

# The Dynamics of Lesbian Crime Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

Lesbian detective fiction offers a fundamental challenge to the accepted conventions of detection genre by firstly placing a female character in a traditional male role and secondly allowing her to transgress the conservative heterosexual norms of sexuality and identity. This paper aims to explore the formula of lesbian detection describing how writers such as Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings or Katherine V. Forrest through the creation of their lesbian detectives deal with the transformations applied to the detection genre when they manage to reconcile two apparently contradictory discourses: the detection genre, which assumes a masculine perspective of existence, and feminist thought which attempts to expand the rigid sexual stereotypes. Among the modifications operated in the genre, most of the texts avoid final resolution, reverse the traditional characterization of criminal and victim and are less concerned with the solving of a crime than with offering a subversive social critique revealing sexist practices. In this sense lesbian crime fiction deals with concerns and conflicts which are particularly relevant to women and forces the reader to confront their own feelings on questions concerning female power and social oppression, while challenging the existing structures of law and patriarchal authority.

**Keywords:** lesbian crime fiction, lesbian detective, feminist crime fiction

## Dinámica de la novela negra lesbiana

### RESUMEN

La ficción de detectives lesbiana reta las convenciones tradicionales del género de detección en primer lugar situando a una mujer detective en un papel mayoritariamente masculino y en segundo lugar al permitirle transgredir las normas tradicionalmente asociadas a la sexualidad e identidad femenina. Este artículo pretende explorar el funcionamiento de la novela de detectives lesbiana mostrando cómo, a través de la creación de detectives lesbianas, autoras como Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings o Katherine V. Forrest, articulan las transformaciones operadas en el género al intentar conciliar dos discursos en apariencia contradictorios: el género de detección que aporta una visión masculinista de la existencia y la ideología feminista que intentó expandir los rígidos estereotipos sexuales. Entre estas modificaciones destacan cómo la novela negra lesbiana suele eludir una resolución final, invierte los roles de criminal y víctima y se preocupa más por ofrecer una crítica social subversiva que por la resolución de un caso. Consecuentemente la novela negra lesbiana reflexiona acerca de preocupaciones y conflictos relevantes para las mujeres e induce al lector a confrontar sus propias actitudes sobre temas como el poder y la

opresión social de las mujeres, mientras cuestiona la organización social y las estructuras de poder patriarcal existentes.

**Palabras clave:** novela negra lesbiana, detective feminista, ficción criminal feminista

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction: On the edges of genre: 2. Lesbian identity, detection and displacement. 3. Sexual politics and social challenges.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: ON THE EDGES OF GENRE

1984 was a crucial year for lesbian feminine fiction, since three relevant works were published at that time: Barbara Wilson's *Murder in the Collective*, Sarah Schulman's *The Sophie Horowitz Story* and Katherine V. Forrest's *Amateur City*. These novels, which received strong public reception, were followed by the contribution of other authors such as Mary Wings, Mary Morell, Catherine Lewis, Sandra Scoppetone, Sarah Dreher or Laurie R. King, in what Anna Wilson (1996: 251) calls "a sudden spate of lesbian detective fiction" appearing in the 1980s and early 1990s, within a context of growth of feminist fiction in general.<sup>11</sup>

The lesbian detective novel can be related to three different literary traditions: first, the lesbian novel, since, as Wilson (1996: 251-53) notes, lesbian detective fiction can be read as the logical successor of the coming-out story; second, the feminist tradition, seeing as the lesbian novel deals with concerns and conflicts particularly relevant to women while assuming a political agenda; and, lastly, the detective novel since these novels feature a detective involved in a detection plot. Considering lesbian crime novels a diversifying development from crime fiction, it can be claimed that lesbian detective fiction offers a fundamental challenge to the accepted conventions of the detective genre by firstly placing a female character in a traditional male role and secondly allowing her to transgress the conservative heterosexual norms of sexuality and identity. Writers such as Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings or Katherine V. Forrest, through the creation of their lesbian detectives, deal with the transformations applied to the detection genre when they manage to reconcile two apparently contradictory discourses: the detection genre, which assumes a masculine perspective of existence, and feminist thought, which attempts to expand the rigid sexual stereotypes.

