Killing a Phantom—or Resurrecting Her? Reclaiming the Femme Fatale in Contemporary U.S. and UK Noir Fiction

Suzanne A. Solomon

Abstract. The femme fatale's development in contemporary U.S. and UK noir fiction differs from hard-boiled fiction's female investigator, who embodies a range of intersectional identities. This article posits that institutional inequities in U.S./UK publishing and a focus on a white, female, and middle-class readership have enabled a postfeminist recuperation of the femme fatale.

The femme fatale figure has survived the classic age of noir to populate post-millennial Anglo-American noir fiction penned by women. Despite the changes wrought by the successive waves[1] (or eras) of feminism that put women on a more equal footing with men in the workplace, society and the bedroom, the trope of the deadly, conniving female who uses her sexual allure to ensnare and betray her (usually, but not always) male antagonists shows no signs of succumbing to feminism's remedial influence. The figure achieved iconic status in popular culture as the acquisitive, sexually voracious, deadly vamp of mid–twentieth-century American noir and hard-boiled novels and the U.S. films based on them, such as James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (book, 1934; films 1946, 1981) and *Double Indemnity* (book, 1943; film 1944). A common interpretation of the femme fatale as an

Suzanne A. Solomon *obtained her PhD in creative-critical writing at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in 2023. She is a humanities visiting research fellow in literature, drama and creative writing at UEA. She was awarded the American Library Scholarship in 2020–21 and 2021–22 to support work on her thesis, an intersectional feminist re-examination of the femme fatale figure in noir fiction and a novel,* The Confidence*. Her short stories have been published in the anthologies* Cutting Edge: New Stories of Mystery and Crime by Women Writers, New Jersey Noir, Jewish Noir*, and other collections and crime fiction magazines.*

CLUES • A Journal of Detection / Volume 43, Number 1 / Spring 2025 / pp. 73–86 /
ISSN 0742-4248 / eISBN 978-1-4766-5780-6 / © 2025 McFarland & Company, Inc.

emasculating female is explained by her appearance in the explosion of noir films during and after World War II, where she infringes upon the traditional roles and prerogatives of men at a time when they were returning from the battlefield, only to find themselves displaced by women on the home front (Grossman 2).

The tail end of the postwar noir period, the late sixties to early seventies (Haut 6), roughly coincided with the ferment of the second wave of feminism. During this period, and beyond, the role of the fictional private detective or investigator figure expanded to include women with a diverse range of identities in novels by writers like Sara Paretsky, Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, Eleanor Taylor Bland, and Val McDermid (Knight, chap.7). With the advent of third-wave feminism in the 1990s, women writing crime fiction set and published in the United States and the United Kingdom were updating many of the elements of classic noir while making selective use of the canonical femme-fatale trope (Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* 264). Yet, despite the appearance of dynamic femme fatale protagonists with intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, and social class in noir novels by writers like Sarah Schulman, Vicki Hendricks, and Jules Grant, discussed later, the literary femme fatale would not, for the most part, continue with this trend. Rather, the woman-authored noir novel, in grappling with the cultural backlash of postfeminism,[2] took a different turn for its female leads in embodying a white, middle-class, and "girlish" heteronormativity in the contemporary femme fatale. The following discussion theorizes the cause for the figure's regression in twenty-first-century noir fiction set and published in the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly in the relatively recent (dating from the mid-aughts–2010s) subgenre of domestic noir. This subgenre, with precursors in the suspense novels of writers like Patricia Highsmith, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Vera Caspary (Peters; Ciocia), has been defined as crime fiction that "focuses on the psychology of the characters" and "centers on the lived experience of women whose identity is tied to the private sphere and its unique anxieties" (Waters and Worthington 209; Burke and Clarke 5). Using reports based on surveys tracking diversity in publishing, this essay posits that the U.S./UK industry's[3] focus on a predominantly white, middle-class female readership of crime fiction has resulted in a "generic contract" (Walton and Jones 87), allowing conservative postfeminist institutional structures to recuperate the figure through a market-mediated rejection of intersectional feminism. It suggests, however, that such a contract can be renegotiated by readers, writers, and publishers of noir fiction, setting up the potential for a literary femme fatale who, in her full range of identities, has the power to disrupt and perhaps even remake the genre.

The noir form inspires fierce fandom, and it seems that for every aficionado, author, and noir scholar, there is a different definition. A good guide can be found in Joyce Carol Oates's description: "*Noir* is the consequence of an individual's expectations, hopes, or intentions confronted by the betrayal of another, often an intimate. *Noir* is usually—though not inevitably—sexual betrayal: death is a secondary matter, set beside the terrible betrayal of trust" (14). This essay follows Lee Horsley and others in not limiting noir fiction to a historical time frame or an exclusively American form, although it is typically held that it originated in the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century (Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* 6). Noir in its literary form is often conflated with the hard-boiled school of crime stories that emerged in 1922 in *Black Mask* magazine. It is useful to distinguish the two using Raymond Chandler's famous formulation. Unlike Chandler's characterization of the hard-boiled hero, the noir protagonist is likely to be both "tarnished" and "afraid" (R. Chandler 24).[4] The noir novel places the reader in the complicitous position of identifying with characters who are at best morally ambiguous and who are often outright criminals (Hilfer 2–3). This situates

the femme fatale as an ideal noir protagonist. The following text will look at the trope's evolution from its early objectified iteration in classic noir to a subjective point-of-view character during feminism's third wave, its postfeminist recuperation in domestic noir aided by the publishing industry's generic contract, and the potential to reclaim the femme fatale in contemporary noir fiction as an active agent of progressive and feminist social change.

