

**Is the gay or lesbian detective necessarily a transgressive figure? The examples
of *Gravedigger* and *Murder By Tradition* under discussion**
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Crime fiction has experienced a great deal of change over the decades and has proven to be one of the most flexible and diverse genres, adapting itself to the needs of very different cultures and social movements and undergoing a reworking and rewriting of its traditional characteristics. In fact, if Chandler or Hammett suddenly came back to life and saw the feminist, black and lesbian – among others – approaches to crime fiction and their challenging of the patriarchal order they tried so hard to reinforce in their novels, they would probably die (again) of a heart attack. Crime fiction has, nonetheless, become one of the favourite literary vehicles for many male and female gay writers to expose the discrimination and injustice that homosexuals have to endure in a society essentially patriarchal. Hard-boiled tradition has been chosen as the preferred model for this purpose and has been subjected to the subversion and transgression of its traditional function: the restoration of the hetero-patriarchal order and of the status quo.

In order to understand to what extent the male and female gay detective figures are transgressive, I will attempt to define which boundaries are being crossed in lesbian and homosexual detective fiction, particularly in the novels of Joseph Hansen and Katherine Forrest: *Gravedigger* (2000) and *Murder By Tradition* (2003), respectively.

Joseph Hansen's Dave Brandstetter's is one of the few crime fiction series featuring a gay male detective. Furthermore, it is one of the few series featuring a *convincing* gay male detective and, interestingly enough, these books were published little after Stonewall and "while the American Psychiatrist Association still listed homosexuality as a mental illness," (1989: 110), as pointed out by Roger Bromley. Dave's homosexuality must be understood, consequently, taking into account not only the possibility of its transgressive nature with respect to the crime fiction genre itself, but also to the American society of its time.

However, if one assumes that Brandstetter's homosexuality is a marker of stigma and thus, a transgression of the heterosexist values of the patriarchal system, one cannot forget that Brandstetter is also, in every other way, a preserving agent of the patriarchal values in that he reinforces the superiority of the male body by rendering the female body invisible. I will argue that the detective's homosexuality is counteracted – and the transgression weakened – by the reinforcement of other masculine values, such as class, race and gender. To support this argument, I will first attempt to analyse to what extent Dave's homosexuality is a transgression and will then go on to analyse the way in which every other value and code of conduct of the patriarchal order is preserved.

In *Gravedigger*, the reader encounters insurance death claims investigator Dave Brandstetter, an "aging homosexual" (2000: 32), as described by himself, who maintains a monogamous love relationship with Cecil, a young black boy. Throughout the novel, Brandstetter never attempts to hide his homosexual identity from other people. He is gay and accepts his sexuality in a natural, non radical way. Moreover, it is his homosexual condition that helps him see what others cannot: homosexual repression and homosexual desire manifested inside the ideal American family structure. Gill Plain states that: "Irrespective of superficial plot details, each Brandstetter novel reveals the ideal of the happy, white, heterosexual family to be built upon a web of deceit and denial. The more ostentatiously 'ideal' the family, the deeper the roots of sexual deceit are likely to run." (2001: 98) and it is often this denial that triggers the tragic end of the man who tries to conceal his desires, as one can see in *Gravedigger*, where the repressed Charles Westover is ultimately forced to eat the heart of his secret lover, Gaillard, by his own daughter. Yet, to what extent is Dave's

homosexuality transgressive? It certainly causes a disruption of the patriarchal order, where heterosexuality and the binary opposition of women/men function as essential values for, as Dennis Altman states, "the depiction of sexuality is always in heterosexual terms, and any affirmation of homosexuality is an attack on the prevalent values." (1982: 3) but if we turn back to the tradition of the subgenre Hansen is rewriting –the hard-boiled – we see that in the fictions of Hammett and Chandler, the stigma was not placed as much on the homosexual man, but on the *effeminate* man, as Roger Bromley points out, "The transgressive female (or the homosexual male, as in the case of Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*) threatens the self-enclosure and intimacy of the ever-vigilant male and refuses, or subverts, a discourse dominated by male values of virility." (1989: 103). Assuming that the ultimate transgressor, the threat to society and to patriarchy, is the feminised man and the woman, and that they are the ones that form the realm of the Other, one cannot consider Brandstetter an outcast just because of his homosexuality, but rather a person subject to constant risk of being alienated because of his homosexual identity.

