



**Department of Education**

**Contemporary Women's Detective Fiction: Feminizing  
the Genre**

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**A dissertation submitted to the University of Cyprus in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## VALIDATION PAGE

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## Abstract

In my thesis, I will focus on contemporary women writers who are working within the genre of detective or crime fiction. Through examining the genre as a formulaic construction, a *formula*, I will initially unpack the elements and conventions that constitute it. My purpose in breaking down the cultural elements that make up the detective novel, is to show how these are reflective of a culture that is sexist, heteronormative, class-divided and racist. As detective fiction first emerged in the English-speaking world during the Victorian era and flourished in-between the two world wars, I will try to throw into relief the dominant perceptions of women, and subsequently women's position in society during this extended period. Once I have unpacked the contexts and conventions of classical detective fiction, mainly through the analysis of the traditional detective figure, I will proceed by shifting my focus on the rewriting of the traditional generic formula by contemporary women authors. By the late 1970s – early 1980s women authors of crime fiction started introducing new elements and new types of characters in their crime novels, quite efficiently contributing to what came to be recognized as the *feminization of the genre*. With the aim of examining the techniques that contemporary women authors have employed so as to challenge the initial conventions of the genre, I have divided my thesis into four chapters, namely *Hard-boiled Women's Detective Fiction*, *Culinary Mysteries*, *African American Women's Detective Fiction*, and *Lesbian Detective Fiction*, in each of which I will be examining the main characteristics and significance of each subgenre. Therefore, through my thesis I wish to navigate through several contemporary women's detective novels, so as to trace the diverse techniques that contemporary women writers employ in order to challenge the formulaic assumptions of the classical detective novel in a way that transforms this traditional male-dominated genre into a textual space where key feminist issues are addressed and debated.

## **Outline of Chapters**

**Introduction**

**Chapter One:** Hard-Boiled Women's Detective Fiction

**Chapter Two:** Culinary Mysteries

**Chapter Three:** African American Women's Detective Fiction

**Chapter Four:** Lesbian Detective Fiction

**Conclusion**

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## Introduction

In this dissertation, my aim is to focus on contemporary women writer's critical engagement with the genre of detective or crime fiction. I will begin by examining the genre as a formulaic construction, a fact reflected in the elements and conventions that constitute it. As John G. Cawelti argues in his book *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, formulas are patterns of convention, quite specific to a particular culture, that are made meaningful within that culture's context. Formulas, as he goes on to explain, involve the usage of certain cultural materials, for example symbols, images, themes, and myths that become embodied in more universal story archetypes (Cawelti 6). My purpose, then, in this introduction is to unpack the cultural elements that make up the detective novel, in an attempt to show how these are reflective of a culture that is sexist, heteronormative, class-divided and racist.

As detective fiction first emerged in the English-speaking world during the Victorian era, hence in the early 1840s, it is important to see how perceptions of women, and subsequently women's position in society during that time, were reflected within this type of literature. Victorian society was dominated by the doctrine of separate spheres, namely the private and public spheres, reflecting the "natural" differences between the sexes.<sup>1</sup> This sex-segregated division of space was connected to Western dualistic patterns of thought<sup>2</sup> and more particularly, the distinction between mind and body. Within this dualistic frame, man was associated with reason and metaphysical pursuits and, as a result, claimed dominance in the public sphere, a realm which favored the exchange of ideas and discussion of politics, the exchange of goods and labor, the accumulation of profit. By contrast, women were linked to emotions and bodily desires and pleasures, for they were considered to be prone to the body's

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<sup>1</sup> For this aspect of Victorian gender ideology, please refer to Susie Steinbach's article on the Victorian era in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to Howard Robinson's article on "Dualism" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and M. James Sawyer's *A World Split Apart: Dualism in Western Culture and Theology*.

cravings. They were naturally confined in the realm of the private, which concerned the care of the family and their material needs as well as the management of the household (Spelman 37-38).

As such distinctions dominated in the minds of the first authors of detective fiction, it is no coincidence that the first detectives to ever emerge were male, as were most of their creators.

The prevalence of male detectives, even in the work of extremely successful female crime writers, points to the way culture was constructed during this time: men were leaders, executors and organisers, and hence within this discourse of patriarchy even a writer with feminist sensibilities tended to gender her sleuth male in order for her characters to make sense to her audience. (Riley 131)

What is of great importance, however, is the attributes that those male characters were given by their predominantly male authors. These attributes constitute the myth which authors of later generations came to base their own writings on. Writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who are by many considered to be the forefathers of detective fiction, have constructed male detectives, namely C. Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes respectively, who introduced and established the loner/eccentric model of detection<sup>3</sup>. In narrating Sherlock's mysteries, Dr. Watson, Sherlock's partner, often refers to the detective's inhumane existence, in that Sherlock is extraordinarily smart, but at the same time secretive to the extent that he is portrayed as having solved the crime early on in the novel, using his exceptional deductive reasoning, but only shares its solution once we, through our

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<sup>3</sup> For this aspect of classical detective fiction please refer to Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight's *The Art of Murder*.

identification with Dr. Watson, have come to understand who the real criminal is. The use of third person narration, which is also employed by Doyle in his own mystery series, in the context of classical detective fiction is seen to intentionally create distance between the detective figure of the story and the rest of the characters and, by extension, between the detective and the readers. The distance that is established by means of this device, to which I will return later in this introduction, is primarily based on the mythology built around the male detective that elevates him to a god-like status. Due to the narrator's comparatively intellectually inferior nature, which is also shared among the rest of the characters of the novel, the figure of the detective is presented as having supernatural abilities that render him divine in the eyes of his associates and, by extension, his readers.

Another main characteristic of these male detectives and the stories in which they are found, is their aristocratic nature, which is seen to further extend this distance established between the readers and the events that unfold within the classical detective novel. Indeed, the first detective narratives are seen to take place in upper class societies, as it was characters that belonged to the aristocracy that could actually afford to hire a detective to help them solve a mystery that involved them in some way. These were also the people in real life who could afford to purchase a detective novel, in which they could see themselves, identifying with its characters and the situations they found themselves in.

Another trait of these male protagonists that is worth examining is their emotional detachment both from situations as well as from people, a fact that is expressive of their rather cynical nature. This aspect of their character enhances the distance that is foregrounded between them and the rest of the characters, especially the victims of the crimes they investigate, treating the circumstances of their life and death as pieces to a puzzle. The male detective's cynical behavior throughout the novel also keeps him at a distance from the readers of the mysteries, who find it difficult to identify with him. Absorbing all the attention

and attraction that the detective novel offers its readers, these protagonists tend to make the rest of the characters invisible and minor, disappearing behind the detectives' magnitude as individuals. Cawelti discusses this aspect, offering as an example Dupin's first mystery, where a mother and a daughter are brutally murdered in a hotel by a chimpanzee that has escaped from its owner. He writes:

His first approach as exemplified in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' was to make his victims obscure, ordinary, and colorless people who meet a grotesque and mystifying end. Consequently their characters do not engage the reader's interest or sympathies, but the nature of their end does. In other words, while Poe tells us nothing about Mme L'Españaye and her daughter that would make us feel one way or another about what happens to them, he makes the circumstances of their demise so strange and terrifying that we feel a great interest in discovering just what happened to them (92).

Cawelti's analysis points to yet another major characteristic of these male detectives, which has to do with the enjoyment they get to experience from solving a crime. Clearly, they are keen on solving the crime not because they deeply care about the victims or the individuals involved in it, but rather due to a fascination with crime itself, which they perceive as a game. This can be additionally confirmed by the moments of crisis that these men get to suffer during times of inaction, which are portrayed as immobilizing to them.<sup>4</sup>

It is mainly through the figure of the classical male detective that we understand the genre's emphasis on reason, as well as its insistence on the value of order. Novels of classical crime fiction are framed as narrations of a game between two opposing forces, the good and the evil, the detective and the criminal. Both these individuals are portrayed as masterminds,

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<sup>4</sup> For this aspect of the traditional male detective figure's disposition, please refer to Roger Caillois' "The Detective Novel as Game" in *The Poetics of murder: detective fiction and literary theory*.

who use their intellect either to solve, or commit a crime (the former being the detective and the latter the criminal). As the good force almost always outwits the bad, the intellectual skills of the detective will prove superior to those of the evil force, the criminal, who will ideally be defeated. This points to the moral nature of the genre, which becomes a parable depicting the prevalence of good in society, driven by the desire to restore order once the bad force is eliminated. In being not only intellectually, but also morally superior, the detective becomes the embodiment of order itself in being responsible for the defeat of the one that brings disorder to society. As Jeanne Addison Roberts argues, “The classical detective is an agent of God – or at least of an anthropomorphic image of a God who protects the established values of a given society” (quoted by Irons 94). Thus, taking into consideration the character of the detective figure, which has been mythologized, as well as the conventional elements that constitute the formula of detective fiction, it is easy to see the sex-segregated nature of the detective novel, which favored woman’s exclusion from what is seen as the prerogative of men: i.e. reason and its employment against social disorder or crime. How could women fit into this myth? Or is there perhaps no need to try to fit in at all?

In connection to this, Anne Cranny Francis begins the fifth chapter of her book *Feminist Fiction*, with a quote by Lawrence Block, who states the following:

Women don’t fit well into a trench coat and a slouch hat... The hard-boiled private eye is a special figure in American mythology. It’s a staple of the myth that he should be a cynical loner, a man at odds with society and its values. That’s not something women normally relate to. Women aren’t cynical loners – that’s not how they like to work. It seems to me that if they want to go into the profession seriously, women writers will have to change the myth itself, instead of trying to fit themselves into it. (Francis 143)

In trying to grasp women's place within a male oriented field, critics have turned their attention to the interwar period – the so-called golden era – when detective fiction flourished. It is of great importance to note how, despite the gradual emergence of women writers, there were still almost no female detectives. In explaining this lack of female detectives, Kathleen Gregory Klein, in her book *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, argues that this is due to the fact that “The existence of fictional female detectives ... threatened the distinctions between public and private spheres of action”. She also points to the tendency of male authors of detective fiction to split their female characters “into two categories: woman or detective” (Klein 32). This was mainly due to the perception that the two could not coexist in one and the same person, given that “woman” was perceived as the negation of “detective”. Hence, a female character would either be portrayed as embodying all the stereotypical characteristics of a woman or she would otherwise exhibit a strikingly atypical behavior for a woman as a result of being a detective.

This led to yet another split within the very core of the classical detective novel, that of the woman/marriage plot and the detective plot. This split is characteristic of the first detective novels featuring female detectives, for example, Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective*, which is also the first detective novel to ever feature a female detective and is written in 1864 – 23 years after the genre's emergence. In explaining how she came to be a detective, G<sup>5</sup>, the protagonist of Forrester's novel offers the following possible explanations: “It may be that I am a widow working for my children—or I may be an unmarried woman, whose only care is herself” (Forrester 1). G's explanation points to how detective work does not fit into the profile of a married woman; only a widow or a spinster could consider detection as a profession. Forrester's choice of narration is also quite interesting for, even though it is his female detective who is the narrator of the story, she intentionally writes in

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<sup>5</sup> We are only given the initial of her name or possibly surname.

the third person. She explains: "In putting the following narratives on paper, I shall take great care to avoid mentioning myself as much as possible" (Forrester 3). In addition to this, Forrester has his female protagonist reproduce sexist perceptions through her remarks on other female characters within the narrative. For example, G writes: "Mrs. Flemps was a worthy woman, who loved to hear herself talk, a failing it is said with her sex" (Forrester 11). Through the above quotation, we understand that G, in being a detective, distances herself from the female sex, while pointing to one of its "failing[s]," which she goes on to discuss negatively.

Analyzing the posited incompatibility of the woman and the detective plots, Klein writes: "Competing with the supposedly dominant detection plot is a powerful sub-plot showing woman in her supposedly rightful place; the detective script and the woman script clash because the necessary conditions for each are the inverse and contradiction of the other" (Klein 57). Since woman was perceived as a foreign element to the dominant form of the genre (mainly due to her connection to bodily needs, emotion and romance), traditional detective novels include female characters in so far as they are depicted to either sacrifice their professional careers as detectives for the sake of getting married or, conversely, their possible marriage for the sake of being detectives. One such example is Harlan P. Halsey's female sleuth, Kate Goelet, in her 1890 novel, titled *The Lady Detective*, where Goelet's marriage unavoidably signals her departure from detecting. Additionally, Goelet's paradoxical nature in being both a woman and a sleuth is often referred to in the novel through quotes such as the following: "She had resources for self-protection ingeniously arranged, and felt perfectly able to take care of herself, although but a young delicate woman" (Halsey 77). The fact that both Forrester's and Halsey's novels bear the title "lady," or "female" detective, in an attempt to emphasize the gendered nature of their detective (in contrast to traditional detective novels which leave the gender of their protagonists invisible

or unmarked) once more presents us with the perceived incompatibility between rational detection and female nature. As I will demonstrate, in the early stages of women's detective fiction this incompatibility will demand the unsexing or masculinization of the female protagonists.

Hence the significance of what Klein describes as the element of masquerade, or disguise. In order to avoid being perceived as "unwomanly", female sleuths are often projected as concealing their true identity as detectives. For instance, Halsey, in speaking of her detective, writes: "she feared that, when the truth became known, he [Wilbur, her husband to be] would despise her, and treat her with contempt and scorn—even worse—absolute hatred, for having deceived him" (Halsey 96). What this amounts to, is the double alienation of women detectives, who are seen, on the one hand, to negate their "true" feminine nature by choosing to become detectives and, on the other hand, they are depicted as never truly able to identify with the cold rationality that characterizes the profession.

In this light, it is clear why the prerogative to keep woman to her culturally imposed space – the private sphere – is integral to the very formula of the detective novel, a formula based on the disruption and re-establishment of (legal, social and semantic) order: "everything in its place, everyone in his allotted role" (Bloom 17, 1988). Classical detective fiction, in returning woman to "her natural place", promotes the idea that a female detective is as much a disruptor of social order as is the criminal of her story. Therefore, it can be said that there is a parallel between the order valued within the very plot of the detective novel, and the order that makes up the nature of the genre itself. It is, then, no wonder that it is the mythologized figure of the male detective who is represented as the authority responsible for the protection and reestablishment of order: "the detective becomes a god-like figure who has the power to confer validity to the social order and to distinguish the guilty from the innocent" (Baučeková 16).

As I have already mentioned, the depiction of the male detective as a “cynical loner” and the narrative technique employed by the author contribute to the production of this god-like image. Cawelti calls the distinct type of third person narrator featured in classical detective fiction the “Watsonian narrator” – alluding to Sherlock Holmes’ partner, Dr. Watson. This is basically a friend or partner of the male detective who narrates the latter’s adventures (Cawelti 83). Through this technique, the detective’s identity is overshadowed by a certain amount of secrecy for, even though the person whose narration we read is considered to be close to him, he is still unable to follow the investigative process of the protagonist. What this amounts to, is the portrayal of the male detective as omnipotent. At the same time, such portrayal of the male detective dehumanizes him, giving him machine-like attributes:

the detective is endowed with superhuman powers of intellect and reason. [Their] mind works in such an orderly and organized fashion that [they] can control and alter the chaotic world around [them] through the sheer power of reason alone. ‘Everything external to the detective can be made to fit the theoretical, the ideal logic’ [...] Thus the detective affirms the rule of human mind and of the rational social order over natural chaos. (Baučeková 27)

As Anne Cranny Francis argues, “The ‘order and meaning’ that the detective restores is that of dominant ideological discourses” (149), for example the *mind/body dualism*, or patriarchal discourses that favor man’s authority and woman’s subordination. So, to return to Lawrence Block’s questions cited earlier, I agree with him that if women writers “want to go into the profession seriously, [they] will have to change the myth itself, instead of trying to fit themselves into it”. My aim then in this thesis is to see how contemporary women authors have succeeded in challenging the detective fiction formula, which represents and treats

women as irrelevant to the detection plot (at best) or as transgressive and disorderly elements that need to be restored to their place.

It was during the late 70s-early 80s when women authors of crime fiction started introducing new elements and new types of characters in their crime novels, responding to Cawelti's invitation to "renew these stereotypes by adding new elements, by showing us some new and unexpected facets, or by relating them to other stereotypes in a particularly expressive fashion" (11). One key element of these rewritings has to do with the shift of attention, which had been initially absorbed by the figure of the detective, to the victim and his/her background. A very good example of this shift is Julia Kristeva's 1996 novel, *Possessions*, which I will analyze in my thesis, in which the investigation develops through her female detective's recollection of the victim's life and relations to her family and friends, who are also possible suspects for her murder. The shift also involves the "humanization" of the detective figure, who is not only seen to empathize with the victims of her investigations, but also shows, either through words or actions, the real emotional impact that violence can have on her. Sue Grafton, one of the writers I will also be discussing in my thesis, has written with regard to the traditional detective figure: "Most of the hard-boiled male detectives go through murder and mayhem, and it has absolutely no impact on their personalities. I find it more interesting to see what the constant exposure to violence and death really does to a human being, how a person incorporates that into their psyche" (Station, 1985). Grafton ends the first detective novel of her "alphabet series" with her female detective confessing: "The shooting disturbs me still. It has moved me into the same camp with soldiers and maniacs... I'll recover of course. I'll be ready for business again in a week or two, but I'll never be the same" (Grafton 275).