The Femme Fatale in Classic Noir

The canonical femme fatale has been defined as "a mysterious, alluring, enigmatic female character in stories, who poses a threat to the male protagonist, using her erotic powers to entrap and lure him to his downfall" (Kuhn and Westwell 158). A prime example is the character of Cora in James M. Cain's noir classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, in which a drifter and the seductive wife of the proprietor of a roadside café/gas station plot her husband's murder, with tragic consequences for all parties. This version of the femme fatale is typically not a point-of-view character, and therefore her state of mind is obscured from the reader. There are female-authored exceptions in the classic noir period that illustrate the potential for the figure's development, such as Vera Caspary's 1943 novel *Laura*, a whodunnit in which the identity of the victim is as much in question as that of her murderer. Caspary uses point of view as well as plot to progressively reframe the titular femme fatale figure and fragment the male gaze, inviting readers to reevaluate their judgment of the character and the trope. Similarly, in Margaret Millar's *Vanish in an Instant* (1952), none of the candidates for the femme fatale/suspect in the stabbing murder of a married gadabout neatly fit the mold, and Millar exploits our expectations by supplying the type of woman a reader/investigator might presume to be guilty. Both novels contain elements that fit within the parameters of domestic noir. In *Laura*, the role of the newly empowered career woman collides with the patriarchal norms of mid–twentieth-century America. In *Vanish in an Instant,* a pampered rich girl, a housewife, and a working woman each display aspects of the femme fatale, with the actual murderer—a double-crossing, multi-tasking, beleaguered, and more complex deadly woman—offering a foretaste of things to come: the femme fatale who has aged out of the male gaze. "*You're showing your age, Emmy*, he said. *You'd better start dyeing your hair*. Those were the last words he ever spoke" (Millar 201; emphasis in original). Through the deployment of such literary devices as plot, perspective, and ironic narrative commentary about noir's generic tropes, these authors offer variations on the femme fatale figure, adding agency and self-awareness, if not full subjectivity.

The classic femme fatale is not simply a literary or cinematic figure, but has historical antecedents and global counterparts, both as a cultural image and as an archetype (Jankowiak and Ramsey). She is the poisonous spider woman, the lethal temptress of myth, folklore, and religion—Medusa whose gaze turns men to stone. This cultural crossover is significant because of the potential of the trope to reinforce reality, and vice versa, bolstering damaging social stereotypes and stoking fear and prejudice about female sexuality (Simkin 10). Consequently, the figure tends to recur during periods of social change: the femme fatale as New Woman, as suffragette, as working woman in the sex-integrated workplace—the usurping, insatiable, emasculating female (Grossman, chap.4). There is an influential history of feminist film scholarship analyzing the femme fatale, often through a historical or psychoanalytical framework (Kaplan; Doane). In that guise, she is typically associated with

death—that of her male victims and, often, her own. Her lethal sexuality is seen as disruptive and demasculinizing, necessitating the "devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of film noir)" (Mulvey 13). Laura Mulvey's film theory concept is often used (across mediums) to analyze the objectification of the femme fatale figure, by which the "determining" male gaze directs the viewer, splitting the look "between active/male and passive/female" (11). In classic noir, the femme fatale is cast as an antagonist, but her neutralization—usually with her death—reinstates male supremacy. Horsley suggests that in literary noir, the femme fatale is "less likely to be repressed, killed or otherwise punished for her strength and transgression" (*The Noir Thriller* 130–31). Despite subtle differences in the figure's treatment in film and fiction, in many ways the trope hearkens back to the American progenitor of the detective story Edgar Allan Poe's "beautiful" but dead white, heteronormative, cisgender female (Poe 122). These two images, the femme fatale and the attractive female corpse, are closely related and remain a preoccupation of contemporary crime fiction. Yet the femme fatale's very liminality, her shapeshifting ability to cross the boundary between literature and culture, also seems to position her to disrupt the genre's patriarchal bias in an era when the male gaze is said to no longer be determinative (Miller 104).

