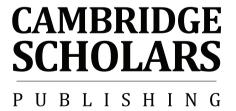# Transgressing Women

Transgressing Women:
Space and The Body
in Contemporary Noir Thrillers

by

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CAMBRIDGE
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In Loving Memory of My Late Parents

Aziz Bin Mohammad
1945-2007

Solehah Binti Abu Bakar
1948-2011

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INTRODUCTION

> Because, tough talk or not, ramming the probe in, pretending to go into it
> from the company angle or however I played it, there was stuff going on
> here I didn't understand, and my stomach was telling me it was no good.
> —James M. Cain, *Jealous Woman*, 1992, pp.36-37

The protagonist in Cain's *Jealous Woman* is blasé about the danger
that he is in, and this world-weary awareness is the translation of his
existential anxiety and angst, which evoke noir's inescapable sense of
determinism. Such an uncontrollable force constitutes a noir credo and this
is articulated by a male noir protagonist's sense of entrapment in the world
of crime that he is driven into, a world that is governed by a bleak,
pessimistic, and delusional vision that inevitably foreshadows his doomed
ending. So important is this force to the conceptualisation of the noir genre
that it is often reified at both structural and iconic levels. At the structural
level, this force is manifested by noir's convoluted narrative style and plot.
Many classical noir narratives, especially in such canonical noir films as
Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*
(1946), are told by using a flashback technique. This technique serves to
create a sense of alienation and at the same time to reveal, in the case of
the latter film, a miasma of double crosses that Swede was involved in. At
the iconic level, both the doomed male protagonists and the duplicitous
femmes fatales form an aesthetic that alludes to the noir genre's
ideological contradictions. While the male protagonist's inescapable
fatality is often the reflection of his own greed and dubious morality, the
annihilation of the femme fatale is rooted in her failure to absorb these
ideological contradictions (as opposed to the good woman's willingness to
assume patriarchal gender roles), which is rather expected as femmes
fatales constitute the embodiment of a male fantasy, serving unconscious
male anxieties; hence, creating a noir sense of ambivalence. The male
protagonist and femme fatale's status as iconic figures in the noir tradition
has been widely discussed, but I am more interested in the portrayal of
other female characters that are constructed as the genre undergoes
continuous and various subversion and expansion, and whose construction
is informed by contemporary theories such as postmodernism and post-
feminism.

   While a considerable amount has been written about a male protagonist and a femme fatale–two iconic figures in the noir tradition–little attention has been given to other female characters, especially the ones that are formed as a result of the genre's development. Even though the traditional femme fatale figure is occasionally referred to throughout my analysis, the main objective is to delineate these 'other female figures' that have also been affected by, and inhabited, the corrupted noir world. To manage this, my analysis, in effect, concentrates on two crucial thematic focuses germane to gender and cultural studies, viz., narrative and space, and the body or self, foregrounding their relevancy and applicability to the theorisation of cinematic and literary noir. The decision to use these thematic focuses is influenced, informed and motivated by my interest in pulling together an eclectic collection of neo-noir texts that may sufficiently encapsulate wider temporal and critical indicators. These temporal and critical indicators are central in contemporary cultural theories such as postmodernism and post-feminism, along with other theorisations of gender and the noir genre, which means that my analysis is drawn from the classical noir examples and will then arrive at the neo-noir sub-genre, and to the latest phenomenon in the genre called 'future noir'. I will argue that the coupling of an interest in the representations of these other women with neo-noir conventions will facilitate the effort to categorise as well as understand the new branch of neo-noir texts written or directed by both male and female authors. With their distinct features the characterisation is important. From my point of view this is long overdue, not so that a new label or name can be attached to it or to show whether or not the texts subvert or challenge the old conventions, but rather so it can be used to discuss and correlate the characters with some contemporary feminist struggles and issues concerning the representation of women in literary and cinematic noir. Eschewing as far as I can the debate on what a 'feminist text' or a text labelled as such is, the overarching and unifying factor of my book is the noir genre itself.

   My book reflects my interest in the representation of the other female characters from noir to neo-noir texts in both film and literature. I should perhaps emphasise here that my book is not an attempt to argue whether the noir thriller is a genre, a movement, or a cycle. I find myself agreeing with more contemporary critics (like James Naremore) who find this argument 'tiresome', and that we should move on. The noir thriller has moved beyond the obstacle or impasse of finding its definition: one (including the non-academician) can now easily distinguish whether a text is a noir text or not, especially due to its extensive turn into a marketing label that attracts its own aficionados. However, what is more relevant for

me is to delineate the ideological and conventional shifts from noir to neo-noir, and this can be done by looking at the varied representation of female characters in the development of the noir genre itself. The central thread linking the chapters is the attempt to explore noir conventions beyond their generic boundary, venturing into the other genres, exploring texts created by a process of generic fertilisation. This is evident both in the eclecticism of the texts selected and the themes explored.