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<sup>11</sup>It is possible, however, to find other less well-known lesbian novels before that date such as M. F. Beal's *Angel Dead* (1977) featuring the radical feminist Chicana detective Kate Guerrero, which can be considered the first lesbian novel, Eve Zaremba's *A Reason to Kill* (1978) introducing detective Helen Keremos and Vicky P. McConnerl's *Mrs Porter's Letters* (1982) portraying the detective Nyla Wade. In fact, the lesbian crime novel found its predecessors in the lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s, with texts offering, according to Munt (1994: 121) "pathologizing psychoanalytic construction of lesbianism, typical of the crude Freudianism prevalent at that time...: lesbian were, simply, sick."

The detective fiction genre has traditionally been accused of being a male territory, even if it also dealt with a significant female presence. Although women have consistently written detective fiction and have introduced female detectives in these stories –as happened in Britain in the late nineteenth century or during the Golden Age– they assumed a male-based perspective of existence underlining the passive status of the female detective. In the late 1970s, however, a group of female writers began to write within the hard-boiled tradition, placing a female detective in the position previously occupied by such emblematic heroes as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. Several factors influenced the development of what Reddy (1988) calls ‘feminist counter tradition’ –referring with this label to hard-boiled fiction written around the 1980s by authors such as Sara Paretsky, Marcia Muller, Linda Barnes, Liza Cody and Sue Grafton– the most relevant being the significant social changes and expanding feminist thought.<sup>2</sup> These women writers began to challenge the constitutive conventions of the genre in order to accommodate an independent and emancipated female detective who transgresses the cultural stereotypes of femininity. Although they address the hard-boiled tradition from different feminist perspectives – the proliferation of women writers portraying women protagonists in the most recent decades has offered a wide range of feminist views in their fiction: liberal, socialist, lesbian, psychoanalytic, postmodern... some texts being more radically subversive than others– all of them seem to share the belief in the necessity to rewrite the detective novel in order to accommodate a new female detective who is aware of her gendered identity.

As Rabinowitz (1987: 8-9) explains, literary genres work through conventions, that is, social constructions that convey an ideological meaning. If the text through its conventions reproduces the dominant ideology, then the narrative process develops smoothly contributing to the underlining of this ideology. Yet, if the narrative process questions some of the genre conventions, then the text strongly objects to the dominant ideology. This fact results in an “unnatural” effect which places both, the text and the reader in an ambivalent position. Heterosexual women’s hard-boiled detective stories offer a fundamental challenge to the established conventions of the genre firstly by placing a female character in a traditional male role and secondly by allowing her to be a competent and professional detective without renouncing her femininity. Since challenging the literary conventions of popular literature implies the questioning of the literary genre’s ideology, women writing within the hard-boiled tradition, when they link the detective’s feminine features to positive connotations instead of negative concepts –passivity, dependence and clumsiness, as femininity

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<sup>2</sup>The Canadian novelist Elizabeth Bowers describes this tendency as “if not consciously feminist, then very obviously influenced by the feminist movement of the 1970s” (Walton and Jones 1999: 13). In fact, this fiction mirrored what was happening in real life: women began to enter professional fields traditionally occupied by men, such as soldiers, firemen and policemen. Accordingly, the rigid sexual stereotypes began to shake and it comes as no surprise that popular literature depicted societal changes.

was interpreted in the past— are simultaneously challenging the rigid sexual stereotypes which had condemned women to a secondary position in society. Rabinowitz underlines this relationship between narrative conventions and ideology:

Conventions... are one of the grounds on which the politics of art is mapped out; often invisible, they serve as enabling conditions for literature's ideological structures. Thus, study of literary conventions can help illuminate the connections between politics on one hand and interpretation and evaluation, as the academy currently practices them, on the other. (Rabinowitz 1987: 9)

In relation to heterosexual women writers writing hard-boiled fiction, lesbian writers of feminist detective fiction certainly go further when revising relevant questions to women such as female power and oppression, the idea of a female community, and female identity and subjectivity for women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Accordingly, lesbian detective texts are more radically subversive than other feminist crime novels in their appropriation of the detective genre from both an ideological perspective —by rejecting the existing structures of law and patriarchal authority— and a formal one —by undermining the traditional constitutive conventions of the genre—. In fact, whereas some critics (Klein 1988, Cranny-Francis 1990, Walton and Jones 1999) of crime fiction argue that not all the feminist writers of crime fiction are successful when challenging the conservative values of the genre<sup>3</sup>, most researchers (Reddy 1988, Humm 1990, Palmer 1997) seem to agree that lesbian crime fiction certainly succeeds in undermining the conventions and appropriating the genre.