Focusing on contemporary women's departures from the classical detective recipe, I will try to examine the techniques they have employed in their attempt to challenge the

conventions of the genre, the new elements, themes or contexts they have introduced, as well as the effects of such innovations on the readers. To this end, I have divided my thesis into four chapters. The first chapter, titled “Hard-boiled Women’s Detective Fiction”, will concentrate on the sub-genre of hard-boiled detective fiction through a close analysis of Julia Kristeva’s *Possessions*, Sue Grafton’s *A is for Alibi*, and Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only*. In this chapter, I will examine how hard-boiled women detectives manage to subvert patriarchal gender ideologies and assert female autonomy. All the above writers’ female protagonists – Kristeva’s Stephanie Delacour, Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone, and Paretsky’s V. I. Warsawski – are independent women detectives who are not afraid and are capable of violence to the same degree as their male counterparts. These women show their autonomy mainly through being solitary, self-reliant, physically tough, and emotionally detached.

Even though this type of representation of the female detective is very promising in terms of challenging the traditional model, where women are mainly the victims of the criminal activity featured in the novel, it nonetheless fails to depart radically from conventional portrayals of the female sleuth as essentially masculine. In other words, the success of these female characters as detectives is achieved on the basis of their assumption of stereotypical male attributes, a fact which has been discussed by a number of critics, such as Scott Christianson, as problematic. For example, Klein, discussing the self-alienating nature of this type of representation, writes: “They are inevitably involved in an act of self-alienation, since the only way in which women can have access to popular codes of knowledge, endurance, physical and intellectual agility in these forms is through the mediating codes of masculinity” (131-132)<sup>6</sup>. By stripping their female detectives off their

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<sup>6</sup> Please also refer to Scott Christianson’s essay, “Talkin’ Trash and Kicking Butt: Sue Grafton’s Hard-Boiled Feminism” in Glenwood Iron’s edited book *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction*.

femininity so as to “fit them in”, these women authors are seen as having failed to truly undermine the conventions of the genre that have systematically excluded them.

From another point of view, these female detectives’ engagement with violence can be seen as necessary in women’s struggle to alter the order imposed both within and outside the detective novel. In other words, the focus on violence that characterizes these women writers’ detective novels succeeds not only in producing a realistic image of contemporary society but also in foregrounding the effects that such violence has on their female protagonists. As I have mentioned, the violence these detectives are exposed to humanizes them, a fact that helps the audience identify with them. Showing the care with which these female protagonists’ bodies are treated (both by themselves and by their friends) after having suffered violence, contemporary female authors of crime fiction introduce what we may call a cathartic moment in the narrative. Thus, it is not simply that at the end of these novels order gets restored but the female detective figures (and, along with them, the readers) are reborn.

In the second chapter of my thesis, titled “Culinary Mysteries”, I will demonstrate how mysteries that are based on knowledge about food and food consumption challenge the dichotomy between mind and body and, subsequently, the division between the private and public sphere. More particularly, I will focus on Joanne Fluke’s novel, *Fudge Cupcake Murder* (featuring her female detective, Hannah Swensen) and Barbara Neely’s two novels, *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche Cleans Up* (featuring domestic worker and amateur female detective, Blanche White). With close reference to these novels, I will initially examine the introduction of new investigative techniques employed by female detectives that do not entirely rely on abstract reason, but rather primarily on knowledge associated with stereotypically female affairs, i.e. domestic and culinary knowledge. My aim is to show how these female detectives’ engagement with food and food production, as well as Blanche’s familiarity with the space of the household, render them suitable to solve the mysteries with

which they are confronted. By shifting the emphasis away from abstract reasoning to more material and mundane means of investigation and questioning, the authors of Hannah and Blanche succeed in changing the formula of the classical detective novel. As Silvia Baučeková writes, “while in early crime fiction the detective’s technique was based on logic, science, and deduction [...] [t]he feminised detective opted for unconventional, feminised techniques, employing domestic knowledge and abductive reasoning” (Baučeková 118).

In the third chapter I will extend my analysis of Neely’s novels, focusing on the factor of race, which is as important in the portrayal of Blanche White as the factors of gender and class. Titled “African American Women’s Detective Fiction”, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the significance of featuring a female detective who uses her identity as a black domestic worker as a form of *passing* or indeed as a cloak of invisibility. This is not merely an asset in her investigative process, offering her access to intimate spaces and details of the suspects’ lives, but it is also a form of empowerment and secret resistance against her social marginalization. Thus, in both chapters concerned with Blanche’s mysteries, I will demonstrate how Barbara Neely manages to construct a powerful female detective by means of appropriating positions and characteristics that would otherwise render her character weak (i.e. her race and social position), transforming them into the very weapons that ensure the success of her investigation. I will devote the last pages of the chapter to discussing Nikki Baker’s *In The Game*, featuring her black lesbian detective, Virginia Kelly. Through my analysis of Baker’s novel, I will demonstrate how the theory of intersectionality becomes a major component in black women’s crime fiction, as does the belief in the multiple jeopardies that women of color, and especially black lesbian women, face in a male dominated society (the kind of society reflected in this male-dominated genre). Despite the pessimistic outcome of Kelly’s case, through the development of which several of her acquaintances (belonging to the black lesbian community) are led to their deaths, Baker’s

realistic depiction of these women's place in society is a major stepping-stone in sensitizing readers and working towards a more just society.

The final chapter of my thesis, titled "Lesbian Detective Fiction", will mainly focus on the theme of sexuality and the subversion of the male gaze, which is dominant in traditional detective fiction, by a lesbian gaze. Having as a reference Barbara Wilson's three novels from her Pam Nilsen series, namely *Murder in the Collective*, *Sisters of The Road*, and *The Dog Collar Murders*, I will demonstrate how these works of fiction challenge the ideal model of the spinster detective and her subsequent desexualization in the context of the assumed incompatibility between the romantic/woman and detective plots, which I explained earlier in this introduction. What is truly significant about these novels is how the development of the story and the investigation are seen to be in parallel with the development of the female detectives' identity and sexuality. Referring to Pam Nilsen, the protagonist of Wilson's fiction, and other female detectives like her, Cranny Francis writes:

These contemporary amateurs are sexually autonomous, economically independent, intelligent and courageous and on those grounds alone offer a fundamental challenge to the traditional role; that is, they substantially 'change the myth.' And sometimes they simultaneously expose the myth, the patriarchal discourse which so seriously limits the range of activities available to women and which accordingly structures their fictional representations (164).

More importantly, I will argue, these female detectives adopt a more political approach to issues relating to crime, exposing a fundamental dimension of the 'whodunit' question by illustrating how the "who" can be a whole institution and/or an institutional ideology, hiding behind the face of a single person. This adds to the more political significance of these novels which, unlike the classical detective novel, promote a collective

sense of investigation over an individualistic one. Pam is seen to conduct her investigations by teaming up with her romantic partner and other people from her circle, in a way that foregrounds the convergence between these women's romantic affairs and process of detection. The political dimension of these works of crime fiction, by extension, lies in their problematization of the notion of "order", upon which crime fiction is based, as I have previously discussed. The reevaluation of dominant perceptions of "order" is mainly achieved by means of shedding light on the social issues that qualify or, indeed, undermine these perceptions as well as through centering on identities (including non-heteronormative identities) which are systematically marginalized by them.

To conclude with, in my thesis I wish to navigate through several contemporary women's detective novels, so as to trace the diverse techniques that women writers employ in order to challenge the initial formulaic presuppositions of the detective novel in a way that gives a feminist edge to a very conventional, male-dominated genre. As Muggie Humm writes in her essay, "Feminist Detective Fiction", "What binds all these women writers is their oppositional stance to the constraints of traditional detective fiction. What marks their fiction as feminist are the strategies they use to question and oppose the traditional construction of gender in detective narratives" (Humm 253). Diverging from its formulaic and limiting presuppositions, these women manage to revitalize the genre of crime fiction by means of opening up a space through which they get to reflect issues of class, race and sexuality in a manner that successfully moves away from classical detective fiction's monolithic and rather prescriptive nature.

## **Chapter 1: Hard-Boiled Women's Detective Fiction**

Hard-boiled detective fiction is one, if not the, most famous sub-genre of detective fiction. In contrast to the classical model of this type of fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction introduces elements that help readers identify both with the characters, as well as the events that make up the plot of these novels. For example, unlike the aristocratic, upper-class characters of traditional detective novels, hard-boiled detective fiction introduces a middle-class environment, through which readers are able to see themselves in situations that remind them of their own lives and experiences. Furthermore, the detectives of hard-boiled detective novels, unlike the amateur detectives of classical ones that get involved in detective work as part of having too much free time in their hands, are paid professionals, known as private eyes, who have to deal with “dirty” criminal activity committed by perpetrators who often act as part of group or gang conspiracy. Classical detective fiction is, by contrast, known for its “clean” puzzle-solving, and its depiction of perpetrators who act alone. Moreover, in classical detective fiction physical violence is minimal, while in the hard-boiled sub-genre it is pervasive, both in description and act<sup>7</sup>. However, one of the most important elements of hard-boiled detective fiction is, initially, its critique of society from below, rather than from above, and, secondly, its morally ambiguous closure, that in many cases negates the traditional model's expected restoration of moral order. Hence, the sub-genre itself disrupts many of the conventions of the traditional genre, by refusing to unfold according to many of the rules to which the classical detective novel must conform.

Despite all these important innovations, hard-boiled detective fiction, due to its “hard-boiled”, thus tough and cynical nature, still excludes women, mainly due to their association

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<sup>7</sup> For a critical perspective on the main distinctive elements of classical and hard-boiled detective fiction please refer to Stephen F. Soitos' *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*

with emotion<sup>8</sup> and hence their assumed repulsion towards acts that involve physical or mental violence<sup>9</sup>. The figure of the hard-boiled detective is characterized by a strong tendency towards violence, alcohol consumption, lovemaking (with multiple partners), and a lack of empathy towards anyone and everyone, including the victims.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, despite being closer to an increasingly middle-class audience in comparison to the distant aristocratic model of the traditional detective presented in classical detective fiction, the figure of the detective is still to a large extent represented as alienated by the author of the hard-boiled sub-genre.

A very good representation of this tendency can be found in Raymond Chandler's 1939 novel, which later became a movie, titled *The Big Sleep*. In *The Big Sleep*, we are for the first time introduced to private detective Philip Marlowe, who will also feature in the following four books of the same series. As the fascination associated with hard-boiled detective fiction derives mostly from the powerful and simultaneously graphic and brutal language and style of narration, the characters employed in the novel are hardly analyzed, both emotionally and in terms of their daily routines and lifestyle. Hence Marlowe's background remains unknown. The only information we have about his character and way of living is his heavy drinking, his straightforward and tough talking (always with a dose of irony), his frequent erotic conquests, and constant exposure to violence. Marlowe, therefore, exhibits all the stereotypically male characteristics that render him a role model both as detective and man.

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<sup>8</sup> For this aspect of women's supposed disposition please refer to Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick's *Feminist Theory and the Body*, where they point to how "Women, [in supposedly] being endowed with less reason than men, indeed with less need for reason since their social lives required of them feeling and not thought, were more easily dominated by extreme emotions", p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> Please refer to Roger Caillois' "The Detective Novel as Game" in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, where both the classical, as well as the hard-boiled model of detective fiction are discussed as exerting power through masculinized attributes; the former through logical thought and the latter through raw violence. "For a woman to fit into either of these two types, she must be stripped off her femininity and remain static into a state of non-existence" (Heissenbittel p. 80), quoted by Caillois.

<sup>10</sup> Please refer to Clive Bloom's *Nineteenth Century Suspense: From Poe to Conan Doyle*, where he discusses how traditional male detectives become engaged with detective work for its own sake and as a means to exhibit their intellectual skills, without really being interested in the victims of the crimes they investigate.

Apart from this new type of detective figure, what is worth examining through Chandler's novel is the role and representation of the female characters who come in Marlowe's way. As the novel is written in first person narration, and hence focalized through Marlowe, the reader gains access to Marlowe's perception and thoughts. In that sense, the reader is able to examine his stereotypical and sexist manner of thinking. Marlowe's first encounter with a female character in the novel, Mrs. Vivian Regan, – the daughter of General Sternwood, who summoned Marlowe in order to investigate a case of blackmailing for supposed gambling debts that involved his younger daughter, Carmen Sternwood, – elicit the following feelings and thoughts to Marlowe:

She was worth a stare. She was trouble. She was stretched out on a modernistic chaise-longue with her slipper off, so I stared at her legs in the sheerest silk stockings. They seemed to be arranged to stare at. They were visible to the knee and one of them well beyond. The knees were dimpled, not bony and sharp. The calves were beautiful, the ankles long and slim and with enough melodic line for a tone poem [...] She had a good mouth and a good chin (Chandler 17).

Marlowe's description of Mrs. Regan is limited to bodily features that cause him to sense trouble. Trouble, however, is sensed due to Marlowe's attraction to Mrs. Regan. The element of attraction towards the female body is presented as troublesome since the very beginning of the novel, something which constitutes femininity and the female body problematic for the male protagonist and eventually leads to their elimination. This is later reinforced through the figure of Miss Carmen Sternwood, Vivian's younger sister, whose nudity is presented as the main source of all troubles and of all the criminal activity in the novel.

Through his investigation of the blackmailing letter sent to Carmen and Vivian's father, Marlowe finds himself in the house of Arthur Gwynn Geiger – the man who sent the letter to General Sternwood, and whose bookshop is later revealed to be a pornography racket – where he finds Carmen sitting naked on a couch with merely her earrings on and Geiger lying dead on the carpet in front of her. We later find out that Geiger's blackmail involved the scandalous pictures he had taken of Carmen, which eventually had him killed by the Sternwood family's chauffeur, who was in love with Carmen. As the story unfolds and many people are led to their death, Carmen paradoxically enough (considering her recent victimization) keeps trying to seduce Marlow, however without success. She even goes as far as to sneak into his house late one night, undress herself and lie naked next to him while he sleeps. Having become aware of her presence the following morning, Marlowe begs Carmen to get dressed and leave his house. Once she is gone, he thinks the following: "The imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets. I put the empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely" (Chandler 159).

The female body is here presented as a site of corruption,<sup>11</sup> a site that justifies violence towards it, due to its scandalous nature. Carmen is eventually revealed as the villain of the story, the one who had previously killed Vivian's ex-husband, Rusty Regan, who was considered missing, and who by the end of the novel even tries to kill Marlowe, due to having rejected her. Carmen is presented as a mentally ill woman, who attempts to murder the men who refuse to succumb to her nudity and other seductive strategies. Therefore, the female body is additionally presented as a tool of manipulation, an object that triggers male attention and to which men are attracted above anything else. The novel ends with Marlowe concealing

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<sup>11</sup> For a critical perspective on this, please refer to Enrico Minardi's *Out of Deadlock: Female Emancipation in Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski Novels, and her Influence on Contemporary Crime Fiction*.

his findings about Carmen's case and his persuasion of Carmen's sister, Vivian, to admit Carmen to a mental asylum.

Chandler's novel is problematic from a feminist perspective in many ways. On one level, it glorifies male cynicism, in the sense that this is portrayed as vital to the investigation at hand. A very good example of this can be Marlowe's confrontation with the first murder scene. Apart from the dead man lying on the floor, Marlow, also has to deal with naked Carmen, who is obviously in a state of shock, but also under the influence of an unidentified narcotic substance. Marlowe's instinct prompts him to slap Carmen repeatedly so as to have her recover. His way of resolving the issue at hand, apart from exhibiting male violence, also shows Marlowe's lack of empathy towards Carmen at the time, when she was still thought of as the victim of the whole case. Having met Carmen the following day at Geiger's house, trying to find the naked photo that had been taken of her the previous night, Marlowe once again slaps Carmen, due to the inconsistency and incomprehension that characterized her speech. He thinks the following: "The giggles stopped dead, but she didn't mind the slap any more than last night. Probably all her boyfriends got around to slapping her sooner or later. I could understand how they might" (Chandler 66).

Male violence directed towards the female body is not simply repeated throughout Chandler's novel, it is also justified. It is portrayed as necessary for the resolution of the detective's problems; problems that arise due to the female body's exhibition of its sexual nature and, hence, its connection to corruption. Not only does Chandler's male protagonist lack empathy and emotion towards others, but he also drains the female body from any feeling and reduces it to mere flesh that justifiably deserves punishment. The element of violence, then, found in hard-boiled detective fiction seems, not incompatible with, but dependent on femininity, posited at the receiving end of its expression. In this light, how can a female writer (re)produce a type of literature that is deeply misogynistic in its treatment of

the female body and female sexuality? If violence is an integral aspect of hard-boiled detective fiction, how can it be employed differently, in ways that neither deprive women of their agency nor threaten women's modes of being?

The first step to rewriting hard-boiled detective fiction, in which the element of violence becomes part of the female detective's personality but is, at the same time, not associated with her own negation as a woman or the victimization of any other female character, involves the humanization of the detective figure. In other words, in women's hard-boiled detective fiction, the female detective figure's capability of violence does not cancel out the empathy she comes to express towards the victims of the crimes she investigates. In this way, even the female victim is not presented as an object, a mere body. Julia Kristeva, in her 1998 novel, titled *Possessions*, demonstrates precisely this. Stephanie Delacour, the female detective of Kristeva's crime series, narrates the story of a woman, Gloria Harrison, whose decapitated body was found by the police. Unlike traditional male authors, Kristeva has her fictional detective look at the woman behind the decapitated body that was found. This, apart from establishing the female detective's empathy towards the woman who has lost her life, also enables us to feel the female victim's presence, despite her death.