In brief, I consider classical noir a genre; this means neo-noir and future noir are its natural extensions or sub-genres, that is, a creative variation and subversion of the classical noir period. I find myself comfortable with the definition of a genre employed by Martin Rubin, who argues that '[a] genre is a set of conventions and shared characteristics that have historically evolved into a distinct, widely recognized type of composition within an art form.'[1] To a certain extent, even though treating noir as a genre often demonstrates a dependency on a set of formulaic features, the chief difference lies, as Paul Cobley opines, in the idea that '[w]hile formula is demonstrable, then, its reception is less easy to define. Genre, in contrast to formula, is concerned precisely with the issue of how audiences receive narrative conventions'.[2] The noir genre, both cinematically and literally, is always about the audience's reaction (as demonstrated by, among others, its complicated narrative that creates a sense of complicity in the audience), especially because of its brooding mood and atmosphere, cynicism, and critical edge. This very recognizably bleak and pessimistic vision first motivated many French critics to name the post-war American 'hard-boiled' stories they found in early 1945 the 'serie noire or "dark series"'.[3] Therefore, when a batch of American crime films that was based on the series appears, maintaining its grim portrayal of American criminal underworld and society in general, the term 'film noir' was coined. Due to the common noir narrative at that time that deals with the failure of the returning war veterans to adapt to the changing society, which is rooted in the radical change in gender assignments due to economic changes and demands, critics of the noir genre were quick to label film noir misogynistic. The feelings of alienation and isolation experienced by these war veterans are translated into noir existential despair and generalised angst; and the source of blame seems to coalesce most insistently around the financially independent and sexually charged women.

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[1] *Thrillers*, 1999, p.3

[2] *Narrative*, 2001, p.213

[3] R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 1994, pp.7-8

Historically, this deep-seated fear of women's freedom in the noir tradition is mutated into a blame on their economic, moral, and sexual independence, as embodied in the femme fatale figure–a woman who, sometimes not through her fault, represents a threat to the male protagonist's virility. It quickly became clear to the critics of the genre that the femme fatale is portrayed as insubordinate by the style, atmosphere, and vision of a noir text, marking the genre's increasing interest in annihilating her subjectivity. Her presence in the narrative represents the destabilisation of masculinity, which adds to 'the experience of alienation, fragmentation and inconsistency that characterise both film noir and neo-noir'.[4] As 'the entire history of American genre film could be traced on the bruised and besieged white male body',[5] her annihilation, therefore, is ideologically driven. Many studies have been carried out on the femme fatale figures in film noir. Little, however, has focused on the representation of the female characters in both literary and cinematic noir. One of the reasons for this, as Lee Horsley has argued, is that 'the femme fatale is a stereotype more prevalent in *film noir* [original italic] than literary noir'.[6] Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre and Masculinity,* for instance, concentrates on the 'classical' Hollywood cinema, paying little attention to the female characters available during that period. E. Ann Kaplan in the new edition of *Women in Film Noir* addresses the lack of 'feminist perspectives on film noir, or perspectives dealing with women at all'.[7] Kaplan's observation also illuminates the fact that even less research has been carried out that combines the study of the literary and cinematic female noir figures. This book aims to redress the balance by combining the study of the representation of the female characters in both literary and cinematic noir and neo-noir, paying particular attention to how noir and neo-noir conventions can be used to give meanings to their characterisations.

In addition to combining the study of cinematic with literary noir, this study also treats and explores the neo-noir sub-genre outside of its American context. This treatment is crucial as part of my evidence that the neo-noir sub-genre, with the influence of postmodernist culture, has expanded beyond the temporal and spatial references of the post-World War II American society. It seems natural for the noir genre's socio-political critics of society to go through some creative variations, namely neo-noir and future noir sub-genres, while maintaining the meta-discourse

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[4] 'E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', *Women in Film Noir*, 2000, p.1

[5] Manohla Dargis, 'Pulp Instincts', in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.120

[6] *The Noir Thriller*, 2000, p.10

[7] 2000, p.5

of its critical edginess and doomed vision. These sub-genres, often generated by noir's blatant honesty and persistent critical enquiry into the dark side of human nature, are in themselves a site for contested cultural ideology. Woody Haut in *Neon Noir*, for example, asserts that:

> Though neon noir fiction reflects the warp and woof of society, it rarely does so to the point of negating the inner workings of the genre or of exposing itself to political categorisation. While most contemporary noirists maintain a grip on the moral centre of their fictional world, others demonstrate a more flexible relationship. Responding to a crime-ridden, economically extreme, and morally uncertain culture, the latter carve out narratives that manoeuvre between fiction and replication, self-reference and artifice.[8]

Haut's view alludes to neo-noir's affinity with a postmodern take on the genre, highlighting the noir genre's adaptability and malleability. The sustainability of the constitution of the noir genre is evident in its sub-genres, and 'what links the 40s and 90s', according to E. Ann Kaplan, 'is the political and social sense of something amiss in American culture–a sense of drift, of pointlessness, political helplessness, and of inaccessible and hidden power creating generalised angst'.[9] Although Haut and Kaplan are talking about noir's critical edge that relies on a maelstrom of political and social events specifically in America, the genre has evolved beyond its geo-political boundaries with noir texts mushrooming outside the American context. The expansion beyond the American context is also possible because of the nature of the neo-noir text itself, which is defined based on temporal rather than spatial specifications. Richard Martin, for instance, sees this transformation and link as a natural part of generic progression:

> Where seventies neo-noir which in itself constituted an investigation and critique of the noir form–was characterised by a thematic revival of the latter-day films noirs of the fifties, and eighties neo-noir tended towards a visual pastiche of what was perceived as a classical noir style, nineties neo-noir offers an eclectic mix of all that has gone before, a self-consciously ironic palimpsest informed by knowledge of the history of the film noir genre from its inception in the forties to its revival in the sixties and continuing evolution through the seventies and eighties.[10]

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[8] 1999, pp.11-12
[9] 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.1
[10] *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 1997, p.117

Martin's observation highlights neo-noir's concern with style, mood, and theme. These are important in characterising neo-noir texts, indicating that neo-noir has become a signal of the postmodern moment–a moment beyond generic boundaries. This link has enabled my analysis to include some British noir texts, for example Nicholas Blincoe's *Acid Casuals* and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*.

The first section of this book concentrates on the central issue surrounding a feminist view of space, demonstrating how noir's tendency to destabilize the dichotomy of privacy and publicity can have progressive effects on the female characters. The general assumption regarding women's association with private space (hence their subordination in patriarchy) is explored by looking at two types of narratives, viz., serial killer narratives and revenge narratives. Chapter one explores the serial killer narratives in relation to female characters and noir conventions by focusing on the dynamics of the discourse of space with gender assignment. By using Donald W. Ball's sociological terms, privacy is defined as 'one's ability to engage in activities without being observed by non-involved others', and publicity as 'the observability of these activities by others not directly involved'.[11] I also use the term space and place interchangeably, arguing that they share the same point of confluence in the way a character finds meanings in his or her identity. To facilitate my analysis, I found the definition given by feminist geographers, Karen Lury and Doreen Massey, to be useful in understanding the meaning of space. Space in the serial killer narratives, I discovered, means three varying types of proximity: one, between the serial killer and the victim; two, the serial killer and the detective; three, the serial killer and society. In this chapter, I return to the question of how liberating these female characters are especially when they are studied in relation to the serial killer narratives and noir or neo-noir conventions. As serial killing is seen as a way of oppressing women, this chapter also tries to show how noir conventions help to subvert and appropriate the private/public paradigm, and to illustrate how this affects the construction of the neo-noir female characters. Lastly, by juxtaposing the female characters in literary noir with its cinematic counterpart, I hope to illustrate that the literary noir woman is usually and largely more progressive than her cinematic counterpart.

Chapter two explores revenge narratives by tracing the link between a male avenging figure in the noir tradition and a femme fatale in the urban milieu that they inhabit. Building upon examples taken from male

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[11] 'Privacy, Publicity, Deviance and Control', *Pacific Social Review*, 1975, p.260

avenging figures in the classical noir tradition, I would like to show that, unlike typical revenge narratives, noir revenge narratives are defined by the avenger's existential despair. Two principal questions of this chapter are: one, how do noir's masculine traits affect the representation of these female avengers?; two, what are the similarities and differences between female avengers in noir and neo-noir texts? To answer these questions, I begin by looking at the failure of community and the failure of agency to understand the motivations behind the female avenger's actions. This chapter also revisits the debate surrounding the idea of gaze as masculine; my focus, however, is on the question of how the process of centering and recentering a female protagonist within the narrative–as theorised by Mary Ann Doanne–alludes both to the noir genre's tendency to disorient the audience and to the ways of foregrounding the theme of alienation and isolation. This chapter also looks at how the appropriation of agency is formed as a result of the postmodern take on female subjectivity, marking her status as a hybrid.

The second section of this book focuses on the representation of the 'female' body/self in neo-noir texts. Chapter three sets out to study and chart some of the trangressive female characters with regard to the representation of their self/body in neo-noir texts. The emphasis on the postmodernist dissolution of modernist subjectivity is central to my analysis in this chapter, producing one of the fundamental questions of this chapter: Is gender difference relevant now? My major interest in analysing the effects of generic mutations on the representation of these women in neo-noir texts leads me to explore how the traditional notion of the feminine, as the antithesis of the masculine, represents lack or the irrationally absent body in this sub-genre, is challenged. It also revisits the debate surrounding the association of woman/feminine with nature, that is, an association that consigns her to a victim role. I suggest the employment of a postmodernist critical perspective to show how its 'expression of ontological rejection' of a unified self, as suggested by Scott McCracken, can facilitate our understanding of the hybrid status of these female characters. My other concern in this chapter is to investigate how a noir female character 'metamorphoses' into a neo-noir subject as the genre is hybridised. Concomitantly, in this chapter, I am also interested in looking at the representation of the 'female' transgressors and their link with the female self as expressed within the neo-noir context. I propose that the female self and desire in neo-noir texts can be analysed especially in association with its spatial clues, which can be traced in her body. My interest is in looking at neo-noir texts that deal with desire as the female characters' main impulse, and in showing how these characters' status as

transgressors can result in the deconstruction and destabilisation of the gender binary.

