain political figures. A subtitle on the U.S. film poster reads “Serial killer, victim, martyr, or commodity?” (Broomfield 1993) and the first hour of the film makes numerous references to the commodification of the trial evidenced in the movie and book deals spiraling around Wuornos at the time. The film includes footage of Broomfield’s repeated attempts to get permission to interview Wuornos from her adoptive mother Arlene Pralle and lawyer Steve Glazer. The director highlights their exploitation of Wuornos in their various attempts at profiting from the media firestorm that evoked the public’s enormous fascination with Wuornos’s trial. The film poster’s subtitle thus acts as both a summary of its subject matter as well as an explanation of Wuornos’s shifting role in the U.S. imaginary.

Broomfield’s second documentary, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, premiered in 2003 after her execution. It opens with a summary of her infamous public perception as “a man-hating lesbian prostitute who tarnished the reputation of all her victims” (Broomfield 2003). Broomfield comments that “even Ted Bundy [an American serial killer, kidnapper, and rapist, who assaulted and murdered young women and girls in the 1970s] was offered life imprisonment” and yet “this was never offered to Aileen Wuornos” (ibid.). The focus of this follow-up documentary is the decision to execute Wuornos despite witness testimony that she was not of sound mind. Hart suggests that the characterization of Wuornos as social depravity personified stemmed from “the historical
conflation of the prostitute and the lesbian, both of whom have been signified in patriarchy under the sign of transgressive sexuality” (Hart 1994: 153). The notion of ‘transgressive sexuality’ or sexuality that does not conform to sociocultural standards is addressed in Broomfield’s documentary, where he explores Wuornos’s relationship with her female lover Tyria Moore. Broomfield specifies that “politicians on the Christian right campaigned for Aileen Wuornos’s execution” as a marker of the anti-lesbian sentiment that permeated the media coverage, building her into a “man-hating lesbian prostitute” who must be put to death (Broomfield 2003). The disdain for lesbianism amongst certain segments of the population that impacted Wuornos’s public perception led Hart to suggest a causal link in their mind between “the ‘inseparable’ bond that Aileen Wuornos had with her lover, Tyria Moore” and her criminality (Hart 1994: 150). As depicted in Broomfield’s film, the media coverage fixated upon Wuornos’s working class lesbian identity to illustrate the numerous ways in which she failed to meet heteronormative societal expectations. In an interview with Steve Rose of The Guardian, Broomfield reflected upon the 2003 theatrical release of Monster, a drama starring Charlize Theron as Wuornos (Rose 2004). Broomfield noted that “the main media interest” concerning Monster “centered around the idea of the beautiful Theron transforming herself into the overweight, boozy, psychotic Wuornos” (ibid.). Theron’s descent into Wuornos’s mind and body is performed in the film through her physical transformation outside the bounds of an assumed gendered norm.

Broomfield can also be said to have contributed to Wuornos’s exploitation despite his stated altruistic intentions. In his first film, he doesn’t get to speak with Wuornos until an hour into the film when, as documented in the film, he is able to meet with her at a Florida prison after he has paid her lawyer $10,000. As the interview begins, Wuornos tells the
director, “I have my doubts about Arlene and Steve….Arlene did not adopt me to be my mother, she adopted me to bury me…I think their motive was to make money,” and “It must be the economy man,” she explains, “they care about the money, they don’t care about me” (Broomfield 1993). Wuornos ultimately becomes a tool for each of their economic, political and social gain.

Other dramatizations of Wuornos’s story, including an episode entitled “Predators” on the Discovery Channel’s mini-series Deadly Women (Hawker 2009), continued the journalistic fascination with the issue of Wuornos’s femininity. Featuring interviews from criminal profilers, reporters and detectives, Deadly Women purports to be a documentary-style series that focuses on female killers. Each episode includes actresses who play the role of a murderess while experts and witnesses provide voiceovers. The “Predators” episode, directed by Paul Hawker, depicts a starkly prejudicial version of Wuornos’s story, opening with the line: “They live among us undetected as they hunt their victims, they are predators” The episode never considers the role of mental health or trauma when describing Wuornos, instead casting her as a woman who was “awfully frightening to men” and who made a “dangerous profession” out of their slaughter. The Deadly Women series ensures that the gender of each featured murderess is central to the storyline. As a marketing tactic, the show works by enumerating the way in which the female protagonists do not adhere to traditional expectations of womanhood. In Wuornos’s case, her sexuality and whiteness combine to magnify the depths of her reversal of social norms. The young actress who plays Wuornos resembles the actress Charlize Theron before her 2003 transformation for Monster – a young, attractive blonde who spends much of Deadly Women seducing men to their deaths. A criminologist who appears in the episode describes her murders as fueled by “hate and
revenge” (ibid.), a clear inversion of Lee’s “doctrine of True Womanhood” (1999: 88) which restrained women to nurturing caretaker roles.