The Emergence of the Third-Wave Femme Fatale

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of femme fatale protagonists who are point-of-view characters in noir novels like *After Delores* by Sarah Schulman (Dutton, 1988), *In the Cut* by Susanna Moore (Knopf, 1995), and *Miami Purity* by Vicki Hendricks (Pantheon, 1995). These transgressive femmes fatales are in control of their own narratives. They are flawed, risk-taking, and aggressively sexual mature women with a drive more typically associated with the male protagonists of classic noir yet not constrained by their normative sexuality. In Moore's *In the Cut*, Frannie Thorstin, a creative writing teacher and collector of street slang in crime-ridden 1990s New York City, witnesses a sex act that precedes a woman's murder and plunges into an affair with the detective investigating the crime, while toying with the affections—and ego—of one of her students. She is only doing what many a male noir protagonist has done before her, risking her skin in a dangerous city and satisfying her sexual urges while crossing a few ethical lines. For this transgression, she will be dealt the fate of a femme fatale: judged and punished, chillingly narrating her own murder. Moore refuses to allow her flawed and sexually bold female protagonist to be rescued or reformed, indicting, rather than valorizing, the sexist and narcissistic male detective who fails to stop—worse, who abets—his own partner, a serial killer. In *After Delores*, the unnamed protagonist, a coffee-shop waitress, avenges the murder of a young lesbian, sleeping her way through a swath of female suspects while processing her heartbreak over being dumped by the eponymous Delores (Schulman, *After Delores*). Schulman reappropriates the tropes of classic noir—the faithless femme fatale, the morally ambiguous protagonist, the betrayal of trust—to critique the damaging assumptions of heteronormativity that contributed to the young woman's death.

In *Miami Purity*, Hendricks offers perhaps the most deliberate ironizing of the femme fatale figure in her send-up of Cain's *Postman*, a tale of doomed and amoral lovers that, as a foundational text in the noir canon, helped to create the template for the fatal woman. In

Hendricks's novel, Sherri Parlay, an erotic dancer trying to go straight after killing her abusive boyfriend, becomes obsessed with the scheming son of the titular dry-cleaning business owner who hires her, expediting the woman's death after a drunken fall to wrest her lover from his mother's incestuous clutches, then murdering him when he double-crosses her with another woman (Hendricks). Hendricks uses the trope to illustrate, and then subvert, the notion of the femme fatale by making Sherri the protagonist and point-of-view character, driving the narrative and her own sexuality: "We stripped down and did it right there, pounded it out fast. Right next to his mother's dangling head. My foot touched her hair while I rode him" (83). But she also employs noir conventions to frame Sherri's restricted social mobility as a working-class woman with no advanced education and few opportunities, whose only prior employment was "dancing and bar jobs" and sex work, as Sherri implies when she incompletely fills out a job application with "gaps in between where I couldn't recall or couldn't put down a name for what I was doing" (Hendricks 7). Hendricks characterizes her femme fatale as a woman whose options have been limited to trading her body for wages, who is driven to kill in self-defense against domestic violence, and who, as a woman with an aggressive sex drive that is expected of men (as seen in the classic noir male protagonist's reaction to the traditional femme fatale) is viewed by patriarchal culture as unnatural and abnormal. The trajectory of a noir protagonist is frequently dictated by social strictures that they experience as fate, and Sherri's future will be predicted by the misspelled fortune cookie she shares with her lover before it all goes wrong: "The best profit [prophet] of the future is the past" (Hendricks 103).

Rather than being seen as a critical departure for feminist noir, however, on publication, these books elicited a flurry of pearl-clutching (albeit some praise), only to be pigeonholed as trashy true-crime confessional (Polito's take on *Miami Purity*), lesbian lit (Schulman, Introduction, on *After Delores*), or titillating women's fiction with a masochistic bent (Kakutani's review of *In the Cut*).[5] Thus, with a few exceptions, this direction for the femme fatale would not be explored in noir fiction; rather, with the new millennium and the rise of postfeminism, there was a regression of the figure that overlaps with the appearance of the subgenre known as domestic noir. Commentators on the subgenre observe that "domestic noir takes the enclosed setting to claustrophobic extremes," but "while female characters may spend much time in the house, they are not at home there" (Waters and Worthington 210). Others point out that rather than fading into the wallpaper, domestic noir's female protagonists have seized agency in that last bastion of patriarchal control: the home (Avanzas Álvarez 181–82).[6]

In 1931, Virginia Woolf described her struggle as a woman writer "to do battle with a certain phantom" (Woolf 243): the Angel in the House, the Victorian archetype personifying the virtues of the domestic goddess devoted to home, hearth, and family. Woolf added that, once having dispatched this specter, she ran up against another, what she called "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body," by which she meant exposing herself in print as a carnal being. While she did not concede defeat, Woolf acknowledged that "it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain" (245). And, as author and critic Claire Hynes writes in her response to Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own," the particular form of phantom will differ for writers of different identities than Woolf, who was a "privileged white British woman supported by cooks, cleaners and housekeepers her entire life" (5). This second-guessing about how much carnality a woman is entitled to experience, and what type of woman is permitted to express it, is encapsulated in the figure of the femme fatale, whose sexuality is both fetishized and

regulated—perhaps even on an unconscious level—in her depiction in contemporary U.S. and UK noir fiction.