This chapter is further divided into the following sections. The first section looks at the notions of desire and transgression. I begin by proposing that neo-noir texts' status as a postmodernist cultural production, which defies any form of homogeny, enables these hybrid female characters to find their own voice. In order to understand the ideological impulse of the Western binary system that consigns women to the status of the object of male desire, I invoke psychoanalysis to provide the background for the formation of this structure of desire in noir texts. This brings me to the theorisations of identification and gaze, which the noir genre is known to destabilise. The second section of this chapter looks at Judith Butler's theory of performativity, arguing that the fluidity of gender definition in postmodernist texts facilitates the formation of a hybrid subject. I argue that the theorisation of gender as performative signals a boundary crossing by the female characters through their performance of gender roles, which then gives them liberatory voices.

Chapter four takes this book a step further from the performative gender roles discussed in chapter three by looking at the representation of the female body in the future noir sub-genre, focusing on the interface between human and machine. One of the major enquiries of this chapter is to investigate the effects of human/machine interface on the status of the female characters, demonstrating the way the ontological uncertainty inherent in noir texts can further complicate the binary opposition between human and machine. This I hope will also reveal the varying degrees of interface that can be liberating and influential to these female characters. By applying the concept of generic hybridisation, I would like to show how and why the amalgamation of genres affects the representation of gender and identity, which in turn is crucial in defining a human within postmodern conditions. By doing this, I hope to be able to trace a variety of female characters in the future noir sub-genre, usually in cyberpunk narrative. This chapter asks: what happens when it is the human body itself that betrays or undermines the traditional definition or constitution of a human being?

This chapter continues with the exploration of the terms cyberpunk, cyberspace and a cyborg. I venture into cyberpunk territory to further investigate the dissolution of the humanist subject through the man/machine interface. This section seeks to answer the question: If a cyborg is a hybrid whereby gender differences are dissolved, how do I define a female character? The main objective of this section is to consider the female perspectives on cyberpunk, especially on the cyborg figure in

the context of future noir. I would like to find out how a female cyborg figure can be a liberating symbol for women, a point supported by feminist critics like Donna Haraway. In order to understand the treatment of the post-human female characters in cyberpunk narrative, I look at post-apocalyptic women and the doppelganger narrative. In the post-apocalyptic women section, my major enquiry is related to the theme of primitiveness and how the lack of a straightforward conceptualisation of the man/machine interface produces a different psychoanalytically informed question: what happens to the female characters after the collapse of the Law of the Father? The doppelganger narrative, on the other hand, offers another perspective on cyborg imagery.

I return to the notion of female desire and fatal sexuality in the next section, focusing on the characters who inhabit or embrace virtual reality. This section seeks to establish how the loss of agency and individual autonomy are linked with cyberpunk's use of virtual reality as a metaphor for a female body and desire. This section is further divided into two sub-sections: one, a brief look at the exegesis of virtual reality; two, an analysis of female-authored texts. Its aim is to find out whether or not these female authors have succeeded in reforming, parodying or appropriating the cyberpunk sub-genre in an effort to liberate their female characters from the constraint of patriarchy. Building on Lee Horsley's analysis of the male characters in William Gibson's Neuromancer and Rudy Rucker's *Software*, I ask, how relevant is this analysis to the female characters? The final concluding section of this chapter looks at two texts written and directed by female authors, Pat Cadigan and Kathryn Bigelow, respectively, questioning whether or not their representations of female characters are progressive or regressive.

CHAPTER ONE

SERIAL KILLER NARRATIVES:
THE TROUBLE WITHIN AND WITHOUT

'He never did anything about it till the first Mrs Nirdlinger died. It happened that one of those children was related to that Mrs Nirdlinger, in such fashion that when that child died, Mrs Nirdlinger became executrix for quite a lot of property the child was due to inherit. In fact, as soon as the legal end was cleared up, Mrs Nirdlinger came into the property herself. Get that, Huff. That's the awful part. Just one of those children was mixed up with property.'

'How about the other two?'

"Nothing. Those two children died just to cover the trail up a little. Think of that, Huff. This woman would kill two extra children, just to get the one child that she wanted, and mixed things up so it would look like one of those cases of negligence they sometimes have in those hospitals. I tell you, she's a pathological case.'[1]

Unlike many classical noir novels that feature the iconographic femme fatale, whose seductiveness and sexuality spell personal trouble and existential dilemmas to the doomed noir heroes, James A. Cain's *Double Indemnity* extends her fatality by portraying her as a cold blooded serial killer. In brief, Mrs. Nirdlinger,[2] whose murderous scheme includes framing the male protagonist, an insurance agent Neff, to kill her husband for monetary reasons, is also a serial killer who has brutally killed some innocent children for the same purpose. Money, ostensibly, is her motivation to kill. This account, however, does not divorce her from the psychoanalytic discourse of madness. 'Frequently,' argues Frank Krutnik, 'the woman is ultimately revealed to be a pathological case, her deviance and dissatisfaction set beyond the boundaries of rational explanation,

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[1] James Cain, *Double Indemnity,* in *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain,* 1985, p.317

[2] Mrs. Nirdlinger is Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson's name from her previous marriage. This reference only takes place in the novel and not the film.

recuperated as madness';[3] encapsulating classical noir's connection with psychoanalysis. This madness finds its expression in Lola's suspicion that Phyllis has 'a look in her eyes', and is followed by the death of her mother who was purportedly murdered by Phyllis. In the Oedipal paradigm, Phyllis is a castrated figure who is aptly killed at the end.