As Kristeva's novel is written also in first person narration,<sup>12</sup> we are able to follow Delacour's train of thought during her confrontation with the dead woman, whom she identifies even though she is missing her head. Delacour not only refuses to neglect the

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<sup>12</sup> Kristeva's novel is a combination of first and third-person narration. This demonstrates her attempt to keep a balance between a distant and a more intimate view of her detective. Delacour's portrayal resists the tendency to present the detective from a distance; we have access to her thoughts, feelings, her personal crises, which points to the humanization of the detective figure. At the same time, she is represented from an outside perspective. We're not allowed to get too close; we are also invited to judge her and her weaknesses from an outside perspective.

woman's life, but she goes as far as to elevate her presence and value by drawing an analogy between her and other important female figures, such as Aphrodite and Dione, who similarly lost their heads once "they left the pediment of the Parthenon for the cavernous recesses of the British Museum" (Kristeva 4-5). Neither they, nor Gloria have lost their value due to having lost their head. In contrast to other detectives, who pay little to no attention to the victim, but merely examine their dead body for possible clues, Delacour dedicates several chapters to discussing the murder scene and the life that Gloria led until her death. Delacour does not even address Gloria as "the victim", something that other detectives in her place would have done, and which would have annihilated the value of Gloria's now lifeless body. Gloria as a woman, a mother, a singular subject is in fact the center of the narrative. She is given the attention she deserves as a person with feelings, not an object, but as a human who up until her death worked, created, was open to life and struggled against her material circumstances. In general, Kristeva's novel can be compared to a palimpsest of recollections of Gloria's life, which are vital for the investigation, and which eventually lead to the capture of her murderers.<sup>13</sup>

What is additionally important about Delacour's narration is the construction of her own identity, through her thoughts and memories regarding her life and background, and also her demonstration of her suitability as a journalist and detective. She specifically writes: "The fact that I was a woman meant I had two advantages: intuition and perseverance" (Kristeva 38); and in another instance, referring to the secret services, "Well, 'they' underestimate me. They ought to know by now the sort of person they have to deal with" (Kristeva 17). Stephanie Delacour is indeed very efficient in her work and her thinking. Furthermore, she

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<sup>13</sup> Gloria was the victim of several aggressors. She was initially given an overdose by her boyfriend, she was then murdered by a serial killer who happened to be passing by and was finally decapitated by her son's speech therapist. In this light, Kristeva, despite her elevation of the female victim, still illustrates how Gloria as a woman, a mother, and a professional becomes the object of hate in a patriarchal society.

does not hesitate to attribute dead Gloria with agency, in the sense that she also considers the possibility that she might have committed suicide. She even goes on to explain the reasons that might have possibly driven Gloria to take her own life. The fact that Delacour does not exclude this scenario shows her determination to treat the female victim as an agent of her life and death, thus refusing to reduce her to a state of passivity.

Another essential aspect of Delacour's narration of Gloria's life, has to do with her presentation of Gloria as both a desiring, as well as a desired woman and mother, a portrayal which comes in contrast with the previous demonization of the sexualized woman, as is the case with Chandler's representation of Carmen. Delacour's narration of Gloria's life additionally contributes to the presentation of a different dimension of motherhood and women's relation to caring. In describing Gloria's relationship with her deaf son, Jerry, she gives a new meaning to what was seen as the "possessive" nature of Gloria's love towards her son. Gloria's possessions, as the title suggests, do not merely have to do with her possession of Jerry, but also the possessions she gains through him, and her need to take care of him.

It was really Gloria who was the handicapped child. On Jerry's behalf she slowly learned what she was supposed to know already but what she had never really possessed. Can you possess something bestowed on you merely as a matter of routine? For Jerry, with Jerry, she taught herself the names of scents and sounds [...] He had to learn, she had to learn to teach him, and to do that she had to learn for herself, to rediscover [...] (Kristeva 55).

Through her love for her son, Gloria is reborn. Teaching Jerry activities of daily living that for her had gradually become mere routines enacted by habit and repetition, forces Gloria to learn anew. And this symbolizes the renewal of her own self and identity as a woman and a mother. Motherhood is no longer associated with confinement and repression, but with

freedom and rebirth.<sup>14</sup> Through her taking care of Jerry, Gloria is provided with the opportunity to reinvent herself through her newly acquired experiences. In that sense, Kristeva's novel is a great example of redefining female identity, regardless of their role in the narrative (whether they are the detective, the victim, or even the criminal of the story, as I will go on to suggest).

Apart from rewriting female identity through her fiction, Kristeva also succeeds in stripping her male characters off their assumed authority over people and situations. In detective fiction written by men this is mainly shown through the male detective's exhibition of intellectual power at the crime scene and during his interviews with the suspects in the case at hand. Kristeva constantly has her female detective mock the stereotypical and preestablished male type of investigation that in her novel is demonstrated through the figure of Captain Northrop Rilsky, the lead investigator of Gloria's murder case. For example: "As if to show he was taking possession of the premises, Rilsky tossed his briefcase carelessly onto the dark blue velvet divan. The case was full of reference books unlikely to be relevant, but he always carried them about with him 'in case they came in handy' [...]" (64). Or, the following passage: "Rilsky always enjoyed his witnesses' discomfiture and allowed it to worsen until the victims flew right off the handle and revealed their lack of good manners or taste. This gave him a sense of superiority and power, not unmingled with pity" (82).

By contrast, Delacour's power as a detective stems from her ability to identify with all characters of the story and, by extension, from her understanding of their psychology and reasons behind their actions. This breaks a key convention of classical detective fiction, which has to do with the portrayal of the criminal as a monster, a mentally ill and evil person who disrupts the moral order, and the detective as the morally good individual who manages

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<sup>14</sup> Freedom from stereotypical and sexist ideologies on motherhood and care-focused activities.

to restore order through the criminal's elimination. By contrast, Delacour does not seek to eliminate the criminals, one of whom turns out to be Jerry's speech therapist, Pauline Gadeau, who had decapitated Gloria's body following her overdose caused by her boyfriend and subsequent murder by a passerby killer. Neither does she present Pauline as a cold blood murderer. She rather discusses Pauline's own relationship with Gloria's son, and her own love and affection towards Jerry, which led to the decapitation of his mother's already murdered body. Delacour's suitability as a detective is especially highlighted in the last pages of the story and discussed in opposition to Rilsky's inability to understand the psychological situations behind the events that led to the commission of the crime. Kristeva writes:

But no, he can't possibly have found out what Stephanie herself has discovered. What does the worthy Rilsky know about a woman's secret world? About a child borne by a woman, an abnormal child to whom she gives life every day, day after day her whole life long? All that has nothing to do with Existence, Man, Humanity, Society, all their subtle verbiage. You either feel it or you don't; it's different, another world at the other end of the earth. At best, if he'd come anywhere near the truth when he offered his necessarily shaky conclusions to the courts in Santa Varvara, he could only have been governed by humanist considerations and his sense of measure and what's right. His restraint couldn't have had anything to do with an understanding of passion, either Gloria's or Pauline's (209-210).

What Kristeva does in the above quoted passage is to elevate emotion and the ability to feel, to understand one's emotions and passion, over any abstract knowledge on "Existence, Man, Humanity, Society". She successfully disputes any association of emotion with lack of objectivity and weakness, promoting it as a source of intellectual power. Woman's association with emotion is what renders her powerful and intelligent. In that sense, there is a reversal in the power struggle between mind and body. Man's association with the mind, demonstrated through the character of Rilsky, and by extension his superficial knowledge of

the world, proves inadequate to help him provide answers to vital questions that arise during the investigation and which have to do with one's psyche. This is portrayed as being mainly due to man's detachment from sentiment, his cynicism. By contrast, Delacour's empathy and capacity for emotion, expressed towards all characters of the story, irrespective of whether they are the victim or the criminal, prove sufficient as well as advantageous.

Delacour's humanization of the victim is a strategy shared by other female detectives of the hard-boiled sub-genre, with one such example being Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, featuring in her alphabetical crime series. Through her fiction, Grafton foregrounds the emotional dimension of female detective work and takes it one step further, by giving visibility to the effects that exposure to violence has on her female protagonist. As Marilyn Station writes:

Emotional integrity is also a key issue for Sue Grafton who says she does not avoid violence but feels compelled to deal with 'the human and emotional ramifications' of it. 'Most of the hard-boiled male detectives go through murder and mayhem, and it has absolutely no impact on their personalities' she says. 'I find it more interesting to see what the constant exposure to violence and death really does to a human being, how a person incorporates that into their psyche. (Station 1985)

Despite having constructed a female character whose power derives mainly from her loneliness, self-reliance, independence, mental and physical toughness, athletic composure, and a smart and sometimes rude way of talking (something which could be and has been, as I will analyze, negatively perceived), Grafton manages to show the other side of the coin. In other words, she shows her protagonist's vulnerability, which even though rare, is still present and should not be neglected. In this way, Grafton successfully builds a female character that, on the one hand, does not fit into the classical distinction between the tough

male detective and his more emotional female counterpart, but on the other hand, shows that irrespective of one's hard and tough disposition, they are still human and emotionally vulnerable. This has nothing to do with one's sex, for emotion is universal, it is human, and it is shared by everyone. In doing this, Grafton creates a bridge between the previously incompatible detective and romantic plots, and this is exactly what gives her fiction a feminist edge. As Kathleen Gregory Klein mentions in *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*:

If any examples of the integration of the woman's script and the detective's script are to be found, consciously feminist detective fiction would provide the models. Feminist ideology rejects sexually differentiated spheres for women's and men's work, assumes women's competence and independent judgement, and encourages the transformation of existing societal values and systems (229).

Another dimension of Grafton's fiction which manages to link the detective and romantic scripts is her foregrounding of sexuality. Female sexuality in Grafton's fiction is portrayed as natural and ordinary, not as a sign of a woman's corruption. Millhone's detective work does not hold her back from being romantically involved. Rejecting the spinster sleuth model, endorsed through older female detective figures, such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Grafton has her female detective combine professional work with romantic experimentation. For example, Millhone, in the first book of Grafton's alphabetical series, titled *A is for Alibi*, is romantically involved with one of the suspects of the murder she is investigating. In trying to prove the innocence of Nikki Fife, who has recently been released from prison (due to being falsely accused of having murdered her husband, Lawrence Fife, because of his infidelity), Millhone gets tangled into a series of murders with many murder suspects. Despite having solved the case for which she was hired (establishing Nikki's

innocence, through finding the real murderer, who turns up to be Lawrence's ex-wife, Gwen), Millhone manages to link the rest of the murders committed to one of the previous suspects, named Charlie Scorsoni. Scorsoni is the late Mr Fife's former law partner, who is later revealed to have been skimming dividend money from estate accounts under his management. Having interrogated Scorsoni multiple times, Millhone becomes romantically involved with the man. What is truly important to see through Millhone's investigation is how she manages to combine her detective work with her romantic life, and at the same time to keep it separate, so as to maintain her objectivity towards the facts making up the case. This is exactly what leads her to the conclusion that it was actually Scorsoni who had committed the rest of the murders by using the same M.O. (modus operandi) as the initial murder – meaning the murder of Lawrence Fife – in order to avoid suspicion. The novel ends with a cat-and-mouse chase between Scorsoni and Millhone, in the course of which Millhone shoots Scorsoni dead.

Through her introduction of female sexuality in a type of fiction that had previously operated by means of establishing a distinction between mind and body, and which by extension privileged rationality over corporeality, Grafton manages, on the one hand to show how rationality does not always entail the rejection of bodily functions and enjoyments, and on the other hand, to prove that female sexuality can be combined with detective work without interfering with its success or becoming a source of trouble. Through this link between mind and body, a link combined with the foregrounding of emotion as a result of having to endure both physical and psychological violence, Grafton portrays not merely the physical fragility but also the psychic vulnerability of an individual constantly exposed to violence. This is especially projected through Millhone's last words, with which the novel ends, in the form of a letter addressed to her audience, in which she writes: "The shooting disturbs me still. It has moved me into the same camp with soldiers and maniacs. I never set

out to kill anyone. But maybe that's what Gwen would say, and Charlie too. I'll recover of course. I'll be ready for business again in a week, or two, but I'll never be the same. You try to keep life simple but it never works, and in the end all you have left is yourself" (Grafton 275).

Despite being traumatized by the event of having to kill her lover and exposing her vulnerability to the circumstances at hand, Millhone understands that violence (even fatal violence) is part of her job, which she will continue practicing irrespective of any risks or the psychological cost. However, Grafton and many other female writers of the hard-boiled sub-genre have been heavily criticized, due to their having constructed female characters whose power and suitability as detectives derive from their embodiment of stereotypically male attributes, a fact which additionally justifies their being systematically exposed to violence. Many critics, including Scott Christianson<sup>15</sup>, have argued that despite their vulnerability and any sentimental aspects of the narrative, these women's efficiency relies mainly on aspects of their character that have to do with their physical strength and intellectual power, their capacity to fight, their fearless and dirty talk, their "unwomanly" behavior and disposition, in general. These critics, moreover, perceive such aspects as the manifestation of a "self-alienating process" in which these female detectives engage. As Klein puts it, "[T]hey are inevitably involved in an act of self-alienation, since the only way in which women can have access to popular codes of knowledge, endurance, physical and intellectual agility in these forms [i.e. male forms of detective fiction] is through the mediating codes of masculinity" (131-132). As I mentioned in my introduction, according to her, female detective figures of the hard-boiled sub-genre are alienated on two levels: On one level, they are alienated as detectives, due to being female, and on a second level, they are alienated from their female

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<sup>15</sup> Please refer to her essay, "Talkin' Trash and Kicking Butt: Sue Grafton's Hard-Boiled Feminism" in Glenwood Iron's edited book *Feminism In Women's Detective Fiction*.

nature, due to being detectives. This double alienation derives from the posited incompatibility between the detective and the woman plot, which led to the scarcity of female detectives in classical detective fiction. This is a convention that feminist writers of the genre have successfully questioned, employing some of the strategies analyzed here.

Indeed, Grafton consciously foregrounds the “unnatural” temperament of her female character, by having other figures in her story comment upon it. For example, Greg Fife, Nikki Fife’s son, having heard Millhone use the word ‘fuck’, tells her: “Because you said ‘fuck.’ I always get tickled when women say that. Especially you. It was the last thing that I expected to come out of your mouth” (139). Grafton’s goal, then, is precisely this: to “tickle” her audience by showing how a woman can also display “man-like” behavior. By having other characters constantly address this issue, she problematizes gender stereotypes, demonstrating patriarchal society’s blind spot in categorizing people, due to their being male or female, an attitude which leads to their predetermined and socially acceptable “male” or “female” behavior. The violence to which Grafton’s protagonist is “unnaturally” exposed is necessary to show that endurance to it is an index of women’s endurance to the violent nature of sexist ideologies, the very ideologies the detective genre has reproduced since its emergence. In this light, it appears that violence is required as a means of offering the audience a glimpse of the reality that women are called forth to confront in a patriarchal society. The answer to this reality is not the creation of utopic fantasy worlds where women detectives solve mysteries without struggle and turmoil, but a convincing representation of the hardships and suffering they have to go through.

As Sara Paretsky – the last female writer, whose work I will discuss in this chapter – explains, violence is the logical counteraction to women’s own reaction to predominant male

ideologies that tend to subordinate women's place and role, both in reality and in fiction.<sup>16</sup> Paretzky has her own female protagonist, named V. I. Warshawski, exposed to violence, especially physical violence, to such a great extent that, at one instance, she needs to be hospitalized and subsequently treated by her female friend and doctor, Lotty Herschel. In Paretzky's initial book of her Warshawski series, titled *Indemnity Only* and published in 1982, Warshawski is brutally beaten by a gang member, Earl Smeissen, entangled in a missing person's investigation, that turns out to be a murder case. In this book, Warshawski is initially summoned by a man, Andrew McGraw, who conceals his true identity by introducing himself using a false name (John Thayer), supposedly looking for his son's missing girlfriend, Anita Hills (in reality, Anita McGraw, his daughter). Through her investigation of Anita's disappearance, Warshawski discovers the murdered body of Anita's boyfriend, Peter Thayer, the son of true John Thayer, who is also later murdered. We eventually come to find out that the murders are tied to an elaborate scheme of insurance fraud, which Peter's father was also entangled with, and that Peter unfortunately for himself had discovered and was executed for. Anita's disappearance is the result of her attempt to hide from the same criminals who have killed her boyfriend and his father. As we find out, the mastermind behind this fraud is a man named Yardley Masters, who is revealed to have orchestrated the murders in the first place and executed some of them himself. Warshawski's brutal beating, then, is carried out because of her "knowing too much", and "sticking her nose where it don't belong".

The severity of the harm done to Warshawski points to her own force of action and willingness to fight back. Speaking of a letter sent to her by a female reader of *Indemnity*

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<sup>16</sup> For this aspect of Paretzky's fiction please see Elizabeth Thompson's "Turning toward the things that make you afraid: Growing pains in Sara Paretzky's Feminist Hard-Boiled Fiction" in *Out of Deadlock: Female Emancipation in Sara Paretzky's V.I. Warshawski Novels, and her Influence on Contemporary Crime Fiction*.

*Only*, who criticized Warshawski's behavior as neither "right" nor "natural", Paretsky emphasized the reader's internalization of abuse that resulted in her perception of women's submission to violence as the only appropriate behavior. Speaking of this incident, Paretsky comes to the realization that her character is indeed subject to violence, due to her "fighting back," her "talking back," her "unwomanly" fashion, her not doing what "decent girls" would do, that is, keep to herself and remain idle. In her own words, quoted by Enrico Minardi in her essay on Paretsky's influence on contemporary crime fiction,

It's true that my detective is physical—she is sometimes criticized for being too physical, for courting danger and taking her lumps. Her main function, though, is to speak, to say those things that people in power want to keep unsaid, unheard. Her job is to advocate for those in the margins. It is her speech that unleashes a physical reaction against her: she does not provoke the powerful because she's assaulted them physically. She arouses their fury, as I did, as Sarkeesian does, by speaking when they want her to be quiet (17).