The Postfeminist Femme Fatale and Domestic Noir

Crime fiction scholars have noted the evolution of female protagonists in women-authored noir, with the shift to point-of-view character and a more complex characterization that does not rely on the angel/whore binary (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 251–52; Plain 104). There are examples of this turn in domestic noir by, for instance, Megan Abbott and Gillian Flynn (Redhead). However, the "girls" (Abbott 283) of much contemporary noir, while sexually mature, often present as neurotic, self-destructive, and on a permanent cusp between adolescence and adulthood. This version of the femme fatale recalls media portrayals of the postfeminist woman, who, gender studies scholar Sarah Projansky has observed, is "quintessentially adolescent, no matter what her age." Projansky is referring to the way that "girlness—particularly adolescent girlness—epitomizes postfeminism" (45). This idea is related to the pairing of the concept of "girl power" with a "sexualized femininity" as a marketing tool that was quickly taken up by media and popular culture outlets in the 1990s and the aughts (Munford 266–69). As Angela McRobbie points out, this highly marketable, commodified version of feminism—some call it "pop feminism" (Faludi n.p.)—has persisted into the 2010s and beyond, adapting itself to the age of #MeToo (McRobbie 42–43). While there has been some debate about the definition of the term, in its popularly understood sense (and as employed here), postfeminism can be described as a cultural phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s, following the second wave of feminism, and that reflects a view that the aims of the movement "have already been achieved" and it is therefore "no longer necessary" (Włodarczyk 3, 6).

The postfeminist woman has primarily been depicted in such outlets as youthful, white, heterosexual, and middle-class, situated in the global West, although recent criticism questions the presumption that women belonging to this demographic are "the privileged—or indeed the sole—subjects of postfeminist discourse" (Gill 612). In looking at how a postfeminist sensibility has manifested in the femme fatale, film critic Katherine Farrimond points to the emergence in 1990s American cinema of the "conventionally attractive, white, Western" teenage incarnation of the figure, calling this phenomenon the "girling of the femme fatale" (59–60, 61). Farrimond observes that "the traction that the *idea* of the femme fatale has gained in recent years suggests that the figure has become a compelling myth for critics, audiences and media producers alike," attributing the draw in part to postfeminism (8; emphasis in original). This deadly combination of can-do girl power coupled with a weaponized regressive female sexuality (regressive because it is defined in relation to a patriarchal ideal [hooks 18]) has carried over to the pages of noir fiction. Although some critics persuasively argue that women writers of noir have employed this iteration of the trope to critique postfeminism (Redhead 130–31), the question remains: why does the femme fatale persist in this highly normative guise when feminism is said to have freed her from the male gaze? This essay contends that despite its long engagement with socially progressive ideas, contemporary noir by U.S. and UK women is still shaped by the patriarchal institutions, with their culturally dominant biases, that control the dissemination of women's stories, as well as the adjudication of the crimes upon which they are based.[7]

Recent critical takes on the domestic noir protagonist as femme fatale underline the subgenre's preoccupation with "white, middle-class modes of femininity" (Couch 32). This suggests that the girling of the femme fatale mirrors the narrative of a postfeminist sensibility. While this sensibility may register an awareness of social inequities, the proffered solution recommends an approach that is, as Rosalind Gill observes, "capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy-friendly," emphasizing personal solutions to systemic problems (618). The domestic noir novels that are predominant in U.S. and UK markets tend to import the solutions of hard-boiled fiction in restoring order by going after individual bad actors rather than the frameworks that ensure their continued domination (Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 269). As Leigh Redhead observes, while "domestic noir explores dark themes [such as] crime within romantic relationships and the family home ... most tend to end optimistically, with order restored: wayward husband punished; abuser exposed and defeated; lost memory restored; alcoholism overcome" (Redhead 116). Its female protagonists vanquish the threat to family and home while failing to address the multiple systemic biases that are the concerns of intersectional feminism.

Publishing's Generic Contract and the Femme Fatale

The systemic bias[8] influencing the U.S./UK publishing industry's view of its target markets may have helped to shape this postfeminist iteration of the femme fatale. Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones theorize that through their buying practices, readers of crime fiction can renegotiate what the authors call the "generic contract" between readers, writers, and publishers (87). They contend that this dynamic has contributed to the market-driven feminist reappropriation of a classically male-dominated genre, hard-boiled fiction, with a wealth of diverse female investigator protagonists. So, who are these readers? By 1999, when Walton and Jones published their study, it was estimated that women composed more than half of readers of mystery fiction in the U.S. market (Smith 172). Two decades later, in a 2020 report on the role of diversity in UK publishing, Saha Anamik and Sandra van Lente documented how the industry caters to a "core reader" of "white, middle-class older" women, particularly in the crime and thriller market (Anamik and van Lente 9). A 2022 report by PEN America reinforces the finding of an industry "belief that the ideal reader—the one the author is addressing—is always white, even for an author of color" (*Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing* 41). It's important to note that market research on buyers and readers of books can be difficult to source because of its proprietary nature; however, such data, the PEN America report observes, is "critical to understanding the lasting biases in the industry" (*Reading Between the Lines* 63). American publisher Lee and Low Books, which in 2015 and 2019 conducted an influential survey to measure diversity in the industry, updated its findings in 2023 to conclude that, although there was a "noticeable" improvement in inclusivity of underrepresented groups, the survey results still reflected a majority of "straight, nondisabled, White women" in the workforce (n.p.).[9] Another recent study, carried out in the United Kingdom in 2024, found that young adults, defined as those between the ages of 16 and 34, "don't feel represented in reading material" and have difficulty finding "books featuring characters with experiences similar to their own" (The Reading Agency). A 2023 survey of fiction published by four of the Big Five publishers—Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan—captures the industry's