The serial killer narrative is not a strange or new phenomenon in the noir tradition, but it usually centres on the idea of women as victims of the crime. American tough gumshoes or egregious vigilantes such as Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer are also bordering on serial killers in their strategies to solve their cases–the victims, however, are mostly women. Lee Horsley views Hammer's 'vigilantism' as leaning 'towards right– rather than left-wing views', which implicitly promotes 'a macho conservatism',[4] foregrounding the symbolic function of his violent action and angry personality. Serial killers function as social commentators who therefore can have either a right-wing or left-wing view. However, they take a step beyond verbal commentary by actually killing their opposition. Jim Thompson explores this narrative in *The Killer Inside Me* with the male left-wing serial killer protagonist, Lou Ford–a deputy sheriff, using the first person narration to foreground his subjectivity. Even though Lou's victims are both males and females, his motivation to kill women is largely psycho-pathological; that is, a recurrent impulse and pattern that hark back to his childhood trauma, using the woman in his past as a scapegoat.

> Mine had started back with the housekeeper [Helen] […] she *was* woman to me; and all womankind bore her face. So I could strike back at any of them, any female, the one it would be safest to strike at, and it would be the same as striking her.[5]

The impulse and pattern are also palpable in the classical cinema like Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase*[6] that explores this phenomenon, with its cinematic representation of a serial killer in a Hitchcockian style noir thriller. The female victims in the film are chosen due to their physical disabilities, and the female protagonist, Helen Capel, is a mute servant in a mansion where the killer actually lives with his invalid and domineering mother. Even though Helen is the central character, the point

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[3] *In A Lonely Street*, 1997, p.141
[4] *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.110
[5] Jim Thompson, '*The Killer Inside Me*', in *Jim Thompson's Omnibus*, 1995, p. 142
[6] 1946

of view of the film is dominated by that of the serial killer, Professor Warren, calibrating her as both the object of his and the audience's gaze. Helen's muteness is also ideologically determined, indicating the film's effort to deny her full and complete subjectivity. These examples illuminate two interlacing ideological structures of serial killer narratives in the classical noir tradition; that is, the woman is almost always the victim and the victimisation is already prescribed by the Western binary system. A female serial killer character and/or a narrative involving a female serial killer, in effect, are rarely explored.

Therefore, considering the period in which the novel *Double Indemnity* was written and the way it was transformed for the silver screen, the quotation above unveils an important assumption about why the serial killer part of Phyllis is obscured from the cinematic narration. The obscurity in the representation of the femme fatale (and this is supported by B. Ruby Rich's suggestion that 'the early *femme fatales* [sic] had no explanation for their relentless pain or greed')[7] reveals that by divulging Phyllis's background, as a person or as a serial killer (as mentioned in the novel), the film version runs the risk of not only breaching the infamous Hay's Production Code[8] but also providing her with a history or subjectivity, constructing her as a sympathetic character. Besides, the expectation that the femme fatale will finally be punished is a crucial ingredient in pleasure an audience derives from her role as the embodiment of male fantasy. In canonical noir, subjectivity is largely permissible only to the male protagonist, a sympathetic fall guy whose flaw in judgement overrides the flaw in his character, living a life engulfed by noir pessimism and determinism. In effect, the serial killer femme fatale in *Double Indemnity* is enough evidence to show that while at the zenith of its classical period, a noir novel's transgressive narrative may dare to venture into the nadir of post-war America's morality. Its elision from the silver screen also exemplifies the extent to which Hollywood is allowed to explore this narrative, reflecting the typical puritanical or 'American right-wing'[9] view that governed the Hays committee. The transgression of the femme fatale is considered morally subversive, perverse, and dubious; therefore punishable usually and especially by death. This, in short, demonstrates that Hollywood then is more interested

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[7] 'Dumb Lugs and Femme Fatales', in *Action/ Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000, p.130

[8] Frank Krutnik argues that the film *Double Indemnity* represents the workability of the compromise between 'Cain's fiction and the representational restrictions of the Production Code' (*In A Lonely Street*, 1997, p.137)

[9] James Naremore, *More Than Night*, 1998, p.96

in the destructive and obsessive relationship between a male noir protagonist and the transgressive femme fatale than in the subjectivity of the femme fatale itself.