Paretsky continues: "I will not let V.I. be a victim. She will be attacked because the physical is an automatic extension in our world of the fear of women's agency. She will not fall, though, and she will never stop talking back" (Minardi 18). In Paretsky's understanding, the brutality with which Warskawski is fought against is the logical result of her struggle towards agency. The more she is feared, due to the agency she develops through her rejection of ideologies that forcefully try to bind her by labeling her unwomanly and indecent, the more violence is inflicted on her. Paretsky is very realistic about the struggle and hardships that women have to undergo so as to build their agency and gain their place in a fictional field that nonetheless reflects the real world. In the real world things have never come women's way easily. It was through constant fights and many defeats that women have succeeded in claiming their autonomy and agency.

Nonetheless, like Kinsey Millhone, V.I. Warshawski has been criticized for being too “masculine” and for engaging in violent acts, with the letter sent to Paretzky being one such example. As Kenneth Paradis argues:

When the hard-boiled detective convention is labelled ‘masculinist,’ it is usually with reference to these ways in which the moral ethos of the private investigator is realized through such interactions between significantly sexed and shaped bodies. However, as Sara Paretzky’s fiction illustrates, this pattern can be modified to express an analogous ‘feminism’ in which the female body and its situational experience become the locus for the articulation of moral agency. (Paradis 89)

Similar to Grafton, Paretzky problematizes “masculinist” hard-boiled conventions by again having other characters of her story comment upon her female protagonist’s unwomanlike behavior. When being asked to describe the crime scene of Peter’s murder to some policemen, Warshawski plays dumb, so as not to share information with them, a strategy which leads them to reply: “you’re no dummy. I know when you – got yourself into the apartment – and we’ll overlook just how you got in there right now – you didn’t scream or throw up, the way any decent girl would” (Paretzky 32). Because she is a detective, and unquestionably a very good one, she is denied her womanhood. Detective work is not compatible with being a “decent girl”, for a decent girl is expected to show weakness, to scream and throw up at the sight of such hideous crime. Remarks such as these, however, are not used by Paretzky in order to emphasize the exceptional nature of her character, but rather, in an attempt to question and mock the assumptions behind them.

Interestingly, Paretzky has her protagonist shorten her name to just her initials, “V. I.” or “Vic”, in her attempt to avoid being defined by association to a specific sex. By adopting this androgynous name, Warshawski symbolically posits herself at the liminal space between

male and female, and demonstrates how detective work has nothing to do with sex. When asked whether she goes by her initials or whether Vic is her real name, Warshawski replies: “It’s a nickname [...] I usually use my initials. I started out my working life as a lawyer, and I found it was harder for male colleagues and opponents to patronize me if they didn’t know my first name” (Paretsky 183). Warshawski’s androgynous name produces a link between supposed opposites: woman/man, woman/detective<sup>17</sup>. Thus, Paretsky builds a character who, like Grafton’s own female detective, displays toughness but also vulnerability. Warskawski, just like Millhone, exposes the cost of the violence she suffers, once again pointing to her humanization as a detective figure. When asked by Peter’s sister, Jill, whether she is scared, because of all the experiences she has had (“I mean you’ve been beaten up and your apartment got torn up, and they – they shot Daddy and Pete”), Warshawski answers: “Yes, of course I am scared [...] Only a fool would look at a mess like this and not be. It’s just that it doesn’t panic me – it makes me careful, being scared does” (140). Warshawski, unlike her male counterparts, who display superhuman powers and pride themselves in their lack of an emotional response to situations (for that would imply a weakness on their part), does not hesitate to admit her fear and to present it as a natural human response. She is no superhuman so as not to be scared. She just manages to channel that fear into her work, which helps her stay calm and careful.

Another dimension of Warshawski’s character that resembles Grafton’s Millhone, is the expression of her sexuality. Despite being on the run all the time, especially due to the brutality that characterizes the plot of *Indemnity Only*, she is seen to be romantically involved with a guy named Ralph Devereux, who also happens to work for Yardley Masters, though he is ignorant of his boss’ mischiefs and association to the murders. However, Paretsky

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<sup>17</sup> However, her androgynous name does not connote the union of the two, but a crossing on the other side, “crossing the border,” as discussed by Clive Bloom in *Twentieth Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age* (p. 237).

purposefully has her female protagonist insist on the incompatibility of the nature of the work she does with being married (thus, reproducing the very ideologies that had previously propelled the plot of detective novels, featuring female sleuths). Significantly, her male lover opposes this view. In this way, Paretsky reverses stereotypical perceptions of gender and preestablished gender roles. She explicitly reverses such roles when she has Warshawski rescue her lover from the gang members who had captured both of them and planned to kill them. Warshawski's male lover is presented as the weakest of the two, and Warshawski as the one in control of the situation.

As I have already mentioned, the novel ends on a cathartic moment when Warshawski is taken care of by her female friend, Lotty.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, this moment points to the collective struggle of women, who take care of and help each other stand back on their feet after they have fallen. It is reflective of the sisterhood that women have managed to form throughout these years of common struggle towards common goals. On the other hand, the recovery of one's body symbolizes the renewal, the rebirth of that body whose wounds have been healed. The stitches with which Warshawski's wounds are treated on many occasions, could be reflective of the links that women build among them and of the connections they establish between mind and body, detective and woman, reason and emotion, love and violence. By bringing such elements together, contemporary female writers of detective fiction alter the conventions that have so far enabled and reinforced the exclusion of women by making them other to the formula of the genre. Therefore, the rebirth of the female body in their narratives is analogous to the rebirth, the rewriting of detective fiction, and the reconstruction of the formula that has brought it to life.

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<sup>18</sup> For a critical perspective on this please refer to Enrico Minardi's *Out of Deadlock: Female Emancipation in Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski Novels, and her Influence on Contemporary Crime Fiction*.

## **Chapter 2: Culinary Mysteries**

While food and detective fiction might seem quite incompatible at first, the recently developed sub-genre of culinary mysteries has captured the attention of quite a large number of readers over the past few years. Many critics have addressed this type of fiction as a hybrid one, due to what is perceived as the oxymoronic nature of the two primary elements that constitute it, namely food and detective work. This paradox that lies at the heart of the sub-genre of culinary mysteries originates from the previously discussed gendered dichotomy between the public and the private sphere. Food has traditionally been connected to domestic life, the home, and specifically the space of the kitchen, where its preparation takes place. In that sense, food has also been linked to women, as they are the prime caretakers of the household and the people living in it, whose nourishment they are also responsible for. Due to its connection to domesticity, food became a symbol of care and nourishment, but also intimacy, as it was the main source of a family's gathering.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, many have discussed the act of food consumption as a community-forming ritual,<sup>20</sup> an association which is, additionally, reinforced through religious practices, such as fasting.

Despite food's primary role in the sustenance of human life, philosophers such as Plato have discussed the triviality of food consumption as a source of bodily pleasure, when compared to the nourishment of the human mind and soul<sup>21</sup>. Through his distinction between the world of Ideas and the world of phenomena, Plato posited the deceptive nature of the senses, characteristic of the body, that bounded humans to the world of phenomena, a mere replica of the world of Ideas, which one can have access to through leading a virtuous life,

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<sup>19</sup> For a critical perspective on this please refer to Silvia Baučeková's *Dining Room Detectives*.

<sup>20</sup> Please refer to Silvia Baučeková's *Dining Room Detectives*

<sup>21</sup> For this aspect of Plato's theory please refer to Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick's *Feminist Theory and the Body*, Section 1.2 "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views".

free of bodily desires. As Price and Shildrick point out, Plato insisted on the destructive effects of the body on the soul, and in doing so, he scorned those who devoted their lives to pleasuring their bodies, namely women, perceiving them as intellectually inferior human beings (39). As I have mentioned, women's association to the domestic sphere has been the product of the dichotomy produced in Western philosophy between mind and body. What this dualistic philosophy did, was to contribute to the establishment of men's superiority over women. Thus, men's assumed possession of a *rational mind* justified their connection to the public sphere and their privileged position in socio-political affairs and the domains of knowledge. By contrast, women's posited lack of reason condemned them to confinement in the house and to a life of material needs and pleasures. In the context of Western dualistic philosophy, then, the perception of the body as inferior to the mind resulted in a number of gendered hierarchies (masculine vs. feminine, public vs. private, intellectual vs. material nourishment) which, as we have seen, have informed and shaped the production of classical detective fiction.

In light of the above, detective fiction, a genre celebrating the (male) power of human reason, seems incompatible with material life, including food and all that is relevant to it. First of all, and according to the formula of classical detective fiction, the protagonist of detective novels is usually a man, whose suitability for the job of the detective relies heavily on his possession of a rational mind. His rational mind, on the one hand, aids him in the solution of the crimes he is confronted with, and, on the other hand, distinguishes him from the rest of the characters, by creating a distance between his god-like intellect and the other characters' intellectual inferiority. The composition of the male detective character, then, is represented as excluding any form of bodily pleasure, for example, that gained through food consumption. Indeed, authors of classical detective fiction construct characters that are almost never portrayed during the act of eating. Even if they are, the act of eating a meal is

not foregrounded, nor is the food that is being consumed. Pleasure in this way is divorced from the act of consuming food, which is presented as a mere habit, the only purpose of which is to contribute to the survival of the human subject.

The classification of detective fiction as “Literature”, a highly-valued product of the human mind, seems also to intensify its incompatibility with the material nature of food. Given its correlation to the body, as well as women, the pleasure offered by food is not as appreciated as that given by literature. Moreover, food’s connection to the household and domestic life seems to be incompatible with the public lifestyle of the detective, whose main achievement is the restoration of order and meaning in society. The challenge, then, for a contemporary female writer of culinary mysteries, is how to work against this posited incompatibility. How can she rewrite the genre in a way that brings these seemingly opposite elements together, blending them in a tasty mix which promises to leave a spicy flavor in the mouths of the audience? What is the secret ingredient<sup>22</sup> that will successfully alter the original recipe for the better – at least as far as women consumers are concerned?

Culinary mystery writers, who are both writers of fiction and of food recipes, have employed various techniques in order to alter the original recipe of the detective story. First of all, their very engagement with fiction and recipe writing is enough to demonstrate the analogy between, on the one hand, the elements and conventions that make up a genre and, on the other hand, the preparation of food. What is important about this analogy drawn between a recipe and the classical formula of a detective novel, is that a recipe can be altered based on one’s taste or the health needs of the consumer, and so can a novel. Just like a lactose intolerant person, who will, instead of cow milk, pour, let us say almond milk, into

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<sup>22</sup> Considering the formula of detective fiction as a recipe constituted by specific ingredients in the context of culinary mysteries, ingredient here refers to the techniques that a female writer of culinary mysteries is to employ as to rewrite the genre, meaning the recipe.

their meal in order to prevent the side-effects of lactose entering their system, a novel can abandon certain conventions and replace some of its traditional elements with others. As Silvia Baučeková writes:

[...] a detective formula is a recipe for writing a mystery or a crime story. If an author wishes to create such a story, she/he needs to follow a set of rules in a certain order and use specific ingredients otherwise the desired result is not achieved. The list of ingredients includes characters (the detective, suspects, the victim, the criminal), the crime and its investigation, and setting. But at the same time a truly brilliant author—exactly like a brilliant chef—must sometimes break the rules in an unexpected way and treat her/his readers to a hitherto unknown flavour. Panek observes that the most successful writers of the Golden Age “flouted the rules with abandon” and, on the contrary, those who adhered to the rules too rigidly, ended up creating “rotten fiction”. (Baučeková 85)

Baučeková posits another level on which food and literature can be perceived as analogous, i.e. in that they are both reflective of society and social phenomena. As she explains, food is itself a social phenomenon loaded with symbolic meanings. It is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (58). To invoke the famous quote, “we are what we eat”, and indeed the food that one consumes is, to a great extent, part of their identity. Classical detective fiction almost entirely takes place in upper-class societies. This can be justified by the fact that the people who had access to literary works, such as detective fiction, at the time of its emergence were mostly individuals who belonged to the upper classes. The absence of food preparation in this type of literature is then far from surprising, as the ones responsible for it were not the characters spoken about in the stories, but those who worked in the background, the people who belonged in the working classes.

Drawing on Carole M. Counihan's analysis, Baučeková also points to the relation between eating and sexual activity. She argues specifically that they "both involve crossing individual body boundaries, are inevitable to sustain life, both engage the senses, are enacted in strongly intimate settings, and involve use of the mouth" (Baučeková 61). She adds that the most important connection between these two activities is their shared governance by a set of rules and taboos that determine, not only the settings in which they are performed, but also the persons with whom they can be performed. Baučeková extends her discussion to reveal an interconnection between gender and food, focusing on the eating habits of men and women. The classification of different kinds of food as either masculine or feminine<sup>23</sup> is analogous to the socially established classification of professions (e.g. that of the detective) on the basis of their suitability to a specific sex.

In this light, it is important to see how food has been employed in contemporary women's detective fiction. Female authors of culinary mysteries have used food in various ways, so as to deconstruct, or rather reconstruct, notions of domesticity, womanhood, as well as female sexuality. For the sake of examining some of these techniques, I have chosen the works of Joanne Fluke and Barbara Neely, two of the most prominent writers of the subgenre of culinary mysteries. The works of both women writers can be considered a major step in the feminization of the genre, with the most central aspect of their rewritings focusing on the figure of the detective.

As we have already seen, rationality is the basic tenet of classical detective fiction, as the genre appears to be fueled by the belief that the "human mind—reason—will eventually triumph over the chaotic phenomena of the world" (Baučeková 128). As Baučeková argues, the detective figure "represents this rational power [and] the solution of the crime [at hand]

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<sup>23</sup> Feminine foods as soft, sweet and delicate and masculine as chewy, heavy and hard to digest.

depends on this faith” (128). One of the central techniques employed by culinary mystery women writers is the undermining of this belief through the replacement of rationality, as the main source of crime solving, with other values, such as the female detective’s culinary and domestic knowledge. I will now proceed to the analysis of one of the books in Joanne Fluke’s culinary mystery series, titled *The Fudge Cupcake Murder*, featuring her female detective, Hannah Swensen. Hannah Swensen is the owner of a small-town bakery and cookie shop, called The Cookie Jar. Her bakery and pastry knowledge, apart from rendering her a successful businesswoman, enables her to offer afternoon cooking classes at a local school. As the one responsible for the release of the so-called “Lake Eden Cookbook”, Hannah takes advantage of her cooking classes to test some of the recipes she is asked to include in the town’s cookbook by some of the town’s people.

Through the character of Swensen, Fluke presents us with a female amateur detective, whose success derives primarily from her knowledge of food and food preparation. As it happens with other female detectives in culinary mysteries, Hannah uses food as a means to investigate the crime she is presented with in every one of her mysteries. One of the main strategies she uses is to offer food to the people whom she wants to question. There are various explanations as to why she does this. On the one hand, she seeks to create an atmosphere of intimacy between her and the individual whom she questions so that she or he will feel secure enough to share valuable information on the crime. Apart from winning the trust of the individual she wants to question, Hannah’s offering of food has to do, on the other hand, with the feelings of pleasure and relaxation that accompany food consumption. This makes the extraction of information easier for her.

A very good example of this investigative technique using food is demonstrated in the aforementioned novel, in the scene where Hannah and her sister, Andrea, visit the late sheriff’s house, so as to offer their condolences to his wife, Nettie. The previous night,

Hannah had found Sheriff Grant murdered and disposed of at the dumpster of the school where she teaches her afternoon cooking lessons. Due to the antagonism between Sheriff Grant and Andrea's husband, Bill (also Hannah's brother-in-law), who had been the opponent of the sheriff in the upcoming sheriff elections, Bill was temporarily suspended from his job. Because of his inability to provide the police with an alibi for the night of the murder, he was thought to be the prime suspect in the murder case. Apart from offering their condolences to the sheriff's wife, Hannah and Andrea were hoping that, through their visit and subsequent discussion with Nettie, they would manage to extract information from her that would help clear Bill's name and establish his innocence. During their conversation, Andrea, being aware of her sister's intention to question the sheriff's wife and with Hannah's guidance, proposes that Nettie have some wine, which will help her relax. However, she refuses to consume some herself, due to being pregnant. So does her sister, giving as an excuse that she will have to drive them both back home.

“Just because we can't doesn't mean you can't” Andrea jumped in quickly, turning to give Hannah a wink. “I think you should have some, Nettie. It's been a rough day and you need to relax. Hannah, why don't you pour a glass of wine for Nettie? [...] Andrea believed that Nettie would be more forthcoming if she drank some wine. Hannah spotted it on the bar at the end of the living room, went over to open it and pour a glass, and carried it back to their hostess. (Fluke 101)

What Fluke succeeds in doing through this scene, apart from showing her female characters' investigative intelligence, is to break food's association with care and safe-keeping. Food is no longer linked to mere pleasure or to survival. It is used as a weapon, an investigative technique, a tool of manipulation or deception. Fluke's female characters take advantage of their “lesser status” as ordinary women who do what ordinary women do, which

is to offer food, drink and company, thus turning their supposed weakness into their secret power.

What is also shown through the above scene is female solidarity, through which this deception is successfully carried out. In fact, deception is a key strategy in the genre of detective fiction. Detectives of classical detective fiction are known for their deceptive strategies, especially through the use of disguise. Sleuths like Sherlock Holmes would often dress up as someone else in order to deceive other characters involved in the mystery, with the ultimate goal of finding out information about the crime they were investigating. Disguise in the case of these male detectives involved the use of costume, wigs or other articles of clothing that would help them conceal their true identity. Through their disguise these men attempted to hide their actual goal and status in order to gain the trust of the characters they tried to deceive. This strategy of deliberately making themselves seem ordinary and harmless emphasizes precisely these detectives' "natural" superiority that needs be concealed only for the sake of solving a crime.