retrenchment after the high-profile hires of Black editors in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder by a white cop in 2020. While the report found that commensurate gains had been made in publishing diverse writers, with "nonwhite writers of fiction more than doubl[ing] their share of published works in five years," it also identified what may be the start of a cyclical trend of reversing that progress with the dismissals of many of those recent hires (Sinykin and So n.p.).

Walton and Jones single out reader identification with the protagonist as a powerful element in the generic contract. Roberta Garrett has observed that the "everywomen" protagonists of domestic noir novels tend to be "white, middle-class and educated" (Garrett 7; see also Beyer 155–56). Although not all these protagonists are femme fatale figures, the majority of femmes fatales in the U.S./UK novels analyzed in a 2018 critical study of the subgenre are cast in this postfeminist mold, whereas discussions of other manifestations of the figure in an intersectional context are primarily focused on European crime fiction in translation (Joyce and Sutton). An article on the website *Crime Reads* links the popularity of domestic noir with its readers' desire for "relatability" (Still). As one reader and writer put it: "Domestic thrillers let you in to the hidden lives of your neighbors, the rich people in the big house on the corner, that doctor everyone loves so much." Another noted: "I'm drawn to suburban settings where people manufacture a façade of happiness but we all know that can't be true, can't be real, as much as we wish it was. It's a uniquely American suburban dream." While these authors may be critiquing the twenty-first century phantom of the postfeminist woman who has it all, an exposé of redlining and the systemic racism that created and perpetuates residential segregation in America's suburbs is not evident.[10] Similar criticisms could be leveled at how persistent barriers of class in the UK limit access to the professional salaries necessary to purchase a house on the suburban commute of the "girl on the train." The relatability such readers crave looks a lot like the predominantly white and middle-class female buyers of crime fiction courted by publishers. In other words, a readership that is negotiating a generic contract that reproduces the postfeminist femme fatale.

It is not this essay's position that publishers, writers, and readers of noir fiction are overtly resistant to expanding the subgenre or the femme fatale trope to a broader representation of identities—of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability, class—that reflect demographic realities. Rather, it appears to be the result of institutional barriers created by systemic biases that pose a disadvantage to the publishing industry itself and do a disservice to readers and writers by reinforcing a myopic and limited view of its market.

There are contemporary noir novels that represent an exception to this trend. One is British writer Jules Grant's 2016 Manchester-set noir (published by independent press Myriad Editions), populated by gangsters and femmes fatales who are often one and the same. In *We Go Around in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire*,[11] Donna Wilson, the leader of the Brontes, a lesbian street gang, risks her life and that of her 10-year-old goddaughter, Aurora, to avenge the murder by a rival male gang member of her second-in-command and unrequited love, Aurora's mother, Carla. Grant vividly depicts the system of institutional patriarchal surveillance set up to monitor the working class, which serves to reinforce class divisions even as it limits social mobility, as when women seeking protection from domestic abuse are themselves infantilized, threatened with loss of their children, under the constant gaze of social care workers, drug-tested, and pressured to "grass" on their abusive partners to "keep the roof" over their heads (Grant 86). As Donna puts it, there's "no place there for a woman whose life is, well, complicated" (Grant 139). For Grant's femmes fatales and others in Manchester's social housing, the answer is a shadow society of criminal gangs that profit

from the sale of drugs and other illegal transactions and interact in shifting relationships of antagonism and alliance, all the while being pursued by police.

If the Brontes' male gang antagonists are eliminated and/or contained by Donna and her sisters in a hard-boiled-inflected violent finale, Grant does offer an alternative vision of society in which the femme fatale figures find solutions to institutional problems through a mutual aid network that replaces the failing and unrepresentative (for people with non-conforming sexual identities and family structures) systems of law and social support. For instance, they work with the rugby team lesbians, "all bugger-me and jolly-hockey-sticks, lawyers, surveyors, all with money to burn and the guilt to go with it" (Grant 139), to create a refuge, or safe house, for domestic violence victims. "That's the thing about the lesbian network, it's like a web no one else gets access to, cuts right across the things that make us different, brings you into contact with people you wouldn't spit on otherwise" (Grant 139–40). Although that model of care does not triumph, with the novel postulating escape from the United Kingdom as a solution rather than reform of the conservative institutions that act to perpetuate class barriers, it is a sprig of hope growing out of the blasted landscape of neoliberalism (Gill 608) and the persistence of heteropatriarchy. Indeed, such "relationality" can promote recognition of our "interdependence" and an "ethics of anti-violence" that, if practiced communally and with an intersectional approach, may work to counteract the self-regulating politics of postfeminism (Butler, cited in McRobbie 70–71). Or as feminist organizer Tooba Syed puts it, generate "radical compassion." In contrast, the path of the postfeminist femme fatale is, as Caroline Reitz writes, that of the "nightmare individualist" for whom "sisterhood is not a solution" (53).