One thematic center of many lesbian crime novels deals with the process of accepting a lesbian identity. In fact, as Munt (1994: 121) states, lesbian novels “have evolved primarily out of lesbian, rather than crime fiction” and many novels —as *Murder in the Collective* (1984) and *Sisters of the Road* (1986) by the feminist author and publisher Barbara Wilson— are as much concerned with the process of accepting a lesbian identity as with the solution of the crime. At the beginning of *Murder in the Collective*, the amateur detective Pam Nilsen is an heterosexual who had felt “estranged for ten months” (Wilson 1984: 9) from her half-Mexican, half-Japanese boyfriend, Ray. Although she still has regrets but no “serious regrets” (Wilson 1984: 10) about him, she begins to feel attracted to a lesbian who comes to work at the printing firm that she manages. At first it is difficult for her to come to terms with this attraction:

At some point I would have to explain to Hadley that I was straight, not at all wavering, and that I didn't feel attracted to her, but just wanted her for a friend, even though I'd never had a lesbian friend before and had no idea if you even could. (Wilson 1984: 47)

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<sup>3</sup>For a detailed enumeration of different critics' views on how successful feminist writers of crime fiction are with respect to the feminist appropriation of the genre, see Makinem (2001: 104-114).

Yet as the novel progresses, Pam comes out as a lesbian, although this self-discovery is not easy and she vacillates about her sexual identity several times, especially when she listens to her sister saying “you’re not gay with one ... encounter” (1984: 119). In *Sisters of the Road* (1986) Pam has already accepted her homosexuality, but her new self-definition doesn’t only bring her happiness, but also feelings of confusion and solitude as any other person can feel in their life. She feels especially lonely when she, having undergone a promiscuous stage (more in her mind than in reality) wants to find “someone who might be *the one*” (Wilson 1986: 14). In fact, Pam emphasizes that her problems are “human problems –like loneliness and losing people or being away from people you care about” (Wilson 1986: 41).

On the contrary, Los Angeles Police Department detective Kate Delafield, portrayed by Katherine V. Forrest, has already accepted her lesbian identity as *Amateur City* (1984) opens –in fact she had a successful twelve-year relationship with Ann until she was killed in a terrible car accident– although she is not interested in coming out publicly and only an exclusive group of people –including her racist and sexist partner Ed Taylor– know her sexual orientation. Her ambivalent position with respect to her “coming out” is described in her second novel *Murder at the Nightwood Bar* (1987):

She knew that [Ed Taylor] knew she was a lesbian, but neither of them discussed or admitted it \_Taylor because he was obviously uncomfortable with the issue, and she because she was convinced that her professional efficiency depended on discretion and silence. (Forrest 1987: 163)

Kate Delafield has decided to withhold her sexual orientation from her professional life, in which she has proved to be extremely serious and competent, due to existing discrimination: “So I am the perfect woman cop. Everyone can respect my work but still be contemptuous. So women can do the job, they tell themselves, but only because they’re pseudo-men” (Forrest 1984: 163-164). The end of *Murder at the Nightwood Bar* is paradigmatic in respect to coming to terms with her lesbian identity –not individually but socially– since she proudly watches the Gay Pride parade: “As far as her tear-blinded eyes could see, there were thousands of gay people. Thousands and thousands” (Forrest 1987: 181).

This coming-out process, although it can be approached from different angles by different authors, is a relevant issue in many lesbian detective novels, with most writers approaching it from a “non-idealistic” point of view. It is not only liberating and a sign of freedom, but it may also be very painful if the price to be paid entails the loss of community and family life.. After her coming out in *Murder in the Collective* (Wilson 1984) Elena is immersed in a custody battle with her ex-husband. In *Murder at the Nightwood Bar* (Forrest 1987) Dory is neglected by her parents when they learn about her sexual orientation and Kate Delafields knows her lesbianism can become a weapon used against: “I’ve never pretended to be

heterosexual. But I've never made any announcements either, and never will. Why give anyone a weapon? And it *is* a weapon (Forrest 1984: 163).