By contrast, female detectives' disguise in classical detective fiction aimed to establish their superiority through the concealment of their womanhood, the aspect of their identity that naturally rendered them weak and inferior. These women, for example, Kate Goelet,<sup>24</sup> would dress up as men in order to make themselves credible as detectives. In cases where the female nature of these women detectives was discovered, they were treated with hatred for their deception. Unlike classical women detectives' problematic relation with disguise and its subsequent connection to the scandal of disclosure, Fluke's female detective does not deny her female identity. She rather hides behind her supposed inferiority as an "ordinary" woman. Hannah, therefore, employs her womanhood as a disguise and uses it to her advantage.

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<sup>24</sup> Found in Harlan P. Halsey's 1890 novel, titled *The Lady Detective*.

Beyond the inclusion of food as a strategy of investigation, Fluke's approach to food also serves to create a link between the public and the private spheres. By having her female protagonist, an unmarried woman, make money out of her culinary knowledge, she questions the idea that food is closely connected to pleasure or family care, pointing to how food can be part of someone's job and hence a public affair. Fluke, additionally, shows how food can be a whole science (what we have come to identify as gastronomy), by explicitly going through the various tests that Hannah makes on the recipes she is asked to include in the town's cookbook. A very good example of this is the case of the fudge cupcakes recipe which had a secret ingredient. By not disclosing the ingredient, Ted's mother, Alma, prompts Hannah to repeatedly test the recipe using different ingredients and amounts of ingredients, so as to finally discover the secret ingredient, which will make the recipe as Ted's girlfriend remembered it, having tasted his mother's cupcakes. The association between food and science is also emphasized when its properties are referred to as "medicinal". As Hannah's sister, Andrea, is pregnant, she is often sick or has mood swings. Hannah's solution is to offer her food, which makes her feel better and improves her mood. One such occasion is when Hannah offers Andrea what she refers to as "a medicinal dose of chocolate", which successfully restores her spirit (Fluke 60).

Going back to the discussion about Alma's secret ingredient, we may be reminded of that ingredient sought by female writers in their desire to alter detective fiction's recipe for the better. Just like fiction is a whole science, a whole system of variable elements, so is food production: i.e. a science of different flavors mingled with one another, liked or disliked by the ones who taste them, according to their appetites. Women's dislike of the classical recipe of the genre, due to it being sexist, classist and reproducing Western dualisms, led to the reexamination of the initial formula and its subsequent rewriting. Fluke gives an example of the difference that good food makes, inviting us to draw an analogy between good food and

good detective fiction. Moishe, Hannah's cat, dislikes his food and reacts by making a mess in Hannah's home and tossing his food around. This causes Hannah to replace it with another brand of cat food. In this way, Hannah manages to restore their relationship and satisfy Moishe, who stops causing trouble. Female writers' replacement of several problematic elements of the classical detective genre manages to reduce the sexism that characterized the genre and restore the genre's relationship with its female audience. Female readers are finally able to identify with female characters who promote behaviors and ways of living that are truly liberating to them.

To a significant extent, this treatment of food is also connected to female characters' sexuality, which is no longer taboo, but instead explicitly represented and talked about. Many contemporary fictional female detectives, like Fluke's Hannah, are shown as no longer having to bear the burden of having to choose between their private and public lives, meaning having to choose between maintaining a romantic relationship or concentrating on their careers as detectives. This is due to the fact that their professional careers no longer pose a threat to their love lives. Hannah is portrayed as a woman who manages to keep a balance between her business as the owner of a cookie shop, her career as a cooking teacher and writer of the town's cookbook, her amateur involvement in detective work, and her romantic relations with more than one man. Not only is Hannah freed from stereotypical notions of womanhood in connection to work, she is also freed from rather sexist notions formed around women's socially desired sexuality. Hannah is a hardworking woman who does not rely on someone else's work in order to be able to provide for herself. Moreover, she does not compromise with male companions who have not yet proved to be right for her, according to her standards. Her autonomous idiosyncrasy provides her with options, which she does not rush to choose between. This enables her to sexually experiment without having to comply with preestablished notions around marriage and monogamy. Despite her mother's belief that

she should eventually get married, Hannah is represented as “not really [wanting] to give up any of her independence” (Fluke 30). Contemplating on her romance with both Norman, her best friend who is also a dentist currently working in Seattle, and Mike, the highest-ranking deputy and colleague of Bill, also responsible for his suspension, Hannah thinks to herself:

Both of them had kissed her and she'd enjoyed it, although their embraces were different. Kissing Norman was like taxiing to a stop at the airport after a turbulent flight. It made her feel comfortable and safe. And kissing Mike was like trying to break the land speed record. It was exciting and thrilling. Did she prefer comfort and safety to excitement and thrill? Hannah sighed and buried her head in her pillow. It was hard to choose when she wanted it all (353).

In the same way that Hannah does not have to choose between her jobs, but rather enjoys being professionally involved in multiple aspects of food production, which she combines with being an amateur detective, she is similarly seen as not rushing to choose between the men she is romantically involved with, and instead enjoys the different aspects of her male companions' embraces. As Fluke points out, Hannah wants it all; and why not have it all, when she is able to do so? Hannah's explicit sexuality and the different types of pleasure she gets to experience by being involved with different men, who elicit within her both feelings of safety and thrill, is additionally correlated with the detailed descriptions of food and its preparation process, which arouse the readers' appetite by bringing into their heads memories of different flavors and tastes. Hannah's experimentation with different sexual pleasures is, then, analogous to the diverse recipes Fluke includes between the chapters that make up her story. Going through each recipe, readers are tempted to try them, as Fluke constantly introduces different flavors, which readers are perhaps able to experience through their own memories of these dishes in real life. Fluke's novel in that sense equates the pleasure that derives from a romantic encounter and that felt through food consumption. Her culinary mystery fiction itself, in introducing new

elements to the detective genre that provide true visibility to women and their sexuality, becomes a pleasurable experience for the female audience and not only for them. As Jacqueline Deval claims, “food mixes well with writing because many readers are ‘sensualists’ who yearn to enter another world. Experiencing what the character is thinking and feeling and sensing is akin to having a good meal” (quoted by Baučeková 83).

I would now like to turn to Barbara Neely’s culinary mystery series, featuring her female amateur detective, Blanche White. What makes Neely’s work even more groundbreaking is the fact that her female character’s involvement with food production occurs in the context of her job as a domestic worker. By introducing us to a female detective, Blanche White, who is black and a domestic worker, Neely manages to move the focal point of her narratives from the world of aristocracy to that of the working class. By doing so, Neely gives visibility to the people who existed at the background of the aristocratic world represented in classical detective fiction. As a result, what used to be in the background has now gained a central position at the heart of the detective novel. It is visible and acknowledged. The importance of this change lies in the common reader’s ability to identify with a character that is closer to them, and whose life is very similar, if not identical with their own. This strengthens the humanization of the detective figure, who is no longer differentiated from the rest of the characters and/or the readers but is now one of them.

Unlike Hannah, Blanche spends most of her time in the house of the aristocrats for whom she works. Her involvement with cooking, therefore, is limited to the feeding of her employers, their guests, and the rest of the people who work in their house. What makes Blanche’s association with food especially worth examining is the fact that she is also the carer of her nephew and niece, Malik and Taifa, whose mother, her sister, has passed away. Yet, she is rarely portrayed in the act of feeding them. Her connection with food and food production, then, is disassociated from her maternal status. As I have already discussed at the beginning of

this chapter, food production had traditionally been associated with women as the prime caretakers of the household, whose responsibilities also entailed the feeding of their family, including their kids. The fact that Blanche, despite being a carer, is responsible for the feeding of people other than her family dissolves traditional notions linked to food production. Being a domestic worker, Blanche cooks as part of her job, something which, by extension, implies the melting down of the barrier that enabled the differentiation between the private and the public sphere in the first place. Food is no longer associated entirely with domesticity but is represented as an employment, for which the protagonist is getting paid; hence, it is clearly seen as a public affair.

Blanche's portrayal as providing for her family through working outside the home also challenges stereotypical perceptions around motherhood. Her role as a mother is not limited to the space of the household, as Blanche is portrayed as a single mother who is able to provide for her family by means of working and offering her services to other people. Another important aspect of Blanche's character, which is also reminiscent of Hannah's own, is her refusal to get married, even when that could mean spending more time with her children by being with someone who would also be able to provide for the family. Blanche, as we come to know in Neely's 1998 book, titled *Blanche Cleans Up*, has sacrificed her relationship with Leo, her high school lover, preferring to see him get married to another woman than rushing to marry him herself. Just like Hannah, Blanche is a strong and independent woman who does not comply with stereotypes of femininity. She is the boss of her own life and self, even when she is working for other people. Describing her protagonist and her involvement with domestic work, Neely writes: "For all the *chatelaine* fantasies of some of the women for whom she worked, she was really her own boss, and her clients knew it. She was the expert. She ordered her employers' lives, not the other way around. She told them when they had to be out of the way, when she would work and when she wouldn't" (Neely 86). It is precisely her expertise

in her employers' households that render Blanche powerful, both as an employee, as well as a detective.

Contrary to perceptions around the subjugating nature of domestic work for women, Blanche is portrayed as a woman who uses this supposed weakness to her advantage. Blanche's association with domesticity renders her powerful on several levels. On a first level, her knowledge of the household itself, as well as the people who inhabit it, offers Blanche an advantage in being able to maneuver herself into prohibited spaces by outsmarting both her employers and the rest of their employees. Being a domestic worker, Blanche is able to roam freely and without suspicion in the private spaces of people, whose secrets are not so secret to her. This is also connected to the previously discussed theme of disguise. Blanche's disguise is herself: her womanhood, her work, and her blackness, which I am going to focus on in the following chapter. Due to stereotypical perceptions of the elements making up her identity, Blanche, as a black female maid, is in no way seen as a possible threat by her employers and the rest of their employees, who are all suspects in her investigations and think their actions go unnoticed and that their secrets are concealed within the four walls of the household.

She closed the door and turned back to covet Felicia's [her current employer's] bathroom for another minute. She lingered in the dressing room, a favorite hiding place of women she'd worked for. It was as if they thought this room was a good hiding place because no one but them and those they thought they controlled entered it. (Neely 1998, 152)

Blanche's social invisibility, then, is presented as her strength. When confronted with the murders taking place in the novels in which she features, Blanche uses her work as a cover up which enables her to look for clues around her employers' house. Even if she is discovered, she can provide a reasonable excuse as to why she was where she was found. In this way, she

has access to anything and everything that can help with her investigation and incrimination of the right people. Her familiarity with the space of the household as well as her experience as a domestic worker render her powerful and definitely suitable to conduct an investigation within the very space she works in and in connection to her employers. Furthermore, her domestic knowledge concerning her employers' habits and behavior is valuable in pointing to the right places, where she will most certainly find clues that will help her investigation. "Experience also told her that men liked having their hiding places in sight. If it was behind a picture, it was a picture in front of rather than behind their favorite chair so that they could keep their eye on it" (Blanche 155).

Additionally, Blanche's association with food production, as part of her job as a housekeeper, gives her the advantage of using food in order to lure people and question them without raising suspicion. Just like Hannah, Blanche is seen to use food as an investigative technique on multiple occasions, a fact which again challenges the conception that detective work relies solely on one's use of abstract reason. Two very good examples of this are illustrated in the following scenes, where Blanche uses food in order to extract information about her employers from Carrie, the second maid, and Mick, Felicia's masseuse.

"Try some of this ham. It's good." Blanche eased a large slice onto Carrie's plate. "He useta be around here all the time, working and not working." "You want that last piece of roast beef?" Blanche pushed the platter closer to Carrie. "What was he doing here if he wasn't working?" she asked as Carrie speared the meat. (Neely 1998, 21)

Blanche cut Mick a healthy slice of cake. "What about their son?" "Marc, he's the son; him and Allister fight a lot. Marc lives right over in Arlington, not a half hour away. Close enough to visit, but never does". (Neely 1998, 48)

Even though the works of both Fluke and Neely, as well as other culinary mystery authors, may at first not seem entirely liberating for women, in the sense that they present us with female protagonists who have not really escaped domestic life and whose suitability for the job of the detective relies on a gendered aspect of their lives, their association with food and the space of the kitchen and the household, in general is, as I have demonstrated, empowering and liberating. By showing these female detectives' agency without having to remove them from the domestic space, Fluke and Neely rewrite the relation between the private and the public and challenge the privileging of the public domain. The value of these female writers' works lies in the re-evaluation of the space that traditionally rendered women inferior to men. Through their fiction, Fluke and Neely show that there is not really a distinctive line separating the public and the private, as the public sphere is clearly affected by the private, while the private can be as uncanny and challenging as the public. The internal space of the home proves vital for what takes place outside the home. Thus, through the bridging of the two spheres, these female authors are successful in demonstrating that skills that are associated with the domestic sphere can be valuable for the wellbeing of society and the protection of its legal system, which has excluded women for so long.

The goal, then, is not to prove women's power and suitability for the detection of crime through drawing on traditionally male discourses, but to produce new discourses and introduce new spaces, through which women can construct their own identities in different, non-conventional terms. Trying to understand female identity through discourses that are by default destined to marginalize and objectify her is futile. The recipe must be altered. Its elements must be tested and changed accordingly. Feminizing the detective genre is not about helping women to fit in. It is about following all necessary steps to create the appropriate conditions in which women can finally claim their agency and thrive. The subgenre of culinary mysteries does exactly this. It successfully creates the kind of space in which women

can emerge as active agents by means of using the same weapons that have for a long time caused women's oppression and which they can now embrace as a source of power and autonomy.

Maria Stylianou

### **Chapter 3: African American Women's Detective Fiction**

The sub-genre of African American women's detective fiction is especially important in contemporary women writers' attempt to move away from the traditional formula of the genre. African American Women's detective fiction causes a reversal in the very core of the genre by introducing elements previously established as alien to the formulaic construction of the detective novel. Reversing the traditional hierarchies that dominated the genre (i.e. reason vs emotion), as well as throwing into visibility characters, themes and contexts that had never been admitted into the original formula, African American Women's detective fiction becomes a powerful turning wheel in the genre's rewriting and subsequent feminization. This sub-genre undermines the classical model of detective fiction due to its combination of two factors that have long been treated as problematic and incompatible to the main tenets of the genre: namely, gender and race. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, race (like gender) has until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century been "an invisible quality" in the production and study of literature. In his essay, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," he reflects on the 17<sup>th</sup> century debate among Europeans about "whether or not the African 'species' [...] could ever create formal literature" (Gates 8) as a means to negate their "natural" enslavement to the white man.<sup>25</sup> He examines how the absence of African literature was perceived as projecting the inferior status of black people on the basis of their lack of reason, for writing was perceived as "the visible sign of reason" (8).

In light of the above, we may be able to approach the emergence of the sub-genre of women's African American detective fiction as an important corrective gesture, critical not only of sexism but also of the racism that has shaped Western, race-blind theories of literature. This sub-genre even goes one step further in establishing the multiple-sourced

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<sup>25</sup> This debate is reminiscent of similar debates that arose concerning women's capacity for reason.

jeopardy that individuals face in being female, black, working-class, as well as lesbian. The introduction of an intersectional perspective, is, then, another important aspect of the development of this sub-genre, which contributes to the humanization of the figure of the detective we have been tracing. Centering on characters who are marginal in the context of Western neo-liberal societies, African-American women's detective fiction shows the distinct challenges and different forms of oppression these characters have to endure, but also the ways in which they can empower themselves.

Before I move on to the analysis of the novels I have chosen for the purposes of this chapter, I would like to focus first on the difficulties black women writers face, especially in a generic field that glorifies white male supremacy. In her essay "Race for Theory", Barbara Christian distinguishes between canonized forms of theoretical work by Western philosophers and the theoretical work produced by minority groups within the field of literature, which adopt unconventional perspectives and styles. In doing so, Christian uncovers the power relations operating within language and literature as systems, showing how these systems preserve hierarchical structures that not only reflect but also perpetuate and reinforce societal norms and forms of oppression. The result, she argues, is the silencing of non-canonical theories and their authors by the authoritative works of the "reigning academic elite" (Christian 53). One of the aspects of canonical theory that Christian condemns is its prescriptive nature for, as she acknowledges, this does not leave room for a combined focus on class, race and gender, something which is of great importance in terms of conveying the reality of particular ethnic groups, such as black women writers.

In the context of this study, the prescriptive nature of what Christian describes as canonical theory can be seen in terms of what I have been referring to as the formulaic construction of classical detective fiction. As I have shown, this generic formula has silenced thematic, social or aesthetic concerns perceived as inconsistent with its main principles. In

this chapter, my aim is to demonstrate how black women writers of detective fiction critically engage with these principles in their attempt to portray the multiple jeopardies they are forced to face, jeopardies which are reflected in their works. More importantly, I will argue, African-American women writers come to develop their own discursive style which enables them to do justice to the lives of black women, bringing their distinct reality into visibility.

In this light and drawing on the thought of bell hooks, we can approach African American Women's detective fiction, as a gesture of "talking back". As bell hooks explains, "talking back" involves an attempt to make oneself equal to a figure of authority. As a result, "To make yourself heard [...] was to invite punishment" (bell hooks 123), for black people and especially black women were never considered or seen as equals in white supremacist societies. This is why, according to hooks, black women writers have struggled not simply to emerge from silence into speech, but to change the nature and direction of conventional literary or theoretical language: "To make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard" (bell hooks 124). Just like Christian, hooks condemns what she calls the "right speech of womanhood" (124), which aims to fall in line with canonized language. Thus, both Christian and hooks advocate the development of a writing that can actually represent black women – a writing that functions as an act of resistance, as well as a political gesture. It is in this way that the personal becomes political, an idea which has repeatedly been invoked by representatives of the black feminist movement, such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks herself. As Christian insists, literature is the expression of a personal experience in being a reflection of the authors' lives. At the same time, it is of necessity political, as it raises issues that concern social justice (54). In her own turn, hooks emphasizes that true speech, as that is produced by literary minority groups, can be and *is* perceived as a threat by those who, for a long time, have worked towards black women's silencing.