Reclaiming the Femme Fatale in Noir Fiction

Earlier in this essay, it was observed that the noir novel makes the reader complicit with a protagonist who is morally ambiguous or even criminal. This, it was suggested, positions the femme fatale as an ideal noir protagonist while distinguishing her from the canonical hard-boiled investigator (as conceived by Raymond Chandler). The difference in how these tropes operate may provide a clue as to why the femme fatale figure is susceptible to recuperation by a postfeminist sensibility that perceives her as a threat to its self-regulatory operation, in which women act to contain themselves. Even in contemporary form, the female investigator protagonist generally does not function in the hard-boiled narrative as a reformer of conservative patriarchal institutions like the justice system, acting instead on a case-by-case basis. While she may temporarily defeat injustice in the form of an individual villain, or even a syndicate of them, the infrastructure that ensures patriarchy's continued domination remains intact. Even in her most radical incarnation, the investigator doesn't act as a disruptive threat to these hegemonic systems.

The femme fatale's role in noir has always been that of a disrupter in need of containment by patriarchy, and her contemporary postfeminist incarnation effectively serves to reinforce its dominance, even as she unsettles it. A femme fatale who does not comply with postfeminism's self-regulating politics and narrow range of acceptable feminine identities represents a threat to that framework; indeed, it is only through the disruption of the publishing industry's institutional inequities that a third (or fourth)-wave feminist femme fatale can emerge. Even in outliers like *Miami Purity* and *Consumed*, in which intersectional

identities of gender, sexuality, and social class complicate and enrich the femme fatale's function, regulatory structures, as represented by the repressive institutions and social barriers reproduced in the texts, limit the figure's scope. The fact that there are two decades between these books is telling. During that time frame, and up to the present, with conservative forces attempting to reverse prior gains in gender and sexual equality, systemic inequities that have a disproportionate impact on women have only hardened. And such impacts are compounded when we take into account intersections of race, color, class, disability, and age (Crenshaw 1244–45). As publishing's critics have pointed out, however, to disrupt that dynamic in the industry, readers, writers, and producers of literature must act together to dismantle systemic bias and "diversify the audience" (Anamik and van Lente 34). Reader demand for a femme fatale who challenges social hegemonies with an ethics of relationality rather than self-regulation may help to renegotiate the industry's view of its market. A truly radical reappropriation of noir fiction's "disastrous woman"[12] would embrace intersectional feminism and contribute to bringing about structural change, embodying the potential of the figure to disrupt the subgenre and break it out of its white heteropatriarchal past.

Keywords: domestic noir, femme fatale, hard-boiled fiction, intersectionality, postfeminism

Acknowledgments

This essay was adapted from the author's PhD thesis and a talk delivered on 24 June 2023 at the Roman policier et démocratie/Crime Fiction and Democracy Conference in the Bibliothèque des littératures policières in Paris. The author would like to thank conference organizers Andrew Pepper, Dominique Jeannerod, and Benoît Tadié for the invitation to present the talk; audience members for their astute and helpful questions; Caroline Reitz for our productive post-talk exchanges and for the invitation to submit to *Clues*; Nonia Williams and Moé Suzuki for their advice and support; and the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments.

Notes

1. Roughly speaking, the first wave encompasses the suffrage movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; the second wave, the sexual revolution and workplace equality gains of the 1960s and 1970s; and the third wave, from the 1990s to the present, the application of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to reflect how the lived experience of women with different racial, ethnic, and sexual identities, as well as social class, disability, age, and other characteristics, intersects with gender inequality to impede social advancement (Leavy and Harris 21). In general, and when the context supports it, the usage of the terms "women" and "female" is intended to include people identifying as women and/or as female. Similarly, references to "men" and "male" are meant to include people who identify as men and/or as male.

2. For the purposes of this discussion, third-wave feminism, whose adherents are seen as generally adopting the goals of the second wave, while rejecting its reliance on universalism and gender essentialism, is differentiated from the roughly contemporaneous but theoretically distinguishable cultural trend known as postfeminism, which emphasizes consumption and personal choice in the wake of a movement that is considered to have largely achieved its aims (Włodarczyk 6–9). This distinction is further developed in the context of the postfeminist femme fatale figure discussed later on.

3. While the femme fatale features in folklore and literature around the world, this inquiry is limited to noir novels written by women in English, published and set in the United States and the United Kingdom, taking the position that a feminist analysis of the femme fatale must factor in the specific historical, social, and political contexts that inform her development, to avoid the trap of essentializing the figure (Kenley 107).