## 2. LESBIAN IDENTITY, DETECTION AND DISPLACEMENT

The lesbian novel challenges the traditional hard-boiled detective's individualism, since the hero is usually a loner and deliberately keeps himself emotionally detached when solving his cases. At a superficial level, this may be a common feature shared by both the hard-boiled hero and the lesbian detective since both can be considered social "outsiders," as Munt (1994: 120) emphasizes: "... the detective hero is an outlaw, and here the parallel with lesbianism is clear. He is alone, isolated, on the edge, an observer, not a participator." Much like the male hero and the heterosexual hard-boiled female detective, the lesbian detective is featured as an orphan with no siblings. Reddy's explanations about the absence of family in life of the female detective are very interesting:

Women have generally been assigned to the domestic sphere and defined by their relationship to others, particularly to family members, with the female loner seldom seen as a hero in literature or in life. The family is, of course, often the locus of women's oppression, with traditional family arrangements mirroring social arrangements under patriarchy and making the continuation of those social arrangement possible. (Reddy 1988: 103)

The traditional family is a locus of oppression for the lesbian detective who usually lives alone or in non-traditional agrupations. However, the lesbian detective is often surrounded by a group of mutually supportive friends with which she can establish "gender complicities", and where she finds guidance in order to forge her lesbian identity. In *Murder in the Collective* (Wilson 1984) Pam Nilsen lives with her twin sister and a heterosexual couple, while in *Sisters of the Road* (Wilson 1986) Pam alternates between solitude and living with a partner. Significantly, throughout Wilson's novels, Pam Nielsen is always portrayed interacting with other lesbians. Kate Delafield lives alone grieving the death of her former partner Ann, but she finds meaningful and supportive relationships with lovers in every novel. As Reddy (1988: 129) notes "none of the lesbian detectives is truly a loner," hence the importance of two interconnected themes: the isolation of the lesbian as a social minority group and the importance of lesbian community as a place to forge a lesbian identity. Social isolation of lesbians is underlined by detective Kate Delafield when she claims in *The Beverly Malibu* (Forrest 1990: 258): "being singled out and persecuted is what being gay or lesbian has always been about." Mutual support inside a female community seems to be the main reason for Pam Nilsen to develop her work: "She's a woman, she's in trouble of some kind, she's one of our collective, she's a woman" (Wilson

1984: 96). Similarly, Forrest's *Murder at the Nightwood Bar* underlines the strong sense of community that women who regularly go to the Nightwood Bar share. This is not the kind of bar Kate could go to when she was young –only a means to pick up an occasional lover, a place which had made her feel humiliated and odd– but a safe place for lesbians, where they can “relax and be themselves” (Forrest 1987: 15).

### 3. SEXUALL POLITICS, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

One of the points on which critics of the lesbian thriller agree is that the feminist lesbian novel uses detection as an excuse to explore a set of social and individual issues relevant to women. Décuré recognizes that “most lesbian mystery novelists use crime stories as pretexts for writing lesbian romances” (1993: 188), while Plain emphasizes that “lesbian detective fiction is undoubtedly characterised by a major investment in material that seems little to do with detection and a lot to do with life, love and politics. . .” (Plain 2001: 203). Significantly, writers of lesbian crime fiction connect lesbian feminism not only to lesbian and gay issues but also to other political issues with wider impact such as sexism, sexual violence, prostitution, pornography, sado-masochism, social oppression, child molestation, homophobia and physical violence.

Mary Wings features the amateur detective Emma Victor in two novels, *She Came Too Late* (1986) and *She Came in a Flash* (1988). Much like Barbara Wilson and Katherine Forrest, Wings uses the crime novel to explore conflicts and concerns certainly relevant to women. In *She Came Too Late*, Wings deals with issues such as reproductive technology and economic corruption, exploring the relation between economic limits and dependency women experience in society. As Humm states (1990: 243) “to cross the boundary of heterosexuality involves much more than sexual liberation but also the need for economic autonomy.”