In her essay, Christian points to the connection between such systematic silencing and Western dualistic patterns of thought:

the terms 'minority' and 'discourse' are located firmly in Western dualistic or 'binary' frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it is major, usually through force and then through language, even as it claims many of the ideas that we, its "historical other, have known and spoken about for so long. For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody's other (54).

This connection is also made by Audre Lorde in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, And Sex: Women Redefining Difference". Lorde writes: "Much of Western European history conditions us to see human difference in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior" (284). Lorde then, just like Christian, throws into relief a process of "othering", as she calls it, which is internalized by black women and forces them to develop an awareness that "that is not me" (285). This othering, produced and preserved by dualistic language, is based on the assumption that the other exists only in opposition to what is posited as the primary, the dominant social category or discourse. Detective fiction, as we have seen, has worked precisely within such a pattern of opposing elements, rendering white male identity superior to all identities opposed to it, including those of women and black people.

In revising the classical formula of detective fiction, then, African-American women writers attempt to undermine the dualistic schema found at the very heart of this genre. They seek to reverse the hierarchical structures that inform it and to demythologize the white male detective figure, shedding light on the ideologies upon which his superiority and god-like identity was based. In their determination to "talk back" to the canonical works in this generic

tradition, they write against the othering process that has objectified black women and has condemned them to the “periphery” of the detective plot. As Christian rightly argues,

Constructs like the *center* and the *periphery* reveal the tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal. Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism since one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity. (Christian 59)

As I have already mentioned, it is by exposing this complexity, this variousness, or indeed the intersectional nature of forms of domination, that black women writers succeed in humanizing their black, socially marginalized protagonists.

This is where the importance of the sub-genre of African American women’s detective fiction lies in the context of the wider trend I am analyzing in this dissertation, that is, the increasing feminization of the genre. The emergence of this sub-genre is evidence of black women’s success in claiming their voice and establishing a literary discourse of their own, one through which they can construct themselves in their own terms, producing an understanding of the complexity of black female identities. As Lorde argues:

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (Lorde 37-38)

African American Women's detective fiction, I suggest, is a form of what Lorde calls "poetry", this newly produced language, which is not mere dream and vision but a demand for change.

I will now move on to the analysis of the texts I have chosen for this chapter, namely Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche Cleans Up*, featuring her black female detective, Blanche White, also discussed in my previous chapter on Culinary Mysteries. I will also focus on Nikki Baker's novel, titled *In the Game*, featuring her black female, lesbian detective, Virginia Kelly. To begin with, the fact that Neely ironically names her black female protagonist, who is also a domestic worker<sup>26</sup>, Blanche White, is a good illustration of the writer's mocking attitude to the superiority of whiteness, one of the identifying markers of the classical detective. Through giving her black female protagonist a name and surname that connote whiteness, Neely demonstrates that being "White" is not self-evident. In addition, she uses her protagonist's name as a means of metaphorically making up for her lack of social power. As I have already suggested, it is precisely this lack of power that fuels Blanche's engagement with detective work, and that makes her successful in the investigation of the crimes she is confronted with.

Blanche, like real life black women, such as the black women writers I have discussed in the introduction of this chapter, is very aware of her place in society and the racist, sexist

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<sup>26</sup> Neely's figure of Blanche White, in the context of Black Women's Detective Fiction, is especially important in that it demonstrates the complexity of the public/private distinction for African American women. Drawing on the analysis of Angela Davis in her essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," it is essential to reflect on the historical context of black women's relation to domestic life. As Davis argues, "Even as she performed her housework, the black woman's role in the slave community could not be identical to the historically evolved female role." The black woman was "stripped of the palliative feminine venter which might have encouraged a passive performance of domestic tasks" (207). The black woman as slave played a central part in the slave "family" (201). In being the housekeeper of the living quarters of her slave-masters, and by extension in being forced to participate in production, or as Angela Davis refers to it "the act of copulation," (213) due to its reduction by the white man to an animal-like act, the black woman as slave was doubly oppressed.

perceptions that limit her existence. As Zora Neal Hurston writes in her famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “the nigger woman is the mule of the world”, because “the white man is the ruler of everything” (Hurston 19). Indeed, in the scale of social hierarchy, white men have always held the top position and black women always found themselves at the bottom, below anyone and everyone. Echoing Hurston’s words, Neely writes about her protagonist: “But she was determined to figure out when she could step back from being a mule” (124). Through these words, Neely points to Blanche’s self-awareness of being seen as a “mule”, while emphasizing her character’s sense of agency in being in the position to determine when the time has come to step out of that position. However, as I have already shown, it is exactly Blanche’s self-awareness that renders her so powerful, enabling her to manipulate other people’s perceptions about her, using them to her advantage.

In his book, *The Blues Detective: A study of African American Detective Fiction*, Stephen F. Soitos discusses African American writers’ use of tropes to signify figures of thought. In doing so, he distinguishes between four tropes employed by black detective fiction writers to show how these alter recognized detective formulas: a) Black detective personas, b) Double-consciousness detection, c) Black vernaculars, and d) Hoodoo. Soitos’ analysis of the second trope, namely *double-consciousness detection*, focuses on black people’s perception of themselves *both* in terms of how they see themselves as well as through the lens others use to see them. Employing W. E. B. Du Bois’ definition of double consciousness in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Soitos writes:

[The] Negro is a sort of seventh son[daughter], born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,— a world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that

looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels [their] twoness,  
– an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts. (quoted by Soitos, 33)

The development of this double level of awareness in the context of African American detective fiction is framed as an intellectual ability that, on the one hand, helps manipulate the rest of the characters' thoughts and course of action, and on the other hand, conceals the black protagonist's actual engagement with the criminal events taking place in the space they occupy. Thus, in reframing the negative consequences that double consciousness involved for black people (as described by Soitos above), black female writers turn these consequences into a form of power and use this power to claim their subject-status.

This trope is also connected to another concern found in black feminist writing, namely, *passing*. Passing as a practice adopted by black people is tied to motivations that have to do with survival, material gain, or indeed resistance against the prejudices prevalent in a racist society. Passing can be seen, then, as the result of the (self)-critical awareness involved in black people's double consciousness, for it is the realization of their inferior position that leads them to passing. This is very well illustrated in Neely's 1992 Blanche mystery novel, titled *Blanche on the Lam*.

*Blanche on the Lam* opens with a scene in which Blanche finds herself at court for not having paid her bills. The judge responsible for her case is shown to disregard the fact that, because her employers are currently out of town, Blanche has not yet been paid. Throughout her trial, Blanche's blackness appears to be the source of her trouble and the reason why the judge refuses to listen to her and threatens to send her to jail. Blanche's understanding that there is no way out of the situation prompts her to flee the court. Walking the streets, while being chased by the police, Blanche wishes "she had a little white child to push in a carriage or a poodle on a leash so she'd look as though she belonged there" (Neely 1992, 7).

Blanche's instinct and sense of survival make her contemplate ways of passing, for she knows that her blackness is enough to make her look suspicious. Blanche's double-consciousness leads her to the house of a family, for which she was supposed to work for some time until their regular help was back from holidays. She initially called her agency to cancel the job, but she now shows up as if she had not, in order to find refuge. On this occasion, her blackness combined with her job as a domestic worker, the two aspects of her identity that have normally functioned as a source of oppression, prove advantageous in becoming the means by which she is saved. "The woman hadn't even bothered to ask her name. That was just fine. The last thing Blanche needed right now was a truly interested employer" (14). The lack of interest on her employer's side, as well as the invisibility that goes hand in hand with her race and occupation, paradoxically benefit her in providing her with a temporary shelter, where she can hide by means of passing as a member of the household.

As we have seen, Du Bois discusses the "Negro" as a sort of seventh child "born with a veil". The image of the veil is very relevant to the theme of passing I am exploring, which connects to another major trope in detective fiction, that of disguise. As I have already emphasized in the previous chapter, this trope is used to enhance the intellectual superiority of the white male detective in classical detective fiction. By contrast, white female detectives' employment of disguise is connected to their attempt to hide their lack; i.e. the lack of not being male and, hence, of all these masculine qualities that would establish them as suitable for the job of the detective. Rather than attempting to hide their lack, black female detectives flaunt it and use it as a form of power, a cloak of invisibility.

Thus, Black female protagonists' disguise is their blackness, the very aspect of their identity that renders them inferior to their white counterparts. This is where the connection between disguise and passing lies within the context of African American detective fiction.

Blanche, as a detective, hides behind the mask of the black servant. With the help of this mask she passes and finds refuge within the household of her uninterested employers.

Neely's reframing of the theme of disguise in the portrayal of her black female detective whose strength is based on the display rather than on the concealment of her lack, offers a glimpse of the uniqueness of the Afro-American detective novel. More importantly, she succeeds in re-interpreting Du Bois' veil covering the "Negro's" face no longer as a plight but as a form of protection and a source of power.

Blanche's own realization of the above is witnessed in the scene where she contemplates her cousin Murphy's words, after she, when she was younger, had been teased by some kids for being black. Murphy had told her then:

Them kids is just as jealous of you as they can be! That's why they tease you," [...] "They jealous 'cause you got the night in you. Some people got night in 'em, some got morning [...] But it's only them that's got night can become invisible. People what got night in 'em can step into the dark and poof – disappear! Go any old where they want. Do anything. Ride them stars up there, like as not. Shoot, girl, no wonder them kids teasing you. I'm a grown woman and I'm jealous, too! (Neely 59, 1992)

Blanche's invisibility, due to being black, is reinterpreted by her cousin Murphy as an advantageous aspect of her identity, an aspect she is envied for. Blanche's superpower, then, is her race, the very factor that has framed her as unsuitable, inferior, lacking, or "other" in classical detective fiction and the society reflected in it. In rewriting the formula, Neely rewrites the hierarchical binaries (white/black, visible/invisible) that have informed its production. Inspired by her cousin's words, Blanche admits to herself:

Everything I was then, I am today. Blanche examined the idea

and discovered all of her Night Girl courage and daring still in the safe in the back of her brain and growing more valuable every day. Without even realizing it, she drew on it when she needed to, like at the courthouse. Her break from there might turn out to have been a crazy thing to do, or it might not. In either case, it was the act of a take-charge kind of woman. A Night Girl kind of woman. (Neely 1992, 60)

As the passage quoted above demonstrates, Blanche finally realizes that the veil she was born with, her “night girl power”, is indeed valuable and powerful. It is a secret but, at the same time, conspicuous strength which she can draw on for her benefit, whenever that seems necessary. That is why Blanche wears her blackness. She does not try to conceal or overcome it, but rather embraces it and puts it on display for others to see. By means of this visible invisibility, Blanche manages not only to save herself on multiple occasions, but also to prove her efficiency in her work in that she can have access to places and people, who would otherwise not open up to her. The mask of the black servant serves Blanche well in allowing her to extract information from people, who think of her as irrelevant and safe to discuss their affairs with. Blanche’s double-consciousness benefits her in that she makes herself seem harmless in the face of her employers whose perception of her, as Blanche understands, is that she could never pose a threat for them, as she is insignificant and “naturally” inferior. Blanche plays the part of the inferior servant so well that she gets to learn family secrets that not even some of the family members she works for are aware of. This is how Blanche succeeds in solving the case of the murder of the real grandmother of the family Blanche works for in *Blanche on the Lam*. Disguise and passing, then, rely on the black subject’s double-consciousness and become an asset for the black female detective, as Neely’s protagonist shows.

Another important aspect of black female authors' rewriting of the detective fiction formula relates to their undermining of the individualistic nature of the detective figure. Unlike the traditional male detective, who promotes a loner-eccentric model of detection in being withdrawn from society and extremely secretive about his findings concerning the crimes he investigates, black female detectives promote a sense of community instead. In other words, black women writers produce narratives and figures inspired by the conviction that "the personal is political", as a result, what poses as an issue for one, should be addressed as an issue that concerns all. In Neely's second book, *Blanche Cleans Up*, this is demonstrated through another amateur detective figure, Aminata, whose investigation takes place alongside Blanche's own. Aminata is an Afro-American woman who, after her son's imprisonment for killing his best friend, started a series of public speeches in an attempt to raise awareness on lead-poisoning, which she sees as the source of her son's "losing his mind" (55). Aminata's investigation focuses on finding connections between lead-poisoning and violence, in an attempt to prove, on the one hand, her son's innocence, and on the other hand, to shed light on the government's unwillingness to improve the black community's quality of life and living circumstances. Aminata's case, then, sheds light on contemporary forms of racism in the sense that the neglect shown by the government and the subsequent violation of basic human rights at the expense of the black community speak of the subterranean ways through which racism has been channeled in modern societies.

In addition to this, the sense of collectivity by which Blanche's own investigation is driven is especially shown in the support she is given by members of the black community, specifically ex-convicts whom she met while attending one of Aminata's speeches. These characters provide both her and her children with security by voluntarily guarding her house, when she becomes a target in the course of her own investigation. Blanche's investigation of the death of a former employer, Ray-Ray, member of the family she works for in *Blanche*

*Cleans Up*, leads her to the discovery of a tape with sexually explicit content concerning her current employer, Mr. Allister. As she finds out, Donnie, an impostor, who had pretended to be Ray-Ray's lover just to get his hands on the tape that Ray-Ray had in his possession, killed him when he refused to be part of the scheme to blackmail Mr. Allister. In Blanche's confrontation with Donnie, who breaks into her house in order to kill her and finally lay hands on the tape, the group of ex-convicts, who secretly protect Blanche, interfere by setting up an ambush for Donnie, who is finally captured and sent away.

However, despite the significance of Neely's foregrounding of the value of collective power, one needs also to acknowledge the vulnerability of the black female detective who, in spite of her intelligent and original detecting methods, is still in need of help from others. As I have mentioned in my first chapter on hard-boiled women's detective fiction, it is very important for contemporary women writers to present, and not sugarcoat, the struggle it takes for change to come about. Humanizing their detectives and exposing their vulnerabilities and multiple challenges is an essential practice adopted by women writers (especially black women writers) in their attempt to avoid creating utopic fantasies. As Christian has argued, writing is not about creating a dream or vision of a better society, but laying the actual material foundations that will support the change that is so desired and worked for.

A horrifying example of the black female detective's vulnerability, despite her power to solve crimes, is the crime committed against her body, namely, rape. Speaking of how her protagonist got raped by one of her employers for having used his bathtub, Neely writes:

He'd made her pay in a much more painful and private way.  
She hadn't bothered to report it to the police. Even if they'd  
believed her and cared about the rape of a black woman by  
a white man, once it came out that she'd been attacked  
while naked in her employer's bathtub, she'd never have

been employed in anybody's house in town again.

(Neely 63, 1992)

Blanche is very much aware that her social inferiority, stemming from her race and gender, would affect the seriousness with which her rape would be treated, had she decided to go to the police. Not only would she not be believed, but she would also risk never being employed again. The irony of her situation is seen in the cautious manner with which her investigations, which involve white families, are being handled, and the minor attention given to her own rape, which she is sadly forced to internalize so as to move on. Apart from showing the vulnerability of the black female subject, this also speaks of the justice that is in most cases served when it comes to white people and that is contrastingly not served when it involves blacks. Black people are often shown to become suspects even in the crimes that have been committed against them, a fact which leads me to the last novel I will be discussing in this chapter, Nikki Baker's *In the Game*. *In the Game* is an interesting example of African American and lesbian detective fiction, introducing black lesbian detective, Virginia Kelly. Through combining detective work with African-American reality and queer sexuality, Baker manages to touch upon issues of racism and sexism, pointing to the vulnerability of marginalized subjects who, in internalizing their own inferiority, eventually turn on each other in a desperate attempt to save themselves.

Since the very beginning of the novel, Virginia Kelly establishes the multiple jeopardy, the complex alienation she, and others like her, have to face due to being black, lesbian, working class women. Understanding how intersectionality plays a major role in one's existence and place in society in creating modes of discrimination and privilege based on the various aspects of one's social and political identities, she thinks to herself:

In my mind it came down to color, class and money. Almost everything does. If you have enough money and you're middle

class, it's okay to be black or latina. It's not okay to be a working-class woman of color in an upscale, white, northside bar, but if you're white nobody cares what your class is as long as there are money enough in your pocket for the five-dollar cover. (Baker 11)

Virginia's narration is not limited to her own story but is a collage of other people's stories, who are either queer, black, or both. In this way, Virginia sheds light on the lives of people who belong to either the black or the queer community, and simultaneously shows how communities intersect. Hence, apart from Virginia's own investigation around which the events of the novel revolve, Baker's narrative is an investigation into black, lesbian relationships, as these are experienced by these subjects themselves and as they are treated by the rest of society in the context of a crime. What is truly magnificent about Baker's novel, however, is how, through her protagonist's analysis of these relationships and the social perceptions that frame them, she manages to show how racism, sexism and social discrimination are the crimes she truly wants us to focus on. In this sense, Virginia's story of her own life, as well as of the lives of other people like herself, is, in fact, the story of a community and the crimes that are being committed against it. One such example, which interestingly also involves the theme of *passing*, is when Virginia, in talking about life in Chicago, where she lives, tells the reader:

In Chicago, as late as the 1960's, the realtor's code of ethics forbade selling a house in a white neighborhood to a black family, though sometimes it happened by mistake when black families, so light-skinned that they could pass for white, did not explain that they were not. (Baker 31)

Recalling my reference to the process of detection as a game of chess in the introduction of my thesis, it is interesting to see how Baker's novel shows how minority groups, such as black, queer women, find themselves being played "in the game", as the title of her novel also suggests. Having been masterfully designed by a white heteronormative society, the aim of the game is to overpower them, playing with both the detective and the criminal figure, as these are found held equally captive by the rules of the game. Focusing on the hardships of the black and queer community in white America, Virginia's narration exposes the nature and dead-ends of the social game, which neither she nor her friends can escape.