Sue Russell, the author of *Lethal Intent* (2002), is also featured in the episode sharing her opinions on Wuornos’s motivations for murder. Russell appears in order to emphasize the view that Wuornos acted of her own volition and to discount the relevance of her biography and mental health, just as they had been discounted during her trial. Though she describes Wuornos as killing “when she felt incredibly desperate” as a result of her “fear of abandonment” (Hawker 2009), she also suggests that stealing money from the men she killed allowed her to continue “buying Ty’s affections” (ibid.), referring to her girlfriend who is also depicted in the episode.

Paradoxically, it was Wuornos’s troubled backstory, plagued by the cruelty and immorality stereotyped as markers of low-income populations, that served to both fascinate audiences and explain how a white woman could engage in such socially improper behavior. The entitlements given to the middle class, such as education and insurance, were not available to Wuornos at any point in her life. While white women are assumed and expected to exude the ‘cleanliness’ and heightened intellect of the middle class, Wuornos’s well-publicized struggles with poverty distanced her from those expectations.

Documentaries, interviews and other televised reports treat bourgeois white women accused of criminal activity according to a specific doctrine of sociocultural expectations. Televised productions contribute to characterizations through a stereotypical lens, just as the written word became a weapon to reify social constructions and to demonize individuals who fail to meet these impossible standards. Cultural translations of gender therefore occur across both printed and cinematic platforms, contributing to a master narrative of the criminal
investigation instead of challenging biased notions held by the public at large. Venuti argued that literary translators could bring a foreign source to a domestic audience by adding markers of the familiar culture; in the cinematic coverage of Knox and Wuornos, journalists more frequently furthered interpretations of femininity more palatable to their audiences instead of focusing on the unbiased facts of the case.
“Lock her up! Lock her up! Lock her up!” In July 2016, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s speech at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio was met with the three-word mantra that would become a slogan for then Republican candidate Donald Trump’s presidential campaign (Stevenson 2016). Christie extolled, in his opinion, the many failings of then Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State. Peter Stevenson of The Washington Post offers a brief history of the “Lock her up!” chant, which he describes as “the most popular chant of Donald Trump's campaign,” and which became “a go-to refrain, punctuating every mention of Clinton's name” (ibid.). Christie’s speech, one of the earliest instances of the slogan, drew from the language of a criminal court as he asked the crowd, “Is she guilty or not guilty?” (ibid.). Stevenson also quotes Trump during the October 2016 presidential debate when he furthered the notion of Clinton’s criminality: “I didn’t think I’d say this, but I’m going to say it, and I hate to say it. But if I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation, because there has never been so many lies, so much deception” (ibid.). The “Lock her up!” chant became a trademark of the 2016 U.S. presidential election – a clear indication, according to my research, of U.S. fascination with a bourgeois white woman running for president while suspected of criminal activity.

Trump eventually won the presidential election in November 2016 with 306 electoral votes to Clinton’s 232; Trump lost the popular vote by a greater margin than any other U.S.
president in history, as Clinton won with an excess of nearly three million votes (Kentish 2017). After his victory, Trump said of his “Lock her up!” chant: “That plays great before the election -- now we don't care, right?” (Diaz 2016). Trump’s comments, and his victory over the Electoral College, indicate the success of Clinton’s alleged criminality as a marketing technique. I argue that the Trump campaign played off of the public’s willingness to distrust Clinton not only because of her perceived failings as Secretary of State, but also because of missteps in her performance of bourgeois white womanhood.