The lack of interest in female subjectivity in canonical noir stems from a woman's status as an embodiment of 'male fantasy',[10] that is, the antithetical trait of the Western dualism that categorises man as the rational being. In a typical noir narrative such as in films like *The Maltese Falcon*[11] and *Out of the Past*,[12] gender assignments are ideologically driven, amounting to femmes fatales being subjects of the investigation and male protagonists being the investigators. At the level of ideological symbolism, the portrayal of an independent woman as duplicitous alludes to her fatal sexuality, referring not only to post-war America when a woman's financial independence posed a threat to male economic resourcefulness, but also to the noir genre not solely a masculine form. Film noir, as feminist critics argue, is not a masculine form *par excellence*, and therefore is potentially subversive in that manner, allowing 'the playing out of *various* gender fantasies',[13] and in this case, it permits the female character to freely roam the public sphere. However, it is in the very subversiveness of the noir narrative that lies conveniently the very conservativeness of its own ideological motif, emphasising the femme fatale's duplicity and the ensuing comeuppance as the ultimate result of her independence. Freedom, it seems, is only an illusion. Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* and Kathie in *Out of the Past* are noir iconic femmes fatales whose eventual death is both ideologically and principally prescribed by the Western schism, highlighting the collective fear of female supremacy. Christine Gledhill argues that,

> Rather than the revelation of socio-economic patterns of political and financial power and corruption which mark the gangster/thriller, film noir probes the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within patterns of submission and dominance.[14]

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[10] Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed., 2000, p.47
[11] Dir. Henry Blake, 1941
[12] Dir. Jacques Taurneur, 1947
[13] E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.10
[14] 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.28

When Walter Neff tells Phyllis that 'I wonder if you wonder' in the flashback narrative technique, he forecloses her subjectivity, setting her as a site to be explored and investigated–a demonstration of what he imagines to be his dominance. Lou Ford, in the final moment of his life as well as the novel, reflects on his actions without wanting to succumb to defeat. He naturalises his crime by de-alienating himself from society with his own set of values ('All of us that started the game with a crooked cue […] that meant so good and did so bad […] All of us. All of us');[15] demonstrating the ubiquitous noir unsettling and satirical ending.

What can be drawn from the representation of these female characters is that in the noir tradition women as embodiments are traceable in the psycho-sociological divisions that associate women with privacy and men with publicity, foregrounding the topographical assignment of gender category. The gendering of this topography defines the ideological pressure that hence creates a signature boundary that these women should traditionally adhere to, and transgressive female characters like Kathie and Phyllis are therefore punishable under patriarchal rules and ethics. These in turn reward Ann and Lola–the redeeming figures in *Out of the Past* and *Double Indemnity*, respectively–by freeing them from any burden of the crime, as long as they stay loyal to the societal expectations of a woman. Ironically, it is the femme fatale, and not the redeeming woman, who achieves the iconic status in the noir tradition, signifying noir fascination with the display of her dangerous sexuality. The typical ending in which femmes fatales like Kathie and Phyllis are killed by gunshots essentialises and spectacularises their dead and violated bodies, foregrounding the body politics at play. This compulsive and covert fascination with femmes fatales' violated and dead bodies is related to what Mark Seltzer calls 'encounters with *exhibitions* of catastrophe',[16] that in this case their bodies function 'as spectacle or representation of crisis, disaster, or atrocity'.[17] Seltzer's argument also points to the positioning of the violated and injured female body inside the public arena, an important part of what he terms as 'America's wound culture',[18] which concurrently illuminates the collapse of the polarity of gender difference in such a culture.

A scarred and disavowed female body unremittingly and publicly on display is part of the proliferation of the body and machine culture, which significantly highlights the links the female body has with a crime scene. The fascination, or I should say the 'love-hate relationship' with the 'open

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[15] Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me*, in *Jim Thompson's Omnibus*, 1995, p.160
[16] *Serial Killers*, 1998, p.35
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid, p.8

wound', is attributable to the origin of the male fear of the female vagina itself, that is, a stigma of a castrated female body in the Oedipal trajectory. Having forsaken its mythological status, this fear of the 'open wound' in machine culture is now being centrally treated, referring literally to the opening of an injured and lacerated female body.[19] A female body is therefore less a metaphor for space and is now more metonymically relevant. Both, in effect, define its role as a victim in a criminal act and place it in the crime scene itself. A wounded female body is now associated with the identification of the site where private desire and public interest collide, a place where the demarcation of gender assignment is finally dissolved. What is disturbing is the fact that the collapse of this boundary is still actually at the expense of a female body and life, confirming her status as a victim. In the context of film noir, femmes fatales' erotic representation devolves on a disavowed body that normally ends up, as Phyllis and Kathie demonstrate, being a compulsive public spectacle of atrocity outside the sanctity of a home. Both of them are killed on the road, marking the restriction of their freedom outside the confinement of a home as the freedom that they seek stops male protagonists from achieving their absolute masculinity in the public arena. The public spectacle of femmes fatales' disavowed bodies is also titillating; thus irreversibly establishing its link with the eroticisation of the crime and crime scene itself, explaining and delineating part of what Mark Seltzer termed as 'pathological public sphere', that is, the shifting of the boundary between the interior and the exterior.