Fantasizing having a highly paid and respectable job, by means of overcoming the "difficulty" of her sexual orientation<sup>27</sup>, Virginia admits: "I had a little fantasy of a new career with the CIA if I could scheme how to get past the sexual orientation questions on the lie detector test" (Baker 35). Through her investigation of the death of Kelly, her best friend's, Bev's, lover, Virginia is led to the conclusion that what is really at stake is not escaping the game, but rather, as she herself puts it, about "scheming," or "cheating" one's way through it. Acknowledging facts, such as how Bev had to pretend not to be the lover of Kelsey at the latter's funeral so as to avoid attracting attention against her in Kelsey's murder case,<sup>28</sup> Virginia realizes that "If the game is rigged," a fact she repeatedly exposes in her narrative, "you have to cheat" (Baker 137).

Cheating, however, both metaphorically and literally is what resulted in the death of several of black, lesbian women in the novel. In an attempt to improve the quality of their lives, due to their realization of how they are being cheated by white, neo-liberal society,

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<sup>27</sup> This aspect highlights how this particular factor of an individual's life poses as a difficulty, a jeopardy, when it comes to one of the most important things in life, the source of one's income, and hence the source of one's survival.

<sup>28</sup> Considering how easy it was for the police to pin crimes on people who belonged to the black or queer community, merely by being so (meaning black and queer).

Bev's girlfriend, Kelsey, and her secret lover, Mary, become involved in a scam for making money (embezzlement). Thus, they try to cheat the system back. In this process, they become entangled in a love triangle and they all end up cheating on each other, that is, using and simultaneously being used by the others. Bev's feeling of having been betrayed, eventually leads her to kill both Kelsey and Mary. Baker's novel, therefore, addresses a major issue that concerns minority groups, such as the ones depicted here. As she shows, due to being the recipients of societal hatred, marginalized subjects end up directing this hatred against each other. Virginia's confrontation with Bev, results in Bev's admitting of having murdered both women. When Virginia suggests that they go to the police, Bev's lack of faith in the white man's justice system and the sudden awareness of her situation cause her sense of survival to kick in. Perceiving Virginia as a threat, she shoots her. Waking up in the hospital, Virginia learns that Bev was hit by a car while trying to flee the scene.

All women's death and Virginia's own wounding indicates the game's power over them, which results in their elimination. Despite the pessimistic outcome of Baker's novel, her story speaks the truth of these women's reality, which is key to altering it. Identifying the vulnerable position of black and queer subjects within a genre that reflects their actual position in a system which is rigged needs to be seen as the number one step towards changing it. As Baker shows, the point is not to escape the system or its rules but to rewriting them and, if this is not always possible, to cheat while continuing to play by the rules. Both Neely's and Baker's novels present us with various techniques employed by contemporary women detective authors, whose goal is to play the game, rather than accepting being played by it. These women's novels work on two levels: The level of identifying the genre's problematic aspects, which result in the othering of non-white, non-male and non-heteronormative characters, and the level of reversing or rewriting these generic aspects so as to rebuild the foundations in ways more accommodating to the survival and dignity of people

pushed to the margins. To conclude with, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, African American women's detective fiction is an important example of what I have described as the feminization of the genre. In redirecting the dominant discourses and narrative forms in detective fiction, it has affirmed the possibility of what bell hooks has called "talking back", reclaiming the spaces of silence within this traditional genre and bringing the occupants of these spaces into visibility and existence.

## **Chapter 4: Lesbian Detective Fiction**

Lesbian detective fiction is undoubtedly the most prominent example of the genre's feminization and redirection from the classical detective formula. Lesbian-feminist detective fiction attacks fundamental notions developed and reproduced throughout the development of the genre. As I have discussed in my introduction, detective fiction has been made possible through a well-fabricated concept, that of social order, based on preestablished social roles and moral codes of behavior. Detective fiction as a genre is mobilized by the disruption of order by a major component of the detective novel, the figure of the criminal, for without a criminal, there would not be a crime for the detective to investigate in the first place. Lesbian detective fiction problematizes precisely this notion of order on multiple levels, with the most evident one being the construction of the lesbian detective figure itself.

The figure of the lesbian detective constitutes a paradox in the context of the conventional ideology that has shaped the standard formula of the genre, according to which the detective, as a representative of order, law and morality, takes up the duty to expose the criminal who has transgressed and has caused havoc in society. The lesbian detective's own transgressive nature, in their refusal to conform to heteronormativity, poses a threat to society's sex and gender system as well as to its family and reproductive politics. As Judith A. Markowitz aptly points out, "Lesbian-feminist and gay positive authors [are all about attacking] the status quo rather than [supporting] it" (Markowitz 14). In this sense, authors of lesbian detective fiction question dominant concepts of social order and introduce to us a scene of new possibilities and identities previously considered incompatible to the genre's moral and didactic nature.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Didactic in the sense that those who disrupt the order are eventually punished for their transgressive acts.

The reevaluation of dominant perceptions of “order” is additionally achieved by means of shedding light on the social issues that qualify or, indeed, undermine them as well as through centering on identities (including non-heteronormative identities) which are systematically marginalized by such perceptions. Lesbian and gay fiction is known for its exposure of numerous problematic aspects of patriarchal society, which result in incidents connected with sexism, racism and homophobia; for example, lesbian and gay bashing or even rape. In this respect, lesbian detective fiction represents the position of socially alienated communities which feel that the dominant institutional, legal order has not only failed them but has resulted in a great number of crimes that have been committed against them in the very name of “law” and “order”. Lesbian detective fiction, then, points to the paradoxes within the operation of the law and the institutions responsible for its protection.

Another dimension of lesbian detective fiction which is quite groundbreaking in the genre’s production is the visibility that it gives to the element of female, as well as queer sexuality. As I have discussed in the first chapter of my dissertation on *Hard-Boiled Women’s Detective Fiction*, female sexuality in early works of male authors of crime fiction has been treated as corruptive and the cause behind the commission of several crimes.<sup>30</sup> However, female sexuality and especially queer sexuality have not been represented from the perspective of female authors and/or characters at all. This absence of representations of female sexuality is all the more visible in the spinster sleuth which produces a totally desexualized (and quite popular) model of the female detective figure. A well-known example of the spinster sleuth is Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple, to whom we are introduced in her 1930 novel, titled *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Unlike her male counterpart, Hercule Poirot, who is presented as a man constantly admired by his associates, Miss Marple is described as a typical spinster quite disliked by the people with whom she is acquainted.

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<sup>30</sup> Please see my discussion on Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*.

Moreover, her status as a spinster is projected as the main source of her ability to solve crimes. Miss Marple is portrayed as the elderly lady who lives next door and who has all the time in the world to observe the things that other characters in Christie's stories do not. In fact, she arrives at the solution of the crimes she is investigating through her use of gossip and her tendency to pry into other people's secrets. This can be witnessed in a conversation that takes place in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, between the narrator and the inspector of the crime who, in discussing the lack of evidence in the case of the murder, comments: "It's a sad pity that there is not a single spinster lady living along [the] road [for] she would've seen something if there had been" (Christie 181). Despite her intelligence and remarkable observation skills, it is Miss Marple's spinster status that renders her valuable when it comes to being a witness to events or scenes that are relevant to the solution of the crime. Otherwise, her stereotypical behavior as a spinster who has nothing better to do than involve herself in other peoples' business is mocked by the rest of the characters.

Unlike works of classical detective fiction, lesbian detective fiction is quite explicit in its representations of female sexuality, which is conventionally perceived as transgressive, in terms of failing to conform to society's dominant sexual orientation (i.e. straightness). Considering the failure of the female protagonist of lesbian detective fiction to conform to preestablished notions of order and the sex and gender systems that these notions sustain, it is important to refer to Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, which offers a different perspective to the notion of failing in the context of queer theory. Based on his analysis of heteronormativity and its connection to capitalism, in the sense that both aim at production and of course reproduction, we can understand Halberstam's association of failure with non-conformity, an anti-capitalist stance and, of-course, non-reproductive lifestyles. Halberstam's reasoning is quite relevant to the idea of failing (refusing, resisting) to conform to the genre's formulaic construction and the ideologies it promotes that I have been pursuing in this thesis.

This is because Halberstam re-frames the failure to reproduce as a marker of change and, hence, as an advantage rather than a liability.

The most important thing Halberstam does in his essay, then, is to redefine failure by providing a new lens through which failure can be viewed as a style, a form of art that produces a distinct queer aesthetics. Halberstam associates queer aesthetics with a dark mode of queer body representation, an absence of light and, in general, with the creation of a dark and gothic atmosphere. He suggests that the point in theorizing a queer aesthetics is that it is not about resisting failure, loss or darkness but, rather about adjusting to less light and working your way through failure, as it is itself a form of resistance. Queerness as this “dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness” (Halberstam 97) needs, in other words, to be embraced for its unpredictability, spontaneity, and creativity that escape suffocating social norms that put the queer subject in a box and shape his or her life according to the interest and convenience of the ones in power. Hence, in defining a queer aesthetics, Halberstam foregrounds the uncanny moments of queerness which seem to spice up the life of individuals and celebrates queer bodies as freed from the normative, predictable structures of society.

In this light, the subgenre of Lesbian detective fiction emerges as a queer genre which fails to follow the traditional rules of the formula and succeeds in liberating its characters, at the same time, exposing the traditional formula’s problematic aspects, as these are reflective of the sexist, heteronormative practices enforced and reinforced by the status quo. In this chapter, I have chosen to focus on three novels from the Pam Nilsen mystery series, namely *Murder in the Collective*, *Sisters of the Road*, and *The Dog Collar Murders*, written by lesbian detective author Barbara Wilson. Wilson’s portrayal of her lesbian, amateur detective Pam Nilsen is especially important in that she presents us with key elements of this subgenre, enabling us to appreciate its contribution to the feminization of the detective genre.

As in most lesbian detective novels, the first book of the Nilsen series concentrates on the coming out story of Pam as a lesbian. Wilson chose to construct Pam as having a twin sister who is, unlike her, heterosexual, and with whom she shares the ownership of the printing collective, which they have inherited from their dead parents.<sup>31</sup> This provides readers with a sense of the protagonist's life, as that is affected by her choice to come out as a lesbian. It also offers us a sense of how her life would have been, had she been heterosexual, as is her identical twin sister. Wilson's portrayal of the different lives of Pam and Penny sheds light on the predictability with which heteronormativity unfolds,<sup>32</sup> and the contrasting uniqueness of Pam's experiences in her quest of discovering her own sexuality. Pam has an adventurous life in experimenting with her sexuality, the discovery of which parallels the equally adventurous discovery of the criminal of the story. If we are to understand Penny's heteronormativity as the product of prescriptive conventionality, the very same conventionality that traditional detective novels abide by, we can perceive Pam's non-conformity as analogous to the non-conformity of the author's writing of the novel itself, in refusing to adhere to accepted generic or social rules. As Phyllis M. Betz puts it, Penny's obedience is made possible by a "framework of credibility"<sup>33</sup> (18), a fact which Pam herself acknowledges, as shown through her discussion of her sister's marriage: "Society's going to reward her now. I'll never be rewarded. I am going to be punished my whole life. She should have stuck with me—out of solidarity" (Wilson 15, 2013 c).

It is due to their seeking of "credibility" that heteronormative characters and the plots built around their lives are condemned to predictability and familiarity.<sup>34</sup> Wilson's awareness of the tension that arises in a subject having to choose between credibility and freedom leads

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<sup>31</sup> They died in a car accident while the two sisters were still in graduate school.

<sup>32</sup> Penny gets into a relationship with Pam's ex-boyfriend, with whom she moves in, and whom she eventually marries and has a baby with.

<sup>33</sup> From Phyllis M. Betz's book, *Lesbian detective Fiction: Woman as Author, Subject, and Reader*

<sup>34</sup> They become clichés, as Betz explains.

her to create Pam's character as someone who, despite eventually breaking free from societal frameworks, is nevertheless initially "torn between this ever-present dichotomy between a sexual choice which she does not feel totally comfortable with and a desire for normality, acceptance, respectability; [this] is illustrated by her conflict with her sister who represents the heterosexual side of her" (Decure 188).

On another note, the ordinariness with which Pam's life and her coming out are narrated, offers a new type of visibility to the lesbian experience and a healthy understanding of lesbian identity and sexual orientation.

By presenting a more complete picture of lesbian life, one that portrays her as experiencing the same tensions with career, relationships, and society, genre fiction allows its readers to adjust their perceptions. The "otherness" of the lesbian becomes identifiable; her private and public situations become recognizable. (Betz 24).

Importantly, the tracing of lesbian experience goes hand-in-hand, as I have mentioned, with the discovery of the criminal in the story. In this sense, the pursuit of both the criminal and love are concurrent, an element of Wilson's story which strongly contradicts the incompatibility with which the detective and love plots had previously been treated: "What appears as conflicting narrative topics [...] become an integrated pursuit by the detective and one where the resolution of one leads to the resolution of the other" (Betz 38). Moreover, Wilson's narration of her protagonist's sexual encounters with her first female lover, Hadley, whom she meets through her investigation of the murder which takes place in *Murder in The Collective*, is quite explicit. As Pam is the focalizer of Wilson's narrative, her sexual encounters as a lesbian woman and her feelings about these encounters are explicitly represented. This offers complete visibility to lesbian life, with which readers can connect

and/or identify, promoting, thus, both the uniqueness and the ordinariness of lesbian experience against normative representations which contribute to its othering. Establishing lesbian life and experience as something ordinary rather than transgressive or criminal, Wilson exposes the true crimes committed by society and social institutions driven by homophobia.

Wilson's *Murder in the Collective* undermines several other conventions upon which the genre relies, such as the positing of order as a fundamental social value as well as the opposition between the detective as a preserver of order and the criminal as the one who disrupts and endangers it. Through the first book of the series, we are introduced to Pam and Penny's business (they are the owners of "Best Printing") as well as to the rest of the members of their printing collective. What is worth noting is the diversity of this collective, since Pam and Penny have employed people of all kinds of ethnicities and sexual orientation. Through Pam's narration, we come to know these people's lives and background; for example, Zee, a Filipino who, apart from her contribution in Pam and Penny's collective, is also responsible for the production of the newsletter of an action group that was at the time getting ready to protest Marcos' visit to the United States. When one of the members of the collective, Jeremy, is found dead at "Best Printing", Pam's investigation begins.

Alongside her own investigation, the police are trying to pin the murder on whoever they can, a fact that exposes, on the one hand, Pam's own distrust of the system, and, on the other hand, the system's corruption as well as its racist and sexist practices. Describing the line of questioning she had to go through once Jeremy's dead body was found, June, a black member of the collective and the girlfriend of Jeremy at the time, tells Pam of her mistreatment and the improper questions she had to answer:

Oh yeah. Just asked a few questions. Like "How long you been fuckin' that white boy, girl?" and "Where'd you get

the gun?” And “shore nuff look like you got a thang against these mens, to be shooting ’em like this.” They gave me a Black cop, see. Get the truth out of me. Someone from my own “culture,” knows about us Black girls’ murderous instincts. (Wilson 88) <sup>35</sup>

The police’s questioning of June, as presented in the novel, demonstrates the stereotypical perceptions that society has of black people and especially black women. The police, as an institution which is expected to protect all citizens regardless of their sex or race, should not reflect such perceptions or engage in acts which reproduce racism and sexism. It is, then, significant that Wilson openly exposes the corrupted practices of social institutions, such as the police force. As I have already mentioned, in doing so, she undermines the dominant concept of order on which classical detective fiction is based, enabling us to approach it as a mask for the social, sexual and racial hierarchies behind it.

A very important aspect of Pam’s investigation of Jeremy’s death relates to the fact that it is carried out with the help she receives from her colleagues and friends, as well as her new girlfriend Hadley.<sup>36</sup> The style with which Pam investigates the murder, on the one hand, contradicts the Loner-eccentric model of detection, which male detectives of classical detective fiction came to establish. On the other hand, as I have argued, the simultaneous development of the investigation and Pam’s own romantic involvement with Hadley negates the supposed incompatibility of the love and detective plots. Pam does not merely enjoy her romantic life with Hadley, she is also helped to a great extent by her in the investigation at hand. As the investigation progresses, we eventually come to find out about Zee’s killing of Jeremy. Jeremy, who was secretly an informant to the CIA and Marcos’ army, had taken

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<sup>35</sup> Years back her late husband was accidentally killed by a gun that went off. Throughout the novel it is implied that June was responsible for his killing but was never convicted for it. June has two kids from her late husband.