*Murder in the Collective* (Wilson 1984) deals with the issues of Nicaragua and the Philippines showing deep concern and solidarity toward the oppressed. *Sisters of the Road* (Wilson 1986) concerns about child molestation and prostitution while *The Dog Collar Murders* (Wilson 1989) discusses feminist politics (pornography and the practice of sado-masochism as an option). As Décuré (1993: 182) notes “other feminist writers such as Sara Paretsky or Gilliam Slovo make statements about women and society. Only Barbara Wilson analyses the subject at length.” In *Sisters of the Road*, Wilson, placing the murder of a prostitute as the center of the detection plot, deeply explores forced prostitution and violent sexual crimes against women. In this novel, Pam tries to help a badly beaten teenager ex-prostitute, Rosalie, a lesbian who wants to quit prostitution. When she eventually dies, Pam goes to help to Rosalie's teenager friend, Trish, who is prevented from leaving the streets by her pimp. Pam learns that Trish was sexually abused by her father with the connivance of her mother. Finally, Trish's stepbrother, the pimp, rapes Pam and tries to kill her, being eventually

saved by her friend June. Both, Pam and June will help Trish to find a better life for the future. It is interesting to note how Wilson offers a in-depth discussion about prostitution –two chapters are devoted to the topic– mainly through collective discussions, Pam Nilsen’s own thoughts and Pam’s conversations with other characters. Wilson tries to explore the subject not from a theoretical point of view but applied to characters’ experiences in life, while presenting a wide range of views from different angles. Wilson is not afraid to offer her inner feelings and contradictions about the subject and is not forcing the readers to adopt their own view. As Reddy (1988: 130-135) highlights, although *Sisters of the Road* (Wilson 1986) denounces male violence against women, there is an optimistic note at the end of the novel when everything seems to be sorted out. Similarly, the end of *Murder at the Nightwood* (Forrest 1987) with Kate staring the Gay pride parade, can be considered as a symbol of the revolutionary potential of gay and lesbian community. In Reddy’s words,

These novels’ conclusions suggest that lesbians (and straight women) speaking the truth about their lives and acting together in support of each other, collectively and individually, will eventually defeat the patriarchal order and, along the way to that goal, will continue to triumph over threatening manifestations of that order. (Reddy 1988: 135)

Lesbian feminist crime novels offer various degrees of challenge to the traditional conventions of mainstream detective fiction. The characterization of the lesbian detective –her behaviour and attitude– opposes to the conventional portray of the male detective who, surrounded by chaos, violence and corruption, and being himself the only trustful element in the plot, tries to restore the law and order. While male detective’s authority, as a representative of the masculinist existing power structure is never questioned neither by society nor by himself, the lesbian detective usually hesitates about her job and her identity, or goes through a difficult situation as, in the case of the feminine cop detective, she has to work in order to affirm the status of a social institution while holding in opposing values. Palmer (1997) makes interesting points about this question, alluding to the different values portrayed by heterosexual men and homosexual women:

The privileges which his status as a heterosexual male confers on him, along with his authoritative position and ruthless behaviour, are at odds with the portrayal of a lesbian protagonist. The woman who identifies as lesbian does not enjoy these privileges and is likely to be socially marginal. She is a member of an oppressed minority, and her lifestyle, in the respect that it challenges patriarchal values and conventions tends to be regarded by the public as transgressive and eccentric. (Palmer 1977: 89)

Los Angeles Police Detective Kate Delafield certainly shows an ambivalent position since she is a representative of a law and order system that most lesbian crime novels question. This contradiction leads her sometimes to shyly question the validity of her job, finding it “inadequate . . . So much effort to accomplish what



seems to make very little difference” (Forrest 1987: 175), and to understand that oppressed minorities hate the police:

Implicit in that power to arrest was the potential to exercise it for capricious, cruel or even thoughtless ends. Small wonder that the cop was the personification of menace to many gay people already brutalized by contempt, whose lives testified to powerlessness without recourse. (Forrest 1987: 26)

As a result of this ambivalence, Kate is sometimes accused to “sold out her own oppressors” (Forrest 1984: 15) since she devotes totally to her job: “The thin blue line of men and women who did their best to protect and to serve –how much longer could they hold back such ferocity? Well, she did her job, it was all she could do” (Forrest 1984: 13). Kate Delafield is a lot more conservative than Pam Nilsen. Delafield takes part in the existing social structure, defending as a cop the law and order while Pam Nilsen is an amateur sleuth that considers social system responsible for social and individual inequality. In this sense, Forrest works in more conventional ways and participates in more traditional plots than Wilson.