4. "But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid."

5. It is notable that two of these groundbreaking books with transgressive femme fatale-type protagonists, *In the Cut* and *After Delores*, subsequently had twenty-fifth-anniversary editions published, and *Miami Purity* was reissued by an independent press with an afterword by the crime writer and scholar Megan Abbott, indicating that the publishers in these cases recognized the figure's marketability.

6. The reference is to heteronormative households, a typical focus of domestic noir (Beyer 198).

7. Disparate treatment of women under the law, on the basis of gender alone or in combination with other categories like race, has a long history that has only relatively recently begun to be remedied (Crenshaw 1241).

8. Institutional or systemic bias is defined as "a tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued" (D. Chandler and Munday 213).

9. According to the Lee and Low report, "almost two hundred companies, of all sizes, from across North America, participated, including 11 review journals, 37 university presses, 62 literary agencies, and 81 trade publishers (including the Big 5)" (n.p.). The PEN America report, which included interviewees from independent publishers as well as the Big Five U.S. publishers—Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House (PRH), and Simon & Schuster—notes that they "collectively control over 80 percent of the so-called trade publishing market, encompassing books sold to a general audience" (*Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing* 3). The Goldsmiths' report, which looked at trade fiction in the United Kingdom, covered respondents from large and small publishing houses, including "all the major publishing houses," as well as literary agencies and booksellers (Anamik and van Lente 1).

10. In contrast to, for instance, U.S. writer Attica Locke's examination of structural racism and real estate in her PI novels starting with *Black Water Rising*.

11. Subsequent textual references to the novel are abbreviated to "*Consumed*."

12. Literally translated from French, the expression can mean "disastrous woman," although it is usually defined as deadly or fatal woman ("Femme Fatale").

Works Cited

Abbott, Megan E. "Afterword: The Woman Through the Window." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 281-84.

Anamik, Saha, and Sandra van Lente. *Rethinking "Diversity" in Publishing*. Goldsmiths, U of London, 2020, https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf.

Avanzas Álvarez, Elena. "The Subversion of the Male Tradition in Crime Fiction: Liane Moriarty's *Little Lies*." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 181-98. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_10.

Beyer, Charlotte. *Intersectionality and Decolonisation in Contemporary British Crime Fiction*. Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2023. *EBSCOhost*.

Burke, Eva, and Clare Clarke. "Introduction: Domestic Noir." *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2021, pp. 5-11. *EBSCOhost*.

Cain, James M. *Double Indemnity*. 1943. Orion, 2005.

_____. "The Postman Always Rings Twice." 1934. *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 40s*, edited by Robert Polito, Library of America, 1997, pp. 3-95.

Caspary, Vera. "Laura." 1943. *Women Crime Writers: Four Suspense Novels of the 1940s*, edited by Sarah Weinman, Library of America, 2015, pp. 1-186.

Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday. "Institutional Bias." *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 3rd ed., 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198841838.001.0001.

Chandler, Raymond. "The Simple Art of Murder: An Essay." *The Simple Art of Murder*. 1944. Knopf, 1988, pp. 1-26. Kindle ed.
Ciocia, Stefania. "Hollywood and the Trailblazers of Domestic Noir: The Case of Vera Caspary's *Laura* (1943)." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 27-49. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_3.
Couch, Rosie. "'I Am Not the Girl I Used to Be': Remembering the Femme Fatale in *The Girl on the Train*." *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2021, pp. 24-35. *EBSCOhost*.
Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.
Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1991.
Faludi, Susan. "Feminism Made a Faustian Bargain with Celebrity Culture. Now It's Paying the Price." *New York Times*, 20 Jun. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/20/opinion/roe-heard-feminism-backlash.html.
Farrimond, Katherine. *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema*. Routledge, 2018. *ProQuest eBook Central.* https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315617510.
"Femme fatale, *noun* (1)." *Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/femme%20fatale. Accessed 9 Aug. 2024.
Garrett, Roberta. "Home Is Where the Hate Is: Gender, Race, Class and the Domestic Abuse Plotline in Fiction and on Screen." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2023, pp. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2155861.
Gill, Rosalind. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6, 2017, pp. 606-26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003.
Gillis, Stacy, et al., eds. *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230593664.
Grant, Jules. *We Go around in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire*. Myriad, 2016.
Grossman, Julie. *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230274983.
Haut, Woody. *Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War*. Serpent's Tail, 1995.
Hendricks, Vicki. *Miami Purity*. 1995. Winona Woods Books, 2014.
Hilfer, Tony. *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*. U of Texas P, 1990.
hooks, bell. "Writing from the Darkness." *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*, E-book, Henry Holt, 2013.
Horsley, Lee. *The Noir Thriller*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, *ProQuest eBook Central*. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230280755.
_____. *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2005. *ProQuest eBook Central*.
Hynes, Claire. "Room." *Wasafiri*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2020, pp. 4-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2020.1760455.
Jankowiak, William, and Angela Ramsey. "Femme Fatale and Status Fatale: A Cross-Cultural Perspective." *Cross-Cultural Research*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2000, pp. 57-69. https://doi.org/10.1177/106939710003400104.
Joyce, Laura Ellen, and Henry Sutton. *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5.
Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times: She Has an Ear for Slang and an Eye for Trouble." *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 1995, https://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/31/books/books-of-the-times-she-has-an-ear-for-slang-and-an-eye-for-trouble.html.
Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women in Film Noir*. BFI, 1998.
Kenley, Nicole. "Women in World Crime Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction*, edited by Stewart King et al., Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 100-16. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108614344.
Knight, Stephen. *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. *ProQuest eBook Central.* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-02021-5.
Kuhn, Annette, and Guy Westwell. "Femme Fatale." *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2020, pp. 158-59. https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198832096.001.0001.
Leavy, Patricia, and Daniel X. Harris. *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice*. Guilford Publ., 2018. *ProQuest eBook Central.*