<sup>36</sup> She met Hadley through the merging of their collective with B. Violet Typesetting, a lesbian-owned and run typesetting.

advantage of Filipinos' need to stay in America and pretended to want to help them through forging their papers with the help of Zee, when in reality he was informing on them. Jeremy's blackmail of Zee resulted in her murdering him, a fact she admits to Pam and the rest of the group, who collectively decide not to give Zee in but rather protect her. Wilson's projection of the murder victim, Jeremy, as actually the criminal in the story, and Zee as his actual victim who was forced to act in self-defense, radically changes the conventions upon which the formula of the detective novel has been based, blurring the line between victim and criminal and introducing a different concept of justice. Foregrounding Zee's victimization, not merely by a person, but by a whole system, Wilson helps us approach the issue of corruption on a political, rather than a solely individual, level. This approach problematizes the uncritical privileging of social and/or legal order in the context of detective fiction, exposing the injustices of social and immigration policies in the United States within which the novel is set. Speaking of the hardships that Filipinos migrating to America have to face, Zee says:

We have been years and years under American imperialism and we hate it. Hate the Coca-Cola and the soldiers and sailors and air force at Subic and Clark, hate the way our women are prostitutes and our men are black marketeers, or the way we have to work for your companies in factories making little pieces of things, not even the whole thing! But we come to the U.S. anyway when we're in trouble or to study, because where else can we go? (Wilson 116-117, 2013 a)

Zee's discussion of American imperialism exposes the material conditions within which people migrating to the U.S. have to live, their desire for a better future for them and their families, when in reality they get to resort to prostitution and other degrading jobs as a means of self-preservation.

The U.S. uses the Third World like a man uses a prostitute, [...] Flirts with her a little, you know pretends she is human, maybe spends a little money on her to make her pretty, then, when he has got what he wanted –the natural resources, control of the economy, a dumping ground for useless commodities, complete subservience, in other words—he treats her like a whore and pretends to feel sorry for her while he kicks dirt in her face and makes sure she can never get up from the ground. (Wilson 126, 2013 a)

Zee reflects on the United States' (and other powerful nations') exploitation of these people's need and their struggle for a better quality of life. She compares this attitude to a man's exploitation of a prostitute, in a way that points to how the status quo protects certain people, while simultaneously allowing crimes against categories of people who are marginalized by it.

As we have seen, from the first book of her series, Wilson problematizes key assumptions of the genre of detective fiction, assumptions relating to crime, justice, as well as truth. By having her protagonist not give Zee in to the police Wilson demonstrates the complexity of justice and truth, emphasizing the need to take decisions, not in abstraction, but in relation to particular contexts and with full awareness of institutional power structures and the different interests at stake. In order to promote this new approach to truth, Wilson makes sure that through her fiction many perspectives on various subjects and social issues, such as prostitution and pornography, are shared, a practice which enhances the political nature of her fiction. Speaking of her writing, she explains:

I was also interested in figuring out how you brought a political consciousness to fiction. I thought the mystery—with its format of question-asking, issues of social justice and crime, and its accusations and vengeance—was well suited for that. I wanted to

see what a mystery could do in terms of tackling social issues.

(quoted by Markowitz 192)

Wilson's final book of her Pam Nilsen mystery series, *The Dog Collar Murders*, is mainly constructed through dialogues and the internal monologues of her protagonist, Pam, revolving around gender issues and several social problems that are connected to them. As the murder of the novel occurs in the context of a conference around sexuality and pornography, Wilson shares with us various arguments around these issues, that also include conceptions around sadomasochism (S&M). In doing so, she points to the blind spots in each position and within the feminist movement itself, a fact which renders Wilson's approach more objective. In the context of the conference, we are introduced to theories on pornography and voyeurism. The adoption of an unconventional attitude to voyeurism and the female body is one of the key elements introduced in Wilson's fiction. Female sexuality is no longer depicted through a male lens, or given meaning based on a man's intentions, as is the case with Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Instead, lesbian detective fiction allows for a women-centered view of the female body and sexuality, one freed from representations of it as submissive. Wilson succeeds in producing an alternative view of female nakedness by promoting and empowering a lesbian gaze. This constitutes a major blow against male-dominated representations of female sexuality:

Looking isn't a neutral activity in Western culture. It's an activity which men have constructed in order to express domination and subordination. The way women's bodies are portrayed over and over in the mass media is sexualized, not just in a way that shows the possibility of violence against them<sup>37</sup>, but almost more insidiously in a way that shows their

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<sup>37</sup> I have discussed this issue in the first chapter on Hard-Boiled Women's Detective Fiction in my analysis of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, through the figure of Carmen Sternwood.

lack of economic and social status relative to men. (Wilson 33, 2013 c)

Reflecting Halberstam's concern with theorizing a queer aesthetics, its awkwardness and confusion, Wilson creates the figure of Miko, a lesbian friend of Hadley's, who creates short videos, the content of which is lesbian sexuality. Through her work, Miko shows that pornography merely captures the physical aspect of female sexuality, while there is a lot more to it. By contrast, in her videos, which several of the characters discuss as confusing and awkward, she demonstrates how sexuality is not limited to physical action, but also includes thoughts, as well as the tension that accompanies the unfulfilled desire between lesbian women who fail to act upon their desire.

Building on this revision of female sexuality through a queer pornography that does not objectify women and the female body, Wilson sets out, additionally, to reflect on prostitution, questioning women's victim-status in relation to it, without dismissing, however, the possible dangers. In the second book of her series, *Sisters of the Road*, which revolves around the murder and disappearance of two girls, Rosalie and Trish, who worked as prostitutes, Pam comes to meet multiple women who are also involved in prostitution. Pam enters the world of prostitution in her attempt to find Trish who has gone missing after Pam had taken her under her care, following her friend's murder.<sup>38</sup> Her engagement with these women offers Pam a new perspective on prostitution, beyond religious moralizing or politically reductive approaches which fail to acknowledge these workers' agency. Wilson shows the economic prosperity of some of the women, who willingly choose to work as prostitutes and consider themselves in control of their life and body. Shedding light on the hypocrisy of the state

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<sup>38</sup> Pam asked Trish to stay with her in her apartment, following her friend's murder. She takes care of her, cooks for her and tries to understand what has happened that resulted in Rosalie's death. Pam wants to eliminate the possibility of Trish being chased by the same killer who has murdered her friend.

which makes laws on prostitution in order to supposedly protect women from the exploitation of men, Janis, a lawyer who helps Pam find Trish, tells her:

“What’s the crime if a woman sleeps with a man for money?  
He gets what he wants sexually, she gets what she needs economically. Why should the state in the guise of public morality intervene? It’s all hypocrisy anyway. Everyone knows that prostitution will continue no matter how many laws you make or unmake. The politicians are some of the prostitutes’ best customers”. (Wilson 168, 2013 c)

What is of great importance in Pam’s approach to the issue of prostitution is that she treats the women she meets with respect, as workers, despite some of her friends’ disparaging comments about Trish and prostitutes in general. Ever since the two girls entered her car to ask for her help, due to one of them having been severely injured, Pam becomes protective of them, especially when the interrogators, who arrive at the hospital to evaluate the situation, become offensive to them. Pam’s investigation is driven by her concern for the victims’ welfare and protection. In contrast to the classical male detective, she does not perceive crime as a game of chess played between the detective and the criminal. This is why her narrative develops as a story of identification and sisterhood, as the title of her novel suggests.

Pam’s discovery of Trish’s diary, by means of which we gain access to her thoughts, feelings, her background and struggles, brings the figure of the victim even closer to the reader as well as to the detective who identifies with her and desperately seeks to protect her. Wilson once again problematizes basic assumptions around which the genre has developed, with the most critical being the moment of identification between detective and victim through the rape of her detective by the criminal in the story. Pam’s rape has a double meaning in Wilson’s narrative. On the one hand, it undermines the notion of the omnipotent

detective by bringing Pam down to the level of victim, a fact which additionally points to the vulnerability of the female lesbian detective. On the other hand, it throws into relief what Pam herself anticipated as society's punishment for being a lesbian woman. Indeed, her rape can be perceived as, not merely a violation of her bodily integrity, but as a practice that aims to "chastise" her and force her into heterosexuality. As Inga Simpson writes:

While the rape of the lesbian detective successfully extends and subverts the genre, challenging traditional notions of the invincible detective, it can also be argued to reinforce the stereotype of the lesbian as victim, and negate the agency and subversive capacity of the lesbian detective. Given the rape of the detective occurs almost exclusively in lesbian and gay detective fiction, it may reflect gay and lesbian self-perception or their vulnerable position in society. Textually, it represents an enforced and violent form of "passing" on which the hetero-patriarchy insists (17).

The lesbian detective's agency, however, is not necessarily cancelled out due to her portrayal as victim. It rather shows how this agency is the product of a history of violation and violence. Recalling the events of her rape, Pam speaks of how one of the officers who came to her rescue was turned on by the sight of her at the moment, with her pants down and tied with a rope, something which made her feel ashamed, as if it was her fault that she had been raped. Wilson's purpose again is to shed light on how society treats rape victims, who eventually end up blaming themselves for the harm that has been done to them. In becoming one of the victims in her own investigation, Pam's relationship with Trish is redefined on the basis of the vulnerability they both now share. "I felt an awkwardness I hadn't had when I was trying to save her from herself. A new vulnerability" (Wilson 249, 2013 b). It is the acknowledgement of this vulnerability that characterizes much feminist fiction as well as women's strug-

gle to reinvent themselves through this experience -- not alone, but collectively. This is precisely what Wilson demonstrates through her fiction and the figure of her detective. Through Pam, she shows how a strong bond of sisterhood can be developed due to women's shared experience of vulnerability.

The crimes that Wilson's fiction narrates are crimes that, despite being committed against one woman at a time, are nonetheless meaningful for and directed against all women and womanhood, an idea which constitutes one of the main tenets of feminist thought. By blurring the boundaries between detective, criminal and victim and demonstrating how all of these figures could easily be turned into victims due to being female and/or queer, Wilson problematizes the formulaic construction of the genre, while simultaneously highlighting how the order imposed by society and reflected within detective fiction is actually at fault for the female victimization recorded in it. As I have shown, it is because of this critical approach to societal order that contemporary female writers of detective fiction, such as Wilson, try to rewrite traditional notions and conventions of the genre.

Returning to Halberstam's discussion on queer aesthetics, we can, indeed, approach Pam's mysteries as narratives of failure. Throughout these mysteries we learn of the stories of queer individuals who work their way through failure, without Wilson sugarcoating the hardships and struggles of their lives. Finding themselves in this "dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness" (97), which Wilson realistically places them in, they demonstrate their strength in consciously choosing to diverge from and ultimately fail in what society prescriptively embraces as the normal path to happiness. Wilson's own failure to abide by the rules of the genre renders her detective fiction powerful in resisting patterns that lead to social marginalization and corruption. Wilson's detective fiction, then, is a prominent example of the development of a lesbian-feminist aesthetics and can

be seen as a major stepping-stone in liberating women (queer or not) from conventional, male-oriented and highly sexist ideologies enforced by a patriarchal, heteronormative society.

Maria Stylianou

## Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis has been to trace contemporary women's rewriting of the detective fiction genre. Examining the formula of crime fiction which, as Cawelti argues, becomes the means through which "specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes" (6), I was able to expose the sexist, classist, racist and heteronormative ideologies that have informed it. Drawing on classical detective novels, such as the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, featuring their male detectives, C. Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, respectively, I discussed the figure of the detective as the embodiment of stereotypically male elitist behavior. Being exceptionally intelligent and morally superior, the classical detective appears as a god-like figure, distant from the rest of the characters, as well as the readers.

Constructing the protagonist of the genre in this way, male authors of classical detective fiction have produced a generic formula that privileges masculinity and traditionally male values, such as reason, autonomy, physical prowess, aggressive behavior, etc. If included in the plot, women characters were primarily presented as victims, sexual objects or sources of moral corruption<sup>39</sup>. Even in cases of detective novels featuring female detectives, their femininity was treated as incompatible to the detective plot, which required their being put back to their place: "everything in its place, everyone in his allotted role" (Bloom 17). As I have shown, novels of classical detective fiction have incorporated perceptions formulated around the 19<sup>th</sup> century division between the public and the private sphere and, as a result, they have emphasized the incompatibility between the detective and the woman plots.

In my dissertation, I have tried to trace the increasing dissatisfaction on the part of contemporary women critics and authors in the dominant detective formula, and their

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<sup>39</sup> Please refer to Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, discussed in the first chapter on Hard-Boiled Women's Detective Fiction.

insistence on the necessity to revitalize the genre.<sup>40</sup> In each of the chapters of this dissertation, I have focused on the various techniques contemporary female authors have developed in their attempt to depart from the generic norms of crime fiction, opening up this previously male-dominated field to women's concerns and to values traditionally dismissed as "feminine". The result, I have argued, is not merely to give greater visibility to women characters from different social or ethnic contexts and of various sexual orientations, but also to produce alternative representations of both the detective and the victim, the nature of crime, the process of investigation and the carrying out of justice.

More particularly, I have focused on diverse female detective figures, who are amateur or professional detectives, owners of their own businesses or domestic workers, in order to trace the contexts within which they work and their distinct investigative methods. These methods, I have emphasized, are not necessarily based on abstract reason, the value that was celebrated in classical crime novels, but also derive from traditionally "feminine" features of their character, such as their capacity to empathize with others or their connection with domesticity and the preparation of food. Foregrounding the use of first-person narration in a lot of the novels I have chosen to read, I have argued that contemporary female writers of crime fiction allow us to access the internal world of their female protagonists. More importantly, they succeed in humanizing their female detectives who, despite their tough and independent disposition, admit to the physical and psychological effects that their job and the violence it involves have on them. It is for this reason that these female detectives undermine the prototype of the God-like male detective and enable both readers and other characters to identify and sympathize with them.

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<sup>40</sup> Please refer to Shalisa M. Collin's "Feminizing the Detective Novel: Marcela Serano's 'Nuestra Senora de la Soledad', the 'Neo-Policial' and the Creation of Feminine Spatial Poetics."

Female solidarity is another important aspect of the genre's feminization. In moving away from the classical loner-eccentric model of detection, contemporary female authors of crime fiction present us with female detectives whose investigations entail the help of friends, family, as well as their partners. This, additionally, rejects the opposition that previously existed between the detective and love plots. Contemporary female detectives show us, through the lives they lead, that detective work can indeed be combined with the sustenance of a romantic relationship and that the former does not necessarily cancel out the latter.

Moreover, playing with the predominant in crime fiction element of disguise and adapting it to the character of their female protagonists, female writers question the gender, race or class hierarchies reproduced in classical detective fiction and reclaim the value of previously otherized identities (e.g. that of an immigrant or that of an African-American female domestic). Contrary to female detectives of classical detective fiction, contemporary female detectives use negative perceptions of their nature and identity to their advantage. They discard disguise as a means to conceal their female and/or black identity (which, based on the classical formula, would disqualify them for detective work), and wear their femininity and/or blackness in a way that gives them a strategic advantage, enabling them to arrive at the solution of the crimes they are confronted with.

Significantly, contemporary female writers of detective fiction, especially of African-American and feminist-lesbian detective fiction, embrace an intersectional perspective, foregrounding the various challenges their characters have to struggle against due to the diverse circumstances of their lives. Presenting us with the role social perceptions play both in the evolution of their characters as well as the commission of the various crimes that take place in their novels, female writers succeed in demonstrating that societal order serves the interests of a white, male heteronormative elite and is preserved at the expense of communities or individuals who are believed to be inferior, namely, female, queer and/or

black communities or individuals. This sheds light, I believe, on the most important dimension of the feminization of the genre, in the sense that it shakes the very foundations upon which the genre of detective fiction has been based: i.e. women writers' questioning of the notion of order, the disruption of which functioned as the source of the detective plot and legitimated the figure of the white, male detective.

Contemporary female writers of crime fiction have managed to expose the subterranean ways in which sexism, racism, heteronormativity, and classism had for a long time now been fueling the production of crime fiction. Their contribution in not only feminizing, but indeed revolutionizing a literary genre which, as has been discussed here, is aesthetically and politically conservative, can be seen in their continuous evolution of the figure of the detective, their politicization of the stakes of the process of investigation, as well as in their shift away from the figure of the disturbed, evil criminal to more institutionalized forms of crime.

Reflecting on 21<sup>st</sup> century works of detective fiction, especially those featuring male detectives (most often created by male authors), one can see that female authors' revolutionizing of the genre by means of the various techniques discussed in this dissertation, has most definitely affected the works of contemporary male authors as well, who are seen to have integrated such techniques into their own writings. Through contemporary male authors' own departure from the classical model of detective fiction, we have come to know of male detectives with more humane and intersectional identities. We, moreover, get to encounter male detectives whose vulnerability and sense of collective detective work are illustrated as major parts of their disposition.

The contribution of the work of contemporary female authors, additionally, resides in its importance in the overall feminist concern with popular fiction, which emerged on both

political and aesthetic grounds.<sup>41</sup> Feminist writers are seen to use popular literary forms, such as detective fiction, as a vehicle for their political concerns, precisely because of its popularity and its wide readership. As Anne Cranny-Francis argues, “People enjoy genre fiction; it sells by the truckload. As a conscious feminist propagandist, it makes sense to use a fictional format which already has a huge market” (Cranny-Francis 2). Feminist revisions of conservative and at the same time popular genre texts, as well as feminist re-evaluations of the ideological significance of those texts, projects feminist writers’ “complex aesthetic/ideological manoeuvre” (6), which can be recognized as a means of political resistance. In this light, the impressive production of revisionary detective works by contemporary women authors, a glimpse of which I have tried to offer in this dissertation, is most promising for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century development of women’s writing and the future of the detective genre. One cannot but predict that their effort will finally be rewarded in a truly golden era for the female detective novel.

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<sup>41</sup> It was an attempt to trace and understand the use of popular fiction as a medium of circulating stereotypical representations of “femininity” and “masculinity;” it was also an attempt to reclaim the aesthetic value of literary genres in which women specialized (and sometimes excelled) but were never really canonized as “high-brow literature.”

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