'The stylistic gloom of film noir,' argued Dale E. Ewing Jr., 'afforded an appealing paradigm of disorder [...] which is a breeding ground for all sorts of irrationalities and fears'.[20] This is another explanation for the 'pathological public sphere', and its detailed expression lies in formulaic noir visual styles: 1) dark and distorted shadowy figures, chiaroscuro lighting, and jarring camera angles; 2) sleazy, "of the shadow" and close up shots of the femme fatale to magnify her physical beauty, seductiveness and duplicity. The first helps to define the mood and atmosphere of the film, usually as a form of visual expression symbolic of the psychological make up or milieu of the brooding male protagonist. The second calibrates fatal female sexuality with a crime scene, magnifying both her socio-economic independence and her (sexual) dominance. The mise-en-scene

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[19] E. Ann Kaplan in the 'Introduction to New Edition' of *Women in Film Noir* also points this out. However, she admits that this issue needs to be pursued elsewhere. This is one of the points of departure that I am taking here (2000, p.12)

[20] Dale E. Ewing, Jr., 'Film Noir: Style and Content', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1988, p.63

of film noir is therefore important in 'the production of a certain mood–angst, despair, nihilism–within which are rearticulated perennial myths and motifs such as the deceptive play of appearance and reality, the eternal fascination and destructiveness of the *femme fatale*, the play of salvation and damnation'.[21] To a great extent, in the neo-noir cinematic representation that deals with serial killer narratives, the waiving of these formulaic visual motifs marks the shift in gender roles, or role reversal. Kaplan, for instance, argues that in neo-noir films of the 1990s, 'the gender roles are reversed: the serial killers fulfil the role of the *femme fatale vis-à-vis* the female heroine as well [...]'.[22] One of the most important effects of this role reversal is the dissolution of gender demarcation, which consequently affects the relationship between gender and the crime scene. In the context of noir novels, Jim Thompson is known for the succession of male serial killer/psychopath protagonists that he created in the fifties through the mid-sixties like *Savage Night* (1953), *The Nothing Man* (1954) and *Pop.1280* (1964).[23] Thompson is 'self-consciously modernist [...] and his best known novels, far more radically unsettling',[24] evoking the 'darkness' which according to James Naremore, 'was central to modernist art of every kind'.[25] This chapter, in part, will look at some of the female characters who are involved in this role reversal, or the lack of it, in serial killer narratives and how they and their roles are affected by the changing gender topography. The central question it asks is: how liberating are these female characters?

In embryo, this chapter explores the serial killer narrative in relation to female characters and noir conventions by focusing on the dynamics of the discourse of space with gender assignments. This analysis is important since serial killer narratives in both novels and films are rarely seen from noir's point of view, foregrounding the complex conflation of both the narrative and noir's mood and style. I believe that this will highlight some significant issues pertaining to the representation of the transgressive female characters in the changing landscape of gender assignments. I would suggest that the symbiosis can be seen in noir convention, with their unsettling and disturbing endings, blurring of the binary opposite of victim

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[21] Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.27

[22] E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, 2000, p.12

[23] Lee Horsley's list of some of Jim Thompson's novels that deal with a psychopathic male protagonist (*The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.122)

[24] Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, 2001, p.121

[25] *More Than Night,* 1998, pp.170-171

and perpetrator, and daringness to venture into the darker side of human nature and the underworld; that is, their long term relationship with elements of realism. This is placed in dialogue with the debate surrounding privacy and publicity, which as I see it, can provide a useful channel to the understanding of serial killer narratives. As serial killing is also about invading a private space, the texts can be paradoxical and counter-reactive to feminist struggles to bring privacy into publicity, foregrounding the close affinity that serial killer narratives have with the debate surrounding the issue of privacy and publicity. Therefore, the conceptions of privacy and publicity are used as a theoretical framework for my analysis of these texts.

The serial killer narrative in a typical Hollywood narrative has not been challenged as far as noir conventions are concerned. Since it is one the characteristics of noir conventions to have an unsettling ending, this means that only noir vision can genuinely capture the essence of the heinous crime, or give voice to the conventionally marginalized character. It is one of the purposes of this analysis to actually demonstrate how noir conventions employed can enhance the effect of the representation of serial killers and female characters in literary and cinematic texts. This chapter also includes texts written or directed by women in an effort to see how or in what manner these texts support or challenge the myth surrounding serial killers. What I am also trying to illustrate is that the literary noir woman is usually and largely stronger and more liberated than her cinematic counterpart. In addition to looking at the female leads, my analysis will also cover marginalized female characters in both literary and cinematic texts. Hopefully, my argument will illustrate that the images of women, despite their positive portrayal, in this kind of narrative are constructed images that are working against liberal feminist struggles, foregrounding the conflict in the struggle for gender equality and how this conflict is manifested in crimes against women. This understanding can be achieved by exploring how the myth surrounding the serial killer shapes or challenges the obsession with privacy and its conflicting existence with public life.