Lee and Low Books, et al. *Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2023 Diversity Baseline Survey Results*. 2024, https://blog.leeandlow.com/2024/02/28/2023diversitybaselinesurvey/.
Locke, Attica. "Attica Locke: Why Did My Black Ancestors Never Leave Texas? They Knew Land Is Power." *The Guardian*, 12 Sept. 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/12/murders-in-my-novels-true-crimes-about-land-attica-locke.
McRobbie, Angela. *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*. Polity P, 2020. *EBSCOhost*.
Millar, Margaret. *Vanish in an Instant*. 1952. Pushkin P, 2018. *ProQuest eBook Central*.
Miller, Emma V. "'How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?': Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 89-113. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_6.
Moore, Susanna. *In the Cut*. 1995. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019. E-book.
Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
Munford, Rebecca. "'Wake up and Smell the Lipgloss': Gender, Generation and the (a)Politics of Girl Power." Gillis et al., pp. 266-79. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230593664_20.
Oates, Joyce Carol. "How Blackly Lovely: Noir in New Jersey." *New Jersey Noir*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates, Akashic, 2011, pp. 13-23.
Peters, Fiona. "The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 11-25. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_2.
Plain, Gill. "Gender and Sexuality." *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Janice Allan et al., Routledge, 2020, pp. 102-10. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453342.
Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe Together with His Essay on the Philosophy of Composition*. Introd. and annot. by Margaret Abbot Eaton, Educational Pub. Co., 1906, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn6ihi&view=1up&seq=7.
Polito, Robert. "Taken to the Cleaners." *New York Times*, 30 Jul. 1995, https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/30/books/taken-to-the-cleaners.html.
Projansky, Sarah. "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminist Daughters." *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 40-72. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1210217.
The Reading Agency. *State of the Nation's Adult Reading*. 2024, https://readingagency.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/State-of-the-Nations-Adult-Reading_2024-Overview-Report-1.pdf.
Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing. PEN America, 2022, https://pen.org/report/race-equity-and-book-publishing/.
Redhead, Leigh. "Teenage Kicks: Performance and Postfeminism in Domestic Noir." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 115-35. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_7.
Reitz, Caroline. "Female Anger in Crime Fiction." *Elements in Crime Narratives*, Cambridge UP, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009358699.
Schulman, Sarah. *After Delores*. 1988. 25th anniv. ed., Arsenal Pulp P, 2013. *ProQuest eBook Central*.
_____. Introduction. Schulman, *After Delores*, pp. 3-8.
Simkin, Stevie. *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137313324.
Sinykin, Dan, and Richard Jean So. "Has the DEI Backlash Come for Publishing?" *Atlantic Online*, 19 June 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2024/06/diversity-publishing-backlash-study/678734/.
Smith, Erin A. *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*. Temple UP, 2000. *ProQuest eBook Central*.
Solomon, Suzanne A. "Killing a Phantom: The Rise and Alleged Demise of the Femme Fatale in Noir Fiction and a Novel, 'The Confidence.'" 2023. PhD thesis, U of East Anglia.
Still, Marie. "The Rise of Domestic Noir: A Decade after 'Gone Girl.'" *Crime Reads*, 2023, https://crimereads.com/the-rise-of-domestic-noir-a-decade-after-gone-girl/.
Syed, Tooba. "Panel Talk." *Transnational Anti-Gender Politics and Resistance*, Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/live/AmLiW_tuyy0?si=ZLYY51npKqMg6sz6.
Walton, Priscilla L., and Manina Jones. *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*. U of California P, 1999. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520921467.

Waters, Diane, and Heather Worthington. "Domestic Noir and the US Cozy as Responses to the Threatened Home." Joyce and Sutton, pp. 199-218. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_11.
Włodarczyk, Justyna. *Ungrateful Daughters: Third Wave Feminist Writings*. Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2010. *EBSCOhost*.
Woolf, Virginia. "Professions for Women." *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, edited by Joy S Ritchie and Kate Ronald, U of Pittsburgh P, 2001, pp. 241-46. *JSTOR*.