Similarly, journalist Carl Bernstein (in his 2007 biography of Clinton) positions her life as one of duplicity: “Hillary Rodham’s childhood was not the suburban idyll suggested by the shaded front porch and gently sloping lawn of what was once the family home” (2007: 12). Raised in Illinois by affluent parents, Clinton’s strict father “imposed a patriarchal unpleasantness and ritual authoritarianism on his household” while maintaining “the distinctly modern notion that Hillary would not be limited in opportunity or skills by the fact that she was a girl” (ibid.: 13). The theme of appearance versus reality would follow Clinton through most of her public life and mar her presidential campaign. According to Bernstein, Clinton attended public schools with predominantly white students “to induce elements of ‘realism’ into the privileged lifestyle of Park Ridge” although “life in the Rodham household resembled a kind of boot camp, presided over by a belittling, impossible-to-satisfy drill instructor” (ibid.: 15). Such stereotypical markers of bourgeois white women, as described by scholars like Rogin (1996) and Lee (1999), were prevalent throughout the affluent Park Ridge area and thus dominated much of Clinton’s early life. In addition, both her upbringing in a traditional nuclear family and her education helped to establish her sociocultural identity, creating ample material for the news media from the very start of her career in politics (much
of it taking place under intense public scrutiny).

In her memoir, *Living History*, Clinton summarizes the impact of the performative framework on her political career: “Like it or not, women are always subject to criticism if they show too much feeling in public” (2004: 304). In this statement, she raises two essential points regarding the treatment of women by the news media. Her mention of ‘criticism’ encapsulates the added vulnerability of women holding positions in the public sphere, while ‘too much feeling’ epitomizes certain aspects of being human that must be carefully kept in check in order to counter sociocultural expectations of women that would be deemed undesirable in the tough game of politics. “We are Americans,” Clinton writes in her more recent memoir, *Hard Choices*, “all with a personal stake in our country” (2014: xii). Despite her emphasis on the sameness of all Americans, her treatment by portions of the news media throughout her career (and most recently during the 2016 U.S. presidential election) have consistently revealed an undeniably gendered translation of her persona not seen of her male counterparts.

A reporter from NBC News commented on the concerted effort throughout the presidential election to turn the news media against the Clinton campaign (Dilanian 2017). Referring to the connections that emerged in the last months of the election campaign between the Trump camp and Russian president Vladimir Putin, Dilanian points to evidence that “Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency” (2017). One of its most notable tactics included “a series of fake news stories damaging to Clinton, many of which got their start with Russian-backed outlets” (ibid.). The role of certain media outlets in the 2016 election cycle is an example of the weaponization of journalism whereby these
outlets become tools to discredit one candidate over another. The discrediting of Clinton seized upon present and previous public perceptions of her character, opinions that had themselves been shaped over years by the same media in which “Clinton was framed as too empowered, whether as a presidential surrogate, legislative task force leader, or political candidate” (Parry-Giles 2014: 177). Parry-Giles suggests that press coverage of Hilary Clinton ever since her time in the White House as First Lady exhibited a type of “linguistic disciplining” regarding her actions mainly from the press but also from (mostly male) politicians. For example, when the public or the press faulted her for overstepping her boundaries as First Lady and she responded by taking on the more ‘traditional’ roles of prior First Ladies, journalists would then question her ‘authenticity’ in this role (where her position as wife and mother were foregrounded) given her self-avowed feminism. This, along with all sorts of other myths about Clinton’s character that circulated, helped sanction the unbridled chants of “Lock her up!” amongst her detractors and also played a part in helping certain voters in her own liberal circles repeatedly citing their lack of trust in her as a candidate.

One sentence in the New York Times article “Hillary Clinton’s Beijing Speech on Women Resonates 20 Years Later” (September 2015) by Amy Chozick furthers the notion of public distrust for Clinton by referencing investigations into her criminality alongside one of her most well-known speeches about women’s rights. Chozick writes, “On Friday, in addition to answering extensive questions about her use of a private email server as secretary of state, Mrs. Clinton discussed the Beijing speech with MSNBC host Andrea Mitchell, who covered the 1995 conference” (Chozick 2015). While the recent interview on MSNBC had been a space for Clinton to showcase her feminist leanings, Chozick’s mention of the Beijing speech in which the then 47-year-old Clinton famously said, “‘Human rights are women’s
rights, and women’s rights are human rights’” comes second, after the issue of her private email server and the implications of criminality. The Trump campaign made great use of Clinton’s email server as a motivation for the “Lock her up!” slogan and the general indication that she was an untrustworthy candidate (Stevenson 2016). Chozick’s sentence, which places these criminal accusations before and beside a reference to one of Clinton’s most notable endorsements of the feminist movement, can be read as manifestation of the belief amongst U.S. voters that her alleged criminality was more relevant than her history of public service to women.