Additionally, while Kate Delafield is portrayed as being extremely competent in her job, “a Kate Delafield investigation was solid, meticulous, documented, a logical tapestry of facts –no sloppiness, no loose ends . . .” (Wilson 1984: 8-9), Pam Nielsen doesn’t value herself as a detective calling herself a “total physical coward” (1984: 48), or denies her competence, “I can summarize and resolve things” (Wilson 1989: 202), coming even to question the validity of her job. Consequently, at the end of *Murder in the Collective*, Pam hesitates about the helpfulness of her detection activities if they will bring as a result the incarceration of a woman:

I suddenly wondered why it was all so important. What did it matter if Zee had done it, or June had, as she claimed? Jeremy has been a dangerous person, missed by no one except his family who remembered him the way he used to be at seven or eight, blond, sweet, sitting on a hired horse. (Wilson 1984: 175-76)

The short opening line of *She Came to the Castro*: “I’m sorry about the gun, Mom” (Wings 1997: XVII), implies, similarly, the contradictions found in the figure of the detective as Plain (2001: 217) specifies: “this one brief statement encapsulates both the detective’s power and its negation. Wings offers the child’s submission to parental authority at the same time as the gun is being cited as the defining characteristic of a new independence.” In fact this sentence shows how more radical lesbian feminist fiction dismantles the detective’s authority and power through a parodic element.

Alongside with the characterization of the detective, other aspects contribute to locate lesbian crime fiction far away from the mainstream detective fiction. In fact, the end of *Murder in the Collective* is far from that of a conventional crime novel.

Jeremy, the murdered man is a CIA informant determined to spy inside the printing plant while the murderer is his wife trying to protect herself and her friends from his blackmailing. With the plot resolution, a narrative convention of mainstream crime fiction is demolished in two different aspects. On one hand, the detective Pam Nilsen let the murder get away with the crime being Jeremy “a weak man who needed a sense of power. There more he got the more he used it” (Wilson 1984: 179), so there is not restoration of social order. On the other hand, when Pam Nilsen is about to unmask the murderer another woman confronts the detective challenging the validity of her job, what makes Nilsen herself question again her detection activity: “You go around acting like detectives, you and that Hadley girl, pointing your finger here and there and here again. You maybe hide Zee but you give her up without a word when the times comes” (Wilson 1984: 175). The novel suggests that women –collectively and individually– are more important than an abstract idea of justice and the lack of firm closure in the plot prevent us from learning if Zee will be able to avoid the police or even if Pam and her friends will decide to protect her. As Cranny-Francis (1990: 172) notices “the question raised by the conclusion is again whether the murdered is as much a product of the system as the victim, who is himself a murdered ...”

The dominant features of the series by Mary Wings, *She Came Too late* (1986) and *She Came as a Flash* (1988) is according to Knight (2004: 77) their formal innovations, mainly their wit, since her narrative is full of jokes and ironies. In fact, one of the distinctive characteristics of Wings is her use of parody to confront patriarchal power. In this sense, Mary Wings alongside other writers of lesbian detective fiction like Barbara Wilson with *Gaudi Afternoon* (1990) or Sara Schulman with *The Sophie Horowitz Story* (1984) take lesbian feminist detective fiction beyond the formal and thematic constraints of the genre. Accordingly, some critics state that the more radical fiction is not properly within the genre, as Knight suggests when exploring some novels by Wilson, Wings and Schulman: [some novels] “move away from crime fiction, as the generic model is primarily used as an instrument to parody quest for knowledge” (Knight 2004: 197). In fact, fiction by Wings, Wilson and Schulman is often labelled as “postmodern crime fiction”. Palmer’s words clarify this point:

Postmodern motifs which find expression in the lesbian thriller include the representation of the individual as the product of cultural and psychic drives, the portrayal of sexuality and subjectivity as produced through fantasy, and the representation of sexual identity and gender in terms of performance and masquerade. Ideas relating to the performative nature of gender lend themselves particularly well to fictional treatment. Wings, Wilson and Shulman approach them as we shall see, from notably different perspectives. (Palmer 1997: 96)

Additionally, frontiers between narrative conventions blur and the detective can be at the same time the agent of detection and the victim. Pam Nilsen is beaten and

brutally raped by Trish's pimp. This terrible fact –which is only described in one sentence “he raped me” (Wilson 1986: 194)– destroys her most inner personality, degrading her as a human being: “I felt that whatever made Pam a person, whatever I knew or had known about myself was being crushed out of me, was spinning into fragments like a planet smashed by meteors” (Wilson 1986: 194). Pam is saved from murder by her friend June in a sisterhood act and Pam knows that if the police officer “right behind her, hadn't stopped her, she would have killed him. I'm sure of that” (Wilson 1986: 194). Reddy comments on the attitude that Wilson offers with respect to the issue of women and violence: “Wilson never directly endorse violence, yet the novel does suggest that, regardless of what one wants to believe, violence may sometimes be the only option that does not require one's own death” (Reddy 1988: 143).