From Metaphor to Metonymy

And in our attempt to understand serial killers, we inevitably create myths about them–works of fiction that may superficially portray the serial killer as the ultimate alien outsider or enemy of society but which simultaneously

reflect back upon society its own perversions, fears, and murderous desires.[26]

Myth and legend are forms of oral traditions that highlight the collective fear and anxiety of society, which often, ironically enough, work as disseminators of those very fears and anxieties. One of the core functions of these oral traditions is their role as a 'social caution' or 'cautionary tale'; a social mechanism that uses the scapegoated Others–the unknown, alienated, monstrous, deplorable, larger than life and to a certain extent metaphysical beings, like the undeads or phantom figures–as social margins that reflect the epistemological pressure of the society. In Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno & The Limehouse Golem,*[27] for instance, the fear of the unknown serial killer is projected into a mythical 'object of horror', [28]that is, any monstrous figure such as the Golem. Ackroyd interweaves his Gothic-style anti-*bildungsroman* first person narration with an investigative narrative embedded in the formal discourse of a court trial, which concomitantly affirms the status of the serial killer as a mythical or legendary figure. The serial killer, in this myth-making tradition, is a metaphor for something else, and that something else can be any literal or psychogenic threat faced by society.

The creation of these mythical or legendary figures is imperative and necessary, both as a way of projecting the society's collective fear outside its own constitution and as a way of signifying a boundary marker that should not be transgressed. The Other, in this context, has to be situated outside, not inside the society itself; it has to bear the burden of the irrational, and usually for that reason possesses 'supernatural-like' ability. It has to live or inhabit the realm beyond the boundary marker–the *outré-mer*–and its occasional infiltration into the society is seen as a portentous disease or plague, an ominous threat to the ostensibly stable and sane world. Though serial killer narratives can be traced back in the Gothic

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[26] Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths*, 2000, pp.1-2

[27] Ackroyd's resembles the Maybrick case in which James Maybrick, a Liverpool cotton merchant, was poisoned by his own wife, Florence. The similarity is based on a diary that was allegedly signed by the sobriquet Jack the Ripper and resurfaced in the early 1990s (Colin Wilson and Damon Wilson, *A Plague of Murder*, 1995, p.xv) He also uses real cases like the young Marr family in Ratcliffe Highway (Wilson and Wilson, p.36 and Ackroyd, p.208) to add credibility to his story.

[28] Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno & The Limehouse Golem*, 1998, p.4

vampire figure, like Dracula or vampires[29] in the Eastern European oral
and literary traditions, it has been made in/famous in modern times by the
notoriously mysterious Jack the Ripper–a figure who is a staple of the
study of serial killers, as all the articles that I have come across never fail
to mention his grotesque sobriquet. Killing five London prostitutes in
1888, Jack was nicknamed after his ritual of mutilating and removing the
organs of his murdered victims. It is the 'notion of the Ripper's
immortality', argued Jane Caputi, that 'is perhaps the most dominant motif
of the entire myth'.[30] The Jack the Ripper story is a prototype for the
figure of the serial killer, providing key semantic references and
vocabulary to serial killer narratives and conventions, such as the schism
of women as victims and men as perpetrators, the elusiveness of the
murderer figure, and the seemingly arbitrary relationship between the
killer and the victim. Jack the Ripper's legendary status also informs the
way the phenomenon is dealt with, allowing contemporary critics to vivify
the contemporary discourse of representation in both fictional and non-
fictional accounts of the serial killer. The 'historical yet enigmatic
personage'[31] Jack the Ripper also signifies the critical impasse in the
absolute separation between fictional and non-fictional representations, as
a great deal of both is informed by each other. Jane Caputi argues that
'[f]act and fiction are blithely blurred; the reality of genocide is
overshadowed by mass fascination with the personality of the killer'.[32]
Therefore, what a serial killer story with a female serial killer like *Dan
Leno and the Limehouse Golem* does is to destabilise the seemingly
monolithic masculine generic convention of serial killer narratives in
which women are eviscerated, foregrounding the omnipresent gender
issues and politics in this kind of narrative. Since in Ackroyd's novel the
serial killer is a woman, the fascination with her personality as suggested
by Caputi also means that she is a person with history–a full subjectivity
that is often denied in literature. By using literary and cinematic noir texts,
this chapter sets out to demonstrate and illustrate how the literary and

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[29] There is no denying that eponymous Dracula or many other vampire figures
pose some epistemological debates that are related to serial killing. This is mainly
due to the fact that their victims are turned into the undeads after the 'killing' takes
place. Nonetheless, Richard Dyer in 'Kill and Kill Again' (*Action/Spectacle: A
Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jose Arroyo, 2000), did include the vampire of
Dusseldorf, albeit in passing, in his discussion of the serial killer.
[30] *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p.26
[31] Patrice Fleck, 'Looking in the Wrong Direction: Displacement and Literacy in
the Hollywood Serial Killer Drama', *Postscript*, 16(1997), p.37
[32] *Age of Sex Crime*, 1988, p.200