Late Night Television as Journalism

Since the 1980s, late night television has played an increasingly influential role in presidential election campaigns. Though not strictly speaking ‘news media,’ presidential candidates are regularly booked on these shows in order to reach out to a younger demographic. In the 2016 campaign, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump made separate appearances on “The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon” where Fallon engaged in conversation with both candidates in a more light-hearted and comedic tone. After Trump’s appearance in September 2016 (before he was elected as the Republican party’s presidential candidate), Fallon received online criticism for his own conduct. The liberal press claimed that he had humanized Trump and had failed to ask him about his controversial statements and overall demeanor on the campaign trail and in the Republican debates: “not only did Fallon comically muss Trump’s hair like he was an adorable toddler, but he failed to press him on any substantive issues even though he knew millions would be watching” (Wilstein 2017). An article in The New York Times featured an interview with a Trump supporter who
said that she had watched the show and voted for Trump “because he seemed ‘very humble’” in his interview with Fallon (Stolberg 2016).

Clinton had appeared a year earlier on Fallon’s show in one of her previous interviews of the campaign (“Good Time Watching” 2015) and had deftly answered Fallon’s comedic questions, responding to “How long do you think [Trump’s campaign] will last?” with a brief statement about the benefits of living in a democracy like the U.S. “That is one of the great things about this country!” she replied laughing (ibid.), thus allowing the audience to perceive her as calm and patriotic. Fallon, without expressly stating that he found fault with any of the Republican presidential contenders, then set Clinton up to offer a dark though still entertaining view of life under a potential Trump presidency. Rather than agree or disagree with Clinton’s view, he remarked, “I think you’re very, very, very tough, you’re a mother and I know you as a grandmother as well, but you’re a tough mother” (ibid.).

Fallon’s focus on Clinton’s gender here likely reflects the fact that, for many voters, femininity was a defining aspect of Clinton’s campaign. Fallon also seems to be expressing the widespread view at the time that Trump did not stand a chance of winning the election, and that the country was preparing to welcome its first female president. And as the first woman who might become the Democratic Party candidate, the focus on Clinton’s roles as mother and grandmother may have also been warranted. Fallon seems to reference these as additional motives for her desire to effect change as president of the United States. He follows with the question, “Are you tough enough to be president?” to which Clinton replies, “Yes, I think so” before restating several key points from her platform (Clinton, “Good Time Watching” 2015).

This interview between Clinton and Fallon, however, becomes yet another example
of the ‘linguistic disciplining’ Parry-Giles has observed in the journalistic coverage of Clinton over the past several decades. When Clinton returned to Fallon’s show nearly a year later in September 2016, arriving just four days after his controversial interview with Trump, Fallon opened with a joke about Clinton’s public struggle with pneumonia that forced her to take several days off from the campaign trail (“Her Health and Recovery” 2016) – an issue which had the media and the Trump campaign alluding to both her age and her stamina. Fallon then alludes to the strain of performing in the public eye: “People want to see someone who is going to protect us and be strong and tough, which is, you have that reputation” (Clinton, “Balancing Seriousness” 2016).

Though Fallon may have been trying to be supportive in these two interviews, his attempt to make Clinton’s different identities cohere – mother, grandmother, protector, strong, tough – ends up contributing to what Parry-Giles has called the (in the case of Clinton, contradictory) “biographical thematics” that accompany political leaders over the course of their careers (Parry-Giles 2014: 177). Parry-Giles argues that “journalists (along with the aid of news writers and news producers) serve as some of the nation’s most powerful biographers” (ibid.). They create and recreate persistent news frames that rely on “the ideologies of the nation state (e.g., nationalism, gender, character, authenticity) just as they simultaneously contribute to the ideological renderings of the nation” (ibid.). Bradley has also noted that journalists, in their coverage of presidential campaigns, translate “cultural impulses of the period in ways that were acceptable to mass media” (2003: 5). He identifies certain “easy stereotypes” adopted by the news media, “the most enduring of which [is] the strident woman” (Bradley 2003: 4). These are the kind of news frames that, according to Parry-Giles, “can function as rhetorics of deterrence and constraint for political women”
Clinton’s ‘reputation’ for being ‘strong’ and ‘tough’ as alluded to by Fallon suggests two traits that are viewed by many as clear violations of the performative framework for bourgeois white femininity that is so engrained in the U.S. imaginary. Some voters may have therefore viewed, consciously or not, such traditionally masculine traits as an improper performance of femininity, further contributing to the perception of Clinton as duplicitous and thus untrustworthy.