In this sense the issue of violence used by women is dealt with differently in heterosexual feminist crime fiction and lesbian crime fiction. Female detectives in hard-boiled fiction written by women are capable of taking care of themselves, being ready to use violence, yet they try to avoid the use of it. With respect to the question of violence, hard-boiled writer Marcia Muller's view, referring to her detective Sharon McCone, is relevant:

My detective definitely gets scared when the bad guy starts coming after her. Sharon isn't one of those super self-assured people who think they know it all. Those super macho types in male private-eye novels set themselves above the law and take it into their own hands. It's that superior attitude that leads to their patronizing treatment of women, as well as their lack of human sympathy for the people they deal with. (in Stasio 1985: 38)

Sara Paretsky likewise states that she felt confined to the genre's conventions and introduced some scenes of violence in her former novels, disregarding them in her subsequent fiction since “women are not interested in homoerotic sadism in the way that men are. I don't feel that my readers need to learn how to fight any more that they need to learn how to have intercourse. So I just don't go in for any detailed description of sex and violence anymore” (in Stasio 1985: 39).

Not only lesbian texts differ from feminist texts in their use of violence but they also are different in their treatment of sexual relationships. As it can be deduced from Paretsky words, the heterosexual feminist writer doesn't seem to be so interested in offering full description of sexual scenes as the lesbian writer is. When analyzing Wings' fiction, Humm (1990: 244) underlines that Wings is offering the readers a message about the enjoyment of lesbian love. Cranny-Francis (1990: 164) underlines the parodic tone of *She Came too Late* while stating that the novel “evaluates potential female lovers with the same kind of cool detachment as Philip Marlowe.” The novel offers full descriptions of lesbian love-making –Emma Victor is powerfully attracted to Dr Frances Cohen– while explores sadomasochistic structures of desire. Munt alludes to the sexual openness of the novel noting that “this move away from

the idealized prescriptiveness of the 1970s involves dipping a toe into murkier waters, a response to a more disseminated dissatisfaction with the romantic dream” Munt (1994: 142). Marchino (1995) in her close study of Kate Delafield explores the reason why many lesbian authors include explicit scenes of love-making in their fiction. According to this critic, they do it firstly because to have sexual intimacy with other women becomes a relevant part of her life, secondly because many different messages can be sent with these passages –on the part of the authors– , and many different interpretations can be received from them –on the part of the readers, thirdly because writing about sex has been largely taboo for women and lesbian writers and they are again breaking the patterns and lastly, due simply to economic reasons since sex scenes sell. Palmer’s (1997) words on this topic are also illustrative:

The lesbian thriller has, in fact, always been to the fore in the treatment of themes relating to sex. . . In the present period a number of factors have helped to accentuate the focus on sex. The emergence of theorists such as Gayle Rubin and Joan Nestle, who champion the right of women to explore a variety of sexual practices in their lives and writing, along with the advent of Queer Politics, with its emphasis on a variety of transgressive sexualities and its problematising of a clearcut division between the categories ‘gay’ and ‘straight’, have served to give the topic of sexuality new prominence. (Palmer 1997: 96)

In short, lesbian detective fiction shifts the boundaries of the genre, dismantles the Manichaeian distinction between good and evil, avoids tidy textual closures and disregards unified subjectivity, while confronting patriarchy. As Humm states “when a woman chooses detective fiction as her genre, she is faced with material that is indifferent to, and often actively hostile to women” (1990: p. 239) so when many women write feminist detective fiction they decide to cross the boundary and stay outside the generic conventions of the genre. By doing so, lesbian writers of crime fiction want to expand the literary representation of contemporary women’s experience by addressing issues of gender and sexual preferences, glorifying marginality and placing women and relationships among women at the centre of its fiction. They are finally alluding to the malleability of the borders of popular genres while proving that crime fiction can be a means of examining relevant and unavoidable questions to women including the exploration of female sexual independence and the nature of gender identity.

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