Dave Brandstetter's homosexuality is, moreover, conveniently counteracted by a series of patriarchal values: he is a wealthy, middle-class white man who represents the ideal of masculinity and male authority. A tough man which clearly shows in his tough talk, "What a shame,' Dave said. 'First mistake I ever made'" (2000: 128), with a grade of sentimentalism and nostalgia that sometimes reminds us of Chandler's hero Philip Marlowe, and, above all, a man that exercises an "unquestioned replication of patriarchal norms" (2001: 101). He has a taste for classical music which is explained by his social background, as well as a taste for alcohol and smoking, traditionally markers of masculinity in hard-boiled fiction. Furthermore, his relationship with the young Cecil frequently resembles that of father and son: "You're old enough so your brother couldn't stop you coming to me, so that means you're old enough for a drink" (2000: 48), or that of the Greek mentor who initiated boys in the arts, philosophy and sexuality. This relationship could be explained not only in terms of homosexuality, but also in terms of homosocial bonding, another characteristic of the hard-boiled tradition and of the patriarchal order. Although, in fact, Brandstetter crosses the boundary of the homosocial to access the transgressive land of homosexuality, he will always be a representative of patriarchal authority. Plain stresses, furthermore, that the patriarchal authority is also reinforced by the absence of women in Hansen's novels: "women, simply, don't signify" (2001: 101), and it is that absence of feminine values which makes Brandstetter's world essentially masculine for, "in a world where the only significant relationships are between men, the founding binary is no longer that of man/woman, but that of man/boy" and "boys... are different from girls because they at least have the potential to turn into men" (2001: 101).

Therefore, Brandstetter's disruption of heterosexual patriarchal values may be explained better as the author desiring to expand the boundaries of masculinity rather than attacking the patriarchal order, for, as Sedgwick declares: "While heterosexuality is necessary for the maintenance of any patriarchy, homophobia, against males at any rate, is not." (1985: 4)

Crime fiction featuring lesbian detectives is more widespread, and is not as isolated a case as Hansen's novels are in the field of male gay detection. Lesbian and feminist writers have found in crime fiction a suitable vehicle to express their manifest opposition to patriarchy, subverting its values and adapting the genre to their interests and worries. However, Katherine Forrest's Detective Delafield remains a particularly interesting case to investigate because of her position as a lesbian cop. The contradictions that arise from the combination of the lesbian and policewoman are multiple and make it more difficult to approach a rewriting and transformation of the hard-boiled subgenre. In fact, Katherine Forrest's detective has been heavily criticised by feminist critics. Nicole Décuré, for example, states simply that "the radical element is absent in the Forrest's novels" (1992: 268) while Sally Munt argues that "the radical

possibilities of the series are frequently undermined by the demonisation of the killer.” (1993). I will argue, however, that Kate Delafield *is* a transgressive figure but that her transgression does not lie as much in her crossing of the heterosexist boundaries as a woman cop and a lesbian, as in the way in which she forces changes within the law to make it work for those whom it would not normally benefit: particularly gay men and women.

Detective Kate Delafield, a middle-aged lesbian cop embodying the archetype of the butch, is presented to the reader in *Murder by Tradition* as leading a double life. On the one hand she is, “in many respects, the conventional authoritative cop of the procedural, with clear ideas of civilization, criminality and social justice” (1994: 113). On the other, she is a lesbian, closeted, but nonetheless representative of transgressive desire, which is “frequently ‘subversive because the insertion of lesbian meanings into any kind of genre fiction disrupts the heterosexist codes of desire’ (Duncker 1992: 99, as quoted in Palmer, 1993: 64)”. She is very much like the tough detective of hard-boiled fiction: a tough policewoman who consciously reinforces her masculine physical appearance when she wants to show authoritative power: “Authoritative clothing, specifically for her interview with Kyle Jensen” (2003: 54). She is not, however, insensitive or detached from her investigations as her male predecessors Spade or Marlowe. As a matter of fact, her involvement in the investigation of the murder of Teddie Crawford, a young gay man, as she instantly senses with “gut-deep certainty” (2003: 8), is so strong that she positions herself in his place: “I am Teddie Crawford” (2003: 124). Actually, the murder of Teddie is, by extension, an attack to the gay society and, Kate Delafield realises, to her own condition as a lesbian.