The impact of news frames upon women in the public eye indicates that “the political agency that women political leaders enjoy comes at considerable personal and cultural costs” (Parry-Giles 2014: 178). The ‘cultural costs’ of trying and, oftentimes, failing to meet the impossible standards of the performative framework were clearly evident in the damage to Clinton’s campaign as a result of the perceptions of certain U.S. voters, even those who did not support her opponents. The words ‘strong’ and ‘tough’ used by Fallon to describe Hillary could just as likely have evoked Trump’s well-documented presentation of masculinity throughout his campaign, which was given full legitimacy by the public (Sexton 2016). By referencing her ‘reputation’ for these traditionally masculine traits, Fallon unwittingly may have reinforced the image of the president of the United States as male and contributed to the confused and contradictory expectations of U.S. voters regarding Hillary Clinton in particular and women politicians more generally. As Parry-Giles (2014) observes,

The sentiment that Clinton was a difficult and haughty woman led some to question her ability to fit into a position that relied on backroom and backslapping deals and required one to be liked by the people who sent her to Congress. These frames reinforced age-old stereotypes that strong women often exhibit personality problems that make them standoffish and incapable of collegiality. Her personality and seemingly her gender, correspondingly, did not fit the profile of a successful political leader (174).

Though a self-proclaimed feminist, Clinton was expected to enact a “virtuous performance”
of bourgeois white women similar to that outlined in the Doctrine of True Womanhood (Lee 1999: 88). Like the vilification of Knox and Wuornos during their criminal trials, the tendency of the press to capitalize on the stereotypes that proliferated throughout the campaign worked against Clinton’s bid for the presidency. On the one hand, the media fixation with obtaining leads that relate to tropes recognizable to their audience, and on the other, societal preoccupations and contradictory expectations regarding the performance of womanhood in public life, ended up restricting the narrative of Clinton’s campaign for many voters to multiple, incompatible options: either she was or was not an elitist and a feminist, either she failed to maintain the virtues of bourgeois white womanhood, or she was inauthentic in all of her attempts.

Events in Clinton’s personal history also allowed the public and the media to embrace the narrative of her criminality, drawing from inflammatory language in the sensationalist press. Two *National Enquirer* articles situated Clinton as fiercely defensive of her husband. One of the headlines read, “Hillary Clinton’s Plot To DESTROY Monica REVEALED” (Jaccarino 2016), and the other, “‘Sick And Tired’ Hillary Erupts At Bill Clinton Rape Protester” (*National Enquirer* Staff 2016), alongside numerous other articles about Clinton’s email scandal. Fox News reported that “Clinton emails show line of pay for play: Does it matter?” (Van Susteren 2016) and “Flynn: Clinton Emails an ‘Incredible Perpetuation of Fraud’” (MacDonald 2016). The Fox News reports reinforced the public’s general mistrust for Clinton by exaggerating leads and focusing upon details of the email scandal to further her vilification in and by the public.

There is undoubtedly a reflexive relationship between all public figures and the U.S. imaginary, where “those who become routine fixtures in news stories can function as didactic
character models to be admired and emulated, chastised and even despised” (Parry-Giles 2014: 177). Just as Knox and Wuornos were both defamed by certain journalists eager to publish publicly appealing leads, the multiple narratives of Clinton’s campaign were directly influenced by widespread cultural sentiment, allowing reporters to amplify minor errors and massively contributing to the myth of her criminality.

Mamta Accapadi uses the term “one up/one down identity” to describe people with one sociocultural identity factor “that is privileged and another that is oppressed” (2007: 208). Accapadi therefore encapsulates the positioning of middle-class white women in the U.S. imaginary, where they simultaneously experience social benefits and limits from their identity. Ultimately, the current U.S. imaginary regarding femininity constructs middle-class white women as domesticated and morally unflappable, a norm that has the effect of casting all women in a complex web of misrecognition and social control. Most notably, the platform of journalism allows these expectations to gain credence and popularity. The expectations set for white femininity within the United States are also predicated upon its history of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia.

Muñoz views the performativity of identity as reliant upon “socially encoded scripts of identity” which are often “formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions” (Muñoz 1999: 6). Sociocultural expectations are often created through fear of the foreign, casting the privileged population as the exact opposite of what society deems unacceptable. Mass cultural acceptance of these phobias attributes considerable social privilege to certain populations (most notably, bourgeois, white, heterosexual men), a privilege that can act as a cage to restrict and control acceptable behavior. The history of white male supremacy has certainly helped to sculpt the U.S.
imaginary, rendering a specific verdict for acceptable behavior for bourgeois white women. It is this verdict that has been interrogated and challenged in this thesis.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