The murderer is soon identified as the traditional white American male and the crime justified by Taylor’s homophobia as “the same tired shit” (2003: 30). It is interesting to notice the way in which Taylor’s comments are extended, in his own words, to the jury, and thus, to the whole American society: “Teddie Crawford made a pass at another guy, backed up his cock with a knife. A jury’s looking at this red-blooded normal guy, they’ll figure Jensen freaked out and lost it, that’s all” (2003: 89). Once Taylor has manifested his opinion on the case, it is left to Kate to figure out by herself what has happened and, in this way she resembles the archetypal figure of the loner detective. Taylor’s hatred towards gay men is revealed as a common attitude among police officers, as Delafield herself declares when analysing the attitude of her partner towards the crime at hand, “Nobody cares about this case. My male partner hates this case because the witnesses are gay – they did toss-off interviews and toss-off reports to prove it. The male pathologist hates this case because Teddie Crawford was gay, and you saw his autopsy report.” (2003: 107), and one could see in the depiction of this behaviour a suggestion of the problems of discrimination and injustice in society having less to do with the law itself than with the state of those who enforce it. Ironically, it is this homophobic response from Taylor which gives Kate freedom to investigate in her own and by her own means, and equally ironical is the fact that Foster is given Teddie Crawford’s case because everyone else in the office refuses to accept it: “The men in this office hate this case too,’ Linda Foster said quietly... ‘I have no illusions why it was assigned to me” (2003: 107). Therefore, the *chess-like game*¹ that is the final trial, paradoxically turns out to be a battlefield where women are transgressively positioned as enforcers of the law, traditionally a role played only by men: judge Alicia Hawkins is a black female, the jury is a fairly equal mixture of females and males of different nationalities and the attorney, Foster, is also a woman. As Gill Plain points out, we are presented with “a truly fantastical game of ‘what if?’ If women ruled the courtroom, never mind the world, look what might be achieved!” (2001: 188). The radical possibilities that derive from this situation are quite difficult to understate, especially

¹ “A courtroom was a battleground, a setting for brutal warfare structured like a highly civilized chess game.” (Forrest, 2003: 121)

when this women-ruling of the courtroom finally makes law work for the Other, Teddie Crawford, the gay man that is ultimately a representative of the homosexual and lesbian communities.

Many critics have commented on Kate's "passing" as a heterosexual policewoman, arguing that the possibility of reading her as a transgressive figure is rendered useless when reminded that she is still in the closet. She is the "apparitional lesbian" (1993) described by Terry Castle: a ghost, something that does not exist because it cannot be named and, therefore, without the power to challenge or change and, at the same time, without the power to subvert or transgress the masculine values of the patriarchal order. However, as stated by Gill Plain, "ghosts can pass through walls – so can Detective Delafield. Her apparitional status carries her through barriers and boundaries closed to the out or tangible lesbian" (2001: 168), to the extent that she is "the enemy within: not only a ghost, but a spy" (2001: 186). She can, therefore, make the law work for those that it traditionally excludes, by means of subverting its codes in a discrete way from the very inside of its structure. Like the spy, Kate's infiltration in the patriarchal order is misrecognized and thus, she is able to challenge its values from within without being noticed: "The very body that upholds the law is in fact the other – the pervert against whom the law is directed." (2001: 184)

Some others comment, nevertheless, that Delafield's transgressive nature in the field of the professional is undermined by her attitude in her personal relationships. It is true that Kate's love relationship with Aimee in *Murder By Tradition* has quite a conservative framework: it seems to mimic a familiar heterosexual model where the butch (Kate Delafield) represents the working man and the femme (Aimee), the domestic wife. Indeed, "the butch position which Kate exemplifies is... a contentious issue among lesbian feminists" for "in the early years of the Women's Movement, lesbians who adopted it were criticised for mimicking male codes of behaviour." (1991: 19). It would be, however, too simplistic to view the butch/femme dynamic as just a replica of heterosexual behaviour. As Joan Nestle has argued, "Butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas." (quoted in Munt, 1993: 132). Although the sexual encounters between Kate and Aimee seem to describe Kate in a position of power and Aimee occupying the role of submission, they also show the anguished need of the detective to feel alive through having sex with Aimee, "Kate finished her answer from a place so dark and so desperate that it would forever exist in silence: 'I need to feel alive,'" (2003: 97) and to feed on her, in order to be able to return to the closeted world of the LAPD, "She would gorge on this feast of a woman, feed herself till she burst." (2003: 97).

Kate Delafield can, thus, be understood as a transgressive figure in her double identity as a lesbian and a cop - which facilitates intrusion both into the traditionally opposite worlds of the heterosexual power structures and the gay society – and in the way in which she upholds patriarchal order while, paradoxically forcing "the law to contradict its founding prejudices and work in favour of women, lesbians and gay men, even when it doesn't want to." (2001: 189)

As a conclusion, it should be said that the male and female gay detectives are necessarily transgressive in crime fiction because the action of crossing over the boundary of heterosexual behaviour disrupts the patriarchal values traditionally reinforced in the genre. However, the transgression can be complicated by other factors, and often undermined by the corroboration of other patriarchal values - as in the case of Hansen's novels – or by rendering the lesbian detective invisible, as with Forrest's Kate Delafield.

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